High paying and low skilled industrial jobs are diminishing, while low skilled and low paying service jobs are increasing. Those who are out of work or underemployed and lack the necessary education to fill higher paying jobs will be unable to fill a needed role in the economy, society, and the workforce. This change signifies a changing economy, the new economy, where globalization and evolving technology have facilitated a rapidly changing knowledge and skill base. The changing economy has facilitated postsecondary education and lifelong learning to become vital for those seeking a job in the current workforce. If those who are unable to fill a role are not encouraged to gain the necessary knowledge and skills, not only will they be unable to be economically self-sufficient, but also they will become a drain on the American economy and society. New economy theory postulates a call for balancing the needs of the economy and the needs of individuals, or the well being of society, individuals, and the economy will deteriorate. Education is the primary avenue to meet the needs of a changing workforce and the needs of individuals, especially those underserved. Community colleges are the most able to supply the education that serves the economy and these underserved students (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; Carnoy, 2000; McCabe, 2000). Through the perceptions and experiences of students who are “beyond the margins,” the rich data will supply guidance on how to meet the needs of this population effectively for the benefit of these individuals, society, and the economy. These suggestions follow from the experiences and perceptions of over forty-five underserved students interviewed at three community colleges in different regions of the United States. The selection of sites and students was theoretically appropriate (Mason, 1996). The
The major conclusion identified was the lack of consciousness that “beyond the margins” students exhibit. These students reveal their lack of awareness through their limited knowledge and understanding of society, work, money, and education. It was also identified that the individual efforts of faculty and staff have significant influence on the development and progression of all students. Furthermore, underserved students must receive individualized and specific assistance to accomplish their academic and work aspirations. This assistance is often gained through a well-designed educational support system. The students interviewed confirmed the need for aid and noted the value of additional support by faculty and staff, various support services, student tracking systems, multiple course-taking pathways, policies and procedures, institutional initiatives and priorities, and funding to encourage their academic success.
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION FOR THE UNDERSERVED IN AMERICA: A STUDY OF HIGHLY NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

by

JERRID P. FREEMAN

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APPROVED BY:

___________________________________         __________________________________
Chair of Advisory Committee

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Biography

Jerrid P. Freeman obtained his Bachelor’s of Science in Secondary Mathematics, Physics, and Coaching at the University of Nebraska at Kearney in 1998. He obtained his Master’s of Arts in College Student Personnel at Bowling Green State University in 2000. Jerrid’s development as a practitioner began at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, and continued at Bowling Green State University, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, and at Elon University. His primary focus both personally and professionally is to help others achieve their dreams; to encourage others in their journey towards purpose; and to support others in their decision making to bring meaning into their lives.
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Chapter One:  
Introduction to the Study  

Reich (1992) states that American society and the American economy are continuing to become separate spheres. In part, this separation is the result of widening educational, cultural, and economical gaps between the rich and the poor (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Castells & Himanen, 2002; Kazis, 2001; Rubenson, 1989). The economic gap increases because wages and salaries have become more directly tied to education than in the past (Grubb, 2002; U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). With limited education and a subsequent lack of societal benefits, individuals will fail to gain wealth. These individuals will likely become poorer without the benefits that are often associated with obtaining postsecondary education (Carnoy, 2000; Carnoy, Castells, Cohen, & Cardoso, 1993; Irby, 2000; Rifkin, 1995; Smith, 2004). The income gap is increasing because the real wage for those in production jobs is rapidly declining and the real wages of those in service jobs are falling. Those in high skilled and high knowledge professions can compete in the global economy, see their real wages rapidly rise, and are valued as workers; those in low skilled and limited knowledge jobs are fairing less well, and they are disposable workers (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Buckley, 2002; Carnevale & Desrochers; Carnoy; Jones & Weinberg, 2000; Reich).  

The change in work and the workforce highlight the troubling state of American society in the 21st century (Reich, 1992; Rifkin, 1995). Individuals are living longer; technology use is growing and changing rapidly; and the knowledge and skills needed in the workplace are expanding (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Castells, 1996). With these changes, customary forms of work diminish. These forms of work were full-time occupations, with a set job pattern (Bridges, 1994; Castells; Rifkin). The reduced availability of these
occupations over the past thirty years coincides with the rapidly evolving need for more knowledge and skills in the work place, and the increasing use of technology (Aronowitz & DiFazio). Arguably, these changes have made education more valuable and necessary.

The economic changes of the 1970s, with a resultant shift to a postindustrial workplace by the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bridges, 1994; Castells & Himanen, 2002; Rifkin, 1995), led to the diminution of high-paid manufacturing jobs that do not require more than a high school diploma (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997). This alteration was accompanied by a steep rise in the number of low-pay service and information jobs (Brint & Karabel, 1997; Castells, 1996; Deem, 1988; Levin, 2001; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Workers found themselves in need of retraining to obtain new knowledge or skills required within organizations (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Carnevale & Desrochers). In addition, those unemployed or yet to enter the workforce were urged to obtain postsecondary education to achieve employment beyond low skill levels (Carnevale & Desrochers; Reich, 1992).

Economic alterations affecting production and work are global (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Castells, 1996; Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999). These outcomes of a globalized economy are clear in America, where there is superpower status but also national economic instability and separation between economic classes (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Barnet & Cavanagh). One-fifth of the U.S. population has the majority of America’s wealth, a population influenced by self-interest and with little motivation for redistribution of wealth (Reich, 1992).

This altered economy has been termed the new economy by numerous economists and scholars. This new economy is characterized by a shifting labor market that uses dynamic and powerful technologies in production and information processing. It is an
The economy in need of more skilled and knowledgeable workers and technologically savvy, autonomous, and flexible workers to meet the needs of a productive and competitive global economy (Carnoy, 2000; Carnoy et al., 1993; Castells, 1996; Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Elsner, 2001; Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001; National University Continuing Education Association, 1995).

The globalization process over the past three decades is largely a movement towards a global economy, where despite distances and boundaries, the economic world figuratively becomes one place (Held, 2000; Levin, 2001). Technology enhanced this globalization process and technology is thought to be the driving force behind globalization and the changing economy (Carnoy et al.; Castells, 1996; Levin). The new economy is based on service and information oriented work and signifies the end of the industrial era where high paid jobs requiring minimal education were the norm (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Brint & Karabel, 1997; Castells; Deem, 1988; Levin; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Theoretical Framework: New Economy Theory

Carnoy (2000) proposes a theory referred to as “new economy theory” that addresses the importance of the problem of economic globalization and employment. Carnoy states that if Reich’s (1992) wealthy one-fifth only focus on the market and their own economic status then they will not only impact those individuals outside the workforce mainstream negatively, but also negatively impact society and the future prosperity of the economy. Carnoy’s main point is that a country cannot succeed in the new economy without ensuring that individuals are able to obtain jobs that allow them to be economically self-sufficient. Those who need the most assistance and will have the most obstacles to overcome in obtaining these jobs in the new economy are those currently unemployed, those
underemployed, which includes many blue collar workers, those in poverty, and those on welfare (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Carnoy; Carnoy et al., 1993; Rifkin, 1995). The transformation of the economy has also become a transformation in perceptions of work, which includes acceptance of part-time, temporary work that fluctuates in its requirements (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Carnoy; Jones & Weinberg, 2000).

Despite the problematic condition of work in the new economy, Carnoy (2000) posits that the United States has the educational services, technology, and economic ability to react positively. He suggests that access to education can and should be maintained for the underserved so that they can obtain needed knowledge and skills. In contrast, Rifkin (1995) argues that the underserved population has been marginalized and will be unable to gain the knowledge necessary to fill a job slot in the “high skills/high wage” workforce. Those unable to gain knowledge needed in the new economy will “become expendable, then irrelevant, and finally invisible” (Rifkin, p. 197). For Carnoy and others (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; McCabe, 2000) higher education has become the solution not only to the problem of a globally competitive workforce but also to the recovery of a population that is becoming “expendable, then irrelevant, and finally invisible” (Rifkin, p. 197).

The Role of Community Colleges in the New Economy

Community colleges have been structured to be responsive to the needs of the community and society, as well as to individuals (Cain, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Community colleges have also been the primary institutions of higher education to provide postsecondary education to underserved populations, especially those who lack the knowledge and skills needed in the new economy (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995). These institutions can address the changing economy
because they are reputed to have the ‘right’ values and attitudes; they have the ‘right’
programs (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; McCabe & Pincus, 1997); they have
comprehensive services; they are flexible and creative, cost effective, and have developed
necessary relationships with business, industry, and the community (Cohen & Brawer, 2003;
McCabe, 2000; Roueche, Taber, & Roueche, 1995). In addition, community colleges have
been considered democratic institutions and able to promote social equality (Herideen, 1998;
Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Yet, the new economy and the market-oriented competition that
comes with it have impeded these traditional ideals (Levin, 2000). The challenge, then, for
these institutions is to balance the needs of the market and the needs of underserved
populations with the community college’s societal charge (Herideen; Rhoads & Valadez).

Levin (2001) argues that institutions of education do not react passively to a
globalized economy. Critical theorists (Apple, 2003; Freire, 1981) agree with Levin and
argue that those working in educational institutions need to examine their organization
critically within its context, in this case the economic context, and maintain institutional
autonomy by forging a direction that suits the best interests of their students. Carnoy et al.
(1993) suggest that in the new economy a democraticized and transformed society is needed
where progress occurs which is not solely economic: “Policies must be globalized and
extended to include the have-nots and the illiterates—those without the new resources
required to participate in the information revolution” (p. 12). New economy theory
emphasizes the importance of educating and training underserved populations. This
perspective is consistent with Levin’s (2001) arguments about the impact of globalization on
community colleges and the imperatives for their maintaining an educational and social
focus.
The Underserved 6

The defining elements of community colleges include equity, open access, a comprehensive curriculum, community-based education and services, a primary focus on teaching, and encouragement of lifelong learning (The American Association of Community Colleges, 2001; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Herideen, 1998; Vaughan, 2000). These characteristics as well as low tuition costs and convenient locations are seen as contributing to increasing enrollments in community colleges (Cain, 1999; Phillippe, 2000). These factors are especially pertinent to students with low socioeconomic status, to women with children, to minorities, and to those who are underemployed, academically unprepared, physically and mentally disabled, or adults looking for a second chance in education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 2002; Phillippe). Community colleges are often more acceptable to and provide more pathways for those who desire an education and hold many of these underserved and at-risk characteristics (Quigley & Bailey, 2003). The acknowledged benefit of community colleges is that they serve the population that is not well served by traditional institutions of higher education (Grubb, Badway, & Bell, 2003; Herideen; Shaw, 1999; Valadez, 1996).

Who are those underserved populations of students that community colleges serve in fulfilling their mission? The majority of students attending community colleges are customarily labeled “non-traditional students.” There is lack of clarity with this label in that subsequent to the 1970s the non-traditional student population became the majority in community colleges. Non-traditional is an umbrella term with many overlapping categories, such as dislocated worker, reentry women, recent immigrant, single parent, racial minority, and worker in training (Coley, 2000; Herideen, 1998). Statistically, the number of non-traditional students in two-year colleges in 2002 was 89% (Choy, 2002). The Department of
Education has defined the non-traditional learner as having one or more of the following characteristics: delayed postsecondary enrollment from high school; enrolled in a postsecondary program on a part-time basis; working full time; financially independent for financial aid purposes; dependants other than a spouse; single parent; and without a high school diploma (Choy; Horn & Carroll, 1996). Categories of non-traditional students—those who are highly non-traditional—overlap with underserved and at-risk populations who are in need of both access and institutional support to obtain the knowledge, skills, and technological ability to become self-sufficient in the new economy.

The underserved, as distinct from the category of “non-traditional,” are identified as having several of the following attributes: low socioeconomic status (SES), racially and ethnically diverse, inadequately prepared for postsecondary education, interrupted education, in need of new knowledge or skills in their work, confined to prisons, or disabled (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Combining these at-risk populations with the characteristics of highly non-traditional students, Levin (2003) uses the term “beyond the margins” students. “Beyond the margins” students are almost invisible not only to scholars, policy makers, and government officials but also to administrators and faculty in their own institution. This group falls outside the mainstream of non-traditional students and includes many students who are in “non-credit courses and programs, those who are or have been on welfare, those who suffer from long-term unemployment or underemployment, and those who are physically disabled, mentally challenged, immigrants, and often minorities” (Levin, p. 3).

Community colleges play a pivotal role, more than any other institutional type, in educating these students (Davies, Safarik, & Banning, 2003; Laden, 1998; Levin, 2003; Terinzini & Cabrera, 2001). Through community colleges, “beyond the margins” students
seek the knowledge and skills needed to survive in the new economy. Survival is equated with success and can be defined as economic self-sufficiency through work and involvement in a democratic society (Carnoy et al., 1993).

Are community colleges supplying the necessary services and education to “beyond the margins” students so that they are prepared for the new economy? “Beyond the margins” students may be unaware of the new economy and its effects upon both work and social structures. Furthermore, students may not know how they should respond to this call for greater knowledge and skills. These issues have not been addressed adequately in the scholarly literature. To begin understanding education and potential work for students who are “beyond the margins” research is needed on the perceptions and experiences of these students during their participation in programs or coursework at community colleges.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study, then, is to understand the perceptions and experiences of “beyond the margins” community college students with respect to their education and employment. Four questions guide this study:

1) What are the institutional experiences of “beyond the margins” students during their educational program?

2) Do “beyond the margins” students believe that their actions follow from their personal hopes and aspirations?

3) Do “beyond the margins” students believe that their actions are influenced by the economy’s workforce needs?

4) How do “beyond the margins” students perceive the role of community colleges in their education and employment?
These perceptions are obtained through a multi-site field study. The investigation relies upon qualitative research methods including interviews, observations, and document analysis for data collection and coding and content analysis for data analysis (Berg, 1995; Burgess, 1984; Erickson, 1986; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Mason, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some of the investigation relies upon scholarship on the case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994). While this investigation is not a case study, it does possess some elements of case study research. For example, when the specific phenomenon the researcher is looking at is intertwined in a real-life context and cannot be separated, a case study approach is recommended (Yin, 1993). The study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of “beyond the margins” students on education and employment. This population is intertwined with the community college because community colleges are the primary source for this population to obtain their needed knowledge and skills.

This investigation identifies the perceptions and experiences of a specific student population, using three sites to examine behaviors. Two sites target the “beyond the margins” population, while the third site is used for comparison purposes. The investigation captures the perspectives of the students and a view of social reality through these students’ perceptions and experiences. It achieves understanding of these students through the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy (Apple, 1996, 2000, 2003; Freire, 1981), human capital (Becker, 1975), and “new economy theory” (Carnoy, 2000), comparing these theories to students’ perceptions and experiences.

Significance of the Study

Student beliefs and perceptions are often ignored in community college literature, while administrative issues are usually the center of the literature (Frye, 1994), with faculty
issues covered in a handful of important investigations (Cohen & Outcalt, 2001; Kempner, 1990; Levin, Kater, Roe, & Wagoner, 2003; McGrath & Spear, 1991). While the connection between the community college and underserved populations is acknowledged in the literature, the student perspective is not evident in this literature. This connection is becoming more important as community colleges are expected to balance the needs of individuals and the changing economy. Of particular importance are those students who are vulnerable to economic conditions and a post-industrial economy, where knowledge and skills are promoted and where low wages are fast becoming the norm for those with little or no postsecondary education.

Levin (2001) has shown that local, state, and federal policy and fiscal initiatives for community colleges have encouraged these institutions to become more market driven and focused on job training for the economy (Bailey, 2002; Bailey & Morest, 2004; Dougherty, 2002). With this encouragement community colleges have become more focused on revenue generation than on their broad mission of access and inclusion of the underserved (Levin; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Several scholars (Apple, 2003; Carnoy, 2000; Carnoy et al., 1993; Levin; Rifkin, 1995) express concern that the response by postsecondary institutions to the new economy will impair access; that there will ultimately be a continued increase in the social, educational, and economic gap between the have and the have-nots. Given this condition, students “beyond the margins,” as a vulnerable group, will not integrate either into society or into the economy.

Community colleges are the primary provider of education to “beyond the margins” students (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Herideen, 1998; Terinzini & Cabrera, 2001) and if these institutions lose sight of the needs of this population to become and remain
economically self-sufficient, both the economy and society as a whole will suffer (Apple, 2000; Carnoy, 2000; Carnoy et al., 1993; Castells, 1996; Rifkin, 1995). Furthermore, individuals will “become expendable, then irrelevant, and finally invisible” (Rifkin, p. 197). Although Laanan (2000) found that traditional students in community colleges are aware of changing demands in the marketplace, both locally and globally, it is questionable if “beyond the margins” students are aware of their skills and opportunities in the workforce. This research intends to assist scholars and practitioners in understanding “beyond the margins” students and their plight in becoming self-sufficient and of benefit to the economy and society.
Chapter Two:
Bridging the Gap Between Individual and Societal Needs

Alteration to the U.S. economy over the past thirty years has been increasingly tied to global forces and the global economy (Carnoy, Castells, Cohen, & Cardoso, 1993; Reich, 1992). The industrial economy and even the post-industrial economy are now referred to as the “new economy” (Carnoy, 2000). In this new economy, low skill and high paid jobs are diminishing, while low skill, low paid jobs in the service and information sector are increasing (Brint & Karabel, 1997; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Castells, 1996; Deem, 1988; Levin, 2001; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). For example, from 1984 to 2004, the number of goods producing jobs diminished nationwide by 1.55 million while the service and information jobs increased, during the same time frame, by 38.5 million (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). Without obtaining appropriate training and education to become more skilled and knowledgeable, technology savvy, autonomous, and flexible, individuals are likely to find work only in these low skilled, low-paid jobs. The prospects are for inadequate incomes and no economic self-sufficiency (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994; Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Carnoy, 2000; Carnoy et al.; Castells; Elsner, 2001; Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001; NUCEA, 1995).

In education and training, those who require the most assistance are those unemployed, those underemployed, such as traditional blue-collar workers, those in poverty, those who are illiterate or for whom English is their second language, and those on welfare. These populations have the most obstacles to overcome in obtaining the education necessary in the new economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Carnoy; Carnoy et al.; Rifkin, 1995; Terenzini & Cabrera, 2001). If postsecondary education and training is an avenue for this
underserved and at-risk population, then the community college is the educational institution that will enroll these populations (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Jacobs, 2002; McCabe & Pincus, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions and experiences of underserved and at-risk community college students with respect to their education and employment. This study will look at the effects of the “new economy” on these several populations as they access and participate in postsecondary education. Three theoretical frameworks will be used to address the experiences of these populations: critical pedagogy, human capital, and new economy theory. Critical pedagogy focuses on the needs and benefits of the individual (Freire, 1981). Human capital theory (Becker, 1975) addresses the market and economic interests of society. New economy theory (Carnoy, 2000) offers a balance on the needs of individuals and the needs of the market so that there is benefit to both.

An analytical framework will also be used to help explain the effects of the changing economy on these underserved and at-risk community college students. Capitalism (Reisman, 1999), the economic practice utilized in America, will be used to analyze data in this investigation. Furthermore, the literature on the role of the community college in supplying the knowledge and skills needed for the changing economy, society, and individuals will be used for data analysis. Lipsky’s (1980) concept of street-level bureaucrats will be used to assist in the analysis of the role faculty, staff, and administrators have in the experiences of the several underserved student populations under investigation.

Beyond the Margins

Roueche and Roueche (1993) were among the first to identify the at-risk student population and the failure of education to encourage the attainment of the students’ academic
goals in open access institutions. This at-risk and also underserved population is often identified as having low socioeconomic status (SES); they are racially and ethnically diverse, inadequately prepared for secondary education, have had their education interrupted for some reason, are in need of new knowledge or skills in their work, are confined to prisons, or are disabled (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). When Levin (2003) studied this population in American community colleges he called these students “beyond the margins.” This group falls outside the mainstream of community college students and includes many students who are in “non-credit courses and programs, those who are or have been on welfare, those who suffer from long-term unemployment or underemployment, and those who are physically disabled, mentally challenged, immigrants, and often minorities” (Levin, p. 3). In spite of this and other research carried out on this population, there is no complete picture of these at-risk and underserved students. In practice, this population is often ignored and invisible to those who need to give assistance to this population.

*Non-Traditional Students*

There are 6.25 million undergraduates enrolled in community colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Eighty-nine percent of the students in community colleges have at least one non-traditional characteristic (Choy, 2002) and thus are labeled non-traditional students. That is, few of the 6.25 million community college students are actually traditional students. A traditional student is conventionally viewed as approximately eighteen to twenty-four years of age, enrolled full-time in postsecondary education, enrolled directly following his or her high school graduation, dependent on parents, and someone who does not work or works part-time during the school year (Choy, 2002; Herideen, 1998). In the 1970’s the non-traditional student population began to grow at a rapid pace until they
became the majority currently found in community colleges. The Department of Education has defined the non-traditional learner as having one or more of the following characteristics: delayed postsecondary enrollment from high school; enrolled in a postsecondary program on a part-time basis; works full time; classified as financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependants other than a spouse; is a single parent; and is without a high school diploma (Choy; Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Horn and Carroll (1996) group non-traditional students into three categories: 40% highly non-traditional (4 or more characteristics); 35% moderately non-traditional (2 or 3 characteristics); and 14% minimally non-traditional (1 characteristic). The overlapping characteristics of non-traditional students are comprised of those who have delayed entry (48%), those who are enrolled part-time (46%), those who work full-time (46%), those who are financially independent (35%), those who have dependents (21.5%), those who are single parents (11%), and those who do not have a high school diploma (11%) (Coley, 2000). These characteristics combined match the categories of those underserved and at-risk in America and include a portion of those who are considered “beyond the margins,” such as dislocated worker, reentry woman, recent immigrant, single parent, racial minority, and worker in training (Coley, 2000; Herideen, 1998). Yet, even these statistics do not encompass many of the students who are “beyond the margins” in that many are in non-credit courses and are often not tracked by either institutions or agencies.

Most students labeled as non-traditional (minimally and moderately non-traditional) are not “beyond the margins” students. Students who meet the highly non-traditional category are likely “beyond the margins” students and have many more non-traditional characteristics that are barriers to their success not only educationally, but also economically.
and socially. This population has greater obstacles to overcome and require more pathways for access to postsecondary education as well as institutional support to obtain the knowledge, skills, and technological ability to become self-sufficient in the new economy.

**Adult Learners**

The adult learner population has also received considerable attention recently from scholars and is grouped within the non-traditional category. The adult learner population, however, is not a focus of this research. One part of the adult learner population has been stereotypically identified as under forty, has completed high school or more, enjoys above-average income, works full-time and in a white-collar occupation, is married and has children, and lives in an urban area (Bash, 2003; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Even though this population has various obstacles to overcome in seeking postsecondary education for greater success in the new economy they do not conform to the conception of “beyond the margins” (Levin, 2003). Adult learners are succeeding or at one point in time had succeeded in the marketplace and have more external agencies concerned about their continual development and success in the new economy (Merriam & Caffarella).

**Non-Traditional Characteristics**

Those who are low-income often fall into the “beyond the margins” category and are of significant concern because access for low-income students is becoming more difficult as costs rise and need based subsidies decrease (Boehner, 2003; Winston, 1999). Ehrenreich’s (2001) ethnographic foray into the world of the working poor suggests that a low-income person who is single, with limited education, in good health, and has a working car can barely remain economically self-sufficient. If an individual who has few barriers besides his or her low-income status and limited education finds it difficult to remain economically self-
sufficient, then it would be increasingly difficult for students with poor health, dependents, and no personal transportation to become economically stable or even able to seek postsecondary education. Grubb (2001), and this is supported by Ehrenreich, states that education is needed for this population, but recognize the numerous barriers that these students, who are often ignored, must overcome.

Another category of “beyond the margins” that is often low-income is the working class or underemployed. Individuals who are considered part of the working class have jobs not careers; their work is not geared towards moving up the ladder; they are often paid hourly and not salary; they have little influence or power in the workplace; and when they leave their job the work is done (Linkon, 1999). Linkon posits that the working class is not determined by race, gender, or sexual identity, but does have a strong association with a lack of power, economic vulnerability, and a low education level. The working class are viewed and view themselves as outsiders—they perceive themselves as not belonging in postsecondary education. Furthermore, by participating in higher education they must neglect their backgrounds (Greenwald & Grant, 1999). The working class can be recognized as “beyond the margins” students when they are laid off and seek to obtain further education. Their occupational status and skills lose their relevancy.

Those on welfare are the next category of “beyond the margins.” Welfare recipients are most often women and certainly low-income. Most welfare recipients follow a depressing routine to keep their family and themselves alive. Welfare benefits do not supply the money necessary for all expenses and the basic essentials. Welfare recipients are then often left to find other avenues of support to make ends meet (Seccombe, 1999). The jobs welfare recipients obtain are low-wage positions with minimal fringe benefits and no sick or vacation
leave (Greenberg, Strawn, & Plimpton, 2000; Seccombe). This problem exists primarily because more than fifty percent of welfare recipients do not have a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) diploma (Manzo, 1997), and this greatly affects their earning potential. These economic and education issues become even more detrimental to welfare recipients given the context of the new economy—the alterations to work itself and the demand for increased knowledge and skills in the workplace.

