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STOPPING-OUT OF COLLEGE: THE STUDENTS' STORIES

A DISSERTATION

Submitted by

DIANE SIMPSON WEBBER

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

LESLEY UNIVERSITY

**May 23
2005**

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
DEPARTMENT OF CHEMISTRY
RESEARCH REPORT

1. Title of the Report
2. Author's Name
3. Date of Report
4. Name of the Advisor
5. Name of the Institution

6. Abstract
7. Introduction
8. Experimental Methods

9. Results
10. Discussion
11. Conclusions

12. References
13. Appendix
14. Acknowledgments
15. Summary

Abstract

This study focuses on young adults under the age of 26 who enrolled in a 4-year college, left college, then later re-enrolled in either the same or a different college. The students stopped-out of college for various reasons. Purposeful sampling identified eight participants, mostly from New England, who were in different stages of the stopping-out process. Qualitative data was gathered through interviewing these participants.

The purpose of this study is to construct stories from the students' words and interviewee observations as a way to better understand how students made meaning from their stopping-out experiences. An overview of retention missions and practices in higher education, as well as an examination of young adult development theories, provides two perspectives on the situation. However, the students' perspectives are the central focus of this research.

The participants spoke frequently about their explorations of identity, expectations, choices, pressures, fears, and responsibilities while stopping out of college. Their words also referred to the need for care, support, acceptance, friends, and community. This study lets these students tell their stories. Parents and professionals concerned with young adult college students may listen to these voices and learn from them, just as they learn from consideration of developmental theories and retention policies. The participants of this study demonstrated that through the acts of asking and telling their stories, they could put into words how they made meaning of their experience. This research brings another perspective to the understanding of young adults meaning-making while stopping-out of college.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This has been a long, adventurous, and insightful learning journey. The many voices that joined mine along the way added tremendous dimension to this project and I owe my deepest gratitude to all the wonderful people whose contributions made these pages possible. I thank the young adults who so graciously offered their voices that provided the poignant and powerful stories that needed to be told and then heard. The insights and lessons they shared will always remain with me.

If it weren't for each member of my dissertation committee, I would probably still be writing page after page loaded with one or another of my random conclusions and absent any real focus. Bard's faith in my topic and her wisdom and guidance in the process were my constant guideposts. She was there when I needed her, and stepped aside when I needed to locate myself. The depth of Barbara's knowledge, combined with her uncanny ability to finesse my thoughts from my mind into words, should be marketed somewhere. She expertly let me find my own voice with incredible patience, humor, and respect. Diane's warmth, compassion, and positive support provided the calm consistency that kept me moving forward over these many years. Her gentle spirit, guiding words, and boundless knowledge kept a light shining for me no matter where I was.

I have many friends that provide what I call *psycho-social* nutrients to the whole of me. They are there for whatever part of me is in need. To name just a few, the nutrients

come from: Brenda's generous soul and excellent editorial skills; Cindy's warmth, caring, and focus; and Marsha's perspective, vision, and compassion. It is also important to recognize the financial and professional support that the Curry College community provided over my many years of doctoral study.

The seeds of this project germinated with my oldest son, Rod, who will always make me challenge my assumptions about young adults since he finds his successes in the most unusual ways. My second son, Russ, will constantly remind me that I have the strength to do almost anything because he will always be there to support me. My oldest daughter, Dede, helped me keep the seeds of this project thriving as she wove her way through college over time. She made me rethink and reconsider so many pieces of this project while she was redirecting so many parts of her own life.

I work perpetually at my home-office computer, just a few feet away from where my youngest child, Megan, whose excellent editorial eye added balanced to this project, was born 21 years ago. Now, I feel as though I have given birth again, to a dissertation that has involved so much of my time, passion, soul, and heart. As Megan graduates soon from college and moves on, I also will grow forward in my life. I thank my four beautiful children for being such unique and inspiring young adults. They are all a part of this paper. We have learned a great deal from each other and I hope to constantly listen to their voices, as well as to the voices of many more young adults, in my future endeavors.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 1991, when the eldest of my four children announced that he was leaving college after one semester, I experienced a parental panic attack. After months of time and energy spent on research, campus visits, SATs, and all the other emotional, physical, and financial trappings of the college admissions process, I was speechless. My son, enrolled in the elite art college of his apparent dreams, was dropping out. My initial thoughts were, “What had I done wrong?” and “What was wrong with him?” Eight years later, when my daughter presented me with a similar pronouncement, I was better equipped to respond. During the intervening years, I became aware that many young adults were deciding to leave college temporarily, and then re-enter the same or a different college to eventually complete their academic programs. Instead of dropping out, they were *stopping-out* of college.

Stop-out, a term coined by the Carnegie Council (1980), refers to the voluntary interruption by students in their enrollment in postsecondary education for one or more terms. According to a report by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2003), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, nearly a third of college students transfer to different institutions before attaining their degrees and only 37% of the students finish a bachelor’s degree on schedule.

My reading of young adult development theories, examination of higher educational institutional policies and programs, combined with my informal conversations with students who have stopped-out of college, drove me to further explore

how these young people make meaning of their stopping-out experience. When I read what experts (Baxter Magolda, 1995; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Cross, 1995; Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Levinson, 1978, 1986; Ward, 2000) said about young adult development, I recognized a possible disconnect between what parents and institutions say about the stopping-out process and what various theorists write about young adult development.

Furthermore, when I listened to what the students themselves said about their stopping-out experience, the disconnect became more complex. Where dropping out and stopping-out may be perceived as negative experiences to parents and institutions, the developmental theories and the students themselves indicated to me that leaving college temporarily may possibly be an appropriately positive behavior for some young adults. Additionally, my informal conversations with these young adults lead me to believe that we may be mistaken when we tend to speak negatively about students who have stopped-out of college. Many of these young adults seemed quite satisfied with their non-linear path through college; in many instances, they viewed their often circuitous route through college as a positive experience.

In casual conversations with parents, I often sensed their concern about children who are stopping-out since they usually consider the matter a problem where either they, or their children, have done something wrong. Parents frequently described feelings of guilt and fear of being considered failures. For many families, leaving college may be loaded with negative connotations. Institutions, themselves, often view student stop-outs negatively and “educators believe that students who graduate on time will be better off” (Arenson, 2003, p. 13). Even the government is trying to solve this so-called problem. President Bush’s administration seems to consider these students as failures while it continues to advocate for legislation that withholds

federal financial funding from institutions that do not graduate enough students within four years (Burd, 2003; Borrego, Brainard, Morgan, & Selingo, 2002). In the U.S. Department of Education's Strategic Plan (Paige, 2002), the Bush administration notes that a priority is to make colleges and universities more accountable for their graduation rates: "Congress also has addressed concerns about the effectiveness of postsecondary institutions in graduating students in a timely fashion" (p.61).

Purpose of the Study

The first chapter of this study presents institutional perspectives on college retention and persistence, including retention data and an historical overview. The second chapter explores the literature on young adult development as it pertains to the stopping-out process. The methodology used to gain access to the students' stories about stopping-out is explained in the third chapter. However, the main focus of this study, in chapters four through eleven, is on listening to the students' voices about their educational experiences regarding stopping-out, since it may provide an important perspective for understanding the issues, challenges, and attitudes facing college students today.

Institutional personnel, who view stopping-out as a problem to be solved, perhaps involving costly special programs and facilities to retain these students, may want to reconsider their position. Parents and families who view their children who stop-out as failures may also want to reconsider the way they think about their children's choices. Without realizing it, parents and institutions of higher education may sometimes be working at cross-purposes with young adults who may actually benefit from time away

from college. Parents and colleges may pressure some students to stay in school, putting significant resources into retaining the young adults, when in many situations it may actually be in everyone's best interest to seek supportive strategies for these young adults as they make transitions into, out of, and back into colleges.

Research Question

Many questions arise when examining the stopping-out process. Do educators, families, and educational institutions need to change the way they view *time* to complete a degree? Should policymakers and institutions respond to an increasingly large student population who choose to take a circuitous route through college by taking more than four years to complete a degree program? The overarching question for this study is: What can individual student stories tell us about the meaning they make from their decisions and experiences around stopping-out of college? I want to learn from the young adults who are taking more time than those in previous generations to obtain a bachelor's degree. In light of institutional missions and developmental theories, are the students speaking so others should listen?

One assumption is that when institutional retention efforts are explored, young adult developmental theories are examined, and the students' voices are heard, readers of this study will find answers to some of these questions. Once the students' stories are told, perhaps a new lens will be revealed for viewing the ways young adults who stop-out of college make meaning of their experiences, which may better inform institutions as they develop systems to support these students.

Understanding student retention is a significant challenge since it is often difficult to make sense of the variable characteristics of student departure from college. There is substantial information about the complexities of retention issues, yet it also seems that what we do know may be wrong or misleading (Tinto, 1993). A good deal of the literature provides us with stereotypical portraits of student *dropouts* presented in negative contexts (Akerhielm, Berger, Hooker, & Wise, 1998; Astin, 2001; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Toma & Kezar, 1999). Tinto (1993) says:

Student dropouts have been portrayed as having a distinct personality profile or as lacking in a particularly important attribute needed for college completion. Therefore, we may have been given the mistaken view that student dropouts are different or deviant from the rest of the student population. (p. 3)

Contextual Framework

Some critics suggest, “The prolonged student tenure has prompted both outrage and concern” by both higher education policymakers and institutional leaders themselves (Arenson, 2003, p.12). Others see the low graduation rates as a failure of colleges to do their job properly, or they blame the students for “being undisciplined and taking up slots better occupied by fresh-faced, motivated freshmen” (p. 12). Frank Newman, director of a research effort called the *Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World*, said, “That’s abysmal” when citing statistics that only one-half of enrolled students graduate within five years (Burd, 2002, p. 21).

Tinto (1993) states that negative stereotypes are reinforced by a way of talking about student departure that labels students as failures for not having completed a course of study in an institution of higher education. In this regard, Tinto explains that the term dropout is one of the more frequently misused words in our repertoire of educational

descriptors. He says the term is used to describe the actions of all leavers regardless of the reasons or conditions that mark their leaving. Tinto notes that although college “leavers often think of themselves as failures, many see their actions as quite positive toward goal fulfillment” (p. 4). Tinto explains that college departure is frequently an important part of a discovery process indicative of personal and cognitive development.

Definitions.

Scholars of college student attrition have long struggled with defining student attrition. At an extreme, Astin (1977) argues that we can never satisfactorily identify students as completers or dropouts until they get a degree or die without obtaining a degree. Within a more moderate perspective, student withdrawal from college is described by several interchangeable terms with somewhat different nuances. The term dropping out has been the most widely used to indicate student departure from college, regardless of whether it is voluntary withdrawal or forced dismissal, although the dropout rate has been more frequently regarded as a failure of students or institutions, especially by early studies in the 1960s (Gekoski & Schwartz, 1961; Hanson & Taylor, 1970; Heilbrum, 1965). Other than dropping out, attrition and departure have also been used interchangeably with withdrawal.

In describing the scope and patterning of student departure, it is important to understand the definitions used by researchers and institutions to describe the various nuances of terms. It is helpful to distinguish between the departure of students from individual institutions, or institutional departure, and departure from the wider system of higher education, called system departure (Tinto, 1993). Not all student departures from

institutions of higher education lead to withdrawal from the broader system of higher education. Though all institutional leavers are similar from the perspective of the institution from which they leave, many of those students transfer to other institutions of higher education and are referred to as immediate transfers. Some eventually earn their college degrees, though it may take them more than four or five years to do so (Astin, 2001). From the perspective of higher educational institutions, those students are considered completers. Not all institutional leavers immediately transfer to other institutions. Some leave higher education altogether, known as system departures, whereas others temporarily withdraw from the system and are referred to as stop-outs. Among the latter group of students, some return to their initial institution, called institutional stop-outs, and others enroll in another institution, and are called delayed transfers. In the latter case, some students may delay their return for many years, or just a few years (Tinto, 1993).

College student attrition can be classified into two broad categories. The first category relates to the nature of departure, i.e., whether a student withdraws from a college voluntarily or is forced to withdraw, considered forced dismissal. The second category pertains to the mode of departure. Students who leave a college and then return either to the institution they first attended, or to a different institution as transfers, are considered stop-outs. Those students who leave the higher education system completely are considered system departures. Table 1 clarifies the meaning of the terminology used in this paper.

Table 1

Definition of Terms

Drop-outs or System Departures	Students who enroll in an institution but leave college and do not return to the system of higher education. These students may leave voluntarily or they may be asked to leave by the institution
Persisters or Completers	Students who are continuously enrolled in any institution of higher education working toward completion of a degree
Stop-outs	Students who are enrolled in an institution of higher education but take a break of one term or more from enrollment and returned to the same or a different institution
Retention Rate	The percentage of students who return to an institution of higher education for a second year
Transfers or Institutional Departures	Students who obtain credits toward a degree at one institution of higher education and carry those credits to another institution
Withdrawal, Attrition, or Departure	The termination of student membership in an institution of higher education due to their dropping-out, stopping-out, or transferring to other institutions

The measures of student attrition in the empirical studies are even more diverse than the definitions. Most studies define a dropout as a student who was previously enrolled at the college but was not enrolled at the time of the study. Some researchers define dropouts as voluntary withdrawals at the end of their first year (Cash & Bissel, 1985; Allen & Nelson, 1989). Others define dropouts or persisters in a similar way, but they consider different time spans. The time span they use to define dropouts or withdrawals varies from one semester to a nine-year period. Grosset (1991) defines persistence in reference to students remaining after the first semester. Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington (1986) adopted a slightly different definition in which a degree completion means completion of at least a bachelor's degree within the nine-year period or currently working toward a bachelor's degree as of 1980.

The relatively short time horizon most studies adopted has tended to make it difficult for researchers to differentiate among dropouts, stop-outs, and transfers. Furthermore, reviews of the empirical studies reveal that most of those studies tend to differentiate voluntary withdrawal and forced dismissal, but are less likely to make a distinction among dropout, stop-out, and transfer. Most retention studies include only voluntary withdrawals in the analysis, while a few studies make a distinction among the three types of departure only when the analysis calls for such differentiation (Gezlar, Sedlacek, Kearney, & Blackwell, 1994; Halpin, 1990; Pascarella, et al., 1986).

In summary, although there is some difficulty in finding out whether a student who left college belongs to a particular withdrawal category unless one keeps tracking the student until he or she graduates, it is still possible to classify student withdrawal behaviors into three distinct categories: transfer, stop-out, and dropout. That is, when a

student withdraws from college, he or she can transfer to another institution, take a break and return to the same or different institution, or leave the system of higher education forever. In practice, researchers often fail to differentiate among the different types of withdrawal behaviors, and in many cases, the operational definitions of withdrawal behavior were not consistent across studies (Pascarella, et al., 1986). This is problematic because grouping various types of withdrawal into one category distorts the relationship between withdrawal and its determinants.

Although a significant number of students are either taking time off, or transferring to other institutions, very few studies have looked specifically at stop-outs and transfers (Gezlaf, et al., 1994; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Stokes & Zusman, 1992). Tinto (1993) points out that different withdrawal behavior, such as stop-out, dropout, and transfer are simply a function of the varying levels of the person's goal and institutional commitment. For example, Tinto (1993) maintains that low goal commitment to the completion of a college education may result in permanent withdrawal from the entire higher education system, while high goal commitment to the completion of a college education may lead an individual to stay or transfer to another institution.

Historical Background

A college degree in the twenty-first century is emerging as the standard for many in America, in contrast to expectations in the twentieth century when a high school diploma was the norm. Higher education is no longer reserved for a fortunate few, and the forms of learning once reserved for a small number of elite have now become potentially accessible to many more Americans, providing opportunities for social

mobility through diverse occupations, higher wages, and higher levels of literacy (Astin, 2001; NCES, 2003). This democratization of higher education includes increased college enrollments of students of all ages from various races, ethnic backgrounds, socio--economic status, family educational history, and educational preparation (NCES). The diverse group of students who now attend college reconfigures the undergraduate student body, and this recent shift is causing educators, administrators, students, and parents to reevaluate the way they view the very nature of the college process.

Not only has there been a shift in the characteristics of students who attend college, but recently there has also been a shift in the length of time it takes those students to complete a traditional four year college program of study. In the 1970s, about 75 % of the young adults who went on to four-year colleges directly after high school managed to complete the academic experience with all of its incumbent pleasures and tribulations within four years (Snyder, 2001). Recent research reveals that only about 25% of traditional age, 18 to 25 year old, college students are earning their bachelor's degrees within four years (Almanac, 2000). Therefore, the traditional pattern of one student attending one institution and graduating in four years no longer endures. Students are attending college for reasons that differ from those of their predecessors; they are taking more than the *normal* four years to complete a four year college program, and they are often leaving college and then re-entering college to complete their degree (NCES, 2003). These students are from different socio-cultural-economic-academic backgrounds, and both men and women are part of this trend (Cohen, 1998).

With a major shift in the undergraduate population and significant changes in attendance patterns, it has become increasingly difficult to understand student retention

and educational goals in the twenty-first century (Arenson, 2003; Astin & Oseguera, 2002). The historic patterns of progress toward a college degree have changed dramatically while our ability to comprehend these patterns has not kept pace as well as it should (Porter, 1999). For the most part, we continue to look at *institutions* as the point of analysis, when “we should be focused on the *individual* – the mobile and technologically agile *student*” (Ewell, Schild, & Paulson, 2003, p. i).

Reisberg (1999) writes that Leon Botstein, President of Bard College, suggests we may need to rethink the way we view the college student journey, and adjust the view that there is nothing wrong with students moving in and out of different colleges over a period of time. Gordon Davies says, “A four year graduation is an exercise in nostalgia. The *non*-traditional student today is an 18-year old white male who lives in a dorm” (Selingo, 2001, p. 22). The common standard now used by the U. S. Department of Education to measure graduation rates is six years and not four years (NCES, 2003). John Lombardi, former president of the University of Florida who currently leads a higher education research center at the university, maintains, “It’s a value judgment that four years is the only way you can get a good education” (Selingo, 2001, p. 22).

Despite many years of research and institutional interventions, only about half of the students who enter college complete their degrees within what many used to consider a reasonable period of time, which was traditionally four to six years for a bachelor’s degree (Ewell, et al., 2003; NCES, 2003). The rest of the students leave their institutions for various reasons before completing their degree requirements. Some take a break and return to the same institution, whereas others either transfer to other institutions or never return to the system of higher education in the United States.

Students leave college for various reasons. Some of them voluntarily withdraw from college due to proximal or personal reasons, such as financial aid, attenuated motivation, and lack of a sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Others withdraw because they perceive their college as failing to nurture them and to provide a supportive environment (Tinto, 1993). Past attrition research has shown that student withdrawal is a result of the complex interplay between personal and contextual issues (Astin, 2001; Tinto, 1993). On one hand, studies are rich in identifying the individual and within college factors that are believed to cause students to leave college before graduation (Lenning, Beal, & Sauer, 1980; Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Summerskill, 1962; Tinto, 1993). On the other hand, factors that are found to be associated with withdrawal behavior of college students are limited in spite of the significant variation in withdrawal rates by institution. Even among the fifty most selective universities in the U.S., recent data show a significant variation in freshman retention rates, ranging from 83% to 99%; and, graduation rates ranging from 66% to 97% (US News, 2000).

Understanding student retention and attainment is a prerequisite to helping students succeed, yet many institutional and public policies are based upon college attendance assumptions that are not necessarily valid today (Burd, 2002; Tinto, 1993). Some states and individual institutions are now collecting specific data about this mobile population to analyze new retention patterns, but geographic and technological mobility ignores state boundaries so our vision may be blurred when considering students' progress (Ewell, et al., 2003). We may actually be creating an inaccurate picture of student retention, persistence, and attainment.

Institutional Perspectives

This section examines the ways institutions of higher education perceive retention and persistence as they relate to students stopping-out of college. Information is presented on the modern college student experience and the way institutional perceptions inform policies and programs meant to accommodate student enrollment choices while maintaining academic integrity and promoting student success. Data will focus specifically on trends in persistence, including statistics on demographics such as geography, race, gender, culture, and socio-economic status to outline the demographic shifts that bring a diverse student body to college campuses. Unless otherwise noted, the data will refer to information regarding traditionally aged college students, ages 17 to 26, who attend four-year private institutions of higher education and will reflect national statistics without regard to local or regional differences.

Altbach (1999) states, “Two powerful reasons exist for the serious study of higher education: because things change and because some things do not change” (p. 38). The character of American higher education has shifted in many ways since its beginning over 300 years ago so each generation, approximately every 30 years, has a unique set of attitudes, goals, and ideologies. Examining various attitudes toward college in the historical context of different generational, socio-economic, and gender issues is an important part of this chapter’s conceptual framework.

Enrollment in institutions of higher education has expanded tremendously since World War II in the United States, as well as in virtually every country of the world (Altbach, 1999). The United States enrolled some 30% of the 17 to 25 year old cohort in

higher education in the immediate postwar period. By the 1960s, the United States increased its proportion to around 50% and was approaching universal access. By the 1990s, enrollment increased by only a few percentage points over the previous twenty years, so the American pattern of access to higher education had begun to stabilize, although enrollments in Europe and many newly industrialized countries continued to expand (Altbach, 1999). Since enrollment percentages in the US have begun to level off in recent years, could that mean young adults are making alternative plans to attending college? Are institutions of higher education not able to keep reliable records of students who leave one college and later enter another college, thereby influencing data on retention and graduation rates?

The context for higher education shifted during the 1970s and 1980s, and the access that had been opened to an earlier generation by the GI Bill, when the government paid the college tuition for enlisted personnel, was extended to include people who had either been systematically excluded or who had never chosen to attend in the first place. Going to college became an increasing necessity for entry into lucrative professions, and the rate of college-going, which had leveled from 1965 to the 1980s, rose again reaching a peak by the mid-1990s never before attained (NCES, 2000). In the mid-1970s, the federal government defined racial categories that solidified the differentiation of groups to whom special treatment should be afforded; the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 further extended the categories (Altbach, 1999). The use of reproducible media, especially computers in the 1990s, expanded and the Internet had opened access to information to a degree that was growing exponentially.

A wide range of current conditions are provoking new organizational structures,

new modes of delivery, new curricular patterns, and new mixes of teaching strategies. Changing student characteristics, more complex societal needs, reduced support, pressures for accountability, and, changing communication and information technologies are challenging institutions of higher education. While the GI Bill was designed to help increase college attendance, it is interesting to note that the current administration is trying to pass legislation that withholds federal financial funding from institutions that do not graduate enough students within four years, thereby attempting to control college enrollment (Borrego, Brainard, Morgan, & Selingo, 2002; Burd, 2003). Cuts in federal appropriations to higher education occurred in at least half of the states, while most other states had increases too small to keep pace with increases in enrollments and inflation (Potter, 2003). As a result of state cuts to higher education budgets, many colleges and universities cut faculty positions, offered fewer classes, increased tuition, and in some cases began denying access to students who would otherwise be eligible to attend (Potter). These forces are driving system changes that could change the character of our colleges and universities.

Enrollment Data

In the last 30 years, we have seen some interesting changes in the way the nation views a college education in terms of economics, support, and accessibility. In the section that follows, I will highlight some of the more significant data that reflect the changes emerging in institutions of higher education and their systems. A major problem in measuring student success in postsecondary education is the difficulty in tracking students' progress as they transfer from one institution to another. Data on these students

are collected, but such student-level data are generally specific to one institution.

Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether a dropout at one school goes on to complete a degree at another school (Porter, 1990). According to a report published by the *Lumina Foundation for Education*, which commissioned the National Center for Higher Educational Management Systems (NCHEMS) to examine existing state enrollment record systems:

We do know that hundreds of thousands of students transfer each year, and we know that current data on student retention reported at the institutional level are incomplete and probably inaccurate, but we have no way of knowing the extent of those inaccuracies. (Ewell et al., 2003, p. 1)

The proportion of college students who earn their degrees within four years continues to decline, according to a study by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (Astin & Oseguera, 2002). According to this survey of 56,818 students who entered 262 four-year colleges and universities in the fall of 1994, only 36.4% were able to complete a bachelor's degree within four years. By the end of six years, 57.6% had finished their degree. A comparable survey in 1989 revealed that nearly 40% of students had completed their degree in four years (Astin & Oseguera).

The degree-completion rate of students also varies substantially according to the race and gender of the student. Among Asian-American students, 38.8% finished a degree in four years, while 37.6% of White students did so (Astin & Oseguera, 2002). Among Mexican-American students, however, only 21.3% completed a degree in four years, as did 28.9% of African-American students (Astin & Oseguera). The four-year completion rate is also higher among women than men. The same is true for the six-year completion rate in all racial groups, except among American Indian students, where the rate for men is slightly higher than the rate for women (Astin & Oseguera).

Transition to College: Who Enrolls in Institutions of Higher Education

Increasing numbers of students are entering college immediately after high school. In 1972, about 49% of all high school completers aged 16 to 24 enrolled in a two or four year college immediately after high school; in 1998, about two-thirds did so (NCES, 2000). Enrollment rates increased faster for women than men, and the gap between white and African-American enrollment rates has decreased since 1984 (NCES). Between 1975 and 1995, the percentage of high school graduates aged 16 to 24 who matriculated in college immediately after high school increased noticeably, from 51% to 62% (NCES). These statistics encouraged me to seek answers to related questions from the students themselves. Is it possible that because so many more students are entering college immediately after high school graduation that these decisions to attend college may play a role in the stopping-out process? If there were a longer transition period between high school and college, would students have a higher completion rate? Is there a socio-cultural emphasis at work here where students feel a culturally imposed directive to go directly to college but are not actually ready to deal with the complexities of the college experience?

Concerns about the length of time students are taking to obtain bachelor's degrees have become more serious in the last 20 years (Cohen, 1998). Cohen says that the high cost of college attendance leads some people to argue that the requirements for the bachelor's degree should be reduced to three years of full-time study, but since most students by 1990 were taking five or more years to complete their undergraduate work, that strategy seems to be unrealistic.

The percentage of freshmen who drop out of college has decreased each year between 1997 and 2000, but the rate at which undergraduates completed their degrees during that same period of time reached an all-time low in 2000 (ACT Newsroom, 2000). This statistic indicates that fewer students are dropping-out of college, but those students who stay are taking longer to complete a degree than students in previous generations. In 2000, the average freshman-to-sophomore-year retention rate at four-year institutions was 25.9%, one % below the high mark recorded in 1996 (ACT Newsroom).

Since there seems to be no accurate way to identify students who actually transfer to a different college and eventually complete their degrees, it is almost impossible to know how many students are actually stopping-out (ACT Newsroom, 2000). The fact that the rate at which undergraduates complete their degrees continues to decline may be significant in the study of stop-outs. It is interesting to note the increasing enrollment in college, yet it must also be noted that more students are not completing college after enrolling. Tinto (1993) says:

More students leave their college or university prior to degree than stay. Of the nearly 2.4 million students who in 1993 entered higher education for the first time, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree. Of those, approximately 1.1 million will leave education altogether, without ever completing either a two- or a four-year degree program. (p. 1)

The consequences of this exodus are not to be taken lightly by anyone involved in higher education. Data still needed to better understand student persistence include information about what percentage of students complete a college degree within a six year period, what proportion of those students complete their degrees within the same institution, and what proportion of those students transfer to another institution and either leave the higher educational system completely, or eventually earn a bachelor's degree. It would

also be helpful to know to what extent those completion rates change when one extends the time to complete a degree to beyond six years.

Socio-cultural Factors

From 1984 to 1998, increases in female enrollment at 4-year institutions contributed to overall growth in enrollment rates, and the gap between White and African-American enrollment rates has decreased since 1984 (NCES, 2000). There was no consistent growth in Hispanic student enrollment (NCES). The increasing diversity of immigrants and the higher birth rates of minority populations in the United States have led to a significant growth in minority populations, as illustrated by the fact that during the 1980s, the non-Hispanic white population increased by about 4%, the African-American population increased by 12%, the Hispanic population by about 53%, and the *other* population group, Asians, American Indians, and those not of Hispanic origins, increased by over 70% (NCES). According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998), it is estimated that the population increased by almost 20 million, and about 67% of that increase was due to minority population growth. In 1995, racial/ethnic minorities constituted 25% of all students in college in the United States (NCES, 2000).

It is important to recognize the high rate of enrollment for women and specific minority groups in institutions of higher education because this data may be important in better understanding just *who* is attending, persisting in, and leaving American colleges today. Demographics suggest that growth in college enrollment is likely to be slower in the next few decades, and college students will likely be older and more diverse than in the past (Murdock & Hoque, 1999). Although these changes in enrollment patterns are

not necessarily problematic, the interrelationships that exist between such demographic characteristics as minority status and reduced access to socio-economic resources are likely to make these interrelationships challenging to institutions of higher education, and may impact students' desire and ability to remain in college.

Socio-economic factors also may influence college enrollment and persistence. According to the *Condition of Education 2000* (NCES, 2000), the higher the family income of high school graduates, the more likely they are to enroll in postsecondary education. Among 1992 high school graduates as a whole, the proportion that enrolled in 4-year institutions by 1994 increased at each family income level, from 33% of low-income students to 47% of middle-income students to 77% of high-income students (NCES). No matter how much the institutions did to support low-income students in attending college, the gap in income between social groups of those attending college continued growing wider. Some maintain that universities should spend more resources to compensate for the gap in income (Geiger, 1986; Lucas, 1994).

Higher Educational Systems

By the end of the twentieth century, the higher educational system, or the academy, that had evolved over the centuries since colonial times in the United States had reached a stage of diversity, complexity, and comprehensiveness that never could have been foreseen (Altbach, 1999). It became more of a social system with its various parts standing in relationship to one another, with specific rules of conduct, sets of shared beliefs, and expectations on the part of students, staff, and the public. This system has become so complex and successful that it is actually more like a "gigantic economic

machine devouring billions of dollars, almost \$190 billion, every year” (Cohen, 1998, p. 319). The problem of access for everyone was mitigated by constructing thousands of community colleges while also maintaining every type of college that had previously been established: residential and commuter; liberal arts and occupational; single-sex and coed; religious and secular. Higher education is involved in basic and applied research, general education, high school make-up studies, professional development, job-entry skills, career upgrading, and personal interest studies (Altbach, 1999). These systemic changes bring more questions to mind that may be better answered by the students themselves. Does the increased range of options and opportunities make it easier or harder for young adults to make important career choices while in college? Do these varied options influence some students to stop-out to reconsider personal plans?

Colleges today are expected to go far beyond preparing students academically, and many institutions have developed a variety of support systems and programs designed to help students adjust to college life. Institutions can control dropout rates to a certain extent based on the time, energy, and funds that are invested in getting students started on the right path in the first semester of college (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Institutions that provide adequate personal and programmatic support through orientation, advising, and careful attention to first year course experiences, actually experience lower dropout rates (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999).

Levitz et al. (1999) maintain that in most colleges across the country, first year students come to school with some level of anxiety or fear about their new beginnings. Some of these students have complicated educational and personal backgrounds related to issues such as, study habits, confidence, desire to finish college, attitudes toward

education, self-reliance, family support, and openness, that are beyond the scope of the services available at many colleges. Many faculty and staff members make the mistake of assuming that first year students come to college as truly independent learners; and, therefore, students are not always given the support they need to remain in college (Altbach, 1999.). Levitz et al. assert:

Students may have the potential to be highly motivated, independent student-scholars. However, hundreds of anecdotal reports from faculty and staff across the nation indicate that a majority of the students today lack the level of independence, skill, and savvy of students in years past. (p. 40)

Higher percentages of students are graduating from high school in 2000 than ever before, and the percentage of those going on to college is also increasing, but even with tightening of high school graduation requirements, the need for college-level remedial education continues to increase (Cohen, 1998; NCES, 2000; Reisberg, 1999). Since the 1960s, more under-prepared students have enrolled in college (Cohen). Perhaps institutions, including faculty, staff, and administrators, along with parents and students, should be more aware of the ramifications that accompany the lack of preparation as it relates to students' ability and desire to stay in college.

Institutions, both high schools and colleges, may need to seek ways to work with students to bring about the developmental growth important for continued persistence in college. Numerous studies have found that basic student characteristics such as gender, race, age, and family income are significantly correlated with both college graduation in general and length of time to degree (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Levine, 1989; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). With more high school graduates, now about 67%, going directly to college, there will likely be larger numbers of inadequately

prepared college freshmen (NCES, 2000; Murtaugh, Burns, & Schuster, 1999). These students have important academic gaps to fill before they can progress toward their degrees (ACT Newsroom, 2000).

Student departure from institutions of higher education poses a long-standing and thorny problem to both scholars and administrators (Braxton, 2001). “The majority of people who enter college finish somewhere, sometime but individual institutions that need to keep the roof from leaking need to keep students in their doors,” says Randy Swing, co-director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College at Brevard College (Russell, 2002, p. 22). Russell quotes Richard Freeland, president of Northeastern University, “For an institution to reposition itself, graduation rate is the single most important indicator....It reflects very deep thinking about institutional character...and it’s very, very difficult to change in a short period” (p. 23). For colleges, dropouts and students transferring elsewhere are not just an educational disappointment. When students leave, they take tuition dollars with them and damage the school’s performance in college rankings.

