

ABSTRACT

NAGLER, ALISA. The influences of institutional reputation on the labor market outcomes of education and training: A case study of community college nursing programs. (Under the direction of Dr. John Levin.)

Community colleges are viewed as one of the possible solutions to society's changing expectations of higher education in the United States. Proponents of community colleges have emphasized the role that community colleges play in training people for the workforce while also providing access to greater social mobility for individuals, reflecting a clear commitment to promoting the ideal of social equality. At the same time, community colleges are criticized as offering a substandard education to those unable to gain access to baccalaureate colleges and universities. This work used a case study approach to investigate employers' perceptions of community college nursing programs and graduates. Interviews were held with 14 nurse managers and human resources personnel from three hospitals. The principle themes that were identified from this sample of employers included sources of bias against community colleges (social class prejudice, institutional prestige, educational background of hiring agent, curricular differences, and program duration), bias outcomes (bachelor degree hiring preference, employment barriers for community college graduates, perpetuation of the negative reputation), and the institutionalization of the community college reputation. The research found that the reputation of community colleges as providing a substandard education persists and that this reputation negatively impacts community college graduates by limiting their potential for career and economic mobility.

THE INFLUENCES OF INSTITUTIONAL REPUTATION ON THE LABOR
MARKET OUTCOMES OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING: A CASE STUDY OF
COMMUNITY COLLEGE NURSING PROGRAMS

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctorate of Education

HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

Raleigh

2006

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my darling children, Elias Charles Kuhns, age 7, and Tali Serene Kuhns, age 5. They have been inquisitive, patient, and tolerant of my studies for the last 7 years, their whole lives. Their sweet faces offered me encouragement and the desire to serve as a role model and finish what I started. I hope my work has reinforced for them the importance of helping to educate others (all who want the opportunity) and ourselves, in our individual quest for knowledge-rich lives. I am hopeful they find the same meaning and passion for learning. I also hope that as I complete this educational path the number of bedtime routines missed will be few.

Biography

Alisa Nagler, daughter of Drs. Barbara and Sylvain Nagler, was born on May 18th, 1966, in Quincy, Massachusetts. The author is the oldest of three children. She received her Bachelor of Science in Human Service Studies from Cornell University in 1989, her Juris Doctor from New England School of Law in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1994, and her Masters of Arts in Sociology from East Carolina University in 2000.

The author worked as a social worker in Boston, Massachusetts, before going to law school. After moving to North Carolina, she began working in the North Carolina Community College System, first as a faculty member in Criminal Justice, then as a department head for a Human Services program, and most recently as the Dean of Health Sciences at Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Alisa Nagler married Kirk D. Kuhns in 1996. They live in Raleigh, North Carolina, and are the parents of Elias (7 years old) and Tali (5 years old) Kuhns.

Acknowledgements

I would not have been able to complete this degree without the support and assistance of so many people. First, I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Marvin Titus, Dr. Leila Gonzalez-Sullivan, Dr. Cynthia Wolf Johnson, and especially the chair of my committee, who has also served as my advisor and mentor for the past five years, Dr. John Levin. Dr. Levin has given endless hours, edits, guidance, and words of encouragement. I truly could not have done it without him!

Completing course work, collecting data, and writing a dissertation while working full time is only possible with caring and supportive supervisors and colleagues. I thank the administration of Wake Tech (especially Dr. Stephen Scott and Ben White) for allowing me time off when needed, offering words of encouragement without pressure, and providing support throughout. I also want to thank my colleagues — fellow deans who checked in periodically and offered words of encouragement and Health Sciences support staff, especially Mohini Singh and Barbara Chelednik, for offering such wonderful support and for taking such good care of me. And of course, I will never forget the calming words and rational advice of Christy Shields at the RDU airport.

I need to thank my friends, those who have supported me and my family throughout this process. They alternated checking in, politely engaging in conversation about my topic, working around class schedules, and not allowing me to give up. It takes a village.

Special gratitude goes to my NCSU colleagues and friends, Karen Haley and Kathy Miller, whose guidance, encouragement, and gentle pushing got me through each

chapter. I could not have finished this dissertation without our Thursday morning gatherings.

I acknowledge and thank my parents, who planted the value of education and reinforced my passions. They are my role models – true educators dedicated to making this a better world. Their high standards and strive for excellence coupled with their overwhelming concern that their children be happy provided the ingredients I needed to finish this challenge.

Lastly, I would like to thank my best friend and husband, Kirk Kuhns, who insisted I finish, who shows unyielding confidence in me, and who listened painfully to every detail along the way.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem statement

The reputation of community colleges may limit the potential for career and economic mobility for its graduates, which in turn, may perpetuate a perception that community colleges provide a substandard education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This qualitative research addresses the reputation of community college education and the influence of such reputation on society and more specifically graduates. This study examines whether the community college reputation is, in part, a result of the socioeconomic status of those most likely to attend: those who have historically been denied access to higher education and who may be less likely to enroll in or be accepted at four-year institutions.

This problem is cyclical in nature. If the reputation of the community college is that it provides a lesser education, employers may be more prone to hire a graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Thus, the graduate of the community college, who most likely entered college with little social, economic, and cultural capital, is forced into a less prestigious and less economically fruitful career track than the baccalaureate degree graduate. The likelihood that the community college graduate will move beyond her socioeconomic status is minimal given the lack of opportunities available to an associate degree program alumna. Her children, now also members of society's low socioeconomic group, will be more likely to enter community colleges than baccalaureate institutions, which limits their social mobility opportunities. Thus, the cycle is refreshed, perpetuating the poor reputation of community colleges (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996).

Overview of the topic

Community colleges are viewed as one of the possible solutions to society's changing expectations of higher education in the United States (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001; Milliron & Santos, 2004; O'Banion, 1997). The mission and role of the community college continue to shift in response to changing social and political forces, making community colleges considerably different institutions than they were in the past. Most recently, community colleges have begun to offer baccalaureate degrees in an effort to meet student and workforce needs. The outcomes are not yet known, given the newness of the endeavor. This shifting of the community college role has not occurred without debate about the prescribed role and mission of the community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001; Levin & Dennison, 1989; McGrath & Spear, 1991; Roueche & Baker, 1987). Regardless of the responsiveness to changing needs, the reputation of the community college as a substandard educational institution persists (Dougherty, 1994). This research examines the causes of the community college reputation and its deleterious social and economic effects on the public, using nursing as a case study.

There are those who would argue that community colleges are at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy among higher education institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994; Frye, 1994). One group of critics has blamed vocational education for tracking students away from college transfer programs and baccalaureate educational institutions (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pincus, 1986; Townsend, 1999; Zwerling, 1976). Clark (1960) argued that community colleges functioned to "cool out" students' economic aspirations. Community college students are

less likely than those beginning their education at baccalaureate institutions to complete a bachelor degree, which in turn may have an indirect negative impact on occupational status and earnings (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Grubb, 1999a; Karabel, 1986). Throughout its changing role, the community college has continuously attracted individuals who are at the lower rungs of the social, economic, and cultural hierarchy (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). These findings have permeated the popular belief about the caliber of education offered at community colleges and tainted their reputation (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Grubb, 1999a).

Community colleges have been criticized for a number of reasons. Scholars have argued that community colleges provide a second-rate education (Dougherty, 1994); that community college faculty are substandard or lacking a professional identity (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Grubb, 1999b); that community colleges are underfunded; and perhaps in part as a result, that students are less likely to graduate if they begin their studies at a community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994; Grubb, 1991; Nora, 2000; Pincus, 1986). There may be some accuracy to these contentions, but it can be argued that the same behaviors and outcomes exist at baccalaureate institutions. What other factor then may play a role in perpetuating the negative reputation of community colleges? Community colleges attract students who have historically been marginalized in higher education because of their socioeconomic status and lack of preparation (Choy, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Labaree, 1997; McCabe, 2003). Perhaps the reputation of the community college is in part a result of the reputation of those who attend (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). If this is the case, the poor reputation of community colleges will persist

as long as the student body continues to be comprised of individuals from the lowest rungs of society's social and economic hierarchies (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

The reputation of the community college and the college's influence on students and graduates are apparent within specific fields of study. The notion that community colleges provide a substandard education has been scrutinized in the field of nursing. In 2003, a published study suggested that surgical patients have a "substantial survival advantage" if treated in hospitals with higher proportions of bachelor degree nurses (Aiken, Clarke & Cheung, 2003). While community colleges have strived to address the national nursing shortage by increasing caps on enrollment and graduating individuals who pass the national licensure examination at 85.3% (NCSBN, 2005), the idea that they would be perceived as less competent than bachelor degree nurses is telling. While the research by Aiken et al. (2003) was found to be flawed by follow-up studies (Bernier, 2003; Lords, 1999), there were harmful repercussions for associate degree nurses and community college nursing education, reinforcing the negative reputation of community colleges.

If community college programs are seen in professional circles as providing a lesser quality education, then graduates of these programs will be viewed as suspect academically. In the field of nursing, this perception, in turn, would have a direct bearing on the status of associate degree nurses as compared with bachelor degree nurses, in spite of the uniform standards for licensure. In addition to the question of why community colleges have a negative reputation, another question that merits deeper inquiry is the possible relationship between the overall pejorative view of community colleges and

what that may mean for graduates of vocational programs such as associate degree nursing.

Theoretical perspectives

Given the complicated nature of the phenomena under investigation, a number of theoretical perspectives are used to guide this research. These include symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), institutional theory (Jepperson, 2001; Scott, 2001), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and critical theories (Faye, 1987).

Symbolic interactionism. The perception of community college education is the result of the meaning attached to it. Community college education, by itself, does not possess its own meaning. Symbolization highlights the processes through which events, people, organizations, and other features of our environment take on particular meanings, becoming objects of orientation that elicit specific feelings and actions (Blumer, 1969). Organizational culture is a “negotiated order that emerges through interactions between participants, a negotiated order influenced by people with symbolic power — the power to define the situation” (Hallett, 2003, p. 135). The reputation of the community college may stem from how it has been defined by individuals or groups with power. This research will explore the meaning attached to community college education and, specifically, to associate degree nursing programs.

Institutional theory. An understanding of the reputation of community colleges is enhanced by applying frameworks of institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Jepperson, 2001; Scott, 2001). In institutional theory, individual and group action are viewed as fundamentally shaped by broader social and cultural processes (Scott, 2001). Neo-institutionalism is a theory that explains the relationship between society, the social

structure, and organizational patterns. Neo-institutional theory offers a framework within which social patterns are explained not by the rational actions of individuals or organizations, but instead by the institution they are a part of, which shapes their thoughts and behaviors (Jepperson, 2001). Organizations and individuals are the products of constructed social environments (Jepperson, 2001). Scott (2001) suggests that institutional theory addresses the ingrained aspects of the social structure of society. Institutional theory considers the processes by which structures become established as respected guidelines for social behavior. One understanding is that an institution is encoded into individuals through socialization. Institutions are internalized and perpetuated, and their existence becomes sedimented and accepted. Jepperson (2001) and others contend that an individual's socialization may even take place without his or her knowledge and that even those not directly engaged with an institution may undergo socialization (Jepperson, 2001). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) use neo-institutional theory in their explanation of homogeneity across organizations. They use the concept of institutional isomorphism and suggest that organizations that share the same environmental conditions are likely to resemble one another. They argue that isomorphism is driven by organizational competition for political power and institutional legitimacy. Levin, Kater, & Wagoner (2006) proposed that community colleges are forced to change their mission and roles in response to social, economic, and political forces outside of the college. Thus community colleges take on a form and identity that is shaped by broader external forces.

Institutional theory can aid our understanding of an organization's status, emphasizing that organizations are influenced by both external and internal forces. New

or neo-institutional theory provides a means to analyze organizations and institutions from numerous frameworks, including cultural and human capital (Campbell, 2004; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2001). According to Nee (1998), institutional theory is critical to the study and understanding of organizations, such as the community college. A central question of the investigation pertains to the causes and deleterious effects of the reputation of community college on the outcomes of community college education and training. If a bachelor degree is perceived as superior to an associate degree as Brint and Karabel argue (1989), then what might this mean for graduates of community colleges? And more specifically, what might it mean for graduates of vocational programs such as associate degree nursing?

Cultural capital. Discussions about career opportunities for community college graduates or relegating associate degree nurses to a subordinate status within a nursing hierarchy raises issues of social justice and equal opportunity for individuals. “Cultural capital refers to different sets of linguistic and cultural competencies that individuals inherit by virtue of their family’s class position” (Trujillo & Diaz, 1999, p. 127). The concept of cultural capital is Bourdieu’s (1977) conceptualization in understanding the educational, cultural, and social reproduction in capitalist societies. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as a class-related concept that represents the status of society’s dominant groups, such as those that possess economic and social capital. The classes of people most connected to mainstream social institutions have the power to assert their cultural competencies as norms.

The culture of the dominant group is validated and distributed through the educational system. Individuals from privileged homes have advantages in adjusting

themselves to the school culture which, in turn, helps facilitate their educational achievement. These students possess the skills and knowledge necessary for understanding and maneuvering through the higher education system. The specific skills, knowledge, and modes of communication associated with college-going behaviors are given status by the dominant groups in society and are transformed into cultural capital that can be used by students from the upper social classes to their advantage. Thus, constituent members of the dominant groups are able to maintain their economic and social advantages through educational attainment. As a result, the cultural capital that achieves the most social value and status in educational institutions is that of the dominant classes (Walpole, 2003). Students are able to exchange their knowledge for academic (and later economic) returns. Thus, schools legitimize and reinforce the values, behaviors, and practices associated with middle-class whites and, as a result, reproduce society by sorting classes into their predetermined positions (Valadez, 1993).

Individuals at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy are at a disadvantage if cultural capital is, in fact, a means to academic and eventual economic success. “The culture of schools, including community colleges, reflects the dominant social relations of a class-based society” (Trujillo & Diaz, 1999, p. 127). A student’s experience in college is influenced by the fit of the institution’s culture with the culture that the student brings to the college.

Because the academy is predominantly framed by a European white male, middle- and upper-class perspective, women, members of diverse racial groups and the lower and working classes, are inherently disadvantaged. They possess forms of knowledge that, for the most part, are not regarded in traditional academic settings

(Rhoads & Valadez, 1996, p. 14).

Community colleges attract individuals who are marginalized in our society. Their lack of access to privileged knowledge serves as a barrier in their struggle to improve their economic and social conditions. “Instead, they bring with them resources that are endemic to their own cultural groups, which may not be recognized or valued by the institution and thus become a liability that community colleges attempt to repair or change” (Valadez, 1993, p. 3). While community colleges have maintained as a mission access to higher education for these marginalized groups, the by-product of this might in fact be harmful to students’ opportunity for social mobility.

Cultural capital theory may help explain the origin and perpetuation of the negative reputation of community colleges. It may also help to explain employers’ perception of associate degree nurses. This research seeks to understand the relationship between hiring practices of nurses and the reputation of community college nursing education.

Social capital. Community colleges attract individuals with little social capital (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). This may be a result of the open door policies and the fact that community colleges provide the only higher education option for individuals with few social connections. Community college students may lack the powerful networks that can help them gain access to competitive programs, the guidance to maneuver elaborate four-year college or university application processes, and or the emotional support to take on new and rigorous academic challenges.

Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources. These social contacts can provide the support necessary to navigate successfully through

society's institutions (Coleman, 1991; Yosso, 2005). These contacts may help an individual gain admission to a competitively oriented college or university, identify and attain financial aid, or secure a first or prestigious job. The network provides the emotional support, guidance, and useful contacts or connections to people in positions of power. Bourdieu asserts that social capital can be inherited from one's family or accumulated through education and work (1977).

Lin suggests that people invest in social relations expecting returns (2001). She offers explanations as to why an investment in social networks enhances outcomes. First, social connections provide information about opportunities and choices. They may also result in information for an organization such as a school or business about an otherwise unknown individual. Second, social ties may exert influence on the organization (e.g., recruiters, admissions committees) who play a critical role in making admissions or hiring decisions. "Putting in a word" can carry enough weight to favor the individual identified. Third, the social connection can serve as a certification of the individual's abilities, potential for productivity, or accessibility to resources, all useful to the organization (Lin, 2001).

Bourdieu's theoretical insight about how social reproduction works may help explain if and why community college graduates have less opportunity for career, economic, and social mobility than their baccalaureate degree counterparts. Bourdieu suggests that social capital can be acquired through formal schooling (1977). However, while education may provide a means to social capital, social capital may be required to gain entry to the kind of schooling predictive of social mobility. Community colleges

provide access to education for those with little social capital, which may result in negative labor market outcomes for these individuals.

Critical theory. Central themes of critical theory include the scientific study of social institutions; the historical problems of domination, alienation, and social struggles; and the envisioning of new possibilities for a more equitable social structure. Another goal is to unmask the sources of oppression, and understand causes and consequences of oppression. An assumption within critical theory is that humans are oppressed because information is created, dominated, and communicated by ruling elites (Faye, 1987; Morrow & Brown, 1994). Thus critical theory may be particularly well suited to question why a community college may be less prestigious than a baccalaureate educational institution: that a community college leaves its graduates relatively disadvantaged in spite of the schooling and as a consequence exploited by employers.

The Investigation

I have chosen a particular segment of society, the nursing profession, in which to investigate the causes and influence of the community college reputation because of the nature of nurse training and the requirements to practice as a nurse. To become a “registered nurse” one may graduate from a diploma, associate (two-year), or bachelor (four year) degree program before taking the national licensing examination (NCLEX). The examination is identical for all graduates, regardless of years of training. The data show that associate degree graduates of nursing programs pass this national examination at a slightly higher rate than graduates of bachelor degree programs (National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2005). Thus, if a bias exists in the hiring, pay, and or promotion of associate degree nurse graduates, there must be an explanation beyond that

of years of training and pass rate on the licensure examination. This investigation uses interviews to examine the perception of community college education and graduates and the hiring practices of nurse managers in three hospitals. Thus, this research explores whether the reputation of community colleges influences decisions of hiring and promotion made by human resources personnel, in this case, nurse employers.

Research questions

The identity and role of community colleges are controversial (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001; Levin & Dennison, 1989; McGrath & Spear, 1991; Roueche & Baker, 1987). The notion that community colleges might perpetuate social inequalities as opposed to providing access and opportunity for social mobility certainly merits serious examination. Using a case study approach, this research examines the relationship between the reputation of community college nursing education and the hiring practices of nurses. The following questions framed the scope of this research endeavor.

1. What are employers' perceptions of community college education (community college reputation) and its graduates, and what shapes these perceptions?
2. What is the relationship between hiring practices of nurses and the reputation of community college nursing education?

Limitations of the study

Qualitative research is distinguished from quantitative research to some extent by acknowledging the participants' and the researcher's subjectivity. Indeed, it is the subjectivity of participants that qualitative researchers seek to capture in their investigations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; LeCompte & Preissle, 2003; Lincoln & Guba,

1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). However, the subjectivity of the researcher has challenged the reputation of qualitative research. Researchers bring to their work their own biases, knowledge, and symbolic understanding (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Qualitative scholars have discussed this topic and identified the problems associated with face-to-face research as well as methods researchers can use to avoid abusing their subjectivity (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

Most of the participants in this study are hospital nurse managers. All are responsible in some way for the hiring of staff nurses. As in any hiring decision, when questioned about why someone was selected for hire, those responsible defend their decision and may use a number of different points to justify the process and outcome. In addition, the debate about the role of associate degree nurses is not new to the healthcare field and has served to divide practitioners. As will be discussed, some choose their “side” based on their own education and some from personal experience or knowledge. There are few nurses who do not have an opinion about this debate, and this is the case for the participants in this investigation as well. Thus, remaining objective or minimizing the impact of one’s personal opinions of associate degree nurses in discussing hiring decisions is a known challenge and limitation.