When welfare was reformed nationally in 1996, there was a fifty-six percent decrease in those on welfare and a two-thirds reduction of those in higher education while on welfare (Barnow & King, 2003; Jacobs & Winslow, 2003). Community colleges have traditionally been the major supplier of education for these welfare recipients. Education has often been considered the primary way for welfare recipients to curtail their need for welfare benefits and to achieve economic self-sufficiency (Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001). Yet, the research is not entirely consistent on whether education (Adair, 2001; London, 2003), finding jobs for welfare recipients and quickly moving them off welfare, or a mixture of both (Greenberg, Strawn, & Plimpton, 2000; Grubb, Badway, Bell, & Castellano, 2002; Pagenette & Kozell, 2001) is the key to moving welfare recipients out of poverty. London states that education assists welfare recipients in receiving a higher income, makes welfare recipients less receptive to welfare, and gives welfare recipients a greater likelihood of getting off welfare early.

Prior to welfare reform it was possible for welfare clients to receive almost unending educational services (Manzo, 1997). Yet, even before welfare reform only fifteen percent of those on welfare were enrolled in two-year and four-year colleges. London (2003) posits that some of the reasons for this low enrollment in postsecondary education include costs, the
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responsibility for children, and individual desire. The lack of regulations on the services offered and the fear that many welfare recipients were not becoming economically self-sufficient in a timely manner were the major issues addressed by legislators and those against the old welfare system. Once the reform took effect the number of regulations increased dramatically and enrollment rates began to drop (Manzo). The reform was meant to move welfare’s focus to work first.

Welfare reform permits states to submit their own plan as long as they follow the new regulations. In the new regulations no more than twenty percent of the state’s welfare population can participate in vocational training and fifty percent of all families on cash assistance must be working thirty hours a week (only ten of the thirty hours can be education related). Another regulation states that work-related activities that can be considered educational are vocational training, job skill training, education directly related to work, and GED preparation (there is a twelve month maximum on these activities). States that do not meet their client and work participation rates will lose some funding. Welfare recipients have two continuous years and a combined total of five years to become economically self-sufficient and no longer in need of welfare (Manzo, 1997; Mazzeo, Rab, & Eachus, 2003). Welfare reform has not only reduced the number of individuals on welfare but also reduced the education that welfare recipients are able to obtain (Jacobs & Winslow, 2003; Manzo). This federal policy change could have even greater negative effects on welfare recipients considering the changing economy and the growing importance of education. For example, an individual on welfare may be placed into a job or even given training for a service or information position. These service and information positions will, in the near future, likely change job responsibilities and result in a shift in the knowledge and skills needed. This
increases the likelihood that this individual will again be jobless and lack the necessary skills and knowledge for another job.

Research shows that community colleges that create programs for welfare recipients and develop relationships with state and local welfare agencies can markedly improve access and retention for this population (Brock, Matus-Grossman, & Hamilton, 2001; Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001; McCormick, 2003). Thus, the community college has a significant role for this population, a segment of “beyond the margins” students.

Another category of “beyond the margins” students who are often ignored in the new economy includes those who are illiterate or have English as a Second Language (ESL). The National Center for Education Statistics conducts a nation-wide study on literacy every ten years. The Center evaluated literacy on a five level range. Forty to forty-three percent of the U.S. population has literacy levels in the lowest two levels, which are levels one and two (Sum, 1999). Those who are unemployed, poor, and have the lowest wages have the lowest literacy levels (Kaestle, Campbell, Finn, Johnson, & Mikulecky, 2001; Sum). Kaestle et al. and Sum have shown that formal education has a positive influence on earnings and literacy level. Immigrants and those who have English as their second language also increase the illiteracy rate in the United States (Gomez, 1999) Formal schooling is the most beneficial method for improving literacy (Greenberg, Macias, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001). Greenberg et al., Kaestle et al., and Sum posit that improved literacy rates for this segment of society will increase their likelihood of obtaining economic self-sufficiency and meeting the individual and societal needs of the changing economy through participation in the workforce. This segment of society is often ignored in the literature and a low priority with politicians and administrators who fund the programs that serve this population.
A common characteristic of “beyond the margins” students is that generally they are part of a minority population. Bowl (2003) states that some minorities attend less prestigious institutions (community colleges) because they are less conspicuous and more comfortable in these often more diverse institutions, which improves their chances of completing their academic goals. While this is true, many of the minorities in community colleges fall into the population that is “beyond the margins” and meet many of the characteristics already described. Twenty-eight percent of the U.S. population is classified as minority, and approximately half of all undergraduate minorities are enrolled in community colleges (Aragon, 2000). Access and retention are increasing for minorities, but there continues to be concern about their lower enrollment and retention rates. Chang (2003), Eimers (2001), Jalamo (2001), and Townsend (2000) encourage community college faculty, staff, and administrators to ensure that the specific needs of these students are addressed and that minorities receive support services that enhance their completion of courses and programs. The participation rates, retention rates, and academic preparedness levels of minorities are not equal to Whites (Creighton & Hudson, 2002; Perin, 2002). This achievement gap is intensified when minorities are also part of the “beyond the margins” population (Shaw, 1999; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004; Valadez, 1996).

The characteristic of disability is the final characteristic of “beyond the margins” students that is discussed. The number of students who seek postsecondary education with learning, mental, and physical disabilities is increasing (Frieden, 2003; Henderson, 1995). As of 1992, federal law mandates that students with a disability who are sixteen or older must be evaluated based on “reasonable accommodation” and “undue hardship” to identify needed support services (Shapiro & Rich, 1999). Reder (1998) and Wilson (1998) posit that it is
essential that students with disabilities are correctly assessed and institutions deliver services that are needed by individual students. Vogel and Reder (1998) state that it is important for faculty, staff, and administrators to validate the student in the environment (not single them out), improve their transition process (help them know pathways and possible goals), and supply the student with support if they are struggling or drop out. This is another subgroup of society that has been, to some extent, ignored and needs individualized support services to be successful in the changing economy so that they do not become invisible to society.

Changing Economy

There is an enormous gap between the career prospects of those who are wealthy in American society and individuals who are “beyond the margins” (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Castells & Himanen, 2002; Kazis, 2001; Reich, 1992; Rubenson, 1989). For example, in 2003, blue-collar employees in service occupations averaged $10.40 and hour, whereas those in white-collar professions averaged $21.85 per hour. Researchers have shown that this gap has indeed grown as our economy has changed from an industrial economy to a service, information, and technological economy (Bridges, 1994; Brint & Karabel, 1997; Castells, 1996; Castells & Himanen, 2002; Deem, 1988; Levin, 2001; Rifkin, 1995; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Carnoy (2000) and Carnoy et al. (1993) have labeled this service, knowledge, and technology based workforce the “new economy.” The new economy has flourished as countries have moved to a more global economy and the globalization process has been possible through the development of technology (Carnoy et al.; Castells; Levin). These changes in the economy and the workforce have made knowledge and skills essential for an individual to find work that will give them economic self-sufficiency (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; Carnoy, 2000; McCabe, 2000). For example, the
number of people who were 25 and older during the 1992 to 2004 period and were employed with less than a high school education dropped by .91 million; those who were employed with a high school diploma remained relatively constant; those who were employed with some college, but less than a bachelor’s increased by 7.4 million; and those who were employed with a bachelor’s degree or higher grew by 12.2 million (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). These labor statistics show the increasing relationship between education and available jobs.

Capitalism

All of these economic changes are occurring in a country that has thrived on capitalism. Capitalism is shaped by an “impersonal goal of profit” (Reisman, 1999, p. 3). This market ideology is based on orderly and practical choice, but does not give legitimate claim to those economically disadvantaged and does not find issue with large wage differentials. Reisman (1999) states that capitalism ultimately creates winners and losers because of its basis in property, the market, the individual, rationality, and growth. In this system it is obvious that the losers are the “beyond the margins” population who are the most affected by the changing economy and ignored in the basic economic structure. Capitalism is also “characterized by saving and capital accumulation, exchange and money, financial self-interest and the profit motive, the freedoms of economic competition and economic inequality, the price system and economic progress, and a harmony of the material self-interest of all the individuals who participate in it” (Reisman, 1996, p. 19). While in theory the advantages and benefits of capitalism are not inaccessible, the tenets of capitalism are virtually impossible to utilize for those who are “beyond the margins” and lack the knowledge and skills to be economically self-sufficient. According to Reisman (1996),
economic inequality and a division of knowledge amongst people are the leading features of capitalism. Educational equality must occur for the gap between the rich and poor, the haves and have nots, to dissipate in a capitalistic society. In a free market society where the wealthy are unwilling to redistribute wealth to the poor (Reich, 1992) capitalism magnifies the growing gap between the rich and poor (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Chomsky, 1999, 2000; Ogbu, 1997). Capitalism is focused on profit for both the economic market and individuals who are able and willing to seize a portion of the economy in a free market society.

McCabe and Day (1998) state that in the U.S., where capitalism reigns and with a rapidly changing economy, there are three major challenges for society. The challenges for society are to remain competitive in a global economy, to stop the growth of the lower class, and to develop a workforce for the new economy. Carnoy’s (2000) new economy theory posits that McCabe and Day have the three challenges correct, but that all three must be achieved or the country will ultimately fail in the new economy. Barnet and Cavanagh (1994), Herideen, (1998), and Reich (1992) posit that politicians and American leaders who utilize a capitalist ideology trust that a trained lower class that is placed into available low wage and low education service and information jobs will stop the growth of the lower class, fill needed and open workforce positions, and then finally help America become more globally competitive. This linear approach has some validity in a few service and information positions, but most of these jobs do not offer sufficient wages or benefits to help these people move from the lower class (Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001; Rifkin, 1995; Seccombe, 1999). For example, in 2003, an individual with a job in a service occupation, such as food service, averaged $7.46 per hour (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). At this rate the annual gross salary would be $15,517 for an individual who works 40 hours a week. This
insufficient salary is common to a large sector of the workforce. The placement scenario in service and information jobs finds many people leaving these jobs because of low wages or having to find another position when the specific service or knowledge is no longer needed. Short-term training and job placements are likely to shrink then expand the gap between the rich and the poor (Shaw & Rab, 2003). This occurs because many low wage service and information jobs not only stop an individual from moving out of the lower class, but also facilitate an individual’s fall into greater poverty (Jones & Weinberg, 2000; Reich; Rifkin; Seccombe). New economy theory (Carnoy) implies that failure to assist the “beyond the margins” population reach self-sufficiency in the changing economy will result in inefficiency for the United States.

Short-term training and education programs have limited benefits for the low SES populations including those on welfare. Grubb, Badway, Bell, and Castellano (2002) have shown that long-term education and skill development programs are more valuable and necessary for the American population to become economically self-sufficient. Carnoy (2000) and Carnoy et al. (1993) posit that if an individual gains the necessary knowledge and skills and becomes and remains economically self-sufficient, they will reduce the lower class, fill jobs in the new economy, and benefit America’s global economy. Reaching these, often ignored, “beyond the margins” students can make a significant impact on individuals, society, and the nation’s economy.

**Human Capital**

The acquisition of both knowledge and skills required by individuals to be productive in the workplace is called human capital (Becker, 1975). Human capital is likely of greater importance in the new economy than it has ever been in the history of society (Carnoy et al.,
The federal government, state governments, and businesses invest in postsecondary education institutions for the development of human capital. This money goes towards access to these institutions, the development of programs needed by the U.S. to remain a global superpower, and to fill the positions needed in the changing economy (Center for Community College Policy, 2000). There are a number of programs developed by the federal and state governments to assist disadvantaged individuals in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2002; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2003). The actions of governments alone suggest that the development of human capital is an important societal issue.

The development of human capital is often viewed as solely benefiting the organization or economic well being of the economy. Yet, Becker (1975) and Paulsen (2001) state that human capital has a number of public (societal) and private (individual) benefits. Paulsen identifies some public benefits as adaptability, political awareness, social awareness, less criminal activity, lower public expenditures, social returns, economic returns to the country, productivity, and greater citizenship. Bowen (1997) recognizes some private benefits such as personal development, life enrichment, development of knowledge and skills, monetary benefits, cognitive growth, emotional awareness, moral development, and practical competence. One individual may gain more human capital from similar training or education than another because they invested more of themselves in the opportunity. This differentiation in the individual attainment of human capital is the result of personal motivation having a significant role in the acquisition of human capital.

Human capital is not easily measured and individual and societal benefits are not necessarily immediate (Becker, 1975). Therefore, an individual must invest a great deal of
time and energy to develop human capital and realize that the benefits may not be readily identified. Paulsen (2001) points out that when an individual makes a decision to invest time and money in obtaining human capital or an external constituent decides to invest money in an individual or group to obtain human capital, the price and benefits must be weighed to ensure they are making a wise investment. For higher education policy, this means that there is a need for information on the increasing value of higher education for individual economic self-sufficiency. Those who are “beyond the margins” could be the beneficiaries of these policy actions. Furthermore, those constituents who subsidize higher education must also be informed of the benefit to the nation’s economic future obtained through educating the often ignored “beyond the margins” population. In the development of and investment in human capital, new economy theory (Carnoy, 2000) notes the importance of balancing the individual and societal benefits.

*Critical Theory*

Critical theorists (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1981) emphasize the individual benefits of human capital and critique decisions made by leaders in government and education that hamper individuals without privilege. Critical theorists emphasize individual consciousness and social awareness. Chomsky (2000) and others suggest that individuals need to understand the historical and political context of decisions made and the future they may face (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Without knowledge of social, political, and economic conditions, individuals cannot make informed and personally beneficial decisions, according to these theorists. Chomsky (1999; 2000) posits that the gap between the rich and poor will continue to exist as long as the voices and concerns of the undeserved populations are ignored and they are uninformed about the realities that exist in the world in which they live.
Herideen (1998) states that critical pedagogy makes it possible to analyze a situation critically, break down inequalities, and open doors and create pathways that may not have existed for individuals. Through critical pedagogy an individual can look at the situation locally, globally, and particularly in multiple ways of power and influence (culturally, economically, and politically) to uncover various perspectives. In understanding these perspectives an individual will develop a better view of human experience and enhance his or her ability to influence their situation (Apple, 2003; Freire, 1981). The antidote then is that critical pedagogy and education together can help students garner the individual and societal benefits of human capital. Developing and obtaining individual and societal human capital will create pathways for the individual to meet the needs of the new economy and become self-sufficient and a productive citizen for society despite these economic forces (Apple, 2000).

**New Economy Theory: Bringing Economists and Critical Theorists Together**

“New economy theory” posits that the fears of critical theorists are justifiable. Carnoy’s (2000) new economy theory suggests that if the underserved population, and by implication the “beyond the margins” students, do not develop specific skills and acquire knowledge for the new economy, then both individuals and the economy will suffer: not only will individuals not attain economic self-sufficiency but also the economy will either have an insufficient workforce or inadequately trained workers. New economy theory (Carnoy) and the concepts proposed by economists (Carnoy et al., 1993; Castells, 1996; Reich, 1992; Reisman, 1996; Rifkin, 1995) and critical theorists (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1981), together, underscore the economic value and societal importance of balancing both economic and social needs with those of individuals (Smith, 2004). Economists, capitalists, and critical
Theorists alike understand a balance must occur, but in a changing economy and tight financial times, according to Carnoy, each must work together more than ever for the benefit of those who are “beyond the margins” and the nation’s economy.

Thus, from these perspectives, in order to ensure that the underserved are not ignored the needs of this population must become valuable elements of the new economy and not subordinate to economic needs of the greater society. The “development of a permanent underclass of people can both destabilize and debilitate a society” (Roueche & Roueche, 1993, p. 12). In economic terms, the costs of ignoring this population are not insignificant. Ukpolo and Dernburg (1997) found that for every public dollar Tennessee invested into higher education, society could expect an average real return of nine dollars and thirty cents. Public investment in educating those who would not be able to afford higher education otherwise pays major dividends to those individuals and society. The public money spent on education is returned back on sales tax alone (Ukpolo & Dernburg). Flanigan (1991) states that there is a cost of $4,600 per year per dropout, due to lost tax revenue and spending for social programs. Fitzgerald and Delaney (2002) posit that if the college attendance and completion rates were narrowed between the rich and the poor there would be a $230 billion increase to the gross domestic product and an $80 billion increase in tax revenue. These economic figures suggest that the focus solely on the economic benefits of society and the economy should not overlook the underserved and “beyond the margins” students. The “beyond the margins” population must obtain the education and skills necessary to become and remain economically self-sufficient. The acquisition of the needed education and skills will pay large dividends not only to these individuals but also to the economy and society.
Community Colleges

Community colleges are the primary postsecondary educational institutions to serve underserved populations, including academically under-prepared students, minority students—particularly Latino students—disabled students, low-income students, and older and part-time students, among others (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995). Community colleges are expected through public policy and federal and state fiscal support to address the educational and civic needs of a diverse society, provide access to education and training where it would otherwise not exist, increase individuals’ abilities to engage in civic life, and provide skills and training for those seeking employment (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen, 2001; Dougherty, 1989; Shaw & Jacobs, 2003). There are considerable economic and fiscal pressures on community colleges, however, to offer less attention to these expectations. Economic pressures have led to a more market-driven institution, with a focus on the skills needed by the local economy rather than the needs of individuals (Levin; Shaw & Jacobs).

Multiple Missions and Pathways

Despite the local, state, and federal policy and fiscal initiatives for community colleges to become more market driven and focused on job training for the economy (Dougherty, 2002; Levin, 2001) there has been an appeal from scholars and practitioners alike for community colleges to continue their historic mission of addressing the diverse educational and civic needs of individuals and society (Herideen, 1998). The plea for community colleges to retain their traditional mission and also respond to the needs of the current market-driven atmosphere and the needs of the workforce has facilitated community colleges to fall short of expectations in almost all areas (Levin). Dougherty (1989) posits that
community colleges are asked to educate America’s workforce, have strong general education classes that prepare students for transfer, educate an at-risk and non-traditional population that many other institutions fail to educate or ignore, and meet various community needs through education and support services. These tasks cover a plethora of areas and needs and can require an assortment of services, programs, and staff to accomplish.

Traditionally, community colleges are considered to be democratic institutions, able to promote social equality. The new economy and its focus on capitalism and human capital have impeded the ability of community colleges to advance social and economic equality (Herideen, 1998). Apple (2003) and others have argued that education does not have to be a passive recipient of economic and social change: educators can forge a direction for institutions that will serve the best interest of its students, especially “beyond the margins” students (Freire, 1981). That is, community colleges do not control the economy, but they can control their response to the needs of the economy, their academic focus and standards, and the programs and services they offer.

Cohen and Brawer (2003) state that the primary method used to promote access and the success of “beyond the margins” students is through developing accessible, new, and different pathways for not only these students, but also for all those who may be interested in postsecondary education. These alternative pathways are multiple avenues students can use to obtain their postsecondary education or other various educational goals through continuing education programs (degrees, certificates, and training) and virtual and distance programs (Callan & Finney, 2003; Quigley & Bailey, 2003). Although these pathways exist, students are not always cognizant of their existence and do not know how to access them (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Community colleges are often the institutions that provide these pathways
for groups of people who would otherwise have been excluded from higher education (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995). Valadez (1993) indicates that these underserved students are frequently the highly non-traditional students that community colleges have historically served: these students have now garnered the attention of society for economic and workforce needs.

There is a concern among scholars that curriculum has evolved so that it is “oriented to intermittent course taking rather than degree or program completion, career related coursework rather than general education, to remediation rather than advanced basic skills or integrative coursework, and to continuing or community education” (Clowes & Levin, 1989, p. 461). It is clear that the mission of community colleges has been in a state of flux (Clowes & Levin; Roueche & Roueche, 1993). Arguably, community colleges do retain their traditional objectives and also integrate new education and training initiatives because of encouragement from external constituents. Levin (2001) states that community colleges are becoming more focused on revenue generation than pursuing their broad mission of access and inclusion of the underserved. The community college mission has changed (Levin, 2000) and this change has had an adverse effect on non-traditional students, especially “beyond the margins” students who are not served by other institutions.

Brint (2003) and Dougherty (1989) both found that community colleges, because of their focus on revenue generation and the changing economy, have adopted a number of missions or initiatives and have become ineffective at all of them. Cain (1999) and Bergquist (1998) state that community colleges have become complex and fragmented and must retain an overarching mission that helps guide all institutional sub-missions. External and internal constituents are unlikely to agree upon a single mission to guide all initiatives because
community colleges are resource dependent and their resource providers are encouraging multiple missions (Bailey, 2002; Bailey & Morest, 2004). Various researchers (Bailey; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Roueche, Taber, & Roueche, 1995) posit that it would be beneficial to students and the local communities served if each community college coordinated their functions and developed complementary missions. Removing some of the complexity and fragmentation that exists in community colleges, which would benefit most community college students, especially those who are underserved, may reduce ineffectiveness.

Financial constraints placed upon community colleges do not block access or change admissions’ standards, but they do reduce access to instruction, cause a decline in scheduled offerings, increase the cost of tuition and fees, and deplete already arguably low student support services (Phillippe, 2000; Sheldon, 2003). Boehner (2003) states that these factors can diminish the access of “beyond the margins” students to postsecondary institutions through greater costs, through the reduction of the needed pathways because of limited classes and greater class sizes, or through decreased services that can thwart the successful completion of their academic goals. With such obstacles evident in community colleges, how are “beyond the margins” students able to reach their academic goals?

Street-Level Bureaucrats

In an organization with decreasing resources, limited services, and an ambiguous mission, “street-level bureaucrats” begin to have a strong influence on the ability of people to achieve desired outcomes (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky defines “street-level bureaucrats” as those who work in organizations with these characteristics that promote the influence of street-level bureaucrats and those in public service positions who interact with customers regularly
and have substantial discretion in their daily work. Community colleges are organizations with declining resources, inadequate services, and an indistinct mission (Cain, 1999; Bergquist, 1998; Winston, 1999) and many of the faculty, staff, and administrators who work with students regularly have a great deal of discretion in their work (Aronowitz, 2001). Faculty, staff, and administrators in community colleges who are street-level bureaucrats have considerable potential impact on the success of students, especially those who are “beyond the margins” (Levin, 2003).

Valadez (1993) notes that faculty interactions and student relationships are influential in the goal achievement of students. These influential relationships with faculty are even more pivotal for students in community colleges, because the majority of student interactions with an institutional representative in community colleges are with faculty (Vaughan, 2000). Researchers (Bowl, 2003; Goto, 1999; Howell, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) indicate that faculty utilize the diverse experiences of students to facilitate a connection between the education students receive in the classroom with the knowledge and skills the students will need in the workplace and as citizens. Grubb (1999) promotes the increased allocation of community college resources and services to help faculty members prepare for their role with students in and out of the classroom. These resources can be used to prepare and mentor new faculty, help faculty create networks, encourage the development of institutional staff, and teach the culture of the institution to incoming faculty and staff. O’Banion (1996) stresses the value of faculty focusing on each student in and out of the classroom. Cohen and Brawer (2003) state that implementation of these faculty preparation suggestions is more imperative in community colleges as more than sixty percent of all community college faculty are part-time.
Other scholars identify a variety of methods that organizational members can use in improving student education, particularly in the retention of underserved and at-risk students. Mentoring is identified (Stromei, 2000). Levine and Nidiffer (1996) note that almost every student who fulfills their academic goals in college in spite of obstacles, common to non-traditional students, has had someone to encourage them. Typically, low-income students have had little encouragement early in life. In addition, low-income students with personal problems—such as psychological, emotional, economic, or relationship instability—have other barriers to overcome besides completing their academic requirements. Levine and Nidiffer state that these students need direction, information, and reassurance given individually and not in a predisposed manner. Others (Jalomo, 2001; Laden, 1999; Valadez, 1993) have noted that beyond mentors, underserved populations also need other human resources such as tutors and counselors to assist in overcoming personal concerns so that they can achieve their academic goals. This present investigation shows the impact faculty and staff—viewed as street level bureaucrats in the community college—can have on students who are “beyond the margins.”

Community College Characteristics and Programs

Community colleges appeal to students who seek postsecondary education, especially “beyond the margins” students, because of low-tuition, convenient locations, open admissions, and comprehensive course offerings (The American Association of Community Colleges, 2001; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Herideen, 1998; Vaughan, 2000). Community colleges are institutions that supply a second chance for these students (Grubb, 2001; Phillippe, 2000). Community colleges fulfill their traditional roles of open access, equity, a comprehensive and convenient curriculum, and a focus on teaching through transfer
programs, occupational/technical programs, developmental/remedial education, basic skills programs, community services, and support services (Dougherty; Vaughan). These defining elements and multiple programs help clarify why community colleges attract underserved students more than any other institution of higher education.

Of the 1,000 public and another 200-300 private community colleges across the country (Phillippe, 2000), each institution can determine its overall focus. Community colleges often focus on transfer education and services or occupational/technical programs while developmental/remedial education, basic skills, community services, and support services become secondary missions (Levin, 2001). While non-traditional students are the primary students in community colleges (Brint, 2003; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Herideen, 1998), the majority of students that are “beyond the margins” are in vocational programs, basic skills courses, and developmental/remedial education courses (Cain, 1999; Levin, 2003; Roueche & Roueche, 1999; Shaw, 2001; Vaughan, 2000). “Beyond the margins” students are also enrolled in transfer education and other traditional Associate degree programs. The courses, basic skills and remedial education, are often noncredit courses and the primary mode of education for those who are considered “beyond the margins.” Over five million students, just slightly less than those enrolled in credit courses, are enrolled in noncredit courses in community colleges across the country (Coley, 2000; Phillippe). Grubb, Badway, and Bell (2003) suggest that noncredit courses serve as a bridging mechanism to credit courses and further access to higher education. Grubb et al. state that these noncredit and basic skills programs are more flexible, low cost, less impersonal and bureaucratic, more likely to be in community facilities and tailored to community needs, and closer to low-income people.
Basic Skills

Basic skills courses often encompass adult education classes, General Education Development (GED) classes, and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Many of the “beyond the margins” students who are illiterate, or are immigrants with limited English, or have learning or physical disabilities, and are often minorities and have low-incomes are found in basic skills courses. In 1998, seventy-one percent of the high school population in the United States graduated with a high school diploma while eighty-six percent had a high school diploma or a GED diploma (Greene, 2002). Approximately 700,000 to 800,000 take the GED each year and 500,000 pass (Tyler, 2003). The immediate benefits of a GED may be limited, but the long-term benefits are greater (Tyler; U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). Those with weak academic skills who obtain a GED receive more immediate benefit than those with high academic skills and without a GED or High School completion because of the job options the GED will make available (Tyler).