Colleges and universities can benefit from keeping students in school because retaining students may result in increased financial resources as well as better accountability. Since state formula budgeting in higher education is designed to reflect the changes in enrollment, an increase in enrollment is accompanied by an increase in appropriations from the state (Cohn & Geske, 1990). Retention rates have sometimes been considered an indicator of institutional performance or effectiveness. For instance, the Accountability Task Force, which was established by the governor of Wisconsin, included the graduation rate of undergraduate students as a measure of institutional

effectiveness (Gaither, Nedwek, & Neal, 1994). Furthermore, even though it is still in debate whether retention rates can be regarded as an indicator of institutional quality, retention rates are used to rank colleges and universities (College Board, 2002; Thompson & Morse, 1998).

Retention Overview

Since colleges across the country started working overtime during the 1980s to keep students in their institutions, several forms of retention programs have been developed. Almost 25% of all colleges have adopted some variation of *learning communities*, which involve team and interdisciplinary teaching as well as student groupings based on specific areas of need and/or interest (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). Many colleges have created freshmen seminars, first year experience programs, or forums to cement students' sense of belonging and address student concerns before they become significant retention problems (Noel et al., 1985). Some critics see such programs as a lot of effort just to massage some statistics, yet Robert Morse, research director for the *US News* rankings, says graduation rates and retention statistics are a reflection of how good a school is, and the information should be available to families who are making important and costly college application decisions (Russell, 2002).

There are many ways institutions of higher education address their own retention and persistence issues. As the competition for students gets tougher each year, these institutions will spend significant time, money, and energy to find ways to attract and keep students. An institutional retention mission is usually composed of institutional, organizational, and student-centered properties that work together to support the retention

and persistence of students (Moxley, Najor-Durack, & Dumbrique, 2001). These properties, such as, staff and faculty participation, ease of use, and available resources, indicate to the members of the educational community that retention is a priority. The retention mission is strengthened when it is co-coordinated with the teaching and student life missions of the higher educational courses of study. Moxley et al. (2001), suggest that institutions clearly articulate endorsement of retention throughout all areas of the institution.

Retention Practices

It is meaningful to identify the major components of supportive retention practices since they underpin or contribute to a number of different programmatic approaches to retention. Moxley et al. (2001) maintain that retention programs should provide emotional support and guidance for students recognizing that entry, re-entry, and involvement in higher education can cause considerable anxiety and stress. They go on to say that informational support is another element important to retention programs. Many students may not understand the requirements of higher education, so programs must provide the information students need to fulfill expectations on campus. It is often helpful for these students to have access to other students who have been successful and who can give them informal information about how to be successful (Moxley, et al.; Porter, 1999).

Levitz et al. (1999) explain that retention programs can also be improved by providing instrumental support where students get practical assistance to resolve the educational challenges and issues they encounter in other areas, such as financial

resources, housing, physical and mental health, and transportation. Such programs could offer students practical, technical assistance and advocacy to persist in their education. Material support is another important aspect of retention efforts. Moxley et al. (2001) suggest that students could receive direct financial aid, or emergency and flexible loan arrangements to support their academic participation in college as well as their housing needs.

New Era in Higher Education

In the 1990s, American higher education showed that it was able to weather many storms of public criticism as well as the vagaries of the socio-economic process, and it became clear that higher education is essential for acquiring the skills and adaptability needed in the modern workplace (Levine, 1997). Vocationalism has been an important trend in the past twenty years, and many critics maintain that the university curriculum must provide relevant training for a variety of increasingly complex jobs (Lucas, 1994). The more traditional concept that higher education should provide liberal, non-vocational studies for elites, through a broad but unfocused curriculum, has been widely criticized as lacking in relevance to the needs of contemporary students (Altbach, 1999). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) remind us that:

Americans often expect colleges and universities to accomplish great goals such as: teaching the heritage of Western civilization; developing excellent verbal and mathematical skills; developing a solid understanding of social, cultural, and political structures; fostering the ability to think creatively, reflectively, analytically, critically, and synthetically; developing a moral and value system; facilitating personal growth and self-identity; and, fostering a career path along with a sense of self in the community. (p. 1)

Students urge colleges to focus on preparation for jobs while employers demand that colleges teach subjects that will be relevant to their future employees. Consequently,

enrollment in the social sciences and humanities has declined in the last two decades (Altbach, 1999). Attempting to adhere to the values as well as the philosophy of a liberal arts education, modern colleges are faced with challenges from economic, societal, and cultural forces. Are the expectations established by both the institutions of higher education and the consumers of those institutions unrealistic, or even overwhelming to many of the students?

While the demographic profile of the American college student is changing, the relationship between higher education and various levels of government and industry is in flux. The way colleges and universities use financial resources is shifting. Significant research on the brain and the learning process is making an impact on curriculum and instructional techniques (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Are the rapid changes taking place in society as a whole and in the institutional systems, themselves, making the college process more difficult for young adults to manage in the current era?

Some people see higher education as a *mature industry* where expansion will be slow and their basic assumptions about the very nature of the academy will focus on stability rather than growth (Levine, 1997). How can this focus deal with the many rapid changes in the world? How will this view of the nature of the academy affect the students that are the very focus of the process? Page (2000) quotes Arthur Levine, who writes extensively on education in an information age and who believes that change is the single greatest issue facing educators today:

The whole of our society has changed. Demographically, economically, technologically – and we're part of a global society. We are faced with a new world, and educational institutions that were created for an industrial society don't match the needs of an information age. The challenge today is not about fixing educational institutions that are broken, but about radically redesigning our entire educational system from a dramatically different world than it was created for originally. (p. 48)

Levine, in Page (2000) explains more about the higher educational system:

Many in government, politics, the press, and academia tend to look for reforms that would return us to the golden era, circa the 1950s.... There is the perception that we had a marvelous educational system, and somehow, we've lost it. If we had that educational system today, it would be *horrendous*. That system allowed large numbers of people to drop out. (p. 48)

The old system of higher education might have worked for the societal needs of past years, but since our students' characteristics are changing, it may be time to listen to what they could be trying to tell us.

Levine (1997) maintains that we are presently in a period of *discontinuity* in which the changes in our society are so broad and deep that our typical methods of readjusting to changes no longer work. Levine suggests that our college students are living in a time where change is dominant and the former cycles of community life and individualism have morphed into a world incorporating incessant and unimaginable change. Higher education is functioning in a far different context than it was over 300 years ago. Levine and Cureton (1998) maintain that externally, the globalized telecommunications revolution has altered the world and created porous national boundaries, which raise new questions about cultural identity and hegemony. Levine and Cureton (1998) say that higher education is being forced to shift from a system based upon conveying traditions to one devoted to shaping those traditions to fit an entirely new set of circumstances. Levine and Cureton explain:

This generation is no better and no worse than any other generation, but, like every other generation before, it is unique. As a result, this generation requires a unique brand of education that will enable it to attain its personal dreams and to serve the society it must lead. The education we offered to previous generations, whether successful or not, will not work for these students. They are different, and their times are different. (p. 157)

There are disparate expectations of college today held by students, parents, the public, employers, and the academy itself. These disparities lead to difficulties in communication, which can influence the development of solutions to problems and the focused attention on the needs of the student. The students, who are the central focus of the educational process, possibly feel this general confusion quite deeply.

The uneven preparation of our students, noticed in the early 1960s, is another reality that colleges need to address. The combination of demographic changes, the democratization of college attendance that reaches deep into the pool of high school graduates, and under-resourced high schools results in new challenges for colleges and their students. The lack of alignment between college entry expectations and high school exit criteria has produced a group of students who are unprepared for college-level learning. Currently, these students more often fail to complete their studies or take far more than four years to do so (Astin, 2001).

The pattern of participation in higher education has become complex and chaotic as students earn credits from multiple institutions over extended periods. Many students work full-time, study part-time, and struggle to balance complicated lives. Levine and Cureton (1998) view a future higher educational landscape in which my grandchildren will enter an entirely new world of college in the mid twenty-first century. They suggest that many traditional campuses will no longer exist since students will take classes wherever they choose: at home; at work; in malls; and, in various educational centers.

Distance learning has recently compounded the notion of traditional concepts of *campus* and *learning community* (Ewell, 1997). According to the 2003 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 80% of college students report that instructors

frequently require them to use information technology in their academic work, 66% of students report that instructors use information technology very often in classes, and 62% of students report that they regularly communicate by e-mail with instructors. These statistics indicate that the college learning environment is being redefined.

Properly articulated and practiced, a twenty-first century education will meet many of the expectations of all concerned. There are many open doors now leading to a college education that accommodate just about anyone interested in entering. Those involved in higher education must focus on what the students need to fully benefit from their education as well as on what they already bring to it. An understanding of the historical context of higher education, in conjunction with demographic data and trends over the years, might provide some insight into what those needs are so more people can better comprehend the choices students make today regarding stopping-out of college. Additionally, information about young adult developmental theories may add another dimension to professional and parental understanding of the way students make meaning from their experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on young adult development. I believe that when educators, parents, and institutional leaders look at the literature and then listen to the students' deliberations over educational options, they may be better informed about developmental issues, such as identity formation and cognitive growth, which can significantly influence students' educational decisions. Institutions that view stopping-out as a problem to be solved, perhaps implementing costly programs and facilities to retain these students, may want to reconsider their positions. Parents and families who view their children who stop-out as failures may also want to reconsider the way they think about their children's choices.

This overview of selected theories on young adult development, within the context of stopping-out of college, gives particular emphasis to the internal changes that students commonly experience during the college years. My assumption is that identity, moral, social/emotional, and cognitive development, as outlined in young adult development theory, influences the decisions students make about their college experiences, and specifically about stopping-out of college.

In Considering Young Adult Development Theory

Viewing young adult development theories as a whole is like looking at a weather map of New England where the patterns can change from day to day, or hour-to-hour, depending on how each forecaster interprets available data, and on which way the wind blows. When using different theories to attempt to understand the same situation, the

results of the analysis will vary. Consideration of many different theoretical lenses provides a more comprehensive understanding of what is happening and points to a variety of possible strategies for addressing issues. Even then, all theories have limitations and challenges so there is not always a theory that will provide the clarity and guidance needed.

An important concern about college student development theory is the narrowness of the populations on which much theory is based. Earlier research centers on Euro-American, white, male, upper- and upper-middle-class students (Garland & Grace, 1993; King, 1994; Strange, 1994). Later research addresses this bias by extending studies to include women, ethnic minorities, and non-heterosexual students, but more work in this area needs to be done. King (1994) suggests considering the influence of factors such as motivation, mastered skills, and disabling conditions. King also recognizes the need to identify factors that individuals have in common as well as their differences.

Many young adult development theories do not adequately discuss how actual growth takes place so the utility of the theories to guide practice is somewhat limited. More advanced theory would likely clarify the mechanisms by which development occurs (Garland & Grace, 1993). Terenzini's (1994) concern is that not enough is known about the timing of development, which is an important concept when working with students who are stopping-out of college. He also notes that there is not enough adequate information about whether the progression of development is linear or discontinuous which indicates a need for more research that extends over a number of years. Discontinuity in development may help inform us of the need for some students to leave college temporarily to allow time to reconnect disparate developmental pieces.

Some critics suggest there is not enough attention given to the role of the environment in developmental change, including the mutual reshaping that results from the interaction of the person and the environment (Kuh, Whitt, & Shedd, 1987; Terenzini, 1994). Other critics note that few theories have been adequately tested for conceptual validity to purposefully explain student change among different student groups (Terenzini; Upcraft & Gardner, 1994). Strange (1994) says that student development theory is “rooted in Western rationalism and American pragmatism” (p. 410). This type of philosophical base may result in a limited set of assumptions and values related to student development. In addition, the focus in young adult development theories is almost totally on individual development, but it excludes attention to the development of community-oriented values such as altruism and service. This limited focus may ignore important aspects of the way students develop in relation to their greater community.

When considering application of young adult development theories, it is important to remember that developmental processes should not be assumed to be the same for every individual in any environment or culture. In addition, many existing young adult development theories tend to fragment development rather than view it holistically. For example, Kohlberg (1976) presents moral development; Cross (1999) discusses African American identity development; and, Josselson (1992) considers women’s identity development. More needs to be known about how these different aspects of development relate to each other if we are to better understand the issues students stopping-out of college may be experiencing. It is essential to consider these limitations and challenges when examining theories of young adult development as they pertain to students’ stopping-out of college.

Theories of Young Adult Development

I consider both psychosocial and cognitive-structural theorists as I explore various ideas about young adult development. I believe that these theories provide a framework necessary to better understand college students, under the age of 26, as they stop-out of college during very formative periods in their lives. Psychosocial theory examines individuals' personal and interpersonal lives; the theorists generally posit that human development continues throughout the lifespan with a basic underlying psychosocial structure that guides this development. These theorists examine the important issues people face as their lives progress, such as; how to define themselves; how to establish and engage in relationships with others; and how to think about and make decisions about what to do with their lives.

The cognitive-structural theorists highlight the changes in the *way* individuals think but not in *what* they think. Many of these theorists place different levels of emphasis on the importance of heredity and environment in intellectual development; they suggest various ways in which individuals develop cognitively. Psychosocial and cognitive development theories have the potential to shed light on stopping-out because the young adult years are periods of significant changes in intellectual and socio-emotional development that may be related to a student's decision to leave college and return again within a few years time.

Young Adult Identity Development

I provide a discussion of Arthur Chickering's (1969, 1981, 1993) theory because he addresses so many of the tasks facing students as they consider their own roles in the

college arena. Chickering provides a broad framework for my exploration of the identity formation process in the lives of students who stop-out of college. Some refer to Chickering's theory as "the *modal* model" since it had such a great influence on the study of college student development (Ellison & Simon, 1973, p. 50). Additionally, I provide focus on Ruthellen Josselson's (1982) theory of women's identity formation because her belief that individuals may be *stuck* in different statuses may better inform our understanding of students in the process of stopping-out of college. Josselson's idea of possible static identity could shed light on the difficulty some students have in personal growth which may lead them to exit college. I include other theories that represent a range of philosophical and methodological perspectives, that are frequently quoted in young adult development literature, and that provide the context I need as I explore the stopping-out process.

Chickering's Seven Vectors

Arthur Chickering (1969), in *Education and Identity*, explains the theory he developed after obtaining data from studies of 13 small colleges across the country. His theory focuses on the influence of the college environment on student development and on the developmental changes experienced by young adults in the college years. He revised his theory in a second edition of his book with Linda Reisser (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) to include new research findings in order to be more inclusive of modern student populations and societal conditions.¹ Chickering states that the establishment of

¹ In this paper, I will only refer to Chickering in citations when describing his theory of college student identity development, even though he co-wrote his 1993 book on *Education and Identity* with Linda Reisser, because he alone initially developed the theory. I will refer to both Chickering and Reisser when the reference includes them both.

identity is the core developmental issue with which students grapple during the college years. He also says that the resolution of a number of concerns in an individual's life contributes to the person's growing sense of identity. Establishment of identity, in turn, allows the person to address matters that may arise later in the developmental process.

Chickering's (1969) foundational work on college student identity development is particularly important for analyzing the identity formation process, the issues resulting from the process, the strategies students use to move through their identity formation, and how identity development relates to decisions the students make about attending college. According to Chickering, seven *vectors of development* contribute to this identity formation. He uses the term "vectors because each seems to have direction and magnitude – even though the direction may be expressed more appropriately by a spiral or by steps than by a straight line" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 8).

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) labels his first vector *achieving competence* and refers to students' development of "the confidence in their own ability to cope with what comes and to achieve successfully what they set out to do" (p. 53). He further explains that there are three kinds of competence; intellectual, physical, and interpersonal. Reisser (1995) suggests that students become intellectually competent when they can acquire knowledge and skills related to particular subject matter, when they can think and reason critically, and when they develop "intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic sophistication" (p. 506). The implication here may be that students who do not make sufficient progress in competency levels may be at a significant disadvantage when maneuvering the challenges of college life. Josselson (1987) asserts that some people remain in a state of moratorium where they cannot move beyond their current level of

development; therefore, a person experiencing no movement, or slow progress, in intellectual development could have a difficult time in college.

According to Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), students' overall sense of competence increases as they learn to trust their abilities, receive accurate feedback from others, and integrate their skills into a stable self-assurance. Other theorists (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1993; Tatum, 1999; Ward, 2000) would add that students from different racial and ethnic histories might not get important positive feedback because of an institutional lack of appreciation of artistic or athletic achievements specific to their own cultural backgrounds. Perhaps the absence of positive acknowledgement of different cultural competencies by college personnel and programs could be a factor in some students leaving college.

The second vector Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) mentions is that of *managing emotions*. He insists that whether new to college or returning after a time away, few students escape anger, fear, hurt, longing, boredom, and tension. He says that anxiety, anger, depression, desire, guilt, and shame all have the power to derail the educational process when they become excessive or overwhelming. Gilligan (1995) would agree with Chickering that these emotions are an integral part of the lives of college students, and her ethic of care suggests that the balancing of emotions does not take place autonomously or independently, as some would emphasize (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1972), but rather through connection and relatedness to others.

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) maintains that these emotions need good management. The first task would not be to eliminate them, but to allow them into personal awareness and to acknowledge them as signals to be watched with care.

According to Chickering, development proceeds when students learn appropriate channels for releasing irritations before they explode, dealing with fears before they become immobilized, and healing emotional wounds before they infect other relationships. Parents and college personnel should be sensitive to the internal processes in which young adults are engaged and to the variety of ways the young people manage emotions as they make sense of the world and their place in the world, either as students or in other roles (Weathersby & Tarule, 1980).

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) says that it may be difficult for students to accept that some amount of tension is normal, that some anxiety may help performance, and that impulse gratification must sometimes be squelched. Delpit (1996) argues that the tension students may feel is a systemic problem that institutions must address, and the tension may be exacerbated for African American students whose lack of power in the institution makes it particularly difficult to balance emotions. Delpit believes that as self-control and self-expression become balanced, awareness and integration of emotions will support each other. While Chickering acknowledges gender differences in managing emotions, he does not address racial or ethnic differences, and he offers no specifics on how men and women do manage their emotions.

A key developmental step of college students is learning to function with relative self-sufficiency, to take responsibility for pursuing self-selected goals, and to be less bound by others' opinions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This move toward internal locus of control may play an important part in the lives of transitioning college students as many students may enter college with a strong need for approval from others and an undeveloped sense of personal direction. Minority students may need far more time to

establish themselves and then redefine their place in the worldview as Ward (2000) suggests.

Chickering's (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) third vector, *developing autonomy*, is defined as, "freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval from others" (p.117). This differs from Gilligan's (1982) emphasis on connectedness, and others' (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) emphasis on connection and collaboration rather than separation. According to Chickering, emotional independence begins with separation from parents and proceeds through reliance on peers, non-parental adults, and occupational or institutional reference groups. It culminates in diminishing need for such supports and increased willingness to risk loss of friends or status in order to pursue strong interests or stand on convictions. Since there are so many uniquely individual ways young people from diverse backgrounds arrive at their own levels of autonomy, it is important to consider a wide range of perspectives on the process (Belenky, et al., 1986; Josselson, 1987).

Instrumental independence includes the skills to organize activities and to solve problems in a self-directed way (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) maintains that this independence also includes the ability to be mobile, getting from place to place without needing detailed directions, as well as the ability to find information or resources required to fulfill personal needs or desires. Instrumental independence, especially self-directed organization, is an important part of college student development that many recognize as a major goal of higher education but college personnel may not recognize their role in facilitating some students' acquisition of the skills needed to achieve that independence (Astin, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Many theorists would caution us that students do not master those skills in isolation (Belenky, et al., 1986; Daloz, 1986; Gilligan, 1982).

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) stresses that developing autonomy culminates in the recognition that one cannot operate in a vacuum and that greater autonomy enables individuals to reach healthier forms of interdependence. With interdependence, Chickering says that relationships with parents are revised while new relationships based on equality and reciprocity replace the less consciously chosen familial and peer bonds. Eventually, the interpersonal context for young adults broadens to include the community, the society, and the world resulting in connectedness with others. Cross (1995) and Helms (1992) argue that some of those familial and peer bonds are integral to the cultural make-up of many young adults and that these bonds will and should never be fully replaced.

The fourth vector of Chickering's (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), is *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, which involves both tolerance and appreciation of differences and the capacity for intimacy that can contribute to the development of the sense of self. He says that these *tolerance* skills include the development of intercultural and interpersonal acceptance of individual differences, as well as the ability to form healthy, lasting relationships with close friends and partners. Reisser (1995) acknowledges "that relationships provide powerful learning experiences about feelings, communication, sexuality, self-esteem, values, and other aspects of identity, for both men and women" (p. 508). She explains that a critical function of the college experience is to promote acceptance of individual differences and an appreciation for cultural diversity.

Other theorists (Ward, 2000; Tatum, 1999) agree that respecting differences in close friends, as Reisser (1995) suggests, can generalize to acquaintances from other countries and cultures. Reisser asserts that these tasks “involve the ability to accept individuals for who they are...and to appreciate commonalities” (p. 509). I also believe that awareness, breadth of experience, openness, curiosity, and objectivity can help students refine first impressions, reduce bias and ethnocentrism, and increase empathy and altruism, allowing for appreciation of diversity. However, I think that without the skills to achieve appropriate relationships, some college students may feel overwhelmed with the demands and the complexities of relationships encountered on college campuses.

Differences in the ways men and women develop interpersonal relationships are not explicitly addressed by Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Some theorists believe the development of mature interpersonal relationships may begin earlier for women than men, and the development of autonomy may actually come later than interpersonal competence for women (Blackhurst, 1995; Taub & McEwen, 1992). It is also possible that many women will actually achieve autonomy through the development of healthy relationships (Straub, 1987; Taub, 1995; Utterback, Spooner, Barbieri, & Fox, 1995). Chickering observes that developing mature relationships includes a shift away from too much dependence or too much dominance and toward an interdependence between equals. The relationship increases in quality, meaning the individuals make lasting commitments based on “honesty, responsiveness, and unconditional regard” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 510). This concept is similar to Gilligan’s (1982) theory of developmental progression to intricate relationships, although Gilligan stresses a process that includes a true balance between self and others in relationships.

Each of Chickering's (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) vectors builds on the one that comes before it, but the *establishing identity* vector builds on each of the previous vectors, and includes the additional component of acknowledging the differences in identity development based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Reisser (1995) says, "Any experience that helps students define 'who I am, who I am not' can help solidify a sense of self. Personal stability and integration are the result" (p. 509). She proposes that with identity development comes a solid sense of self and it becomes more apparent that there is an *I* who controls the facets of personality and who takes full ownership of all the elements of oneself. Parker Palmer (1999) explains further:

Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live – but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life. (p. 3)

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) maintains that establishing identity also includes reflecting on one's family of origin and ethnic heritage, defining self as part of a religious or cultural tradition, and seeing self within a social and historical context. Cross (1995) takes this concept further by suggesting that individuals do not simply *see* themselves in a cultural context, but that they actually transform their identity. For Chickering, establishing identity involves gaining a sense of how one is seen and evaluated by others; it leads to "clarity and stability and a feeling of warmth for this core self as capable, familiar, and worthwhile" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 48). Cross (1995) suggests that the important task of developing clarity of self could become a struggle that influences identity development.

The applicability of Chickering's (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) theory to students who are not from white, middle-class backgrounds could be questioned since the

development of racial and ethnic identity could be more complex for some minority students. Focusing substantial energy on developing racial/ethnic identity could possibly cause delays in other aspects of psychosocial development (Taub & McEwen, 1992). It can also be noted that for African Americans, developing independence and autonomy often occurs in the context of interpersonal relationships; family and extended family also exert a pervasive influence on this population (Branch-Simpson, 1984; Hughes, 1987). Religion, spiritual development, and social responsibility also are more prevalent concepts in the lives and identities of African American students than Chickering seems to acknowledge (Branch-Simpson; Hughes).

The *developing purpose* vector described by Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) consists of developing clear vocational goals, making meaningful commitments to specific personal interests and activities, and establishing strong interpersonal commitments. For Chickering, this phase includes making and staying with decisions with a sense of *intentionality*, even in difficult circumstances. Chickering says that we discover our vocation by discovering what we love to do, what energizes and fulfills us, what uses our talents and challenges us to develop new ones, and what actualizes all our potentials for excellence. Palmer (1999) recommends that a search for a vocation includes listening to what one's soul is saying. I assert that it is difficult for many students to construct a plan that balances lifestyle considerations, vocational aspirations, relationships, and avocational interests. I believe that developing a purpose in life is basic to identity development and at different points of development, it is resolved in different ways. It seems that Chickering does not adequately address students' motivational levels

as they relate to developing a purpose in life since desire to seek a vocational goal must affect developmental progress.

For college students, social and emotional maturity, lifestyle, and family influences may all affect decision-making and goal-setting processes involved in developing the sense of purpose that Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) describes. While many students may have clarified who they are and where they came from, I believe that they have only a vague notion of who they want to be. Schlossberg (1984), in *Counseling Adults in Transition*, notes that some students in transitional stages may actually appear to have a decline in growth as they struggle to find purpose for their lives. Schlossberg also suggests that professionals who work with young adults should watch for signs of this type of decline since it may indicate a need for a change in environment as they seek their path toward stronger intentionality. Baxter Magolda (1992) agrees with Chickering that developing purpose involves a growing ability to unify one's many different goals within the scope of a larger, more meaningful purpose, and to exercise intentionality on a daily basis. Baxter Magolda also stresses the importance of providing validation for students to encourage them to use their own voices as they construct meaning for themselves.

Chickering's (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) last vector, *developing integrity*, includes "three sequential but overlapping stages: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence" (p. 51). Chickering discusses how students progress from a more rigid, moralistic way of thinking, similar to Kohlberg's (1972) sense of justice, to a more humanized value system. This system is relative rather than dualistic, where the interests of others are balanced with their own interests (Perry, 1981).

Chickering notes that a personalized value system is then established where core values are consciously affirmed and the beliefs of others are acknowledged and respected.

In the process of developing congruence, Chickering asserts that the students' values and actions become more in line with each other and more authentic as personal self-interest becomes balanced with a sense of social responsibility. Belenky, et al. (1986) add that this authenticity includes an intermingling of voice, mind, and self. They say it can be facilitated by the presence of connected teaching where teachers guide the development of personal voice by stressing connection and understanding. For example, a student participating in a sorority may initially want to go along with the values of those around her, but as she develops a sense of integrity, she may move away from the dictates of the sorority sisters and begin to establish a personal value system thereby becoming aware that her values have implications for her actions.

Students bring to college an array of assumptions about what is right and wrong, true and false, good and bad, important and unimportant. Younger students may have acquired these assumptions from parents, church, school, media, peers, or other sources. Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) maintains that when others' values are internalized, most behavior conforms to these values even when the *judge* is absent. He claims that disobedience produces either a diffuse anxiety or specific fear of discovery and punishment. He also says that students' values are implicit and unconsciously held; therefore, they are hard to identify or explain. This is similar to Kohlberg's (1976) focus on rightness and obligation as individuals attempt to define what they *ought* to do. With the humanizing of values, much of this *baggage* becomes known so the contents can be examined. Chickering believes many items are discarded on brief inspection, sometimes

with later regret. He says some items are tried and found suitable while a few are set aside because they still fit and can be incorporated into a new *wardrobe*.

Chickering describes a “personalizing of value” that occurs as the new wardrobe is assembled (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 61). Ultimately, the items selected are those required by the characteristics of the wearer, by the work expected, by the situations encountered, and by the persons seen as important. Chickering suggests that individuals select guidelines to suit themselves as well as the conditions of their lives. Using the clothing metaphor, Chickering says that the components of a wardrobe are actively embraced as part of the self, and they become standards to flexibly assess personal actions. Chickering believes that personalizing of values leads to the development of *congruence*, which is the “achievement of behavior consistent with the personalized values held” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 86). The abilities to personalize values and to make choices with conviction, as well as the willingness to take a risk, are important skills for college students’ success (Astin, 2001; Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) offers some very practical suggestions to institutions of higher education that seek to apply his theory in practice. He maintains that institutions must have specific objectives with consistent programs, policies, and practices, all of which take into account the developmental process of the students. Chickering also says that the size of the institution is important because “as the number of persons outstrips the opportunities for significant participation and satisfaction, the developmental potential of available settings is attenuated for all” (p. 269). He also indicates that a large institution does not automatically limit the possibilities for student involvement, but the ratio of faculty and staff to students may influence the opportunities

for those groups to make close connections. Smaller communities within a larger system may enhance opportunities for those connections.

Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) states that extensive and varied interaction among faculty and students facilitates development. Students need to see faculty in a variety of situations involving different roles and responsibilities because such interaction leads students to perceive faculty as real people who are accessible and interested in them beyond the classroom. He also says that a relevant curriculum is needed that is sensitive to individual differences, offers diverse perspectives, which is a critically important issue for Delpit (1996), and helps students make sense of what they are learning. The assumptions about student learning that underlie the curriculum and the process by which learning takes place have as much impact on outcomes as the specific curricular content.

For development to occur, Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) maintains that teaching should involve active learning, student-faculty interaction, timely feedback, high expectations, and respect for individual learning differences. Delpit and Dowdy (2002) take the concept of active learning to a more complex level as they emphasize the need to include all facets of the students' culture in the learning environment to allow for genuine student-teacher interaction and intellectual development. Chickering says that meaningful friendships and diverse student communities in which shared interests exist and significant interactions occur encourage development of all seven vectors. Ward (2002) and Tatum (1999) warn that simply assembling diverse communities will not provide opportunities for authentic racial and ethnic identity development since active dialogue about diversity is the critical component.

Finally, Chickering (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) says we must acknowledge the cyclical nature of learning and development because learning involves periods of differentiation and integration, equilibrium and disequilibrium. New experiences and challenges provide opportunities for new perspectives and understanding that is more complex to occur. Chickering and Reisser caution, “Signs of discomfort and upset are not necessarily negative. On the contrary, they often signal that developmentally fruitful encounters are occurring, that stimuli for learning are at work” (p. 479). Some studies suggest that education may be one of many connected factors that catalyze movement in students’ lives, and they propose that there is a reciprocal relationship between development and education (Daloz, 1986; King & Kitchener, 1994; Weathersby & Tarule, 1980). This possible relationship is an important concept to consider while exploring decisions young adults make about college attendance.

Additional Identity Development Theories

Where Chickering and Reisser (1993) discuss vectors that students follow and possibly revisit as they develop, other theorists describe a more progressive and linear developmental path (Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1978; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). The bulk of research related to psychosocial identity development stems from Erikson’s theoretical framework (1963, 1968). Much research on identity development in young adults conducted between 1950 and 1970 examines late-adolescent men at prestigious colleges from an Eriksonian perspective and generalizes findings to include women. A warning about these, and other stage/age theories of development, is that it is important to guard against uncritically accepting the universality and generalizability of the concepts

they propose. Many of these theories often assume that patterns found in research studies are representative of the larger population. With the exclusion of ethnic minorities and women, and the lack of representation of a variety of socio-economic classes in many of the samples, this assumption should be questioned (Ross-Gordon, 1991).

Some theorists (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Levinson, 1986; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970) allude to a continued building and re-building of identity as some things are left behind and/or built upon during this reappraisal of life and commitment process. They also maintain that development is inextricably connected to the task of continual questioning, evaluating, and letting go of deeply held values, ideas, and beliefs formulated in childhood. In this developmental progression, Loevinger (1976) identifies different stages of self-development that move from more simple, impulsive, and inflexible ways of making sense of oneself and others to more complex, flexible, and better integrated means of self exploration. Some young adults may get to a point of reassessing their reasons for being in college, and perhaps modifying their previously held beliefs. Understanding this complex self-exploration process may assist personnel working with these students.

Levinson (1978), in a study of middle-class, white, men, maintains that an individual builds a life structure to organize both the inner, psychological life and the outer life that involves interaction with the external environment. Levinson says that an individual continually tries to find a balance, during alternating times of stability and transition, so there is constant adaptation to biological, social, environmental, and psychological changes. According to Levinson, if an individual has too much difficulty adapting to myriad social and environmental changes, then that individual may feel the

need to rethink the situation. Recognizing that students may be struggling to reestablish their equilibrium and personal balance, Daloz (1986) emphasizes the importance of developing a community where students have *safe* spaces providing support and comfort.

Perry (1970) suggests that such environments could provide situations conducive to the questioning, reflecting, and reevaluating that is a part of young adult development. Perry's (1970) study of undergraduates in their four years at elite colleges reveals a hierarchical sequence in their ethical and cognitive development. He says that as individuals develop, they progress toward relativistic thinking with the ability to accept multiple perspectives. Loevinger (1976) develops the process further by explaining that the ego is the general organizing framework for individuals as they progress in new ways to perceive themselves and their worlds. For Loevinger, "ego development connotes the course of character development within individuals" (p. 3). She suggests that the developing individual starts at what she calls a *conformist* stage where an individual's behavior closely matches that of a group's behavior. The individual then moves to a stage she calls *self-aware*, similar to Perry's multiplicity stage, which often includes risk-taking. Weathersby and Tarule (1980) warn that this risk-taking is a challenge for young adults and "frequently both intellectual and emotional trauma accompany change in one's epistemological world view" (p. 38). Perry suggests that educators wishing to facilitate students in progressing to higher levels of cognitive and ethical development must attend to the individual's needs and their current ways of making meaning.