I am a dean of a health sciences division at a local community college that has a significant relationship with the three hospitals participating in the study. This may have made it difficult for some participants to be frank and open regarding their views of the quality of community college education. More than half of the participants were aware of my position. Others may not have known my connection to a community college nursing

program, as it did not come up in several interviews. For those who did, especially those whom I had not met before and would be unlikely to see again, it may not have impacted their responses at all. I did attempt to establish trust with the interviewees. The establishment of trust often involves exposing biases and assumptions in the research process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), and thus my openness about my employment and uncertainty about what the research would show should have minimized bias or discomfort on the part of many of the participants and not affected the collection of data. If my position had an impact on the information participants shared, this may not have been any different regardless of the sample of hospitals. It is more likely that the hospital personnel I work with professionally on a regular basis, in this case, the “gatekeepers” or human resource personnel, would be most influenced and perhaps most reluctant to be as they would be open as if someone they did not know interviewed them. Given that this was the case in only three of the fourteen interviews, it should not have had grave implications for the findings.

Given the nature of qualitative research, the findings from this research are confined to the case identified. However, while this research is restricted to the hiring practices of a select group of hospital employers in the same region in North Carolina, efforts were made throughout the process to present findings that will be transferable or useful to others. While the case study limits the analysis of hiring practices to the field of nursing, the findings may help explain the relationship¹ between other community college training areas and employer hiring. In addition, while the case study is confined to nurse hiring practices in a city in North Carolina, this research more generally addresses the

¹ LeCompte and Preissle (2003) discuss the use of qualitative methodology to establish linkages and relationships between categories or phenomena.

reputation of community colleges and its potential effect on graduates and the larger society.

Significance of the study

This study contributes to scholarship and to practice by enhancing the understanding of the role of community colleges in our society. This research yields valuable explanations of employer utilization of community college graduates, in this case, nurses. In addition, it allows for a systematic analysis of the role of community colleges in providing opportunities of social mobility for those with little social, economic, and cultural capital. This research helps shape current responses to the ongoing debates about the reputation of the community college and its origin. In addition, the findings may be used as support to encourage relevant entities, such as funders, corporate partners, and employers to reevaluate the role of community colleges and provide additional support to them.

For the field of healthcare, this study will contribute to the research in progress addressing the national nursing shortage. This research will provide some explanation for the current nurse hiring and promotion practices in hospital settings. Finally, this research will assist national and state governing boards, with jurisdiction over the education and practice of nursing, as they continue to wrestle with the question of what is the appropriate role of associate degree nurses in healthcare.

Dissertation organization

This dissertation is organized in six chapters. Chapter two is a review of the related literature regarding the role and reputation of community colleges and the issues surrounding nurse education training and practice. Chapter three outlines the

methodology used for this research. Chapter four includes the results, the stories and information gathered from the interviews. Chapter five contains a conclusion, and chapter six provides theoretical implications, implications for practice, and future research.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

The role and reputation of the community college

The mission and role of the community college remain a continued source of controversy and debate (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001; Levin & Dennison, 1989; Grubb, 1991; McGrath & Spear, 1991; Roueche & Baker, 1987) as they have changed over time to meet student and workforce needs. Initially, the community college was a public junior college, often associated with a local high school, and frequently assumed to be an extension of the high school, as the 13th and 14th years. The junior college was a source of upward mobility through access to higher education (Frye, 1992). Later, community colleges were called upon to concentrate on the training of workers for industry and then to enhance its transfer function for those pursuing a baccalaureate degree (Bradburn & Hurst, 2001; Ehrenberg & Smith, 2004; Tobolowsky, 1998; Townsend, 2002; Zamani, 2001). The community college has continued to add, not necessarily swap, offerings in response to student and community needs, authenticating its existence as a comprehensive educational institution (Levin, 2005a; Milliron & Santos, 2004). Throughout these changes, the community college has remained steadfast in its mission of providing access to higher education for those who otherwise would not or could not attend (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Vaughan, 2000).

Regarding the impact of the community college movement, battleground positions have been staked out clearly. The positions can be summarized with the question of whether community colleges have led to a democratization of higher education. Does the institution bring in students who would not otherwise have attended a postsecondary institution and provide them an opportunity for social mobility? Or does the community

college divert students who would otherwise have attended a baccalaureate college or university away from such an education and or provide them with a poor education limiting their opportunities for social mobility (Brint, 2003; Gonzalez & Hilmer, 2004)?

If a bachelor degree is viewed as superior to an associate degree as Brint and Karabel argue (1989), then what might this mean for graduates of community colleges? If community college programs are generally seen as providing a lesser quality education (McGrath & Spear 1991; Townsend, 1999; Zwerling, 1976), clearly their graduates will be undermined when presenting their earned diplomas as a valid credential to an employer. More specifically, what might it mean for graduates of vocational programs, such as associate degree nursing, that prepare graduates for the same national examination as their bachelor degree counterparts?

In different ways this analysis has infiltrated the popular culture and led to a pejorative assessment of the caliber of education offered at community colleges. The consequence is that the reputation of community colleges has been significantly tainted (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). This in turn has had an impact on community college graduates as alumna of an institution that has a reputation of providing a substandard education, limiting social mobility opportunities via professional employment and salary. The outcome is that those with little social, economic, and cultural capital, those the community college intends to serve, remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, reproducing society's current social order.

Access. Proponents of community colleges have emphasized the role community colleges have played in providing access to greater social mobility, reflecting a clear commitment to promoting the ideal of social equality (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). One way

the community college seeks to achieve this objective is through its efforts to enable equal access to quality education for prospective students regardless of their social and economic circumstances (Bryant-Serrano, 1995; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Roueche & Baker, 1987). Indeed, community colleges have been referred to as “democracy’s college” and “people’s colleges” (Dougherty, 1994; Levin, 2001). Implicit in these designations is the notion that open access and equal opportunity are crucial characteristics of the community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dowd, 2003; Shaw, 1999).

The community college student. Community colleges have offered an alternative for individuals who have historically been denied access to higher education and who may be less likely to enroll in or be accepted at baccalaureate colleges and universities. While secondary students may share the interest in attending college, Adelman (1992) has found a pronounced diversity in the reasons that bring certain students to the community college. Community colleges remain the primary point of entry into higher education for people of color and low-income students, those who have historically been situated on the lower rungs of society’s hierarchy of privilege and power (Bragg, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; Labaree, 1997; McCabe, 2003; Rhoads & Valadez 1996). Twenty-nine percent of community college students come from families with incomes below \$17,000, and only 17 percent of students come from families whose incomes exceed \$50,000 (Choy, 2002). These marginalized groups occupy social strata which are described as disadvantaged or oppressed. Such figures support the contention that it has been the community college’s mission to address the important political and

social problem of equality of access and opportunity by attempting to democratize American higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001).

Based on the United States Census Bureau data, by the year 2015, minority enrollments in community colleges are projected to increase by approximately 12%. Recent data show that 46% of all African-American students and 55% of all Hispanic students in higher education attend a community college. In 2003, first generation college students made up more than 45% of the public community college population (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2005). These statistics confirm the role that community colleges play in providing access to higher education through the open door philosophy. “Community colleges are champions of access, opening the door of higher education to those traditionally less likely to engage this pathway to possibility...With a tradition of open-door admissions, low tuition, flexible programming, customized student services, and quality learning opportunities, community colleges continue to be the pathway to higher education for minorities” (Milliron & Santos, 2004, p. 107).

McCabe (2000, 2003) states that the number of students entering community colleges who lack academic and or social preparation to be successful in education is increasing. He describes how community college developmental and remedial education programs attempt to address this social problem. These programs “are often the bridge that brings these students into productive lives in society, helping them to help themselves and move toward a brighter future” (Milliron & Santos, 2004, p. 108).

Social and economic mobility. In addition to providing open access and student support to those who might otherwise not attend or complete a college degree, the goal of community colleges has been to provide social mobility opportunities for graduates.

Through workforce training, community colleges allow individuals to acquire educational credentials that are not only economically redeemable but also pave a path for them to climb higher up the academic credential ladder (Dougherty, 1994; Grubb, 2002a, 2002b). “Organizations representing the working class, ethnic minorities, and women have all seen this educational agenda as a means for becoming participants in the political process and for gaining access to the more attractive social positions” (Dowd, 2003, p. 37). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) shares that community college graduates run international corporations, hold powerful governmental offices, and provide leadership in industries throughout the world (2006). In this way, community colleges represent one avenue for advancement in a society that heralds “you can be anything you want to be.”

Community colleges as inferior institutions. In rather sharp contrast to this optimistic assessment of community colleges, critics have argued that community colleges are, quite simply, inferior institutions (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Research suggests that students from community colleges are less likely to transfer and complete a bachelor degree than those who attended a baccalaureate college or university from the beginning (Nora, 2000; Pincus, 1986; Townsend, 2000). Rather than facilitating upward mobility as "democracy's colleges," critics assert that community colleges merely reproduce social and economic inequalities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Karabel, 1986; Weis, 1985).

Critics of the role community colleges have played assert that community colleges are inferior institutions and offer an inferior education targeted mostly to less advantaged students (Brint & Karabel, 1989). They argue, in part, that the failure of

community colleges is due to structural constraints, notably the lower status of students, and to universities monopolizing the professional workforce markets (Brint & Karabel, 1989). There are others who have suggested that the community college concept was promoted by leaders of baccalaureate colleges and universities to redirect students who might otherwise demand access to baccalaureate colleges and universities and by those from higher socioeconomic status groups in an effort to perpetuate social and economic inequities (Zwerling, 1976).

Furthermore, vocational education programs have been blamed for tracking students away from college transfer programs and baccalaureate educational institutions (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pincus, 1974; Townsend, 1999; Zwerling, 1976). In effect, the reasoning goes, community colleges lower the ambitions of their students by marketing paraprofessional or vocational careers in the workforce, leaving students less likely to complete a bachelor degree, which in turn may have an indirect negative impact on occupational status and earning potential (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Karabel, 1986).

Cooling out. There is a general consensus that for students recently out of high school who say they plan to obtain a bachelor degree, attendance at a community college diminishes their educational expectation (Clark, 1960; Dougherty, 1994; Pascarella, 1999; Shaw, Valadez & Rhoads, 1999). Clark (1960) popularized the concept of “cooling out,” which when applied to this debate, suggests that community colleges function to “cool out” students’ economic aspirations and redirect them away from high goals and expectations. Dougherty, relying on data from the 1970s and 1980s, claimed that approximately 70-75% of students entering community colleges expressed a desire to

earn a bachelor degree, but less than a fifth of them succeeded (1994). The argument continues that community colleges serve mainly to stratify higher education and perpetuate social and economic inequalities in society (Bailey, Calcagno, Juan, Jenkins, Kienzle & Leinbach, 2005; Dougherty, 1994).

Others contend that any cooling out actually happens long before students enter community colleges (Pascarella, 1999; Romano, 2004; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999a). Pascarella suggests that without being able to ascertain accurate data for those who start at community colleges with the goal of obtaining a bachelor degree, it cannot be confirmed that these students are being cooled out. Romano (2004) contends that in research that controls for ability and family background, the cooling out effect is reduced substantially (2004).

Romano (2004) conducted research surveying more than 1000 students at Broome Community College in Binghamton, New York. He found that 33.6% of community college students raised their educational aspirations, while only 2.5% of the students lowered them (Romano, 2004). He surmised that students attending community colleges may have unclear or confused educational aspirations, and that they are formed well before the students enter college. "Once they enroll, the community college is faced with a cohort that has less strongly held aspirations and a higher degree of uncertainty over their future educational plans than the students who enter the 4-year college. Whether the community college continues the cooling process or reignites the flame (heats them up) is still a matter of some debate" (Romano, 2004, p. 314).

Romano's (2004) work followed similar research conducted by Rehberg (1978). Rehberg (1978) stated that students have uncertain goals about their educational future

from the time they are young. These expectations are influenced by parents, teachers, and friends. Rehberg's (1978) study showed the lowering of educational aspirations of individuals who would later decide to enter community college (Rehberg, 1978).

Uncertainty of educational goals of community college entrants was confirmed by Schneider and Stevenson (1999a) in a similar study. Community college students may have their aspirations cooled out long before they enter college, and thus the cooling out effect may be overestimated.

An alternative response to critics' assertions that community colleges serve to "cool out" students and perpetuate social class inequities is the notion that this is not the intention or fault of the institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2005a). Community colleges cannot be blamed for the decline of transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities if students freely choose vocational programs (Grubb, 1991, 1999a; Leigh & Gill; 2003). Perhaps the cause of low transfer rates is not the caliber of student or poor job of the community college, but instead the lack of coordination between community college and baccalaureate colleges and universities (Clowes, 1991).

Democratization or diversion. Instead of suggesting that community colleges may cool out or divert students away from baccalaureate programs, it has also been argued that community colleges may instead solve these problems through open enrollment policies or by allowing students to remedy deficiencies or improve their academic record before they transfer to universities (Gonzalez & Hilmer, 2004; Hilmer, 1997). In discussing the role of the community college, Gonzalez and Hilmer (2004) identify the debate between the diversion effect and the democratization effect. The diversion effect

occurs when students attend community colleges and complete fewer years of college than they would have had they instead attended a baccalaureate college or university. The democratization effect occurs when individuals are able to attend community colleges to pursue a college education because of the lower tuitions, closer proximities, and open door admissions policies. Gonzalez and Hilmer (2004) found that community colleges have an unambiguously positive effect on the educational attainment of Hispanics. They argue that community colleges have become an increasingly important part of American higher education over the last two decades, especially for Hispanics. Their research shows that Hispanics are disproportionately likely to start their postsecondary education path in community colleges, and by starting there these students better develop the skills and attitudes required to persist to college graduation (Gilroy, 1998; Gonzalez & Hilmer, 2004; Rendon & Garza, 1996). Their research on Hispanics' college attendance found that the democratization effect does not come at the expense of diverting Hispanics from attaining bachelor degrees (Gonzalez & Hilmer, 2004). However, they have not convinced other scholars in this area.

The changing role of community colleges. Community colleges have faced new external pressures in the last decade, adding to the controversy of their mission and role (Levin, 2001, 2005a, Levin, Kater, & Wagoner, 2006). According to institutional theory, institutions of higher education are highly influenced by external pressures both in the role they play and because of the reputation they hold (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Levin, Kater, and Wagoner (2006) recognize three factors that have forced community colleges to reevaluate their mission and role. First, community colleges have had to seek new and innovative ways to support their existence financially (Levin et al., 2006).

Second, globalization has forced community colleges to respond to the needs of industry by providing vocational skill training detracting from liberal arts and college transfer offerings (Levin, 2001; Levin et al., 2006). Third, neo-liberalism has pressured the community college to restructure into a more competitive and productive entity, a “nouveau college” (Levin et al., 2006, p. 57), much like a business or corporation (Levin, 2005a; Levin et al., 2006).

The community college is innovative in its efforts to continue to be all things to all entities – students and employers (Levin, 2005a). Both opponents and proponents of community college education at least agree that the community college’s role has been comprehensive, that it serves multiple educational objectives both individual and societal (Bailey & Morest, 2004). Approximately 1,000 community colleges across the United States serve more than 10 million continuing education and degree-seeking students in a broad range of programs (Milliron & Santos, 2004). There are several prominent functions community colleges have incorporated into their mission and goals: academic, vocational and remedial education; community development; workforce development and training; job preparation; preparation for bachelor degrees; and higher education for those unable or willing to attend elsewhere (Levin, 2001). “As an institution, the community college is both responsive to external demands and adaptable in meeting those demands” (Levin, 2001, p. xix). Scholars in community college research argue that community colleges will only survive and prosper in the 21st century if they are market sensitive and market driven (Levin, 2001; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). A community college president in the state of North Carolina advocates that community colleges must recognize that they must evolve to meet the changing and increasing demands of individuals and the

workforce by providing the training they want, when and where they want it (Zeiss, 1997). "Those colleges that attempt to protect their time-honored traditions without providing new delivery options for their students are doomed to extinction" (Zeiss, 1998, p. 12). The shift toward workforce development complements the traditional community college mission by again preparing people for employment and presenting opportunities for upward mobility while continuing to provide access to students who are unlikely to attend four-year institutions (McCabe, 1997; Zeiss, 1997, 1998).

One of the major recent shifts in community colleges is the growing number of students returning to community colleges after earning a bachelor degree or higher. A study conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges noted that almost 25% of students served by community colleges across credit and non-credit programs had already earned a bachelor degree or higher (Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). These individuals are returning to school to "re-tool": to gain the skills and or certification they need for high-paying technical jobs. Some have referred to this phenomenon as "reverse transfer" or called community colleges "graduate school" (Daggett, 2001; Milliron & Santos, 2004; Quinley & Quinley, 1998).

Is the comprehensive community college working? The question has been raised whether community colleges can remain true to their mission of providing access while also responding to community and workforce needs during this shift (Bragg, 2002; Levin, 2001; Orr, 2001). "Despite this more or less constant backdrop of criticism that the colleges are sacrificing quality and falling short of promoting equity, the accretion of activities continues unabated" (Bailey & Morest, 2004, p. 4). Scholars suggest that this meets the needs of the organization, especially in times of poor economic support, and is

required in order to shift with globalization (Bailey & Morest, 2004; Levin et al., 2006). In times of economic crisis, the community college may not be in a position to choose, as it must respond to the external political forces in order to prove legitimacy and maintain support (Levin, 2005a; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

It is not apparent that the community college can continue to be all things to all people with its multiple missions (Bailey & Morest, 2004). Neo-liberalism has required the community college to respond to forces outside of education (Levin et al., 2006) that may require it to relinquish its comprehensiveness (Levin et al., 2006). The community college role in society has meant a shift from the student or individual as customer to businesses and industry as customer (Dougherty 1994; Dougherty & Bakia 2000; Dowd, 2003; Levin 2001, 2005a). Levin et al. suggest that this change has led to students becoming “economic entities” (Levin et al., 2006, p. 82) and has minimized the broad access mission (Levin et al., 2006). There is considerable concern that the open door, broad access mission of the community college is at risk (Dougherty, 1994; Herideen, 1998; Levin, 2005a; Levin et al., 2006; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Shaw, 1999).

The neoliberal restructuring of the community college threatens to erode its comprehensive curriculum and undermine the mission of access, particularly for underserved or marginalized groups. Furthermore, community colleges have shifted their organizational functions dramatically so that they reflect a business model that many not leave room for instructional purposes and academic practices oriented to social reform and democracy (Levin, 2005a, p. 17).

A greater focus on vocational programs and contract training to meet business needs may be distracting students from completing college transfer programs and limiting

services available to students most in need (Dougherty 1994; Gumport, 2003). Bachelor degrees, as distinct from associate degrees, are a realization of cultural capital, as Bourdieu asserts that education is a means of accumulating specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, the more education, the more cultural capital gained. This distinction spotlights the relatively lower standing of community college graduates and, in the process, further diminishes the reputation of the community college (Gumport, 2003).