Community colleges are also the second largest supplier of adult literacy programs. Literacy programs may be ESL classes for immigrants or classes to improve literacy skills of native English speakers (Gomez, 1999). Immigrants who fail to attain any formal schooling or arrive in the U.S. after the age of twelve struggle to obtain literacy levels high enough to become and remain economically self-sufficient (Greenberg, Macias, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001). GED and ESL classes supply a pathway for those students who are considered “beyond the margins” to further postsecondary education and to be economically self-sufficient.
Developmental/Remedial Education

Developmental/remedial education is also a large component of community college education, especially for the underserved (Phipps, 1998; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Remedial education differs from basic skills in that basic skills are often programs and courses that are noncredit, such as ESL or GED classes. Remedial/developmental courses can be credit or noncredit classes, but regardless, do not count towards any degree requirement. A student needs to complete the remedial course or courses before he or she can enroll in an upper level class that meets degree requirements. Students most likely enroll in a remedial course because they do not meet the requirements upon enrollment or do not score high enough in a specific content area on their placement exam.

Remedial education is a necessary pathway to allow access to higher education for some portions of our society, especially those who are “beyond the margins.” Shaw (2001) has argued that remedial education is the only way for some students to enter or obtain academic success in postsecondary education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) states that remedial courses are offered in ninety-eight percent of all community colleges and forty-two percent of each first year class is enrolled in one or more remedial course, thirty-five percent in math and twenty-three percent in reading. The institutional cost of remediation is around one percent of the total cost for education. If remediation was no longer utilized, it is unlikely that any other program would have the societal and individual benefits that the remediation courses in community colleges supply. Phipps (1998) states that remediation is a benefit to society over the alternatives of unemployment, low-wage jobs, or incarceration. Public benefits of remediation include increased tax revenue, greater productivity, reduced crime rate, and an increased quality of civic life (Phipps). Perin (2002)
The Underserved posits that remedial classes need to be aligned with curriculum courses; academically underprepared students need to be given individualized attention and tutoring; and faculty need to be given motivation to teach remedial courses to have greater results for those underserved students in these courses.

Vocational Education

Vocational education also serves a number of low-income, unemployed, and underemployed “beyond the margins” students. Vocational education serves an even more diverse and constantly changing clientele because of the rapidly shifting economy (Bragg, 2001). Vocational education has become a vital mission of community colleges as the economy has changed and business and industry use community colleges to train their employees and use vocational courses as recruiting tools (Brint, 2003; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 2002). Grubb (2001) posits that community colleges can develop better vocational programs through developing relationships with other institutions, the state government, businesses, high schools, and the community to ensure vocational education is integrated with the overall mission of the community college (Johnson, 2002). There has been a fear by some scholars that highly non-traditional and at-risk students will be trained and educated by community colleges for business and industry to fill a needed work slot, and that they will not receive the knowledge and skills needed to be economically self-sufficient in the new economy.

The mission of the “community college shifted in the 1990s from serving local communities to serving the economy, specifically serving the interests of capital by producing labor and reducing public sector spending” (Levin, 2000, p. 19). Community college “behaviors were responses to a global economy, promoted by the state and guided by
institutional managers. College administrators reacted to demands from students and business
and industry leaders for skills training for employment. Faculty altered curriculum to adjust
to marketplace demands, particularly the requirement for employability skills” (Levin, p. 2).
Community college faculty, administrators, and staff have made changes in their curriculum
and services to meet the needs of a changing economy. Business and industry have utilized
community colleges to hire students to meet workforce needs. New economy theory (Carnoy,
2000) implies that “beyond the margins” students must obtain the knowledge and skills
needed not only to fill a slot in the workforce but also to fill a job slot and remain
economically self-sufficient. This is in the best interest of the individual, society, and the
nation’s economy.

Community colleges are the primary postsecondary institutions to serve a growing and
diverse underserved population in America. These actions have required community colleges
to diversify their programs and services to meet the needs of individuals and the needs of
business and industry. These changes have also developed community colleges into
organizations where street-level bureaucrats (faculty and staff) may play an increasingly
important role in the academic success of students. “Beyond the margins” students are not
only ignored by society and the economy but also are ignored by community colleges.
“Beyond the margins” students who have the most obstacles to overcome in seeking their
academic goals are largely enrolled in programs that receive the least internal focus and
services and minimal external resources. That a population needing the greatest services is
systematically given the lease amount of support is a matter of concern. New economy
theory suggests that the “beyond the margins” population cannot be ignored (Carnoy, 2000).
Education supplies a number of public and private benefits to society and the major question
about these benefits is whether economic public (societal) benefits can be balanced with private (individual) benefits for the underserved in America. Those in society who are “beyond the margins” must be understood so that society and community colleges can promote the development of this population through essential responses and support services.
Chapter Three:
Methodology and Methods

This study examines the perceptions of “beyond the margins” community college students on education and work. To both capture and understand these perceptions, it is necessary in research to understand, listen, and to some extent respond to the voices of these students. “Only by watching carefully what people do and say, following their example, and slowly becoming part of their groups, activities, conversations, and connections do we stand a chance of grasping what is meaningful to them” (Eisenhart, 2001, p. 23). Categories of race, gender, and class are important to consider in this understanding. As well, social, economic, and political issues, as well as institutional contexts play a role in understanding the social reality of others. Qualitative field methods are appropriate for capturing and understanding this social reality (Mason, 1996), as is a qualitative research design (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

In order to fulfill the purpose of this investigation—that is, to understand the perceptions and experiences of “beyond the margins” students with respect to their education and employment—I used a multi-site field study. In employing several of the characteristics of case study research, this investigation is “bounded” to current non-traditional community college students and focuses on those who are viewed as “beyond the margins” (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 1993). This approach provides discovery, insight, and interpretation of the perceptions and experiences of these students (Merriam, 1988).

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1 This research was part of a Lumina Foundation funded project directed by John S. Levin and data from that project are used in this dissertation.
Settings and Sample

The community college as a site has been chosen because the community college is the institution where highly non-traditional students in large numbers are found—more so than at any other postsecondary educational institution (Choy, 2002). Thus, selection is theoretically appropriate (Mason, 1996). Three sites were selected because several characteristics of the sites shed light on students’ perceptions and the institutional context that frames perceptions. These characteristics include geographical location, student demographics, and legal jurisdiction and framework. The literature on community colleges indicates that of the many variables that affect institutional behaviors location, demographics, and governance are among the most salient (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Kater & Levin, 2005; Levin, 2001). I selected three community colleges, one in Illinois, one in North Carolina, and one in California as sites for the investigation. The Illinois College is a unionized institution located in a major U.S. city, in an industrial and inner city area, with a student population that includes a majority of students self-identifying as Hispanic/Latino. The North Carolina College is a non-unionized institution in a moderately sized city, with a student population that has a substantial percentage of African American students. The California College is a unionized institution in a moderately sized agricultural city, with a student population comprised of equal numbers of Hispanic/Latino and Caucasian students. All three colleges serve between 30,000 - 50,000 students in urban or city settings and have comprehensive curricula, including substantial offerings at the developmental or remedial levels. Institutions of this size and in these urban/city locations are impacted more by the global economy than smaller institutions (Levin; Pepicello & Hopkins, 1998). In discussing these three sites, I use pseudonyms, as required in the protocol for this investigation (Patton, 2002). The three
colleges are thus named Illinois Community College, North Carolina Community College, and California Community College. These institutions are known in their respective communities as quality institutions, but are not known nationally as model institutions. The institutions are typical urban/city community colleges in the United States.

Within these institutions, I interviewed and observed students who are characterized as “beyond the margins” (underserved and at-risk) as well as administrators and faculty who work with these students. “Beyond the margins” students are those who struggle in the new economy, are often in non-credit or pre-collegiate courses and programs in community colleges, are often or have been on welfare, often suffer from long-term unemployment or underemployment, are often physically disabled, are often mentally challenged, are often immigrants, and are often minorities (Levin, 2003). The students interviewed at California Community College are used for comparison purposes. The students at California Community College exhibit personal characteristics and attributes that distinguish the unique characteristics of “beyond the margins” students that are targeted at North Carolina and Illinois Community College and are considered highly non-traditional. The students at California Community College are similar to the “beyond the margins” population; however, they do not exhibit as many non-traditional characteristics and are considered minimally or moderately non-traditional. To gain access to these individuals, I worked with administrators and faculty to select students from vocational classes, English as a Second Language classes, Adult High School classes, General Education Department classes, Adult Basic Education classes, and compensatory education classes for those mentally and physically disabled. As well, from the California College, I used data, previously collected by John S. Levin, drawn from interviews with students in a variety of program areas, including academic and
The underserved 45

occupational. These serve as comparative data for those data from Illinois and North Carolina. Theoretical sampling, the use of participants whom meet the characteristics of the population under investigation, was used to obtain student participants for the interviews (Mason, 1996; Patton, 2002). The different classes and areas were chosen to ensure a representative sample of “beyond the margins” students.

Data Collection

Before beginning data collection, I completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application and was approved by the IRB (See Appendix A). I gained access to the campus sites through the president or an upper-level administrator. This relationship opened communication with academic deans responsible for the departments relevant to this study. Once access to the sites was obtained, I asked the Dean to make contact with faculty and staff. The faculty and staff then worked with me to select students from classes to be interviewed. Students, chosen randomly by faculty, were asked to participate in the investigation. A modified snowball sampling technique was used as well (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). If the student declined the next person was asked to participate. Students were neither rewarded nor punished by their participation or refusal to participate in the interviews. Approximately three students at each Illinois Community College and North Carolina Community College did not participate when asked because of time constraints, such as working on their academic assignments. At California Community College, all students asked agreed to participate. Each student was guaranteed anonymity and assured that the information they shared would be used, primarily, in the aggregate to represent “beyond the margins” students at each site. Direct quotations were used in the
study to allow student voices to guide the results. Each student was given a pseudonym to provide humanity to the students yet maintaining their anonymity (Patton, 2002).

The interviews at California College occurred in the spring of 2003 and 2004 and the interviews at Illinois and North Carolina occurred in the spring of 2004. A complete timeline for this study can be found in Appendix B. The students interviewed had been enrolled in the institutions for at least half a semester. They were not new attendees at the time of the interviews. Each student at Illinois and North Carolina Community College participated in an interview for twenty minutes to an hour in length. Interview times varied because of the students’ availability, for example several took time out of their class to participate in the interviews. At the start of the interview each student was notified of the study’s purpose, that a tape recorder would record the interview, and that a consent form was going to be used (Creswell, 1998). Before the interview began the contents of the consent form were communicated to the participant before they signed the form (See Appendix C).

The interview used open-ended semi-structured questions (See Appendix D). The background literature, the purpose of the study, and the research questions of the study guided the strategy of inquiry and development of the interview questions (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Open-ended questions are necessary to ensure that the researcher can find and understand patterns that exist among participants and it also assists in limiting the researcher’s personal beliefs (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, I engaged the participants in conversations (Burgess, 1984) as a device to gain personal perceptions and tease out through probes the thoughts and beliefs of these students. I was diligent in allowing the words of the participants not my own words to dominate the discussion or conversation. Student interviews concluded once the data become saturated and new information was no longer
communicated (Creswell, 1998). I also interviewed a sample of faculty and administrators, primarily to serve as validity checks.

Observations were ancillary but served as memory and validity checks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I recorded observations by hand in a journal. Observations included the interactions of students as well as the site environment, such as its location and potential influence upon student perceptions and educational experiences.

Documents were also ancillary but served as validity checks as well as background information to guide analysis. Documents included institutional data drawn from the college website and from institutional research offices. Demographic and financial data provided evidence of student characteristics and institutional resources.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, the recording of each interview was transcribed verbatim (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). Following the transcriptions, the interviews were coded using open coding (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). All interviews were coded together, after all the data were collected. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione’s (2002) Three Iterations of Analysis were used to guide the analysis of data. The first iteration obtained surface content analysis of the data. In the second iteration the data were analyzed again using the theoretical frameworks drawn from new economy theory (Carnoy, 2000), critical pedagogy (Apple, 1996, 2000, 2003; Freire, 1981), and human capital (Becker, 1975). Information on the theoretical and analytical frameworks and other perspectives that were used in data analysis can be found in Appendix E. The third iteration was a combination of results from the first and second iterations of the data and then the application of the analysis results to the research questions. This last iteration brought meaning to the analyzed data and assisted in
connecting the results to the questions of the study (Anfara et al.). Miles and Huberman’s (1994) process for generating findings and conclusions and for verification guided this process.

A number of documents were collected from the sites, including from institutional websites and from institutional officials to corroborate the information obtained from the primary data collected through student interviews. These documents assisted me in understanding the students’ experiences and perceptions and how those might affect their behaviors. Document analysis relied upon the theoretical frameworks of new economy theory, critical pedagogy, and human capital.

Observations based upon limited participation (Burgess, 1984) were also utilized to supplement interview data (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). These observations occurred primarily in public areas on the campuses, and I observed the behaviors of students, including those with whom they communicated on a regular basis, and what they discussed. The data obtained through observation were used to corroborate the data already gathered through interviews.

The three sites were compared once the data from each institution were coded and analyzed. Before the sites were compared, I followed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) advice on developing site summaries and sharing these with a colleague for their review. This approach brings clarity to the researcher’s thoughts and a deeper understanding of each site, as well as providing challenge to and support for the findings from analysis.

Data and findings from the three sites were compared. In this way, this investigation offered analysis within sites, among sites, and between two sites (North Carolina and Illinois Community College) and the third site (California Community College), providing three
perspectives on data. Results from this investigation then indicated the particularities of individual sites, the similarities of all three sites, the differences between the two similar student participant sites and the third site, and aggregate findings from the three sites as one unit, generalized as the community college.

In order to validate findings and conclusions, I relied upon the several techniques of Miles and Huberman (1994). These included looking for negative evidence, checking out rival explanations, following up on surprises, understanding researcher effects, and ruling out spurious relations. For further validation data are displayed through the use of extensive quotations in the text of this dissertation. These quotations serve as consistent and numerous evidence for the findings of this research. As well, the reporting of direct quotations from interviews underscores the focus of this research on student perceptions (Mason, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The benefit of the use of three sites is that at one of the sites another researcher undertook data collection and thus there is greater potential to identify researcher effects as well as a broader range of evidence.

Researcher Bias Statement

My previous experiences and my knowledge limited as well as facilitated the generation and interpretation of data (Patton, 2002). I have worked and been a student for over a decade in public higher education institutions, although I have never worked or been a student at a community college. I am a first generation college student who believes that the achievement of a student is directly related to personal determination and willingness to sacrifice. Yet, I also understand that many students need support and guidance to reach their potential and overcome obstacles. I am also a proponent of new economy theory: I understand the value of balancing the needs of individuals and the needs of the market so that
both sides benefit. These assumptions influenced the purpose of this study. These assumptions and my experiences are important because they shape the way I see the world and influence how I conduct research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Nonetheless, by relying upon the scholarship on qualitative research and on the methods of data collection and techniques of data analysis, I provided credible and trustworthy results.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity do not take on the same meaning as they do in quantitative research, but they are vital elements of a research study if considered part of the investigation’s credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Mason, 1996). It is important to ensure that the researcher uses quality data gathering techniques and that the data obtained are consistent, legitimate, and dependable (Patton, 2003). The validity or trustworthiness of the study was achieved through recorded observations, analysis of documents, thick descriptions from student interviews, colleague reviews, and oversight by a research advisor (Creswell, 1998). The problem of the researcher’s identity and the relationship of the researcher to study participants are complicated matters in qualitative research (Mason, 1996), but in order to diminish researcher effects, numerous researchers have offered guidance (Burgess, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mason). While the students were largely of working class backgrounds and a large portion were students of color, social class and ethnic differences between researcher and participants can be overcome with both researcher sensitivity and validity checks, such as efforts to look for disconfirming evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, providing a record of evidence (Creswell). Colleagues supplied checks on my coding of data. Further consultation with colleagues on findings and
conclusions were used to ensure that research was not influenced by personal opinion and so that the chain of evidence can be followed logically. This approximates researcher triangulation (Patton). Finally, an audit trail, which includes field notes, a calendar, a journal, consent forms, transcriptions, and documents collected, served as a mechanism of trustworthiness of findings.

Qualitative field studies address constantly changing environments and site investigation depends on the style and choices, developed relationships, and interpersonal skills of the researcher. Through systematic approaches and the use of data collection and data analysis techniques based upon the advice of qualitative scholars, the qualitative researcher can increase credibility of results and thus become more useful for future researchers (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Through theoretical generalization (Mason, 1996), this multi site investigation can be used to understand other “beyond the margins” students at community colleges across the country.
Chapter Four:
The Experiences and Perceptions of “Beyond the Margins” Students

The analysis of “beyond the margins” students’ perceptions on education and work, as well as on their college experiences, elicited rich data. These data exhibited a number of patterns and connections that apply to the four major research questions of this study.

The participants were students in three community colleges in different regions of the United States. Two of the community colleges, North Carolina Community College and Illinois Community College, are compared and share a similar population of “beyond the margins” students who were interviewed. The third college, California Community College, is used for comparison purposes with the other two community colleges: its students are considered non-traditional but not necessarily “beyond the margins” or highly non-traditional. The subtle differences and similarities in these two populations are evident in the voices and experiences of the students at each institution. These differences indicate that “beyond the margins” students are both ignored by and seemingly invisible in society. The California Community College will be covered in less detail than the other two institutions, but the student voices indicate by comparison the extreme needs of “beyond the margins” students at the two sites. In all three sites, a limited number of faculty and staff supply supplemental data both to give validity to the findings and enhance our understanding of the student voices. Pseudonyms identify all students, faculty, and administrative staff at North Carolina and Illinois Community College. Three themes—institutional issues, social/culture issues, and skill development issues—are used to organize the findings identified through the perceptions and experiences of those interviewed at each of the three sites.
North Carolina Community College

North Carolina Community College enrolls approximately 40,000 students in curriculum classes. The number of students enrolled in noncredit classes is not tracked, but is estimated to be approximately 20,000 students. North Carolina Community College is a nonresidential campus and has one main campus, four satellite campuses, and forty-three community sites. The sites are dispersed throughout the community. The basic skills division houses most of these “beyond the margins” students in one of the satellite campuses. This site is an old building within the city, and neither distinguishable nor attractive. The basic skills division at North Carolina Community College is large and is composed predominately of Latino/a and African American Students. North Carolina Community College has a rapidly growing student population, with plans to have more campus sites, and is undergoing financial struggles. The seventeen “beyond the margins” students interviewed ranged between the ages of eighteen and sixty-four, came from seven different countries, and represented four ethnicities, although the students were predominately Caucasian and African American. Through analyzing North Carolina Community College students’ perceptions and experiences, I identified a number of themes pertaining to the three themes: institutional issues, social/cultural issues, and skill development issues.

**Institutional Issues**

The structure of the programs at North Carolina Community College are beneficial to “beyond the margins” students. The students acknowledge and value that their education is without tuition cost, inexpensive compared to other institutions, that the schedule is flexible enough that they can work at their own pace, and that the institution does not resemble high school. Harry, an Adult High School student, says “Basically for the first two years you pay
one-tenth of what a university would charge you and then the last two years you go to the University. You get the same degree and it is as if you went there for four years.” Harry also acknowledged the flexibility of the classes. “It is a lot more flexible than high school…especially since you are doing it independently, you don’t have to wait for anyone else. The flexibility is awesome, especially if you have the day off from work you can do overtime.” Angela, in Adult High School, remarks “I can learn at my own pace, instead of everybody else’s.” Rufus, an Adult High School student, agrees: “The good and the bad thing is the fact that you can leave when you want.” The students also appreciate the limited interruptions in class, no homework, and that people are more focused on school than ‘being cool’. They are thankful they can pursue an education on their own terms and do so without coercion. It is their choice. Darrel, a vocational student, notes “I have had a blast here. I’ve learned more than I ever thought I would, and it’s been rewarding to me.” The students also recognize the practical nature of their assignments. Darrel asserts “Here instructors are down to earth, it’s more practical…Here it is a daily thing. Kelly, a GED student, emotes “I am more comfortable here, it is a lot easier around here. I feel like there is more people my age or older and I don’t feel uncomfortable.” Susan, an administrator, states that community colleges are “the most effective agency of the government for training and retraining, because they are accessible, affordable, and have a quick turn around time.” Susan believes the goal of the community colleges is to “accept students where they are and take them as far as they can go.” Faculty and staff, according to Susan, create a number of pathways for the students to utilize.

The students realize that the low cost and flexible programs developed primarily for students who have already failed in the education system, as well as the various support
services designed to promote their goal attainment, are opportunities that are not well understood by the public. Students suggest better marketing of these programs and the institution because many could benefit from the opportunities at the community college.

Harry, from Adult High School, noted:

If kids knew more about [the community college and its programs and services], I think it would help the community by getting kids off the street… Put it in the paper, put it on TV, whatever. That is another thing, I had been here for my first three months, I was shocked that there wasn’t a line of people, these kids coming in here begging, please let me come in here and work here, this is great. I don’t think it is too published I guess, people don’t know about it. If it was more well known and got more popular, they would have more donations and have a bigger facility, they would be able to capacitiate more people.

Celeste, a GED student, concurs and her experience supports the point.

I would have done this long ago. I never found it. I think they should really…have this advertised because I said to myself how many people are out there like me that are willing and want to but they don’t know. It took me 3 years to find this place. I didn’t find it in the media or the phone book. I had to cry. The last time I talked to that woman, I cried and I said I am not going to give up, please find somebody to help me. She was touched and it took her one referral that led to another referral until I finally got here and realized this was the place for me…How much does it take for people to have this opportunity? We do have programs in this country. It’s not just getting GED,
basic fundamentals of education; we do have programs, list those places so people can come like I am. I could have had this many years ago if I had known where to find this program but each time you went in, it was so advanced, something to read and if you don’t understand, how can you read it? So, I advocate strongly for something like that.

While the structure of academic programs and services assist “beyond the margins” students, there are some common structural problems for those in basic skills classes. There is little group work, if any, done in the programs. Kelly, a GED student, elaborates: “It is not like there is any group work or anything like that. It is mostly just you doing what you need to do.” An Adult High School student, Shantia, notes “I don’t talk to anyone, it is quiet.” Angela, an Adult High School student, states “In any room I might be the only one doing World History and other people might be doing math or something. It is just me; Independent.” A GED student, Kelly, remarks “Everybody comes and goes at their own pace. Sometimes it is really hard. I have spoken to people, but I haven’t developed any relationship with anyone.”

Students often verbalized their desire to learn how to use computers better, but noted that they were not gaining the necessary skills in class. The students realize that computer skills are necessary to pursue a number of jobs. A GED student, Kelly, exemplifies this thought by saying “That is something I would like to learn and I am probably going to have to take a class if I would like to be in an office somewhere.” Almost every student used computers at least once a week for class, while only a few students used it daily in their classes.
The students understand that faculty members have the well being of the students in mind; they motivate and care about students.

The teachers are nice. The supervising teachers are really nice; they offer their help, but they are not all over you all the time. I think there is pretty good communication between the students and the staff. So, I mean I like it, I like it a lot more (Angela, Adult High School).

Shantia, an Adult High School student, reaffirms “Nobody in the class disrespect[ed] the teacher so you didn’t have to stop and stuff like that.” She continues, “[Teachers] pay attention to you.” Val, who is also a student in Adult High School, asserts:

Teachers, they are willing to help if you are willing to learn and stuff like that. They really do care. If you haven’t been here in a while they ask you how you have been, how your family has been, and stuff like that. They are really open minded and caring and stuff like that. That is my experience, they are real caring. They want to see you get more in life than just anything…Ya, it is better. They teach you like adults and not like little kids.

Students acknowledge the individualized attention. Celeste, a GED student, believes faculty members are supportive: “They have been very supportive here, you know, and they are always willing to go that extra mile.”

Faculty and staff members go out of their way to help students reach their goals, but do not push them in a specific direction. The faculty and staff do not encourage the students to be overly focused on the jobs available in the new economy. Instead, they encourage and motivate their students to succeed at their own pursuits. Angela, in Adult High School, affirms “It is kind of just whatever you’re interested in. If you want to work they would show
you how to do that, if I want to go to college, they will help you with that.” Harry, an Adult High School student, states:

They say, ‘do you want to go to college or do you want to work?’ If you want to go to college, they help you ask questions. If you want to go to work, they help you ask questions about that. It is really helpful, but it is up to you what to do, but it helps you out…I make a couple decisions, ask a couple questions, and they support, not push you where you should go.

An administrator, Jeff, notes that the goal of continuing education programs is to teach the basics so that the students can survive and “adapt quickly and effectively.”

While the students at North Carolina Community College did not indicate that they were pressured into specific educational areas, many students did express a feeling of pressure to progress rapidly in their academic endeavor. Kelly notes:

Sometimes I feel like they are pushing me too fast to hurry up and study and take a practice test. I don’t like that. I’ve got to learn and study at my own pace. I don’t care if it takes me 2 years if that is what I have got to do. I know they are just doing that because they want; they feel that you can do it. Sometimes you yourself don’t quite feel comfortable doing that yet. I don’t want to set myself up for failure and say ‘yes, I can do this’ and in my mind I am really not ready. I work at my own pace and tell them when I want to go take the test.