Perry (1970) maintains that young adults eventually become independent thinkers who are able to make commitments through which they can resolve the initial sense of confusion that was part of their more simplistic style of thinking. Loevinger (1976)

supports Perry's theory of sequential thinking, and suggests that the individual eventually transitions to a stage where rules and values have been internalized allowing the individual to experience detachment and empathy. Perry maintains that although development is sequential, it is also recursive because individuals often revisit similar issues at later ages in life, but they do so with a different perspective. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) believe that the evidence of significant ego development in college is inconsistent. They suggest that there is little if no change at all during the college years. Some of Loevinger's (1976) own research indicates that there *may* even be a regression for some individuals, which is similar to Josselson's (1996) idea that individuals may appear to be in a state of decline.

Abundant literature highlights differences between men and women in critical areas of young adult development (Belenky, et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). Belenky, et al. note that while Perry (1970) provides a fine template for examining the epistemological development of men, the fact that his theory was derived from men's experiences limits it as a way of understanding women's intellectual and ethical development. Belenky, et al. also recognize that Perry's approach reveals only what women share in common with men but does not explore issues more characteristic of women's development. They traced women's epistemological development through a progression in which women gradually became more able to think for themselves and to see themselves as "constructors of truth rather than as passive receivers" (p. 69). Perry used a relatively homogeneous population, thereby identifying consistent patterns of development, however, this type of generalized track was not obvious when using subjects from diverse backgrounds as Belenky, et al. used in their research.

Josselson's Theory of Women's Identity Development

Ruthellen Josselson (1992) notes that past theories of human development were often conceived in terms of male development, with female development either ignored or tacked on as an addendum (Evans, et al., 1998; Josselson, 1987; Kuh, 1996; Strange, 1994). Josselson says the concepts of autonomy, independence, and separation did not describe the central issues of women's development and inadequately discussed the importance of relatedness and attachment in women's lives. The past theories' models lacked flexibility to "encompass the multiplicity of roles and circumstances in women's lives" (Josselson, 1987, p. 27). In her study, Josselson wants to "understand the internal and developmental roots of identity formation in women" (p. 33). Josselson attempts to explain why some women can resolve their identity crisis while others actually avoid creating identity or fail to move beyond what she calls a crisis.

Josselson (1973) finds that women, in creating their identity, are more likely to "focus on the kind of person to be rather than to focus on their occupational decisions, sexual identifications, political/ideological ideologies, or religious convictions" (p. 47). Therefore, she maintains that a woman's relationship with herself is held together by who she is and not by the decisions she makes. Josselson's (1982) later research led her to the exploration of the internal differences among identity statuses to explain why some women resolve their identity crisis while others avoid creating identity or fail to move beyond the crisis.

In Josselson's (1987) more recent work, she is careful to avoid the tendency to generalize about all women, or to assume that all women are fundamentally alike. She

also does not compare women based on particular variables, such as sexual orientation, or work status, because she understands that these dimensions are only smaller parts of a larger identity. She seeks to understand how the parts fit together into some meaningful whole. Josselson says that a person's identity status may or may not change over the lifespan. This theory of possible static identity differs from the thoughts of some other theorists who say that there is a progression in identity formation, either linear or circular (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Levinson, 1986; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970). Josselson (1987) would agree with developmental theorists that there is a progression in identity development, but she maintains that some women can be *stuck* in one of four statuses: *Diffusion*, *Foreclosure*, *Moratorium*, and *Achievement*.

Josselson's (1987) four identity statuses are the basis for her exploration and she seeks the internal differences among them, noting that they are not necessarily progressive, but neither are they necessarily permanent. According to Josselson, individuals in the state of *Diffusion* refuse or are unable to commit, although they may experience crisis. In what Josselson calls state of *Foreclosure*, individuals do not question but rather accept parental values so their commitments often come with some type of personal crisis. Josselson says that those in the state of *Moratorium* actively question parental values in order to form their own identity so their identity crisis comes without commitment. Josselson sees these people as either "sensitive or anxiety-ridden, highly ethical or self-righteous, flexible or vacillating" (1987, p. 135). This is an important concept to consider when working with students experiencing severe anxiety or contradictory behavior.

For Josselson (1987), the state of *Achievement* comes after a period of identity crisis in which critical choices are made and strong commitments are achieved. Josselson asserts that secure ego identity, similar to Loevinger's (1976) view of ego development, is evident in this state. She considers it the healthiest psychological status one can obtain since people in this state are seen as strong, self-directed, and highly adaptive (Josselson, 1987). Josselson (1987) maintains that women in the *Foreclosure* state often graduate from college with identity commitment but without experiencing identity crisis. She thinks that from a young age, these women tend to know what they want and they pursue it with fierce determination. For Josselson, childhood assumptions and identifications serve as the basis for the confidence in the direction of these women's lives.

Loevinger (1976) suggests that during the conformist stage, individuals match their behavior, values, and attitudes to their peers, while Josselson asserts that women in *Foreclosure* actually make choices without doubt, hesitation, or questioning the basic messages from people in their childhood. Josselson adds that women in *Foreclosure* often automatically adopt their parents' standards about sexual morality and choose an occupation and religion that reflects parental beliefs and preferences, thereby avoiding disappointing the parents.

For Josselson (1987), a college student who remains in this *Foreclosure* state usually builds her identity on unchallenged ego organization and gives few indications of psychological growth. Gilligan (1982) suggests that a woman's security tends to lie in her relationships, and Josselson adds that this security is not dependent on a woman's chosen career path as her life is usually filled with a strong sense of family, tradition, and moral values. For Josselson, this student is often grounded in identification with family rather

than individuation, so she usually discovers herself through her parents rather than through self-discovery and differentiation.

Josselson (1987) says that women in the *Identity Achievement* status are able to break the psychological ties to their childhood and form separate, distinct identities. According to Josselson, separation is painful for many because it means giving up what is known and trusted while simultaneously opening up to the unpredictable and unknown possibilities that lie ahead. While they are young adults, Josselson states that women in the *Identity Achievement* status go through a process of “reshaping, modifying, adding to, and mixing together the individuated and unindividuated aspects of their own selves” (1987, p. 145). According to Josselson, these young women usually look closely at the childhood identity which was established for them by their parents. Then they create an identity in their own way after examining their past identity and addressing who they want to be in the future. They are able to integrate their needs for relatedness and self-assertion where they attempt to invent their own beliefs, values, and sense of self, or self-authorship (Belenky, et al., 1986; Kegan, 1994). Josselson (1987) believes that identity achievers are also likely to make decisions contrary to parental expectations. These individuals move toward maturity without really experiencing an identity crisis because they tend to test their options silently and internally, through a “tolerance for ambiguity, a resignation to what is outside one’s control, and increasing confidence in the capacity to affect what can be controlled” (p. 104).

Josselson (1987) describes the *Moratorium* state as an unstable time when a person experiments and searches for new identities. For her, it is also a time for one to internalize a paradox that indicates there are many ways *to be right*. As college students,

these women are “aware of choice and often paralyzed by their awareness” (p. 106).

When a person learns that there are other *right* ways of being, she may actually go into a tailspin. Josselson asserts that many women who remain in the *Moratorium* state in college are caught in identity conflict and are so paralyzed by it that they can’t move beyond the conflict, thereby needing more time to resolve their identity conflict.

Josselson’s (1987) fourth identity state is *Identity Diffusion*, which is marked by both lack of crisis and lack of commitment. According to Josselson, women in this state often rank low in ego development, have trouble establishing relationships, and often rank high in anxiety. Josselson states that they have trouble making decisions based on external stimuli and they generally tend to withdraw from situations rather than confront the issues. For Josselson, these women tended to fall outside the normal range of a healthy personality. Josselson says that women in this state often suffered early emotional scars such as emotional neglect or loss of a caretaker that caused feelings of powerlessness making it difficult for them to form healthy identities.

Josselson (1992) asserts that relatedness is central in the lives of women and men, but connections with others are manifest in qualitatively different ways for each gender. For example, Josselson maintains that women tend to see relationships as fluid and dynamic, and they tend to feel and describe their connections to others “as multifaceted, complex, and often contradictory and paradoxical,” whereas men often view relationships as “permanent structures which are likely to continue in roughly the same pattern once they are formed” (p. 223). Since Josselson suggests that relationships can be a particularly important part of their experience, female college students may need to find opportunities to foster friendships and communities. I assert that we should

continue to explore areas of connection, intimacy, interdependence, autonomy, and independence to better understand others in the fast-paced, technologically connected world. Then we can help set the stage for women's growth and development in our colleges and universities as female students make difficult life decisions.

Josselson (1992) attempts to go beyond the frameworks of previous research to identify what is fundamental to women's experience producing a uniquely feminine identity and her theory enriches our understanding of relatedness as a positive aspect of the self as she clarifies how positive, healthy relationships are formed for women. While her study of women's identity development is important, one criticism is that Josselson's theory does not address the issue of identity formation through the lens of diverse student subpopulations. Josselson herself mentions the difficulty she found in applying her research to assist someone in moving from one status to another. She offers little detail in how to help young women develop the sense of competence in their abilities that she found important in identity development and there is a paucity of applications of any of Josselson's theory to practice (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Gender identity.

One subset of overall identity development that is discussed by several experts is development of gender identity through which individuals seek to make sense of their gender roles and sexuality. According to D'Augelli (1994), many gay, lesbian, and bisexual students tend to begin or accelerate the complex process of exploration of their identities during college. Although individuals may have been aware of their sexual orientation earlier in their lives, Cass (1983-1984) asserts that college is often seen as a

safer environment in which to explore and *come out* than the home and family environment. Ellis (1996) says that as many as 10% of all students outwardly identify in college as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and others may be questioning their sexuality.

Cass' (1979) model is based on the assumption that acquisition of a homosexual identity is a developmental process resulting from the interaction between individuals and their environment. Cass defines identity formation as "the process by which a person comes first to consider and later to acquire the identity of 'homosexual' as a relevant aspect of self" (p. 219). D'Augelli (1994) argues against Cass' notion of sequential stages of identity development that are achieved in early adulthood and endure throughout life. Rather, D'Augelli views identity as a social construction, which is shaped to different degrees by social circumstances and environment. For D'Augelli, identity is changeable throughout life. Cass (1983-1984) agrees that to develop a positive sexual identity, many individuals give up the prescribed heterosexual identity they have assumed since birth; however, shedding that identity involves giving up the social approval associated with this identity while taking on an identity often denigrated by society.

Cass (1979) identifies different stages of perception and behavior, moving from minimal awareness and acceptance of a homosexual identity to a final stage in which homosexual identity is integrated with other aspects of the self. According to Cass, before the first stage, individuals think of themselves as heterosexual and as their perceptions change, increased conflict may occur among self-concept, behavior, and the perceptions of others. Early stages of identity development are often associated with feelings of isolation, anxiety, and confusion (Troiden, 1989). Cass (1979) says that this conflict may result either in movement to a new stage or to identity foreclosure, similar to Josselson's

(1982) foreclosure stage, which consists of either staying at the current stage or retreating to an earlier one. Cass (1979) cautions that not all individuals progress through all the stages and stresses that individuals do play an active part in the development of their identities. One study reports that keeping gender identity hidden may hinder development of interpersonal relationships (Rhoads, 1994).

Cass (1983 - 1984) notes that homosexual identity varies “from person to person, from situation to situation, and from period to period,” but admits that more research needs to be done to explore the cultural and gender differences in the development of homosexual identity as well as the process of identifying as bisexual (p. 111). It is possible that the developmental process of gender identification is different for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals. Nevertheless, self-identification as gay or lesbian has been found to be positively associated with self-esteem and adjustment which should encourage college personnel to provide safe spaces for young adults to explore their gender identities (Rhoads, 1994; Troiden, 1989).

Racial/ethnic identity.

Racial and ethnic identity, particularly for ethnic minorities, is an important aspect of psychosocial identity development. If one wonders why, in the face of increasing diversity, all the Black kids sit together in the cafeteria, Tatum (1999) would say it is because they “find support in the face of stress which is a positive coping strategy” that she suggests is not something to fear or even to try to prevent (p. 21). Tatum asserts that it is acceptable, even necessary, for young Black individuals to have a strong sense of belonging, which may even require a period of segregation.

According to Helms (1993), racial identity can be defined as a “sense of group or collective identity based on one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (p. 3). With a slightly different focus, Tatum (1999) emphasizes the individuality of racial identity in her definition of the term: “the process of defining for one’s self the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group” (p. 16). Helms (1993) maintains that racial identity theory comes from the “tradition of treating race as a socio-political, and to a lesser extent, a cultural construction” (p. 181). In contrast, Yinger (1976) defines ethnic identity as “identification with a segment of a larger society whose members are thought, by themselves or others, to have a common origin and to share segments of common culture and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients” (p. 200). Tatum (1999) would add to this definition the elements of “defining for one’s self the personal *cultural* criteria, such as language, customs, and shared history” (Tatum, p. 16).

Cross (1995) incorporates ideas of racial and ethnic identity for Black students in a concept of psychological *nigrescence* defined as a “resocializing experience” in which the individual’s identity is “transformed from one of non-Afrocentrism to Afrocentrism to multiculturalism” (p. 23). Cross states that this is a cyclical rather than a linear journey where changes in self-identification and worldviews may occur over a lifetime. Different college students could easily be at very different stages of their racial/ethnic identity development. Cross warns that as institutions of higher education become increasingly more diverse, the failure of educators to understand students’ racial and ethnic identity

development can lead to ineffective and inappropriate responses to a variety of situations on campus, some of which are potentially volatile.

Janie Ward (2000) takes Cross' (1995) theory a bit further when she suggests that it is important to do more than have personal transformations. Ward (2000) notes that there is a new racism which is more subtle and covert than the racism faced by earlier generations but no less pernicious in its impact. According to Ward, reading a situation for race, as opposed to reacting blindly to it or not seeing it at all, means understanding the race and gender dynamics of a situation and the underlying attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Tatum (1999) would suggest this also means teaching White youths to understand their own racial identity without shame and to think critically about racism. For Ward (2000), the habit of naming the situation involves determining whether something is racist or not; it is important to recognize that people do what they do for a variety of reasons.

According to Ward (2000), as young adults “grow older and gain experience decoding their racial world and establishing healthy resistance strategies,” they will be more successful in developing their own racial identities (p. 85). As understandings of racial identity are formed, Ward says Black young adults often tackle the difficult task of integrating individual personal identity with racial identity as an important phase of healthy growth and development of the Black self. “Identity (knowing who you are) and ideology (knowing what you believe) are critical to the developmental processes in adolescence” (Ward, p. 126). Black youth must be able to grow beyond feelings of racial subservience to racial pride by confronting their racial identity where they can

acknowledge what they are *not* before they can move to what they *are*; then they must add, “I am not what you believe black people to be, and I am black” (Ward, p. 126).

Tatum (1999) notes that most people grow up in socially segregated neighborhoods and college is often the first time they have really had to interact closely, in residence halls, and other college settings, with people from different racial backgrounds. Tatum maintains that opportunities for young adults to connect with those who may share common experiences and interests can be an important part of identity development. Astin (2001) supports the need for these peer relationships and says, “Viewed as a whole, the many empirical findings...seem to warrant the following general conclusion: the students’ peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). Tatum goes on to suggest that we should work to provide opportunities for young people to connect across lines of difference also; it is important to both affirm identity *and* build community, so all student feels part of the whole as they develop a strong racial identity.

Helms’ (1993) model of White identity development parallels Cross’s (1995) nigrescence model, and both say that White college communities should find ways to understand White identity development to break the gridlock that White domination and racism often cause. Cross suggests that educators become more cognizant and responsive to the developmental nature and implications of the ethnic/racial identity process. It is important to match curriculum content and instructional style with ethnic/racial identity stages in mind. Astin (2001) notes that while institutional *structure* is not always a main ingredient in student development, rather it is “the kinds of peer groups and faculty

environments that tend to emerge under these different structures” that play such a critical part in college student development (p. 413).

Helms (1992) takes Cross’ (1995) ideas one step further by offering a model where Whites move toward a non-racist White identity and subsequently abandon racism completely. For Helms, the search for White identity is a process that involves complex interactions of attitudes, emotions, and behaviors so that as individuals change from racist to non-racist they truly acknowledge racism and become more conscious of whiteness. Helms (1992) and Ward (2000) both agree that although many Whites may recognize that minorities are placed at a disadvantage in the systems created by Whites, few acknowledge, much less attempt to change, systems that confer dominance on Whites. Helms (1992) states that more must be known about the identity and acculturation processes of diverse students from a “dynamic perspective – the affective and cognitive manifestations and their implications for an individual’s psychological well-being and personality and/or characterological development from both a short and a long-term perspective” (p. 60).

Lisa Delpit (1996), in *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, is even more passionate about the educational system and names its near fatal flaw as its failure to include, or even hear, the views and experiences of those outside the White mainstream culture. Tatum (1999) agrees with Delpit and adds that the “original creation of racial categories was in the service of oppression” (p. 17). Through her own personal transformation as a parent and educator, Delpit (1996) argues that White progressive education failed for blacks because they forced their agenda on minority families and teachers, most of whom rejected what was offered. Delpit feels this happens

because those with power are frequently unaware of, or unwilling to acknowledge, their power; those with less power are all too cognizant of power's presence.

Young Adult Moral and Cognitive Development Theories

Encouraging autonomy, interdependence, meaning making, holistic thinking, ethics, personal voice, and critical thinking are some of the goals of higher education (Baxter Magolda, 1998; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Lawrence Kohlberg (1972) notes the many moral dilemmas that college students face on a regular basis, and one aspect of his theory of human development is moral development in the college years where he focuses specifically on how people make moral judgments. Kohlberg sees these judgments as having three qualities: an emphasis on value rather than fact; an effect on a person or persons; and, a requirement that an action be taken. His view of moral development represents "transformations that occur in a person's form or structure of thought" with regard to what is viewed as right or necessary (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977, p. 54). Kohlberg states that the "principle central to the development of moral judgment is that of *justice*. Justice, the primary regard for the value and equality of all human beings, and for reciprocity in human relations, is a basic and human standard" (p. 14).

Kohlberg (1976) claims that moral reasoning progresses through six stages grouped into three levels. Each level represents a different relationship between the self and society's rules and expectations. Kohlberg's Level I includes *heteronomous morality* where *right* involves simply obeying rules and *individualistic, instrumental morality* where individuals follow rules if it is in their best interests. His level II includes *interpersonally normative morality* where individuals believe they are *right* when they

live up to others' expectations and *social system morality* where individuals believe that doing *right* involves upholding the rules of their social system. Kohlberg's level III includes *human rights and social welfare morality* where individuals evaluate social system laws in relation to human rights and values. His level III also includes *morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles* where individuals consider all points of view in moral situations (Kohlberg).

Gilligan (1982) refers to the justice orientation that Kohlberg (1976) proposes as patriarchal, Gilligan says this focus on justice treats the individual as separate, autonomous, and independent. Kohlberg's (1976) justice orientation, as well as his sole attention to men, focuses morality on understanding rights and rules that reflect a progression from lower-order thinking to a higher order in which autonomy is prized and universal justice is the goal. In contrast, Gilligan (1982) depicts the care voice as derived from a conception of the self that is relational and a view of self and others as connected and interdependent. Gilligan's central focus of care orientation is attachment to others. She makes it clear that relationships with others must carry equal weight with self-care when making moral decisions.

The core of Kohlberg's (1976) theory is the claim that moral reasoning develops through a sequential and hierarchical process in which each level is defined by its socio-moral perspective, namely "the point of view the individual takes in defining both social facts and socio-moral values, or *oughts*" (p. 33). Kohlberg suggests that each level represents a different relationship between the self and society's rules and expectations where the moral stages center on judgments of rightness and obligation. Kohlberg's stages represent holistic structures that develop in a very specific, hierarchic sequence,

thus his is considered a *hard* stage model. In his later research, Kohlberg's (1981) major efforts have been directed to developing moral education programs and *just communities* for schools and prisons; his initial attempts focused on providing students with opportunities to discuss hypothetical moral dilemmas in a classroom setting with the goal of encouraging development by creating cognitive conflict through the presentation of higher-stage thinking.

Gilligan (1982) attempts to shift discourse on moral development from the objective individualism of Kohlberg (1976) to relationship; from the struggle of the individual as an autonomous moral agent, or one who is engaged with or against society, to the struggle of the individual as a connected moral agent; or, as one who is affiliated with members of a society. For Gilligan (1982), care and responsibility are the major themes behind a woman's moral compass. Women's moral development proceeds through a sequence of levels and transition periods where each level identifies a more intricate relationship between self and others. Eventually, Gilligan recognizes a more sophisticated understanding between selfishness and responsibility in women's development, where relationships with others must carry equal weight with self-care when making moral decisions. The way Gilligan examines moral development through a different lens brings richness to the study of moral development not often found in the singular, objective reality of the more traditional paradigm.

The process of entering and then later re-entering college can be both a cause of cognitive and ethical change and a result of that change (Baxter Magolda, 1995; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This duality can bring on conflicts and insecurities identified by Belenky, et al. (1986) as common reactions to change. In transitional

phases, or periods of perspective transformation, often filled with flux, imbalance, and many reconsiderations, young adult students may need help in reestablishing a new equilibrium that includes introducing new behaviors, perspectives, attitudes, and knowledge into their lives (Belenky, et al., 1986; Daloz, 1986). For women, in particular, Belenky, et al. (1986) suggest new perspectives that may also include the development of voice, mind, and self that are *intricately intertwined*, where voice assumes a meaning beyond that of a point of view and includes aspects of intellectual and ethical development (p. 18). Belenky, et al. speak about “pain and anger” and about the “roar which lies on the other side of silence when ordinary women find their voice and use it to gain control over their lives” (p. 4). Belenky, et al. advocate *connected teaching* where teachers help women nurture their own voices by emphasizing connection rather than separation, understanding and acceptance rather than assessment, and collaboration rather than debate. Belenky, et al. believe the teacher’s role would be “similar to that of a midwife where one assists students in giving birth to their own ideas” (p. 217).

Baxter Magolda (1992) recognizes the need to address cognitive development by studying both men and women. She sees more similarities than differences in men and women’s ways of knowing and she stresses that variability also exists among members of a particular gender; therefore, patterns are related to, but not dictated by, gender. Baxter Magolda states that “understanding college students’ intellectual development is at the heart of effective educational practice” (p. 3). She also stresses the importance of validating students as *knowers* in order to encourage development of their voices, which is consistent with the teacher as midwife concept offered by Belenky, et al. (1986).

Baxter Magolda (1992) maintains the need to put the students' learning into a context related to their own experiences. This need for contextual learning experiences may provide some insight as to why many students regard their extra-curricular involvements as such important parts of their academic lives. Perhaps the extra activities place a student's experience in the forefront, thereby legitimizing it as a basis for constructing new knowledge (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Baxter Magolda (1992) continues to explain that "defining learning as jointly constructed meaning empowers students to see themselves as constructing knowledge" (p. 390). In Baxter Magolda's (2001) later work, *Making their own Way: Narratives for Transforming Higher Education to Promote Self-Development*, she stresses that the relational aspect of the three concepts of validating students as knowers, valuing situated learning experiences, and seeing learning as a joint construction of meaning, is essential for educational practice if students are to become empowered to construct knowledge.

Transitions

College students frequently face many changes that can have short and/or long-term effects on their lives. Rindfuss (1991) calls the period from age 18 to 25 "demographically dense" because of the "many demographic transitions that take place during that time" (p. 496). Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), in a second edition of Schlossberg's (1984) earlier work, provide insights into factors related to the transitions, the decisions, and the environment that are likely to determine the degree of impact a given transitional situation will have at a particular point in time on a college student. Since each student goes through a variety of transitions during the college years,

the approach Schlossberg, et al. present can be used to assess the success with which traditionally aged students address change and delineate factors related to the transition that led to stopping-out of college.

Schlossberg, et al. (1995) define a transition as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). They stress the role of *perception* in transitions and maintain that a transition exists only if it is actually defined as such by the individual experiencing it. They assert that changes may occur in one’s life without the individual attaching much significance to them so those changes would not be considered transitions. Tinto (1987) adds that individuals entering college react differently to the stress and challenge of transitions depending on variables such as personality characteristics, personal coping skills, and familiar cultural behavior patterns. Tinto’s observation is important in assessing the difficulty students may have in transitioning out of college and later re-entering.

Arnett (2000) adds a larger dimension to the concept of transitions since he insists that young adults are not just in brief transitional phases of their lives as they move in and out of college. He asserts that young adulthood is a distinct period of the life course, which he calls *emerging adulthood*, characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions. Regardless of the way one defines transitions, understanding the impact of what individuals experience during times of life event changes is important to anyone working with college students.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) note that although a single event or non-event may precipitate a transition, the individual deals with the transition in a process that extends over varying amounts of time, including moving from a preoccupation with to an

integration of the transition. Transitions may lead to either growth or decline, and moving out of a situation in which an individual has become comfortable can bring on a sense of disequilibrium. A student who has been living and working successfully at one point may face difficult transitional challenges when starting a new lifestyle in a college environment (Gardner & Van der Veer, 1997). Hoff (1995) notes that transitions can be turning points that have the potential to cause an emotional crisis for individuals who do not possess the necessary coping skills.

Schlossberg (1984) points to the importance of considering the concepts of *marginality* and *mattering* when examining the impact of the college experience on student development. Schlossberg defines *marginality* as a sense of not fitting in and can lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression. For members of minority groups, Schlossberg says that marginality is often a permanent condition; others, such as new college students from dominant populations, may temporarily experience these feelings.

When students feel marginal, they worry about whether they matter to anyone. *Mattering* is a “belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 9). Schlossberg maintains that we must consider the desire to be noticed and needed, the belief that one is cared about, the hope that someone will be proud of or sympathetic to one’s actions, and the hope that one’s efforts are appreciated by others. She stresses that institutions of higher education need to help people feel like they matter. This goal is a precursor to students’ becoming involved in activities and academic programs that would facilitate development and learning. Astin (2001) adds that student involvement is critical to development where the involvement refers to what a student actually does, rather than the student’s thoughts or feelings.

Using Theories

While young adult development theory may not tell us everything, it does tell us a great deal. One significant value of the theories is that they provide a source of common language. This language can promote empathetic listening, which is a critical process for those in higher education working with students. Professionals must honor and respect this language as well as recognize its limitations. They must help teach the language to the wider community so students' developmental needs will have a chance to be understood as well as satisfied.

Young adult theory base has grown over the years to include numerous important perspectives that challenge educators to expand their thinking, particularly related to the development of women, students from different racial and ethnic groups, and gay, bisexual, and lesbian students. Increasing research has been conducted to critically examine the propositions related to existing theories, to explore the applicability of the theories to different student populations, and to develop new theories. Using the common living language of young adult development is one part of a process that college faculty and staff may more effectively and insightfully build into their work with individual students. The knowledge of theories and research is helpful as the professionals advise and instruct student groups and organizations, design classroom experiences, and evaluate and develop policy and procedures on college campuses. This more informed group of educators might be able to better understand and support students as they make important decisions about stopping-out of college.

While these theories are important functional underpinnings for college professionals developing programs and policies, another often overlooked part of the

entire college retention and persistence picture may be missing. The students who are entering college, leaving temporarily, and eventually returning to college do not have the opportunity to share their perspectives on their experiences with the very people who are most concerned with the students. It may be helpful to consider the developmental theories and higher educational programs, and then set them aside to listen to the voices of the students as they shed another light on the picture.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was constructed so individual students could tell their stories of stopping-out of college in order to let college professionals, and others working with these young adults, better understand how they made meaning from their decisions and experiences. My purpose was to understand more about the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of stopping-out of college; it was not to develop plans or devise procedures to keep students enrolled in college. Adult development theorist, Robert Kegan (1982), maintains that meaning-making is what we do with what happens to us. I wanted to understand what young adults do with their college transitional experiences in order to make their insights available to the families and personnel concerned with this population.

Research Design

Qualitative research is an inquiry process; it is rich, flexible, unpredictable, and based on understanding how humans construct meaning in a given setting (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). Since my interest was in exploring ways young adults who have stopped-out of college make meaning of their experience, I chose a qualitative research design as an effective way to give these students a place in the literature, where college personnel could hear these richly unique stories. This design was appropriate for my purposes because it allowed for an examination of individual, personal histories.

By focusing on the self-reported personal stories behind students' decisions to stop-out of college, my hope was to provide a means to view a richer and deeper picture of these young adults as they progressed through the stopping out experience. My research

question involved understanding meaning-making and is a formulation of what I wanted to understand rather than what I wanted to accomplish or to prove. Mishler (1999) maintains that all “stories are situated retellings. They are responsive to the contexts of their production...they may be thought of as co-produced, as developed within the ongoing dialogue between interviewer and respondent” (p. 51). White (1998) suggests that human beings are interpreting beings in that “we are active in the interpretation of our experiences as we live our lives” (p. 13). For us to interpret our experiences, we need a context for the experiences that makes the attribution of meaning possible. My students’ stories helped provide that context.

Process

College student retention is an issue that institutions of higher education have been grappling with for years. Higher education personnel try to understand college students’ decision-making processes so they often examine data, develop retention programs, and spend tremendous energy and resources in order to keep students within their ranks. Developmental theorists also attempt to provide explanations for these students’ behavior.

As both an educator in the field of higher education and a student of developmental psychology, I too have sought answers to questions about why a particular student decides to enter or leave college. I can often rationalize a logical answer based on a reasonable developmental theory. What we seem to lack are the students’ unique voices telling us how they make sense of their experience. We need to hear the students’ voices tell us what we need to know because these young adults just might be able to shed light on ideas that do not fit neatly into traditional retention or developmental theoretical frameworks. Perhaps

we have been imposing our institutional and developmental lenses on young adults for too long without listening mindfully to the students.

Seeds

The initial seeds for this research project germinated at my kitchen table about ten years ago when several of my oldest son's friends began to share details of their personal journeys into and out of college. More seeds sprouted when friends of my next two children shared their stories of leaving and later re-entering college. I soon had a virtual garden filled with anecdotal stories of young adults' experiences of stopping-out of college. To understand more fully how different students make meaning from their experiences, I needed to enter into research relationships with them.

Reaching Out

I researched the methods used by many other qualitative researchers, yet could not locate one particular method of inquiry that would work for me, so I extrapolated parts of many techniques and constructed my own methodology. Deborah Tolman and Mary Brydon-Miller's (2001) *From Subjects to Subjectivities* guided my overall thinking about qualitative research as they explained the importance of a relational methodology that acknowledges and actively involves the "relationships between researchers and participants, as well as their respective subjectivities" and they encouraged researchers to "explore and embrace the role of subjectivity" in this research without attempting to eliminate bias (p. 5). I looked to other qualitative researchers for techniques appropriate for my study. Maxwell (1996) suggests "contextualizing strategies" so the researcher can

“connect statements and events within a context into a coherent whole” (p. 79). Creswell (1998) describes these statements as “meaning units” constitute a way to report the students’ words verbatim as part of a “textural” description of the experience to discover themes and theories (p. 150).

Seidman’s (1991) strategy constructs profiles of the students from the transcripts in order to identify structures and policies embedded in the stories. Miles and Huberman (1984) stress the importance of doing data analysis with data collection to develop better understanding of the interviews, but I wanted to let the students use their own words to tell the readers about their understandings. Weiss (1994) emphasizes shaping interviews based on preconceived issues and integration of data by coding and summaries that include the researchers’ interpretations. Many of these methods involve inductive generation of themes through interpretation and the identification of patterns of association and contrast, data analysis, coding, and theory making. Since I wanted to immerse myself in the subjective experience so the experience could uncover meaning, these methods seemed to have too many shortcomings for my purposes.

In my search for an appropriate methodology, I read Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s *Respect* (1999) and was struck by her style of writing in the present tense, while putting herself in the story alongside her interviewee in a power-equalizing manner that allows the reader to hear the peoples’ voices and see their actions as their experiences unfold over time even as they are reinvented in the present. When Lawrence-Lightfoot talks with the people interviewed for her book, she “feels as though we are in a hall of mirrors, seeing ourselves reflected in each other’s eyes, hearing our conversations echoed in their stories” (p. 13). I attempted to follow this style in my writing so my readers would have a similar

feeling. Brydon-Miller and Tolman (2001) provided me with the energy to make a contribution to the field by their clarification of the need to generate new knowledge and to help participants through “increased self-knowledge, empathetic relationships, and positive social change” (p. 319).

Brown and Gilligan (1992) explain that experiential narratives, usually co-constructed, have multiple layers of meaning and that researchers must negotiate their own and their participants’ subjectivities in understanding interviews. Describing feminist inquiry, they also state the importance of recognizing the need to be sensitive to the relational and unique nature of qualitative research and interviewing. Marsha Rossiter (1999) convinced me that my stories would be an important and valid contribution to the field with her words, “Learners are experts on their own development...Acknowledging the validity of the learners’ definition of their own developmental path is an empowering and respectful teaching orientation and it yields fuller understanding of developmental change (p. 83). These concepts solidified my resolve to center my research on students’ stories.

Gathering and Building Up

Since I wanted my readers to listen to the students’ stories as co-constructed with my own participation, I developed a personal method culled from a variety of sources, which I called *gardened stories*. My process involved entering into relationships with students during interviews, which is like visiting personal flower gardens to learn and appreciate what is growing in a specific location at a particular time. Since I believed in the importance of maintaining a sense of *being there* for the reader and expected to tell the students’ stories about their stopping-out experience, I used Seidman’s (1991) strategy for

constructing profiles. I preferred to call them *stories*, as a way of sharing what I gleaned from the in-depth interviews while exploring the students' meaning-making. I also wrote memos about my thoughts, ideas, and noticings before, during, and after the interviews, which included notes about my personal assumptions, biases, worries, observations, beliefs, reflections, and retrospections.