Dougherty and Bakia (2000) agree that college transfer programs may be influenced the most as community college personnel spend more time providing contracted services to industry and less time serving under-prepared students. They express concern that administrative attention may be pulled away from the traditional notion of the community college providing access and social opportunity and moved more toward pursuing connections with business and industry, thus creating a new culture or organization attitude, a new institution (Dougherty & Bakia, 2000). “Where the needs of business and industry are central, the doctrine of human capital theory is pitted against liberal learning” (Levin, 2005a, p. 6).

Jacobs (2001) contends that one of the core missions of community colleges is workforce development or the preparation of all community college students for the world of work. He also contends that community colleges are not effective at meeting this goal as they are stuck in their mode of offering education in a traditional manner. “Ignoring fundamental changes in the structure of the American industrial economy, traditional vocational education continues to structure itself around ‘terminal’ programs directed at preparing young people for entry-level work. Moreover, they fail to provide a

seamless curriculum culminating in admission to, and completion of, the growing number of career-specific, four year degrees” (Jacob, 2001, p.1).

Dowd (2003) suggests that in the effort to meet business demands there has been a loss of commitment to students who were originally intended to be served, those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Dowd’s (2003) research on accountability standards includes an analysis of what she refers to as the privatization of community colleges and its effects on the democratizing mission of these institutions. She suggests that social issues have been transcended by economic issues. Community colleges are strongly encouraged to supply workers for the workforce, and to do so with fewer resources than they have had in the past as public financial support dwindles. While access may remain a core objective of the community college, it has become less feasible (Dowd, 2003; Levin, 2001).

With its evolving mission and role, the community college has been noted as trying to be “all things to all people” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). But can it continue to do so without jeopardizing the quality of education? Levin, Kater and Wagoner (2006) suggest that community colleges may be stretching too far in following the latest responses to globalization and neo-liberalism. By holding on to the commitment to access while also attempting to fulfill workforce needs, community colleges may be harming students most in need (Levin et al., 2006). Levin asserts that the community college experience for “under-prepared” students is a “luck of the draw,” dependent on the individual community college they are attending and their particular contacts with faculty and staff. It is no longer certain that community colleges exist to provide and prioritize social mobility opportunities for those less fortunate (Levin, 2005b).

Thus, there is no easy answer to the question of what factors help construct the reputation of community colleges. Is it the social circumstances of the students (McCabe, 2003); the lack of support from local, state, and national entities (Martinez, 2004); a result of the community college attempting to meet too many needs (Levin, 2005a; Levin et al., 2006); or the community college itself that has created this reputation (Clowes, 1991; Dougherty, 1994)? Regardless of the factors, the question is whether the reputation of community colleges as providing a lesser education, in turn, influences the outcomes of such training and education.

Nursing education and practice

The nation is challenged with a serious nursing shortage that may impact the quality of healthcare. It is estimated that the United States had a shortage of approximately 168,000 nurses in 2003. By 2020 the national shortage is projected to increase to more than one million nurses, meeting only 64 percent of the projected demand (Health Resources and Services Administration [HRSA], 2004). Recently, 53% of physicians and 65% of the public cited the shortage of nurses as a leading cause of medical errors (Harvard School of Public Health, 2002). The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare reported that low nurse staffing levels have contributed to 24% of unanticipated events in hospitals that resulted in death, injury, or permanent loss of function (Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations [JCAHO], 2005). Adding to the problem is the fact that colleges and universities are struggling to maintain enrollment levels to meet the projected nursing workforce need. In addition, colleges and universities have faculty vacancies that do not enable them to admit all the

prospective students who apply to enroll (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2003).

The case of nurse hiring practices can reveal the way in which academic reputation has a deleterious affect on those whom community college programs are designed to accommodate — that population that generally has been denied equality of access and opportunity. Registered nurses obtain their training or education via diploma, associate, or bachelor degree programs. All three types of programs prepare individuals to be entry-level practitioners. Completion of the four-year bachelor degree in nursing results in the award of the BSN degree. The community college program awards the associate degree in nursing, or ADN. Finally, there are a small number of two or three-year hospital based programs that award a diploma in nursing. All three types of programs are found throughout the United States (King, 1986). The amount of clinical preparation required varies between types of programs and between institutions. Ultimately, graduates of each of the three types of programs take the same licensing board for entry into nursing practice. Statistics show that among the 2004 graduates taking the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN), 60 percent held associate degrees, 36 percent held bachelor degrees, and just over three percent graduated from a diploma program (NCSBN, 2005).² Regardless of the years of training a student receives or the type of educational institution from which a nurse earns her or his degree, all graduates of nursing programs must take the same national licensing examination developed by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN).

This examination tests the entry-level nursing competence of candidates for licensure as

¹ This investigation does not include or address diploma programs, as the number of nurses graduating from these programs is small in comparison to associate degree and bachelor degree nurses.

registered nurses (NCSBN, 2005). The examination is intended to serve as a screening device, separating those who are deemed skilled and knowledgeable and thus safe to practice nursing from those who are not. The screening hypothesis posits that this examination might not be the only tool used to identify individuals preferred for hires as education level may have a bearing on hiring decisions as well. Education is used to identify, select, and assign individuals according to externally imposed criteria (Collins, 1979). There is further discussion of the screening hypothesis in chapter five.

Nursing practice is also regulated by state legislatures under the direction of the National Council of State Boards of Nursing. State Boards of Nursing are authorized to develop local administrative rules and regulations (called Nurse Practice Acts) that can mandate additional professional qualifications and training requirements. Nursing is heavily regulated because as a health profession it poses risks of harm to the public if practiced by someone who is unprepared and or incompetent. The professional standards are systematic and closely regulated and do not permit any deviations from prescribed standards and expectations (National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2005; North Carolina Board of Nursing [NCBON], 2006).

Legislatures in each state enact a Nurse Practice Act which dictates the requirements for becoming licensed and for practicing nursing in that particular state. These requirements typically include graduating from a recognized nursing program and passing the NCLEX-RN examination for registered nurses. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing does not dictate the type or length of program required, although states can include such specification in their respective Nurse Practice Acts.³ Educational

³ The North Carolina Board of Nursing does not specify education requirements other than that applicants for licensure must have “graduated from a course of study approved by the Board” (NCBON, 2005).

programs range in duration, content of course work, and hours spent in a clinical setting, but all graduates (associate and bachelor degrees alike) must pass the NCLEX-RN to become licensed as a registered nurse (NCSBN, 2005). While some may question the validity of such standardized exams, the NCLEX-RN has satisfied state legislatures and health care organizations throughout the country. Thus the NCLEX-RN is used as a filter to let into the profession only those deemed safe to practice nursing. The test, therefore, represents a satisfactory accounting of nurse training in general, not distinguishing between associate degree and bachelor degree.

The number of graduates and the national pass rates for two types of nursing programs (associate and bachelor) for years 2000 through 2004 are illustrated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

NCLEX-RN Pass Rate by Program Type

Year		Number of Graduates	NCLEX-RN Passage Rate
2004	Associate Degree	53,275	85.3%
	Bachelor Degree	30,648	84.8%
2003	Associate Degree	47,415	87%
	Bachelor Degree	26,632	86.9%
2002	Associate Degree	42,382	86.7%
	Bachelor Degree	25,821	86.7%
2001	Associate Degree	41,567	85.3%
	Bachelor Degree	24,832	85.9%
2000	Associate Degree	42,665	83.8%
	Bachelor Degree	26,048	83.9%

(NCSBN, 2006)

This table indicates that the community college plays a major role in providing nurses for the workforce. It also shows that associate degree nurse graduates are just as likely to pass the NCLEX-RN examination as bachelor degree nurses. Begging the question of whether associate degree nurses are considered less skilled or capable of practicing nursing than their bachelor degree counterparts. If so, why would associate degree nurses be seen as less capable than bachelor degree nurses, as Aiken et al., (2003) and others have argued, given the NCLEX-RN results illustrating that associate degree nurses have the same chance of passing the national examination?

While Jacobs (2001) is critical of community colleges' inability to shift to meet the growing needs of occupational training, he commends community colleges for their efforts and successes in the training of nurses and allied health professionals.

Adults, many single heads of household, return to school, master complex math and science classes, and then take a demanding health care program. If they are successful in getting admitted to the program (many of these programs are in such high demand that enrollment is restricted) and complete it, there is an over 90% certainty that they will pass the state-administered comprehensive nursing examinations and be licensed to practice. Anyone who questions the value of post-secondary occupational education in the lives of people should attend the nursing pinning ceremony at a local community college. These are moving testimonials to the success of community colleges in providing valuable job skills for people. These programs provide entire nursing staffs for many communities in the United States — over 60% of the new nurses in the United States have received their education at a community college (Jacobs, 2001; NCSBN, 2005)

The role of the associate degree nurse. In spite of the need to train and graduate more nurses in response to the national shortage and understanding that graduates of associate degree programs are at least as likely to pass the NCLEX-RN examination as bachelor degree nurses (NCSBN, 2005), there is a movement on the part of nursing professionals and employers to differentiate roles of nurses based on education level. These proposed changes include limiting the care that can be provided by associate degree nurses, developing a hierarchical rank with lower compensation for associate degree nurses than bachelor degree nurses, and in some regions even eliminating the

associate degree programs (American Associate of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2005; Aiken, Clark, & Cheung, 2003; North Carolina Board of Nursing [NCBON], 2006).

This topic received considerable attention in 2003 when Aiken and her colleagues published a controversial article (Aiken et al., 2003). They suggested that surgical patients have a "substantial survival advantage" if treated in hospitals with a higher proportion of nurses educated at the baccalaureate level or higher. Their research states that the educational backgrounds of hospital registered nurses is a predictor of patient mortality, apart from factors such as nurse staffing and experience. The research concludes that a 10% increase in baccalaureate education within a hospital's nursing workforce is associated with a 5% decline in mortality (Aiken et al., 2003). In spite of criticism that the research used flawed methodology and states numerous inaccuracies (Bernier, 2003; National Organization for Associate Degree Nurses [N-OADN], 2005), this research supported movements by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) and other groups for the creation of a more highly educated nursing workforce (defined as having baccalaureate versus associate degrees) in the interest of improving patient safety and providing better care for patients in hospitals (AACN, 2005; Aiken et al., 2003).

As an example, the North Carolina Board of Nursing proposed legislation in 2005 that would allow associate degree nurses to work only with patients who have a "predictable" illness and remove them from any and all specialty areas, such as obstetrics, geriatrics, and mental health (NCBON, 2006). Such a practice would distinguish registered nurses by their education, leaving the more challenging and prestigious

practices to bachelor degree nurses.⁴ This would presumably create a formal hierarchy with associate degree nurses on the bottom rung, a move that would most likely result in lower pay and less opportunity for advancement (N-OADN, 2005). If such a plan were to be implemented, it would likely have an adverse impact on a select population within society: those more likely to obtain a community college education — those from lower socioeconomic groups with little social, economic, and cultural capital.

Those in favor of requiring a bachelor degree to practice nursing indicate that two years of college do not prepare a nurse for professional practice, suggesting that associate degree nurses have basic fundamental skills but not the depth of knowledge that should be required (Long, 2003; Lords, 1999). Those opposed to such a change argue that there is no supporting evidence to suggest associate degree nurses are any less skilled or capable than their bachelor degree colleagues (Bernier, 2003; Lords, 1999). They argue that the profession's standardized entrance examination (NCLEX-RN) is an objective measure, and data from that examination illustrate that graduates of associate degree programs perform slightly better (Lords, 1999). “When hospital mortality rates are age-adjusted for background mortality rates in the general population (that is, the ratio of Pennsylvania hospital mortality to United States mortality) a weak relationship emerges that counters the study’s findings” (Bernier, 2003, p. 138).

Associate degree nursing versus bachelor degree nursing. While there are efforts underway to require four years of education to become a nurse, there is little current or conclusive research that addresses what specific knowledge and or skills, beyond what is

⁴ This raises the question of whether education level in fact distinguishes individuals by skill and knowledge gained in school (human capital) or instead selects individuals with higher degrees under the assumption that they are more likely to be productive (screening hypothesis). Additional discussion of the screening hypothesis is included in chapter five.

already included in an associate degree program, is necessary for a student to obtain prior to practicing nursing. Do associate degree programs prepare nurses adequately for patient care practice? If the answer is no, then what additional substantive course content is necessary to bring associate degree graduates to an “acceptable level?” Those in support of requiring a bachelor degree to practice nursing state there is simply no substitute for education, not even experience (Long, 2003).

There is little question that nursing education is the foundation on which the quality of nursing care rests. Jacob, MiMattio, Bishop and Fields (1998) state that “[T]he education of professional nurses must take place in institutions of higher learning with a bachelor of science in nursing degree required for professional practice” (p. 225). Jacobs et al. (1998) claim that many of the problems within the field of nursing are a result of the profession not setting entry level requirements. They claim as the health care field becomes more complicated, nurses will only be able to address these changes if they are trained at the baccalaureate degree level. “For nursing to secure its position in the new marketplace, nurses must be able to practice autonomously, synthesize vast amounts of knowledge, problem-solve in situations of high uncertainty, supervise the work of others, practice across health care settings, and participate in policy making” (Wunderlich, Sloan, & Davis, 1996, p. 87). The authors propose eliminating recognition of the associate degree as a terminal degree in nursing. They do recognize the need for the community college as providing affordable education and thus advocate an improved system of articulation between community colleges and baccalaureate degree programs.

One means of attempting to understand differences in educational levels is to study those who have attended both community college and bachelor degree institutions.

Research has been done using general college transfer students, those who have attended community colleges with the goal of transferring on to earn a bachelor degree at a college or university (Andres, 2001; Townsend, 1993, 2003; Vaala, 1989). Research showed that students perceived the university portion of their studies to have heavier workloads, higher academic standards, more assignments, and more challenging course content.

The nursing literature on diploma or associate degree nurses who return to four-year colleges or universities to earn their bachelor degree in nursing also shows that those who continue on to bachelor degree colleges and universities experienced an increase in workload and rigor (Huston, Shovin, Damazo, & Fox, 2001; Maltby & Andrusyszyn, 1997; Nesler, Hanner, Melburg, & McGowan, 2001). In a study conducted by Cameron (2005), examining ADN and BSN programs, it was found that “[t]he pedagogical practices and overall curriculum philosophy were consistent from community college to university, but difficulties emerged as the nursing students experience an increased course workload, a greater volume of readings, and higher expectations related to critical thinking and critical reflection in journals and scholarly writing” (Cameron, 2005, p. 36).

There have been attempts to identify differences in practice between associate and bachelor degree nurses.⁵ Diede, McNish, and Coose (2000) asked employers about staffing patterns and role differentiation between these groups. Their research found that the roles of associate degree nurses were different from the roles of graduates of bachelor degree programs as a result of noted skill differences. The bachelor degree graduate had more management and leadership skills, and the associate degree graduate

⁵ It is important to note that many associate degree programs actually require greater than two years of enrollment. In the case of nursing programs, community colleges may require or encourage students to complete numerous general education courses prior to enrolling in the actual nursing program. These additional courses, or required schedule, may result in a program being two and one half or three years in length.

was stronger in technical skills (Diede, McNish, & Coose 2000). When employers were asked about what associate degree programs might add, responses included the following: management and leadership skills, critical thinking, communication, and documentation (Diede et al., 2000).

Other literature does suggest that the differences between community college and bachelor degree programs are not significant when it comes to a nurse's ability to perform basic skills and that both programs prepare registered nurses for entry-level positions in most health care settings (Karp, Jacobs, & Hughes, 2002). In addition, Karp, Jacobs, and Hughes (2002) provide suggestions to help ensure that associate degree nurses are competent and capable in their performance once employed. These suggestions include allowing entry-level nurses to start with basic nursing tasks before they are given additional responsibilities or challenges and providing an experienced nurse as a mentor for the entry-level nurse. Karp et al. also provide lessons for those involved in educating nurses, which include ensuring bachelor and associate degree programs work together, differentiating between novice and advanced practice, and easing movement between ADN and BSN (Karp, Jacobs, & Hughes, 2002).

In an effort to address whether educational program or individual characteristics are responsible for nurses' differing levels of self-actualization, Fetzer (2003) relied on findings that indicate that self-actualization is positively and significantly related to the degree of professionalism. She examined graduates of bachelor degree programs and graduates of associate degree programs enrolling in bachelor degree programs after working as nurses. She found that associate degree nurses returning to school to earn their bachelor degree had the same, if not more, professionalism than their bachelor

degree colleagues (Fetzer, 2003). Fetzer concluded that, “[B]accalaureate completion programs for associate degree nurses may need to reconsider their mission of inducting and injecting professional values, attitudes, and behaviors into RN-BSN students.

According to the high scores on the professionalism measure found in this study, a group of ADN-prepared nurses have already acquired these values, attitudes, and behaviors” (Fetzer, 2003, p. 142). She suggests that “the profession’s leaders need to reconsider alternative terms to differentiate ADN and BSN prepared nurses, as professionalism is not the exclusive purview of the baccalaureate graduate” (Fetzer, 2003, p. 143).

There is not a simple answer to the question of how (if at all) associate degree nurses are less skilled or capable than their bachelor degree counterparts. A theme evident in the literature is the importance of critical thinking skills and the possibility that associate degree nurses, as compared with their bachelor degree counterparts, lack competency in this area. According to nursing scholars, the ability to think critically is important in nursing practice given the inevitable challenges nurses must face in a constantly changing health care arena (Maynard, 1996; Thorpe & Loo, 2003).

Critical thinking. Given the growing complexity of society in most areas of work, there is a renewed emphasis on the ability of employees to think critically (Friedman, 2000). Jones and Brown (1991) suggest that critical thinking is essential to autonomy in a complex society. Critical thinking, however, is a difficult concept to define. The process, it has been stated, includes, but is not limited to, the identification of facts, clarification, reasoning, logical thought processes, and evaluation of outcomes (Bandman & Bandman, 1988; Halpern, 1989; Kurfiss, 1988; Regal, 1990). Given the growing demand by employers for employees and college graduates to have this skill, colleges and

universities have turned to an exploration of what critical thinking is and how to teach it (Halpern, 1989). Jacobs (2001) argues that community college programs are disconnected from liberal arts education that develops these essential critical thinking skills (Jacobs, 2001). Milliron and Santos (2004), in discussing the role of community colleges, assert that, “[w]e must also be courageous catalysts of learning that provides life, civic and engagement skills. These ‘habits of life’ or ‘higher learning’ includes key skills in communication” (p. 115).

The field of nursing is no exception to the popular perception that critical thinking is vital to one’s development, and thus teaching it must be included in college education (Jones & Brown, 1991). Jacobs, DiMattio, Bishop, and Fields (1998) state that those “whose introduction to the discipline and profession of nursing is informed by liberal education, will be better prepared to think critically, to think creatively, and to lead” (Jacobs et al., 1998, p. 231). Hermann (2004), suggests that liberal learning and professional learning must be linked and offers one approach to do so in the area of nursing.

Integration of the humanities has been described as one curricular approach that supports the growth of critical thinking within a humanistic perspective as well as the personal and professional development of the nursing students. Explaining societal and health care complexities demands that professional nursing education be tailored to prepare nursing students as informed, responsible, democratic citizens as well as empowered, competent, compassionate professional nurses (Hermann, 2004, p. 42).