Celeste, a GED student, concurs: “The teachers must get tired of me, because I am not in a rush. They just have to be patient with me. I don’t want to leave here with a certificate and leave here an educated fool.” The administrators confirmed that they intend to have the
students move in and out as quickly as possible. According to these administrators, the community college must meet a number of federal and state requirements that require a 75% retention rate in order to maintain funding levels. There is pressure for the institution to track and test the students regularly. There are increasing mandates and no extra funding for the institution. Jeff, an administrator, states this problem simply: “If it doesn’t count, why bother. If we are not going to get funded for it, we just can’t.” Administrators recognize that students enter and exit multiple times, which makes tracking difficult. Jeff also realizes these mandates and goal requirements are not fair for this population. “We are dealing with the poorest of the poor, with the handicapped, with learning disabled people…most under funded, under skilled.” Administrators understand that many students are unable to stay in school or out of work for a long time period; they try to help the students complete their educational pursuits as quickly as possible.

Only in compensatory education are students’ educational pursuits set by the faculty and staff. Faculty and staff assist these students with individual goals, but those individual interests do not dictate what the faculty member teaches the students in class. Joan, a compensatory education student, states “They teach you basically what they think will help me.” These students have all made significant strides to greater self-sufficiency through the program. According to the students, the community college helps them find both jobs and volunteer activities in the area.

Non-instructional staff supplies students with services to achieve academic, work, and personal goals. The institution’s counselors help students evaluate their goals and give them guidance in reaching their goals. Shantia, an Adult High School student, states “It is a lady, she will help you. If you want to go to [college], she will help you get in and tell you all that
you need.” The institution also had various classes that the students utilize to learn basic skills and specialized skills. An Adult High School student, Val, notes “Our counselor, she is the lady that helps us if we need anything with school. If you want to go on or to other colleges, she will help us get ready for that.”

Yet, students notice the limited and outdated resources available. Harry, an Adult High School student, notes “I know some of the [computer] programs are probably pretty close to being outdated.” Students also mentioned that textbooks are limited to the extent that they cannot be removed for home study. Administrators understand the difficulties of serving this population, because the college has limited facilities, staff, and funding for all basic education students. In addition, high faculty and staff turnover in personnel affect student outcomes according to these administrators.

Social/Culture Issues

Students indicate that their actions are not influenced by societal needs. These students make choices based on their interests and what they assume would not inconvenience them. Few students have been influenced in a way that has caused them to alter their personal aspirations. The students understand there are jobs where they could make more money, but have chosen to do what they enjoy or assume would give them pleasure. The students understand that money is essential, but they want to earn only enough money to pursue what they enjoy and obtain basic necessities. Rufus, an Adult High School student, states:

My mom, she really wanted me to go to college, but I just told her, I was like. I mean the college thing, I like watching the games and stuff, but that is not for me. I couldn’t go. If I was going to go to a college I would do something
like, some other type of college. If I could just go to a college, where I wake
up motorcycles all day long and go to sleep motorcycles that would be perfect.
Their end goal is personal happiness, rather than economic well being.

Only three or four students expressed an understanding of the current state of the
economy: the need to learn new skills and the necessity of financial security. These students
had been out in the work force and were returning for retraining or a new skill. Yet, even
these students were not willing to sacrifice family, to re-locate, or work outside their interest
areas to fill a job in the economy. Only two students in the vocational programs mentioned
the growing unemployment rate. Those students who sought vocational education often had a
clearer idea of the education necessary and the field they were pursuing, but few tangible
ideas of what they wanted to accomplish once they finished school and secured a job. The
vocational students also understood that American jobs were becoming more global, leaving
American soil. Darrel, a vocational student, remarks “Yeah, I could have gotten a job if I
wanted to move from the states.” He is now pursuing education to find a service sector job,
but understands that, “at my age you may not get a job anywhere.” Gerry, another vocational
student, agrees: “I always wanted my own business and I may one day but I think for now I
just want to get a good head start. Maybe they won’t sell out to Mexico or somewhere, where
everything else is going.”

Students state that education and a job are goals, but education is a goal because they
believe it is their only means to obtain a job. The students are uncertain of what education
they need and are given little direction on how to obtain their goals pertaining to education
and work. The students were unable to identify what classes are necessary to complete, even
when they articulate a specific educational goal. Angela, an Adult High School student, states
“I want to go to college and you have to finish high school to go to college.” A short conversation the researcher had with Angela, exemplifies this population’s lack of direction even when they state their goal. Researcher: “Once you finish your classes here then you will go to the main campus to do a year or two of college?” Angela: “I guess so. I am not sure. I haven’t looked into it yet.” All students state a desire to work and many students voiced an area of interest, but very few had an idea of what is needed to be able to obtain a position in their field of interest. The students stated a career or educational plan, but never investigated or put action into their plan. Several students articulated lofty goals, but the goals exceeded the potential of these students because of time limitations and personal restrictions. The students had a limited idea of how to accomplish their goals. The students remarked on their need to wait before they take action or make their intentions known. One student in GED, Harry, comments that he wants to transfer into an academic program. “I haven’t really delved into it quite yet, but that is something that is going to come up in the very very near future.” Gerry, a vocational student, notes “I’ve never really asked for advice on where I should go work or anything.” Many of the students stated frustration when they perceived that their academics were encroaching on their time to work. The students understand that education is valuable for job attainment and for having an economically stable life. But they lacked vision, a detailed goal attainment strategy, and action towards those goals.

Students alluded to the view that a good job will immediately follow the attainment of their education. Harry, an adult High school student, says “When you start a new job, I want to stick with the job at least for a year. Once you have been there for a year, whatever the position you have been doing, unless you have been promoted, you are an expert at it.” These students have a limited understanding of education.
Many of the students’ reasons for seeking postsecondary education are for basic or low level needs. A vocational student, Wong, comments “I know the unemployment rate is high, but with vocational…I think I have a pretty good chance of getting a good job.” An immigrant who is enrolled in GED classes, Celeste, states:

You want to share this [college] because they want people, every country in the world; they want their people to be educated and literate. This country is the greatest country in the world and they do everything. You know something? Some are just too lazy. It is not like a third world country…If you go out there to work without a high school diploma, you get less money than if you have one. I say what are you wasting your time about? You worried about the job that is paying you five dollars an hour, do this and go to college; you can earn 45 dollars an hour. I say but you have to work to get it. It is not one of those things that you can just have. These kids only worry about money to buy clothes. I say ‘come on, if you have it up here (pointing to her head) you can get enough money to buy clothes, a house, and a car’.

Another GED student, Todd, considers: “As far as picking a career, who knows, until you are there, if you picked the right career.”

The students at North Carolina Community College are dependant on others to support them financially, especially if they decided to move into a degree program that would require additional costs. Shantia, an Adult High School student, notes “My Mom and Dad said that if I go to college they will pay for it.” An Adult High School student, Angela, states “My parents will pay for my school if I start the transfer program.” Even though, Harry, an Adult High School student, is currently estranged from his family he expects that
they will support him. “I have been saving up a little bit right now, but I definitely anticipate my parents helping pay [for college].” Only a few of the students understood what failure on their part would mean because of this support. Val, an Adult High School student, remarks “My mom is taking care of me right now.” A vocational student, Gerry, comments “I fish, that’s my main priority. I’m going to get this degree and in getting this degree, my Dad is going to get my bass boat and start sponsoring me in tournaments.” A spouse in GED classes, Kelly, notes “If I went to college, my husband would be paying for it or help me out. But my son is my top priority. It depends if I can juggle a home and a job and all that.” Not a single student spoke of possible poverty or lacking basic necessities if they did not reach their academic goals.

Nearly all students had someone, a family member or a significant other, to support their educational pursuits. Celeste, a GED student, states “My sister is encouraging me you know. With each little progress I make here, it…encourages me towards my goal and my husband has been very supportive and encouraging too.” Family members, who served as a support network, also tried to encourage the students to pursue a field that pays well or is in demand. Most of the students stated they were not interested in those high demand fields. Val, an Adult High School student, remarks “Ya, my aunt, they want me to go into nursing. I didn’t really want to do that. I want to be out in the open…I know they need a lot of nurses but that is not for me.” These support networks encouraged the students, supported them emotionally, and even supplied financial assistance.

Others often influenced those “beyond the margins” students who even exhibited a great deal of independence. While many of the students had a strong desire to reach their personal goals in their own way and time, a few students were easily swayed into taking
certain steps if they were told what to do or given suggestions. Wong, a vocational student, stated “A guy encouraged me to start this program. He’s lazy, but he guided me this way and like, so I have no complaints.” Val, an Adult High School student, notes “I told my mamma I would come back. I am just doing it for her and myself.” When the students are given a suggestion or idea on how to accomplish a goal, they state that often they would follow the advice or indicate acceptance of the advice. Todd, a GED student, remarks “A counselor helped me figure it out. The first day I talked to her, I talked to her for two hours and she spent a long time. That is how I came up with the things that I am looking at studying.”

At North Carolina Community College there is considerable diversity in the classroom and students seek education for different reasons. The students look beyond their differences of race, culture, religion, and individual traits in their progress toward personal goals. An immigrant in vocational education, Wong, states “When I came here I knew nobody. So, school is an institute that I feel I belong to somewhere and they are warm and I’m getting to know people.” Rufus, in Adult High School, remarks:

I see something of everything. I see friends who just haven’t graduated. It is not a color thing either. I see White, Black, Hispanics; everybody is in there. I haven’t really talked to everybody, but everybody has a different story. It is not like a group of kids. We are in here; they are out there. Everybody is in for a different reason…Unfortunate things can happen: Some people have babies; some people drop out; some people can’t get to school; some people’s lives are just messed up…It is a lot of different reasons. I mean everybody has their own reason for being here. Not a lot of them are the same. I mean you see a lot of people.
An immigrant in ESL, Olivia, comments:

With people from all over the world and you are here for the same thing and you don’t speak the same language, but when you are here, it is like you speak the same language, because you have to help each other, because you are solitary with each other. It is very nice. You make friends with people very different from you. In here we seem the same.

There is little doubt that the students recognize the commonality of their condition with other students. They identify as a group. However, they do not see themselves with any complexity on the potential of this condition—either as individual learners or as members of society. The students did not seek to utilize their differences so that they could assist one another in accomplishing their goals.

*Skill Development Issues*

Although these students have failed in previous educational pursuits, they were achieving their educational goals at the community college. The students who had not received a high school diploma and tried to return to a traditional high school found that experience difficult. Angela, an Adult High School student, states, “It was a lot easier to get into this than it is to try and finish high school.” Approximately half of the students noted they attempted to undertake a program at the main site, but that did not work either. They were more comfortable at the satellite campus. Kelly, a GED student, reflects: “I am more comfortable here. It is a lot easier around here. I feel like there are more people my age or older and I don’t feel uncomfortable.” Rufus, another Adult High School student, in a series of statements concurs: “I mean, you realize how much you can really learn, you know, once you get past the distractions, the jokes and the friends and it is just you…I say one productive
day here is like a week at a regular high school…It is a good place to go, if you want a second chance.” Todd, a GED student, comments “I now know the importance of education and how it can affect your life when you are an adult. When you are a teenager you don’t have a clue.” Todd continues: “I think anybody that has the opportunity, that doesn’t have a high school diploma should get that, if they have the opportunity should do it. I think if you put your mind to it you can do it.” Kelly, another GED student, agrees: “You need to do at least two years of [postsecondary education] or otherwise in today’s society you won’t make any money.” A GED student, Celeste, remarks:

[Other students] are worried about money and I tell them not to worry about it, when you have this you have that. So you get that first, right. They say the opportunity is there and you don’t know how long it is going to last. They may have to cut back these programs, you have to pay for them, I say, ‘make hay.’ There is lots of opportunity here, don’t fool around. Come do the work, go out here, go to college.

Administrators also realize that continuing education students have often already failed in the education system, whether that is in high school, a different program, or at another postsecondary institution.

Students know the various obstacles they and other students must overcome to achieve their goals. The students realize that students do fail and have failed to complete their educational pursuits. A vocational student, Wong, comments “there were a lot of students when I started. It was full and only half, I think maybe half or one-third, of the students made second semester.” Some of these students mentioned that it is virtually impossible to work
full-time and attend college or go to school while paying for childcare. Those students who had children stated that childcare was the main reason they were able to come back to school.

Another obstacle for the students at North Carolina Community College is that they were unable to verbalize what they hope to do or what they want to learn. Gerry, in vocational education, had the typical response to questions relating to personal mission and vision. The only difference in his response is that he was aware of his lack of direction. “I’m going to be honest with you. I’m not sure.” The researcher often had to prod and ask the same question in different ways to obtain any tangible answer, beyond a general descriptor such as “things” or “stuff”. The students also answered open-ended questions with simple responses, such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’. They were also often slow to respond to questions.

There is evidence that “beyond the margins” students’ lack of awareness could be associated with their low opinion of themselves. Kelly, a GED student, comments “Sometimes I get really overwhelmed and I feel like I just can’t do this.” Celeste, another GED student, concurred: “I don’t have a lot of confidence. It was like I was in the dark; I had to make my inner light shine you know so I could survive. But in truth there was no light because if you don’t understand then you are in the dark.” Olivia, an ESL student, affirmed “When I start, I thought, my gosh, what am I doing here, I don’t understand anything.”

But, not all “beyond the margins” students have low self-esteem. Highly educated immigrants without English language proficiency present a complex twist to this research because they are considered uneducated in the U.S. society until they can speak English. Those students who are in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses understand that their inability to speak English limits what they can accomplish. Rayasam, an ESL student, notes “My problem was that I couldn’t speak English or understand and now I speak English and
understand very well…You must learn to speak English. I can speak many things, but my handicap is English.” Olivia, another ESL student, comments “Portuguese is my native language. I speak Spanish also, but here I don’t have a job yet. I must learn English first.” The ESL students realize the language barrier is a common problem to overcome to survive and flourish in the U.S. economy and society.

Student characteristics, perceptions, and experiences at North Carolina Community College are not unique to one community college, but rather show commonality for this population at another institution in another state—Illinois Community College.

Illinois Community College

Illinois Community College is the second site investigated where a population of students possessed characteristics similar to those interviewed at North Carolina Community College: for example, educational attainment and socio-economic background. Illinois Community College enrolls approximately 33,000 students, with nearly 28,000 of those students in non-credit or basic skills courses. Illinois Community College is one out of seven of the City Community College System. Illinois Community College is a nonresidential campus and has one main site for all students. The institution is in the middle of a neglected area of the city, but stands out as a pristine element of the community and, according to the students and institutional staff, gives a feeling of hope to those in the area. The majority of the “beyond the margins” students at this institution are enrolled in Adult High School, GED, or ESL classes. The institution has a major population of non-credit students and a large component of these the non-credit students are enrolled in ESL courses. These students are predominately Latino/a. The students’ achievement in these non-credit courses was evident, in that thirty percent of the credit students have previously been in these non-credit courses.
Even with the success of the institution’s non-credit programs, Illinois Community College is relatively stagnant. According to administrators, the institution is financially struggling, is in the midst of major staff cuts, and is heavily influenced by the state and city to meet accountability requirements. The faculty and staff indicate they are doing all they can to meet the needs of the students. In spite of the condition uncertainty, the students and staff expressed about the future of the non-credit programs, the students remained relatively optimistic that the programs would have a positive impact on their future. Although there are serious institutional concerns about Illinois Community College’s future and a community neighborhood context that is seemingly dire, the students have developed a strong academic and supportive community with one another. The twenty-one “beyond the margins” students interviewed ranged between the ages of twenty and sixty-one, came from fourteen different countries, and represented at least ten ethnicities although the students were predominately Hispanic and African American.

Institutional Issues

The educational programs have helped the students at Illinois Community College become more confident and gain basic skills. Some of the students attend the community college because it is close to their homes; some attend because there are no costs; but most attend because they are achieving their goals here and have not achieved them elsewhere. Rafael, an ESL student, comments “They have helped me a lot, more than supposed to be…and I started so um, right now it is very good for me and like I say, good for everybody.” Rafael also makes it clear that without the free classes this opportunity would not be possible. “Yeah. If I know I had to pay myself, it is just depend on how much if it pay too high I can’t do this, then I can’t pay myself to do it but I try to do it.” Namish, an ESL student, remarks “I
don’t think I and other students can afford paying for these classes. I understand that not all classes can be for free, but now it is good for us being free.” Stephanie, an Adult High School student, understands: “I sure couldn’t afford it. If you had to pay for it, I sure couldn’t afford it, I couldn’t even start.” Another ESL student, Tia, states “By being here I have been able to control, you know, my…I mean, my skills, my communication skills.” Jorge, an ESL student, agrees: “I think classes are perfect. I don’t think I would change anything in classes. I would need to change myself. It is not bad, it is bad students. They don’t have to change anything.” The administrators noted that the program changes as the students change in order to meet their needs. Carlos, an administrator, states:

We are very flexible in that we can do anything we want or what the community needs and we do a lot of needs assessment of the students, surveys to see where they are at, because the influx of immigrants that are coming in, they vary. I remember when I first came, it was strictly life skills and then more educated immigrants came in and we had to refocus our curriculum more academically.

While the structure of academic programs and services assists these students, there are some common structural problems for those in basic skills classes similar to those seen at North Carolina Community College. One example is the limited use of group work in classes. The students indicate it is often difficult to teach them in groups because of their varying needs. Katarina, an ESL student, states “Every student wanted something else to improve. Like, that is what I noticed, like a lot of students in my classes.” Antone, an ESL student, concurs: “The teacher is trying to follow every student to help them, but sometimes it is, the classes are too big I think.” Another ESL student, Miriam, comments: “Sometimes
in the class…this is my opinion. It is not equal level.” A GED student, Madeline, agrees: “When you have like, let’s say twenty-eight students, and each is at different levels, it is pretty hard to maintain.” Szeda, an Adult High School student, relates “I just don’t talk to [the other students]. When I come to class I just listen to the teacher and when she gives me something to do.”

The students rarely use computers in their studies and they do not improve their computer skills. Most students only use computers once a week. Tia, an ESL student, remarks “Maybe, learn more about, more involved with the computer, more accustomed to it…That would be very helpful. I think it would be helpful to others in my situation as well.” An ESL student, Jorge, notes “Yes we have one day we go to computers downstairs in basement and use them and they help, they help much.” Madeline, a GED student, states “Lets have a computer in class and someone to teach students computer in class. There are a lot of students that can’t afford a computer.” Basic computer classes are also not free. Madeline, also comments “[Computer classes] cost a lot of money and I don’t have those type of funds, but I do want to learn. They do offer it, but it is not in my price range.” An Adult High School, Melanie, reiterates “We don’t use [computers].”

The students are also not given homework to complete outside of class. Joan, a GED student, makes this point clear when she says “I need something like homework. Take homework home with you, do some studies. That is what I want. Right now, he told me I am on my own. If I don’t understand to call him.”

The students indicate that faculty members assist them in their goal attainment. At this institution, the primary interactions students have with the organization’s staff are usually with the faculty. Rafael, an ESL student, states “The teachers are good and they are
dependable and they ask if you have got it.” An ESL student, Joseph, concurs: “Very helpful. The teacher corrects me all the time in my pronunciation and everything like that.” Katarina, another ESL student, comments “I find this school is a good place, really nice and comfortable to students and it seems like everybody wants to help you. They wanted to help me you know and so the people here are very nice.” Cindy, an ESL student, remarks “Best experience. I think, my teacher, he was really good. I like the way he talked and I like learning about words.” Another ESL student, Boris, notes:

Everything is well organized, the teachers, our teacher he is definitely very good. I like to speak with him for just practicing…The attitude, the teachers try to help you, this is the most important. Also, they are doing their job very well. I mean they are good teachers…Everything I ask, they help. Some things are out of their hands, they cannot do alone.

Natalia, as ESL student, agrees: “People are just very friendly and caring. Very good teachers. They teach very, I like the way they teach.” Another ESL student, Namish, responds, noting that:

Our teachers have different kinds of teaching, which is good, because some like grammar, some like to learn how to speak. I like the classes the best that have little grammar. That is for me. We also have lot of different, presentation, we needed to talk out front of the class without papers and we have video, marketing. A lot of activities. A lot of writings of our opinions about some topics and watching movies and listening to music so it was fun…Intensive, everyday, and lots of hours. Teachers are also very good here and really helpful.
Jorge, an ESL student, remarks:

Yeah, yeah, the teachers are good. They are every time, so good, they talk to you like a friend and they sometimes, we are late for classes and the teachers say, hey where were you, why were you late to class. They say you gotta do this and you gotta do that and they help every time. They help, they are good teachers.

Juan, an ESL Student, has not had all good experiences with the faculty, but has had some faculty reach out to him.

I take some classes and unfortunately, I tell you sometimes I am confused. I mean they have some wonderful teachers, but some are not interested in teaching here. I met one who really helped me. She is very very concerned and she makes a lot of recommendations for the students, maybe participate with the students.

Yet, for these students, teachers can only do so much. An ESL student, Antone, states “The teacher trying to follow every student to help him, but sometimes it is, the classes are too big I think.” Tatiana, a GED student, comments on the efforts put forth by most faculty and staff members though. “If I need something they are always there for me. If I have to leave early, if I have to take my kids to school, they are okay if I come in late.” A GED student, Madeline, agrees: “In my experience the best thing is the people; the people that you meet and the teachers. My experience here has been wonderful as far as the staff is concerned. You have certain people you talk to, but I think it is that way everywhere.” Szeda, an Adult High School student, remarks: “They treat you good…I don’t know if this is the best, but I know they treat you good…They are good people. They do their best to help us.”
An administrator, Carlos, stated “I think our staff is more…more caring, more of a community. They build communities within the classroom, whereas the credit student that just comes in and walks out and goes to work, commuter. We are more intimate at creating those communities in the classroom.”

Only one student mentioned that the faculty needed to have new and better methods for teaching. The remainder of the students thought the faculty taught well. An ESL student, Juan, comments:

I don’t know, I shouldn’t criticize them, I think that they need to make some work shops in order the teacher know the new because they have a lot of individual helps and they don’t use them. They use the one, blackboard and chalk, that is it. They don’t use a lot of technology.

Faculty and staff members desire to help students obtain a better job and complete the academic program or class in which they are enrolled. The faculty and staff also realize the limited ability they have to give the students knowledge and skills needed in the current job market. The Dean of Basic Education, Carlos, states:

Our objective is to try to get them into a track to find a job and succeed and get a better paying job, besides being a waiter, or a bus boy, or a dishwasher…We try to be at the forefront of things and now this new initiative with the shortage of skills. Now we are getting on the bandwagon and trying to focus more on those needs…Of course, we focus on the four learning skills needed by the workforce. It is embedded in the curriculum. Technology is embedded in the curriculum.
These changes Carlos speaks of are imminent but have not yet been integrated into the classroom. A faculty member, Tom, concurs: “They plan to significantly change the curriculum so that instead of the English programs, teaching English acquisition, they are going to be more narrowly focused on particular job areas and particular industries.” Tom continues to identify the special needs of this population and how they seek to assist the students.

We can have discussion on world events or psychological counseling and how it has hurt or helped the people in the room, or child abuse and all kinds of things, but at the end of the day I have to tie it down to preparing them for a test. To have relevance or otherwise people think, you know, and it is true, it is not what they came here for. They came here to prepare. Mainly, it is to prepare them for the test. The test has changed and there is a lot less emphasis on reading comprehensive and a lot more on critical thinking skills, inferential reasoning skills, trying to find out the assumptions, being able to find out which conclusions are based on the evidence presented in front of them, bares a higher weight. I hope I have adjusted my teaching to that. That is mostly it; the outside world. Computers are more important, also. We go to computers once a week now.

Nearly all of the students at Illinois Community College mentioned that they were not pushed to go on for further education or into specific jobs. The faculty and staff seem only to help the students progress towards the goals the students have for themselves. The faculty and staff do not exert influence on the students. Many of the students are unaware of the types of classes offered, the available services, or the flexibility in class times. Students
expressed a need to be motivated by others. Cindy, an ESL student, states “I am kind of lazy and I need to somebody to push me.” Another ESL student, Randall, concurs: “I have been lazy. All my life even in high school, you know. Lot of trouble.” Tia, also an ESL student, remarks “No, we haven’t spoke with any advisors. If I get a chance to do it I would.” Antone, an ESL student, notes: “In here, the people around here tell me that the money is not important, but I have to be honest with me. If I want to live in here, I have to have money, I can’t afford to do what I really want to do if I don’t have the money.” Tatiana, a GED student, comments “I should study more hard for myself. Something that would give me more pressure to study. Okay, you have got to read all of this and tell me tomorrow. I would like some homework, but they said no.”

At Illinois Community College it is difficult for students to obtain help outside the classroom. Institutional support staff is limited for these students. Rafael, an ESL student, states:

I wait for the counselor before. She was a counselor over here. Now it is too hard and crowded over here. You have to make appointment. You had to go a day ahead. I asked for help right now and they don’t have anymore. They are busy right now and they can’t right now…So, other people they don’t tell you anything they don’t say, you can take this or that, they don’t tell that.

Without assistance from individual faculty and staff, the students indicate they are on their own. Another ESL student, Randal, concurs: “No, no, Desperately I need some help…But I don’t know who should I speak to or who has time. I need time, I need a person, I am looking for a person.” Namish, an ESL student, agrees: “No, not a lot of interaction with anyone outside of the classroom.” Joan, a GED student, comments: “I don’t know. I haven’t a clue.
A GED student, Tatiana, notes: “I wish I could find someone to talk with me more and just get it over. It takes time…I don’t get much help outside of school.” An Adult High School student, Bomi, says:

[Tutors] use to come and help me, but now tutors, they ask us. I remember a girl, I asked for help. She said, no, no. Before the problem is that the tutors were good to teach, but now, no. That has changed. It has changed a lot. I just want someone who can help push me through everything and help me finish quickly…No one wants to help.