Reflexing Inward

Then, with an interview transcript in one hand and my memos in another, I assembled a bouquet of words developing a story that incorporated much of what the student told me in the interview, as well as my thoughts, theories, interpretations, and assumptions. As a researcher, I entered into a relationship with my participants and brought my own assumptions, beliefs, and biases to the process. My presence likely affected the process of story telling and sharing as well as the way the participant provided information. These reflexive issues needed to be acknowledged and explored as I sorted through the transcripts and memos.

Just as I have been a gardener all my life, I have also been a gatherer and firm proponent of developmental theory; young adult developmental theory in particular. As such, I methodically placed my theories into the flowerpot and matched them with my interpretation of the students' various stages of development, as many expert researchers have done before me. Yet, my motivation continued to be the sharing of stories as students told them and as I witnessed them, letting the interpretations come from the co-constructed story-tellings themselves, without efforts to prove anything to anyone.

Therefore, I read, re-read, and re-listened to the transcripts, memos, and initial stories, while remaining conscious of important personal and societal issues. I was alert to conflict between the individual and myself, as well as within the individual. I was aware of our hopes, frustrations, expectations, and aspirations, whether fulfilled or not. I noticed our language, both verbal and non-verbal. Implicit and explicit issues of class, gender, race, community, power, and authority were always with me. Most importantly, I continually needed to remove my gardening gloves as I put aside my propensity for finding developmental connections in my students' experiences. I also took off the hat of my professional self as a college instructor.

Sometimes I let my biases come through in the stories, but I let the reader know what I was doing each time. By setting aside my lenses of educator and theorist, I expected to gain a better entrance into the students' framework. Maxwell (1996) and Creswell (1998) suggest ways to code transcripts to locate themes and "meaning units," and I will use those concepts, not to code, but to locate my assumptions, biases, and personal interpretations. As I read each initial story, I highlighted statements in different colors that reflected my issues in order to remain alert to them: my biases in red marker; my assumptions in yellow; and, my interpretations in blue marker.

Moving Forward

It was important for me to dig into the stories with bare hands to try to feel what each interviewee's words meant to him or her so meaning-making could come from the individual's spoken word rather than my interpretation of those words. I wanted the reader to come away with the feeling that, "I understand better what it is like for someone to

experience that” (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). With my gloves and hat off and my hands deeply immersed in the subjectivity of the students’ stories, I then rewrote each story so that readers could see the essence of the students’ experiences. Sometimes my color-coded biases, assumptions, and interpretations were pertinent to the dialogue of the interview, so I made certain to identify them as such. Otherwise, I tried to remove them.

I wrote the students’ stories using their own words while weaving my own *noticings* and thoughts from my memos into the story to provide the reader with a clear picture of the story as the student spoke it and as I received it to provide context and a sense of place. In each story, my open interview questions guided the flow of the story (see Appendix A). I presented the interview passages in the order in which they actually were spoken since material that has meaning in one context may change if placed in another context. I attempted to act like a gardener placing stepping-stones, water gauges, and other decorations into the garden area as part of my personal participation in the story telling. The finished stories let the students make meaning of their unique experiences, and I was with them all the way.

Participants

The participants for this research were selected by purposeful sampling, a strategy that separates the population into groups with specific characteristics that bring a richness of information to the process (Patton, 1990). In this study, the purposeful sampling was comprised of students who have stopped-out of college. Colleagues and educational consultants, in accordance with my criteria, recommended participants to me, and I further refined the group in order to get subjects who reflected diversity in culture, gender, and

socio-economic background. I was interested in the stories of students who have made personal choices about their education, and in particular, I wanted to hear from students who had chosen, for themselves, to return to college so I could understand what was happening during the transitional process. I attempted to tell the stories of students who stopped-out for diverse reasons in order to provide different perspectives, so I chose my respondents accordingly.

Once identified, I was in touch with each student by telephone to explain my process. If the participant agreed to the interview, we arranged a time and place to meet. I requested that all participants answer a demographic questionnaire to better inform the interview process (see Appendix B). Each participant received a consent form to sign before the interview began (see Appendix C). A participant could choose to continue to withdraw at any time during the process for any reason. This was a low risk research design, although ethical implications always exist when a person is asked personal questions. My committee and I concurred that I did not need permission from the Internal Review Board before beginning this project, and I was constantly aware of the need to maintain individual rights of privacy, dignity and confidentiality (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

In-Depth Interviews

I conducted in-depth interviews with individuals who stopped-out of college, and as Creswell (1998) suggests, no more than ten individuals were included. All interviews were audio-taped, with participants' permission, to allow me to participate as fully as possible as a conversational partner as opposed to merely being a researcher simply taking notes. The interviews were transcribed and

available in written format for all participants to review. The interviews lasted about two to three hours each; they took place in mutually agreed-upon locations that were private, quiet, and with adequate acoustics for audio-taping. I kept a journal to record observations, questions, non-verbal language, topics for further analysis, and self-reflection regarding my own interviewing techniques. Since I was asking open-ended questions, my expectation and understanding was that the questions might change or be modified during the research process as understanding grew and evolved, and as I allowed participants to explore areas of importance to them. As anticipated, I was able to ask all participants the same questions, but often follow-up questions differed in each situation.

Assumptions and Limitations

This methodology highlights many assumptions and limitations inherent in the research design and information gathering. I had to rely on students' memories of their experiences leaving and entering college, which often involved a span of several years, so their recall of facts and feelings might be filtered since past memories are often difficult to retrieve. Past reflections of experiences could be difficult or unpleasant, so recollections might be distorted or buried as a result. Parents, family, and friends may also have influenced participants' memories. Thus, my assumption that I have told the student's own story may actually be more reflective of a complex web of outside influences as opposed to personal reminiscences.

I intended to interview ten students, but due to logistical and practical matters, I only provided eight stories. One student was not included in this project because at the onset of

the interview, I realized that she did not meet the criteria initially established. Another student's audio-tape was faulty, so I was unable to collect the necessary information. Those two potential participants were not included in this study. This small number is a limitation since my study reflected the experiences of a very limited population. As reported in the demographic questionnaire, my participants were mostly from the Northeast and were mainly from white, middle-to-upper class backgrounds, which did not allow for perspectives from populations that are more diverse.

Another limitation was the fact that two of my own children stopped-out of college within the past seven years, so I was personally close to this situation. It was important that I not interject my own feelings and thoughts about this experience onto my participants. I attempted to be vigilant in not asking leading questions that may be reflective of my children's experiences since I wanted my participants to provide me with accurate details of their own experiences without mixing them with my personal experiences. My diligence was well intentioned, but a limitation nonetheless.

This type of qualitative research involved getting to know the respondent and was conducted from the perspective of the student. Interviewing others such as parents, siblings, friends, and college personnel who had direct, sustained contact with each of the respondents could have added to the knowledge about each student or case and, thereby, about the transition process. This, however, was impossible within the limits of the present study.

These narratives were by nature limited. The students' lives continued while the narratives of them were framed and solidified. The narratives were merely a function of my personal interaction with the participants and their words at a point in time.

Other participants may have told different stories and other researchers may have interacted in a different manner. In-depth interviewing can be illuminating; stories and themes are compelling, yet indeterminacy pervades this type of research (Seidman, 1991). It is incumbent that I allow considerable tolerance for uncertainty in the reporting of what I have learned from this study.

Research Contributions and Motivation

My intent was to highlight the meanings expressed by the participants so that this research could support and motivate change in institutions of higher education. I suggest that college personnel foster the respect and understanding that these students may deserve as they weave their way through the higher educational system. I believe that these students have much to tell us about their learning as it relates to their unique experiences. The young adults who returned to school after stopping-out were often making a conscious choice to transform their lives. Those involved with these young people, inside the institutions of higher education, may eventually want to commend and celebrate such choices that often demanded significant personal courage. These students were forging life paths that were often imaginative, formative, and liberating while they ventured outside the four corners of the four-year college plan. I suspected they might know something that I wanted to learn, so I could then share my new knowledge with other college professionals.

The strength of these interviews may be that through them we can come to understand the details of these students' experiences from their point of view. We may see how their individual experiences interact with powerful social and organizational forces woven throughout the context in which they operate. My in-depth interviews may lead to a deeper

understanding and appreciation of the complex intricacies as well as the coherence of students' stopping-out experiences. It is hoped that this study will lead to a more conscious awareness of the power of the social and organizational context of these students' experiences. Most importantly, this research may lead others to respect the participants, to relish the understanding that I gained from them, and to take pleasure in the sharing of these stories.

Singer and Salovey (1993) explain:

In this process of telling and listening, both teller and listener reaffirm a common bond, a humanity inherent in conversation. Our listening gives us both a respect for the experience of history and a tempered but persistent hope for the attainment of goals as yet unrealized. (p. 218)

Change has been a major constant in American higher education throughout its history, yet this history must not be ignored or diminished. College students' needs, desires, and aspirations have also changed over time, and these changes deserve respect and consideration. When students talk about their hopes and goals, and we listen with ears tuned in stereo to both the past and future as they surround the students' present voices, the resulting conversation can change lives. This style of participatory research with thoughtful telling and listening, may help to develop critical consciousness of the stopping-out process, to improve the lives of those in the midst of stopping-out, and to transform societal and institutional structures. I hope that this methodology will act as a device for listening to voices telling their own stories through their personal lenses. It should place voice and insight on center-stage so college professionals may better see and hear how some students can make meaning out of less traditional ways of experiencing education as new paths are carved into the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER FOUR: KERRETT'S STORY

Kerett is a 22-year-old young man from the Middle East who was educated for his first three years in French schools, the next five years in Saudi Arabia, then in a New England boarding school for four years. He is a dark-haired man of average height and a sturdy build who meets me at my office dressed in a sweater and dark blue jeans. Kerett opens the office door for me and pulls out my chair as I start to sit down. As he selects a chair near mine, I mentally note how impressed I am with his excellent manners and sophisticated charm. Kerett is the boyfriend of my college [small, suburban, liberal arts college in New England] student who mentioned my project to him. He called me to get specific details, and we set up this appointment. His educational and cultural backgrounds are of special interest to me since the majority of my information on stopping-out comes from young adults with an American heritage.

We settle procedural matters and complete all the necessary paperwork, but before I have a chance to ask Kerett any questions, he describes his feelings about school. *My parents withdrew me from the French school because my performance was horrible.* He learned Arabic and English at an early age and then attended French schools. *I always hated school, but I did well enough in high school to get accepted to college.*

Going to College

I feel like this is a terrific opening for my first question, so I ask Kerett to tell me about his plans for attending college. *I was expected to go to college and I wanted to go.*

Everything in my high school led me to apply to college. I got into college [large urban university in New England], which is where I wanted to go to study engineering. After graduation from high school, I went home for awhile. I met a girl. It was my first serious relationship and I was reluctant to leave. I finally came back to the States and I started studying [at college]. Everything was fine but my love life, as I'll call it, was interfering with my school life. I wasn't paying much attention to my studies and it was under all the wrong circumstances. I mean, later, I ended up finding out she was more in it [the relationship] for the money than for anything. It totally made me lose focus of what I was doing. So, the first semester I did OK. What really distressed me was that the classes I was the best at throughout high school, which was math and physics, I wasn't able to focus as much as I wanted to. I ended up failing in physics and withdrawing from math. So, I gave myself another shot the semester after that, but nothing seemed to improve.

Kerett speaks clearly and distinctly, with just a slight hint of an accent. His first comments provide me with an overview of his college situation, so I ask him to tell me specifically about his initial decision to attend college. *I'm the one who chose the college [large urban university in New England], because of the co-op program that they had. I thought it would be fun to work and to study at the same time. But at the time [applying to colleges] I didn't know my ex so it was a lot different. I was looking forward to it. I was excited. I was going to do something I wanted to do, which was civil engineering. Even during the time when I took a semester off between high school and starting college, I worked in an engineering firm in Saudi, and I enjoyed what I did. I liked it. It was hard, hard work. You had to be up by 4:30 a.m. and be on the site at 5:30, but I enjoyed it.*

I ask him to tell me more about his initial experiences. *I was looking forward to college and engineering. The first semester...my engineering classes I enjoyed a lot... I had a lot of trouble in my math and my physics classes because of the sheer size. The math, the instructor was from China, and I couldn't keep up with what he was doing. I knew that I knew the stuff, I mean, but I didn't focus enough on it. Even in physics, to prove it, once I got a hundred on one of the exams, but all the exams besides that I failed. It was very random studying that I did, There was also the life of living in my own apartment. I never went out to night-clubs though, I was never into that. But still, a lot of my roommates, my friends ... were out drinking, almost every night. I didn't really focus on what I had to be focusing on as I'm doing now. There was something about me that I didn't understand when I was going through it. I think I was too young and inexperienced with life to know what to do with everything that was happening to me.*

I want to know more about some of the things that were happening to him, so I ask a question. "You say that math and physics were something that were strong previously but you weren't able to focus. Can you tell me more about your focus?" *Yes. It was the love life, And also the roommate that used to watch movies until 3 o'clock in the morning. It got so bad I couldn't sleep. A few factors came into play; the timing, the girlfriend, the apartment, classes, the finances. I was spending all my money on the phone bill because it was a long distance relationship [with his girlfriend in Saudi]. I set myself up to fail, basically. I couldn't handle anything.*

Kerett's answers are right to the point, yet too general for me. I feel the need to ask questions frequently in order to get more details about what he was feeling during this initial college experience. I ask for more specifics.

It was all OK at first, but it all went downhill fast. There was one math class. It was a small class but the sheer speed that he [the professor] was going at was very hard to keep up. His heavy accent also made him hard to understand. I remember because the whole class had a hard time. I wasn't the only one to have a problem with that. Well, I ended up withdrawing from the class the last week of the semester, right before finals, because I knew I was going to fail the class. So, I thought a W [for withdraw] would look better than an F. But in physics, I didn't withdraw. I thought I would have a good chance. I was wrong. But the other two classes I was taking at the time was Freshmen English, which I got a B+ in; and, I believe, Engineering Graphics, which I also got a B+ in. Overall, I did OK, but there were some bad notes there. The second semester, I started doing much worse. Even though I had withdrawn from the first math class, I still messed up the second one. I never showed up. I missed most all of my classes that semester. I just gave up.

I need more clarity, so I say, "So you didn't go to classes right from the start of the semester?" *Yeah, things weren't right. I was starting to give up. It was very hard for me. Engineering was something that I always wanted to do but I was starting to give up. I was thinking that maybe I wasn't cut out for it. I wasn't good at it anymore. I thought that I should try something else. My parents would be happy if I got a degree in business, so I applied to a smaller college with a Business Management Department, and I got accepted. I think I was just stabbing in the dark for something I could do.*

Can you tell me more about why you thought things weren't right? *Honestly, at the time, I was thinking that engineering wasn't the right path for me 'cause I had failed. I didn't know if I should try something else, or if maybe I was just trying to find a way*

out. In a way, maybe I wanted not to redeem myself, but cover my ass, basically, in front of my mother. Basically, I could tell her I failed here [at large urban university in New England] but I am going somewhere else and I'll do better, which I ended up doing. But I don't know if it was a way out or it's just that I needed a change. I mean, at the university, some classes I was very happy in, and some classes I just ...I don't know if it's the size of the school. I think it's a combination of a lot of things at the same time. I mean, my physics class I got an F in the class but I got an A in the lab, which doesn't make much sense. The only thing I can say, it's probably because the size of the class that I wasn't used to. I don't know. I wasn't sure of anything.

I get the sense that, even in retrospect, Kerett is still not clear about why he did what he did during his first year in college. I wonder if talking about the experience now with me will provide more clarity for him. I remind myself that there does not need to be an answer to and a reason for everything. I also recognize that there may be some cultural nuances to Kerett's situation. I move along.

I ask Kerett about his family's reaction to his college situation. *I never felt as though I had a say in anything. My parents ... It's hard because my brother was the perfect student. I mean at the time, I believe he was already graduated from McGill. He was working in Japan for a year for experience. He was very bright. I know I'm bright, but he's just very hard working and very focused. At the time, I wasn't focused, so it's very hard. The first thing they told my mother when they found out I was dyslexic is that you can't compare your kids. They're two very different kids. They're both very bright, but they're very different. And at the time, even though you tell that to a parent, they can't help but doing it [compare children] even if they don't mean to do it.*

Unconsciously, they'll do it. Even myself, I start comparing myself to my brother and thinking I was a failure when I look at him. It was very hard.

Pressures

Kerett is talking about some personal and potentially emotional experiences, yet I do not detect signs of emotion. He appears calm and collected, almost stoic, to me. I ask Kerett what he was feeling at this point. *Oh. I wanted to be able to say to my mother, I will go to another college. It's not like I'm out of school completely.* I reinforce this line of thinking by saying, "You didn't want to drop out of school?" *No, I didn't want to drop out of college. I know I needed college. There was also a lot of pressure from my ex that was trying to shape me into something that I didn't want to be, which was because she was older. She expected more out of me. She was basically trying to pressure me into something like I didn't want to do. She was looking down upon the fact that I was doing engineering because it wasn't a good field... civil engineering... and she wanted me to do something with computers which I really didn't want to do. So she was putting a lot of pressure on me from that side too. She wasn't letting me do what I wanted to do. She wanted me to do what she wanted me to do, which was not what I wanted.*

I also had a lot of parental pressure. In my family, it was important for people in my class to go to a good college in the States to prove myself. It was important for my parents to maintain their social position. I had a lot of expectations from my parents, especially my father. I'm the youngest one in the family and he expects the most out of me. What hurts me the most is when he tells me, 'I'm old. I just want to see you graduate before I die.' You know, it's very hard for me to live up to and puts a lot of pressure on

me. It's hard to satisfy him and to please him. I mean, he sees the grades. I'll get all A's and a B and he'll tell me why the B? I'll tell him, well it was in a field, like fine arts, and I'm not good at fine arts. I don't like fine arts much. It's not what I like, therefore, I won't be as good as the others at it. But he has trouble understanding that. He thinks I should be good at everything. Again, he compares me to my brother, which I'm not.

I am full of empathy for Kerett, and I let my personal experience come out by explaining, "As a middle child of five, I also felt I was always being compared to my siblings." He gives me his first smile, and I smile with him while feeling very comfortable with our conversation. In the interest of moving forward, I look down at my notes and comment. "So you took time off after withdrawing from college. You went back to Saudi to be with your girlfriend. What was going on in your life at the time when you actually came back to college?"

I didn't change much. I was still with her. I went to classes [at the small suburban liberal arts college]. I did the work, but only the requirements. I didn't put any effort into it. I lived at a friend's apartment. My mother wouldn't give me any of my allowance. I mean, I remember, I think she only gave me one-month payment and that was it. So, basically, for the whole semester I was on my own. I feel surprised by my own feeling of disappointment, since I expect Kerett to tell me how he then came to realize what was going on with his girlfriend. I must be patient and wait for him to tell the whole story. I take a deep breath and ask, "Why was that?"

His face appears animated as I watch his dark eyebrows raise and his eyes open wide. I feel like he is sharing a mystery tale with me, and I know my eyes must be as large as his. *Because of my previous habits. The second semester at college [large, urban,*

New England university], *nobody knows this, I never told anyone else. The money meant for the tuition, I had actually spent on phone bills to call my girlfriend. My mother, when she found out, she was very upset. I don't blame her now. Now, I mean, at the time, I knew what I was doing, and I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I said, 'What the heck, I might as well do it.'* Also, like I said, *my finances were really bad. I wasn't paying rent, so my roommate was paying the whole thing. My mother found out, and I think the bill added up to \$14,000, if not more. Actually, no, it was less than that, I don't really remember. It was bad. So, my mother was very upset at that. I don't blame her, and she decided to teach me a lesson in money management. So, I think she only gave me, two thousand dollars for the semester, basically. So, I didn't pay for rent, I lived on a friend's couch. I still had my car, but I had to pay for the insurance and the gas. So, basically, I was living on next to nothing, and it was very miserable. I was still in the relationship, so I still had the problem with the phone bills. I was sleeping on someone's couch, and it was a very hard time.*

I am touched with the way Kerett takes me into his personal confidence. Now I ask how he was feeling during that time, and if he realized what was happening. *Did I know? I don't think I realized how bad the situation was until I actually had to withdraw from college. Even then, I was still with the same girl. Even through the first semester at the new college [small liberal arts college]. I was in a horrible depression. All I did was sleep all day. I wouldn't socialize with anyone. I was still with the girl and I had no idea what I was doing. I was cut off from my parents and money and I was an awful student. A real mess. Finally, I met someone that showed me this isn't the way it should be. Since then things were much better. I was doing fine.*

Can you explain how you learned the way it should be for you? *A girl. Another girl showed me that what I was doing was basically wrong. I finally realized that what I had in Saudi [relationship with the first girlfriend] was not what I should have been doing. My mother knew it from the beginning, but never spoke up. She just backed off and let me do what I did.* I chuckle to myself that it takes one girl to throw him off-focus and another girl to bring him back. Then I remind myself that his childhood and adolescence, not to mention family life, were all foreign to my own experience. I respect his honesty. Kerett's story remains tremendously interesting to me and I continue to ask questions since his answers remain too broad for my curiosity. I ask him how he knows his mother knew about his issues.

Oh, because I'm not stupid and I know she knew it from the beginning. I know my mother. She is the type of person that will let you mess up on your own and then she'll tell you, "I told you so." Well, yeah. She'll tell you that mother knows best. She forgave me. We're on very good terms now, but throughout the whole relationship she just was against it. Totally against it. The girl was older than I was. She was making me do things that I wouldn't normally do, like spend all my money on her and stuff like that.

Thank you. Now can you tell me how you were feeling when you left college? *Had I realized earlier and gotten rid of my ex, I think I would have been fine because I could have been able to focus more on school. The finances were killing me. I was having arguments with my roommate all the time over money. Had I gotten rid of her, a lot of the pieces would have fallen into place.*

Did you talk to anyone about your situation at the time? *No. Now I realize I should have, but at the time I thought I knew what was best for me. I honestly believed*

that it's my life. I know what I am doing. All my friends knew that what I was doing was wrong, but they never spoke up because they respected me as a person, and I was very stubborn. They never spoke up. They never said anything. They let me be. I think it was because a lot of my friends are much older than I am. I'm talking, like at the time, I was, 21, and they were in their late 20s, early 30s. They had been there, They had seen this before. They knew what they were talking about. But, of course, I was the young one. I had to learn. I'm the stubborn one. You know, I think I know better than they do.

I feel somewhat confused about the chronology of Kerett's story, but want him to tell it his own way. Still, I attempt to verbalize a timeline for him, to make his story easier to follow. You were at [large urban university in New England] for two semesters, then you left. What did you do then? *I went home to be with her once again. My mother was still against the relationship completely, but, no, she never said anything. I don't think it would have changed anything for me, even if she had said anything. It would probably made things worse. Home was fun. I was there for about six months...but all I did was see her, see my friends, not much else.*

OK. Let me get the sequence straight. You were back home, for about six months, having fun, then you came to the States and went to college [small suburban liberal arts college]. For many reasons, you're sleeping on a couch, with no money, but you are going to classes and kind of squeaking by for a semester at school. Then what happened? *I met a girl who made me realize that what I was going through I shouldn't be going through. She made me. She gave life to my life, you could say. My life was very dull. I was going through a depression. All I did was sleep on the couch and eat egg rolls every day. I don't know why, but it was egg rolls every day. I wasn't doing much with*

my life. I wasn't talking to people. I was viewed as a very anti-social person at school because I guess I looked miserable all the time. Everybody told me that I looked very mean and angry when I came to school. So, a lot of people didn't like me because of the way I looked.

Focusing

But you stayed? *Yeah, I made it through. I made it through.* What do you think contributed to that? What made you stick with it? *The fact that my parents were giving me another chance. I wanted to prove to my mother that I was worth giving the other chance. I mean, I know I'm not stupid, and I know I can do it. I just wanted to prove it myself and to my mother that I could do it. I don't remember how I did. I think I did decent the first semester. I liked the instructors, I liked the professors. I got along with them. It was a lot friendlier. I realized I was good at something, which was accounting. I was enjoying it very much. I found something that I liked, that I was good at. I didn't have to put much effort into it to be good at it, which was a very weird feeling. Everybody told me I was very good at it, and I was enjoying it. That part I was enjoying, but the rest, my social life, I couldn't care less at the time. I just didn't care much about the world. I was just living in my little shell.*

So, were you doing well in accounting? *Yeah, in accounting, especially accounting, I saw everybody struggling, and I always got hundreds, and I never put much effort into it.*

Had you ever experienced anything like that in school? *No, no, not really. In high school, I had to work hard. I graduated top of my class, but I had to work hard at it*

to get it. I didn't just get by. I worked. In my other school, I was labeled as a failure, like 'He's never going to make it.' Only a few teachers ever said to my mother, 'We know he's bright and we know he's extremely smart, but he's under the wrong circumstances. He'll show sparks whenever he wants.' I have a problem. If I don't like the professors, I won't do well in class. It's not to defy them, it's because I don't care. Throughout my French school, I didn't get along with any of the teachers mostly, though some of them I did. I didn't care how I did. I didn't care about my performance. But, in high school, I got along with the teachers. The professors at my college [small suburban liberal arts college] are very friendly. They're always available. They're very nice. If you need help, they're willing to give it to you. It's more of a personal, small family feeling than the university where the professors couldn't care less who you are, how you do, if you pass or fail, if you show up or if you don't. So, it gives you more of a family type environment. The professors actually care.

OK. Let me understand. You're doing well in college now and due to graduate soon. You have made it through some interesting challenges and situations. If you were going to tell somebody else, some 17 or 18-year-old person just starting out going to college, what kind of advice would you give them? What have you learned about your experiences that you might share?

Kerett does not hesitate as he answers. *Don't let anything distract you. Listen to your friends and your parents' advice. They're only trying to do the best for you. Try and get to know the professors that you're dealing with. Do the work. Don't let it fall behind. Put your work before your social life; don't let that interfere with your studies. I know sometimes it's going to be hard and you're going to feel like you're not going to get*

through this, but trust me, you're going to get through it and you'll look back at it. Next time you come up to something you can think, well I got through that, I can get through this. At the beginning of the semester, you might be a bit discouraged because the semester is just starting, but just think of the past one that you've just gotten through and think that you got through that one, so you can get through this one.

Retrospective

Especially, now that I'm about to graduate, I think back and I think this semester is probably one of the hardest of my semesters because I'm taking so many classes to finish. But, I think back at the classes I've had in the past, and I've gotten through them. When I have to do a presentation, which is my biggest problem, I just think to myself that in an hour the presentation will be over and I'll be fine. I'll have lived through it. I had a presentation yesterday morning, and I was driving to school and I was thinking, well, I wish it were an hour and a half from now after the presentation was done. I thought, I'll get through it.

Also, try and make friends at school. That helps a lot. Don't be anti-social, as I was, because people will view you the wrong way and that can sometimes hurt a lot. I know you'll end up drinking and partying, but don't let it interfere with your school life, and do it under controlled basis. See, I've been here probably the longest out of all the Arabs that have been here. My friends have graduated or gone back to Saudi or gone to San Francisco. And the younger brothers and the younger generations come through. We all go through the same thing for the first semester: they party, they drink, they have fun, they run after girls and they end up failing or barely getting by.

Why do you say this specifically about the Arabs? *The Arabs, in general, when they go to school in Saudi, it's all boys. It's very structured, They don't have the problem with alcohol because it is forbidden. They haven't partied much. They don't know, well, they know what nightclubs are because they do that during the summer. They live with their parents. They're very dependent on their parents. They have a very controlled life. And when they hit the States, it's like freedom. They're here to study, but their focus becomes partying. Some get by it, through the first semester, and then they finally settle down. And, some I've seen crashed and burn. They kept going through the first, the second and the third semester and ended up going back home because their parents brought them back because it was just a waste of their time and their money. I've seen a lot of these cases happen. I've seen a lot of people get through it. Usually, after the first semester, they settle down. I only think I know of two people out of probably thirty that have gone back because they just couldn't get back under control. But, I'm here for a reason. I have to finish my studies, I have to do my master's. I'm trying to work for my future. It's my choice to be here. I'm the one who decided to stay. I could've moved somewhere else, but I'm doing this for my future. Now, I realize this. In the beginning, I couldn't care less. I just wanted to get by. But, now I'm thinking positive and I'm thinking ahead; I'm not just thinking present.*

Moving On

Is there anything else that you'd like to say that I haven't asked about?

The hardest thing I had to do was forget about my failure [at the large urban university in New England] and not let that get in my way. I don't like failure. I don't believe

anybody likes failure. My hardest thing was maturing and realizing that, hey, I messed up. But I have a second chance, and now it's time to prove to my parents and to myself that I can do it. I mean it was very hard for me going from the French school, where I was labeled a failure, to high school, where I was labeled as the brightest kid, back to college where I failed. I wanted to succeed again, which I ended up doing.

It's funny. A lot of people come to me for help and advice here. I don't know why. I guess because I'm viewed as someone that has somewhat intelligence or they come for me for advice. Like, a friend of mine wanted to transfer out and he wanted to transfer to a bigger school. I told him, listen, I know you're extremely smart, I know you're hard working, but trust me, it's really not worth it. A few people that I see, specifically a friend of mine, he was still in high school. He came straight to college [a small suburban liberal arts college] and wanted to transfer to a bigger school. He ended up transferring. Since the beginning, I told him, 'Don't.' I know the type of person he is. I was like, 'Listen buddy. You're not going to make it.' Well, he ended up transferring out, even though I suggested not to, but it was his choice. He ended up doing horribly at the university and the hardest part was to get him to come back here [small liberal arts college] because he was ashamed. He thought people would judge him for his failure. I had to explain to him, hey, we all fail.

I failed in the past. I'll probably fail in the future, but the hardest thing is to accept it and get on with it. I think the hardest thing to deal with in college is failure, in general, in life; not only in college. Only thing I can say is accept failure and get past it. We all have gone through it. We'll all go through it. We're not going to think you're less

of a person for failing. At least, look at it this way. You gave it a shot. You saw that it wasn't for you. At least you had the common sense to come back and finish.

Can you tell me what was most important to you in this experience? When I think about what I did, I know relationships are important to me. I think people need guidance in general. If you're smart as hell and you're doing great, maybe you're not doing well in your social life and you need someone to help you out. Well, if you're too focused on something, you need someone to help you. You can't make it by yourself alone. Maybe a parent, maybe a friend, maybe a teacher, maybe an advisor. Who knows? But, there's always that one person in your life that makes a difference and leaves a mark. For me, it's my mother. My father isn't really in my life. My mother, now my brother, and definitely my [new] girlfriend make a difference for me. You have to have a support system. Even if at the time you don't realize it, the support system is important. Later, you'll realize that. You'll think back at it and you'll think that it did help.

CHAPTER FIVE: NICK'S STORY

Nick is a 28-year-old, dark-haired, young man of average height, wearing loose-fitting corduroy pants and a dark blue sweater. He is the oldest of four children and attended public schools for 12 years in a suburb west of Boston. He seems relaxed as he enters my home office, which makes it easy for us to quickly settle into chairs across from each other. Once I explain the interview process to Nick, he fills out the required paperwork without questions or comments. I fumble with the tape in my recorder, and Nick says, *I can help you with that.*

I move immediately into questioning mode. "Can you tell me about what was going on as you were in the last years of high school and thinking about what you would do after graduation?" *Well.* Nick pauses for several seconds. *Going to college was expected for me.* He pauses for several more seconds but I let the silence remain. *It was a complicated situation back then. I was thinking about not going to college in high school. My parents could see I was not ready, but I had to disagree with them, so I went. After my first semester at college, I said I didn't want to go back, but they sort of pushed me into going back. But, they didn't push me to go in the first place. That's the way parents are! Total flip flop. So, I spent one year at college [small, elite, liberal arts college in southern New England], then left school to work at different jobs. I did really badly one semester, but I didn't really want to be there. I was totally disenchanted with that school. By the middle of my spring semester, I made the decision not to return to college, no matter what my parents said. I bummed around a lot during that year. Some friends were going*

out to Colorado and I thought about doing that but was not sure what I wanted to do. I eventually went to my parents' house and worked at stupid jobs.

I note that Nick has pushed to the chronological end of his story, so I seek a way for him to explain more about his early experiences. “What was happening while you were still in high school?” *I was doing almost no work in high school, and getting lousy grades, but I was a National Merit Semi-finalist. That means you're smart! My smart friends were trying to get into Harvard. I was not sure where I would get into. I had mixed feelings. I got into a great college on a scholarship and four years of housing! I was feeling guilty and some kind of pleasure watching friends stress out. It was shameful joy; guilty pleasure. You know, the system's mixed up, but there's no perfect system, and there's so many people in the system.* His voice trails off so I can't hear what he says.