Most studies in the nursing literature related to critical thinking deal with comparing one type of nursing program to another. Pardue (1987) conducted a study to examine the differences in critical thinking ability among 121 nurses with differing levels of education. The study found that those with a higher level of education scored higher on the Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal Form. Pardue (1987) suggested that this was the case because bachelor and masters prepared nurses have more extensive experience and knowledge. Brooks and Sheperd (1990) had similar results. They found that bachelor degree students in their last year had a higher level of critical thinking ability than their associate degree counterparts. This could be a result of human capital gained with additional education (Gullason, 1999; Psacharopoulos, 1996). Other researchers suggest that it is not the education that provides the skill but instead individual qualities and experience (Gross, Takazawa & Rose, 1987). The higher level of critical thinking ability may be inherent in the student body enrolled and graduating from baccalaureate or masters degree programs as compared with associate degree programs using a cultural capital framework (Bourdieu, 1977)

While the above research indicates that students in bachelor or masters degree programs score higher on critical thinking tests, the reasons for this difference are unknown. In addition, it would be difficult to control for other potential contributing factors.

This research examines the perceptions held by employers regarding the nature and quality of the educational programs and professional preparation obtained by graduates from two different types of teaching programs: community colleges and four-year colleges and universities. Data were collected to examine nurse hiring practices in

hospitals. Three hospitals in North Carolina were used as sites for a case study to investigate whether employers are more disposed to hire and promote nurses with education beyond the associate degree level. The following questions guide this research.

1. What are employers' perceptions of community college education (community college reputation) and its graduates, and what shapes these perceptions?
2. What is the relationship between hiring practices of nurses and the reputation of community college nursing education?

Chapter Three: Methodology

This research investigates what institutional characteristics and or subjective attitudes contribute to the reputation of community college education, how that reputation might be perpetuated, and its subsequent impact on graduates of community colleges. In consideration of the types of information available to the researcher and the topic addressed, a qualitative case study method was deemed to be a well-suited research format. This research provides an in-depth understanding of the complex social phenomena studied by gaining entry into the thoughts and worlds of participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; LeCompte & Preissle, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The following questions guided the research.

1. What are employers' perceptions of community college education (community college reputation) and its graduates, and what shapes these perceptions?
2. What is the relationship between hiring practices of nurses and the reputation of community college nursing education?

Qualitative research is often associated with hermeneutic or interpretative research. Interpretative research involves a concern for meaning. "These studies are framed by descriptions of, explanations for, or meanings given to phenomena by both the researcher and the study participants rather than by the definitions and interpretations of the researcher alone. These studies emphasize analysis of language and discourse" (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003, p. 32). That is, qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of phenomena and behaviors through the meanings that people attribute to phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Hermeneutics addresses ways to explain, translate, and interpret perceived reality (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). The term

hermeneutics comes from a Greek word meaning “to translate.” Hermeneutics is the theory and practice of both interpretation and understanding in various human contexts.

Wolcott (1994) shares that in interpretation the researcher surpasses hard or numerical data and circumspect analysis and begins to explore meaning and understanding. Wolcott (1994) cautions that this exploration is not a license to offer results and conclusions without linkage to relevant and clear research based data. If commonalities can be found, then these commonalties will become the research data to support the interpretation and understanding of the issue. The philosophy is well suited to this research. In order for this study to be useful to community colleges, the researcher seeks comprehension of general perceptions held about community college education. The participants’ perceptions provide answers to the general research questions regarding the causes and outcomes of the reputation of community colleges.

Establishing linkages and relationships can be part of the theorizing that takes place during qualitative analysis. “Theorizing is the cognitive process of discovering or manipulating abstract categories and the relationships among those categories” (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003, p. 239). In this study the researcher sought to understand the relationship between hiring practices of nurses and the reputation of community college nursing education.

To understand what contributes to the reputation of community college education and how that reputation might be perpetuated, this research relied upon case study methods. Case studies allow researchers to seek an understanding of complex, social phenomena in an actual social context without having to identify cause and effect relationships (Creswell, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989).

According to Yin, “Case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1989, p. 13). In turn, the results of case studies offer thick, rich descriptions that can provide a broad explanation of the phenomena.

The research conducted is an in-depth exploration of how and why the reputation of community college programs, in this case associate degree nursing programs, affects the hiring and promotion practices of hospital personnel in three North Carolina hospitals. Given that licensure requirements for nursing are identical for both associate and bachelor degree graduates, this was a unique research opportunity to examine how the academic reputations of each, at least in the one field of nursing, has a bearing on professional hiring practices (and perhaps on subsequent promotional opportunities as well).

In order to practice nursing in the United States, one has to be a registered nurse. In order to become a registered nurse, one must graduate from an associate or bachelor degree program and pass a national licensing examination (NCSBN, 2005). All graduates are given the same examination, and thus it is presumed that passing the examination qualifies one for practicing patient care, regardless of the academic institution where the degree was earned. If associate degree nurse graduates are not hired and promoted at a comparable rate as bachelor prepared nurses, this practice suggests that employers may view community college education as “lesser” than the education obtained at the bachelor degree level and go on to impose that bias in their personnel practices.

A case study is appropriately utilized when there is a formal or informal bounded system and when there are a finite number of people (Merriam, 1988). The “case” for this research is comprised of nurse managers and others involved in the hiring of nurses from three hospitals in North Carolina. The use of more than one site allows for comparisons between sites and provides as well for a more informed basis for generating principles of how community college academic training fares in the world of employment. This case is bounded by place – nurse managers and those involved in hiring at three hospitals. In the researcher’s attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the hospitals’ hiring and promotion practices, the researcher used both interviews (of those involved, directly and indirectly, in hiring and promoting) and document analysis (hospital human resources and personnel material).

Research sites

Sites were selected that provide diversity of organization type. The hospitals selected range in size, geography, patient population, and employee vacancy rates. The hospitals included recruit from the same pool of nursing graduates: those graduating from the local programs as well as those individuals from other areas of the state or nation seeking relocation in the area in North Carolina where the hospitals are located. The three institutions hire both associate degree and bachelor degree nurses who have passed their NCLEX-RN examination and have become licensed to practice in North Carolina, and none of the institutions advertise or have in place hiring policies requiring a bachelor degree for entry-level nursing positions.

Hospital Magnet is a private, not-for-profit health care system with 394 beds. It first opened in 1894 and is thus the oldest hospital of the three. At the time of the

research, Hospital Magnet was involved in applying for magnet status,⁶ which it received in 2006. This is the only hospital of the three that has magnet status. Hospital Big is a 752 bed, private, not-for-profit health care system that first opened in 1961. It is the largest of the three and was at one time a public hospital. Hospital Big has offered over one million dollars of charitable care per year for the last few years and is thus where the majority of patients without health insurance seek care. Hospital Satellite is a private institution which opened in 1914 and currently has 186 beds. It is a small satellite of a larger hospital in another county.

The institutions were purposefully selected to satisfy the following criteria: (a) all three institutions hire both associate degree and bachelor degree nurses who have passed their NCLEX-RN examination and have become licensed to practice nursing in North Carolina, and (b) none of the institutions advertise or have in place hiring policies requiring a bachelor degree for entry-level nursing positions. Therefore, differential hiring decisions made by the participants invited a search for other considerations, including the college degree earned and whatever class and status differences are associated with it. These particular sites were also selected because the researcher had already established working relationships with existing personnel who were able to assist in facilitating the collection of data.

Participants

The sample population was hospital employees who are responsible for the hiring or promoting of nurses in their respective institutions. In most cases, the hiring of nurses

⁶ Magnet status is an award given by the American Nurses' Credentialing Center (ANCC), an affiliate of the American Nurses Association, to hospitals that satisfy a set of criteria designed to measure the strength and quality of their nursing. A Magnet hospital is stated to be one where nursing delivers excellent patient outcomes, where nurses have a high level of job satisfaction, and where there is a low staff nurse turnover rate.

is the responsibility of nurse managers, individuals who are themselves registered nurses. The participants were selected randomly and include nursing staff and human resources personnel from all levels of education — associate, baccalaureate and graduate, without attention to gender, age, or race.

Representatives from the human resources offices at each institution served as the gatekeepers. Gatekeepers can facilitate access to the desired group of people (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). These gatekeepers were also interviewed by the researcher to gather data on the general hospital hiring policies and practices. A purposeful sampling strategy was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher requested that these gatekeepers identify a pool of nurse employees for the sample — employees with varying degrees of education and in a variety of positions within the hospitals who have some authority in the hiring or promoting of nurses at their respective hospitals. No other restrictions were placed on the pool of volunteers or participants.

Fourteen individuals from the three hospitals were interviewed, as this was determined to be a workable and reasonable number for the sample (Yin, 1989). For purposes of anonymity, the hospitals are given fictitious names that simply describe a unique aspect of each: Hospital Big, Hospital Satellite, and Hospital Magnet. In order to obtain diversity of perspective, the researcher selected individuals from varied educational backgrounds and positions within the institutions. Initially, the plan was to interview one human resources employee from each of the three hospitals (who also served as the gatekeeper) and three other nurse managers from each hospital, for a total of four individuals from each hospital and a grand total of 12 participant interviews. Instead, a total of 14 individuals were interviewed, five human resources personnel and nine nurse

managers. In Hospital Big, four nurse managers and one human resources person were interviewed individually. In Hospital Satellite, three nurse managers and one human resources person were interviewed individually. In Hospital Magnet, a group interview was conducted with three human resources employees and two nurse managers. After numerous failed attempts to schedule independent interviews, the gatekeeper at Hospital Magnet recommended a group interview and invited the participants as stated above.

A major goal of the interviews was to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of community college nursing education and to learn about hiring and promotion practices at each institution. Attention was paid to the training programs from which each of the interviewees had graduated to see if there was a discernable pattern. All of the nurse managers interviewed were Registered Nurses; their nursing education ranged from associate degree to masters degree. None of the human resource personnel had had community college training. Education levels of human resources personnel ranged from bachelor degree to masters degree as well; however, none of them were trained as nurses. A summary of the participant information is included in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Participant Information

Participant	Hospital	Position	Community College Education other than Nursing	Community College Nursing Graduate	Non-Community College Education
1	Big	Nurse Manager		X	X Pursuing MSN
2	Big	Nurse Manager			X BA, MS
3	Big	Nurse Manager		X	X Pursuing BSN
4	Big	Nurse Manager	X AAS – EMS (tested AND)		X BS Pursuing MSN
5	Big	Human Resources			X BA, MS
6	Satellite	Human Resources			X BS
7	Satellite	Nurse Manager			X BSN
8	Satellite	Nurse Manager	X Started in ADN program		X BSN, MSN
9	Satellite	Nurse Manager			X BSN, MSN
10	Magnet	Human Resources			X BA, MS
11	Magnet	Human Resources			X BA
12	Magnet	Human Resources			X BA, MHA
13	Magnet	Nurse Manager			X BSN, MSN
14	Magnet	Nurse Manager		X	X BSN, MSN

Data gathering

Interviews. Interviews served as the primary method of data collection and were conducted over a two-month period. Interviews depend on face-to-face questioning and eliciting data from participants (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). Through elicitation and personal interaction, the investigator is able to obtain data addressing the questions asked in the study. Denzin (1978) differentiates three forms of interviews according to their degree of structure: scheduled standardized interview, non-scheduled standardized interview, and non-standardized interview. The researcher used a combination of the latter two. The non-scheduled standardized interview relies upon the same questions and probes for all respondents, but the order in which they are posed may be changed according to how the participants react. The non-standardized interview is an interview guide. General questions to be addressed and specific information desired by the researcher are anticipated but may be addressed during the interview informally in whatever order or context they happen to arise (Denzin, 1978). This approach is similar to what Patton (1990) refers to as “the standardized open-ended interview” and what Rubin and Rubin (1995) refer to as a “guided conversation.” This form of data collection allows the participants to introduce concepts that the researcher did not anticipate, and may provide additional rich data (Seidman, 1991).

The interviews were held at a time and place mutually agreeable to the interviewer and participants. Informed consent was assured for each participant in the study with a signed letter of consent. Field notes were recorded during the interview and directly after to add descriptive information to the individual interview and to allow for an opportunity for timely reflection on methodology and analysis. The interviews ranged

in length from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, with the group interview lasting the longest. The list of prepared questions in Appendix A was used to guide the interviews toward the issues of interest in the study and to elicit responses or prompt the participants at gaps in the conversation. All questions in the Interview Guide were asked of all participants, although not always in the same order. The lack of structure in the interviews was intentional, as the researcher encouraged participants to speak freely about the hiring and promoting processes and their perceptions of associate degree nurses so that valuable data would be collected. Special attention was paid to the participants' interpretations and justifications of their hiring decisions.

While it was not necessary to interview additional participants or follow up with participants after the interviews, in some cases, the interviewer posed a more direct question that was not part of the original Interview Guide. In seven interviews, the interviewer asked the question, "What is your perception of community college education?" The answers to this question provided less information about the personal experiences of the interviewees and instead yielded general statements or views. In addition, during some interviews (three) it was determined that a discussion around the following question would be useful: "Does the community college attract a certain group of individuals, and do these individuals perpetuate the reputation of community colleges as providing a substandard education?" Again, this question was not a part of the original Interview Guide. This question was asked of only three participants near the end of the interview, when they had already offered during the discussion that community colleges provide a substandard education and that community colleges enroll students with little economic and social capital. In these interviews the participants seemed hesitant to

complete their thoughts. It was not intended to be a leading question to reveal what the researcher may have believed was a preferable answer but instead to probe the participant further. “Nevertheless, a well-worded, leading question can contain a deliberate assumption or overstatement, provoking a complex or elaborate response which otherwise would be missed (Preissle & Compte, 2003, p. 173). The question was asked to determine if participants saw a connection between the two (reputation and student body) as they seemed to be suggesting, and to further the thought process of the interviewee and the discussion.

The taped interviews were transcribed verbatim by a skilled secretary and reviewed by the researcher for correctness. The transcriptions then became the data for the study and were numbered for anonymity. The anonymity of the participants was maintained in the reporting, as well, by changing information to protect the identity of the person in the text. Participants are referred to as P1, P2, P3, and so on.

Document analysis. Another means of data collection was document analysis. “History and context surrounding a specific setting come, in part, from reviewing documents” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 116). The researcher obtained copies of hospital human resources hiring policies, pay rates, a listing of department employee qualifications, and when possible, records of academic levels of current employees for each hospital. The documents gathered and analyzed were linked to the research questions developed in the framework for the study. Document analysis aided in the interpretation of employers’ perceptions of associate degree nurses (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and thus supported (or not) the data collected from the interviews, another means of triangulating the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003; Marshall &

Rossman, 1999).

Data analysis and interpretation

According to Huberman and Miles (1994), qualitative analysis consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction refers to the process of collecting, organizing, and transforming the data collected. Data display refers to the various ways of organizing or compressing the information into accessible forms. Drawing conclusions refers to the process of constructing meaning from the data. These three processes did not occur in a linear fashion. Instead, collection of data continued while analysis of previously gathered information was conducted. This is similar to what Creswell (1997) refers to as the “data analysis spiral.” In the data analysis spiral, data are first managed or organized, then described and or interpreted and finally presented. Each phase involves data reduction until the lengthy transcripts and numerous documents are narrowed to allow the researcher to bring meaning to the words of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Prior to data reduction or analysis, a preliminary analysis was conducted in order to speculate about research outcomes, using the literature review. Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to this as a “start list.” Marshall and Rossman (1999) refer to this as a “template” analysis strategy. It is used without threatening the exploratory value of qualitative research and allows the researcher to identify and organize appropriate analytical frameworks and increase the efficiency of data recording and analysis (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). Thus, data collected were recorded on pre-developed data recording cards. As an example, review of the literature suggests that some employers do

hold a preference for one degree (bachelor or associate) over the other. Given this, the researcher developed categories prior to collecting and or analyzing data that included “preference for associate degree,” “preference for bachelor degree,” and “no preference” to make the coding and analysis processes more efficient. Categories identified prior to data collection are listed in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Start List

- Preference for ADN, Preference for BSN, No Preference
 - Associate Degree Academic Standards vs. Baccalaureate Degree Academic Standards
 - Intervening Variables
 - Education Level of Participant
 - Participant’s Employer
 - Unique Role of Community College Education
-

The analytical frameworks used come from the theoretical perspectives discussed in chapter one. Thus, critical theory, institutionalism, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic interactionism theories provided an analytical framework for coding the data. They helped to frame the identification or patterns and themes that explain the reputation of community college education and its impact on the hiring and promoting of community college graduates. Documents were analyzed using an analytical framework drawn from institutionalism and symbolic interactionism theories.

I began data reduction or organization by reviewing interview transcripts and taking notes in the margins while also transferring that which is appropriate onto the data cards discussed above (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles &

Huberman, 1994). This involved reading the transcripts in their entirety several times and looking for relationships or themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding (abbreviations of key words and highlighting with color) was used to identify passages or thoughts of the participants that belonged in a category. The pre-existing categories on the data cards (start-list) were reviewed and revised as new or different categories or themes were identified. As the categories changed, new visual devices were used (charts, tables, diagrams) as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). These categories were reviewed and revised as the analysis continued. The interpretation solidified as modifications occurred less often and important concepts from the transcripts fell into established categories (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This “spiral” resulted in a limited number of categories which served as the focus of analysis.

While the above was part of the initial research proposal and was in fact meaningful, as will be seen in chapter five, it did not fully address the research questions or capture the data that were collected. Once the researcher began the interview process, it became apparent that to describe and analyze the data collected fully, additional frameworks or methods of organization were needed. Table 3.3 lists the final categories utilized to organize the data. These will be explained in chapter five.

Table 3.3

Final Categories and Codes

- The community college student (economic, social, & cultural capital frameworks)
 - Financial status
 - Academic preparation and ability
 - Motivation level

 - Reputation of community college (institutional theory & symbolic interactionism framework)
 - Lower standards at community college
 - Difference between associate and baccalaureate: Critical thinking skills
 - Difference between associate and baccalaureate: More is better
 - Difference between associate and baccalaureate: Who is the student?

 - Hiring and promoting practices (critical theory and screening hypothesis)
 - Employer guidelines and personal preference
 - ADN: Better clinical skills
-

The researcher analyzed documents and interview data as they were retrieved and organized, and continued this action throughout the analysis process. The data collection, organization, and analysis were completed within a six-month period. Tying the findings back to the research questions and theoretical frameworks was the final stage.

Strategies for validating findings

It is more difficult and less appropriate to attempt to prove validity and reliability in qualitative research than in quantitative research. The attempt to define validity in qualitative research as it is defined in quantitative research is problematic and may detract from what qualitative research is intended to provide (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003). However, it is imperative that the findings be credible and trustworthy. Marshall and Rossman state that “the strength of a qualitative study rests with its validity” (1999, p. 192). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four standards that help sustain quality in

qualitative research. They are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher used these constructs as guiding principles during the data collection and analysis to ensure trustworthiness.

Credibility can be gained by identifying and describing the subject accurately (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This research examines the reputation of community colleges and the implications of this reputation. Transferability is achieved if the findings would be useful to others in similar situations (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Findings from this research will help clarify the status of community college graduates beyond North Carolina and beyond the field of nursing. Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest that triangulating multiple sources of data can enhance a study's generalizability. In an effort to triangulate the data, the researcher reviewed documents and conducted interviews with individuals from a variety of hospitals in a variety of positions.

Dependability can be achieved by changing methods as new understandings of the phenomenon are gained (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). If it was determined during the data collection and analysis stages that additional people in alternative positions at the hospitals should be interviewed, or that additional hospitals should be included, or that follow up interviews or group interviews would provide additional data to answer the stated research questions, these efforts would have been taken.

Finally, confirmability suggests that similar findings could be confirmed by another researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This requires the researcher to remove subjectivity during analysis and rely heavily on actual data. The process of recording, transcribing, reading and rereading, and coding the interviews or data addressed this

construct with the intention that other researchers could confirm the findings through a similar study.