Administrators corroborate the student comments by noting that there are cuts to student services making these more difficult for students to obtain. Martha, an administrator, comments “I would like to serve them better. Well, serving them is pretty much bare bones at this point. The more people they’ve laid off, the more nuts and bolts, no ups and no extras, my job has become.” She adds “A lot of that support staff vanished because of budget cuts…But you are talking about a population that has been badly served in the past, by the system that ultimately fails them and continues to be badly served here. It is just the resources aren’t here.” Carlos, another administrator, agrees: “Two years ago, they eliminated the counselors and they just created the advisor positions. We had counselors who went in and oriented the students, because the students are new here probably and we also had a coordinator who also used to do orientations every semester.” A faculty member, Tom, describes the effect of these limited support services on these students.

They really need more counselors and more help while they are here… We use to have two counselors here who were full-time…and they knew all the resources in the region from counselors, to homeless shelters, abuse
counselors, alcoholic counselors, drug counselors, city agencies. They are
gone. We don’t have anyone to send them too. It is really a crime against
these young people. I mean we do the best we can, but we are not that. We
can’t do that. It is terrible, it really is.

Nearly all “beyond the margins” students are unaware of specific support services
and staff that exist. Those who are aware rarely ask for assistance. Cindy, an ESL student,
remarks “No, probably I am not interested in that. I never asked.” Another ESL student, Tia,
comments: “I did not get a chance to talk to a lot of people… I haven’t talked to someone, I
would like to. Ya. I would definitely like too… I don’t know. I really don’t know, right now.
I really don’t know.” Antone, an ESL student, states “No, I haven’t gone to talk with an
advisor. I will probably go in the next month.” In one conversation the researcher asks “Have
you talked with anyone about that right here?” An ESL student, Tatiana, replies “No, I
haven’t tried, because everybody says, first you have to do GED. Finish that and then you
can go.” The researcher asked again “Have you talked with any of the advisors or counselors
here?” Tatiana, responds “No, I just come here and try to study. I don’t have time to ask.”

Illinois Community College’s answer to the limited support services is outsourcing.
Carlos, an administrator, notes: “We partner with community organizations and other
agencies that have these services that we don’t have. Have them come here. Give that
information to the students. We are developing partnerships with them.” The institution
continues to place more responsibility on the faculty and have fewer support staff to help
individual students.
Social/Culture Issues

The students at Illinois Community College do not indicate that their actions are influenced by workforce needs. They are focused mostly on jobs they think they would enjoy. Faculty members believe that the students are unaware of workforce needs because the students are generally ignored by society. Martha, an administrator says:

But ya, that is a long way around saying, why is it part-time, it is because, I think, ultimately it boils down to who cares about these disenfranchised people. Do they vote? So do ESL students vote? Not likely when they are new immigrants and they haven’t had a chance to become citizens. Do GED students vote? I don’t think there is a real high rate of that, despite voter registration drives. So, they do it because they can get away with it.

A faculty member, Tom, remarks “Really the world outside is telling them you need computers, you need this. They know from experience that there are not too many decent jobs out there unless you have some particular skills to sell.” Even with this knowledge, the students continue to focus on their own interests and simply hope for positive outcomes.

The students at Illinois Community College focus more on what will make them happy than what will make them money. The response of Madeline, a GED student, epitomizes the thought process of these students. “My goal is working in what I want.” Only one or two students stated a need to fill a role for society; they were mostly concerned about themselves. Only one student, Tia, who is in ESL, mentioned her role in society. “You know, according to society, I have got to find, I am looking for a place to fit, in accordance with society over here.”
Those in GED and Adult High School exhibited limited knowledge of how American culture or society operates with regards to work and money. These students also did not understand what credentials are needed to fill certain job roles and for those that did, they were unaware of how to obtain those credentials. Many of these students did not realize all the possibilities that exist, while several students mentioned goals that would likely be impossible to obtain considering the students’ backgrounds and educational achievement levels.

The students exhibited an unrealistic understanding of the benefits education will have for them. These students assume that the education they are receiving will supply them with a better job and more money. An ESL student, Rafael, comments: “I want to go to the college too. So, I want it for myself, for something more better than, the factory is sometimes, is you work in the place hot and you work and if you go to the college for something easy and fast and they pay you more and you don’t have to work a lot.” He also adds “First, I want to do something so they pay me more so I don’t have to work so hard.” Another ESL student, Joseph, remarks “I want to prepare myself for a better position in my job.” Tatiana, a GED student, notes “My husband’s salary is far too small and that is why I am trying to come to school. Trying to get a better job than just cleaning.” An Adult High Student, Susan, states “I came to get my GED and trying to look for a job. That is about it.” She also says “I tell everybody, I tell my girl cousin to stay in school. Don’t be a drop out. Get educated.” Szeda, another Adult High School student, comments “I am looking for a job, but I have not found one yet.” Melanie, an Adult High School student, believes, “[With an education,] I can do anything I want to do.” A faculty member, Tom, states:
For a lot of my students it is like, if I want to break out of 8 dollars an hour jobs, I have got to have a better background and more skills and stuff like that. For them there is a connection, it is a bridge out of eight dollars an hour, going nowhere jobs, which don’t pay the rent. I have got to have something better and society tells me that the only way I can do it, is if I get an education.

The students in GED and Adult High School courses had little understanding of what they were learning while in their classes. Many of the students were vague in their responses and had little depth to their comments. The students often answered open-ended questions with ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. Susan, an Adult High School student, demonstrates this vagueness and lack of depth. “We read and we do math, and then we do, what other stuff do we do? She read a book. She comes one by one and she will read for us… They help me to know words and stuff. They help me. They come to me one on one and talk to me like that.”

The students at Illinois Community College meet large numbers of people within the college with varying differences. These differences become negligible to the students as they seek to achieve academic goals. Joseph, an ESL student, comments “Very interesting because you know other people and you know other cultures. You learn a lot.” Another ESL student, Katarina, notes “I like the people who I am attending the classes. They are from different countries from all over the world. It is really interesting.” Cindy, an ESL student, agrees: “A lot of friends. There are a lot of Europeans here. We don’t feel uncomfortable here, with our accent. Nobody cares and people are really nice. I was impressed when I came here.” Boris, also in ESL, remarks “The people are different. Because here, everyone comes from some other country. Someone before 200 years, someone before 100, someone like me, before two months.” Tia, an ESL student, concurs:
No, they are not different from me. They are from different parts of the world. We are all the same in the feelings. We may all speak different languages, but we don’t speak English right now. I was speaking with people from four different countries, you know, and we live on different continents, with four different continents and four different religions.

Madeline, a GED student, brings this feeling of acceptance to the forefront:

I am accepted here. I am mixed. I am different as you can see. I am light colored. Going to the other schools, even if I am Black, it was a lot of conflict and negative atmosphere and it didn’t work for me. By me coming to [this college] and having different cultures and everything I was able to relax and study more without having conflict like the other schools. So it is worth it to make that trip. A person can’t study when you are in a lot of racial conflict.

A faculty member, Tom, supports the students’ comments:

It is almost like a small United Nations, quite a mix in my class, which is really great actually. It works out very well. I almost never hear any back bighting or anything like that, because people are here for a common reason…It is amazing all the talk about all the racial conflict and divisions that exist, they do exist in the world, but it is like, people pair up make friends, hang out together and it is not racial or anything at all in here.

The students often work individually instead of in groups.

*Skill Development Issues*

The students at Illinois Community College have failed in previous academic pursuits, except some of the ESL students who had already obtained postsecondary education
in their country of origin. An ESL student, Randall, comments “About 5 or 6 years I have
been in and out. Work, excuses, family. Always something. I have never been here really.
Because like I said, in and out. One month, two months and then I have to drop the classes,
because of work. Need to learn the English.” Namish, another ESL student, compares his
experience at this institution with educational experiences elsewhere: “Here I like much
better. Because intensive class and we speak a lot and we do different exercises…I didn’t
learn as fast as I am learning now.” An ESL student, Antone, remarks “It was far away from
my place and actually I didn’t like that school.” Madeline, a GED student, notes “I am back
to pick up where I left on the GED.” An Adult High School student, Susan, comments “I left
high school when I was 12 years old.” Szeda, another Adult High School student, states “I
start only one time in Florida, but it isn’t good like this school.” An Adult High School
student, Stephanie, remarks “I didn’t finish [high] school. I tried [finishing in New York], but
I didn’t really…I tried, but I stopped.” Bomi, an Adult High School student, confirms: “I
didn’t finish high school because of my children.” The faculty and staff believe the role of
the community college is to reach these students who would not succeed at another
institution or agency. A faculty member, Tom, remarks “Sometimes students don’t want to
come out of their neighborhood because they are afraid to come here. So, we are reaching out
to those students who wouldn’t necessarily come here.”

The students, especially those with limited education, doubted their ability to succeed
when they first started their classes. Natalia, an ESL student, states “I thought, why why why
did I make this decision.” A GED student, Joan, comments “I want to get that feeling, I can
do it, I can do it, I can do it, I can do that. Right now, I am still frustrated.” Stephanie, an
Adult High School student, agrees: “Sometimes I think I doubt myself too, so when teacher tell me that [I did well]…I’m like, are you sure? I tell myself, are you sure.”

The students who are currently achieving their academic goals at the community college and have overcome their self-doubt and previous academic failures recognize that other students are not as fortunate. Approximately half the students who start the classes fail to complete the class. Rafael, an ESL student, states “When they start the classes it is maybe 35 people and in between that is only 10 or 20 less than when they started.” Another ESL student, Joseph, concurs: “When we started school there was about 35 and there was something like that and at the end of the class there are only like 15, 20. Few people left, I don’t know why.” Katarina, an ESL student, also agrees: “I think there should be like 25, but it was always less. Not everybody comes to the class.” Even those students who struggle to remain in class. Jorge, an ESL student, comments “Sometimes I stress myself. I wonder if I should get out of school.” Tatiana, a GED student, notes:

I know they are like dropouts from high school. They are like 18, 19. They don’t care. They are just having a good time. They have a phone, they are talking, they are walking out. Sometimes she even calls the security. What is she going to do? They will give you a harder time one day.

Another GED student, Natalia, remarks “In the beginning we have students who are into drugs and talking drugs. And those are the ones that do not come back, but they do have identification so they can walk through the halls and outside selling. I tend to ignore them, but it interferes with the other students.” Tatiana continues: “Right now it has dwindled down to about six. There was more than that when it first started.”
These students have complex and time pressured lives where they are squeezing in school around their other responsibilities. Rafael, an ESL student, states “It is all day, all the time like that. Come here, go my house and then go to work, and then come back.” Another ESL student, Joseph, concurs: “A lot of these people have to work, work at nights and sometimes it’s hard. Sometimes it is hard for me to get up early because of work, something like that, it is very hard to get up but you want to do something you have to. Keep pushing…” Cindy, an ESL student, remarks “It is hard to have a job and go to school.” An ESL student, Randall, notes “I just don’t have the time. The time is the problem.” Jorge, another ESL student, corroborates “I was working there and housekeeping and stuff and I started classes too and was working 7 pm to 7 am and then I had to go to my home and take a shower and then go to school until 12 and then go home and sleep and on and around.” Jorge also states: “I was working in construction and sometimes I left work late. My teacher, she smiled like, ‘I understand it is hard for you.’ You know. Sometimes, I try to do my best to be here in class more.” Mirian, an ESL student, commented on work: “I come at night. Immediately following work I come here.” Tatiana, a GED student, understands the struggle. I use to come four days a week and I have to cut it to one day a week, because the kids will be home for the summer and I don’t have anybody to watch them. I feel like I can only squeeze out one day…I am trying to squeeze time to come here. I take classes after school and leave my daughter at my house, my husband will sometimes call me here and I will have to leave and cut a class to go home. I try to put her here but they told me that I have to be here 5 days a week.
A GED student, Madeline, agrees: “During the winter, the traveling distance is pretty hard and then you have the students who have little children and it is pretty hard on them. They can’t afford to pay a baby sitter, so they miss a lot of class.” Szeda, an Adult High School student, brings these obstacles to life.

It is a good program for me. Because my husband doesn’t work, I don’t work and I have to take care of the kids, pay for the bills, and take care of everything, but we don’t work now… I don’t know, but we will need to borrow some money from people. Next month we don’t know if we can pay the rent. I don’t know. I had got that news last Thursday, he told me he don’t know if he can pay the rent. But I don’t know what to do. I just go on my knees and I pray so God can do something for me.

Carlos, an administrator, understands the students’ obstacles.

They are struggling through working 24 hours, they come here tired. It is big sacrifice for these students and those are the challenges that we wish there were ways we could help them… We don’t know all their issues, but we know a lot of issues. There are people that come to class who are hungry, battered wives, with whole mess of problems. Everything. I have seen everything: suicides, depression.

Tom, a faculty member, comments: “Usually it has to do with kids that are poor, their friends are into drugs, they want to go out and play, there is alcoholism or drug problems in the family; they have to go to work; they are pregnant; you know, all of those kind of things, plus a million different other stories.”
In addition to specific obstacles, these students, except those highly educated ESL students, are unclear about what they want to accomplish. If they do have goals, they often are uncertain of how to achieve them. The students are also slow in taking steps to pursue their goals. Those in ESL who already had some postsecondary education expressed goals that were tied more to the economy and society. Nonetheless, they had little direction or initiative in reaching those goals. Rafael, an ESL student, commented “I don’t know, I am not sure. Any work they give me the opportunity to work…I am not sure right now so maybe I talk with counselors, like to help me to more better hear more ideas they can help me maybe I can get decided later.” Nearly all of the students were unaware of what it would take to reach their goals. The students just do what they are told will help them progress. Katarina, another ESL student, states: “Since I came here, no I did not apply yet. I say I am not ready yet, I am not ready yet. I see that it is not a good idea thinking like this, I am not ready. I hope that maybe 1 month, I will do something really…the next step. I am almost ready.” Once Katarina was asked about what she will do when she completes her educational goal, she stated “I don’t think about this right now.” Namish, another ESL student, remarks “I don’t know because I didn’t search or something about what I need to do. I think I will need to have a license here to take some classes…Yes…they usually…I hope so, because I was looking for…I think maybe it could be difficult for me to find a job here, but maybe I try an internship.” A GED student, Joan, concurs: “I have no clue. I have never thought about that. I am only focusing on what I am doing. I am not trying to think about anything else but that. I am not thinking about what I will do after that.” One ESL student, Jorge, when asked how he plans to accomplish his goals responds “I don’t have any ideas about that.” Antone, an ESL student, has another consistent response: “I am not sure. I can’t decide. I am telling myself,
so far so good—in the future, maybe next year.” Miriam, an ESL student, shows this lack of understanding or direction. The researcher asks: “Do you know where you would go to get those classes?” Miriam responds: “No, I don’t know. What I can investigate to find out, maybe you can give me some advice.” The researcher replies: “I know the school has some advisors that you can talk to and they can tell you what classes are available and what you would need to take.” Miriam questions: “Here?” The researcher confirms: “Yes!” Miriam then states: “Okay, I will investigate. I will try to find those who can help me. Now is too early, I have to finish program and then I can start.” An Adult High School student, Szeda, notes “I don’t have high school diploma. They say if I finish four classes, if I pass, they say they are going to give me the high school diploma” The researcher asks: “What do you want to study?” Szeda, responds: “I don’t know yet.” Finally, another Adult High School student, Stephanie, states: “What types of jobs? (long pause) What types of jobs am I looking for? Well, for right now, I could take…whatever I can get I will do for now. Whatever I get will do for now.”

The students were often unclear about their beliefs. In responding to questions, the students offered contradictory statements. They had difficulty articulating their thoughts and ideas. For example, the researcher asked “Do you use any computers or any other technology in your classrooms?” An Adult High School student, Susan, replies: “Yes, we use computers in our classroom.” The researcher rephrases when he was unsure what she said: “You don’t use them?” Susan replies: “No.” The researcher asks again: “So, do you use them at all for anything?” Susan responds: “We go to the computer every Thursday.” These contradictory responses were common.
Only a few students who are already have some postsecondary education and are in ESL realize that the education they are receiving is the first step they need to take before entering a college or university. The students understand that they must first obtain some basic skills. Rafael, an ESL student, comments “That is why I am going to the college, I had to prepare first myself. More ready. That’s why I came here.”

Some of the ESL students at this institution have a strong academic background, yet they are severely limited by their inability to speak English. An ESL student, Cindy, states “[Knowing English] is the only way I can do whatever I want.” These more educated ESL students have a clearer idea of what it takes to accomplish their goals. Nonetheless, this population has a number of obstacles. Their planning how to overcome those obstacles is an important step. Joseph, another ESL student, comments “First I would have to save some money and after I save some money I would have to go apply for some financial aid.” Cindy also believes that she “will ask for a loan. I will have to pay all my life but it’s ok, I don’t mind.” Boris, also in ESL, remarks: “Need to finish [learning English] the job can work out and I can pay for my car, and everything. So, right now I study English to improve my language because with the language barrier it is difficult.”

Those in ESL who were more educated were able to articulate their ideas, hopes, and aspirations. These articulations were rare among the other students. Tia, an ESL student, notes “I am not in a position to choose what I want to do right now. There is a lot involved. You know, like money matters or disabilities, you know, a lot of things come. I have to listen to reality right now and do what it presented to me.” Tia continues: “It is really hard especially when a lot of people on the street, you can’t talk with them on the street as they do. They think you are stupid. It is hard, because you can’t explain that to them. Of course
you can, they just won’t understand you.” Juan, also an ESL student, comments “I want to improve my English in order to take my degree in the United States and work in better conditions because now the condition for work is a little nasty and not too much.” Melanie, an Adult High School student, who was also once in ESL, states “I am planning to become a nurse. They ask me that my English was no good, so I have to improve my English before I can get into that program.” Basic education faculty and staff agree that the community college is the only place to serve the growing immigrant population. An administrator, Martha, agrees: “We don’t pay any attention [to our international students]. For all we know we could have every terrorist in the world registered and we would know none the less.”

California Community College²

California Community College is the third site investigated and is used for comparison purposes with the first two institutions. California Community College enrolls almost 15,000 students in curriculum classes and approximately 15,000 students in noncredit classes. California Community College is a nonresidential campus and has one main site and two satellite campuses. The institution is predominately Latino/a and White, with the Latino/a population steadily rising as the White population falls. The college is part of a district of three other colleges and has a fairly typical structure and governance system to other California community colleges. Similar to Illinois and North Carolina Community Colleges, California Community College is an “open-access” institution that has a comprehensive curriculum. It thus has an institutional identity as a comprehensive community college (Levin, 2001).

² These data come from interviews conducted by John S. Levin. He uses the actual first names of interviewees in his reporting of data. To maintain both consistency and integrity with Levin’s research, I will use actual names here, not pseudonyms as used for North Carolina and Illinois Community College.
The institution has been a fixture of the community for over seventy years and has developed a number of strong community connections and services. They have CalWorks (a program to assist those on welfare in obtaining an education and finding a job), community education, corporate and community services, environmental training, small business development center, Tech Prep, and workplace skills and training. The institution also has a strong focus on maintaining strong and diverse student services, but it was obvious that budget cuts were diminishing that trend. Most of the students interviewed were enrolled in credit courses, in pursuit of a degree, either Associate’s or Baccalaureate, or both. Many of these students used institutional services that provided them with support, such as financial and academic. The twenty-one “beyond the margins” students interviewed ranged between the ages of twenty and fifty-five, came from three different countries (most of the students were from Mexico and the U.S.), and represented four ethnicities, with Latina/o as the main minority ethnicity.

Institutional Issues

Through the structure of the institution, students at California Community College have developed a coherent and meaningful sense of direction. Jose, an anthropology and forestry student, notes “[The institution] has helped me a lot. As far as the direction that I wanted to go into, it kind of took time, but it formed the direction that I’m in right now.” Michael, an administration of justice student, remarks “The program itself, it’s just educating me more and giving me more knowledge and of knowing things I didn’t even know yet and it’s just a real good program.” An ESL and pre-nursing student, Nidia, comments: “I didn’t get a good grade in it, but I learned how to find myself in that class actually…I developed a lot of self-confidence.” James, a liberal arts student, declares “I learned how to, my studies is
better. Like when I want to study. Like when I want to learn my subject and stuff like that. I learned, I learned a lot about life that I didn’t know. Like a plan, like a plan, know what you’re going to do. Not just run and do anything.” A re-entry student, Karen, states “I’m learning so much…Just different ways of solving problems, dealing with people and their issues.”

These students focus on the curriculum in the classroom and express that they are frustrated when other students do not take classes seriously. An applied science and technology student, Ernie, notes: “What really fried me my first semester up here was the fact that the younger students coming into class were very disruptive. I am here because it is cool to be here or I am here because my parents are sending me here…People who were really serious about getting an education were very peeved about the distraction in this class.” Nidia, an ESL and pre-nursing student, comments “Well what I notice, I’m thinking about the ESL, I noticed most of the students taking that credit were not taking it too serious. And I tell you right now they didn’t pass the class.” Kathleen, an applied technology student, remarks “A lot of people that couldn’t take it seriously or didn’t want to take it seriously, they are just not with us anymore…They just don’t know how to discipline themselves.”

California Community College students are able to identify individual faculty and staff who encourage and support them to reach their goals. Individuals made a significant impact on these students and assisted in their achievement. Grace, an ESL and political science student, states:

And then I went to talk to the teacher and I was like, you know this one, this book, because we were studying the tougher book, and I was like no, this book is really hard for me, and I’m going to drop your class and I’m going to go
back. And he was like, no, that would be a big mistake, you better stay. And I was like, OK, so I stay and that’s why I learned…The counselors have been helpful. But, for example, in the beginning, the counselor that I had, he wasn’t all that helpful, but then I went with another one and she was.

An applied science and technology student, Maria, remarks:

A lot of them influenced you, go to school, go to school, and here the instructors are incredible at giving you that motivation to move on. The motivation has been overwhelming, but they just really want you to succeed. They tell you eventually what to do. All you have to do is listen. Every single instructor I have had here, incredible, they have the knowledge, they bring it to the table, and it makes the experience so much better, not easier, but better. More engaging and I feel like you connect more 1-1 and they really see a student as a student, not as a number…I connected with one of my instructors and he really guided me a lot; Incredible influence on me, incredible. I think, when he sees a spark in a student, he follows up…when you show an interest in a student, the student comes back for more.

Kathleen, another applied science and technology student, says:

I swear to God, this man could take, you could read a book, I mean look at a book in Swahili and say, okay, this is never going to happen, and he could like get up and he could say blah blah blah, and you would say, okay, I get it. You know, he just has a very good way of illustrating from his life experience or he will explain it in a way, you will understand it, period. Also because he was so
interested in everybody, you know, how they were doing and he would make it a point to put it together.

A nursing student, Guilleen, observes “A lot of the instructors challenge us to learn…It makes you want to learn and want to understand what they’re talking about….The teachers are committed.” An administration of justice student, Michael, remarks “I guess a lot of people get embarrassed or think that they’ll feel stupid to ask questions and everything and that’s the worst thing you can think, especially here in college. Without the help you won’t get by, you can’t get by.”

The faculty members at California Community College identified motivated students and endeavored to help these students achieve their academic goals. Student support staff at the institution also attempted to assist these students excel in their classes. An ESL and pre-nursing student, Nidia, notes:

Actually [he] is very good, excellent tutor. He helped me and actually I’m very lucky that the reason I passed my ESL is because of him. Because he showed me and told me what was my mistakes were and he helped me to do my thesis very well and because of that I did very good in my ESL.

A liberal arts student, James, comments:

I listen to our transfer counselor…He made me realize that I can get a degree, he made me believe in myself. Because he was like, I used to party and I used to, you know college life, I used to do all that stuff. And then he’s all, you know what? You can do it if I could do it.

A re-entry student, Karen, remarks:
Without my Cal Works Coordinator, I would not have succeeded. I was a blubbering mess when I got here. I had no clue where to start, what to do or anything. And she’s kind of helped guide me through the process until I was on my feet enough to do what I needed to do and be successful.

Ernie, an applied science and technology student, agrees:

I have met some really good counselors and staff people here that have really been very helpful, especially in the supportive services section. Just unbelievable, just bend over backwards to help you achieve what you need to achieve, with problems that you are having with other instructors or communication or getting from point A to point B, just bend over backwards for you.

These students have also interacted with individuals who do not help them. Ernie experienced those who did not assist him. “If I had waited for him, I still wouldn’t be in school.” He is also frustrated with being “ignored by instructors.” Bonnie, a basic education faculty member, affirms the students’ voices: “I meet with the students for one solid week before they start their academic program to get their study skills up to speed so they’re able to survive the program.” Diane, the CalWorks Coordinator, states her desire to help students: “I’m available for hand-holding, mentoring, you list it… I might have a student who’s suspected of learning disabilities, physical disabilities, all I have to do is pick up the phone and we set up the linkage to our campus supportive services.” Diane is also struggling to save her position and has fears about what will happen to these students if she loses her job. A basic skills learning center faculty member, Stephanie, notes her hopes:
That was my big thing when I go to the classes is to let students know that there is a lot of help out there. If you are not feeling comfortable in your class, if you’re not happy with your grades, come on over to the learning center, talk to us and maybe one or more than one of the services that we offer might be beneficial to you as far as helping you get through your classes successfully.