Decisions

I nod my head in a show of understanding, but I restrain myself from offering my own opinions. “So what happened next?” *I was deciding between two colleges [two elite liberal arts colleges]. I don't know why I decided to go to where I did. First, I didn't like it when I went to see it. It was a particularly bad mistake to go there. It was a mistake to go anywhere. I was not in a place where I could get through school, much less learn anything. I did no work. I was totally not interested in school. I was not ready. I was not prepared to handle everything that was thrown at me.*

I did no work in high school but that really had no consequences. I barely went to class [in college] since it was just as awful as high school, so it was not all their fault that I did lousy. I just wasn't ready to do the work and was not ready to handle the freedom. I

was not ready to marshal my behavior. But, I went to college anyway, because I thought that that was what I was supposed to do. That's what everyone was doing. Also, I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't imagine making a living on my own. I always thought I would go to college. While I was growing up, I assumed I would [go to college] because that's what you do. Of course, you're going to go to college so you can get a job and most of my friends went to college.

"Did you talk to anyone about choices?" My parents and I discussed a PG [post graduate] year, but that was not the problem. We talked about Outward Bound and short-term things, where I could still live at home and get a job. All my friends would be living away so those things were not appealing. I didn't know what else to do. There was no other choice that I was aware of except going to school. Now I know that for the first year after high school I could have volunteered or something like that before going to college. You can get internships like digging around in sites. It wouldn't have mattered much what it was. I probably had some vague understanding of that sort of thing, but I never examined it very closely and I don't know why. It was never presented to me or it never was encouraged. I don't want to blame other people, because I was 18. I could have done what I wanted. But, choices were never really presented by anyone except going to college. There were not that many alternative things discussed by anyone, especially not the guidance counselor at school.

"How about your family?" My parents, guidance counselors, and relatives all talked about college. I was always trying to get to the end of a conversation because everyone was always asking me what I was going to do. I think I would have been interested in some alternatives. It depends on how much of a pain in the ass it was going

to be. It depends on how much of a hassle my parents were going to make it for me. It was all hassles. How many interminable conversations would we have around the dinner table? We had hundreds of them! They never got us anywhere! If I came home with information about an archeological dig in Belize, I think that they might have thought it was OK, but if they talked to me too much about it, I would have said to just forget it. No one exerted individual pressure, but collectively the relatives did have some influence.

Nick speaks clearly and seems to pick his words thoughtfully. His pensive demeanor and solid grasp of language keeps me very interested in his story. He also seems to say just what he wants. We continue.

Exploration

“What did you do while you were out of school?” A lot of my friends, and myself, were experimenting with drugs. We were thinking and examining our place in the universe. Some of my friends were appearing to have their day-to-day processes be not so good. They didn't have jobs. Their way of acting and perceiving the world was not like mine. I have mixed feelings about society and how adults interact with each other. I'm expected to do that [interact as an adult] and will some day. I felt myself separating from that while I was out of school; separating from contact with regular people. The more time you spend separated from people who challenge your thoughts, the harder it is to go back. I figured out that I needed to be around regular people. I was worried about my ability to do schoolwork. I didn't have good study skills and the longer I was away from school, the less able I thought I would be to do the work. A lot of my friends had left school. A good number of them had left for one reason or another; many from really

competitive places. After I was out of school for a year and a half, I began to see that I needed to do something more.

I am impressed with Nick's candor and seeming lack of self-consciousness. "Can you tell what you thought you needed to do?" *My parents wanted me to go back [to college] and they were encouraging me to go back, but I mostly thought of it on my own. I looked at my friends who were not in school. I realized that when you get further away, and when you go outside the mainstream, and you get further and further out, it's so much harder to get back in. It's harder to get back in the flow of operating among people, regular people; people who are in the mainstream. I felt like I had to go back or I might never go back. That other place is not where I belonged.*

Nick pauses for several seconds and he stands up, stretches his arms over his head, then abruptly sits back down. "So what happened?" *I knew I had to go back to school, but definitely not [the first college]. It was not a place with much passion for life or learning. There was no intellectual discourse. It was just about making grades to go on a transcript. "How were you feeling about yourself?" Nick scowls yet answers immediately. I was embarrassed mainly. It was a stigma for someone from my town to not be in college. I would feel like a bum. I was pretty much a failure.*

"So what's next?" *I decided was going to go to college but hated that whole process. I only looked at one [large New England public university]. It was the cheapest and easiest to deal with. I hate to deal with all the people and paperwork. "Can you tell me why you thought you had to go back to school?" I knew that I couldn't make it in this world without an education, even though I hated everything I knew about the educational system. But, I couldn't stay outside the system much longer and still survive. I want to*

know more about Nick's feeling about the educational system, so I ask him to tell me about his experience at this new college?

At first, I enjoyed it. I was excited and it made me sort of appreciate being in school rather than not being in school and working. Working is tiring as hell! School is much easier than working. I was psyched to be back and have everyone around. And, I was more able to deal with things socially. My first semester went well. I almost flunked a couple classes because of procrastinating but I pulled it together. It was the most successful semester of school since 6th grade and yet I almost flunked a couple classes! It was successful grade wise and learning wise. "What you mean by learning?"

Insights

I always liked to read. I always read a lot and I think I learned more from reading than anything else I've ever done. I don't feel as though I was taught anything in school. Math. I actually did learn things and I had pretty good math teachers. My English teachers pretty much stank except for one of them. Basically, they were terrible. I wasn't a good student because I didn't put my heart into what I did, but the teachers were always concerned with things like paragraph structure. They cared about things that were obvious and stupid! Those things are important to a point, but every teacher since sixth grade makes the same corrections. They are not really getting past the junk to get to anything important. My education was pretty passionless. Not all teachers were awful, just most of them. School was just boring and I usually stared off into space.

What would you like to tell others about school? *I have all sorts of radical ideas that will never happen. Get rid of tenure. Pay teachers more. Get younger teachers, or at*

least medium-aged teachers. Interact better with students. Pay them more so they will want to be teachers and stay teachers. Let them do more exciting things. Pay for their trips so they can be more excited about things. Teachers need to know stuff but they need to know how to teach it, too. The way they teach is very important but I don't think anyone knows that. They need to inspire a passion for learning instead of killing the passion that might be there somewhere.

What leads you to all these ideas? *I had an adversarial relationship with almost everyone in high school. It wasn't all their fault and it wasn't all my fault. I wish I had had a better education and I know it could have been better but there is nothing I can do about it now. Things could have been smoother. The way it works is that the teachers and administrators see you pass though each year and they are doing the same things as always. The kids are all different but they don't treat you that way. I think I was seldom treated as an individual. You know when an adult is spouting and they are giving you a load of crap. When they say, 'We know you can do it, and we are counting on you,' you know it means nothing when you have heard it a thousand times.*

Retrospections

"Would you change anything about your experience?" If I had had somebody other than my parents taking a positive interest in me, in myself and my development, then I think it could have been different. Someone like a mentor, but there are kids more deserving than me of a mentor. Someone who went to a really bad school and has no financial resources would be more deserving than me. I'm just a spoiled, rich, kid. I would not have gone to school right away if I could do it all over again. I would go out of

the US. I would like to have some responsibility, but not too much, and have some medium type supervision.

“What would you say to high school seniors?” I would say to take your time. You don't have to do anything, really. See some place that's a little different. Get out of town! All the stuff on TV is assaulting your brain. Travel helps you to know yourself better. Take your time and do what else you can that's new to you. I don't think people really know about any stuff other than going to college. It's hard to find something productive to do. Who wants to be doing something productive? It's a word parents use, but it is actually valuable. Maybe parents shouldn't say it's productive because it will turn them off. If you say you can learn something, it will also turn them off. If you say it's an 'archeological adventure' it would be better! The packaging makes a difference.

Is there anything else you would like to say that we haven't covered already? Parents, people my parents age, expect you to go to college in four years and then get a job. That's what they all did. Then you aren't doing it and they can't handle it! They should get used to it! The world has changed. We have more opportunities now. We don't need to go to school right away to get ahead. So many people aren't doing that. It used to be that if you had a job for 25 years, you worked in a plant or something, and you stayed and retired. Now people have two or three or four separate careers, never-mind the same job! You aren't stuck behind this huge wad of people. The world is a lot bigger now. I know parents' job is not easy. They should support kids and trust them and be able to see things different from when they were kids. The relationship with parents and kids is complicated. Maybe we should find someone the kid trusts, but is not their parent, because you can't really open up to your parent.

CHAPTER SIX: ALISON'S STORY

Alison spent 12 years in the public school system with her older sister, in a small town just outside New York City. Her parents divorced when she was nine and her father died two years later. She is a tall, thin 24-year-old, dressed in black pants and a dark t-shirt whose long, dark curls fall back and forth across her face as she speaks. When I describe the interview process and necessary paperwork, Alison speaks slowly and responds in softly spoken, short answers. I look for hints of emotion in her body language and facial expression, but she generally appears calm and collected. My initial impression is that Alison is quiet, reserved, and rather serious-minded.

Once we are settled, I ask her to describe the process she went through when she was deciding what to do after high school graduation. *I guess, when I was like a junior [in high school], college was like sort of what I was going to do. It was what everybody expected of me, and others. I guess I didn't have much of a concern with it. I wasn't like one of those kids that has been planning on going to college their whole life, and then starts looking into it when they are ten, and then deciding where they want to go when they're 13. For me, it was like, 'Uh oh! It's time to do this! I gotta take the SATs. Where am I gonna go? Everybody's doing it! Oh! It's gotta be art school because everybody thought it was what I was good at, so they expected I'd go to art school.' So, I started to look at art schools. I didn't really even like my art classes, so it was even like I was disappointed in the possibility of going to art school. I was like upset that I was going to have to take basic drawing again because I had been doing it for three years already. I was in AP Drawing. Then I was looking at the schools in New York City. Everything is all*

cramped there. They were little art classrooms and I was thinking that I like to paint things that are big, like 5 feet long.. So, there was no way I could take classes in small rooms. So that answers the question about me not going to school in the city.

Decisions

I ask Alison if there was anyone she talked with about college decisions. *Well, there were guidance counselors. We had to go through them, so by the time I reached my senior year I had already pretty much reached the decision that I didn't want to go to college. Or, I didn't want to go to college right away. I'd applied to schools and went through the motions of applying to college. I did all the stuff with letters and tests and all.*

"Can you tell me more about what you were thinking at the time?" I don't think I knew anything at that point, but at that point, I wasn't enthusiastic at all. I did the preliminary application to college [large urban university], but didn't send them a portfolio, but then I got in anyway, interestingly enough. I applied to like 2 or 3 schools, but I did it sort of half-assed. I wasn't exactly sure at that time what I was going to do.

Alison's responses are brief and her pauses seem to indicate that she is finished talking. Maybe I am impatient, but I want to keep a flow going, so I ask what happened next. *I guess it was when I got into the schools, somewhere throughout senior year, I realized it wasn't for me. It just didn't feel like it was what I wanted to do.* Alison pauses now, so I throw out another question. *"Were you talking to anyone about this?" Actually, when I was a senior, my sister went to college and she had been there for about a year. Then she left and came home. I think that had an influence on me. School didn't work out*

for her and maybe it wouldn't be good for me either. I want to ask more about why her sister left college, but I resist, since Alison is my focus here.

She continues. I think a major thing that made me not go to school in the first place was also just wanting to be out of society. I was thinking that I don't care about any of this. I don't want one of those jobs that college is promising me or is supposed to be promising me. But when I got to being out of school, I had had these ideals that nature would be enough for me. But, basically, I found that it wasn't and I found that I was bored. I had no peers. There was no one to hang out with. No one to interact with, which was very important to me. Being with my sister all the time was no fun and there was nothing to do. We hung out and traveled a little. I did some drawing, but I really didn't do much of anything for a year. I was really, really bored.

So far, I do not see any show of emotions in either Alison's voice or her facial expressions as she tells her story. She does not seem angry, upset, happy, relieved, or any of the other emotions that I anticipate. There are no clear smiles recognized and no strong words heard. When Alison stops speaking, I get the sense that she has said what she means to say on that topic. I move on with my questions. "Can you tell me what you did next?" *My high school ceramics teacher had always said, 'I think you should go to [small liberal arts college in New York State]. I think you'd really like it.' So, it was in my mind already, and then I went to look at it, and I was like, wow! So, I went there, and I was ecstatic. Really! It was a great year. I lived in a room by myself. I don't know. It was great. I learned a lot of things. I know that really being around intelligent, interested people was a first for me because the people in high school were not. I think it was probably the first time I felt like an adult. I was a college kid but I felt like I was really*

doing something on my own and because it was my decision to be there. I really felt like this is what I want to do and I felt good about doing it, like I'm doing well. It was very important that it was my own decision, which is probably why I was so happy. Just when I was giving up on hearing some passion in her voice, Alison begins to provide some emphasis to her words.

Influences

Alison's face is becoming animated. Maybe she is feeling more comfortable with me. I ask if there were other important people in her life. *Yeah, my mom. My mom was big into school. She says, 'Thou shalt drop out not of college.' But she had to be supportive of whatever I did because I'm a headstrong person. But whenever I would say, 'I'm just not happy', she would say, 'Well, most people your age are in school!' So, she definitely directed me in any way that she could.*

I am guiding the story now. "Can you tell me about your experience in college initially?" *Well, I only went to that college [small liberal arts college in New York State] for two years, so those years were good, except in my fourth semester, I started feeling like it wasn't for me. I was thinking of doing something different. I liked the professors and the learning. But I wasn't taking art classes. I was taking Philosophy and Religion and stuff like that. So, I was talking to a friend of mine saying, 'This is great, but I'm paying a lot of money and not getting exactly what I want.' My friend encouraged me to stick with it. That was my second semester and I got all happy again. I joined a music group, which I really liked. Then, in the second semester, I decided when I came back, I was going to take a lot of my classes in the music program. I registered to take all of my classes, but I wound up only getting my second choice classes. I thought, why would I pay*

\$20,000 a year to take classes that I didn't want. So, I thought this was not the best place for me and that I couldn't afford to be there.

“Was the money a problem?” Not really, because I also had a scholarship. The registration process there is ridiculous. There is like one little crumb over there and everyone is starving; particularly with art classes, like photography. There are huge lines and if you are a freshman, you are last for everything. They're telling you that you have to take these classes, but then you can't take them because the professors are like, 'I've filled up an hour ago.' That was very frustrating to me. I guess I really felt like I'm paying all this money and I'm putting all this effort into this. I'm not getting the classes I want and they're telling me I can't take it. That's ridiculous! I think I got too angry about that. So, at the end of my sophomore year, I applied to a few different schools. I applied to one place [small liberal arts college in northern New England] while I was still in college, so it wasn't like I was done with college. It was I'm done with one college at that point. Then, I took a year off. Not that I planned it that way. I went to France for the summer and was going to return to college in the fall.

Alison pauses for several moments, and I think she is waiting for me to say something, although I would prefer to let her keep leading the way. Nevertheless, I ask a question. “Can you tell me about your year off?” *I called up the college like the week before it started in September to say I wasn't coming. So, I was sort of into this spiritual thing at the time and I was hanging out with all these new age kind of people in France. They were telling me to stay in France. They put me up and helped me with my music. They really took care of me because they were all older. I just got it in my head, again. It was the same thing as before. My ideal. I was thinking I could make it on my own. I guess*

my feeling was like, I guess I'll just do art. If I'm not going to be studying art in school, what's the point of being in school?

Another long pause, so I toss out another question. "What was important to you at that point?" *The people in France were important. They were telling me not to go to school and that it's not so important. I don't think I knew at the time what was important to me. I think I was just doing whatever I felt like at the moment. I don't think I was thinking about much other than my own self and if I was happy. That was all that was important to me.*

Here I am probing again. "OK. So can you tell me how you are feeling at that point?" *I was staying with these people and it's so far away from my life. I felt good about myself, and I was being taken care of by people that thought I was great. They really liked me and thought I was important. They thought my music was good. I was also doing a lot of painting that they kept telling me I should sell. They were very supportive. So, it was easy for me to think I don't need school. I guess I wasn't thinking about years from then.*

"What happened next?" *I was gonna stay [in France] but my sister made me feel guilty. So, I came back. I moved to this house I couldn't really afford, by myself in the woods [in northern New England]. I only lasted there for about a month. So, that was not for me. So, then I moved to a college town and worked in a coffee shop. Again, I realized I like having peers and having people around me. Definitely, I was needing college, or that peer group, because I was relatively happy not going to college. But what happened was I took myself and said I'm going to live in the woods in nature. That was going to be great. And I'm going to do art and it's going to be inspiring and all that. And then this*

friend was opening a coffee shop and I said I was going to work for him. So, I lived in a college town working at a coffee shop. I was happy hanging out. That was the year that I started doing music really seriously. There was some good stuff that came out of it, but no structure. I guess during that time, again, I realized something. I guess it's my personality. I don't just create stuff all by myself. I need some kind of structure, like a deadline, and somebody telling me that I'm good. I wasn't producing as much art as I thought I would. I guess I felt like I should go to college. I guess I should be back in school.

Matterings

"Were you talking to others about your choices?" Oh, sure. I talked to my sister. I think that by that time I had learned not to talk to my mother about such things because I knew what her answer was. I think that she's just so oriented to just go to school. She would say you should just go to school without thinking about it. I notice that Alison seems most animated when she speaks about her mother. Her eyes open wide. She furrows her brow, speaks louder, and moves her hands around. "How did you feel about that?" It was annoying. I felt like she wasn't understanding exactly where I was coming from. It just wasn't very helpful because she wasn't weighing things like I was.

"Can you tell me about returning to school?" I think it went pretty well. I liked it. I didn't get quite as much of the structure I think I wanted but I was very productive. It was this totally weird program but it was suited to me in a lot of ways. I really wasn't like a student living on campus and going to classes all the time. My first year there I was in a regular college program doing lots of art. But my second year, I was off-campus in a

residency program where there was no real structure. I was really on my own, even though there was an advisor that kept in touch with me. I finally got to do what I really wanted to do and not always fight with the system. I liked going there.

“Can you tell me what you liked?” The structure, which was not much, and the feedback. I liked the conversations about what I’m doing what I’m thinking. I like having someone to talk to about my work and my thinking and my ideas. I think what I got most out of the place was that I learned to put myself in my surroundings: in my time frame, in my geographical location, and my set group, as a female. I was basically learning about becoming a little less egocentric. I guess the liberal arts aspect of it, which I resisted the whole time in school, but in retrospect, was good for me. I’m glad I went and did it.

Although I feel as though I am constantly prodding for details, Alison’s clear yet succinct responses are gradually letting the pieces of her story come to light. I ask, “What would you say about your college experience?” *Well, I definitely learned that I was different from everybody else. I think college is a good thing to do if it’s what you feel like doing. But, if you’re not sure about going to college, then I think you shouldn’t go because it can be a rewarding experience, but it’s not gonna be if you don’t want to be there. I know that people’s parents make them go. Society does too. Fear makes them go, too. It is fear of what might happen if they don’t go to college. Then they might have to be a waitress for the rest of their lives or something. Probably, it is fear of being cut off from their parents in whatever way, whether it’s financial or emotional or whatever.*

Retrospections

I ask Alison, “Is there anything you’d do differently if you could?” She replies more readily than she has for any other question. *I think I’d have stayed at my first*

college. Here is another one of her concise answers. *“Why?” Because it’s a really good school. I think I was too young to deal with the things I was being faced with at the time but I wish that if I could go back, knowing what I know now, I’d definitely do that. It has a lot to offer and lots of interesting people and opportunities. I think maybe I was young and impatient. I think I was expecting too much. I also think I deserved to get everything I wanted right away, but there were lots of other people there in the same situation. There really were lots of other things I could do even if I didn’t get just what I thought I wanted at the time.*

I am impressed with her personal insight, and slightly surprised at her response, but she answers with what I sense to be confidence. I ask another question. *“What would you tell others about college?” I think I would tell someone that if they make it their own, then it is a good experience.* Another long pause, so I step in to get more clarity. *“What do you mean by making it your own? You know how I said it was my decision to go? Well, if you really choose to do it and you can then get out of it what you really want as opposed to taking the classes that you think you should take, or whatever. If you just look and evaluate the situation, and see what you want, and then go for it to make it your own; then it’s a good idea to go.*

Context

I want to know more about her thoughts on ownership, so I ask, *“What do you think actually gets in the way of people not making it their own?”* Alison shows great energy now and startles me with her answer. *Standardized testing! Grades! People just growing up and being told that this is how you have to be! To just fit into a mold and not*

being given choices! I say standardized testing because the thing that I did get at my high school was critical thinking, but that is not tested on the SATs. But I think a lot of kids are not taught critical thinking, they just don't know how to evaluate the situation. I don't think people are thinking! You go to a guidance counselor and they say, 'OK, what school do you want to go to?' But it's never about what if I don't want to go to school right now! No one asks, 'Do you want to go to school? How do you feel about school? If you could think of your ideal next step, what would it be?' If they were asking questions like that, it would be good. Then, if the kid said I want to join the circus, they could say you have these three options. Or, do you like to dance? And if you like to dance, they can give ideas about options.

Alison stands up as if she is ready to leave. I tell her I have one more question if she could stay another minute. She sits down again, but appears tired to me, as she slouches in her seat. I press on. "Is there anything or anyone that you think could have been helpful to you in the process of entering and re-entering college?" *Well, I guess I've always thought it would be good if there was some place where I could go, especially as a non-student, maybe wanting to go back to school. I was just talking to this girl who just applied for some scholarships and got them. She said, 'There's a big room in my high school. I went there and I used all their resources.'* I just realized that she has that, but what do I have right now? I mean, I do have the Internet, but if there was like some room I could go to like where I could talk to someone about possibilities, it would be good. *Particularly if there is someone that's not your parents because that's who you end up talking to, but they have their own agenda because they're your parents. Peers are in the*

same place that you're at. They don't know any more than you do. I mean, they're good to talk to, but they don't have ideas and don't have all the information about options.

I quickly throw in one last question, and she replies in her typically brief manner. "Is there anything else that you'd like to add here that I haven't mentioned yet?" *I feel good about going to college, at least it got my mom off my back. But there is that societal thing about going to college. If you don't [go to college], then there's something wrong with you. I do like being educated and I feel educated, but I also like, for the reasons of society, to be able to say that I am a college graduate. I'll admit that!*

CHAPTER SEVEN: TOM'S STORY

Tom moved from the mid-west to a small suburb west of Boston with his parents and two brothers for his last three years of high school. He attended two colleges, left each of them at different points, and is back in college again at the age of 21. The friend of a colleague gave Tom's name to me, and he agreed to participate in my project when I contacted him. On a cold winter afternoon, I see a tall, lean, young man dressed in light tan jeans and black sweater walk quickly into my home office. I believe I see a sparkle in his blue eyes, and I sense a very warm energy as Tom smiles and stretches his hand toward mine. We share a firm handshake while making direct eye contact.

We settle into seats across from each other, and I begin to explain the specifics of the interview process. Tom's eyes glance around the papers I hand him while he clicks the pen on and off. He seems a bit confused as he attempts to fill out the questionnaire. I take some extra time to explain the forms in more detail. As he completes the paperwork, Tom gives a loud sigh, which I suspect indicates he is not thrilled with that written task. Tom's seeming reluctance to put thoughts on paper is rapidly overshadowed by what I realize may be an enthusiastic desire to put all those ideas into words.

Expectations

My first question is intended to help me understand Tom's initial experience of coming to enroll in college. No more than a split second passes before Tom spills out an answer. *Oh! I didn't really think much about it [going to college] at all! There wasn't a lot of thinking to do because it seemed like everyone was doing the thinking and deciding*

for me. I don't think I was given any options and the whole college thing was just a pain in the ass to me then. I remember people asking me questions and telling me what to do. It was all taxing and so tedious. I don't think I wanted to go to college but it was expected because everyone else was doing it. All the advisors [in high school] would talk about was all the stuff I had to do to go college. It was like I had to do stuff. The teachers made us write essays and we had to get teachers to write stuff for us.

Tom is speaking rapidly and is almost breathless. I wonder if he feels he was a bystander in his own decision-making. He takes a long pause and then jumps forward. *Everything was focused on what to do for college but no one said what to do if you didn't want to go to college. There were no options and I was heavily stressed. So were many of my friends, although I think they had a better idea about what they wanted than I did. So, I just went along with the program to keep everyone off my back. So, I applied to 3 colleges, I got into two of them, and I didn't really think too much about any of it. I just did it all because I had to. My parents thought I should and so did the counselors at school.*

Tom pauses, and seems relaxed, so I try to get in another question about some of his first year experiences. *I went to college [small, private, mid-western liberal arts college] and made a lot of friends. I just had a blast! I went to classes I was interested in but not the classes I wasn't interested in. I didn't really do my work, especially stuff that I had to write. I can't write papers the way teachers want them. I did well in the classes I went to, like geology. I did OK with geology without studying, because I like the subject and there were lots of interesting hands-on activities. But in other classes, where I had to write things, it just didn't work out very well. I wasn't interested and I would rather go*

have a good time. So, I stayed one year. I got enough done so as to not be kicked out the first semester. Then in the second semester, I ended up getting enough credits to come back, but I just decided not to.

I am confused about his decision to not return to college since he seems to enjoy it and the college has not removed him academically. I prompt him to tell me more about what was going on in his life when he actually makes the decision to leave college, even though I worry that we are not staying focused on one topic at a time.

Divergence

I decided not to go back to school because I had made the decision during the second semester that I was going to run a vineyard. To do that, then why in the world was I in this college? It was sort of a romantic interest. I had started working with plants, actually pressing them. I was making wine and it was kinda cool. So, I decide I am going to go somewhere where I can learn about what I what to learn about. I made a kind of a career decision. I gave myself some direction and decided that was the right thing to do. So, I left that school and decided to go to somewhere else [a large, New England, public university]. I guess I applied late and my transcripts weren't so good, so I didn't get in there. So, I just bummed around.

Tom seems to express himself in a matter-of-fact tone and comes to an abrupt halt when he finishes a thought. I ask if he had talked to anyone at school about any of his plans to leave college. *Oh! No! No!! I probably could have, but I did talk to some friends of mine. They like said, 'Oh, you shouldn't leave. I think you could do well here if you'd just do something. You can create your own major. There is a very good biology*

department and la da da'. But after I didn't get into the university, I said, 'Oh screw that! I don't want to go anyway.' I think I just didn't want to go to college. When I think about it now, I am not sure if I did want to go to college because I still didn't do anything. I moved [to a university town] and I was taking classes [at the public university]. I took Continuing Education classes and just failed them miserably on purpose. I know I felt that I should have been going to college, and that was the thing for me to be doing at the time. Go to college!

I am trying to sort out what Tom is saying because I think I hear conflicting stories, but I know it's important for him to get through his telling in the best way for him, so I am patient. I ask him to describe his feelings about what he thought he should do. *That was just the impression I got from my parents and from other students and from what I thought was expected of me.* He leans forward toward me now, and takes the interview in his own direction as he tells me what he does as he bums around.

So, I was living in a big house with bunch of students. I was washing dishes and taking Continuing Education classes at night. Washing dishes was bad. It wasn't much fun. Nobody talked to me and I just didn't like it. Work was tough. It was hard and not good pay. Going to class was bad. There were large classes with uninspired teachers. Well, I don't know what was happening. I like being stimulated but I found myself always complaining about this or that. I would say 'This is why I shouldn't have to do something' and then I would not do it and just waste my time. When I wanted to get stimulated, I could go to the library.

I am becoming comfortable with Tom's direct speaking style, since I get the impression that he says just what he means, but I am totally thrown off-guard when he

tells me his next plan. *So, I decided that I wanted to go to another college [small, liberal arts college in the northwest] because there I could do whatever I wanted and that would be great. I did really want to go there, but I think it was more because my friends at [first mid-western college] were going there, and we wanted to start a band. I know that if we did start a band, I could probably get credit for it anyway. So, I get applications and start thinking about going there.* Tom stops talking abruptly again. I am surprised at what he reveals about his plans, but I retain my composure and ask him to explain more.

I was still thinking about this college, but I was already [in New England] taking part-time classes. I just didn't go to classes, so I got an F and an incomplete. Then, my parents said, 'I think you should take some time off, and not go to school.' They said, 'It would probably be much better for you because it wears on you. You don't like it and it makes you crazy. So, just take some time off and see what happens.' So, I did. I took some time off. I did apply to college [small Northwest college] and I got in, but I didn't go because I decided to take time off.

Reflecting in time

I ask what happens next. *Well, I was off [out of college] for one year. I worked [a local coffee shop] this past year. I lived at home and had a girlfriend. It was fine. At first, it was great. I didn't know anyone where I was [living]. My family had moved up to the north shore and I didn't know anybody, so I met people at work. We hung out and had good times. I'd see them at work and we'd have a good time there. Work is just work. You kind of have to just get used to it and I didn't mind the work at all. Some days I'd be grumpy but I'd just work through it.* When I ask what was important to him while he was

out of school and working, he smiles and describes his need for friends. *Having friends is important because for me if I don't have friends where I'm going, it wears on me. I need to know there's people where I am. If I can't make friends, either I'm not putting out the effort to make friends or they suck, which probably isn't entirely true, or they don't like me, like I suck for some reason, or like I'm too intimidating, or whatever. So, if there are people around, I like to make friends. Just for your general state of mind, it's good to have people around to talk to.* I ask again if he talked to other people about any of his college decisions.

I talked to my mother. And, there were friends, too. I mentioned it to some of my friends' parents. I wasn't like completely unhappy, so I just let it go and then figured it out for myself. My parents knew that I'm not going to do anything if I don't want to. So, the best they could do is to support me in whatever I do and try to give me direction, but not try to tell me what to do. So, they try to look for the good in what's happening. So, they saw that I was washing dishes, and living, and they thought that was very good because I am experiencing living on my own. I am having to have a job, and paying rent, and learning to budget. Tom seems to want to talk forever!

I think I learned a lot of stuff that year about getting things done. I learned the necessity of actually listening to people. I learned about others telling you what to do and having to get into the mode of working. I know that before that year, whenever I went to work, I was living at home. I didn't really need the money; I just took a job because my parents were kind of on my case about it. I got the job and I'd feel pissy. I got this feeling that I was stuck in a cage and I still get that [feeling], but I think that that is part of having to be at work. You are stuck there, especially when you are in a situation you

can't really change. Like I need the money to pay my rent because I signed the lease, and if I don't pay it, I make more people than just me in trouble. So, I'm stuck here because of my own decision. It's my decision and I just have to do it. I learned how to do that and know that is how it goes and I have to play along.

I am very interested in hearing more of Tom's story, so I move my questions to the next phase by asking about his experience returning to college. He does not answer my question, so I am ambushed again. I suspect he has something important to say.

Noticing

Well, straight out of high school, I don't think is a good time to go to college because you've been stimulated in all of these different categories of things. People say you can do whatever you want to choose. So, here is everything for you. For me, it was just a big mush of stuff that I'm good at. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I'm good at any number of things so I could focus on one thing. But no, it was just a big mass of stuff to have to think about. There was a bunch of options, but it wasn't until I got out of school and was really on my own that I noticed what I needed to do or what I wanted to do when I wasn't washing dishes or in class. That was playing music or painting. Making art was another thing I was good at. It's what I've always been good at and it's actually one of the only things I paid attention to when I was in college. Art and music were more important but I didn't really notice it then. I don't think schools let you think that art and music are important. Reading and writing are all that are important in schools for teachers, but if you are good in art, no one cares. But art and music were what I went to

because they were easy for me. But some other things were easy as well, but they [art and music] grab my attention and engage me more than anything else.

So, after a while, my Dad noticed that I like to do art and he's a very creative guy. He was checking things out and saw that an art college is nearby. It's good and we can afford it. So, he asked if I wanted to apply. I had been out of school for awhile and I was getting really antsy from working. I remember driving around feeling completely bad because all I ever do is drive around, eat stuff, drink stuff, and then make coffee for people and go to stupid work. I just felt crappy and uninterested in anything. Like, I wanted to be interested. Then my Dad mentioned an art college, and I sort of envisioned myself there. I could see myself there. It felt very good to think about going to there, so I applied there. I got in, and I go there now. Tom smiles, smacks the table with his palms, and stops talking. I sense confidence in his voice.

It's hard for me to anticipate where Tom's story will go next, but I ask about how he feels about this current college experience. I am there full-time now. All these things that I didn't really place before have been really forming while I have been out of school. Like work. Having my own work. I have something I'm interested in. I'm getting things done in an orderly way and planning my time. All of these things have been forming. They are new to me and I feel so silly and a little stupid because it's all so simple to do things in an organized way. Just do things a little at a time and don't get behind. The realization about all these things didn't really happen until I'd already done the things the wrong way. I always had trouble with organization and getting things done on time. The first week of college, I just went to all the classes, and all the meetings, and things. I

paid attention and I took a lot of notes and I got things to keep my papers in. I got separate notebooks for everything.

Self-discovery

All this is new to me. I never did this before in school. It all made perfect sense. I just used logic. If I want to do well, which I do, then these are the things I have to do because I know myself. I know that if I keep all my notes in the same folder, I won't be able to go through them and find what I want. So, I keep them in separate folders. It's so simple. If I shove all my papers in one place, some of them will get lost and some will get wrinkled and some will get ruined. So, I keep a file and I got a locker. I never used a locker before. I can go to class with just what I need and I write down my assignments because I'm kind of scatter-brained. I'll forget things. I also have a day-planner because I know I will be very busy and I need to keep track of things. There will be activities, things I want to do, and things I need to do aside from classes.