Chapter Four: Results

The data collected from the interviews for this research can be placed into three major categories. First, the data indicate that students entering community colleges represent a specific group of individuals — namely, those with little cultural capital. Data that fit within the second category (institutionalism and symbolic interactionism frameworks) suggest that community colleges have a negative reputation of offering a substandard education, an education that is less rigorous, complete, or well rounded than that of four-year colleges and universities. The third category includes the data that illustrate hiring and promoting practices that show an inherent preference for nurses who have graduated from four-year colleges and universities (critical theory). Table 4.2 illustrates these categories.

Table 4.1 (same as Table 3.3)

Final Categories and Codes

- The community college student (economic, social, & cultural capital frameworks)
 - Financial status
 - Academic preparation and ability
 - Motivation level
 - Reputation of community college (institutional theory & symbolic interactionism framework)
 - Lower standards at community college
 - Difference between associate and baccalaureate: Critical thinking skills
 - Difference between associate and baccalaureate: More is better
 - Difference between associate and baccalaureate: Who is the student?
 - Hiring and promoting practices (critical theory and screening hypothesis)
 - Employer guidelines and personal preference
 - ADN: Better clinical skills
-

The community college student

The current study contributes to the conversation on the student body attracted to community colleges and how these individuals as a group may impact the colleges' reputation. The findings are presented through economic, social, and cultural capital frameworks. As described in the literature review, the concept of cultural capital is Bourdieu's (1977) conceptualization in understanding the educational, cultural, and social reproduction in capitalist societies. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as a class-related concept that represents the status of society's dominant groups, such as those that possess economic and social capital. Thus, portions of the data are organized into categories of economic (financial status) and social and cultural (academic preparation and ability and motivation) capital.

More than half of the participants in this study expressed a view that students entering community colleges did so because this was their only option. Some participants focused on the individual's socioeconomic status, suggesting that students who attend community colleges could not afford to attend other higher education institutions. Others stated that students who attend community colleges may not have been accepted into colleges and or universities and thus an open door admission institutions such as the community college was the only option available. "[Y]ou have some nurses that are more committed initially, and they have the funds and the time that they can go for a four-year degree" (P1). Some participants said that those entering community colleges may have been brought up in environments that do not "honor" lifelong learning. It was suggested that community college students do not know how to postpone gratification and thus they are motivated only to complete training that will move them into the paying workforce as

quickly as possible. Bourdieu (1977) asserts that these are “class-rooted” cultural dispositions.

Given the nature of the topic and its connection to social class issues, participants varied in how comfortable they appeared during the interview and discussion. Some participants were candid about their perception of the community college student body, adamant that it is individuals from working class backgrounds who are most attracted to community colleges. “[Y]es, [they] do attract the more middle class, blue collar type, you know — maybe” (P8). In most cases these are the participants who were candid in stating that community colleges offer a substandard education; two of them did not even refer to community colleges as “college.” Others were clearly more uncomfortable and would either hesitate in answering or stumble for words or might state that they had heard others voice this view. In some cases, participants spoke generally and referred to the “popular perception” or ideas of “society” instead of suggesting that this was what they believed to be true. There were also two participants who questioned “popular belief” that community colleges attract only or mostly individuals from the bottom of the social class ladder and suggested instead that this is a stereotype and potentially not true.

Financial status. Community colleges have offered an alternative for individuals who have historically been denied access to higher education and who may be less likely to enroll in or be accepted at four-year colleges or universities. Community colleges remain the primary point of entry into higher education for people of color and low-income students, those who have historically been situated on the lower rungs of society’s hierarchy of privilege and power (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; Labaree, 1997; McCabe, 2003; Rhoads & Valadez 1996). Twenty-nine percent of

community college students come from families with incomes below \$17,000, and only seventeen percent of students come from families whose incomes exceed \$50,000 (Choy, 2002). These marginalized groups occupy social strata that are described as disadvantaged or oppressed. These demographics support the contention that it has been the community college's mission to address the important political and social problem of equality of access and opportunity by attempting to democratize American higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001).

While the participants in this study were not asked specifically about the social class or financial status of community college students, most of the participants in this study expressed a view that students chose to attend community college (as opposed to four-year college or university) because of their lack of financial resources. This was expressed both as a criticism and as a compliment to community colleges.

The majority of participants cited community colleges as a means for people with few resources to obtain workforce training or a college education. This was the case both for those who appeared to be either opponents or proponents of community colleges. When the issue of financial status was discussed, there were some generalizations made about who the community college students might be, as is illustrated in this participant's response:

And I think some of it is intellectual as well as some of it being financial. I think some of your lower socioeconomic, unless they were counseled the right way in high school how to get free money to go to a four-year college, really their only avenue is to go to an ADN program, or if you're a teenager being a single parent, you really don't have the luxury of going to a four-year school (P10).

This participant also alluded to the social capital that community college students may be lacking when they are being advised (or not) how to successfully maneuver the higher education system.

Another participant indicated that she advises people interested in nursing differently based on their financial status. “And I ask them, I say, ‘Okay, can you afford to go to school for four years? You know, one, the tuition, and then all the time you’re going to be off work to do this’” (P4). Thus, participants voiced that community colleges provide a means for individuals to obtain a college degree at a low cost. For some individuals, access to community college education is the only option, given their financial situation.

Participants who either stated directly or indirectly that they had a favorable view of community colleges contended that community colleges serve to “democratize” society. All four of the participants who earned an associate’s degree at a community college saw these institutions as an affordable option within higher education and suggested that college may not have been possible without it. There were also participants who had not attended community colleges who expressed that these institutions provided a means for disenfranchised individuals to better themselves. “I think there’s a lot of opportunities for people to go through community colleges that wouldn’t otherwise be able to afford going to a bachelor’s program” (P6).

Many participants who were either blatant about their perception that community colleges are substandard, or who suggested that community colleges are on the far end of the caliber of education continuum, also expressed the view that community colleges attract economically poor individuals, first-time college attendees and those who cannot

afford to attend four-year colleges or universities. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory suggests that education offers a class-rooted cultural bias (1977). Those who are well endowed with cultural capital have favorable chances for a rewarding educational and professional experience. Two participants suggested that individuals low on the economic hierarchy belong at community colleges as opposed to four-year colleges or universities.

These data bring into question the origin of the reputation of the community college as providing a substandard education. Does the student body, those from the lowest rungs of the social class hierarchy, taint the community college reputation, or the opposite? Do the substandard schools attract and recruit only individuals with the least prestige and power in society, and if so, what is the labor market outcome for these individuals? Put another way, if economic status is strongly related to educational attainment, is educational attainment also strongly related to later economic status (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kingston, Hubbard, Lapp, Schroeder & Wilson, 2003). This will be discussed in chapter five.

In contrast to the above, there were four participants who noted the changing role of community colleges and the numbers of individuals with bachelor degrees and higher returning to community colleges to "re-tool" or gain the skills and knowledge needed to gain lucrative employment in high demand career fields, in this case nursing. This reaffirms scholars such as Levin (2001), Levin et al. (2006), McCabe (1997), and practitioners such as a North Carolina community college president, Zeiss (1997, 1998), who contend that the community college has attempted to continually reevaluate its mission and role to remain aligned with the needs of society. More specifically, the community college continues to respond to industry needs and workforce demands.

These participants who acknowledged the changing role of community colleges made no assumptions or generalizations about community college students being from working class backgrounds or having little economic capital.

The bachelors, going back, they want to be done, they want to get in and get it done, but they already have their bachelor degree. So, they just know they're going to get a job faster and be done with it sooner if they have an ADN program. But they already have that background, as the BS, not the BSN....and some of those tend to be really good employees...They're very motivated to do this (P10). Another participant noted that the quality of nursing applicants has improved and that there seems to be less of a difference in the groups of individuals attracted to associate degree and bachelor degree programs because of this growing number of individuals who return to community college with degrees (P5).

Academic preparation and ability. With regard to the type of student the community college attracts or recruits, in addition to the notion that community colleges attract students from the bottom of the economic hierarchy, the data also indicate a perception that community colleges attract individuals who could not gain entrance to or complete a degree at a four-year college or university. Thus, it is suggested that community college students lack social and cultural capital as they have neither the guidance and connections nor the experience and exposure to maneuver the higher education admissions system.

Social capital is a means to academic and, eventually, economic success (Trujillo & Diaz, 1999). Individuals from privileged homes have advantages in adjusting themselves to gain entry to and be successful in their educational achievements. These

students possess the skills and knowledge necessary for understanding and maneuvering through the higher education system (Valadez, 1993; Walpole, 2003).

Scholars contend that community colleges attract individuals who are marginalized in our society, those who are at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. Their lack of access to privileged knowledge, (lack of social and cultural capital) serves as a barrier in their attending colleges and universities and thus a barrier to their struggle to improve their economic and social conditions. A student's experience in college is influenced by the fit of the institution's culture with the cultural characteristics that the student brings to the college (Trujillo & Diaz, 1999).

The majority of participants in this study expressed the view that community colleges have lower expectations and are less rigorous academically. "I think at times the course is a little easier than what you would find at a university or a four-year program" (P1). For many, this translated into the notion that community colleges attract and or recruit students who could not gain access to or complete a baccalaureate degree education.

I think it's the population of the people that are there. When you go and often times those individuals who could not get into a four-year school or they had difficulties, they may have flunked out, they fooled around too much. My son had a lot of friends who started off with him, played way too much so, therefore, had to drop. Then they find themselves at a community college. So I think that plays into it that it's looked at well this is the place you can go when you really can't get into any other facility or four-year education (P1).

More than half of the participants noted that baccalaureate program admission requirements limit the opportunity for many students to attend, which redirects them to open door community colleges.

No participants used the words “social capital,” and the term was not introduced by the researcher. However, the idea that community colleges attract those with little social capital was voiced by some of the participants. Three of the participants mentioned that community college students were usually first-time college attendees or individuals who did not hold high standards for themselves because of guidance or lack thereof from their family or high school counselors. “I’m sure that probably the majority of people that go to an ADN program come from a different place than those with the BSN...[M]aybe the parents weren’t college graduates” (P8). In some cases, participants spoke of community colleges students as “less bright” or “less likely to be able to handle rigorous course work.” In referring to four-year colleges and universities, one participant said,

And I think sometimes when you get in a college environment you – you get in with a group of people that are driven, much more driven...I guess you’d have to ask yourself if you were an ADN, if you were in one of those programs, I mean, do you think you’d meet those people? I mean, I don’t know that they – those goals – that they come in with that type of auspicious goal (9).

Suggested here is that community college students lack cultural capital.

Participants also commented that community college students could not gain entrance to competitive four-year colleges and universities and thus used community colleges as an alternative avenue to higher education. “Well, the admission requirements are such that the individual may not have any choice but to go to an associate’s degree

program” (P10). “The BS programs are very competitive. I mean, I certainly could see where, you know, someone might have to go that route to get, you know, a BS, to maybe pursue the ADN first” (P7). These participants view community college as a second choice to a four-year institution or as a “safety school,” and suggest that the curriculum is less rigorous and a good fit for those with little social capital.

As mentioned above, four of the participants noted that the student body of community colleges is changing and that individuals choose community college as their first choice instead of as a last resort to higher education. This reaffirms the idea that community colleges include in their mission the goal of meeting the needs of students and the workforce, and thus the institution attracts both those with degrees returning to school and those graduating from high school because of the technical training offered in high demand, stable career areas, such as nursing. Again, this reiterates the concept that community colleges have been forced to restructure into a more competitive and productive entity, in this case workforce development training institutions, that Levin and colleagues refer to as “nouveau college” (Levin et al., 2006).

Motivation level. Data from this study revealed another category of students (although perhaps overlapping with the students in the categories above) who are attracted to and enrolled in community colleges. Three participants noted that either their experience with community college graduates (practicing ADNs) or their perception of individuals who attend community colleges was that they are not motivated enough to pursue four years of education. “[I]f you want to go on and get your BSN...that represents that you’re motivated and you’re looking to reach a higher level for yourself”

(P3). Participants who noted that community college students are not as motivated as those who seek a bachelor degree had never attended a community college as a student.

As will be discussed in detail in chapter five, some of the responses by participants about the lack of motivation of community college graduates could be interpreted as a means to rationalize their view that community colleges offer a substandard education, and thus they would prefer to hire bachelor prepared individuals. When asked what they look for in a nurse when hiring or promoting, all of the participants listed ideals and noted personal characteristics related to motivation. In many cases, answers included “hard working,” “desire to move up,” and “committed to personal development.”

This can be understood within the framework of social and cultural capital and the idea that some individuals, because of their position in society, possess a different set of expectations for themselves or expectations from their family and friends by virtue of their family’s class position (Trujillo & Diaz, 1999). Those attending community colleges come already disenfranchised and thus lack the tools to complete a degree or training.

Participants’ comments about the motivational level of students entering community colleges suggest that these same participants perceived community college graduates to be less motivated as employees than their bachelor degree colleagues. This concept was clearly illustrated throughout the interviews in numerous comments about associate degree nurses viewing their work as a job and not a profession.

Whether it be an outside perception like community-wide thinking that a BSN is a profession and the ADN is not, whether it be within nursing in and of itself saying, ‘You know, I’m BSN, I’m getting more prepared to move up the ladder,

and it's a profession; it matters to me what my North Carolina Board of Nursing says; and it matters to me what the NCCN says; and it matters to me what kind of policies and regulations are going on and the governmental regulations that are going on' versus 'I want to get in, do my two years, get out, get a job and make money' (P11).

One participant stated that bachelor prepared nurses "see themselves as being more important to deal with the patient...have a little bit more ownership of the total patient" (P9). These views suggest that the perception that those entering community colleges lack motivation then influences the perception of community college graduates as also lacking motivation, in their place of work or life in general.

Inherent in this issue is the idea that those employees who view themselves as professionals are in a class or category higher than those viewing their employment only as a job. "A BSN has that over ADN. I think it's more cerebral. They're thinking more where the ADN is more task oriented" (P9). As will be discussed later, all of the participants discussed the qualities nurse managers look for in nurses when hiring or promoting, and all included a form of professionalism and respect for the profession. Thus, if community colleges graduates view their training as just that which is necessary to gain lucrative employment but do not view themselves as professionals, they are at a disadvantage for social and economic mobility. Because higher education is predominantly framed by a white middle and upper class perspective, individuals with little cultural capital, in this case, respect for higher education, are inherently disadvantaged (Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). This will be discussed in chapter five.

Reputation of the community college

The positions are clearly staked out about the role of community college and its caliber. Proponents of community college functions and outcomes have emphasized the role community colleges have played in providing access to greater social mobility, reflecting a clear commitment to promoting the ideal of social equality (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). One way the community college seeks to achieve this objective is through efforts to enable equal access to quality education for prospective students regardless of their social and economic circumstances (Bryant-Serrano, 1995; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996; Roueche & Baker, 1987). Indeed, community colleges have been referred to as “democracy’s college” and the “people’s colleges” (Dougherty, 1994; Levin, 2001). Implicit in these designations is the notion that open access and equal opportunity are crucial characteristics of the community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dowd, 2003; Shaw, 1999).

Opponents of community college functions and outcomes assert that community colleges are inferior institutions and serve to “cool out” students (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Clark, 1960; Zwerling, 1976). The history of the community college as a junior college and vocational college has separated it from universities and minimized its importance and prestige. Cohen and Brawer (2003) suggest that this view has infiltrated the popular culture and led to a pejorative assessment of the caliber of education offered at community colleges. Movements in the nursing profession reaffirm some of these beliefs by suggesting that associate degree nurses are inferior to nurses with baccalaureate degrees. In addition, the study cited by Aiken and her colleagues suggests that the safety

of patients in hospitals is in fact jeopardized as the number of associate degree nurses increases in hospitals (Aiken et al., 2003).

Lower standards at community college. One of the central questions of this research is “What are employers’ perceptions of community college education (community college reputation) and its graduates, and what shapes these perceptions?” While chapter five will explore and explain the answer to this question, it is important to provide here the data results directly related to the question. As was explained in chapter three, while this question was not originally part of the Interview Guide, discussions during some of the interviews, or the researcher’s need to paraphrase a question, often led to this question: “What is your perception of community college education in general?”

The replies fall neatly into three categories. First, four participants indicated that community colleges do an admirable job at what they are intended to do. Second, four participants stated they were reluctant to answer as they are uncertain of their views. Third, four participants voiced their perception that community colleges offer substandard education. It could be argued that the second category does not need to be included. However, one could also argue that the inability to respond to the question about one’s general perception of community colleges may be meaningful and deserves some analysis, especially from a critical theory and or rationalization perspective.

The four participants who stated that community colleges are doing an admirable job of training individuals were graduates of community colleges. All of these participants are in the process of continuing their education or have already completed a BSN or MSN. These participants voiced their dependency on qualities or characteristics other than education level in determining whether to hire or promote a nurse. “[I]t’s not

all about, you know, clinic skills, especially with new grads. But again, a lot of it is, you know, how you, how you relate to people and how you get along with people, how you handle those stressful days...you're looking at, again, leadership, interpersonal, how they relate to and get along with people...I think people naturally have that ability" (P3).

These participants were of the opinion that personal characteristics, perhaps unrelated to education, determined if these individuals could be good nurses or not. Given the responses, participants' education level or education experience is seen by the interviewer as an "intervening variable," which will be discussed in chapter five.

Two of those who graduated from a community college did state that while their experience was a positive one, community college education is insufficient or not adequate for a professional career.

[T]he BSN...has two more years on the ADN. So, I mean, there's two more years of class, I think, and leadership and leadership development and nursing theory...[T]hey're exposed to a lot more, so that can't ever hurt. I mean, you know, the more you learn the better..... I think just the educational level...[Y]ou're more exposed to, ah, theory...[Y]ou know, you expand your mind and think more, and are exposed to a little more, ah, you know, research and you know the more education you have, I mean, it does help to expand your mind and to maybe to look at a bigger picture and to have been exposed to more theory....[J]ust being exposed to the process of learning more (P3).

Thus this participant held that community college education is beneficial to individuals, but additional education is even more beneficial to the students (nurses), and in this case the patients as well.

When asked about their general perception of community college education, four of the participants stated in a variety of ways that community college education is substandard. There were two participants who did not refer to the community college as a college throughout the interview. When one of the participants was asked why she chose her educational route, the response was “[B]ecause I – I desired to have a college degree. I mean, I never, you know – I mean, my – you know, my siblings were – you know, were college prepared...” (P7). When asked about the difference between an associate degree and a baccalaureate degree, this participant responded, “Well, I think college just broadens your perspective on the world, for one thing” (P7), again suggesting that community college is not college. This same individual answered the question about perception of community college with “I think of it as substandard” (P7).

Even those who expressed a belief that community colleges were useful institutions, providing quality instruction and training, stated that they knew others were of a different opinion. One participant shared that the negative reputation of community colleges even makes graduates feel inferior. “[S]ome people even hate to say they graduated from Wake Tech or any community college...the level of education is not at the same standard as a four-year school” (P1). Yet another participant offered that the name “technical” might play a role in the negative perception of community colleges and suggested that changing the name might improve the reputation. “Well, and I mean, even from changing the name of a technical – from technical to –“ (P6).

Other responses by these four participants were simply that community college education was not sufficient, should only be a starting point, and was not adequate to be a

terminal degree. These participants also stated that community colleges do serve an important role.