These students at California Community College try to utilize all the services and opportunities around them in an effort to achieve their aspirations. A human services student, Ellen, notes: “I don’t think I could make it without [my Pell Grant]. And then EOPS, they provide my books and services, for my books. I try to use as many of the programs as possible.” Jose, an anthropology and forestry student, remarks “I’m a federal, under federal work study. I’m a peer mentor.” Several of these students found college graduates who had been in the same program and were willing to give them advice. This is highlighted by Michael, an administration of justice student, who states:

Yes, grads. They introduce me to people that can help me and from the people that, help introduce me to more people and it’s just a variety of people that I know around here. So, I get a lot of help. I mean, it’s like, I never can say I don’t get help here…[The staff] help me with my class schedules, help me to fill out financial aid and giving, helping me get books, getting my whole educational plan.

Ernie, an applied science and technology student, comments: “I broke my tibia and had to be retrained. So, I went to the Department of Rehabilitation and asked them if they would help me. So, they asked me, ‘what do you want to do’?” Karen, a re-entry student, confirms “Cal Works is $1500. That’s my cash aid and my food stamps. And then the month I get my grants
it’s just extra money that helps us get the things that we can’t get otherwise. It pays for extra books, supplies…and my Pell grant.” Diane, the CalWorks Coordinator, notes: “This institution has been successful in coexisting and supporting other campus services. They spent two years planning before the dollars began to flow [to fund the student services].” Stephanie, a learning center faculty member, remarks “The [student success lab] is a place where students can come and very personally and very privately build their skills.” A counselor for under prepared students, Vera, adds “We help students who are low income and essentially under prepared and primarily at that particular point, first generation college students. And we provide academic advising, personal counseling, career counseling, just about whatever walks in the door with the student.”

Nearly all of the students are involved with an organization or work for a department at the institution. Outside of the classroom student involvement with the institution is high. Ellen, a student services student, expresses this theme in her comments.

I started off just as a student taking regular classes, I got involved with the federal work-study program, and I started out in the work experience program. They kept asking me back and there I did Orientation, help students. Then I went over to job placement, which is also through federal work-study. I then came and spoke with Manuel, I came to a peer/mentor appointment as a matter of fact and my peer mentor, I end up talking to him and he was like, wow, you should do this…Now, I am here.

California Community College students recognize that diminished services and classes are a result of budget cuts, which negatively affect the academic achievement of students. Nidia, a pre-nursing, and ESL student, comments “I think what can be improved is
more help. I tried to make an appointment with a teacher and I can’t, because he’s already booked.” James, a liberal arts student, states “The bad part is that you can’t get into classes.” An astute anthropology and forestry student, Jose, notes “What could be improved here is the state coming out of its crisis and this institution…laying instructors off, vital instructors. The ones that end up suffering besides instructors being laid off are the students.” A basic skills faculty member, Stephanie, affirms the student perspectives: “I’ve lost a lot of staffing in the lab. We used to have 2 to 3 people in the lab at all times, so now it is pretty much one person.” She is afraid that “with the loss of staff, whether I’m going to be able to continue [assisting these students].” Vera, a counselor of under prepared students, states her concerns: “ESL is probably the fastest growing number of our student population and it seems like we are having less and less classes for them. There will probably not be classes for them and we will turn them away and there is nothing else.”

Social/Culture Issues

California Community College students not only focus upon their own learning and achievements but also on others’. Indeed, they tend to address the needs of others more than their own. They want to help people and encourage others to seek an education as well. Ellen, a human services student, comments:

I think I kind of had an influence on what she did and I think that I also had an influence on my sons wanting to stay in school and keep going. The oldest who thought school was a curse, at every age, he came to me the other day and said, Mom, I am enrolling for the fall. He said I want to get my bachelor’s…I think that is why I am in this field, I could help them to do that and to realize who they are and that they have so much going for them.
An ESL and pre-nursing student, Nidia, indicates: “I like to take care of people. I just I feel I have that gift, the gift of being caring, generous, and loving. That’s what I think. I don’t know, I always wanted to be a nurse. That’s something I wanted to do when I was a child.”

The students at California Community College did not simply focus on seeking education or careers that would put them in high salary jobs. The students would rather work in an area of personal interest. This theme is made clear through the goals James, a liberal arts student, who states “To get my career, to basically want to enjoy going to work. I don’t want to be going to construction, something that I don’t want to do.”

The students are able to look beyond their individual goals and realize that their fellow students seek an education for similar reasons. They want to see one another complete their program, and this perception is reflective of group solidarity. Jose, an anthropology and forestry student, clarifies this point: “As far as similarities, we all have the same goal in mind, is to complete whatever course is being taken and graduate from this institution and go forth with if need be.” Ellen, a Human Services student, remarks “I talk with a lot of these students. I want to talk with them about their appearance. I am not trying to down them, because I have been there, I am as poor as they are, but you have to be clean, just be neat and clean.” An Applied Science and technology student, Kathleen, states “Not that everybody is in, we are in it together. You have a stake in your associates success.” James, a liberal arts student, comments: “Everybody is different and comes from a different world, but we are all trying to get a degree.”

These students understand the value of the relationships they are developing. Jose remarks: “My best experiences here would probably be the contacts that I make or made—the networking that went on here with the instructors, with students.” Michael, an
administration of justice student, agrees: “Once in a while I go and look around the campus and also see the programs that they have and get to know some people around there, so in case I need something that I got someone there to help me out.” A liberal arts student, James, notes: “Everybody’s different…I have met a lot of different people…I found out who my friends were.”

**Skill Development Issues**

Nearly all of the students at California Community College have either failed in a previous educational pursuit or did not take education seriously. An anthropology and forestry student, Jose, notes: “When I graduated from high school I didn’t take higher education seriously and absolutely now that I’m older, I don’t have, time is not on my side anymore like it was.” Kathleen, an applied science and technology student, comments “When I graduated from high school back in 1970 I chose to ignore everybody, go to college, go to college, or you will never amount to anything. I decided not to do that.” Ernie, also an applied science and technology student, notes, “I tried to take some night school classes and found that was impossible because I had a family to support then and my job changed and I had to start working nights, well I was on call, so I had to drop my classes.”

These students understand that if they want to achieve their goals they must be self-motivated. An applied science and technology student, Kathleen, states: “The students start college and find out it is not like high school, you don’t have to go, actually, nothing really bad happens if you don’t go except for at the end when you don’t pass the course.” These students also understand that they must take risks and make sacrifices to achieve their goals. Maria, an applied science and technology student, states:
I thought that was a sacrifice to go four years [in the Army] and in return I can
go to college, because that is what I wanted to do. I wanted to make a better
life than what my parents gave to me and just move up the chain. So, I started
here in the community college using my GI Bill, but at that point that wasn’t
enough money. So, I worked and got financial aid at the same time.

An ESL and pre-nursing student, Nidia, notes:

I got married and I was coming to BC on and off but then after I had my last
child, my three years, he’s three now, I decided I wanted to do something
better than what I’m doing now. I think I can do better than what I do now and
that’s why I decided to come back to school. And because I always wanted to
be a nurse.

Ernie, another applied science and technology student, confirms: “All I know is I need to be
reeducated into something that will allow me to support my family.” Vera, a counselor for
under prepared students, adds: “The majority of these students have young children, so
they’re trying to improve their lives and the lives of their children.” Although these students
have personal difficulties and responsibilities, they make their education a priority.

Students in credit courses at California Community College were also willing to incur
considerable debt. This debt occurs even though these students work part-time or full-time
and receive financial aid. Kathleen, an Applied Science and Technology student, states “I
spend more than I pay, you know how that goes. (laughs) It is not like I pay off everything I
spend…I am heavily in debt.” If the students are not incurring debt to go to college, they
often find it hard to pay for the necessities from month to month. Nidia, an ESL and Pre-
Nursing student, notes “How do you expect people to go to school if they can’t even afford to
pay for tuition because it is so high?” A liberal arts student, James, remarks “A negative experience has been money wise. Books are real expensive and that hurt my pocket.” Karen, a re-entry student, comments: “Financially…we survive. Grants help us get the things we can’t get otherwise. When I transfer it will mean taking a student loan.” They must incur debt to overcome the obstacles that face them.

California Community College students have had a number of obstacles to overcome in order to achieve their goals in college. Ellen, a human services student, states “I have two boys in college. Ages 22 and 19. I have a 12-year-old daughter in junior high and I have a 2 year old. I have been here at [this] College since, I started originally in 2000, I have had a lot of setbacks due to health problems.” Ellen is also a full-time student and works part-time at an engineering company. An anthropology and forestry student, Jose, notes:

I’m on sabbatical. I took time off to complete my education, which is taking a little longer than what I wanted, but as far as me right now, I’m, besides being a student, I do care for my mother. My father passed away a couple of years ago, so I take care of her…I also suffer from depression. Panic attacks, anxiety attacks and having to incorporate those episodes with class.

A nursing student, Guillean, talks about her ability to balance work and school. “It’s very, very difficult.” She also states “most [students] are over 30, some ladies are divorced, and many of them have children.” Ernie, an applied science and technology student, remarks “Being out of school for 35 years and then coming back to school is a major shock.” Karen notes “I’m a re-entry student, I’m 43. I’m a single mom of six. First generation college student, growing up I was never encouraged to go to college. Ended up in an abusive marriage, two years ago, got out and knew the only way we could stand on our own two feet
was for me to come back to school. And I had to fight to get here.” She continues discussing her philosophy: “It is just a matter of taking a heavy load. I also work in addition to going to school and taking care of my family.” Diane, a CalWorks Coordinator, confirms the burdens for students: “Housing is a big issue for students, transportation is a major issue. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that education and training are needed by these students. We need to spend the up-front dollars on that, as far as I’m concerned, or we will pay later.” A Basic skills learning center faculty, Stephanie, states: “The majority of the students are low SES and work…and yes they will likely fill the low, service sector jobs in society.”

These students understand the struggles other students must overcome to reach their goals in college and realize that they must each overcome those struggles on their own. A human services student, Ellen, told her employer “you have got to change this place. When you are poor and you are used to living in the ghetto and you don’t have anything, you know, going into a business setting is intimidating.” She also states: ”And I think once you gain their trust and get them to open up and realize that they are more than they have been told they are, they will open up to other options…So, you have to put other options in front of them.” An applied science and technology student, Maria, remarks “I actually had to venture out to learn what I was supposed to be learning. To me, that was horrible. And to include that, the instructor had a horrible personality. [This was a] huge barrier to learning.” Maria also notes “I found a lot of people, just had no clue, whatsoever, how the whole system, how do you get into classes, how do you pay for books.” Another applied science and technology student, Kathleen, comments: “The other thing that I was stunned by was to find out you just can’t go to school. You just can’t go to any classroom you wanted. I was so foolish. I was like, what do you mean the class is full. I also didn’t have much idea what was going on with
institutional policies, activities, and clubs.” Kathleen also states: “It is the unwritten rules, that’s what it is. Because you come and you just think, you assume it is like, you go to the grocery store and everybody can get what they want off the shelf, but that is not the way it is.” Michael, an administration of justice student, notes:

Students don’t think college is for them. They believe it’s like for smarter people or that they can’t do it because they’re not that smart that they can’t do it. They think they can’t do it. [They] struggled in high school and they think they’ll struggle more, far more worse than they did in high school and they didn’t believe that they were college material…[Faculty and staff] need to work on outreaching to some of the students or, I mean, some of the students don’t even know some of the programs out there yet. If they reach out to them and let them know what the programs that they have and what they can do and what they can offer, then they won’t feel like that…There’s a lot of students that are lost. They don’t even know what they’re going for. They’re just all undecided and you get a lot of those…If students know more about what programs they have to offer, how much help they can get, they wouldn’t have any problems.

Karen, a re-entry student, comments: “There’s a lot of other re-entry students. I think a lot of us have come out of bad situations. Not all, but a lot. And we see the need for changing some of the stereotypes in some of the services that are available.” Bonnie, an adult education faculty member, corroborates the students’ comments: “Working with under prepared students is kind of like danger teaching.”
The students at California Community College have a reasonable understanding of how they plan to accomplish their goals. An anthropology and forestry student, Jose, remarks: “I have many years of experience; I know which direction I’m going in, whereas a lot of these students that are a lot younger than me don’t have a direction they’re going to.” Maria, an applied science and technology student, notes “So you kind of have to go with the goals and learn. A lot of people don’t know that. So, I take initiative all the time.”

California Community College students also understand that obtaining a certificate or an Associate’s degree will not solve their problems, but is an important step in their preferred direction. They realize that there are many more obstacles yet to overcome. Ellen, a human services student, states:

I do know a long time ago, the AA degree was like a really big thing, you can do a lot, it is almost a high school diploma now. And I am like, okay, but it is important, I am not downplaying it in any way, it is very important to have and it, but you know, I think now, you are going to have to take that extra step, you are going to have to keep up with the times.

An anthropology and forestry student, Jose, notes “I came to a crossroads where to go the direction I wanted to go into, it required a degree.” Guilleen, a nursing student, remarks “What I’ve heard is that a lot of people think that somebody with a Bachelor’s will definitely get the job over somebody who’s only got the Associate’s degree.” An ESL and pre-nursing student, Nidia, comments: “The books are expensive. They need to do something. I think education is something that people need to, here in America; they need to look into it. How do you expect people to go to school if they can’t even afford to pay for the tuition because
it’s so high.” Ernie, an applied science and technology student, posits “Now days, unless you have a degree, most people don’t even want to talk to you.” Karen, a re-entry student, adds:

Reinforcing that we’re never too old to stop learning. That there is a lot out there to learn, there’s a lot of different possibilities that we don’t always consider. I know coming out of high school you don’t always understand all the different possibilities as far as jobs and where you can go and what you can do with it, it opens up a lot of worlds for us.

Diane, the CalWorks coordinator, confirms the desire for students to develop this mindset.

One of my missions is to take a student who’s here for short-term training and hopefully help them change their whole worldview so that lifetime learning is now part of their worldview, and that even after they get into the workplace they know that there’s someplace they can come and continue to work on their education.

Stephanie, a basic skills faculty member, states “I want them to believe in themselves, that they can improve their lot in life.”

These credit students at California Community College want to obtain more education beyond the community college. Karen, a re-entry student, notes this by saying “And I will go on to get my BA and my Master’s, which I never, when I first got here I would’ve never believed possible or had never considered, because it wasn’t in my realm of possibilities at the time.” Ellen, a Human Services student, remarks “I plan to transfer after I am done here. This last year I have really been cramming my classes and taking everything I need so I can get out of here.” A Political Science student, Grace, notes: “I want to finish my general [requirements] here. After that, I want to transfer, where I am planning to get a BA.”
Maria, an Applied Science and technology students, comments “In two years I graduated with my AS…I am to get my master’s. That I have already mapped out. It is just five classes after I after I get my license.” An ESL and Pre-Nursing student, Nidia, states “My thinking is later on, get my Master’s.” James, a liberal arts student, remarks “I can’t go to a university, because it is too expensive…but will transfer to a college at the end of the semester.” A re-entry student, Karen, notes: “I will go on to get my BA and Master’s, which I never though possible when I first got here…It wasn’t in my realm of possibilities.”

Similarities between Sites

The students interviewed at all three community colleges shared a number of similarities in their perceptions and experiences. The structure of the programs at the community colleges was beneficial to students at all three sites. The students stated that their achievements would not have been possible had it not been for the flexibility of the program, the direction and guidance they received about the programs, and the availability of varying types of programs, certificates, and classes. The faculty and staff were credited with having significant influence on each individual student interviewed at the three sites. Every student could mention an institutional employee who had given them assistance or encouraged them to achieve the goals they had set.

The efforts of these individual faculty and staff members and the overall structure of the community college have affected these students and their educational development. This positive impact is evident through the achievement of these students at all three community colleges, especially given the students’ failures in previous educational pursuits before enrolling at their current institution. The students, particularly at North Carolina and Illinois Community College, attempted education at other venues: traditional high schools, four-year
colleges and universities, adult education programs, and even other community colleges. At these they failed to accomplish their academic goals.

Associated with their previous failures, many of the students started at the community college with low self-esteem or self-doubt. All the students at the three sites gained confidence through their achievements at the community college. One distinct difference among the three sets of college students was that the students at California Community College overcame their self-doubts more quickly—they were confident, motivated, and willing to take charge of their intended actions. Not only have nearly all of these students previously failed in other educational institutions and have a low self-esteem but also they have a number of obstacles to overcome while pursuing their educational goals. Several of these obstacles are overcome through the support of the institution’s structure, the assistance of faculty and staff, other external structures designed to assist these student populations, including family members and friends.

English as a Second Language (ESL) students possessed characteristics separate from the other students interviewed. The major difference between the ESL students and the other students interviewed rested on educational or employment attainment. Many of the ESL students had already completed some postsecondary education or had held a high salary or high wage position in their country of origin. In spite of these differences, the ESL students shared a common struggle with all community college students: to gain educational credentials and find a place in American society. The language barrier these students experience negated much of the social and economic value of their past education. The ESL students understood that they must learn English before they could utilize their past accomplishments and become an active member in America’s culture and workforce.
Differences between Sites

The students interviewed at the three community colleges also exhibited a number of differences. Most of these differences were evident in comparing the students at California Community College and the other two sites—Illinois Community College and North Carolina Community College. The differences in the students interviewed at each site are no doubt a factor in the variations among the sites. Student differences include their personal confidence, level of education, and aspirations. Institutional differences, such as organizational initiatives, priorities, and faculty and staff behaviors also factor into the differences between sites.

Student Differences

The students at California Community College exhibit knowledge of society with regards to work and money, while the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College have relatively limited knowledge of these areas. This lack of knowledge has a bearing on students’ understanding of both their educational and occupational goals. These student differences are likely attributable to the lack of work and educational experiences of these students and the limited perspective they have of society. For example, the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College are enrolled in classes, but are uncertain of what classes they need to take to reach their academic goals. Even if they possess academic goals, numerous students do not know what they will be qualified to do in the workforce once they complete their program. These students often have unclear goals and act with little vision or direction. The students at California Community College are focused on and possess detailed knowledge of what classes they need to take and the degrees they want to obtain. They know what they expect to accomplish and where they would like to work when
they are finished. The students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College are also personally or individually oriented. This is a consequence of the limited understanding of the benefits of social capital and their personal feelings of isolation for the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College. They are not concerned about their role in society and their actions and goals are driven by their personal happiness. The students at California Community College are focused on society in general, on other individuals, such as their peers and their family, and they act according to the needs and expectations of others.

The students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College seek an education to meet their basic needs. In general they want only enough education to be qualified for a job that will allow them to live a happy and comfortable life. Many of the students did not desire education beyond the community college and assumed that the basic skills (Adult High School, ESL, or GED) they were receiving would allow them to find a job where they could remain financially solvent. These students possessed unreasonable views of the benefits they would receive from completing these basic skills programs. California Community College students know a certificate or an Associate's degree will help them attain a secure and well-paying job, although this will not solve all their problems. The students know that there will be more obstacles to overcome and that they will likely need more postsecondary education. The students at California Community College desired to obtain further education beyond the community college.

North Carolina and Illinois College students are also unaware of the consequences of not obtaining further education. The students were oblivious to their future in the workforce and their financial well being with or without an education. The students at California Community College understood what failure on their part would mean for their financial
future. These students were willing to take risks and would give extra effort to ensure they would reach their academic and work related goals. The students at California Community College accepted incurring some debt to achieve their academic goals, whereas many of the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College stated they would not seek further education if it cost more.

The students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College did not actively seek advice or suggestions about their future, but if given suggestions on how to reach their goals, often stated interest in accepting the advice. These students’ lack of awareness made every proposition seem valid and, to them, almost ‘too good to be true.’ However, these students rarely acted on the suggestions they were given. California Community College students often sought advice and took suggestions, but made their own decisions after weighing their options thoroughly. These students were involved and active in their educational decisions.

The students at all three sites experience considerable diversity of student backgrounds and characteristics in their classes. While the students at all three sites acknowledge these differences and understand they all have a goal to obtain an education, the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College did not express a bond with their fellow students. The students at North Carolina Community College understand they are all seeking a similar education, but perceive that their actions stem from different motivations. The students at Illinois Community College were aware that they share similar academic goals and were grateful for what they could teach one another, but they did not develop a strong connection with their fellow students. California Community College students were able to see that different people were in the same program together trying to complete an
academic program. These students expressed their feelings of a common bond, looked out for one another, and tried to ensure they all passed their courses.

_Institutional Differences_

Even though the students at all three community colleges had received assistance from faculty and staff to reach their academic goals, the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College were rarely encouraged to look into fields that were in high demand or to seek further education. The students at California Community Colleges were encouraged to continue their education beyond the community college and to look at other fields or careers they may not have known existed or were in need of workers.

While it was noted that support services and staff were available for all the students at the three community colleges, all three community colleges experienced budget cuts that were diminishing the level of services available to these students. Each institution had varying types and levels of services available to their students, yet a difference evident at California Community Colleges was the higher rate students utilized support staff and services. Nearly every student interviewed at California Community College used financial assistance programs, worked with support staff for guidance and direction, and developed strong relationships with faculty, staff, and students. These types of relationships and support services were more of an anomaly for the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College. The students at California Community College understand the value of the relationships they are developing. California Community College students were also highly active and engaged with the institution’s community, which was not the case at the other two institutions. The students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College were often unaware that support services and staff existed, and those students who did know the services
were available rarely used them. Textbooks and technology were also often outdated for the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College, whereas the students at California Community College purchased their own books and did not voice any concerns about the available technology. Consistent with this pattern, the students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College were not given any homework and did not work in groups, while the students at California Community College were often given homework and worked in groups on a regular basis.

The patterns and connections that were evident in the voices of the students and the faculty and administrators at the three community colleges provide some useful answers to the four research questions. The similarities and differences between these sites also increase the understanding of the “beyond the margins” students with regards to the four research questions. These similarities and differences can also be viewed in a table (See Appendix F). The conclusions that are developed from the analysis of the data and the answers to the four research questions will illuminate the need for institutional responses and the prospects of these students with and without assistance.
Chapter Five:
Discussion and Conclusions

The themes identified through the voices of these students signify several clear messages about a segment of society that is ignored. Each of the three sites has its own individual characteristics, yet all three sites also share a number of similarities. These similarities suggest a number of issues that are of particular significance to this investigation. According to data from students, faculty, and administrators, institutional officials at community colleges, state governments, and the federal government are not responding to these issues. The different issues evident at the sites identify both the multiple non-traditional populations and the need to respond to those populations in different ways. The “beyond the margins” population, who are highly non-traditional, are not only under prepared for postsecondary education but also high risk for course and program completion (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Both the student populations at North Carolina Community College and Illinois Community College addressed in this investigation are unprepared for the current job market. The student population at California Community College is considered non-traditional as well, but not necessarily “beyond the margins.” These minimally or moderately non-traditional students at California Community College exhibit personal characteristics and attributes that distinguish them from the “beyond the margins” students, and serve as a useful comparison to the other two sites. As a whole the investigation of these three populations suggests methods that could be effective in promoting the achievement of these students in postsecondary education and in employment.
Institutional Experiences of “Beyond the Margins” Students

The four research questions will guide the discussion on these similar and different characteristics that identify students who are “beyond the margins.” The first research question is: What are the institutional experiences of “beyond the margins” students during their educational program? The structure of community colleges is one of the main reasons they are a viable avenue for many students to seek an education. Low cost, flexible schedules, different learning approaches in the classroom, and multiple pathways for degrees, programs, certificates, and training are among the community college attributes that students state lead to their college attendance and achievement of academic goals (The American Association of Community Colleges, 2001; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Herideen, 1998; Vaughan, 2000). Yet, despite these system characteristics that encourage students to flourish at community colleges more than at any other institution (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995), there are characteristics that do not facilitate the development of students who are “beyond the margins.” These characteristics were identified through the perspectives and experiences of the students interviewed.

“Beyond the margins” students noted the limited use of group work. Group work is a common “soft skill” needed in the changing economy (Castells, 1996; Elsner, 2001). Most of the “beyond the margins” students work at their own pace and on their own schedule in their basic skills classes. These students are also not given homework. When students finish their work in the classroom, there are few, if any, materials available for them to continue their education outside of the classroom. Some students even requested homework to complete outside of the classroom and faculty were unable or unwilling to accommodate these requests.
The students in basic skills courses who are primarily “beyond the margins” also stated that books and technology were outdated and limited. The possession of up-to-date knowledge and students’ having the ability to use current technology are also necessary skills in the new economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997; Carnoy, 2000; Carnoy et al., 1993; Castells, 1996; Elsner, 2001; Golonka & Matus-Grossman, 2001; National University Continuing Education Association, 1995). While the amount of limited and outdated technology and books fluctuated between classes and programs and North Carolina and Illinois Community College, the students in credit courses at California Community College did not often experience this problem.

Students in credit programs are closely monitored and tracked by the institution, but the primarily “beyond the margins” students in non-credit and basic skills programs are not often tracked. North Carolina Community College had a limited tracking system and technique for monitoring student goal achievement for their basic skills students, while Illinois Community College had none at all. Students’ perspectives and experiences showed that when there is no tracking system or structure devised to encourage consistent interaction and motivational techniques, they exhibit limited connection with the institution and little external encouragement to continue pursuing their academic goals at the community college. Reisberg (1999) states that the main reason students leave their institution before completing their academic goals is because they do not become connected to the institution. Many of the faculty and staff at the institutions in this study noted the damaging effect budget cuts and a lack of institutional focus on tracking students has on creating and developing structures for these students. Budget cuts and a shifting institutional focus have also diminished support services and limited individual attention, which is detrimental to students who are “beyond
the margins.” The achievement of these students’ goals often depends on the ability of faculty or staff members to encourage, motivate, and guide them (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; O’Banion, 1996; Stromei, 2000). In an effort to compensate for diminished support services, Illinois and North Carolina Community College outsource some support services. For example, Illinois Community College is now working with external agencies to supply assistance for students with physical and mental disabilities, while cuts continue to diminish other campus support services (for example, tutoring, counselors). As the California Community College students show, students who are not necessarily “beyond the margins” are more able to overcome this lack of individual attention by seeking out faculty, staff, and support services that will assist in the completion of their goals.