Tom sounds rather proud of himself to me and to get him to expand on this apparent self-knowledge, I ask how he thinks he came to know himself better. *It was because, right out of high school, I thought I was the greatest thing in the world. There is absolutely no reason why I should have to do all of these stupid things because I rule, obviously! I mean, why should I write down my assignments? I have a wonderful memory! I remember everything that I want to. It just isn't true though! So, over time, you accept your faults, if you want to call them that. You learn how you work as an individual and from there you can go on in a realistic fashion. I don't think I was very realistic at all before.* He stops here in his abrupt style, and later I regret not probing

more to get him to talk more specifically about his process of self-understanding since I think it could add more dimensions to his story. Without trying to stay on the previous topic, I jump to my next question to ask if he would change anything he did. Tom thinks for a few moments before responding.

There are things I regret, but I'm not sure I'd do it very different. I mean, there are things I'd do differently, but the overall timeline and plot line, I don't think I would [change]. Coming out of high school to college was good because I learned about life, and I got engaged in friendships that were very good, strong friendships. I think that was good and I also had a terrific time! I learned about myself, what makes me tick, and how I work with other people. It was different than in high school because [in college] I was thrown into situations where I didn't know anybody, where I just knew a few people. I learned how I like to operate and how my ideas form. I can use my own style. It's not very academic, the things I learned, but it was important anyway. Then, living on my own, I don't know. I washed dishes and I just learned how to tough it out. When things are bad, work through it anyway. Just because you feel bad is not an excuse not to do your work. Also, I found sort of an explanation of my shadow self. All the things I had tried to put away from myself, I had to face. I see how I am, the truth of me. I'm not the king of the world, but I thought that I was. I'm just a regular guy with problems, just like everybody else. This is the way that life is so you're just going to have to deal with it in a more realistic way. This was important for me to learn. Maybe the moment [living on my own] in my life was just re-enforcing those ideas. I was very uncomfortable and very upset with myself. [I had a] low self image when I got back because in all that time there

wasn't anyone who said, 'Tom you are terrific! You are great, great, great!' It was all just me discovering about me because I didn't have anyone else who really knew me.

Tom takes a deep breath and gulps a long drink of water. He stretches both his arms over his head, stands up, and promptly sits back down with his legs propped up on the table in front of him. I sense a bit of drama in his movements. I smile quietly and wait for Tom to continue since I believe he has more to say.

Retrospection

He speaks slowly. I think friends are important. To keep yourself straight you gotta have friends. I went crazy a lot when I didn't have friends. I think it was important for me to realize who I was as a person, to get use to myself by myself. I had to sort of discover how I felt with myself and I don't think friends can help you with that. Sometimes you just go out and have a good time and forget about stuff by yourself. I find myself trying to forget about stuff but it's really difficult, so I just read a book to get away from everything. Tom is quiet for almost one minute and I now offer a new path for the conversation. "What would you tell others about the whole college process?"

Well, I've got a little 15-year old brother, and I'd say, 'Always have patience and you'll find your own way. Just be patient and know that you will find your own way.' That's the best advice I think I can give. For different people things work differently. I don't think I would tell people to go to college right after high school. Everybody I've talked to says, gosh, you know, they did go to college right after high school and did a good job, did a great job. But, then they say, you know, I really would have been better if I'd taken some time off first. I would make more out of the experience in college.

Everyone that I talk to says that. They say you're really lucky to be doing it now because you can have more focus. I know I didn't have that [focus] before. They tell me you've got that [focus]; you've had time to think about why you're here. I know they miss it now because for the first year, or first two years, they just didn't appreciate it [college]. They didn't know exactly what they had there. It was just they were straight out of high school. This is what you're entitled to and you go and do it, blah blah blah. When in the last two years you are kinda like; whoa! This is pretty cool and you get a little more engaged. This is what a number of friends said to me. So, they would have liked to have spent those two years not as they did in the first half of college. Even though it can all be such an incredible experience. So, they would have liked to have taken some time off. That's what I'd say. Take at least the first semester to yourself before going to college, at the very least. Tom hesitates for a few moments. I wonder if he is rethinking his comments. Or, I don't know! It's such a scary thing to not go to college when everyone else is doing it!

I ask "Why?" Because of all the people around me. My parents would frown on me. Whenever we'd talk about that [not going to college], they'd give me 'that look.' They'd be very disapproving. I don't like that feeling and don't like that look. I'd say, I guess I should go to college. It's true, da, da, da. I know they are right but I don't want to. If you start thinking along those lines, that I don't want to go but I know it's right, then sometimes it'll lead to a perversion of the original idea. Then it turns into, I just don't want to. I'm sort of in defiance for some silly reason. Another thing that's difficult about not going to college after high school is you don't have the same momentum and I think it could be very difficult to get back into the swing of being in school. Tom takes a deep breath, smiles, and pushes himself further back in his seat.

“Is there anything you would change about your college experience?” *I think a good career counselor would have been a fine idea. At the right time, it would have worked out well. I know that in the first year I didn’t want to think about a career until I decided what it was that I wanted to do. I wasn’t going to take anyone else’s input. So, I guess a career counselor would be a bad idea.* This apparent contradiction confuses me, but I think perhaps the terminology may be causing trouble so I redirect the words. “What if that person wasn’t a career counselor? Does that word make a difference?”

Tom takes a moment and replies. *Well, some sort of counselor might be OK. Maybe a directional counselor. Like in high school, maybe talking to a directional counselor would have been helpful. I was no good at deciding what I wanted to do. So, other people made decisions for me. Really, if given the choice, at that point, I bet if I didn’t go to college, I would just cruise around and get into trouble.* I don’t think I can take this conversation any further because I see Tom getting restless as he stands up and sits down rapidly several times in the last few minutes. Tom proves me correct. *I have to go, but I really liked talking to you.*

CHAPTER EIGHT: LISA'S STORY

Lisa is a petite, young woman wearing a tight-fitting t-shirt and faded blue jeans. As she walks into my office, I notice a vibrancy in her demeanor and a glimmer in her light blue eyes that give me the feeling of exuberant and creative charm. Her curly, blonde hair frames her face and her dainty hands are in constant motion as they appear to illustrate her words in mid-air. Lisa grew up on the west coast, and moved to Boston's western suburbs with her parents and younger sister when she was in 6th grade. She attended public schools. A long-time friend of mine suggested that Lisa, the daughter of her friend, might be interested in my project. My phone call to Lisa confirms her availability and we meet in my home office. Lisa speaks with a clarity and conviction that belie her 21 years.

Once we take care of necessary paperwork and clarifications of the interview process, I begin by asking Lisa about her experience in coming to enroll in college. *Well, I knew, basically my entire life, that I wanted to do something in art. That was just, without a question, totally clear to me. I did not have good grades in high school in my academic subjects. I knew that certain art schools, because I wanted to go to an art school, looked at your academics and certain ones didn't as much. So, I applied to a few schools. I sort of did not try to reach too far with my goals of which schools I was applying to because of my grades. I figured that I'd apply to one art school [a local art college]. I decided to go there because it was close by. I knew that it wasn't really the long-term school for me but I was just going to do my foundation year there, build up my portfolio, build up my grades, and then apply somewhere else.*

I am curious about Lisa's rationale, and am anxious to hear her story. *I didn't really know exactly how it [going to college] was going to unfold, but I didn't really have a sense that it [the local art college] was my school. I just sort of did that to get the ball going.* She provides more detail on why she was unsure of her direction. *Also, obviously in high school, you have a limited exposure to different mediums and different sorts of disciplines within art, so the only things I really sort of knew were very simple things: drawing, painting, and clay, or something like that. Everything was very simple and very basic. I didn't really have a sense of what different titles meant in art disciplines. For example, I knew that there was something called 'illustration' but I didn't really know what it meant to do the illustrations. So, when I was kind of getting into the disciplines, I feel like I had to sort out what everything meant. But, even when I went to [another mid-western art college], I still didn't really know what these different things meant. I went into the illustration and design program without really knowing what it meant to be an illustrator or designer. Then, after being there, and sort of learning what those terms actually mean, discovered that's not really what I want to do.* To me, Lisa does not sound frustrated with her experience of spending time learning about something and then realizing she didn't want it anyway. She offers the facts without expressing much obvious emotion about the course of the events.

Lisa is moving quickly with her story and I feel lost without a better sense of the timeline of her story, so I attempt to redirect her by asking about her initial experience of going to college. *Well, to me, my decisions were between two possibilities. I got into college [a local art college], which was not a bad school, but also not a fantastic school. And, I got into a huge art college [a large, elite mid-western art college], which is a pretty*

good school, but it was sort of a big school. I didn't really want to be there [a large mid-western city]. It was sort of a stretch for me in a way. There were some other schools I would of rather of gone to beyond both of those, but I was just thinking of going somewhere [the local college] close by. I knew that it wasn't going to be permanent and when knowing that it wasn't going to really be permanent, I didn't really want to get too far away from home. I wonder what Lisa is saying about her readiness to leave home and look forward to hearing how her story unfolds.

Going to college

When I first went [the local art college], I lived in the city. First, I lived in sort of a school-organized sharing apartment type of place. After a semester there, I was able to escape and get into my own apartment. I note her use of the word 'escape' here and feel that it may be an important area to explore, but I decide to let her continue with her present line of thinking. So, I was there for my foundation year and then after that year, or during the end of that year, I discovered that I was attracted to another college [a small mid-western art college]. I transferred there and was in the program for Illustration and Design. I stayed there for one semester and discovered that I really did not want to be there any longer, even though I really liked the school. Then, I went back to the [local art college] part-time, but not in any one school or discipline. Then, in the summer, I continued taking classes in a couple of areas that I was interested in, which were Design and Printmaking.

Then, at the end of that summer, I had arranged to do an internship in a graphic design company in Germany that would have lasted three months. I am thinking that Lisa

likely spent a great deal of time and energy researching so many options. *So, I went to Germany and I did that [internship]. After those three months, I ended up staying. I lived there for about a year doing a little bit in this design company and doing my own sort of art in a studio that was there. After that year, sort of not really being in any sort of discipline but just learning a language and doing my own thing, I knew that I wanted to get back to school. I also did not think I wanted to do it [college] in the United States. I thought about doing it [college] in Germany, so I started applying to and started looking seriously into it. Then, I decided maybe I would rather study in English as not to concentrate on the language as much, but on my other subjects, so I applied to some schools in England. I got into them. Now, I attend one [college in England] and it is a three-year program. I am in my first year.*

I further explore Lisa's feelings about her experiences. To bring her back to the beginning of the college process, I ask, "Can you tell me how you were feeling about your college decisions?" *I think I really had no idea about what college was about and I really had no idea about the seriousness involved in my choices. I had no idea about what I really wanted to focus in. I had no idea about what these things meant. I wasn't really self-motivated, at least not in contrast to now, I think the year of doing nothing, officially nothing structured, in Germany, was sort of what got me ready to meet the structure again. Then, knowing what kind of structure I wanted, in what way it worked for me, was important. I can see it now that I am in a place where I want to be. It is where I choose to be. It is where I motivate myself and push myself to be. In both of those places [local and mid-western colleges], I think it was more like a chore that I was forced to do as opposed to my own goal.*

Mattering

As Lisa is telling me about what matters to her, I am interested in learning more about her motivations, so she explains for me. It was different in those two places. *In the [local college], it was sort of carrying over from high school, which even in high school I loved doing art and loved being creative. I did not love getting assignments. I don't think I really had a sense of why I was getting those assignments and how they would benefit me. I think I was just anti-assignments. So, in college, it was still like not really wanting to show up for class. It was just, basically, how high school was. It was how it was for me in high school in all of my academic subjects. It was feeling like I had to be there but I didn't really want to be there. I think I just got into the mode of feeling like I have to be there but I don't really want to be there, even though it was art school and I wanted to be there. She laughs.*

I want to learn more about her attitude toward school. "Can you tell me about your feelings about education?" *I had an awful history in high school of not wanting to attend classes. I just absolutely was not self-motivated. Now, it is different. I can understand the difference now that I want to learn things. Now, I just want to get as much information as I can and learn everything there is to know. I think really what probably happened in high school, or in middle school, or grammar school, sort of made me give up effort in areas that I wasn't really gifted in. I always got rejected in my classes and then I started rejecting those things back ever since. I just stopped trying because I did not want to fail over and over again. I am fascinated. My professional tendency now is*

to assume that if she didn't like school, it would not make sense to jump right into college after what she says was *an awful history in high school*.

My next question is about her initial decision to go to college. *I feel like my parents are somewhat open-minded about most things. But, for my parents, that is what you do. You go to college after you go to high school. That is what we do in these sort of upper class communities [Boston's western suburbs] in the United States. That is just what we do these days. It wasn't that I really had to be there. I also didn't want to take a year off. At that time, I just did it because that was the routine. I was used to this attitude of being in classes because I had to be there. I was always being checked up on with teachers in high school about 'did Lisa show up in class.' I did not want to go to school needing to find all kinds of excuses not to go to school. That just became my routine. 'I just don't want to go to school' was my routine.*

I wonder if Lisa ever felt she had options other than college. My bias-laden gardening gloves are inches away from me now, and I want to put them on and provide Lisa with various data and theories about college attendance. I remain silent as Lisa continues talking. *I knew some people that were taking a year off, so I knew that choice existed but it was just sort of there. There was nothing specifically I wanted to do to take a year off. My view is totally different now than it was then. Then, it was I just didn't have certain personal goals. There was no direction. I think you just get used to these sorts of expectations and routines in what is around you in society and what is expected of you in a way.*

I sense confidence in Lisa's voice as she explains her lack of direction initially in contrast to her current focus. Now, I ask about her feeling regarding other people's

expectations. *I feel like somebody should do that [go to college] when they are ready to. Because now I am ready and it is so much more beneficial to be in school when you are really ready. Somebody should go to school and learn things in whatever way when they want. They should go when they are ready to go by themselves.* She hesitates here, looks straight at me, and then continues. *But, I suppose not everybody is going to get to that place and not everybody won't ever be in that place of wanting to learn things.*

Lisa now asks permission to give me her opinion on education and I immediately encourage her voice. *Can I say something about how I feel about education?* I say, "Go right ahead!" *I sort of disagree with the way society forces you to do things, but also in Germany you need certificates for everything. If you are going to sell bread in a bakery, you need at least two years of education to do that. It is every little minute job that has this sort of requirement. It's incredible. It's a lot more strict than here, I think. I think that some people might want to be janitors or bakers, selling bread or something like that. Those jobs are also important, and realistically you do not need a very huge education for that. But, I feel that if that expectation wasn't there, maybe some people would not push themselves or be pushed. Because I think if that expectation wasn't there, I would not have found my way to expect that of myself.*

Zigzagging

I ask Lisa if she would change anything about her college experiences. Her answers do not surprise me. *I'm quite pleased with the route I took even though it was totally zigzag. Maybe I could say that it was wasting time because I went through a total of two years of school, which sort of didn't amount to so much. But, I learned things in*

those experiences that put me where I am now, which is the right place. It was totally zigzagging, but it was the right route. It was the best way to go for me. It was not direct like most of my peers from high school. But nothing could have been better for me than to zigzag through school. I guess that's my way. And, I feel fine about it. Totally fine.

I believe Lisa speaks with a candor and confidence that impresses me. Next, I ask what actually brought her back to college full-time? *It was always in the back of my mind because I knew I wanted to have some certificate of some kind, eventually. I sort of went mad doing my year without any assignments. I tried doing some assignments for myself, but it just wasn't really real. Yet, it [returning to college] was always sort of in the back of my mind. I looked into a bunch of German schools. I went visiting them, I applied to them, and I really knew I did not want to go back to the United States. I had sort of casually looked into schools in England before all of this in Germany. I don't even remember why I was looking into it but I was maybe for some kind of exchange or working or something. So, I had heard about the school I am at now, and knew it had a nice reputation, and that I was interested to learn a little more about that. So, it was always sort of in the back of my mind. Luckily, I started looking into applying just in time before the deadlines.*

I haven't heard much about the people in her life and I want to know more about peer and family influence on her experiences. *Well, my parents are very supportive. They started out with this whole thing [changing colleges and countries] being a little bit scared with each step, really. But they are very supportive and somewhere along the line, they began trusting me. Then, actually, they thought I was being responsible, especially since I arranged everything for myself, including going to school in England. I think they*

sort of sensed that I was now motivated and that I was not feeling cornered. Lisa's choice of the word 'cornered' interests me. My parents and everybody who I have met along the way have been supportive in giving me advice and connections.

My interest in examining her self-motivation elicits what I think is an interesting response. Lisa says it all started [in the mid-western art college] where she needed to get to know people. *I was seeing new things and meeting new people because that was all part of the college thing, and I was getting interested in new things. I didn't want to stay there, so I was looking for other places. I was sort of starting making arrangements for something that would be beneficial for my future. I wanted to be more immersed in German because I was learning a little bit of German from a friend. And a very good friend of the family, who is a designer from Germany, has lots of connections through all different places. She knew the people who had a graphic design company in Germany, so she sort of put me in contact with them for an internship. So, I got this internship in Germany and didn't go to school right away.*

Learning

Lisa is sharing some interesting experiences and I ask her to tell me more about how she feels about her opportunities. *I have finally learned what certain things mean, like what illustration means, what all those things mean that I always wanted to know but didn't always know I needed to know them. I have learned so much, so much. I've learned about my own motivation and where it comes from and where it gets me. That is really the main thing. I mean, I have learned so much through this whole process. It's mostly when my parents told me all these things when I was younger. It all went in one*

ear and out the other, because I wasn't ready for the information. Then, I went through my own course of events and in not having structure, I found that I desired structure. So, I went to college and it all came from me. It all was self-motivated. I did it all myself really. It wasn't someone telling me you have to go to school and you have to do this and you have to do that. I was doing it when I was ready. I am incredibly motivated; unbelievably motivated now. It is such a different feeling from the entire rest of my life, which always felt like I was doing what I had to do because of other people; not learning because I wanted to learn. Now, I try and get as much information as I can because I want it. But it came from me when I was ready.

“What would you say to others about the college experience?” The problem is I feel like that when you are at that age, and you are not feeling incredibly motivated like I was, then you do not hear that advice. But, if I gave advice, I would speak to the people giving them advice, parents or whatever. I would say to let the motivation come to students when they are ready for it because it can't come any other way. So many people tried to force me to realize things earlier than I realized them about being motivated, about learning things, and things like that. I wasn't ready to know that. I didn't know that yet. I like her honesty and seemingly astute answer.

Insight

I ask how she felt about herself at that time. I thought I knew what I was talking about. I mean, I thought I didn't like being in high school because of this or that reason. Now, I see it probably wasn't because of those reasons but I don't think I belonged in a public high school at all. I was in the wrong school for me. I ask Lisa, “Can you think of anything or anyone that could have made things different for you?” Lisa replies with

what I sense to be heartfelt, thoughtfully chosen and slowly paced words. *I know it is a little bit of a different issue. I know the public high school was the absolute wrong, wrong place for me. It is just so unfortunate that I stayed there for financial reasons instead of going to a different high school. I even knew of a certain school that would have been better for me to go to. It was a private high school, which was more art orientated, and more sort of open-minded. And I just think that if money wasn't an issue, if my parents had the money to send me to the private high school, it would have been so much better altogether in those early parts of [my] development.*

I was told to see a counselor and I know that college counseling programs are supposed to be a help, but I wonder how much of a help because I feel that some of those things get learned when you just do it. It's just trial and error. I feel like a lot of my sort of decision- making was process of elimination, which got me here now. And it is all very fine. Lisa's voice is loud and clear. She accentuates the words in the last three sentences. *My route might be a little strange, yeah, because I tried different things. And because at that age [high school] you just don't know what everything means. Maybe it would be good if there would be some kind of arrangement made so that high school students could narrow down what kind of interests they might have. Maybe they could do half-a-day for a week in these kinds of places where they might have interest in and see what it is all about. Like if they have interest in graphic arts designing, then they could have some kind of program where they could sort of watch over the graphic designers for a short amount of time. They could get a little sense in their mind about what it actually means to be a graphic designer or an engineer or something.* I ask her to tell me a little more about the college counselors, since I can't help thinking that guidance is usually helpful.

She proves me wrong. *I feel like theoretically having somebody like a special counselor would be very good but I feel like that when I was in high school, I probably would of rejected a person like that. I ask why. I don't think I would have taken them very seriously. I feel like I went to the college counselors and they really didn't give a care about what I was up to. "You used the word theoretically?" Theoretically, now being an adult looking back to figure it all out. A counselor or support program for kids in that age group sounds like a good idea, but I feel like when I was a kid at that age, I wouldn't have accepted that.*

I ask her if that's because it didn't exist. *I think it really depends on who the character would have been because I had a school social worker who I was very, very close to. I really liked her personality and really liked being around her. Then, there were these other kinds of people who did tests on me and things like that, who I really did not appreciate at all. I didn't want to be around them. They had bad breath and they were so out of it. They were just absolutely not in my generation. They had no idea! They had totally different views. They were just absolutely in a different planet than I was and I did not relate to them at all! I did not trust them. I just didn't relate to them. I didn't feel I could communicate with them. Lisa hardly takes a breath during this part of her story, and all I can do is feel empathy for her.*

She continues and I listen. *I just feel like my whole education would have been altered if people had taken a different approach to my way of learning and my way of being intelligent because I don't think I am not intelligent. I just got awful grades in high school. I just sort of felt like I never really had too many teachers who understood me. Maybe just the whole public school system really is off. That's why I say if I had gone to*

this other high school, it would have been better. There were sort of different approaches taken, but it was too expensive. I just continuously felt sort of shot down in a way that I didn't like at all.

Lisa begins to stumble with her words now. I sense strong emotion in her voice. *It's all clear in looking back on it now. But, back then, I don't think I was feeling like 'oh, I'm so stupid' or anything like that. Although, probably, sometimes, I don't know, maybe I did [feel stupid]. I sort of feel like it must have been that I tried a few times to do what I was supposed to do in school but it didn't work. Then, I felt I needed to reject things instead of everything rejecting me. I didn't want to always be wrong. So, I just didn't put any effort into school. So, it wasn't like I put the effort in and I didn't succeed. It was that I just didn't put the effort in so it was like, 'maybe, oh, I am a bad ass. I don't care about this or something.' But I think I always had a sense that there were different ways of doing things and this definitely wasn't my way. But, this is the way it is in the public school that you don't pay for. So, you pledge allegiance to the flag and you have to take this credit and that credit, and art is only an elective that no one thinks is important.*

Statement

My instincts tell me that Lisa is becoming emotionally drained as she recounts her past school experiences. What she is saying is quite powerful to hear. After several quiet moments, and a few sips of water, I ask if there is anything she wants to ask me, or if there anything else she wants to tell me. *Well, just one other thing that really is not part of your project, but I don't know any other place to say this. I know that our taxes in the United States are not very high and so therefore we don't get education paid for. College*

is sort of an extra you pay for yourself, but I just think that is so awful. I think it is so capitalistic. I just think that it is not OK that kids growing up in certain families with not very much money have like miles of loans ahead of them to look forward to if they do go to school. I think the system needs improvement generally.

She provides more details to her explanation. Her accuracy is a bit off, since European colleges are a bit more expensive than Lisa believes, but her adamancy leaves no doubt in my mind. *German citizens and European citizens don't pay for school. You pay maybe \$25 a year total for paperwork charges, or something, but it's there for you. Of course, the taxes are much higher but nonetheless, taxes are based on the percentage of how much you earn so that everybody, every single person, has the same opportunity to go to school without dealing with loans or anything like that. And [it's] the same in England. They pay about a thousand pounds a year, which is a lot for them. There are protest rallies against even paying that much because they are not used to it. It's sort of new there [England], but it's still a lot less than it is here, which doesn't sound so expensive. I just think it's not OK to sort of have the kind of society that we have where education is so critical for jobs and then having it be so expensive. It would be one thing if it was \$2,000 a year but it is \$20,000 a year and that is ridiculous. I just needed to say this to someone who works in a college. Thank you for listening.*

CHAPTER NINE: MIKE'S STORY

Mike is a 26-year-old, dark-haired young man who is well over six feet tall. My glance at his unshaven face, faded blue jeans, and overstretched sweater gives me the initial impression that he has a casual and easy-going manner. I notice his lanky stride and open smile as he greets me in what I believe to be a soft-spoken and almost shy voice. Yet, as soon as our interview is underway, I detect an energy and passion that belie the quiet demeanor and soon I witness a fire inside what I describe as a highly intelligent, focused, and articulate graduate student. I ready myself for an interesting visit with Mike.

Mike and I meet in his father's home office in a structure separate from the family's main house, which is situated on a densely wooded side-road in a suburb northwest of Boston. As I enter the room, Mike offers me bottled water that I accept willingly. I make a mental note of the way his presence puts me at ease since I am usually the one creating a comfort zone for others. Mike sweeps a pile of books and papers off the table to clear a space for our drinks. He sits in an overstuffed chair directly across from me. I stay perched at the edge of my chair with easy access to my tape recorder and journal. His father's office is filled with books, journals, and notebooks on shelves, tables, and the floor. Mike's father is an educator, so I briefly wonder if his profession had any impact on Mike's educational experiences.

I met Mike's mother at a regional function. While chatting about our own various interests, I mentioned my plans to develop a study about students' stopping-out of college. She suggested I talk with her son about his experiences coming and going from college. I

eventually spoke with him on the phone and he agreed to meet me at his home for an interview within the week.

After filling out questionnaires and consent forms, Mike begins his story. My first comments to Mike are about my interest in his initial experiences of coming to enroll in college. *I guess it was just assumed in my family that I would go, but I never thought about why or the motivations behind it. It was just the next step. It was the natural thing that you just do. I guess I was pretty ambivalent about it. I only applied to three schools.* Mike pauses here for a few moments and I let the silence remain since I want to set a tone where he is in control of his story. His eyes dart all around the room and I wonder he if seeking a rationale for his past actions. A few more seconds pass, and he resumes talking.

I knew I wanted to go to this college [a large, public mid-Atlantic university] as soon as I toured it, so it was the only application that I took seriously. I actually applied to others [large, public, New England universities] as just a safety and I got in one, but I got rejected from another because something was missing from my application. It was clerical errors but it never really meant anything to me because as soon as I got into my first choice, I knew where I was going. I guess I really didn't think about the whole college thing very much. Everyone else was doing it. My friends were going to college, so I was going to college. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't gone to college, so I just went.

I am just becoming familiar with his rapid speaking style when he stops abruptly. I regain my composure and ask about his feelings about going to college. His answer is loud enough to startle me. *I was excited, I mean, you're going to college! There are all the girls, the parties, and all that stuff. It wasn't like 'what the hell am I doing here.' It felt natural. It was the right thing to do, but maybe the right thing to do for all the wrong reasons. I wasn't*

going there to learn. I was going to party. That's what I did my first two years. I went to parties and I wanted to go far away. Not too far away, but I wanted to get out of there [home town]. I wanted to live. I wanted to go somewhere else. Get away from home. Leave. So, at that point [until going to college], I had been coasting. I had been able to get by in high school with very little effort and still make pretty good grades. It was kind of a breeze.

I ask Mike about goals he may have set for himself when going to college, and his reply surprises me as I sense his intense animation and swift spontaneity. *History has always been my passion and it is what I got [eventually] my bachelor's degree in. I had a vague idea of being a historian but I didn't understand what that was or how I was going to go about doing it. I just knew I wanted to take a lot of history classes. So I did.* He chuckles for a few moments and displays what appears to me to be an impish grin. *It was good and everything. But I didn't take it seriously until my last two years of college. My first two and last two years of college were totally different.* I recognize some foreshadowing of what may come in Mike's story when he says he didn't take his first two years seriously, and I remember his initial comments about going to college to party. This is the start of what I call the boomerang aspect of his story, where he throws out some hints of his experiences and then often comes back to his own core reflections. I ask him to tell me about those first two years.

Initial College Experiences

Well. He hesitates and stretches out his long legs so they reach the table in front of him. *I got into college.* With energy and more focus than I have noticed so far, he explains further. *My first two years of college I was drunk and stoned. That's all I did. Drink and party. I joined a fraternity, though I really don't blame them for it. The frat had nothing*

really to do with it. What Mike means by *it* is not clear to me, but he talks rapidly and passionately. I don't want to slow him down with my questions.

As soon as I joined the frat, I wasn't really hanging out there. All I really did was drink and hang out with friends. Mike jumps forward in time and I cannot make sense of the sequence of events as he tells them, but he plunges on with his story. *I was really distressed and depressed. I gained a whole lot of weight, after my freshman year. I gained a whole lot of weight, and I got really bad grades, so I went back home in the summer. I was fat and not doing well in school. I was just out of it and asking myself what I was going to do. I decided that when I go back for my second year I am going to turn it around. I did that for one semester, but not really. I think I got like a 2.2 GPA and that was my best GPA up to that point. But at least I wasn't going to fail out. I was on academic probation. Then my second semester, sophomore year, I just went back to my old ways. I just stopped going to classes again and I failed out of school after my second semester. It took me four semesters to fail out. I was gone by the end of my sophomore year.*

I would fail all of my math and science classes and get A's and B's in my history course. That's why it took me so long to fail out. For every F I got, I also got an A. But I was getting a lot of F's. He laughs loudly. *Eventually, everything caught up with me. I mean. I wasn't showing my parents my grades. I had them completely in the dark. They didn't know what in the hell was going on but I think they knew something wasn't right. I was just drinking way, way, way too much and smoking too much pot. You know. I mean.* His voice trails off. I sense his discomfort as he fidgets with his fingers and squirms in his chair. But, I also detect strength and passion in his voice, so I choose not to interrupt.

He throws out the boomerang again and it comes back directly to him. *So many college kids go down that road and I just went that way, too. I don't blame the alcohol at all; I mean I blame myself for just the sense of apathy that I had. Jesus, man, you gotta straighten up and fly right, you know. I needed to give myself a pep talk and just do it. You know you can do it. It wasn't like it was an addiction to anything but it was me making choices. I would just rather go out and get drunk with my friends who don't have a test tomorrow than study for the test. I never wanted to miss out on anything. So I didn't, except for all of my classes!*

He stops, so I let the silence provide time for thought. I am silently amazed at his candor and am deeply pleased that he is confiding in me.

Leaving College

So, I failed out and my parents finally got the letter saying, 'You're gone.' So, my parents say 'Now you've got to move home and start paying rent if you choose to live with us.' I'd been a house painter all through high school and my summers at college, so they told me that would be my trade now. That really scared me and I was like, 'Wow! God! How did things come to this?' I ask Mike how his parents reacted to the news. Oh, they were realistic. I mean, they were trying to be supportive. They really did put their best face on for a really ugly situation. I mean, of course they were disappointed. My brother [a fraternal twin] got into trouble just when I had gotten accepted back full time. Things had just gotten back to normal when my brother gets into trouble [and left college]. Looking back, it was funny. I shouldn't say it was funny, but it kinda was! Mike laughs and I feel as though he couldn't stifle the laugh if he even wanted to. He grins at me. I ask if Mike knew this letter was coming. I didn't specifically know because I chose not to. I kept myself in the dark. It was obvious. I mean I

had gained 45 pounds and I was depressed. I was sullen. I wasn't going to class and it was obvious. Yet, I didn't know I was going to fail out. I had a good idea I would be. His voice fades.

I ask if there was anyone at school making suggestions or talking to him about his progress. *No! No! It's [the university] a big school. There's no one telling you anything. It's very easy to get lost and I did. I was really embarrassed. I couldn't believe that I'd let things like that slide for two years. I'd never really done anything like that before so I didn't believe I'd done it now! But I did!* He laughs for what seems to be a long time but is only several seconds. Then he stretches his arms over his head. I sense that boomerang being tossed out and caught again, where Mike talks about his experience and then brings the blame back onto himself. *I deserved the grades that I got. I never felt slighted although in history my prof gave me a C and I was pissed because I thought I deserved a B. That was the only time a had a bone to pick with a professor about a grade. I messed everything up all by myself.*

Mike appears pensive and quiet now. I wonder if talking about some of these past personal experiences may be somewhat draining on him.. I ask about the reactions he got from others regarding his leaving college. *Oh, my friends were typical friends. They laughed and kinda joked about it. Most of my friends, or only about half my friends actually graduated in four years, so I ended up graduating around the same time as everyone else did. That was a major thing for me!. For me, it turned into a race against time, once I decided to get my act together. That's why I didn't come home for summers and stayed at school to take classes because I didn't want to be in school for six years. I so did not want to be that guy...who is like 27 and still hasn't graduated and has been in college for eight years. Did you ever see the movie Better Off Dead? The lame character, Charles, he'd been in high school for 7 1/2*

years. I'm no dummy and I didn't want to be that guy. That was my main motivation; just shame. I just didn't want to be the guy who is still around like after all your friends graduate.

It's lonely after your friends are gone and I didn't want to make new friends. I had my friends. I didn't want to hang out with younger guys. My girlfriend graduated so I felt like I was getting left behind. It turned into a big race to catch up. I came close. Maybe I could have walked [participated in commencement exercises] but I didn't even ask. I didn't feel like I deserved it. The funny thing is that a friend of mine who did walk still hasn't graduated. He still hasn't gotten his degree. The friend who made fun of me the most, one of my best friends. He's one credit shy to this day and he 'graduated' in four years but he still doesn't have the degree.