Well, I think it may – it may have to do with my – a little bit with my upbringing, but, ah, I guess I just – maybe I have a bias that I can't imagine somebody – I mean, I can't imagine somebody choosing to do the ADN.....I think one of the things that might be good for – for community colleges would be just to maybe be an entry point where, you know, someone would go in and get maybe a year or, you know, for people who – who just aren't quite sure, you know, maybe they're not ready to go to a university, or whatever. But just provide a springboard or entry point that, ah, you know, partner with a university program to accept those students if they meet a certain criteria and maybe reserve places for them....But, you know, not that be – not let that be the kind of the end point (P7).

These participants emphasized the need for community college education and the benefits community colleges could provide individuals. They concluded, however, that community college education, by itself, is inadequate and substandard. Thus, except for those who had personal experience with community college education, a majority of the participants view community college education as substandard as compared with bachelor degree nursing programs. To explore this further, the researcher sought participants' awareness of the dissimilarity between associate degree and bachelor degree programs.

Participants were asked to discuss their perception of the differences between associate degree and four-year college and university degree programs, and their

responses can be categorized into three areas: (1) critical thinking skills, (2) more education is better, and (3) student characteristics.

Difference between associate and baccalaureate: Critical thinking skills. The most common participant response with regard to the differences between associate and baccalaureate degree nursing programs suggests that community college students lack training in critical thinking. In direct response to an interview question, all fourteen of the participants noted qualities or characteristics they seek when hiring or promoting nurses. Seven of the fourteen participants articulated that the very characteristics they deemed important for a nurse are traits encouraged or promoted in a bachelor degree program and not a part of community college programs. Some of the qualities noted as important for a nurse to be successful were leadership potential, ability to be a team player, empathy, and commitment to and understanding of the profession. A majority of the participants admitted that these qualities were not encouraged or taught in community college programs simply because there was not enough time in the associate degree programs. “They’re probably receiving a lot more training on the leadership end, communication, interpersonal skills, that type of training, that an ADN is not receiving” (P1).

[A]nd communication skills that are all taught in that BSN program that are not taught in the ADN program. So if I have two candidates that I am looking at and they are equal in interview skill, I’m going to take that BSN person over the ADN person because of that extra education that they did receive (P10).

Participants both directly and indirectly suggested that the extra years of education allowed time for the students to gain critical thinking skills above and beyond the technical clinical skills necessary to be a good nurse. Suggesting that skills acquired in

school directly enhance work productivity is part of the human capital theory (Brown & Sessions, 1999).

Several of the participants noted that the nurses with a baccalaureate degree had a broader perspective of health care than those who had graduated from community college programs.

But so I see that difference being out in the community. And then you asked what else I see between the ADN and the BSN students. I notice the BSN students are more prepared in knowing what's going on outside as well. They know about their organizations. They know about their Board of Nursing and their CEs that they're required to have. They know more about magnet. In all the universities I went to this year, they knew what magnet was. The colleges I went to did not know what magnet was (P12).

“And – and then the general education that you get I think gives you a broader, a little bit broader perspective...I just think their – you know, their attitudes in – in the workplace is a little bit different” (P7). “I mean logic would somehow dictate to you that perhaps someone who goes through a four-year program and has more opportunity for theory and exposure would have a broader ability to do critical thinking” (P8). These participants stated that some of their best nurse employees were those who had gained these critical thinking skills via a bachelor degree program.

Five participants used examples of nurses they worked with or knew about to illustrate that graduates of baccalaureate degree programs possess a broader understanding of their role in the larger health care picture. Participant 9 told a story of a patient who had been unhappy with the care while staying at the hospital. This participant

explained that a graduate of a baccalaureate degree program would understand why it is important to help make that patient feel more positive about their experience. She suggested that a graduate of an associate degree program would not realize, “or perhaps care,” that this patient’s negative experience could negatively impact the hospital. She explained that a patient who has a negative or unfavorable experience in the hospital will leave dissatisfied and share this discontent with others. The others might in turn share this story with yet more people, all of whom may select a different hospital when given a choice. Thus this one individual’s negative experience could impact the reputation of the hospital and the number of patients utilizing its services. She noted that baccalaureate degree nurses care more about the reputation of the hospital and thus are more motivated to do what they can to improve patients’ perception of their care.

Difference between associate and baccalaureate: More is better. The majority of the participants suggested that a baccalaureate degree is better simply because it is two years more education than an associate’s degree. One participant offered the analogy that a mother of one child may be an “okay” mother but a mother of three or four children has learned to be very good at what she does (P6).

Yeah. I mean, naturally it – the more you study and the more you learn, you know, it’s got to, you know, open your mind up more. To be able to – to study, and learn, and research and read, and look at what’s best practice and what’s the best for – you know, that doesn’t come naturally. You know, you look at what are standards, and what are – what’s out there in the community, and that comes with education, ah, research. So, again you want bright people that can think that way,

too. You know, not just look at what's going on right here, but be able to look at a broader...And I think that comes with education (P3).

Another participant stated, “[I]f you do have an advanced degree, you're going to be bringing more skills to the table than you would with, you know, an ADN. I mean – I mean, I think that's just common sense” (P4). It may be that schooling directly augments individual productivity (human capital theory), or this may be a form of rationalization for individuals who are not clear or are uncomfortable stating that they prefer a bachelor degree nurse or consider a community college education to be substandard to a baccalaureate degree education. A simple explanation is that “more is better”.

Difference between associate and baccalaureate: Student characteristics. What other differences may exist between associate and baccalaureate degrees? Four participants voiced that they would prefer bachelor prepared nurses because individuals who apply to these programs have inherent qualities and characteristics that make a nurse more qualified. The screening hypothesis asserts that schooling merely signals inherent productivity and employers may use credentials to identify certain groups and exclude others (Arrow, 1973; Collins, 1979). In response to a question about why a bachelor prepared nurse makes a better employee, one participant said, “I hate to say it's the person attracted....I really think it's a personal thing about the individual being – not having taken that challenge, and you don't know why they didn't take the challenge to go to college” (P9). One participant stated that if an individual was motivated and committed and thus hardworking, he/she would only attend a four-year college or university. This same participant argued that those willing to enroll in school for four years would clearly be harder working nurses than those who chose only two years of higher education.

Because I feel like someone that is willing to put the extra effort into having a general education and nursing education at a college level is – is very motivated, and intelligent, and ah – willing to be that staff person that has the potential to – to take the position to a different level (P7).

This suggests that community college students and graduates do not have these qualities necessary to make a good nurse, which again begs the question about what kind of individuals are attracted to community colleges.

Hiring and promoting practices

The data endorse that community colleges have a reputation of providing a substandard education, addressing the first research question posed in this study. The second research question is, “What is the relationship between hiring practices of nurses and the reputation of community college nursing education?” That is, if the participants regard community college education as substandard, does this influence their hiring and promoting practices of nurses? This next section will present the data collected on hiring and promoting practices in relation to participants’ views on the quality of community college training.

Employer guidelines and personal preference. Hospital documents coupled with participants’ feedback indicate that all three hospitals included in this research require only that nurses be registered for entry-level “bedside” nursing positions. Thus, in all cases, nurses who graduate from associate degree programs and pass their licensure examination are just as qualified for entry-level positions as their bachelor degree counterparts at the three hospitals included in this study. In addition, the data confirm that there is no pay differential for education level at these three hospitals. That is, the salaries

of community college graduates and four-year degree graduates, with the same experience, are identical. Despite these hospital policies, all participants noted that their respective hospital administrations made it clear that they would prefer bachelor degree nurses, all else being equal, when given the choice. Participants from one hospital that was seeking magnet status noted that in order to be granted such status, a minimum of fifty percent of nurses must have a bachelor degree; thus, they were strongly encouraged by the hospital administration to hire bachelor degree nurses.⁷ Two participants shared that they would hire only bachelor degree nurses and would in fact re-advertise a position before they would hire an associate degree nurse, if the time and situation permitted.

So if I have two candidates that I am looking at and they are equal in interview skill, I'm going to take that BSN person over the ADN person...I work on a very closed unit where the personalities are very high...so they really have to be on top of their game with conflict management and communication skills (P10).

When given the option, a majority of the participants stated that they would hire a nurse with a bachelor degree before a nurse with a community college degree.

In addition to evidence from hospital hiring policies and job descriptions, all participants articulated the qualities and characteristics they look for in a nurse when hiring or promoting. These data were collected as a response to the researcher's question, "What are you looking for in a candidate when you are hiring (or promoting) for a nurse position?" There was consistency across the board in response to this question. All participants mentioned one or more of the following: team player, ability to handle stress, conflict resolution skills, dedication to patient care, ability to be empathetic, pride in

⁷ An implication of a "magnet status" option is the isomorphism of hospitals and their hiring preferences and practices. This is discussed in greater detail in chapter six.

nursing career, respect for patients, good interpersonal skills. A number of participants mentioned that these traits are not necessarily taught or learned in a classroom but are instead innate qualities. “I don’t think you have to be a BSN to have those skills. You know, I think that comes with, again, time and experience and, you know, the more you do something, the better you get” (P3). Another participant stated, “Because I think a degree enhances a person. It doesn’t make an individual” (P4). When responding to what makes a good nurse, three participants stated, “you either have what it takes, or you don’t.”

In spite of acknowledgement by some participants that the qualities they seek in a nurse when hiring or promoting are inherent characteristics, others persisted in their judgment that bachelor prepared nurses are superior in practice to community college graduates and thus preferred. Two participants explained that they attempt to “balance” their staff or unit. Thus, they will hire an associate degree nurse if there are a number of bachelor prepared nurses on the floor, or if the current staff is “strong.” One of the participants (P10) said, “[I]f I have a number of BSNs on the floor, I know the ADN will be okay so I may hire her” (P10). As cited above, P3 described the hospital where she works as having a good reputation because health care is about human improvement, and the hospital stresses the importance of continued learning. Thus, whether the preference for bachelor degree nurses is motivated by the individual participant’s views or the spoken or unspoken recommendation or mandate of the hospital administration, a majority of participants noted a preference for bachelor prepared nurses.

Most of the participants spoke of their employers’ unspoken and unwritten preference for baccalaureate-prepared nurses, but only few spoke of other external

pressures to differentiate nurses by education level in the hiring or promotion process. Two participants mentioned that other states had moved to using baccalaureate degree nurses only for positions in critical care or other specialized units. No participants noted the work or position of the North Carolina Board of Nursing or the North Carolina Center for Nursing, both of which have proposed a restricted role for associate degree nurses at some point in the last few years (NCBON, 2006; North Carolina Center for Nursing [NCCN], 2006). The role of such agencies in creating or perpetuating the reputation of community colleges and its graduates will be discussed in later chapters.

Only one participant was consistent in her responses that the preference for graduates of baccalaureate degree programs is regrettable. She noted that, “the hospital’s new CEO has created a culture — a culture of lifelong learning and education” (P1). This participant acknowledged that this is unfortunate for those associate degree nurses who are skilled and effective at what they do, as they will not have an opportunity to be promoted without additional education. A participant from this same hospital, who is an associate degree nurse in a management position, explained that she was promoted into the position prior to the requirement that for nurse managers have a higher level of education. She indicated that she tries to justify the education level requirements but also trusts that she has done a good job as would other associate degree nurses. She noted that she is constantly anxious that she may be asked to leave the position or go back to school.

Document review and participant feedback also affirm that all supervisor and or nurse manager positions require a baccalaureate degree or higher. In two of the hospitals, a masters degree is required for manager positions and a bachelor degree for supervisor positions. While not part of the Interview Guide, most participants were asked why this

might be the case why is a higher level of education required for supervisors and managers? All of the participants who were asked this question responded first by stating that it is hospital policy. Four participants elaborated by articulating that supervisors and managers must be role models and role models, should have more education and experience than the individuals they supervise. In addition, a few participants noted that these jobs require not only leadership abilities and critical thinking but also unique skills that might best be learned in a classroom. These skills include budgeting, conflict resolution, and team building.

Associate degree nurse: Better clinical skills? There was a consistent and pronounced theme in the data that is contrary to the other findings. Ten of the fourteen participants contended that new community college graduates, in this case associate degree nurses, exhibit better clinical skills than newly graduated baccalaureate degree nurses. “You know, really what we’ve noticed is for the first five years the ADN is really the better nurse” (P5).

I have found over the years that nurses with a two-year degree come to the unit more prepared to take care of patients. They have more hands-on patient experience than nurses with the four-year degree. It will take longer to orient a nurse with a four-year degree than a two-year degree because the two-year degree they are in the patients rooms, providing patient care almost from day one where with the four-year degree that doesn’t happen quite as soon as it does with a two-year. So if I can get a two-year nurse, I’m usually going to grab them because they can hit the floor running. Where it takes a little bit longer for four-year degree to hit the floor running..... through the experience of hiring. When you

get a four-year degree nurse in, they, at times, don't even have the experience with basic skills. You're having to start over with some basic skills, review of that, whereas you're not having to do that with the two-year nurse. They truly do take more time for basic skills (P1).

A majority of the participants noted that new community college graduates will “out perform” graduates of bachelor degree programs immediately out of school.

There were two general explanations provided by participants as to why community college nurses are better prepared to work with patients immediately after graduation than graduates of baccalaureate degree nursing programs. First, participants either speculated or noted with confidence that associate degree nurses spend more hours in clinical training than their bachelor degree counterparts. “My impression has been, the folks that come out with the associate degree program sometimes have had more clinical time than the BS folks” (P6). “You know, the ADN comes out clinically better prepared” (P8). Some of these same participants explained the role of community colleges as that of “workforce trainer,” stating that community colleges focus on providing the skills and knowledge individuals need in the workforce, much like what community college scholars have suggested (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994; Dowd, 2003; Jacob, 2001; Levin, 2001, 2005a; Levin et al., 2006).

On the other hand, two of the participants noted that community college students tend to live near the college and become familiar with hospitals through clinical rotations. These students ultimately are employed at these sites following graduation. Community colleges are “commuter schools.” Community college students who stay in the area (their

home town) and become employed in the very hospitals in which they are trained are oriented to hospital protocol long before they are hired.

[T]he ADN or the diploma folks have seemed to get more clinical time than the BS folks. And I don't know if that is changing, but that has been sort of the perception. And in a lot of cases the Associate Degree folks around this area may have done clinical rotations within the local hospitals, so they already sort of have an edge over the B.S. folks if they haven't done rotations (P6).

These two participants concluded that this phenomenon makes it probable for community college graduates to move right into the role of an effective and efficient employee who provides safe patient care.

If ten of the fourteen participants noted that associate degree nurses are better prepared clinically than bachelor degree nurses, then why did a majority of the participants state or suggest that they prefer bachelor prepared nurses when hiring or promoting nurses? Several participants addressed this very question. In some interviews, it became appropriate to ask whether the reputation of community colleges as providing a substandard education taints hiring and promoting practices. In three cases, participants answered in the affirmative, but none went on to elaborate. However, all participants noted that their respective hospitals preferred to hire baccalaureate graduates, and for most, this was their rationalization for why their hiring and promoting practices included the preferential treatment of baccalaureate degree nurses over associate degree nurses.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

There seems little doubt that a prospective employer who reviews resumes from a pool of applicants would be inexorably drawn to those from graduates of prestigious institutions of higher education. Indeed, in many instances such an identification may be seen as a necessary condition for passing the first screening. This reality is one of the powerful justifications for the willingness of families and students to pay out huge tuition costs in order to obtain a label associated with prestige (Hearn 1984; McDonough 1994; McPherson & Schapiro, 1990). This is not to say that the educational quality, or what the graduate has actually learned, is by any means guaranteed, as the screening hypothesis suggests (Arrow, 1973; Brown & Sessions, 1999; Gullason, 1999).

Clearly, then, the institutional name inscribed on the diploma carries considerable weight, to the decided advantage of those who select, are accepted into, and can afford to attend the more prestigious institutions and to the disadvantage of no less talented graduates whose alma mater does not rank as high on the “prestige scale” (McPherson & Schapiro, 1990). Sociologists have described how individuals of higher class origin gain access to greater educational credentials with greater exchange value in economic and social markets (Connell, 1993; Gladieux, & Hauptman, 1995; McPherson & Schapiro, 1990). One of the challenges for educational institutions is to find ways to elevate their “prestige standing” so that their graduates become more attractive, under the safe assumption that with such an elevation the institution will become more attractive to prospective applicants. The likely result of such a shift would be not only an increase in the raw number of applicants but also a change in the character of the applicant pool to

those who are “better prepared” and predicted to have a greater chance of academic success (Bourdieu, 1977; McPherson & Schapiro, 1990; Winston, 1999).

As scholarly research indicates, the task to position oneself as a quality institution, to be regarded as a college with a fine reputation, is a goal that community colleges have been struggling with since their origin, complicated by the changing demands that have been imposed on them by the reality of the social context in which they exist (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001). Whether they are to be a temporary stop for students on their way to four-year colleges and universities, or whether they are to be the training ground for industry and the business world, community colleges have a major challenge establishing themselves as legitimate players in the world of higher education. This task has been complicated, as implied above, by the changing expectations of what the mission of these institutions ought to be (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001). What has remained fixed is the community college’s goal of providing open access to higher education for any individual who wants to attend. What is not clear or what has created questions on the part of the community college is the nature of the training to be provided and who is to benefit. If community colleges are to be a conduit for students who plan to continue their education at the baccalaureate level, then the community college reputation will presumably be judged by the success of transfer students who pursue their studies at four-year colleges and universities (Bradburn & Hurst, 2001; Doyle, 2006; Tobolowsky, 1998; Townsend, 2002; Zamani, 2001). If, on the other hand, community colleges are to be the training ground for business, vocational, and service industries, then their reputation will be judged by how successful their graduates are as practitioners in the fields of their choosing (Bragg,

2002; Grubb, 2002a, 2002b). One could assume that the criteria for measuring such successes would be objective and fair-minded. Unfortunately, that may not be the case entirely.

Thus, one question to address is whether it is possible that objective-based criteria are trumped by more nebulous and perhaps politically motivated forces. Does an institution's reputation depend solely on objectively defined measures? More particularly, does the concept of "community college" have surplus meaning? What does it convey to the world outside? How is it regarded by its four-year counterparts or how does it compare to its four-year counterparts in the eyes of employers? If a Harvard degree trumps one from a state university, do all, or most, four-year degrees similarly trump all, or most, community college degrees? This question is not merely an abstract and obscure theoretical one, as it has rather grave implications for community colleges and students who attend such institutions. For community colleges, the question bears on shaping their future; for community college graduates, it bears on their subsequent career pursuits — both educational and vocational — and thus their status in society.

There is a dearth of empirical studies that directly assess the differential performance of community college and four-year college and university graduates who pursue similar post-degree goals (other than graduation rates and income data). The professional field of nursing, however, does provide indicators which can shed some light on this question. Nursing is a licensed profession into which passing a standardized examination (NCLEX-RN) is required. It is noteworthy that graduates from community college nursing programs fare just as well on this examination as do baccalaureate graduates (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2003). While there may be those

who would dispute the validity of these examinations, they are sufficiently valid to satisfy the various agencies which are in place to protect the public's health. They should represent, therefore, a satisfactory accounting of educational quality of the different institutions.