The perceptions and experiences of the students interviewed at all three institutions emphasized the significant effect individual faculty and staff members have on students. Lipsky (1980) identifies these individual faculty and staff members in organizations, such as community colleges, especially those whose employees are under funded and work in marginalized programs such as basic skills, as street-level bureaucrats. Street-level bureaucrats are often able to and do interpret policy and regulations in such a way that is most beneficial to the student or students they seek to assist. Most of the students interviewed mentioned a faculty or staff member who took a particular interest in them, encouraged or motivated them to accomplish goals they thought impossible, or made extraordinary efforts to assist them in some way. These individual efforts had a positive influence on these students’ perceptions and experiences at the community college. Many of the students noted that the efforts of these street-level bureaucrats are what helped them remain and achieve their goals at the institution.
The perceptions and experiences of these students lead to the conclusion that without the intervention of street-level bureaucrats “beyond the margins” students are less likely to achieve their academic goals. The students at North Carolina Community College noted that faculty and staff encouraged and motivated them on a more systematic basis, while the intervention by faculty and staff at Illinois Community College was less systematic and more inconsistent. This suggests that an institution with systematic faculty and staff intervention with students should provide students with a more consistent experience and motivation for them to accomplish their academic and career goals. Faculty and staff who took extra time, supplied support and guidance, and/or motivated students to achieve more than they thought possible influenced the experiences and perceptions of “beyond the margins” students in significant ways. A basic education faculty member, Bonnie, at California Community College notes the difference between students who are “beyond the margins” and those who are not classified as such.

Some students may only need someone to come alongside and offer a little bit of assistance, whereas my under prepared students are not at that point yet. They need much more support to handle the work…If I’ve got a group of students there that have needs over here and I’m over here teaching them because it’s in my syllabus, then what is the point?…With developmental students in particular, you need to teach the student.

The faculty members’ comments and the experiences of these students indicate the importance of faculty and staff assisting “beyond the margins” students. The creation of institutional norms and policies that encourage well thought out, consistent, and fair intervention by faculty and staff would be pivotal for these students.
The students at all three community colleges noted that most faculty and staff cared about them and motivated them in and out of the classroom. The “beyond the margins” students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College emphasized the role of faculty more than staff. This greater faculty impact on students’ experiences is likely influenced by the lack of support services and staff available to these students, and even when staff and services are available, students do not often use them. Furthermore, as Vaughan (2000) notes, students in community colleges often have more interaction with faculty than institutional staff members. While students at all three sites were aware of which faculty members would be most encouraging and helpful to their own personal education, growth, and development, students at California Community College were able to enroll in specific classes based on this knowledge of faculty and students in basic skills classes at the other two colleges often had little or no options to choose specific faculty members. The students at California Community College were also more involved and engaged with the institution than those students at the other two colleges. These California Community College students were more aware of their limitations and the need for others to help them than the “beyond the margins” students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College. In pursuing their academic objectives the students at California Community College were more cognizant of and prepared to utilize the opportunities, support services, and support staff available to them.

“Beyond the margins” students’ limited understanding and knowledge of education, possible job options, and their social environment increases the impact faculty and staff can have on this population. This limited understanding and inability to verbalize their perceptions were usually accompanied by an eagerness on the part of students to obtain direction and advice on how to accomplish their stated goals. Despite this eagerness to
receive direction and advice, many of the “beyond the margins” students did not experience the encouragement of faculty or staff members to obtain further education or seek available jobs. Only two students at North Carolina Community College noted pressure to complete their basic skills program, but that was the only influence stated by “beyond the margins” students. This perception or experience by the students at North Carolina Community College could be a result of the goal attainment tracking system the institution has in place, which is also tied to funding and institutional priorities.

The students interviewed noted the numerous obstacles they must overcome while in the community college and in their daily lives. Some of these common obstacles include family responsibilities, lack of finances, non-traditional age, limited education, and inadequate work experience (some held various low wage jobs). Those with disabilities have even further obstacles. This perception of obstacles was not as prevalent at California Community College where students had work experience and had already obtained further (formal and informal) education than the “beyond the margins” students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College. These students at California Community College with fewer non-traditional characteristics were more likely to identify the possible pathways and take the necessary steps to overcome their obstacles.

Students’ perceptions identified a significant depletion of support services and diminishing resources in the community college, which is corroborated by faculty and staff in these community colleges. The possible influence street-level bureaucrats can have on students increases as services, staff, and resources become less available (Lipsky, 1980). These diminishing support services have the greatest negative influence on students who are “beyond the margins” (Levin, 2003). Without an institutional focus or structure organized to
serve these “beyond the margins” students (a condition that students perceive as valuable to their achievement), individualized faculty and staff interaction, which is both consistent and balanced, diminishes rapidly. The CalWorks Coordinator, Diane, at California Community College, makes this point obvious in her comments.

As our economy is screaming for more vocationally trained folks, they’re cutting back community colleges. But as need is going up, there are cuts, resources just keep going down and I think we’re just deescalating faster and faster…The morale at the college is lower than I have seen in five years, gonna expect to get lower…There will be service providers that will go the extra mile, but the reality is there’s going to be less classes available, less counseling time.

This trend in community colleges will influence the behaviors of “beyond the margins” students whose goal achievement most relies on these services (Jalomo, 2001; Laden, 1999; Valadez, 1993). The injustice does not stop there, however. Carlos, a Dean at Illinois Community College, points out that his community college has numerous sites and numerous locations, but “we have more students than we could possibly accommodate.” Lack of accommodations for those who are “beyond the margins” serves as another major obstacle for this population.

The experiences and perceptions of the students interviewed illustrate how the individual efforts of faculty and staff can have a positive influence on students. These individual efforts can become more consistent and equal through structuring the quality and quantity of support services and developing structured initiatives for faculty and staff. Bolman and Deal (1997) imply that the structural development of processes that facilitate
faculty and staff to meet the individual needs of each student can promote predictability and uniformity of those efforts for all students, especially those who are “beyond the margins.” The individual efforts of faculty and staff (street-level bureaucrats) can be effective for individual students, but relying on this unfettered and haphazard system rests on the willingness of individuals to go above and beyond to assist every student. As Bolman and Deal suggest, a well-designed organizational structure and logical initiatives can encourage the development of students more consistently than the individual efforts of some faculty or staff members.

The students interviewed at all three institutions noted the presence of considerable ethnic, cultural, religious, age, and background diversity in their academic environment. The students perceive that their enrollment in similar classes creates a common bond despite these differences, but they lack cognizance of the similar educational pursuits and life goals among these diverse populations. The students do not realize their common hope of gaining the skills and education to be successful (self-sufficient) in the changing economy, only the differing severity and types of obstacles they must each overcome. The “beyond the margins” students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College in particular focused individually on achieving their own goals and not how they could work with their fellow students and utilize each others’ strengths to reach both collective and individual goals.

The common experiences and perceptions that emerged from the students interviewed related to their education, job interests, and the theoretical framework of this investigation suggest practical ways to support both consistently and equally “beyond the margins” students in their educational pursuits.
Hopes and Aspirations of “Beyond the Margins” Students

The second research question is: Do “beyond the margins” students believe that their actions follow from their personal hopes and aspirations? As a collective whole, “beyond the margins” students’ actions follow from their personal hopes and aspirations. The actions and goals of the “beyond the margins” students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College are internally focused. The students in basic skills were focused on themselves and had a limited perception of society, education, and work. They did not seek an education so that they could occupy a specific role in society or make money; they were seeking what they often called “happiness.” Most students who are “beyond the margins” did not desire academic credentials or a job that would benefit their community or the economy. The students interviewed at California Community College who were not “beyond the margins” were much more focused on helping society and encouraging others. These students’ aspirations were more externally rather than internally focused.

“Beyond the margins” students decide how to reach their personal hopes and dreams with regards to education and work, yet they lack an understanding of education, the current economy, and job availability. This finding is a troublesome prospect. “Beyond the margins” students are also often uncertain of their aspirations and if they do have stated goals, they are not aware of how to reach them. A basic education faculty member, Bonnie, at California Community College, states this lack of understanding:

Most students do not know what degree or credential they’re going for. They know they need to get that college degree to get that better job, but they do not know the path there yet. They don’t know what kind of degree. So they’re probably in the right place. They’re trying things, they’re experimenting, and
they’re getting their basic skills down, but I think the vast majority, don’t
know exactly what they want to do, they just want the degree.

The individually oriented focus, lack of economic and educational understanding, coupled
with the limited influence by faculty and staff on students who are “beyond the margins” is
alarming. These characteristics place this population at risk in their educational endeavors.
Without a concerted effort to assist this population, Rifkin’s (1995) fear that this population
will be ignored and ultimately become invisible will be realized. “Beyond the margins”
students’ lack of knowledge will likely lead them to make decisions that bring them no closer
to economic self-sufficiency and goal attainment. A counselor, Audrey, at California
Community College acknowledges this fear and understands the need to have constant and
equal faculty and staff intervention. “These students need a lot of guidance because they are
so under prepared. They don’t know what questions to ask or even how to ask them or who
to ask or how to find out.”

The “beyond the margins” students also had little depth to their comments and
provided vague answers to the questions presented to them. There was a relationship between
the amount of formal education the students had and their ability to articulate thoughts and
aspirations. The faculty and staff at all three institutions noted the lack of educational,
societal, and workforce understanding possessed by “beyond the margins” students, but few
articulated methods to assist students beyond their individual efforts to motivate and
encourage them.

The theoretical framework of critical pedagogy is used to look at these students’
individualized orientations and limited understanding. In the first stage of critical pedagogy,
consciousness, “beyond the margins” students are unable to see personal logic in contrast to
global logic and the role they, as individuals, are to play in society (Freire, 1981). “Beyond the margins” students also do not confront power or inequalities or liberate themselves from real and perceived oppression so that they can have personal empowerment, which comprise the second and third stages of critical pedagogy. These students did not verbalize either the inequalities that exist for them or their lack of empowerment. The fourth stage of critical pedagogy is common good over profit. “Beyond the margins” students desire to be ‘happy’ in life—that is, achieve personal satisfaction—and to them, happiness is not about making money. The students do not focus on developing their human capital for society, but only for themselves. They are focused on doing what they think will bring them joy and happiness. Students stated that joy and happiness were a consequence of having enough money to obtain the basic necessities and to enjoy the simple pleasures in life. In contrast, the students interviewed at California Community College and many of the ESL students at all colleges were conscious of the global society and of the inequalities and power differentiations that exist. Some of these minimally or moderately non-traditional students wanted to confront the power differentiation and inequalities and even liberate others. This was noted from the desire of immigrant students to return home, to Brazil for example, to help others who are less fortunate.

Theoretically, through critical pedagogy, “beyond the margins” students must be educated to develop a consciousness of society, education, and the current economy and its workforce. Without this understanding and knowledge this population will have difficulty in reaching the other stages of critical pedagogy and having an active role in society and the economy. “Beyond the margins” students also lack the basic knowledge necessary to make well-informed choices that will assist them in achieving their personal aspirations. Given
these conclusions, according to critical pedagogy, American society should not be content with their current institutions in that there is little likelihood that this population will become active participants in society and the economy.

Rhoads and Valadez (1996) also declare a serious need to develop the consciousness of community college students. They propose a change in education, where the traditional passive student becomes more involved and engaged where they develop knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world around them. They encourage these students to move to the higher stages of critical pedagogy theory: awareness of power and domination (Freire, 1981). This lack of consciousness has only become worse as the economy continues to change, as Rhoads and Valadez also note, and the need for knowledge and skills (consciousness) increases. As numerous community college students move into low-income jobs and are not economically self-sufficient, the assumptions of Rhoads and Valadez are warranted: justice is not uniform in society and the needs of all individuals are not taken into consideration. Rhoades and Valadez, however, examine nontraditional students, but not solely those who are “beyond the margins,” those experiencing considerable obstacles, who have a greater need for support services and staff, and need individualized assistance to achieve their academic and work goals. As this research has shown, these students exhibit a major challenge to higher education, society, and the economy.

The students interviewed at all three community colleges entered postsecondary education with a low self-esteem and only the students at California Community College had an understanding of what hopes and aspirations were possible for them. Through experiencing some educational successes the students at California Community College gained greater confidence and broader hopes and aspirations, while the “beyond the margins”
students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College, whose educational successes were negligible in comparison, did not gain assurance or greater aspirations as quickly. Students with a low self-concept need faculty and staff to take an interest or encourage these disenfranchised and discouraged students individually (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Karen, a re-entry student at California Community College, notes the debilitating effect low self-esteem can cause:

If you are coming back to college after being away, you don’t always know the process or where to start or where to begin or who to ask…Your esteem is so low anyway, that you need that extra guidance…I would not have considered college at the time, because it seemed out of reach. And whether it truly was or not, I would not have known where to start the process. I was a mess.

Even a basic skills faculty member at California Community College noted the seriousness of this problem for these students who are “beyond the margins.” “I used to think that there was nothing more fragile than the ego of a first grader, until I came up here and then I realized that [underdeveloped students] ego is as fragile as a first grader times however many years they’ve been out of school.” These students need help to develop their self-image so that they will be more likely to achieve their personal hopes and aspirations with regards to education and work and can be active members of society and the economy.

Influence of the Economy on “Beyond the Margins” Students

The third research question is: Do “beyond the margins” students believe that their actions are influenced by the economy’s workforce needs? “Beyond the margins” students state that their actions are not affected by the economy’s workforce needs, yet their
aspirations appear to be influenced by the economy. The students’ individually oriented nature and focus on personal happiness over profit and employment in high demand fields would lead one to believe that these students’ actions are not influenced by the economy’s workforce needs. Yet, many of the students have aspirations to pursue postsecondary education and be financially solvent. “Beyond the margins” students lack an interest in the economy and they do not know how to reach or understand the benefits of academic and educational goals. These students’ postsecondary education pursuits and fiscal objectives must have been communicated to these students at some point and influence the decisions they make and the aspirations they seek to accomplish.

“Beyond the margins” students are not economically oriented, despite the influence the economy does or does not have on them. These students do not set goals or make decisions based on the economy or economic factors. Instead they make decisions based on their need to obtain basic (low level) needs and wants. For example, “beyond the margins” students are enrolled in class, but are unsure what other courses they need to take or where the classes they are taking will lead. This example illustrates the findings of this study, in that these students have unclear goals and values; their actions have an undetermined outcome; and they do not think about how their current behaviors may impact their future. This may have a strong correlation with this population’s lack of understanding and knowledge of society, education, and the workforce. These students are not aware of the new economy, with only five students’ noting that jobs were being lost to other countries. These findings also support the need to develop the consciousness of these students.

This lack of consciousness and knowledge of the economy’s workforce needs by those who are “beyond the margins” is evidenced by students’ limited knowledge of society
with regards to work and money. The students understand that money is essential, but they only want to earn enough wages to pursue their aspirations and obtain basic necessities. A trend that emerged from the perceptions of the students interviewed was that the less education the student had obtained, the more basic the goals desired by the individual. Approximately five students stated any global or societal goals or noted a need to educate society to promote the best interests of the country. These few students who possessed some knowledge of the economy and workforce needs perceived the presence of the old economy, not the new economy. The students indicated that if they could become an expert in a skill over a short time period that they would be able to obtain a good job. While this may have been accurate for the industrial economy, in the new economy it is vital to obtain new knowledge and skills that are necessary to remain competitive in the workforce (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; Carnoy, 2000; McCabe, 2000). In contrast to the students from Illinois and North Carolina, the students at California Community College are focused on gaining the knowledge and skills that will enable them to be active participants in society. They understand the need to develop human and social capital continually, even though most of these students also have a limited understanding of the changing economy.

The students interviewed at North Carolina and Illinois Community College were not willing to give up simple pleasures or their personal wants and aspirations to have a high wage job. These students did not want to move around the country or find a job that would consume the majority of their time, a trend with high paying jobs in the new economy (Bridges, 1994; Castells, 1996; Rifkin, 1995). The students at California Community College were more willing to take risks and make sacrifices to accomplish and achieve their academic
goals. For example, one of these risks was incurring debt to achieve their academic goals. Even though these students were willing to make some sacrifices to pursue further education, they had limited knowledge of the changing jobs and workforce and the knowledge and skills needed to fill those jobs.

The Role of Community Colleges

The fourth research question is: How do “beyond the margins” students perceive the role of community colleges in their education and employment? The student expectations of community colleges were similar for those who are “beyond the margins” and the rest of the non-traditional students who were interviewed. The students at all three institutions expect multiple pathways to exist. The students are grateful for the various credit programs, basic skills programs, certificate programs, special skills and training classes, and compensatory education programs. While many of the students do not know all the pathways that exist or the requirements for each of them, they do understand that the various pathways hold great value and benefit for those who follow them to their end (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). The students stated a need for more marketing and publicity of the programs and services available for those who do not know they exist. One GED student, Molly, at North Carolina Community College notes the importance of these multiple pathways after failing repeatedly to reach her academic goals. “It just goes to show that hope is not lost until you have tried and found the right avenue.” Research has shown that the students are correct in valuing the multiple pathways, especially for those who are “beyond the margins,” otherwise they may be excluded from postsecondary education (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995).
The students at all three community colleges express the need for more support services and resources to become available while institutions also retain existing services. The students understand how helpful the services are for them in their achievement of academic and career goals, along with building their confidence. Yet, many of the “beyond the margins” students at North Carolina and Illinois Community College fail to know and utilize what services are available to them.

The students want and need the community college to supply them with a second chance, because nearly every student has failed in previous academic pursuits. These students who have previous failures and limited educational experiences enter these programs or courses with a low self-esteem and expect the community college to build their confidence and expand their possibilities. As a result of this limited knowledge of the education system these students were quick to use guidance and direction and even ask questions in a one-on-one situation, but were not interested in being referred or seeking additional assistance from others. Even though these students have experienced failure in education, they demonstrated the ability to pursue further education and fill needed positions in the new economy, while approximately fifteen of the basic skills students are achieving as much as they can currently.

The students at all three sites expect the community college to supply them with the education necessary to obtain a job that will help them remain or become economically self-sufficient. Those interviewed perceive that they will receive an education that at a minimum meets their basic level needs (a job), and they believe their education will supply them with more opportunities than it likely will. Approximately ten of the students who are “beyond the margins” perceive that the basic education (high school diploma or GED) they are seeking will supply them with a significantly better job and more money, an unrealistic assumption.
These students with unrealistic expectations often think in the old economy sense, where learning a specific skill will give them the knowledge needed to find a high paying job or career. “Beyond the margins” students fail to recognize the need for continuous education in the new economy (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994; Carnevale & Desrochers, 1997).

The non-traditional students interviewed at California Community College not only expect their community college education to supply them with a high paying job or career but also would like the community college to supply them with the credentials and knowledge necessary to seek an education beyond the community college. These same students also understand the value of the relationships that the community college atmosphere supplies and they want to gain valuable connections that will assist them in future endeavors. These expectations are not found among students who are “beyond the margins.”

The ESL students at all three community colleges, regardless of educational background, must have strong English skills to be active participants in America's society. These students expect the community college to supply them with English speaking abilities and the needed grammar. These students do not want to be overlooked or ignored in the workforce and they must acquire fluency in English before this is possible (Libman, 2004).

These are the common perceptions that emerged from the students interviewed as these related to the expected role of community colleges with regards to education and employment. “Beyond the margins” students want the community college to have the necessary programs and courses available to them and they also expect those programs to be extensively marketed. Once the students are in the classes and programs they desire guidance and support to gain the knowledge necessary to find a job. They anticipate this acquired
knowledge and a subsequent job will lead to the attainment of basic needs and personal contentment.

Conclusions

Students who are “beyond the margins” are unlikely to progress in their academic careers and unlikely to obtain a level of employment that will constitute self-sufficiency. Furthermore, their future in the new economy looks bleak and their social and economic prospects are limited. Educationally, they are underserved. They need assistance to overcome the various obstacles that exist in their lives.

While the findings of this study are not necessarily generalizable to all students who are “beyond the margins,” the findings do convey experiences and perceptions of this population that are neither random nor idiosyncratic (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). The experiences and perceptions of the “beyond the margins” population in this investigation are applicable to a similar population at other institutions (Bogdan & Biklin; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), in part because of the theoretical sampling of the research—including sites and populations—and in part because of the theoretical grounding of the investigation. The findings of this investigation are consistent with the scholarly literature and the study’s theoretical frameworks.

Yet as well as confirming existing knowledge, this investigation has led to new knowledge. “Beyond the margins” students are viewed as a segment of non-traditional students, as noted by Levin (2003). Here the comparison between those who are classified as non-traditional, generally, and those who are now classified as “beyond the margins” yields important differences between the two populations.
It is clear that the individual efforts of faculty and staff have significant influence on the development and progression of students in community colleges. Yet, the positive influence of faculty and staff is currently based upon chance and circumstance. Many “beyond the margins” students have limited interaction with institutional support staff (the support staff available are usually limited and often unknown to them), and faculty are frequently unable to give students the attention necessary to meet their individual needs. This population of students is not regularly and systematically encouraged to seek further education or directed into highly available jobs. Thus, the students are content to obtain just enough education to acquire a job and obtain the basic necessities so that they can, in their words, be “happy.” A large percentage of these students are satisfied with these basic goals, in large part because they have failed in previous academic pursuits, have low self-esteem, and possess limited consciousness about the nature of the new economy or the larger society they inhabit. Their expectations and goals are consistent with the expectations conveyed to them by others and by those set for themselves. The evidence suggests that “beyond the margins” students require considerable support services as well as encouragement and guidance from staff and faculty—more than is typically available in their institutions.

In addition to a lack of support and encouragement, coupled with higher expectations than simply survival, “beyond the margins” students lack awareness and consciousness of their social environment and the new economy. The students revealed their lack of awareness through their limited knowledge and understanding about their society, work, finances, and education. In stark contrast, the students at California Community College were aware of their role in society, knew what jobs were available, understood the type of education they needed and its probable benefits, and realized the costs needed to reach their goals and how
they would obtain the necessary finances. “Beyond the margins” students did not know what classes they should take or where the classes they planned to take would lead them. They had unclear aspirations and their actions had minimal direction. This population was not concerned about their role in society and focused their attention on their individual interests. They did not comprehend the implications of failure in school or what low-paying jobs would mean for their future. Moreover, they had no conception of the effects their lack of attainment would have on society in general or on the economy in specific.

Their condition, then, is clarified through the use of the theoretical frameworks of this study. The first stage of Freire’s (1981) theory of critical pedagogy is consciousness. The following stages focus on the individual using the knowledge gained to help themselves and others. Freire’s theory makes it clear that for an individual to make a positive difference in their own life and in the lives of others, they must first develop a level of consciousness of the world around them. This attainment of knowledge can also be thought of as developing human capital as proposed by Becker (1975). Carnoy’s (2000) theory of the new economy supports Freire by showing that individuals who are unable to be self-sufficient in the new economy because they lack the necessary knowledge and skills will be unable to benefit society; and ultimately they become a burden to society. As Carnoy states, this problem can only be overcome through developing the consciousness of this population so that they can develop the necessary knowledge and skills to be economically self-sufficient and improve the overall financial well being of America’s society and economy. While it is clear that human capital (Becker) and capitalism (Reisman, 1999) are often at odds with critical pedagogy (Freire), Carnoy conceives through his new economy theory that these concepts and ideals can be merged. Capitalism and the development of human capital can focus on the
needs of all individuals, as critical pedagogy states, especially those often overlooked and ignored so that individuals, society, and the economy will benefit.

Implications for Research

The population of “beyond the margins” students is often overlooked in research, aggregated with the larger population of non-traditional students. Yet “beyond the margins” students exhibit attributes that are different from both traditional students as well as the non-traditional population in the aggregate (Levin, 2003; Roueche & Roueche, 1993). A basic skills faculty member, Stephanie, at California Community College states “I just go and look at my students and go, ‘thank you God.’ Because we just have it so good compared to some of our students.” Her comments signify the difficulty those who have achieved a degree in higher education, those who work for the state or federal government, and those faculty and staff who work in institutions of higher education have in relating to and understanding how to comprehend the experiences and perceptions of this population. Practitioners needs the assistance of researchers to understand the “beyond the margins” students and thus this populations needs to be investigated more thoroughly by researchers so that practitioners including policy makers and institutional leaders can have a knowledge base for their actions.

The results of this investigation challenge previous research conducted on the role of community colleges. Previous literature (Brint, 2003; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Dougherty, 1989; McGrath & Spear, 1991) has disputed the impact that America’s community colleges are having on their students. These scholars note a plethora of problems and deficiencies of the community college: their multiple and conflicting missions, faculty and staff shortages, limited support services, lack of academic culture, and unsatisfactory relationships with traditional four-year institutions, among others. The claim is that the
community college is an institution that lowers student ambitions, limits opportunities, and funnels students away from university transfer programs into vocational programs. This scholarship addresses a student population enrolled in credit classes that is able and largely capable to pursue further education. For the “beyond the margins” population enrolling and matriculating in a vocational program would be a major accomplishment—the lack of academic culture or university transfer is not the problem. But institutional structures and behaviors are not necessarily the sole sources of impediments for “beyond the margins” students.