Taking Responsibility

I detect intense energy in Mike's voice as he appears to charge forward with his story. I feel as though I am entering into a very emotional part of his memories, as the words seem to literally tumble from his mouth. I begged and pleaded with them [the university] to let me come back. They have this program where if you fail out you don't actually fail out forever. You can come back and take two classes. There is a complicated system where you get quality points for As, Bs, and Cs and deficit points for Ds and Fs. So, I needed to go back and get some quality points to offset my deficit points. Then they would readmit me full time. It only took me one semester to do it. I went back and got all As. Then I went to school for two straight years; all summers, all semesters. I was just in class for the next two straight years, making up all the credits. I was taking a full credit semester, then during a winter semester, I took the maximum number of credits. Over the summer, I took another 12 credits. God, I was

getting between a 3.5 and 3.8 the whole time. So, then I got back on track. In the spring of 2000, I should have originally graduated; I was only nine credits shy at that point. So, I was close, real close to graduation and it was a forgone conclusion that I was going to graduate. Now, I had turned everything around but I was burned out because I had been in school for too long without a break, living at school. I decided that I just wanted to take a semester off before I came back to finish things. I got a work permit and went to Australia with a couple friends and just worked, traveled, and had a good time. I want to ask more about this trip to Australia, but I also want to find out the reactions of others while he is still animated.

I ask Mike if he thought there was anything that anyone could have done that would have changed his situation when he left college. *Well, maybe Mom and Dad could have been a little more demanding to ask to see my grades and then make some serious threats, I guess. But I respect what they were doing and they were respecting me. They were expecting me to act like an adult and to take care of my own business, which is what I wanted! It is what I demanded!* I sense passion, strength, and conviction in Mike's voice. I almost expect him to stand up and slam something down on the table to emphasize his point. *It's what I demanded. They were to stay out of my life as far as they possibly could. I didn't want them anywhere near it. And then I completely dropped the ball! Let it all go to hell! But you can't just say, 'You should have been tougher with me.' I was 19 or 20, so I was an adult. I was a young man and I demanded to be treated like one.*

Then I ask Mike if there was anyone else who may have made a difference in his situation. *Maybe my advisor could have taken a more active interest in me but she had like 300 kids, so she was just swamped. So, maybe they [the university] could have improved by having more advisors. It would have made me more aware of the situation. I don't know that*

it would have changed it but at least I would have known what was happening. But I take full responsibility. Just as I take full responsibility for getting myself back into school and graduating. That was all me too. He stands up and then sits right down with a loud sigh.

My goal now is to get Mike to talk a bit more about his experience while he was out of school in Australia. That was a reward for myself. It was for a job well done. The end is in sight and you can relax now. I had been on this frenetic pace for two years and I just wanted to chill out for a little while to go somewhere sunny, make some money, and do some mindless manual labor for a little while. I was just having a good time and had a good frame of mind. I had gone back to the gym and lost all the weight I had gained. I'd pulled up my GPA. All my friends had graduated. I was happy for them and I knew I was going to graduate at that point. There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to graduate. I was going to come out with a bachelor's degree so I was proud of myself and wanted just four months of hanging out. God, it was so much fun! I always look back on those months as a really, really, good time.

I want to know if anything besides fun was happening while he was out of school, traveling, and working in Australia. That trip made me decide that I wanted to go to South America and I wanted to learn a second language, which I had blown off all through high school. I worked in a kitchen with a bunch of Brazilians and we couldn't communicate really. They spoke Portuguese and very, very broken English. I spoke English. So, we used whistles and snaps to communicate with each other. It was fun. They were great guys and we had fun working together. It showed me that not everyone speaks English and there lots of other people out there. I chose Spanish because that opens up a lot of people to talk to and I'm a talkative guy. Mike chuckles and then tosses me a wide grin. He settles down and a few quiet moments pass.

I ask what other people thought of his time off from school. *My parents were really supportive about it. They said, 'You deserve it.' It wasn't like they were paying for me since I was earning my own keep over there, so I wasn't financial burden on anyone. My friends all thought it was cool and I went with a core group of friends. I don't remember anyone really questioning what I was doing out of school. If anyone would, I think I'd get really mad. When people tend to question my decisions, I get really defensive. If they did [question my decisions] then I'd say, 'If you don't think I should do this, then I am definitely going to do it!' In millions of other situations in my life, if me and my parents disagree, then I would definitely, absolutely have to do it. I don't think anyone really questioned it, and if they had, then war would have started. It wouldn't be worth the war because then I would have gone regardless. I would have gone somehow, with a poor attitude, and without support. It would really have strained our relationship, which was just becoming good again. Now that I had my self-confidence back and wasn't always down on myself, I was able to be OK with them.*

Taking Charge

My next question is about his experience in returning to school after a semester away. I wonder how he handles himself in new academic circumstances. *The last semester was a breeze academically, but socially it was slow because most of my friends were gone. I went to Philly a lot on weekends because that's where my friends moved; or I'd go down to the DC area. I want to know about faculty and college personnel reactions. Oh, they didn't even know I had left. They didn't even notice. I didn't care much about anything and didn't put much thought into anything as long as I was passing the courses. My professors recognized that and because I was a finishing senior, they were more than willing to accommodate me in*

just graduating. Like the ice-skating class that I took for physical education credits. I skipped it a million times and I came in and told the professor I already know how to skate. She said to just show up on the last day, do my thing, and you'll pass. I got that from most of my professors. It was just some kind of formality just to give me the credits to get out. I feel disappointed about this academic experience so I ask how he felt about the formality he was allowed. No problem. I needed to get out of there to get on with my life.

I want to know how he would share his experience with others. I ask what he would tell other students about the college process. *Go to class! Go to Class! Go to class!* His voice is loud, clear, and strong. His hand slaps his lap with each word. *When I was skipping classes, I always had this nervous kind of feeling in the back of my head, like, God, I wonder what I missed today. You just don't know because you're never going to class. As long as you go to class, it is like a security blanket where nothing can go wrong because at least you know what you are supposed to be doing. I would also tell people not to feel like you have to be part of everything. Just do the things you really want to do. Sometimes it's better to miss something – don't over commit! There is always a party so you don't have to go to all of them.*

I ask, "Is there anything you would change about your college experience?" His response comes instantly. *No! No! No, I wouldn't. Failing out of school taught me so much. Honestly, it made me a much better person. It showed me how low and how bad things can be. It's not like I'm homeless; it never really got that bad. On the grand scheme of things, it didn't get so bad. It just taught me so much about myself. Just the whole recovery process of getting back. It taught me that I can be responsible, that I can do something if I put my mind to it. It was my first real challenge in life. Nothing had really challenged me until then.*

Everything was just there and you just did it. So, I don't think I've ever been rejected from anything. Everything just kind of happened for me up until that point.

It all just taught me a lot about self-reliance and about not letting setbacks get you really down. Just about taking responsibility for yourself and challenging yourself. Challenge can be enjoyable and the sort of accomplishment that sort of comes with meeting a goal or rising to a challenge. That's kinda influenced my life ever since then. I went to South America for the last two years. I learned Spanish. I never would have attempted that.

I came home after school and worked for a few months. I went to Guatemala for three months, lived with a family, and studied Spanish. I wanted to learn Spanish after spending time in Australia away from college. The fastest way to do it was to go to a Spanish speaking country. So, I lived in a town where no one spoke English, with a family that didn't speak English. Then I moved to Chile for two years and it really paid off. I'm in grad school now [in New England], and I'm getting my masters for teaching ESL. I'm going to go back to Chile after that and probably teach.

I ask, "Is there is anything else that you think would be helpful for me to know?"

Yeah. When I graduated school, I swore I'd never go back because it was such an ordeal. But I'm back in school which is kinda funny, I think. I think that it is because I gained the academic confidence that I never had before. I know I can do it now. So grad school wasn't as intimidating as school was right when I first started college. Learning Spanish gave me a lot of confidence, too. I figured if I can learn stuff in Spanish, then I can learn stuff in English any time I want. Failing out of school was the best thing that ever happened to me. I really, really believe that it was the best thing that could ever happen to me. I mean, I was really cocky. A real, cocky, son of a bitch. I just thought I was really cool. So, failing out is not such a bad

thing. Up until that point, I had refused to learn from my mistakes, but then I was forced to. I mean I had to. I had to. It was either sink or swim. So, I would say to just pay attention to what's going on in your life and if it's bad, don't run away from it. Mike takes a deep breath and continues talking rapidly.

Also, yes, take responsibility. Acknowledge what you have done, what you haven't done, and what you need to do. So, take responsibility for what you have done or what you haven't done. This is basically my grad school admittance essay. I talked about all this stuff. About how failing out of school improved me as a person. They [graduate school staff] said, 'You know this is a really intensive program, do you think you can handle it?' I said, 'Well, if we did this three years ago I'd say, No! I wouldn't be able to handle it, but I can now because of what's happened to me.' I definitely can handle it now. I think it's a major reason why they bothered to accept me. It's because in my acceptance essay, I take responsibility for failing out of undergrad, which is usually something you wouldn't want to call attention to when you're applying to grad school! Mike stands up, stretches his arms to the ceiling, and announces, *That's it. Thanks!*

CHAPTER TEN: GEOFF'S STORY

Geoff is a tall, thin 26-year-old man who opens the door for me with a smile when I come to his home in one of Boston's northwest suburbs for an interview. He attended local public schools and is back at the family home for the winter holidays. He is wearing corduroy pants and an untucked flannel shirt. His dark hair is slightly disheveled and hangs down almost to the back of his neck. We exchange pleasantries, and then Geoff leads me to the office where we will talk. He suggests that I take the comfortable chair as we both sit down in seats opposite each other. As I set up my tape-recorder on the table between us, I discuss the details of my project. Geoff does not hesitate or ask questions as he fills out the necessary paperwork. I feel comfortable immediately, and I sense that Geoff is also at-ease, so I start right in with my first query. "Can you tell me about your initial experience of coming to enroll in college?"

Geoff clears his throat and pauses a moment. *My initial experience, when I moved to college, I was not, I guess, the most enthusiastic person about going to college. I didn't really give it much thought. I mean, it wasn't that I didn't want to go. I knew I wanted to go. It was just there wasn't so much a concern to me as long as it [college] was fairly near in New England. So, I went to [a public university in northern New England], to visit. I mean, it was a beautiful, fall day and the sun was shining. The leaves were turning and it looked like the classic college campus. A couple friends from high school were also considering it and we all said we'd go together. It made it a no-brainer for me.*

Looking for more detail on his decision-making, I ask Geoff what he thought was interesting about the university. *I'd just heard through the grapevine that it was a fun*

place and it was a decent, fairly good school. As long as those two criteria were met, I was willing to go there. His laugh is loud and long. He stretches his legs out in front of himself as his mouth opens into a wide grin.

“Can you tell me a little about your experience? Do you remember any particular feelings about the college experience?” *I remember when I first got there being excited, You know, it’s a major shift in your life. I’ve always been the kind of person who likes meeting new people and doing new things and stuff, so I was just looking forward to being excited about the new prospects that were going to be opened up to me.*

He pauses for a few moments, so I ask if he had any goals at that point. *I had no goals in college!* His loud laugh returns. *As far as academic-wise, I just really wanted to graduate. I had no idea what I wanted to do! I was still in the process of figuring out exactly what I wanted to do. So, I had no goals except maybe to graduate and have a good time in the process.* Geoff’s answers are brief and I don’t feel a comfortable rapport in our discussion yet, so I keep asking more questions. “How did others react to your decision to go [to this university]?” *My parents have always been extremely good about not applying pressure. It’s more about the pressure I put on myself. I feel pressure academically. I’ve always felt obligated to do things, so I felt obligated to succeed at one point or another.* I say, “Because?” *Just because. I don’t know why. That’s just the way I feel.*

Geoff laughs and I wonder if he is uncomfortable with our conversation. *It wasn’t like it was an outside force pressing on me to do OK. When you’re there, I felt obligated to take advantage, or at least to meet some sort of requirements, just to graduate. You understand what I’m saying?* I nod my head vigorously in the affirmative to his question,

even though I am still somewhat confused. I want him to feel free to speak about anything without worrying about what I think. “Yes, I do. I’m just trying to go a little bit further with that thought because it’s interesting to me.” *OK. I guess the obligation that I feel is just toward anything. I thought if I’ve been given all these opportunities, then I need to take advantage of it in some sense and not waste them.*

Derailed

I decide to change direction with my next question, and am quickly surprised at his swift and blunt response. “OK. What experiences brought you to leave college.” *Oh, I didn’t want to leave college! I was, I was arrested! I got arrested my junior year for drunk driving. And, I lost my license. I was in Massachusetts over Thanksgiving break and I got my license suspended for six months. The way they do it, in Massachusetts, is you have to be back [in MA] for this course once every week. So, it’s this 21- week program I had to participate in. I had to be back in MA every Tuesday night to do it. But, I didn’t have a license so I couldn’t drive back and forth and my parents couldn’t pick me up. To meet my legal requirements, I needed to be home. So I dropped out of school for the semester. That was the spring semester of my junior year that I was not in school. And I got a job landscaping with my buddy. I did that all through that semester and all through the summer. Then I went back to school [in the fall semester]. It was an absolute nightmare.*

Geoff hesitates, stands up to stretch, and then sits down quickly. I let the pause remain because I sense that he needs some time to gather his thoughts and feelings after such a pointed disclosure. When I finally become uncomfortable with the silence, I ask

him if there was anything that he wants to add here. *No. I mean, I was really stupid. It was just dumb for me to do that. I could have not dropped my friend off who I was dropping off, so the cop wouldn't have been around. It was a behavioral thing. It was just a stupid decision I made. Unfortunately. Unfortunately, I've always been the kind of person where I have to learn the hard way, especially when I was younger. No one was gonna tell me what to do. No one was gonna tell me how to do it. I had to feel the backlash in some sense before I would make a change.*

Looking inward

Geoff's voice is strong and his body animated as he waves his hands in the air, and I ask if he thinks he could have done anything differently. *No one besides myself was to blame, so there was nothing anyone could do differently except me. There was no one else but me. Well, maybe I could have been more responsible. I was just making irresponsible decisions that led to leaving college that I eventually had to pay for.*

Geoff's response is quick, forthright, and focused. I ask about his experiences while he was not in college. *I was working a lot doing landscaping about 50 to 60 hours a week or close to it. Just kinda punishing myself, right?* Geoff laughs loudly and grins at me. *I mean, I spent a lot of time at home just kind of knocking on my head, going, 'Why are you so dumb?' That's basically it! Yeah, I just worked hard and kinda put my head down. I kinda laid low until I could work my way out of the ditch I'd dug for myself.* He laughs again. *And I was digging ditches!* More laughs. *It was a therapeutic means to get through it all.*

There is another pause that I let continue since I also want Geoff to stay focused without letting his humor take over. His choice of the word *therapeutic* is interesting. When Geoff's smile is gone and I sense a more serious demeanor, I ask what he was feeling at that time. Geoff takes several moments before answering. *Hmm. I was just feeling stupid. 'Cause I was 21 years old and I was getting in trouble. I was not progressing. I was taking steps backwards. I felt like I was completely backtracking my life. You know, totally knocked myself off course. And, I was just kinda eager to straighten everything out to kinda get back to where I could progress.*

A long pause, and I let at least one minute pass before saying anything, because I want him to lead the way in his story. I sense he has more to say since his eyes are darting around the room as if to locate something, so I ask, "Do you have anything to add?" *Yeah! I was, I was just afraid. I was afraid that this was gonna be something that would haunt me for years and years to come. And I was afraid that it was gonna close doors as far as opportunity goes. So, that was my big fear.* Geoff lets out a loud sigh that made me look up from my notes.

I move the story in a different direction by asking how others reacted. He stumbles with his words initially. *Uh, they know, you know, I mean, I'm not the first person in the world who this has happened to! That's for sure!* He laughs. *People were more like, 'Just don't worry about it. It's okay.'* *Like I was just beating myself up so bad about it. My parents were OK with me. There was no punishment or anything. The whole situation was punishment enough! I was so distressed over it myself. So, yeah, everyone was cool. It was more just kind of a punch in the arm from the guys. You know. They'd*

say, 'Don't worry about it. You'll get through it.' My parents were great. I actually got comforted by them. People were very supportive.

What do you mean by *people*? *People, my people, important people in my life. People like my friends and my family. It's not something really that I share with everyone. It's not like I say to everyone, 'Hey I got arrested for drunk driving!' I didn't tell the school why I was leaving. I told them that I was leaving for a semester and that was that. So, it was kind of a hush-hush kind of a thing with anyone I wasn't close to. He pauses and grins at me. I was embarrassed!*

Working

Can you tell me about what was going on in your life while you were landscaping and not in school? *Well, I was working all the time and hanging out with guys. They are guys I'd known. The guys who never went to college but I went to high school with. We would pal around. I didn't necessarily go through any big shifts in my thinking or anything like that. They didn't give me a hard time or anything. It wasn't like walking into a totally new situation or anything. I worked hard and had fun with my friends.*

There were a couple other of my friends from high school who were home going through kind of the same thing. Not for being arrested, or whatever, just taking semesters off and so I hung out a lot with them. There were two guys in particular who I spent the majority of my free time with. We just did whatever; watching TV, movies, and stuff.

You said there was no big *shift* in your thinking. Can you tell me what you mean? *OK. My way of thinking didn't change. I felt stupid for what I did, but it was done and I had to make the best of the situation. I mean, as far as behavioral changes, I wasn't drinking and driving anymore. Geoff laughs loudly. Or anything like that. I curiously*

ask, "Did that stop the drinking?" *No. I mean, I still drank. I mean, OK. They took the license away, So, I didn't drink and drive. I just got more responsible about drinking. It wasn't like I lost friends over it. "What were you feeling about the whole situation at the time?" It's my fault for putting myself in that situation. I was drunk and I was driving a car. That's illegal and I wasn't supposed to be doing that. You can't really hold it against the cops. They're doing their job and they were nice about it. They weren't being assholes. I was the jerk.*

"Could you tell me more about the work you were doing during the semester away from college?" *Hard labor! Yeah! It was good, you know. It's the kind of work you come home feeling a good tired, at the end of the day. I was in the best shape of my life! I was feeling pretty good about myself other than the fact that I was thrown out of school. His laugh is long and loud. After a few months, after the whole sting wears off, and stuff like that, you start to move on. So, and you know, I had a great tan this summer! Geoff gives another loud burst of laughter. I say, "So, there were a couple of benefits?" Right. His face looks serious now, with the grin gone. The fringe benefits of it were that I was in great shape with a good tan. Those were about the only benefits that I kinda like. I was also paid well for that time in my life, but I also paid well for what I did.*

"Can you tell me about your return to college?" *Well, I was trying to pick up where I left off. It wasn't like it was too hard. I was always a B student. A couple C's here a couple A's there. It wasn't really a tough adjustment with me as far as classes go. I just jumped right back in and moved back in. I lived with pretty much the same guy all through college. We went through high school together, so we got an apartment together. I knew I was going back [to the same university]. I just had to get through a bad time. I*

was close. I was able to go up and visit my friends and stuff, so it wasn't like I had lost contact with people. I'd stayed in contact with a lot of people and so it really was just picking up the reins and going. My friends and family were still there for me so the important stuff was always pretty constant for me.

Interpretations

I change directions with my next question. “If you were going to share something with other students about the college process, what would you say?” Geoff does not hesitate. *Go to class! He laughs. It really is important and I think everyone says that but no one gets it! All you have to do is show up for class and be there for the allotted times. You just get so much more out of it. I skipped. I never went to class. I never did anything! You know, I was lucky to get decent grades. I was smart enough that I was able to coast and do OK. I mean, that's why kids just don't really go to class. You don't even have to do your homework during the week if you're in class. You can do well on the exams if you just listen and if you're there to pick up the material. You know! That's it!* He slaps his hands. *That's 95% of going to college right there and no one gets it!* Geoff laughs again.

“And why do you think that's the case?” *I think because everyone's so caught up in having fun, in having a good time being free. I mean, with me, that's all I did in college was concentrate on my major and have fun. And, I happened to get a degree.* “Anything else to share?” *Yeah! Yeah! And don't drink five nights a week. Be sober for class.* Geoff laughs, then stops. *No, this is important stuff. I don't want you to think I'm some sort of degenerate. They just don't get it. They just don't understand. And I didn't*

either. I mean, I was one of those people. I didn't get it. I didn't understand what it meant to be in college. I don't know if there's any way for anybody, me or you, to tell those other 18 year olds coming along just go to class. I have a younger brother and I try to impart these things to him and it's just, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.'

Retrospections

“If you could, would you change anything about your college experience?”

Geoff's reply comes swift and strong. *Yeah. I would work harder because I could have. I could have been a 4.0 student if I had just given the effort. It would have made things easier for me in my life right now. For instance, I'm trying to get into grad school in public policy and I'm very nervous about my decidedly mediocre transcript!* His chuckle is subdued. *I have one good proactive work experience and I did well on my GRE's, but I could have a much better transcript of grades.* “Where do you want to go?” [To a mid-Atlantic university] *where I'll get in-state tuition [near where I live now], so it's gonna be cheap as anything and it's a good program. They have a good abroad program at Oxford, which I want to take advantage of. It's local and it's convenient. It's also kind of oriented to the type of public policy I want.* “What are you doing now?” *I'm working for a congressman as a legislative assistant.*

“Is there anything else that you'd like to say to others thinking about college?”

Geoff does not hesitate. *Yeah! You can have as much fun as you want, if you can just set aside time. It's almost that I wish I had followed the 9-5 routine that I had in my work life. Because if you go to two or three classes a day, you do your homework by five o'clock, and it's all done!* He snaps his fingers twice as he waves them over his head.

That's it! You can do whatever you want! You can go out and have as much fun as you want as long as you do what you have to do to get your work done. That would be my advice to a prospective college student.

“Would you like to add anything?” Yes. I think the whole thing was positive for me. First of all, in my job, I developed a great work ethic. I was at work at 7 a.m. and wasn't getting home until 6 p.m. I was working hard all day. I've always been a hard worker but that really defined it for me! Really! That was hard work and as far as my behavior and my life was, I learned consequences for my actions. He sighs. I suppose I didn't think that could happen to me, but it did. I had been arrested a couple times in high school, too, but for minor things and the kinda things you can blow off. This was much bigger. And, I was no longer a kid. I finally came to realize that through that action, it was time to grow up. Life was moving on. I almost felt through this that life was almost passing me by. I did not want to be caught in the same rut when I was 30 as I was now, due to the stupid decisions that I had made. It was time to start thinking a little more long-term than just what's going on this weekend. That whole experience was big-time. It was absolutely a wakeup call.

Context

I was lucky that I could make these mistakes and bounce back from them due to my support structure. I'm thinking there are a lot of people who don't have the support that I have had all through my life, and they would not be able to bounce back as easily or as successfully. I mean some people would probably get kicked out of the house and the parents would say, 'Like fine, you're out of school, go get an apartment and pay your own living.' I paid rent when I was home, but my parents were supportive. I apologized

to my parents for my behavior on numerous occasions. I felt like I let them down. I let down people who were important to me and I let them all down. I was hurting them. I wasn't just hurting myself, and that was something I still carry around. I have guilt for the gray hair I put on their head. I was extremely remorseful. The way I was treated by my family was more the velvet glove instead of the mailed fist. I had my parents and I wasn't allowed to do anything I wanted, but my parents would never kick me out if I screwed up. Fortunately. I'm a good guy who made bad decisions. So, maybe I would say to the world to tolerate misadventures. As long as the person who's making these mistakes realizes the mistake, it's something that should be forgiven.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CHAD'S STORY

Chad is a tall, thin 21-year-old male who enters my home office on a cold, January morning wearing corduroy pants and a bulky sweater. He smiles as he introduces himself to me, and I am quietly pleased that he made our appointment on time since the weather is so miserable. As he stands motionless at my office door, my first efforts are to put Chad at ease, since I notice that he looks around the room with his eyes, but does not make eye contact with me. Once we exchange more pleasantries, sip soft drinks, and clarify the process and paperwork, Chad slowly settles into his chair with a sigh and a smile. I sit opposite him with my tape-recorder humming, and begin the interview with my standard question about his initial experience of coming to enroll in college. To my amazement, the young man who I feared was shy and awkward, plunges right in and goes quickly to the chronological end of his story almost immediately!

When I first started hearing from colleges, it [a large, New England university] was the first to accept me and it is where I ended up going for my first semester. The decision was made pretty easy. I pay for college myself. My parents aren't able to help me out. So, they gave me the most money. It was very, very cheap for me to go to school there. Plus, it was close to home. My mom had spent the previous two years in and out of the hospital, so that made it easy enough. I could go home and help her out when she needed it. It wasn't my first choice, but I got into the honors college there, and I got into a talent advancement program. It is where they pick 24 students from a major and they put them on a floor together their freshman year. We all took classes together. I was a political science major... It was good because, since it was such a large school, I was still

able to have a small community. I was taking classes with others who had similar schedules, so it just made the whole transition period easy to deal with. I spent a lot of time going back and forth [home] because my mom was going back in and out of the hospital. My step-dad would be away on business, so I'd go home for a couple days and take care of my mom. But I still did very well my first semester. I got like a 3.4 or 3.5 GPA, which I thought was pretty good considering the circumstances.

Chad comes to a pause in his story and I nod vigorously and express my agreement that his GPA is quite commendable. He smiles. I think he really appreciates the compliment. I ask him to explain more about his circumstances. After a loud sip of soda and a long breath, he continues. His voice is low and his pace slow.

During my first semester, my real father had a heart attack, so I took a week off from school. He lives in Maine. So, it was just kind of a trying first semester. My second semester, I did pretty well again. I maintained over a 3.0 average, but I partied. I guess that's what college is all about. I partied, not a whole lot, maybe a couple days a week, with friends. All in all, I really enjoyed my first year. The second year, however, is when things started to change. The program [Honors] was only a one year program, and so we went from taking really small classes and knowing the professors to being thrown back into the whole lot of huge lectures with professors that seemed not to really care at all. So, I felt as though I learned more my freshman year than I did all of my sophomore year.

Chad is moving into what I call rapid-fire mode where he seems to burst ahead with words with what I consider a stern look on his face and a serious tone to his voice. Chad tends to look all around the room as he speaks, and each time he looks at me, I offer an encouraging smile. *So, it kind of made me question the whole school thing. I wasn't*

sure whether it was really worth my time. I started to not go to my classes. The professors didn't care if you were there or not. My grades started to slip a little bit, but I didn't really care. I believe I can detect anger in his tone now.

I developed the attitude that I wasn't really learning anything when I was in class, so it didn't really matter if I was there or not. The professors didn't even know my name, let alone whether I was in class or not. So, that semester [first semester, second year], I got a 2.1 GPA, which was a significant drop. My parents have never really hassled me about my grades, because I pay for college. So, there's not a whole lot they can say. They push me to do well, but it's pretty much me on my own working to do well. It [low GPA] was kind of a slap in the face because I knew that I should be doing a lot better than that.

Chad pauses for a few seconds and I continue to smile. He looks to me as if to ask if he should continue, and I offer my smiling nod again. I take my time since I want to notice any emotions he might show, and then I offer a question. "What were you feeling about yourself at the time?"

That's when I really began to question school. [I didn't know] if it was really the place for me. I didn't know why I was there anymore. That whole first part of my sophomore year was a mess and I didn't know what to think or do. I had all sorts of questions but no real answers. Then, I went back for second semester [sophomore year] and it was pretty much more of the same. For some unknown reason, I decided it was a great idea to take all my classes on just two days a week. So, I took all my classes on Tuesday and Thursday, and had Monday, Wednesday, and Fridays off, which led to a lot more partying. I wonder what I was thinking! Chad grins at me now. With the intention

of keeping the tone upbeat, I ask if there are any positive experiences at this point of his college life.

Well, my GPA went back up to a 3.0 again [second semester, sophomore year], amazingly, but I still didn't feel as though I was really learning anything. I enrolled in a program [at a nearby liberal arts college] because there is a program where you can take classes at other colleges. It [the small, liberal arts college] is an amazing place. I was able to take a class with this great professor in Political Science called Political Obligations. It was amazing to be in a class where everyone did the reading; where everyone cared; everyone went to class; the professor kept everyone's attention. It was amazing! At the last class, everyone stood up and applauded him. It was not one of those forced things. It was like, wow! It was amazing! Chad emphasizes each word in what I think is a rather dramatic fashion. I repeat my happy nod and he keeps talking.

So, that was the only class I really enjoyed. I started doing a lot more theatre, my second semester sophomore year. I was in a couple shows at school, and in a couple acting classes. I decided that's where I wanted to spend more of my energy anyway, in theatre. So, I was driving back from a weekend [for finals] with a really good friend in college. She was telling me 'I don't think I'm going back to school next semester.' I was like, 'Hey, that sounds like a really good idea. I don't think I really want to be here anyway either.' So, we both started to think about it [not returning to college].

Situating self in time and place

I ask Chad if he talked to anyone else [in addition to the girl in the car] about this idea of leaving college. *I talked to some friends about it, but not a whole lot of people.*

After finals, when I got back home, I just told my parents I wasn't going to go back to school. They were kind of shocked. They knew I wasn't really happy with college, so they were like, 'Well, just come up with a plan and we'll support you. It [whatever you do] should get you in a place where you think you need to be.' So, at that point, I knew I didn't want to go back. I decided I was going to take [part-time] classes and work and figure out what to do with myself. Chad moves from a slouch to an upright position in his chair. I wonder what his parents were really thinking when Chad announced his plans.

His decision to leave college is important and I want to explore the process he followed, so I ask, "Can you explain more about your decision-making process to leave college?" *When I was talking with one of my best friends about not going back to school, it was the last push for me. It was like, someone else is doing it, and it put it [leaving college] as an actual option. Before [talking with the friend], I was just going to tough it out at school. Once I realized it was OK to leave school, and I realized that there are actually other ways of doing or getting where I want, it kind of just set in. So, I was thinking about it, and I talked to a couple other close friends, and that was it for me!*

Chad seems proud of himself and I think I hear confidence mixed with some braggadocio in his voice. Now, I ask about the reactions of other people to his decision. *A lot of my close friends at school were like, 'What do you mean you are thinking of leaving?' I had been looking at apartments for my junior year, so I had to let people know I wasn't coming back. They were some of my best friends. They were making their own decisions about where to live and they needed to know that I wouldn't be there. I think I had pretty much made up my mind to not return and none of my friends really could sway me. I was pretty sure I wasn't going back. I think I was frustrated with*

school. I thought I was wasting my time and not really learning anything, and I was paying for it all. I was really partying almost five nights a week and that's not really me. I didn't like who I was becoming. But, it's kind of the atmosphere at college.

I am interested in Chad's reflections, so I ask, "Can you explain more about how you were feeling about yourself?" *I decided that there were many things about myself I wasn't happy about, so I knew something needed to change. When I think about it, maybe I was lucky to be unhappy because my unhappiness helped me find a way for me to change things. Then, I could begin to move in a different direction that was better for me.* I stifle my urge to praise Chad for his independent thinking and personal progress. What I do say is that, "I am sure this was a tough decision for you to make. Can you tell me about reactions you got from others?"

My parents were expecting me to come up with a plan. They were not just going to let me 'not go to college' and be out of college, live at home, and do whatever I wanted. Their idea is, if you're out of college, you are on your own basically. That's a good kick in the butt! It made me come up with a plan on what I was going to do with myself and how I was going to get there.

Mattering

"Can you tell me about your plans?" *One of my professors, who I was really close to in the program from my freshman year, had given me the names of a couple professors at a college near home that he knew and he recommended. He also left that same semester [as I did]. The university was going through lots of budget cuts. Lots of programs were being cut. My program was being cut. Like half of their professors were*

cut. The arts department, which I was interested in, the theatre department, lost a lot of professors and a lot of funding. So, that was another thing. Like what's my degree going to mean? If it's like this now and we have some money, what's it going to be like with more budget cuts? So, he gave me names of professors and that kind of put me toward looking [at the local college] for taking a couple classes.

So, I made a deal with my parents. I worked that summer [after I left college]. I did a lot of summer theatre and I made a deal that in August I would enroll in night classes for the year. I'd take two or three classes each semester to show colleges I was still interested in furthering my education, and to somehow still be a student, so my friends would not think I was a total failure. I know I was thinking about what other people would think about me, and I was not sure how to think about myself either. I felt I still wanted to go to college at some time, I just didn't know exactly where or when or how or why.

Chad appears to me to be losing steam and slows down his rate of talking. I am uncertain if this is because the topic is emotionally difficult to discuss or if there is another reason. I ask, "Is there anything anyone could have done that would have made a difference to you in your decision to leave college?" He surprises me with a quick response.

I went into college knowing that the responsibility for doing well and for everything was all on myself, so I was really happy with my performance my freshman year. I was proud of the way I handled everything. But, I felt as though I was disappointed in myself. I know that if I focused more and tried harder, I could have maybe made college work. But, I think in the end, I realized if it wasn't working for me

for whatever reason, maybe I was just telling myself that I needed a change. So, I really don't think there is anything anyone could have said or done. It was a self-realization thing that this was not the best place for me at this time.