From this research a differential hiring pattern was discovered relative to degree (associate or baccalaureate), and thus other factors must be incorporated into the equation to explain the disparity. Put another way, if professional preparation is not the primary criterion (as measured by licensing examinations such as NCLEX-RN), what other variables need to be factored in to understand employer's preference for bachelor degree trained nurses? One likely candidate is the reputation of the granting academic institution, a rather imprecise yet convenient measure. It is imprecise because, unlike the objective statistical findings available from test score results, it is subject to biases inherent in individual and aggregate perceptions; it is convenient because it is general and nonspecific enough to avoid careful scrutiny while masking other, perhaps controversial, factors. This research suggests that institutional reputation governs, to a significant extent, the personnel practices of facilities employing nurses.

There is an absence of any clear, substantive evidence that graduates from community colleges are less qualified than those from baccalaureate degree programs. There is also the continuing and persistent impression held publicly that the quality of education is, in fact, not comparable between the two, with community college programs rated as inferior. Participants in this study failed to offer concrete examples of associate degree nurses who perform poorly as compared to their bachelor degree counterparts. For every example that a participant offered about an associate degree graduate who may

have performed below expectations, there was an example of an “exception” of an associate degree nurse who “outshined” all others, regardless of education. For many participants, associate degree nurses who were viewed as outstanding employees were considered “exceptions.” Participants rationalized their statements that bachelor degree graduates are more qualified than associate degree graduates with justifications such as “more education is just better.” Others referred to the education offered by community colleges as technical or vocational and inherently inferior to four-year colleges and universities. This research confirmed that the reputation of community colleges is that they provide a substandard education and that the origin of such perception and reputation may not be objective or based in reality.

Sources of bias

Clearly bias on the part of hiring officials and their institutions is evident. There is a bias in favor of baccalaureate degree graduates and against community college graduates. This research found that the bias against community college education has several sources: social class prejudice, institutional prestige, educational background of subject, curricula differences, and program duration.

Social class prejudice. The community college mission has historically included open access to higher education for disenfranchised individuals who have been denied access or are less likely to enroll in four-year colleges and universities (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Levin, 2001; McCabe, 2003; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). This function of the community college has not restricted participation in the community college by other segments of society. In fact, there are a growing number of students who enter community colleges with bachelor and masters degrees, a concept referred to as “reverse

transfer” (Daggett, 2001; Milliron & Santos, 2004; Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). In addition, the community college serves employees in the workforce as employers contract for customized training. These individuals come to community colleges with a range of experience and education. Regardless of the role community colleges have played or the students they serve, the popular perception remains that community colleges serve only those marginalized groups from the lowest economic and social rungs of society.

All participants in this study alluded to the social class status of community college students. References were made about the economic status of the students, parents’ education, students’ needs to work, and their limited exposure to and preparation for four-year colleges and universities. The research participants who had not attended a community college stated that students enter community colleges because they are unable to gain access to four-year colleges and universities. They suggest that the caliber of students at community colleges is lower than that at other institutions. Most participants suggested that community college students lack social or cultural capital and are thus limited to community college education, as they cannot gain entry to more competitive four-year college and university programs.

One’s cultural capital is a result of position in society, a by-product of birth into a certain group (Bourdieu, 1977; Trujillo & Diaz, 1999; Walpole, 2003). Participants noted academic ability and or student motivation as causes for students being limited to access to community colleges. Inherent in their comments was the idea that individuals from low socioeconomic status groups do not know any better. Academic ability of students may be measured by high school grades, SAT scores, class rank, and other placement test

scores. Measuring a student's motivation is more difficult. One measurement may be students' education or career goals. If an individual declares that an associate degree is his or her final goal, does this in fact indicate less motivation, or simply that the professional goal sought does not require credentials beyond an associate degree?

The view that students enroll in community college programs because they are unwilling to pursue and complete four years of college education, and hence not motivated, permeates employers' beliefs about community college graduates. Participants from this study commented on the low motivation level of community college students and concluded that these individuals are in turn less motivated as employees. If the motivation level of community college students is measured by subjective means, it does not prohibit this reasoning from negatively impacting graduates of community college programs. Certainly an employee who is labeled "not motivated" is less likely to be given additional responsibilities, opportunities for promotions or leadership roles. The label may prohibit a supervisor from evaluating the individual using objective criteria, such as actual work performance.

Social class prejudice is one source of bias against community colleges and their students. This research suggests that the perception of the community college student body as that of individuals with low socioeconomic status influences and shapes the reputation of community colleges as providing a substandard education. Those participants most convinced of the economic and social makeup of the community college student body were also the participants who did not refer to community college as "college." The perception that community college students lack social privilege

perpetuates the idea that community colleges need only offer a poor education to those with little cultural capital.

Institutional prestige. Johnson (2001) argues that those in privileged positions are typically blind to the advantages bestowed on them by virtue of their position and status in society. Individuals are privileged not as a result of some Herculean effort on their part, but rather as a result of being positioned in society in a place that affords them numerous advantages. What is particularly revealing about his analysis (see also Flagg, 1998; Wildman, 1996) is how well one disguises the advantages he or she acquires as a direct by-product of unearned privileged positions, as a result of being a member of a designated group, for example, race or gender. Students who attend community colleges are not likely to occupy such privileged positions, in contrast to those who attend four-year institutions. For the most part, it is the less privileged who comprise the community college population and the more privileged who attend the more prestigious and more highly reputed four-year colleges and universities. Not to differentiate between the two would be to deny those who are privileged the advantage of having attended a better academic institution and received a better or higher quality education. When one attends a flagship academic campus, nothing but a quality education and the reputation that is associated with the degree is expected (McPherson & Schapiro, 1990). One of the benefits of holding certain cultural capital is that the screening hypothesis works in your favor (Arrow, 1973; Bourdieu, 1977, Gullason, 1999). Similarly, if one attends a community college, there may be the suspicion that the quality of the education received is lower than that a more well-known and prestigious college or university would

provide. This then impacts graduates' positioning power (or lack thereof) with regard to employment, income, and status in society.

Despite the lack of evidence that graduates of community colleges are less qualified, the reputation of community colleges as substandard to baccalaureate degrees persists. This popular concept leaves the community college far down on the prestige hierarchy of higher education. Often the rigor of required coursework or the competitiveness of admissions is used to measure the quality of education. Thus, institutions such as Harvard, Stanford, and Yale, whose average SAT scores are close to perfect and whose admissions are highly selective, are considered more prestigious education institutions than the rest.

The open door policy at the community college, which provides access regardless of SAT score or class rank, is thus seen as having little prestige. Participants in this study discussed community college coursework as lacking rigor. Participants noted that community college education excludes training in leadership, professionalism, and critical thinking and instead offers only what is necessary for entry-level work. Again, there were few, if any, specific examples but instead general and vague descriptions of community college education as undemanding and thus not prestigious. This may again serve as a rationalization for participants' presumptions about community college education as substandard.

If the community college does provide education that is substandard or lax, then community college educators would presumably be the first to attempt to rectify this by changing curricula and raising standards. However, this research used nursing education in an attempt to control for level of education. The fact that graduates of both associate

degree and bachelor degree programs are eligible to take the same national licensing examination, NCLEX-RN, is telling. The results are even more telling, as they show that community college graduates do just as well as their four-year college and university counterparts. While institutional prestige may play a role in the bias against community colleges, its basis may be flawed, given the NCLEX-RN pass rates and thus community college students' educational preparation for the examination and for practice as a nurse. Hospitals are no different than other employers in their search to employ graduates of prestigious higher education institutions. Perhaps some of this is not solely the fault of those who hire, in that it is culturally acceptable for patients to seek out hospitals with staff from prestigious institutions when seeking "life or death" healthcare.

Educational background of hiring agent. The role of the associate degree nurse has been controversial throughout nursing education history (Jacobs, DiMattio, Bishop, & Fields, 1998; Karp, Jacobs, & Hughes, 2002; Long, 2003; Lords, 1999). There have been efforts to eliminate associate degree nursing education or to limit the scope of practice for these graduates (Aiken et al., 2003; Jacobs et al., 1998). In spite of the national licensing results that illustrate that associate degree graduates just as likely to be successful on the examination as bachelor degree graduates, the argument continues to be made that associate degree nurses are not adequately trained. Aiken's (2003) article re-energized this movement, attempting to link mortality to associate degree nursing practice.

In this research the participants' educational level and attendance at a community college served as an intervening variable. A majority of the participants who had no personal experience with community college education deemed community college

education substandard, without rigor, and insufficient to train nurses adequately. Two of the participants who had no experience with community college education would not refer to the community college as “college.” Those who had had some experience with community college education were less likely to criticize the institution or its graduates and more likely to speak of evaluating applicants and practicing nurses based on qualities other than their educational alma mater. Those who had attended community colleges cited the importance of community colleges, whether as a terminal degree granting institution or as an entry point for individuals intending to transfer to a four-year college or university (Bradburn & Hurst, 2001; Ehrenberg & Smith, 2004; Tobolowsky, 1998; Townsend, 2002; Zamani, 2001). In addition, those who had some personal experience with the community college shared that a bachelor degree as a minimum requirement for supervisors and management positions has little merit. Instead, these participants with community college experience and or degrees proposed that education alone should not restrict one’s scope of practice or advancement opportunities. Thus, those with little or no personal experience with the community college have less favorable perceptions of community college education and its graduates.

Curricula differences. While nursing programs differ substantially, the details of these differences across community colleges and between community college programs and four-year programs are not well known. This is an obvious area for future research.

One quality of importance for nurses raised in the literature and in the interviews with participants is critical thinking. A majority of the participants in this research spoke of the importance for nurses to be able to think critically. In addition, the hospital job descriptions list qualities such as leadership potential, team player, and patient centered.

While there may be little debate regarding whether critical thinking is an important skill for nurses, the question remains whether community college education includes this in the curriculum as well as four-year college and university programs. The literature shows mixed findings, some suggesting that bachelor degree nurses possess better critical thinking skills (Brooks & Sheperd, 1990; Pardue, 1987) and other research suggesting that it is the education that produces this skill but instead individual qualities and experiences that are identified through a screening process, with bachelor prepared individuals being identified as more likely to be productive (Arrow, 1973; Brown & Sessions, 1999; Gross, Takazawa, & Rose, 1987; Gullason, 1999).

Management or leadership skills were also identified as important qualities for nurses to possess. Those participants with little or no community college experience claimed that associate degree nursing programs do not incorporate such training in their programs, leaving graduates unprepared or inadequate in their work. Using a human capital theory, these participants suggest that the baccalaureate program completes the package of knowledge needed to be a successful nurse (Gullason, 1999).

The majority of participants in this study stated that if given a choice between an associate degree nurse and a bachelor degree nurse, they would hire the bachelor degree nurse. A few stated they would only hire a bachelor degree nurse and thus would re-advertise before hiring an associate degree nurse. This has significant ramifications for associate nurses and other community college graduates. This hiring preference suggests that regardless of how community college graduates interview, what information they have to share, what experience they have, and what their credentials are (other than

education), they may not be given an equal opportunity for employment because of where they went to school and presumptions made about community college curricula.

Program duration — more is better. The concept that more is better was cited by participants as justification for their idea that graduates of four-year colleges and universities are better prepared than those who attend community colleges. While more is better may be a commonly used concept, it is not applicable in all cases. In order to justify or confirm that more is better in higher education, one would need to evaluate both what the “more” is (what courses, experience, knowledge gained) and how to define “better.” If the additional classes taken in a baccalaureate degree program provide knowledge or skills beyond that of the two-year degree program, which are then utilized in the workplace to better meet patient and employer needs, then “more is better” might have more merit.

The elementary concept of “more is better” provides a facile rationale or justification for someone’s preference for bachelor degree graduates over community college graduates. Even if this preference was justified, the argument that a bachelor degree program prepares nurses better than an associate degree program, simply because it is two years longer, excludes other qualities and characteristics that may be just as likely (or not) to predict nursing ability.

Employment constraints

Bias and prejudice may have little meaning or power unless they are used to discriminate. The poor reputation of community colleges becomes problematic when it negatively impacts the institution, students, or graduates. This research found that the bias against community colleges has three outcomes: bachelor degree hiring preference,

community college graduate employment barriers, and perpetuation of negative reputation.

Bachelor degree hiring preference. There is significant bias in the professional field in favor of university prepared graduates and against community college prepared individuals, in this case, nurses. In spite of the community college's stated mission and efforts to meet student and workforce needs, employers opt away from these graduates and work counter to the efforts of the community college. As was illustrated in the literature review, more than 60% of practicing nurses graduate from associate degree programs (NCSBN, 2005). Thus, community colleges provide nurses in a time of nursing shortage. Community colleges are charged with attempting to meet workforce needs, in this case increasing the capacity of nursing programs and making additional efforts to improve attrition. Associate degree graduates of nursing programs are just as likely to pass the national licensing examination as bachelor degree graduates and thus graduate ready to work in greater numbers than bachelor degree graduates (NCSBN, 2005). Despite this, employers (participants) shared that they would prefer to hire bachelor prepared nurses and admitted that in certain situations they would not even consider associate degree graduates. Thus, the very groups of individuals for whom community colleges attempt to provide career ladder opportunities, those most in need of socioeconomic mobility, are the ones discriminated against and challenged with the brand of being less competent or under-prepared.

One explanation for employers' preference for hiring baccalaureate prepared individuals is the screening hypothesis (Arrow, 1973; Brown & Sessions, 1999; Gullason, 1999; Lang, 1994).

The screening hypothesis speculates that schooling is simply used as a screening device which allows employers to assess quickly and cheaply the productivity levels of potential employees. According to this hypothesis, those with more schooling are typically more productive to begin with, indicating that the skills acquired in school may not contribute much (if at all) to subsequent job-related productivity. Consequently, the observed positive relationship between schooling and earnings is explained by the role of schooling as a screening device (Gullason, 1999, p. 142).

If the only purpose of schooling is to provide signals to employers, then efforts to expand or upgrade community college programs may not prove beneficial for students graduating from community colleges.

The correlation between education and productivity intrigues economists, and two contrasting views have emerged (Brown & Sessions, 1999). The screening hypothesis holds that schooling merely signals inherent productivity as opposed to the human capital theory, which attests that schooling directly enhances individual productivity. Results are inconclusive regarding whether the human capital theory or the screening hypothesis is accurate. To address this debate, the question to determine is whether individuals' earnings increase when the skills they acquire in school are directly relevant to their occupations, as opposed to when they are not relevant. The presence of such an earnings premium supports the human capital theory (Psacharopoulos, 1996), while its absence supports the screening hypothesis (Brown & Sessions, 1999).

The screening hypothesis may provide an explanation for the nurse managers' hiring preferences found in this research. If a higher level of education is associated with

greater productivity, despite the actual skills or knowledge acquired during that education, than bachelor degree nurses will be selected over associate degree nurses regardless of their NCLEX-RN results, their previous experience or the caliber of the program they graduated from. This has implications for the future of community college education and efforts to maintain and enhance the quality of programs offered. “[T]he connection between education and success in careers reflects the class-rooted cultural bias of schools. The implication of the strong argument about social reproduction is that, controlling for class origins, the net effects of education should be small” (Kingston et al., 2003, p. 57). If the screening hypothesis is accurate and the bias in favor of baccalaureate graduates is intrinsic, it does not matter what the quality of community college education is or how it is showcased with regard to preparing graduates to be competitive in the workplace.

Critical theory addresses the phenomena of domination and oppression. It attempts to help understand the causes and consequences of such oppression. One of the assumptions within critical theory is that individuals are oppressed because those with power and privilege create or dominate or perpetuate information and information flows (Faye, 1987; Morrow & Brown, 1994). In this case, graduates of community college programs are the oppressed. Critical theory also addresses the rationalization that takes place to mask the oppression or at a minimum make the oppressors justify their discrimination. Those with baccalaureate degrees and higher may subconsciously be unwilling to relinquish the elevated prestige of their institution by admitting that community colleges offer an education on par with other colleges and universities.

Employment barriers for community college graduates. The three hospitals represented in this research have formal policies permitting only those with a bachelor degree or higher to serve as a nurse supervisor and requiring a masters degree or higher for nurse manager positions. This leaves little room for career mobility or advancement for associate degree nurses, restricting them to the entry-level job they entered upon graduation. The average national salary of a nurse is \$58,501 (http://swz.salary.com/salarywizard/layouthtmls/swzl_compresult_national_HC07000001.html), well above the poverty line and or minimum wage, and thus there is a pay off for community college education (Goho & Blackman, 2004; Leigh & Gill, 1997; Marcotte, Bailey, Barkoski, & Kienzl, 2005). The goal of democratization for community colleges intends that graduates will have career and economic mobility options. “In American society, education and earned wealth substitutes for inherited status” (Jacobs et al., 1998; p. 232). The American dream to move up the socioeconomic ladder, gain cultural capital, and better position one’s children is a promise of education. In spite of the mission and intention of the community college, this research shows that a community college education may limit one’s ability to move up career and social ladders. For nurses, without education past an associate degree, career options beyond entry-level positions are likely limited.

Perpetuation of the negative reputation. Using the familiar “chicken or egg” hypothesis, the question here is whether a negative community college reputation taints employers’ perceptions of graduates, or whether graduates’ less-than-satisfactory job performance creates or confirms a negative reputation for community colleges. Or, is the performance of community college graduates unsatisfactory, thus creating or confirming

the negative reputation of community colleges? The participants in this study did not provide specific examples of the hypothetical differences in the quality of work between community college and baccalaureate degree graduates. The existing research outlined in the Literature Review is also not conclusive regarding the performance of community college graduates as compared with bachelor degree graduates (Bernier, 2003; Karp, Jacob, & Hughes, 2002; Lords, 1999). The results of this study do illustrate that those who make hiring decisions prefer, in general, bachelor degree graduates over associate degree graduates. Regardless of the sources for the preference or bias, this perpetuates the negative reputation of community colleges and community college graduates.

It is a matter of speculation what impact this has on the students' self-assessment of their skills and ability levels, what they think of themselves and their intellectual potential. It is also a matter of speculation how this distinction plays out with the attending faculty. In what is still regarded as a classic study in the field, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) highlighted the impact that teachers' expectations of their students' abilities can have on students' success. They demonstrated the powerful impact the self-fulfilling prophecy can have on the actual performance of students based on the way they are regarded and treated by their instructors.

Not long after the Rosenthal study was published, Rist (1970) investigated the impact of a teacher's expectation of her kindergarten students. Without having access to any intellectual measures, she categorized the youngsters and went on to place them at three different tables based on what she perceived as their potential. What is particularly revealing about what Rist (1970) found was that the teacher's biased perceptions of the children (their dress and language style turned out to be significant factors in the

teacher's judgments), and not their ability level, were the basis for her assessment of them and how she engaged them.

Carnoy and Levin's research had similar findings after observing teachers' interactions in two different schools: one in an upper class neighborhood and the other in a working class neighborhood. They found that teachers held different expectations for children from different social class backgrounds and "reinforce the differential class structure in preparing the young for future occupational roles" (Carnoy & Levin, 1985, p. 141).

The question is whether the diminished reputation of community colleges has influenced the teaching staff of those same institutions and whether, similar to the teachers in Rosenthal's study and Rist's study, they approach their students with a diminished assessment of their capabilities (in spite of their eventual performance on the licensing examination). Do community college faculty contribute to the questionable reputation of community colleges? Do the community college students see themselves as somehow less able and motivated than their counterparts at more prestigious four-years colleges? These are questions for future research.

Institutionalization of community college reputation

The perception that community colleges provide a substandard education persists, as indicated by participant responses. However, participants were unable to provide specific knowledge or examples to establish the finding that community college graduates are unable to perform the duties of a nurse as expected. These participants supervise and work alongside nurses who are trained at both the associate and bachelor degree levels. All of the nurses within their organizations passed the licensing

examination in order to practice as nurses, the same licensing examination given to graduates of community college and baccalaureate programs. Why, then, would the participants respond that they prefer bachelor degree nurses over associate degree nurses?