This investigation does not move beyond the institutional level; however, the findings suggest that both state and federal governments are implicated in the education and training of these students as well as in their connection, or lack, to the new economy. State and federal policy as well as funding behaviors can be viewed as responsible in part at least for the plight of “beyond the margins” students. Certainly welfare policy and enactment influence students’ educational participation as well as their employment potential given the short duration of college work permitted under the policy regulations (Mazzeo, Rab, & Eachus, 2003). State systems, as well, such as those noted in North Carolina, while aimed at accountability and student performance, and although scrutinized, yield inconsistent results, with large portions of their targeted population ignored. Scholarly research on current state policies and practices that affect “beyond the margins” students can clarify the extent to which this population is ignored or underserved, as well as identify more conclusively the outcomes of policy that signal both lack of participation in productive education and training and underperformance of students when students do participate. Further research can show us
if the trend towards service sector job preparation as noted by Levin (2001) and others is a product of state and federal policy.

However, the state and federal governments do not shoulder the entire burden for addressing the needs of the “beyond the margins” population. Institutional policies, procedures, and behaviors are also responsible for student outcomes. For example, students who are classified as “beyond the margins” often require alternate instructional methods if they are to achieve a level of competency in their course work (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Jalomo, 2001; Laden, 1999; Valadez, 1993). Work by Grubb and Associates (1999) on teaching in community colleges can be advanced if research addresses institutional practices for students in such areas as English as a Second Language, Basic Skills, and Adult High School, as well as short-term vocational training to identify deficiencies in instructional methods for these student populations. Furthermore, institutional priorities, and the extent to which these focus upon the underserved and the “beyond the margins” students, are matters for research. As noted in this investigation, students who are segregated, provided with fewer resources than other populations, and treated as low achievers with little future promise do not rise above their condition without considerable intervention. The extent to which this is an institutionalized phenomenon for community colleges is called into question in the comparison of North Carolina Community College and Illinois Community College with California Community College. Further research at more sites will clarify the role of the institution in advancing student achievement.

This research with its institutional perspective does not address those who are not students at the community college, but if they were would be classified as “beyond the margins” students. This study does not encompass those outside of postsecondary education
institutions nor does it address the overall problems facing this group in U.S. society. A large segment of this population does not show up in institutions of higher education, but can be found in prisons, living on the streets, seeking assistance in other institutional support centers, or cared for by family. While this population outside of higher education exhibits the same characteristics as “beyond the margins” students, they do not participate in higher education. Research may be able to indicate why they are non-participants, and bring understanding to their experiences as well as to identifying the problems of institutions in including them in their practices.

Implications for Practice

“Beyond the margins” students cannot overcome a broad range of obstacles—such as financial, linguistic, and academic—on their own. Community colleges have, if their mandate is to serve the underserved, the responsibility to assist these individuals develop the knowledge and skills necessary in the new economy. These institutions are charged with the responsibility to help this population become self-sufficient so that they will survive, even thrive, in the new economy (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2001; Carnoy, 2000; McCabe, 2000).

There is an identifiable need for community colleges, which serve these “beyond the margins” students, to reach out more than in the past, to some extent because of the widening of access in the community college to include ever-greater numbers of non-traditional students. “Beyond the margins” students require a structure that addresses their specific characteristics and problems. Community colleges have developed a structure that attracts and provides the necessary support for many non-traditional students to achieve their academic goals (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995). Yet, especially for “beyond the margins” students, more should be done. “Beyond the margins”
students are primarily enrolled in basic skills education, developmental and remedial
education, short term vocational education, and often non-credit classes that have less
structure and support services and staff than other community college programs (Levin,
2003). The “beyond the margins” students demonstrate a high need for these support services
and staff. In order to assist these students further, community colleges should align their
policies and behaviors. For example, the students at North Carolina Community College
noted the structured interaction, albeit limited, they had with support staff, such as a career
counselor. Students at Illinois Community College mentioned the diminished support staff
for both their classes and individual needs and that they would like to see greater institutional
support for their goals. In comparison, the students enrolled in credit courses at California
Community College noted that support services and staff were routinely and readily available
to them. These differences between the two sets of colleges in the support staff and resources
available can be associated with institutional priorities and funding.

The development of these students cannot rest solely on street-level bureaucrats who
variably promote and enhance the achievement of students through their efforts. Instead,
these actions need to be structured and formalized within the institution. Institutional
encouragement and incentives are required so that administrators, faculty, and staff can
develop productive relationships with students and supply adequate support and challenge to
motivate “beyond the margins” students. Specifically, more support staff and services should
be made available for these students who are most often found in non-credit and basic skills
courses. To increase support services and staff it will be necessary to review and revise
funding, policies and procedures, institutional initiatives, and institutional priorities. Support
staff, along with faculty members and administrators, can develop purposeful efforts to
encourage these students to expand their understanding of society with regards to work and education. Once students develop this knowledge, they should be assisted with developing clarity in their aspirations. “Beyond the margins” students need to develop and initiate an action plan that merges their personal aspirations with the current state of the economy, society, the workforce, and education: for this they require institutional support.

In critical pedagogy, developing greater clarity, knowledge, and understanding is considered greater consciousness (Freire, 1981). “Beyond the margins” students do not have a well-defined level of consciousness of society, education, or work. Once this knowledge and understanding are developed, community colleges can then assist these students in reaching individual goals and aspirations that have a “realistic” chance of accomplishment. A majority of these students, even those who were able to verbalize their goals, were unaware of the education needed or the necessary steps required to fulfill their aspirations. Their understanding of the concepts of human capital (development of skills and knowledge) and society with regards to work and money will allow these students to then strive towards the next steps of critical pedagogy: (2) confrontation of power and inequalities, then (3) liberation, and ultimately (4) transformation (Freire, 1981).

It is imperative that those who are “beyond the margins” understand their role in society and improve their consciousness of work, money, and education for the benefit of themselves and society. Consciousness is a deep source “of freedom and power with which oppressed people historically have been able to move immense boulders and create remarkable change” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 198). U.S. society and its economy will regress if state and federal governments and postsecondary institutions do not target the consciousness of this population.
For these “beyond the margins” students to be knowledgeable about possible paths and become more action oriented with the information they have, community colleges should assist this population in developing a greater level of consciousness. Only then can Carnoy’s (2000) new economy theory be tested. Social and institutional continuation of ignoring the “beyond the margins” population will only perpetuate their lack of consciousness (Rifkin, 1995). These students cannot be expected to learn this information on their own. The federal government, state governments, institutions, and the public are collectively responsible for educating this population (Smith, 2004). Institutions of higher education will be more equipped to supply “beyond the margins” students with consistent and equal support through advanced technology, greater use of technology in classes, current books and resources, more opportunities to participate in group work, the requirement to do home work outside of class, enhanced tracking systems of student performance, and individual goal attainment strategies. It may also be reasonable to develop required general education classes for all basic skills, vocational education, and certificate-seeking students that focus on increasing the student’s level of consciousness of society, education, and work. This research amply demonstrates that this population of students lacks knowledge in these areas.

The significant level of diversity that each student encounters in class must also be utilized. Faculty and staff can encourage students to develop a sense of support and camaraderie amongst one another and to instill willingness to encourage and help one another. This will create community (Tinto, 1998). While these recommendations are evident in the literature pertaining to students in credit programs, there is little evidence that these recommendations have been associated with non-credit programs, the destination of “beyond the margins” students (Levin, 2003).
The community college is the primary educational institution that accommodates “beyond the margins” students (Levin, 2001; Shaw & London, 2001; Shaw, Rhoads, & Valadez, 1995). Diane, the CalWorks Coordinator at California Community College, states that “the community college is the only system that has services for persons with [severe] learning disabilities.” The community college is not only the primary educational institution for all students who are “beyond the margins” but also the only educational institution for some segments of the “beyond the margins” population. Without the community college, a large segment of these students would either be living on the streets or institutionalized. They would be highly dependent on others and would not move past high school or into college life. Karen, a re-entry student at California Community College, notes the benefit of community colleges over traditional colleges and universities for some populations of students. “Some of my kids’ friends went straight to a four year [institution] and totally bombed because they didn’t have the groundwork that the community college could’ve given them.” Community colleges serve “beyond the margins” students who lack a basic understanding of their aspirations and the implications of their choices. These students enter classes and programs with little confidence and low self-esteem. They are at the mercy of the priorities and behaviors of the community college.

There is a necessity, then, for the development of multiple pathways and continuation of those institutional characteristics that facilitate the enrollment of these students at community colleges (Newman, Courturier, & Scurry, 2004). These characteristics include equity, open access, low tuition costs, convenient locations, a comprehensive curriculum, community-based education and services, a primary focus on teaching, and encouragement of learning (The American Association of Community Colleges, 2001; Brint & Karabel,
The students interviewed noted the need for these multiple pathways to be explained and marketed to students currently in the institution and to people in the surrounding community. Regardless of the structures developed, the accommodating and beneficial characteristics of community colleges, and the extraordinary efforts of staff and faculty to help these students, those who are unaware of the pathways that exist will remain invisible because of their self-doubt, lack of knowledge (Freire’s unconsciousness), skeptical and guarded nature that these students often exhibit, as well as their powerlessness within society generally. The charge, then, to the community college is to develop in their students consciousness of education, the economy, and societal roles so that each individual has the knowledge and ability to become economically self-sufficient and an active and productive member of society.
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Title of Project: Postsecondary education for the underserved in America: A study of highly non-traditional students in community colleges

Principal Investigator: Jerrid P. Freeman  Department: Adult and Community College Education

Source of Funding (required information): Lumina Foundation grant, conducted by Dr. John Levin, dissertation chair advisor

Campus Address (box number): 7801

Email: jpfreem@email.unc.edu  Phone: (919)619-2553 Fax: (919)515-6305

Rank: □ Faculty

□ Student: □ Undergraduate □ Masters; or □ PhD

☒ Other: EdD

If rank is not faculty (i.e. student or other), provide the name of the faculty sponsor overseeing the research: Dr. John Levin

Faculty Sponsor’s email: john_levin@ncsu.edu  Campus Box: 7801  Phone: (919)513-1285

Investigator Statement of Responsibility
“As the Principal Investigator, my signature testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for approval prior to implementation.”

Principal Investigator’s Signature* ___________________________ Date ______________

Faculty Sponsor Statement of Responsibility
“As the Faculty Sponsor, my signature testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as principal investigator of record.”

Faculty Sponsor’s Signature* ___________________________ Date ______________

*electronic submissions to the IRB are considered signed via an electronic signature

PLEASE COMPLETE IN DUPLICATE AND DELIVER TO:
Institutional Review Board, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (lower level of Leazar Hall)

For IRB office Use Only

Review Received: □ Administrative □ Expedited □ Full Board

Review Decision: □ Approve □ Approve with Modifications □ Table □ Disapprove

Reviewer____________________ Signature______________________ Date ______________
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

If at any time you have questions or difficulties while completing IRB forms, please feel free to contact Deb Paxton at debra_paxton@ncsu.edu or 919-515-4514.

In your narrative, please address each of the questions below. Keep in mind that the more details that you provide, the easier an IRB reviewer will be able to understand your research and reach a prompt decision.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. In lay language, please briefly describe your research, its purpose, procedures, and expected contribution to its field or to the general population.

   The purpose of this study is to analyze and understand the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional community college students on further education and employment opportunities. Understanding the viewpoints and experiences of nontraditional students enrolled at community colleges will be pivotal in completing this research, since the current literature lacks their viewpoint on this issue. The researcher will interview and observe nontraditional students at 3 to 4 community colleges across the country. The researcher will keep detailed notes of experiences and thoughts, along with audio taped interviews. The study will contribute information to the field of higher education on a large group of students that have been overlooked in research on the workforce. The research will address how community colleges grant access and equity to workforce preparation and further education.

2. If this is student research, indicate whether it's for a course, thesis, or dissertation.

   This study is being conducted for the primary researcher's dissertation.

B. SUBJECT POPULATION

1. How many subjects will be involved in the research?

   Between 10 to 20 nontraditional students will be interviewed at each community college. The study will be conducted at 3 to 4 community colleges across the country. Some other individuals will be indirectly involved, when I observe the students at each institution, but I will not be asking them questions pertaining to the study.

2. Describe how subjects will be recruited. If flyers, advertisements, or recruitment letters will be used, please attach copies of those documents.

   I will utilize administrators and faculty members at the institutions to help make contact with students who fit the criteria of this study and then work with the students in setting up interviews on their campus. Each person will have the study explained to them and be able to decide whether they will participate or not.

3. List specific eligibility requirements for subjects, describe screening procedures, and justify criteria that will exclude otherwise acceptable subjects.

   The participants will all be nontraditional students enrolled part-time or full-time at the specific community colleges I visit. I will also be looking for students who are in non-credit courses and programs, who are or have been on welfare, who suffer from long-term unemployment, who are physically disabled, mentally challenged, and are often people of color.

4. Explain and justify and sampling procedures that exclude specific populations.

   I will choose a mixture of community colleges in different sections of the United States. I will utilize institutions that are willing to grant me access and will support and assist in
the arrangement of participants for the study. I will work with faculty and staff to identify nontraditional students and assist in arranging the place and time for interviews with the chosen students.

5. Disclose any relationship between researcher and subjects, such as teacher/student or employer/employee.
   I will have no relationship with those I interview.

6. Check any vulnerable populations that you will intentionally include in the study:
   - Minors (under the age of 18) - if you will involve minors in your study, you must make provisions for parental consent and minor assent to the research
   - Pregnant women
   - Persons with mental, psychiatric, or emotional disabilities
   - Persons with physical disabilities
   - Elderly
   - Students from a class taught by the Principal Investigator
   - Prisoners
   - Other vulnerable populations:

If any of the above are used, justify the necessity for doing so. Please indicate the approximate age range of minors to be involved. These students are considered central to this investigation. The interviews will ask about their experiences and viewpoints of college before and after they entered the system as a student. No special actions will be taken for these vulnerable groups because the questions are not evasive.

C. PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED
1. In lay language, describe completely and with good detail all the procedures involving human subjects that will be followed during the course of the study. Provide sufficient detail so the committee is able to adequately review the research. Each subject will be interviewed in a one-on-one interview where I will tape record responses. I will transcribe the interviews verbatim and keep the tapes to ensure participants are not misrepresented in any way. The rest of my interactions will be in observation and informal discussion. I will not be tape recording or asking probing questions during the observation part of the research.

2. How much time will be required of each subject?
   I will interview each participant for an estimated hour or more if they are willing and able to interview longer.

D. POTENTIAL RISKS
1. State the potential risks from the research (psychological, social, financial, legal, physical, or otherwise). State how you plan to minimize these risks. During the interview the participants will be asked about their personal thoughts and experiences before they entered college and while they are enrolled in college. There will be minimal risk on their part, because no information will be shared with anyone at their institution as it pertains to them specifically, but there are always some limited risks by the participant when their personal views and experiences are discussed. I will in no way attempt to increase those risks for the participant. Their name and any identifying descriptors will be kept anonymous.

2. Will there be a request for information that if accidentally made public could embarrass the subjects or reasonably place them at risk of criminal, social, or professional harm?
   I will ask for information on their perspective of college before they entered and their experiences and perceptions while enrolled in college. Participants’ names will not be used, therefore there will be no public disclosures.
3. Could any of the study procedures or information collected produce stress, anxiety, or psychological harm? If yes, please justify the need for such procedures or information, and describe methods you will take to minimize the harm a subject encounters (e.g. you will provide or arrange for psychological counseling for those subjects who experience distress due to your study).

No question will be asked intentionally to induce stress, cause anxiety, or cause harm.

4. Describe methods for protecting your subjects' confidentiality. How will data be recorded and stored? Will any identifiers be collected? If so, how and why? If you will collect identifiers, will you destroy the link between subject identity and data at some point? If you are collecting audio or video recordings, do you plan to destroy the recordings after the research is complete?

Information will be stored through audio tapes, notes, and transcription of the audio tapes. The audio recordings, the notes, and transcriptions will be destroyed ten years following the study. The audio tapes, notes, and transcriptions will be stored in the researcher's personal residence or on the researcher's personal computer and will be accessible to the researcher and his advisor. Subject code numbers will be used on all transcriptions and interview notes to protect the participants confidentiality. This code can be linked to the participants identity on a master list. The master list will be destroyed at the completion of the research.

5. If your research will be reported in a case study format, how will you protect individual subjects' responses/information?

All individual identities and names will be held confidential in all reporting of information.

6. Is there any deception of subjects in this study? If yes, please describe the deception, justify it, and provide a debriefing procedure.

The subjects will not be deceived consciously or purposfully.

E. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Please address benefits expected from the research. Please note that this does not include compensation for participation, in any form. Specifically, what, if any, direct benefit is to be gained by the subject? If no direct benefit is expected, but indirect benefit may be expected (i.e. to general society), please explain.

I will be able to give some of my time back to the interviewees after the study if they ask to discuss the experience in more detail. The greatest benefit will be how the information will be used to help those who read the findings and the possible future implications for nontraditional students. The study hopes to contribute information to the field of higher education on a large group of students who have been overlooked in higher education. It is important to understand the various viewpoints and experiences that nontraditional students have experienced and ensure the decisions being made to meet the needs of the economy and marketplace in the present are serving the needs of these students. Overall, the research hopes to ensure community colleges are serving a valuable role for students, higher education, and society by continuing to grant access and equity.

F. COMPENSATION

Explain compensation that subjects will receive for participating in the study, as well as provisions for the withdrawal of a subject prior to completion of the study.

Participants will not receive any financial compensation.

1. If class credit will be offered for participation, list the amount given and alternate ways to earn the same amount of credit.

Participants will not receive any class credit compensation.

G. COLLABORATORS
If you anticipate that additional investigators (other than those listed on the cover page) may be involved in the research, list them here indicating their institution, department and phone number.  

*Not applicable, except for my dissertation advisor who is listed above and will be guiding me throughout the process.*

H. **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

1. If a questionnaire, survey, or interview instrument is to be used, attach a copy to this proposal.

2. Attach to this document a copy of the informed consent document that you will use.

3. If your study involves minors, attach a copy of the parental permission and child assent documents that you will use.

4. Please provide any additional materials or information that may aid the IRB in making its decision.
Timeline for Dissertation

a. Data collection: January 2004 to December 2004
b. Data analysis: October 2004 to March 2005
c. Dissertation draft chapters 2 & 3: April 2005
d. Dissertation draft chapter 4 (data analysis): May 2005
e. Dissertation draft chapter 5 (findings and conclusions): July 2005
f. Complete draft of dissertation: August 2005
g. Dissertation to committee: September 2005
h. Dissertation defense: October 2005
Title of Study: Postsecondary education for the underserved in America: A study of highly non-traditional students in community colleges

Principal Investigator: Jerrid P. Freeman  Faculty Sponsor: Dr. John Levin

I am asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to analyze and understand the perceptions and experiences of nontraditional community college students on further education and employment opportunities.

INFORMATION
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview that will last, on average, between 45 to 90 minutes. During the interview I will tape record the conversation, which will later be transcribed and used confidentially to supply description to the report outlining the issue being studied. Once you have completed the interview nothing more will be asked of you, unless you wish to be involved in any other manner.

RISKS
During the interview you will be asked about your personal thoughts and experiences before you entered college and while you are enrolled in college. There will be minimal risk on your part, because no information will be shared with anyone at your institution as it pertains to you specifically, but there are always some limited risks when personal views and experiences are discussed. I will in no way attempt to increase those risks. Your name and any identifying descriptors will be kept anonymous.

BENEFITS
The study hopes to contribute information to the field of higher education on a large group of students who have been overlooked in higher education. It is important to understand the various viewpoints and experiences that nontraditional students have experienced and ensure the decisions being made to meet the needs of the economy and marketplace in the present are serving the needs of these students. Overall, the research hopes to ensure community colleges are serving a valuable role for students, higher education, and society by continuing to grant access and equity.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information obtained throughout the study will be kept strictly confidential. Information will be stored through audio tapes, notes, and transcription of the audio tapes. The audio tapes, notes, and coded transcriptions will be stored in the researchers personal residence or on the researchers personal computer and will not be accessible to anyone else. They will be destroyed ten years after the study is completed. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link a participant to the study.

CONTACT
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher: Jerrid P. Freeman, at 1000 Smith Level Rd. Apt. U-10, Carrboro, NC 27510 (919/619-2553). If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148).

PARTICIPATION
Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed at your request.

CONSENT
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.”

Subject's signature_______________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature__________________________________ Date _________________
## Interview of nontraditional community college student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Background/experience:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about yourself—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do you live and what distance is that from the college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you employed, and is that employment full or part-time?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you come to college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda</td>
<td>Responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tell me about your experiences here at the college—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Why did you enroll here?</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sort of skills, certificates, credentials, degrees, and training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do you seek? *Why did you choose this route? Has this changed any</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>since you enrolled, if so, why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you received any guidance for your goals? Has anyone tried to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guide you in a different direction?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the curricula (program/courses) you are taking and have taken?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are you learning?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you use technology in or for your courses? If so, how is that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>going?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you utilize any courses that are strictly or primarily on-line?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the other students in your courses or programs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sort of employment awaits you upon completion of their course of study?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>How do you pay for your program/courses? Do you work? What do you do? How many hours/week?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>What are your best educational experiences here? What are some bad experiences? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>What could be improved in your program, courses, or in this institution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Who or what has been helpful to you here? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analytical Framework Codes For Data Analysis

Theoretical Frameworks:
⇒ Critical Pedagogy (Apple, 2000; Freire, 1981)
  o Consciousness (logic vs. global and social vs. society)
  o Confrontation of power and inequalities (Not passive)
  o Liberate (social and personal empowerment)
  o Transformation (open dialogue) (common good over profit)
⇒ New Economy Theory (Carnoy, 2000)
  o Balance between the individual and the interests of the market
⇒ Human Capital (Becker, 1975)

Analytical Frameworks:
➢ New Economy (Carnoy; Castells, 1996)
➢ Globalization (Held, 2000; Levin, 2001)
➢ Street – Level Bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1983)

Analytical Perspectives:
✓ Personal (individual Students)
✓ Group (Aggregate of students)
✓ Social / Cultural (Local, State, Nation)
✓ Economic (Local, State, Nation)
✓ Organizational (Individual College)
✓ Institutional (Community Colleges)
## Site Similarities and Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North Carolina Community College</th>
<th>Illinois Community College</th>
<th>California Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure of the program is beneficial</strong></td>
<td>Structure of the program is beneficial</td>
<td>Structure of the program is beneficial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and staff help students, but don't encourage the students to seek further education or direct them into highly available jobs</td>
<td>Faculty and staff help students, but don't encourage the students to seek further education or direct them into highly available jobs</td>
<td>Faculty and staff help students, but encourage student to seek further education and to look at other fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff and services are available for students, although they are not often used</td>
<td><strong>Limited</strong> support staff and services are available for students, which are not often used</td>
<td>Support staff and services are available for students, which are often utilized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity in classes, but students perceive they are enrolled for different reasons</td>
<td>Diversity in classes and the students share a similar goal of completing the class or program</td>
<td>Diversity in classes and they support and encourage one another in the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a number of obstacles to overcome in an effort to be in and complete their classes in college</td>
<td>Have a number of obstacles to overcome in an effort to be in and complete their classes in college</td>
<td>Have a number of obstacles to overcome in an effort to be in and complete their classes in college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No group work or home work utilized</td>
<td>No group work or home work utilized</td>
<td><strong>Group work and home work utilized</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in class, but unsure what classes to take or where the classes they are taking will lead. Unclear aspirations and have directionless actions</td>
<td>Enrolled in class, but unsure what classes to take or where the classes they are taking will lead. Unclear aspirations and have directionless actions</td>
<td><strong>Very focused and detailed on what classes and degree they want to obtain and their future aspirations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions and goals are individually oriented. Not concerned about their role in society</td>
<td>Actions and goals are individually oriented. Not concerned about their role in society</td>
<td>Actions and goals are focused on society, others, and their family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited knowledge of society with regards to work and money</td>
<td>Limited knowledge of society with regards to work and money</td>
<td><strong>Strong knowledge of society with regards to work and money</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most have someone supporting them financially, but do not fully grasp what failure on their part would mean for their future</td>
<td>Mostly on their own, but do not fully grasp what failure on their part would mean for their future</td>
<td>Mostly on their own, but have utilized many outside resources. Understand what failure on their part would mean to their future and willing to take risks to be successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered with low self-esteem, but have become a little more confident</td>
<td>Entered with low self-esteem, but have become a little more confident</td>
<td>Entered with some doubt, but have quickly become confident, motivated, and willing to take charge of their outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking education to meet their basic level needs (a job and happiness), but also perceive that education will supply them with more opportunities than it likely will</td>
<td>Seeking education to meet their basic level needs (a job and happiness), but also perceive that education will supply them with more opportunities than it likely will</td>
<td><strong>Know a certificate or an Associate’s degree will help them get a better job, but the students know they will have to overcome more obstacles and likely need more education</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed in previous academic pursuits</td>
<td>Failed in previous academic pursuits</td>
<td>Failed in previous academic pursuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL students, regardless of educational background, must have strong English skills to be an active member in America’s society</td>
<td>ESL students, regardless of educational background, must have strong English skills to be an active member in America’s society</td>
<td>ESL students, regardless of educational background, must have strong English skills to be an active member in America’s society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books and technology were limited and outdated</td>
<td>Books and technology were limited and outdated</td>
<td><strong>Purchased their own books and technology was up-to-date</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readily followed suggestions</td>
<td>Readily followed suggestions</td>
<td>Sought advice and took suggestions, but ultimately made their own decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

****Bolded items signify differences between sites****