The findings from this research suggest that employers rely on culturally or institutionally accepted assumptions to justify their perception that community colleges are substandard. The participants did note their employers' unspoken preference for bachelor prepared nurses. Clearly, for those knowledgeable about "magnet status," an external standard, there is perhaps pressure to hire baccalaureate degree nurses over associate degree nurses. In addition, agencies such as the North Carolina Center for Nursing and the North Carolina Board of Nursing have taken a stance on this issue throughout the years which may directly or indirectly impact human resources policies and individual hiring decisions. While not approved and implemented yet, the North Carolina Board of Nursing supported limiting the practice of associate degree nurses (NCBON, 2006). The North Carolina Center for Nursing has proposed increasing the proportion of bachelor prepared nurses to associate degree nurses (NCCN, 2003). Such proposals by licensing boards and research-based lobbying organizations carry weight when an individual or a large employer may be looking for a rationalization to distinguish education level and favor a baccalaureate prepared individual over an associate prepared individual. The message is shared in a variety of ways that community college graduates are substandard, as compared to their bachelor prepared counterparts.

Aside from indirect internal (employer) and external (e.g., North Carolina Center for Nursing) pressure to show preference for graduates of baccalaureate degree programs, there are additional factors that have worked to perpetuate the negative reputation of

community colleges, negatively impacting the hiring of community college graduates. All of the participants indicated that the community college student body is comprised of underprivileged individuals from working class homes. In addition, the participants spoke of community college training as vocational or technical. Assumptions about the community college student body and the training provided by community colleges have infiltrated both popular and professional cultures and led to a negative assessment of the caliber of community colleges, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Given that there is a lack of evidentiary support for the bias, it can be argued that the foundation of the bias is instead institutionalized and has become a part of both popular and professional cultures. Scott (2001) argues that institutionalization occurs when actions are repeated and given similar meaning by individuals (Scott, 2001).

Both disenfranchised students and vocational training carry negative stigmas within society, and community college students carry the reputation of less worthy of investment than four-year college and university students (Cohen & Brawer, 2004; McGrath & Spear, 1991; Townsend, 1999; Zwerling, 1976). Thus, regardless of the community colleges' stated mission or efforts to democratize, the reputation of community colleges as substandard is perpetuated, hindering graduates. Perhaps Brint and Karabel (1989) are correct in their analysis that community colleges thwart students' opportunity for mobility and advancement because the basis for the reputation has become institutionalized. Regardless of the bases for the bias against community colleges, there remains a considerable danger that this reputation has (and will continue to have) an adverse impact on those whom they serve (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). If these campuses are to fulfill their noble mission of serving as a

democratizing institution, they will need to be regarded with respect and supported generously.

Chapter Six: Implications

Theoretical Implications

The following theoretical perspectives were used to guide this research: symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), institutionalism (Jepperson, 2001; Scott, 2001), cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), social capital (Lin, 1999), and critical theory (Faye, 1987).

Symbolic interactionism. The perception of community college education is the result of the symbolic meaning attached to the community college as an entity. Blumer indicates that symbolization highlights the processes through which organizations and other features of our environment take on particular meanings and elicit specific feelings and actions (Blumer, 1969). This research confirmed that the perception that community colleges provide a substandard education persists. The participants indicated that community college education means or symbolizes a non-rigorous curriculum offered to individuals with little cultural capital. Hallett states that it is people with power who are able to attach meaning to phenomena or organizations (2003). This investigation shows that the reputation of the community college and its graduates is partially defined and or perpetuated by those in positions of hiring or those with employment power. A majority of the participants noted their preference for bachelor degree nurses, thus limiting the career opportunities for associate degree graduates as a result of the meaning attached to community colleges.

Institutional theory. An understanding of the reputation of community colleges is enhanced by applying frameworks of institutionalism (Jepperson, 2001; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2001). Scott (2001) suggests that institutional theory addresses the ingrained aspects of the social structure of society. Institutions are internalized and

their meaning perpetuated and accepted. There is a continuing and persistent impression held publicly that the quality of education at community colleges is inferior to that of baccalaureate degree programs. While participants in this study failed to offer concrete examples of overall poor performance of associate degree nurses as compared with bachelor degree nurses, in general they indicated a preference for baccalaureate degree graduates. In addition, the participants in this study revealed that to move beyond an entry-level nurse position in a hospital, a baccalaureate degree or higher is required. Participants were not able to justify why this is the case but agreed that it was a justified policy adopted by the majority of employers. Jepperson (2001) and others contend that an individual's socialization may even take place without his or her knowledge (Jepperson, 2001). Thus, the reputation of community college education and its graduates is institutionalized, perhaps even unbeknownst to those who act in response to the reputation, such as employers.

Cultural capital. Cultural capital theory aids in the explanation of employers' perceptions of associate degree nurses and the relationship between the reputation of community college education and hiring practices regarding community college graduates. Cultural capital refers to capital that individuals inherit by virtue of their family's class position (Bourdieu, 1977; Trujillo & Diaz, 1999). Community colleges attract and enroll individuals who have historically been situated on the lowest rungs of society's hierarchy of privilege and power. These marginalized groups occupy social strata which are described as disadvantaged or oppressed (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Levin, 2001; McCabe, 2003; Rhoades & Valadez, 1996). In general, community college students lack cultural capital.

Individuals at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy are at a disadvantage, as cultural capital is a means to academic and eventual economic success (Bourdieu, 1977; Valadez, 1993; Walpole, 2003). Community colleges attract individuals who are marginalized in society. Their lack of access to privileged knowledge serves as a barrier in their struggle to improve their economic and social conditions. This investigation sought to examine whether the community college reputation is, in part, a result of the socioeconomic status of those most likely to attend. While participants in the study did not speak of cultural capital, they suggested that the caliber of students at community colleges is lower than that at other institutions. This social class bias is one factor resulting in employers' preference for bachelor prepared graduates. Thus, while community colleges have maintained as a mission access to higher education for these marginalized groups, the by-product of this might in fact be harmful to students' opportunity for social mobility.

Social capital. Coleman suggests that all social relations and social structures facilitate some form of social capital (1990). Social capital provides individuals the information, support, connections, and validation necessary to be successful in dealing with entities such as higher education institutions (Lin, 1999). Community colleges attract and or enroll students with little social capital (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Rhoades & Valadez, 1996). One consequence of little social capital is limited access to higher education, resulting in a lack of opportunity for social mobility. Whether it be a result of the screening hypothesis or the limitations of community college programs (insufficient or substandard curriculum), this research shows a bias against community college graduates in the hiring decisions made by employers. Thus

community college graduates are limited in their career options, further limiting their access to social capital, reproducing the social class status quo (Kingston et al., 2003).

Critical theory. Critical theory is the study of social institutions and problems of social struggles as a result of domination. Community colleges, certainly in the past four decades, have attracted individuals who are at the lower rungs of the social, economic, and cultural hierarchy (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Labaree, 1997; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Brint and Karabel (1989) argue that the community college tracks students away from baccalaureate degree programs and thus limits their economic and social mobility (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Thus, does the community college oppress its graduates by limiting their potential? Or, are there individuals who have adopted the negative reputation of community colleges in order to justify the oppression of its graduates? A majority of participants in this study expressed a preference for bachelor prepared nurses, with little explanation. Using critical theory, it could be understood that employers who show preference for bachelor degree graduates, with little justification, are discriminating against associate degree graduates, those individuals from the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. In spite of the community college's mission to provide access and opportunity to individuals less likely to enroll in or be accepted into baccalaureate degree programs, the socioeconomic status of those most likely to attend plays a part in perpetuating the negative reputation of the community college. This reputation, in turn, results in discrimination or oppression of community college graduates, limiting their opportunities to move beyond their socioeconomic status.

Implications for practice

What does this mean for community colleges and their graduates? While workforce demands change, making traditional education less useful, community colleges are relied on more heavily by students and employers (Dougherty 1994; Dougherty & Bakia 2000; Dowd, 2003; Levin 2001, 2005a). Simultaneously, the reputation of community colleges as providing a lesser education persists. One answer is to continue to market the community colleges in a positive light. Too often the successes of community colleges go unnoticed. Thus, community colleges and their proponents must increase the efforts to publicly highlight the work community colleges are doing. In order to refute Brint and Karabel's views of the community college as a diversionary institution, practitioners need to amass evidence of positive student outcomes in the labor market. The economic outcomes of graduates and the supply of high-demand workers trained at community colleges should be highlighted more aggressively.

Another answer to the persistent reputation of community colleges as providing a substandard education and its negative labor market outcomes for graduates is to move beyond the symbolic institutionalized reputation of community colleges and look at individual skills, knowledge, and abilities to determine what role community college graduates can and should play in the workforce. The community college is caught in a problematic situation as an open door institution. The students are the most diverse in higher education, and those with little or no personal community college experience make generalizations about the population served, instead of acknowledging the diversity and richness of the community college student body. It is important for the public to gain a greater understanding of the multiple tasks and roles taken on by the community college

in their effort to provide quality education and training and meet needs of the workforce as well as student needs. It should also be noted that community colleges use competitive admissions in high-demand programs (e.g. health programs), that bachelor degree students return to community colleges to receive training in areas of well-paying employment, and that community colleges are responsive to changing industry. Greater funding support from both the private and public spheres will also enhance the worth of community colleges, indicating that community colleges and their graduates are worthy institutions.

In addition, the community college's role in preparing students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities is of growing importance. Community college students who intend to enroll are in general education college transfer programs and not in Associate in Applied Science or other program specific terminal degree tracks. From the literature on nursing programs and preparation as well as findings from the interviews in this research, it is clear that increased transfer opportunities for nurses are important to ensure baccalaureate attainment. Greater dialogue and partnerships between community college professional programs and counterparts at four-year colleges and universities should be another goal for higher education. Of most importance are transfer agreements, which are the acknowledged formal structures whereby community college students can be assured of credit transfer (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Implications for policy

There are several implications for policy that arise from this investigation, two of which are discussed here. If the baccalaureate degree is going to continue to be the hiring preference for employers, then improved and additional articulation agreements are

critical. The role of the community college in providing an open door and affordable access to students can be maintained but students will need more opportunities to transition successfully into baccalaureate degree programs. Most formal articulation agreements at this time are in the College-University Transfer area or the Associate in Art or Associate in Science areas. Seamless transition to bachelor programs for students in technical areas such as nursing or other allied health fields, engineering, business, and education are not commonplace but would address some of the challenges found in this research. To move in this direction, community colleges will need to be seen as an integral part of the entire higher education system.

Community colleges have been accused of “cooling out” student aspirations or limiting career and economic mobility through vocational training with limited opportunities. A consideration of community colleges as one point of entry into higher education, with endless transfer opportunities, may address both the reputation of community college education and labor market outcomes.

A second policy implication from this research regards the institutional isomorphism that is occurring across hospitals, or nurse employers. There was little distinction between the hospitals in the data gathered. At the time of interviews, Hospital Magnet was seeking magnet status, yet this action did not result in different responses from hospital participants. This suggests that hospital employment policies and practices are similar among hospitals; indeed they may have been different at one time, but they have converged. Isomorphism is a process that compels one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fennell, 1980; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Hawley, 1968). Research such

as Aiken's arguing that there is a relationship between patient mortality and the proportion of bachelor degree nurses to associate degree nurses pressures hospitals to respond accordingly. Organizations compete not just for resources and customers but also political power and institutional legitimacy (Aldrich, 1979; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Hospitals are increasingly homogeneous and reflect rules or popular guidelines that have been institutionalized and legitimized. Aiken's study, national magnet status requirements, and the North Carolina Center for Nursing all provide formal or informal pressures or cultural expectations with regard to the hiring of nurses based on education level. Thus norms are shaped to define appropriate organizational structure, and these impact behavior or hiring practices that may go unquestioned for years to come. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that "[t]o the extent that pluralism is a guiding value in public policy deliberations, we need to discover new forms of intersectoral coordination that will encourage diversification rather than hastening homogenization (p. 158). This suggestion reinforces the need to move beyond the symbolic reputation of community colleges and focus instead on the skills and performance of graduates or applicants for hire. Otherwise, the isomorphism of hospitals will further reinforce the bias against community college graduates.

Implications for future research

Three areas of further research are recommended as a consequence of this investigation: (1) an examination of perceptions of employers, generally, about the value and or worth of community college students and community colleges; (2) comparisons between baccalaureate and associate degree programs in the same fields (e.g., business, engineering, dental hygiene, and accounting) to determine workplace performance of

graduates; and (3) a study of baccalaureate degree programs at community colleges to determine if their graduates face similar biases to those expressed in this investigation.

This investigation attempted to gain an understanding of the reputation of community colleges by using nursing as a case study. The investigation examined employer perceptions of associate degree nursing programs and their graduates and found a clear bias against community colleges. Further examination of employer perceptions of community college programs and graduates is needed. This research should include employer perceptions of graduates of programs other than nursing. If employers prefer to hire graduates of baccalaureate degree programs over associate degree programs in other areas, the findings from this study will be corroborated. Future research may also seek the sources of such bias, if they exist. If the bias against community colleges is based on factors other than employees' (community college graduates') knowledge or skills, then it is further confirmed that a source of the negative reputation of community colleges is neither curriculum nor academic standards, but instead a condition such as social class prejudice or institutional prestige, as found in this research.

Additional research that compares associate degree and bachelor degree programs (in the same disciplines or fields) as well as a review of community college graduates' performance in the workplace is needed. This will determine the knowledge, skills, and experiences of baccalaureate students compared to those of associate degree students and indicate the presence or absence of significant educational differences. In nursing, for example, if the knowledge and skills gained from additional course work in a bachelor degree program is positively linked to nursing practice once an individual graduates and

moves to the workforce, educational differences of the two program types can be confirmed.

This investigation indicated a preference for baccalaureate degree nurses. Some participants noted differences in curriculum that influenced workplace performance and thus justified their preference. The research found that sources other than curriculum differences (social class bias, institutional prestige, and educational background of hiring agent) played a role in perpetuating the negative reputation of community colleges. Further investigation that compares associate and bachelor degree graduates in the same fields would be useful. Findings could identify additional sources of the negative reputation of community colleges or might confirm the sources that were found in this investigation. Findings could also point to differences in curricula that would be useful for community colleges to use in improving current programs.

Finally, community colleges are beginning to offer baccalaureate programs. Further research regarding these programs will help inform educators and practitioners whether it is community colleges or associate degree programs that hold the negative stigma. Is it the degree or the institution? Do employers value community college baccalaureate graduates in the same way they value university baccalaureate graduates? This can be useful for the community college as it continues work to meet the needs of students and the workforce and position itself as a quality institution.

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Appendices

Letter of Introduction
Human Resources

My name is Alisa Nagler and I am a graduate student at North Carolina State University in the Adult and Community College Education department. I have completed my course work and am collecting data for my dissertation. The title of my dissertation is: *The influences of institutional reputation on the outcomes of education and training: A case study of community college nursing programs*. To examine this issue, I plan to interview employees of three local hospitals (WakeMed, Rex Healthcare and Duke Health Raleigh Hospital) who are responsible in some way for the hiring or promoting of nurses. I am writing to request your assistance with this endeavor.

I would like to interview you to learn about the general policies and procedures of hiring at your institution, specifically for the hiring of nurses. The interview will take no longer than one hour and will be recorded. While the data you will help provide will be used in my research and data analysis, your identity will not be disclosed in anyway.

My second request of you is to assist in identifying three additional staff who are involved in the hiring of nurses within your hospital. I am assuming these would be nurse managers or supervisors. I am not sure what would be most convenient for you or what your policies may be about sharing employee names so please let me know what will work best for you. If you would like to send this email on to others and have individuals contact me, that is fine. If you prefer to give me a list of more than three and have me contact them, that is of course fine as well. Please let me know how I may be able to assist you with this request.

I am happy to meet with you at a time and location that is convenient for you. I am excited about meeting with you and the other staff at your hospital. Please let me know a time that is convenient for you so that we can meet. If you have questions, please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your participation.

Letter of Introduction
Nurse Manager

My name is Alisa Nagler and I am a graduate student at North Carolina State University in the Adult and Community College Education department. I have completed my course work and am collecting data for my dissertation. The title of my dissertation is: *The influences of institutional reputation on the outcomes of education and training: A case study of community college nursing programs*. To examine this issue, I plan to interview employees of three local hospitals (WakeMed, Rex Healthcare and Duke Health Raleigh Hospital) who are responsible in some way for the hiring or promoting of nurses. I am writing to request your assistance with this endeavor.

Your hospital's Human Resources Vice President identified you as someone who is involved in the hiring or promoting of nurses for your institution. I would like to interview you to learn about your experiences in this process. The interview will take no longer than one hour and will be recorded. While the data you will provide will be used in my research and data analysis, your identity will not be disclosed in anyway. Even though your hospital's Human Resources Vice President provided your name to me as a potential research subject, participation in this study is not a part of your job, and your decision to participate or not will not affect your employment.

I am happy to meet with you at a time and location that is convenient for you. Please let me know a time that is convenient for you so that we can meet. If you have questions, please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your participation.

Appendix C

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study *The influences of institutional reputation on the outcomes of education and training: A case study of community college nursing programs.*

Principal Investigator Alisa Nagler

Faculty Sponsor Dr. John Levin

We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is explain the role and reputation of community colleges and the impact of their reputation on education and training outcomes. A case study will be conducted using qualitative research methods. Twelve employees of three hospitals in Raleigh, North Carolina (4 from each site) will be interviewed to gather data on hiring and promotion practices at those institutions. This research will contribute to the field of higher education by helping to recognize determinants of the reputation of community colleges which could lead to changes in policy and practices of these colleges and workforce employers.

INFORMATION

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the principal investigator at a time convenient for you. The interview will be recorded and will last no longer than one hour. You are free to end the interview or terminate your participation in the study at any time. Participation in this study is not a part of your job, and your decision to participate or not will not affect your employment.

RISKS

Utmost care will be given to the confidentiality of information collected. Interviews will be conducted at a time and place convenient for you. Data will be collected and stored at the researcher's home. Interviews will be transcribed and names will be coded or deleted. Recordings and transcripts will be kept in a locked facility. Recordings will be destroyed eight years after collection. Names of interviewees will not be disclosed; anonymity of individuals will be protected. Code names or pseudonyms will be given and used in transcripts and the writing of the dissertation. Thus, there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with this research or your participation.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to the participants. There may, however, be an indirect benefit as this research will add to the existing literature on community college education which may positively influence higher education in general through policy and or practice changes at community colleges or places of employment.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely at the researcher's home. Recordings will be destroyed eight years after collection. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION

No compensation will be given to subjects participating in this study.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Alisa Nagler at 325 Shaftsberry Court, Raleigh, N.C. 27609 or 919-821-0568 or anagler@waketech.edu. 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."

Interview Guide

What is your position at the hospital?

What is your education and where did you earn your degree?

Explain your role in hiring or promoting nurses at this institution.

What are you looking for in a candidate when you are hiring for a nurse position?

What are you looking for in a candidate when you are promoting a nurse?

Does education play a role in these decisions? Why or why not and please elaborate?

What are your experiences with graduates of community colleges?

What do you think of community colleges and community college education?

Do you believe there is a difference in community college versus four-year college/university nursing training? Practicing nurses? Please explain.