My next question now leads Chad to explore his experiences while he was out of school. *The entire summer after sophomore year, I did summer theatre. I directed West Side Story with a summer theatre program [local church group] so that pushed me more toward theatre, which is actually what I'm doing now in school. After the summer, then I got a job working at a restaurant. I was waiting tables and bartending down there, so I was working 40 hours a week and taking a night class.*

I ask for more details about his class. *I took a class on the Holocaust that was really hard. You'd leave the class feeling really depressed, because of the topic. The professor knew who I was and the class had discussions and debates. It wasn't so much lecture. We were able to learn and draw from the material. That's a big part of education to me, being able to talk and discuss about my ideas and about what the theories are. It makes me feel a part of the class. I have the idea that if the professor doesn't want to be there, I don't want to be there. But, I could tell my professor really wanted to be there and he was extremely interested in the subject. It's a caring thing. My Holocaust professor's on the board of trustees for the Holocaust Museum. The guy's absolutely brilliant! It was clear he came in with a lesson plan on what he wanted to do. It was refreshing! And, everyone was coming from a full day of work like I was, and they still wanted to be there. It was refreshing. So, I realized that I was once again capable of doing it [being a good student]. I got an A, so I was definitely going in the right direction. That gave me a lot of encouragement. Plus, being able to balance that and*

work made me realize that I could do just about anything I set my mind to do. I kind of found that the more I have on my plate the better I am able to manage everything because I just don't have all this free time. You don't get used to doing nothing. I keep myself busy and it's much more efficient for me.

Community Support

Chad's story totally engages me and I am interested in learning more about his experiences. I hear him express his desire to be involved and to keep busy. My guess is that he wants to use his intelligence and talents to the best of his ability. I now want to explore his motivation to return to college, so I ask, "You were out of college full-time for awhile, so what brought you back to school?" *One of the things that pushed me to get back into school was because my town [New England suburb] is not the best place to be if you're not in school. It was weird. There weren't many people around my age. I was the young one at work. Everyone was in their late 20's and I was only 20 years old. I was serving drinks and I couldn't even drink yet. They [co-workers], would all go out to bars and to parties, so it was like this weird situation. There were not a whole lot of people to hang out with, so I'd go to [my old college] visit sometimes.*

My parents were really supportive of me the whole time. They don't really question what I do. They put a whole lot of faith and trust in me. I think that's a good thing for me because it's not that I'm doing it for them. I'm doing it for myself. But, I also wouldn't want to let them down. But they made things easy on me. I was able to use the car to go to and from work; then to and from school. My mom helped me out with

my tuition for the [night] class. "What about your friends?" My friends were like, 'I can't believe you left! Why aren't you here? You're missing this and this and this!'

Chad explains his thinking. *A lot of it was the party atmosphere. The social scene is definitely what I missed most. College is all about that. Hanging out with friends and going to parties and all the funny things that happen in college. But everything I heard academically [from my friends], it was everything that I was going through. So, as much as I missed them and as much as they gave me a hard time, for the most part they understood why I left. It was a weird time because they were still at college and you don't want to insult the school. I don't want to say I thought this school was crap, because I don't want to offend them because they're still getting their education from this school. It's hard to tow that line so not to offend but to also explain why you left. So, that was the hardest part.*

Chad really does not answer my question about his return to college but I decide to stay with the flow of his current thinking and feeling, so I ask, "Can you tell me about your hopes and dreams at this point?" *I knew my plan was on taking the year off of college. I basically wanted to go to a better school. I left college with that in the back of my mind, so I had to come up with a plan that was going to get me someplace that I felt would be better for me. So, my motivation to figure out the best situation for me was driving me. A lot of people I know who take time off [from college] start working a whole lot and don't go back to school because of all the money. I stopped taking night classes the second semester because I couldn't afford to and I had no time. I was working like 60 or 70 hours a week and had constant cash flow in my pocket, especially when I was*

bartending. I was like 20 years old and was making almost \$1000 a week and that's a lot of money for me.

Anyway, I was working as many hours as I could so I could save money for school for next year. That kicked me in the ass because I realized I didn't want to work 60 hours a week for the rest of my life, as much as the constant money flow was nice. I didn't like getting up at 9 a.m. and getting home at 9 p.m. at night. It wasn't my idea of fun, even though I was making lots of money. It wasn't really for me I could look around at work and see some waiters in their late 40's and I was like, I don't want to be doing that when I'm 40! That was a really big motivation for me to get back to school. I know I had a lot more fun at school, so if I can like balance that a little more, maybe that's what I want to be doing. I got excited about going back to school. I just didn't want to live at home any more. Those were my biggest motivations to go back to school.

I am impressed with the way Chad expresses his feelings and rationale. I now feel comfortable moving forward with my previous question about his actual return to college. "Can you tell me about your experience returning to college?" *When I was just working during the spring and summer after I left college, I applied to more colleges. I got accepted at a bunch of schools, but one college [small, liberal arts college in upstate New York] offered me the most money, and they accepted most of my credits. They accepted 60 [credits] where another college [elite mid-Atlantic university] only accepted 15 [credits]. It was basically do two years at one college, or basically start my college career over again at the other school. It made it an easy choice.*

So, at the end of August, I left for upstate New York. I remember Chad telling me about making the decision to attend college initially because of the price and I reflect

now on his decision to attend another college using money as a main criteria. I also think about how attending the elite mid-Atlantic university could be considered more prestigious than the small liberal arts college, but that was not an apparent motivator for Chad. He explains. *I needed to move forward with my education. I wanted to graduate without owing tons of money and in a decent time. The decision to go to New York was not hard at all.* I understand, so I move forward by asking, “How did things go when you returned to college?”

I met with my advisor the first day I was there which was amazing because I had never met an advisor before. I never knew who it was. So, to all of a sudden meet my advisor was kinda nice. I lucked out because my advisor also wound up being a professor for two of my classes. She was absolutely brilliant. She was from Ghana. It was cool that I went to two classes and my prof already knew my name. When I walked into her office the first time, she already knew a lot about me. She had read my file and my transcript, and all the things I had sent in. She made an active effort to get to know me and learn about me. It made the transition to the academic life a lot easier than I was expecting. The class sizes were much smaller and I was able to establish a relationship with my teachers.

My curiosity brings me to ask how he was feeling about himself once he was back in college full-time. *I had definitely toned down the partying. It [large, public university] is such a party school. I was excited [to be in the small liberal arts college]. The campus itself is really, really small. It's like 6000 people so it's not too small with people, but classes aren't too large. The campus is pretty central as far as the classes go. Once I was on campus, it was easy to go from one class to another. I didn't have the urge to go*

back to my room and just hang out like before. Like, my next class would be right down the hall, so it was easy to just go to it...I was on the Frisbee team... it's an easy way to meet people. Everyone made me feel right at home and invited me to come to parties. The faculty was great. They all talked to me. Everyone was very welcoming. I couldn't have asked for anything better...I met the deans and I met the president. It was all so helpful, not what I expected.

Chad speaks with confidence and I guess that he is pleased with his decisions so far. I want to know what he might tell other young students about the college process? *You don't have to know exactly what you are looking for when you go into college because most people don't, but it is good to have an idea of what situations you want to put yourself in. Some people go into it [college] like they are just going to do whatever comes...just let it happen. But, I think you should know who you are and what you're looking for before you enter into any college environment.*

I think Chad is referring to his own lack of goal-setting, but I want him to explain a bit further. *Well, a lot of kids didn't do the party scene in high school and they got to college and they went crazy. They were doing drugs and drinking every night of the week. A lot of them you'd see for one semester and they'd leave. They kind of lost all sense of who they were when they got to college and that's something you just can't do.*

“What would you tell other young students?” *Just try to remember what's important. Don't get caught up in that whole peer pressure thing. It's kind of a cliché, but it's OK to go out and have fun and experiment with different things, but you should have goals set. If you are in a position where you can't get what you want, then you should try different ways to achieve your goals. That's part of the biggest reason I left*

school. It was that I think my friend saying that she wasn't coming back...then it was OK for me to try something else to get where I want to be. So, that's probably the most important thing.

"Do you have anything else you'd like to say that we haven't covered?" In a town like mine, there's such a stigma for people who don't even go to college. There's always the talk in high school about where people are going to college...So, it's like everyone has to go to college. I'm the first person in my family to go to college. I didn't have the pressure growing up like a lot of my friends. My parents always expected me to go to college, but it was always for me, myself, that I was going to go. It wasn't like you have to go to be successful because I could look around my family and see lots of people who were successful [without college]. There were a lot of hopes about what I was going to do but there was no pressure. I think all the decisions I've made have been my own. I lived almost on my own for a year when my mom was in the hospital. Most everything has been on my own. My parents never checked my grades. They just trusted me... never asked where I was. I never had a curfew...so I think that was really nice for me.

I see a lot of people who came from such a strict family who were so stressed about the whole college thing... but it might not be for them or they might not do so well. They get so afraid because there's such a stigma attached to it [not going to college] in this town. Especially the pressure the whole town puts on the kids and the parents put pressure on their own kids. The people I found that are most happy and most successful are the ones doing it for themselves. I think that's really important. If they need to take a year off and figure out just what they want to do, it's OK. At 17 or 18, you don't know exactly where you want to go or what you want to do. If you don't have goals, you have

no way to go or nothing to shoot for. You kind of get lost in the middle. So, if you take some time to discover what you want, it's OK and good for you.

I know it [taking time off] helped me dramatically. I think if I stayed [at the first university], I would have graduated with a decent GPA but I wouldn't have learned anything. I would have gotten through college on natural ability and I would have had a blast socially, but I don't think I would have been prepared for the real world. I got by doing almost nothing. It's easy to manipulate the system and just get by since it's so large. I didn't want to do that since I was paying for it. I wanted to get my money's worth. I am happy for Chad since he seems to be pleased with his situation. He shares many feelings about his experience.

Retrospections

My final question is, "If you could, would you do anything differently?" I could say that I wished I'd spent more time in my classes at first. I could have just buckled down and just done it. But I kind of like where I've ended up now. I guess that when you look back at the process and see things you could have changed, you see your mistakes. But, I am very happy with where I am and the results. I haven't finished college yet, but I am extremely happy with what I learned with my year off and the people I met. I did a lot of growing up in that year off. The year off, even though it took me slacking off in school to get me to this point, which is not really a great characteristic, was a good thing. I think everything happens for a reason. It's the end result that matters. I was able to take a negative situation, or what the town thought was a negative, and put a positive spin on it. It was not negative to me. I am a positive person and like to do a lot of things. But, me

not going to class and me slacking off is not my characteristic, so I certainly wouldn't want to be defined by that. That would be the negative. It would be negative if I let myself become that type of person. But, it was a good thing that I was able to realize that I shouldn't go down that path because it was easy. It was expected that you stay in college and finish in four years. I could stay in college for four years and do that, but I chose a different path, but it ended up being the right one.

Finally, I ask Chad if there is anything he would like to add to his story that we didn't already cover. *I think the whole issue is kids rebelling. It's kind of like they don't fit into that classic four years [where] you go to high school, then you go to college, then you go to grad school, or get a job. We really need to take time to figure out what we want to do. I think it's a positive thing to take time off. Everyone I know that went to night school was there for themselves and not for anyone else. It made me realize that it is possible to do things for yourself, and not for others or because others think you should do it. It was a real positive experience for me to see that. Part of me wanted to take time before I went to college to do AmeriCorps. I looked into that but with my mom being sick I thought it best to stay close to home and go to college. A lot of outside forces played into my decision to go to college. Now, especially that my mom is better, I was able to make choices for me. That was another thing that prompted me to make a change. Now, no one was depending on me to be around so it made my choices a lot easier.*

CHAPTER TWELVE: LISTENING TO THE STORIES

Socio-cultural and developmental changes, as well as shifts in personal life choices, have motivated many young adults to enroll in four-year colleges, stop-out for a period of time, and then re-enroll in college to complete a degree. Researchers have examined retention data and explored young adult development theories in an effort to better understand these changes and to address what is often considered a retention and persistence problem in today's colleges (Astin, 2001; Chickering & Kytle, 1999; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Levine, 1989; Tinto, 1987). This study focused on eight young adult college students who stopped-out of college. Their individual stories were explored and recorded through in-depth interviews. After looking at the retention research and developmental theories, I wanted to hear what the students themselves would say about stopping out of college. I wanted to know: *What can individual student stories tell us about the meaning they make from their decisions and experiences around stopping-out of college?* I also wanted to know: *What can their stories teach us about the experiences of stopping-out, given that their stories add to our understanding and are sometimes different from the understandings of developmental theory?*

The first chapter of this study discussed the historical data and issues pertaining to the trends in college attendance. I reviewed practices and missions developed by institutions of higher education as they sought ways to retain the students who were leaving their programs in larger numbers every year. The second chapter examined the literature on young adult developmental theories as they related to college student persistence. The third chapter provided the qualitative research methodology including

my rationale and process for providing the students' stories. The next eight chapters provided the co-constructed stories in the words of the eight students with me as the interviewer. I felt it was important for personnel working with these students to listen to the words of the students to better understand how these young adults made meaning from their experience. My intent was to use the students' words to bring their experiences alive without the distractions of retention data and developmental theories that may cloud the reading/listening experience.

This final chapter is called *Listening to the Stories*. While it includes developmental theorists' and institutional perspectives, it focuses attention on the stories told by the students themselves about their stopping-out experience. In an effort to honor the integrity of their stories and to acknowledge my role in the telling of their stories, I clarify my own perspectives on the topic. It is important to note that the particular words and phrases I chose to include in this chapter are also a reflection of my personal lenses since these reflect what I perceive to be relevant and important to the students' experiences.

The most significant element of this chapter addresses the students' perspectives of their meaning making as told in their own words. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a framework to reflect on the students' stories as they sought meaning from their stopping-out process. It is meant to offer implications and recommendations for the readers, rather than conclusions, since the students' speak well for themselves. In this chapter, the students' words are shown in italics when used to provide examples of various themes. An ellipse is used between some words to indicate the continuation of a

student's thoughts, otherwise, the period at the end of one sentence indicates a new student voice in the next sentence.

Soundings Related to the Students' Experiences

Some researchers use the word *findings* to describe the results of data analysis, but I prefer to use the word *soundings* for this project. Webster (2002) defines sounding: "a measurement of atmospheric conditions at various heights; a probe, test, or sampling of opinion or intention" (p. 235). Since my purpose is to listen to the students, while keeping retention and developmental data in perspective, it seems appropriate to consider my results as soundings, where the students' unique conditions are *measured* at various stages of the stopping-out process. Therefore, I am presenting a sampling of students' intentions and opinions as they make meaning of their experience.

Readers of the stories included in chapters four through eleven can reach their own conclusions and take their own *measurements* as they listen to the different voices. My soundings are drawn from every aspect of the study and are a construction of my own understanding of the participants' stories as I seek to understand their meaning making. My interpretations are in relation to my participants and in synchrony with my relationship to my own world. My questions, actions, and reactions affect the telling of the students' stories and my own meaning-making tempers the way I co-construct the stories for this study. In addition, my role as a parent of two young adults who stopped out of college is part of who I am, as is my role as a teacher/advisor of college students. My comments to my participants frequently reflect my personal attitudes and values regarding education. My intent is to share with the readers whatever insights I discovered

in the process of this project and in conjunction with the students who provided the words and experiences for the telling.

I noticed two key soundings that are a function of my understanding of these stories. Several themes, revealed throughout the stories, are the underpinnings of these soundings. The first main sounding emphasizes the importance each student placed on personal, internal self-awareness. The second sounding is the exploration process the students developed as they sought to define their role in the external world during the stopping-out experience. These are not separate concepts but rather overlapping and interconnected, as they relate to time, context, interpretation, and reflection. It is impossible for themes to stand on their own, as they are revealed in the stories, since the themes are woven around each other as integral parts of a greater whole. Nonetheless, for ease of discussion, I will address the themes separately with the understanding that one these always relates to a part of another theme. These soundings eventually led me to implications that could be of import to families, students, and those involved with young adults in high schools and colleges.

Internal Sense of Self

One major theme related to the *internal self* that stands out in the stories is the exploration and acceptance of personal identity. There are other themes situated in the stories, such as, the need for autonomy, personal expectations, pressures, and choices. The feelings of fear and shame are important themes for examination. A sense of isolation and a sense of responsibility are repeatedly mentioned by the participants. The students' words referred to these themes consistently and frequently.

Identity

Students repeatedly expressed the need to find out who they were, how to make meaning of their actions and feelings, and how to understand themselves. *I had to sort of discover how I felt with myself. We really need to take time to figure out what we want. It made me realize that it is possible to do things for yourself and not for others. Failing out of school taught me so much...it taught me so much about myself. It was all just me discovering about me because I didn't have anyone else who really knew me. I don't think I knew at the time what was important to me.* All of these students took some time off from college for different reasons, and they each found some very different ways to learn about their own identities because of that break from school.

In exploring their identities, students reveal the importance of learning from mistakes, their own readiness for different experiences, and the strong need to reflect on their actions in order to make meaning of them. *I have learned about my own motivation and where it comes from and where it gets me. Realization about all these things didn't really happen until I'd already done the things the wrong way. I learned about life. It was all just me discovering about me. Fortunately, I'm a good guy who made bad decisions.* Many of these comments remind me of Palmer's (1999) words, "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am" (p. 3).

With their reflections came the understanding of how time factored into their process of *becoming*. Some of the students speak of their change over time. They also describe a very powerful process of self-reflection as they develop more of an observing self. *When I was younger...I wasn't ready for the information. I was doing it when I was*

ready. I was too young and inexperienced with life to know what to do with everything that was happening to me. In the beginning, I couldn't care less...but now I'm thinking positive and I'm thinking ahead. You kind of get lost in the middle, so if you take some time to discover what you want; it's OK and good for you. Life was moving on. I almost felt through this that life was almost passing me by. I didn't want to be caught in the same rut when I was 30 as I was now. I realized I didn't want to work 60 hours a week for the rest of my life. There was some good stuff that came of it [stopping-out]. In retrospect, it [leaving college] was good for me.

The students express how they reframed themselves through self-reflection and self-insight. *I found sort of an explanation of my shadow self. All the things I had tried to put away from myself, I had to face. I see how I am, the truth of me. I'm the kind of person who has to learn the hard way. I decided there were many things about myself I wasn't happy about, so I knew something needed to change. I didn't like who I was becoming. It was a self-realization thing. Failing out of school taught me so much.... It made me a better person....It showed me how bad things can be.... It taught me that I can do something if I put my mind to it. Pay attention to what's going on in your life.... If it's bad, don't run away from it.* These words speak to how the students view their lives, and how they redefine the way they live those lives. As retrospective observing selves, they can determine who it is they want to become as they shape their own identities.

Autonomy

Each student describes a struggle to make sense of himself or herself as an individual trying to follow societal norms while also developing a sense of autonomy.

The autonomy these young adults are seeking is self-control and self-confidence while asserting the power of self. Their words actually show how they were developing a cognitive and affective awareness of their own self-knowledge construction. The students' voices made me think of young adults developing identity in opposition to, and as separation from, parents and authority figures. *I didn't want to live at home any more...my biggest motivation to go back to school was being on my own. I needed to move forward with my education. I did a lot of growing up in that year off. I wanted to take care of my own business...it is what I demanded. They [parents] were to stay out of my life as far as they possibly could. I didn't want them anywhere near it...I was a young man and I demanded to be treated like one.* These words are consistent with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) thoughts about the need for autonomy that culminates in the recognition that one cannot operate in a vacuum and greater autonomy enables individuals to reach healthier forms of interdependence.

As the students move forward in self-knowledge, their inner voices are stronger and clearer. *I gained the academic confidence that I never had before, that I know I can do it now. Failing out of school was the best thing that ever happened to me...Up until that point, I had refused to learn from my mistakes, but I was forced to. It was either sink or swim. I am pleased with the route I took, even though it was totally zigzag....I learned then, because it was those experiences that put me where I am now. I could have been a 4.0 student if I had just put in the effort.*

Chickering and Reisser (1993) remind us that "signs of discomfort and upset are not necessarily negative" (p. 479). Most of these students indicated that while they suffered adversity, they grew from it. *I know it [taking time off] helped me dramatically.*

I think if I had stayed [at a university], I would have graduated with a decent GPA, but I wouldn't have learned anything.... I would have gotten through college on natural ability and I would have had a blast socially, but I don't think I would have been prepared for the real world. I think the whole thing is kids rebelling. It's like they don't fit into the classic four years [where] you go to high school, then you go to college. I couldn't learn anything in college because I spent so much time partying. I don't think I knew then what it meant to learn ideas. Many of the students' words refer to their desire to learn. Their view of education is movement beyond the acquisition of facts. It also seems the students see education as a way of preparing for adult life.

These voices show how students' feel as they gain control of their lives. I went to college [after stopping-out] and it all came from me...I did it myself really. I was doing what I had to do because...I wanted to learn...it came from me when I was ready. All of these things that I didn't really place before have really been forming while I have been out of school. When I had time to think about what I wanted, then I could actually make plans to do what was best for me and not what everyone thought I should do...I finally felt in control of myself. ...I could actually like being in school and learning what I wanted once I understood what was important...That was not easy at first, but it got easier when I was making my own decisions. We really need to take time to figure out what we want to do...it is possible to do things for yourself and not for others. These words and phrases denote an active empowerment in the storytellers and provide validity to the individuals' experiences. There is insight about how the students understand the world, their place in it, and how they come to possess the internal locus of control over their own lives. Their words also illuminate the relationship between achieving an

internal sense of competence/authority/control and the construction of identity. Their self is becoming defined as who they really are rather than who others think they should be.

Expectations, Pressures, and Choices

The stresses surrounding the college process were emphasized by the words of the students as they repeatedly referred to the expectations and pressures they felt when considering college attendance. The theme of pressures exerted by family, friends, and teachers seemed to affect the decisions and actions of most of the participants. Many of them do not feel equipped to handle those pressures until they were able to separate themselves from the sources of the pressures. *All the people around me...my parents would frown on me...they'd be very disproving [if I did not go to college]. I always felt like I was doing what I had to do because of other people. I was expected to go to college. There was a lot of pressure from my ex that was trying to shape me into something that I didn't want to be...she wasn't letting me do what I wanted to do....She wanted me to do what she wanted me to do, which was not what I wanted. I also had a lot of parental pressure. I just went along with the program to keep everyone off my back. It's such a scary thing to not go to college when everyone else is doing it. College is what everyone expected of me. Going to college was expected for me. I did all the stuff with letters and tests and all.... I was not the most enthusiastic person about going to college.*

The socio-cultural pressures from living in an environment where college attendance after high school was an expectation regardless of readiness or motivation were frequently mentioned. *In a town like mine, there's such a stigma for people who don't go to college...it's like everyone has to go to college. There is the pressure the*

whole town puts on the kids, and the parents put pressure on their own kids. They get so afraid because there's such a stigma attached to it [not going to college] in this town. Especially the pressure the whole town puts on the kids and the parents put pressure on their kids. I know that people's parents make them [go to college]. Society does too, and, basically, fear makes them go, too. There's that societal thing about going to college.

Along with the pressures that the students mentioned repeatedly were words describing the confusion that they felt over choices. It seems as though there were too many choices, or these young adults were not able to understand the choices available. They may not have felt prepared to make important choices. Whether they were making decisions to keep up with their peers or to oppose parental wishes, it may have been hard for them to determine what is the *right* thing to do. *I had no idea what I wanted to do.... I had no goals. I think I really had no idea about what college was about and I really had no idea about the seriousness involved in my choices. I think I was just stabbing in the dark for something I could do. Maybe it was the right thing to do for all the wrong reasons. My first two years I was drunk and stoned. I guess I really didn't think about the whole college thing very much. I never thought about why [I would go to college]. When people tend to question my decisions I get really defensive...In millions of other situations in my life, if me and my parents disagree, then I would definitely, absolutely have to do it.*

It is interesting to see how their voices were weak initially but got stronger as they could actually recognize and ponder their choices and set their own goals. *I can see now that I am in a place where I want to be. It is where I choose to be. It is where I motivate and push myself to be. In both of those places [cities], I think it was more like a chore*

that I was forced to do as opposed to my own goal. It's my choice to be here, I'm the one who decided to stay. I was really doing something on my own and...it was my decision to be there. I really felt like this is what I want to do and I felt good about doing it.... It was my own decision, which is probably why I was so happy.... I was able to make choice for me. The challenge many young adults face in making life choices is described by Jeffrey Arnett (2000) who suggests that young adulthood is a distinct period in the life course characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions. The repeated reference to making their own choices and decisions internalizes their locus of control.

Feelings of Fear, Rejection, and Shame

Voice after voice express some level of fear regarding attending college initially or about something the students experienced in the stopping-out process. *It is fear of what might happen. Fear makes them [students] go [to college]. They get so afraid [to make a decision different from others]. It's such a scary thing to not go to college when everyone else is doing it. It is fear of being cut off from their parents in whatever way. I was not progressing.... I was afraid of failure. It was scary.... I was taking steps backward. I was afraid that this was going to be something that would haunt me. I kept myself in the dark. It is fear of what might happen if they don't go to college. If you don't go to college, then there's something wrong with you.*

Feelings of fear were also related to the pain of rejection. *I always got rejected in my classes and then I started rejecting those things back. I felt I needed to reject things instead of everything rejecting me. I didn't want to always be wrong. I did not want to fail over and over again. In my other school I was labeled a failure. I was so afraid of*

failing. I was afraid of what everyone would think of me. I start comparing myself to my brother and think I was a failure. Students were seeking ways to take control of their own lives and to move away from being victims of rejection.

Along with fear and rejection, feelings of shame and embarrassment were often cited. *That was my main motivation [to graduate], just shame. I was disappointed in myself. There is such a stigma if you are not in college. I was really embarrassed. I was totally ashamed of myself. I couldn't believe I had gotten myself into that situation [failing classes]. I wanted to cover my ass, basically, in front of my mother. I was in a horrible depression...I was a real mess. I was viewed as anti-social. I just didn't care much about the world. I was so ashamed of myself for all my mistakes. The hardest thing to deal with in college is failure.* These students repeatedly mention their feelings of embarrassment and shame while stopping-out of college. They are looking inward and not pleased with what they see. This negative self-perspective provides a structure for them to reframe and rebuild once they develop the capacity for the redesign.

Sense of Isolation

Along with the feelings of fear, rejection, and shame, the students' stories frequently reveal a recurring theme of a sense of isolation while out of college. The students describe the pervasive need for friends in their lives to counteract the feeling of isolation. Many of them explore ways to develop a sense of independence yet repeatedly discover that being separated from friends was a strong motivator in returning to college. This resonates with the words of Astin (2001) who says, "Peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years"

(p. 398). Most of the students expressed how they wanted to be part of a peer group they thought they could find in college more readily than in the working world. There was a real need for a sense of place or community.

Josselson (1973) suggests that female college students, in particular, need opportunities to foster friendships and communities. Both the male and female students in this study express similar needs for peer and community support. *I had no peers. I worked in a coffee shop...and realized I like having peers and people around me. Having friends is important.... I need to know there's people where I am. The social scene is what I missed most...hanging out with friends and going to parties. There were not a whole lot of people to hang out with. It's lonely after all your friends are gone. I know relationships are important to me. You can't make it by yourself alone. Nobody talked to me and I just didn't like it.... I went crazy a lot when I didn't have friends. People are very important. There was no one to hang out with, no one to interact with.... It's easy to get lost and I did.*

Responsibility

Another recurring theme was the students' realization of the meaning of responsibility in their lives. Many of the participants came from privileged families and had not experienced significant adversity or consequences to their actions. It is interesting to consider that these students ultimately discovered a sense of self by creating adversity while they didn't follow a prescribed path through college. Most of the students worked at menial jobs when they were out of college, and this experience provided them with a new perspective of themselves in relation to the world. Often our self-perceptions are

very narrow, and if we take ourselves out of our comfortable environs, it is easier to see whom we really are and whom we can be. The students' stories speak to the experience of operating in a social class different from what was *expected* from family and friends.

Student voice after voice mentioned reactions to their work experiences and what they learned from them. *I learned the necessity of actually listening to people. I learned about others telling you what to do and having to get in the mode of working. The whole thing was positive for me...in my job I developed a great work ethic...I was working hard all day and then I knew I could work hard at school. I got a job landscaping with my buddy...it was an absolute nightmare.... I learned consequences for my actions. I just worked hard and...laid low until I could work my way out of the ditch I'd dug for myself. I was afraid that this was gonna be something that would haunt me for years to come. I could look around at work and see some waiters in their late 40's and I ...don't want to be doing that when I'm 40!*

I also noticed that several students took responsibility for their actions without blaming others. *I take full responsibility...just as I take full responsibility for getting myself back into school and graduating. I messed everything up all by myself. Just the whole recovery process of getting back... taught me I can be responsible. It's my fault for putting myself in that situation...It is due to myself that I got out of a bad situation and no one could do that but me. I felt so much better when I could take control over my own life even if it meant not having some of the things I was used to having.* The locus of control moves into the hands of the students. They experienced challenges, adversity, shame, and rejection, yet were able to regain control by taking responsibility for their actions. They could react to their own actions and act again with a well-defined sense of control.

Role of Self in the External World

The second main sounding is the role of self as it relates to the students' experiences in the external world as they describe themselves in the stopping-out process. The themes related to self in the world are: the need for people who care by providing support and acceptance; the role of adversity and challenge brought about by others; and, exploration of self in relation to the world.

Care, Support, and Acceptance

There were many references to the need for a caring environment for the transitioning students regardless of whether they were attending high school, college, or considering re-entry into college. As the students struggle to gain familiarity with their environment, acquire skills and strategies to function effectively and efficiently in the new realm, come to terms with changes in themselves and their relationships, and make meaning of their experiences, they all speak to the need for a caring support system. The students' words reflect the notion of *mattering* described by Schlossberg et al. (1995), "That we matter to someone else" (p. 9). Schlossberg et al. suggest that we consider these young adults' desire to be noticed, needed, and appreciated; that we foster a belief that they are cared about; and, that we provide the hope that someone will be proud of or sympathetic to their actions.

The students repeatedly express a need for caring. *People need guidance in general. The faculty was great. They all talked to me. Everyone was very welcoming...I met the deans and I met the president. It was all so helpful. I found something that I liked,*

that I was good at...and everybody told me I was very good at it, and I was enjoying it. It was amazing to be in a class where everyone did the reading; where everyone cared. [There were a] whole lot of huge lectures with professors that seemed not to really care at all.

Words referring to support and structure occur frequently in the stories. *They [parents] were trying to be supportive. They really did put their best face on for an ugly situation. All in all, I had pretty good friends, and they were pretty supportive. You have to have a support system. My parents are very supportive...and somewhere along the line they began trusting me. My parents were giving me another chance. I actually got comforted by them [parents]. They [parents] were very supportive. I need...somebody telling me I'm good. The way I was treated by my family was more the velvet glove instead of the mailed fist. She [mother] had to be supportive of whatever I did because I'm a headstrong person. In not having structure, I found I desired structure.... I just don't create all by myself...I need structure and support.*

Along with the need for care and support, different students spoke of a desire to be understood, accepted, and known as individual spirits with unique talents. *I liked the conversations [with teachers] about what I'm doing and what I'm thinking. I like having someone to talk to about my work and my thinking and my ideas. [I needed] somebody other than my parents taking a positive interest in me. I met with my advisor the first day I was there which was amazing because I had never met my advisor at [large university]....I never knew who it was. They really [counselors] didn't care about what I was up to. They [counselors] had bad breath and they were so out of it. They [counselors] had no idea...I did not trust them. If you are good in art, no one cares.... I don't think*

that schools let you think that art and music are important They [teachers] had totally different views...they were just absolutely in a different planet than I was and I did not relate to them at all. There is like one little crumb over there and everyone is starving...if you are a freshman, you are last for everything. I'm paying all this money and I'm putting all this effort into this and I'm not getting the classes I want, and they're telling me I can't take it [classes that I want].

In conjunction with the desire for the care ethic, there were many references to a craving for passion in teaching and learning. *I barely went to class [in college] since it was just as awful as high school. I wasn't a good student because I didn't put my heart into what I did, but the teachers were always concerned with things like paragraph structure. They [teachers] cared about things that were obvious and stupid! Not all teachers were awful, just most of them. School was just boring and I usually stared off into space. Teachers need to know stuff, but they need to know how to teach it, too. They [teachers] need to inspire a passion for learning instead of killing the passion that might be there somewhere.* Delpit and Dowdy (2002) reaffirm the students' voices when they say there is a real need for relevant curriculum that is sensitive to individual differences and diverse perspectives in our schools today. Belenkey et al. (1986) speak about the importance of connected teaching and emphasize connections and nurturing of individual voices that echoes what the students are saying. Gilligan (1982) suggests collaboration and relationships in the educational setting while establishing caring communities that foster personal responsibility. These voices are in concert with each other.

These young adults often mention the need for acceptance as they moved forward in their development of self-awareness and their understanding of how they relate to the

world. One student says he felt better knowing that someone else was stopping out of college, so at least she would accept him for doing likewise. *My friend said that she wasn't coming back...that's part of the reason I felt it was OK for me to leave school because then it was OK for me to try something else to get where I want to be. I would say to the world to tolerate misadventures. I did not want my friends to think I was a total failure.* One young adult used the following words, but Sizer and Sizer (1999) could have easily have written them in *The Students are Watching*. Nick said, *The way it works is that the teachers and administrators see you pass through each year and they are doing the same things as always. The kids are all different, but they don't treat you that way. I think I was seldom treated as an individual. You know when an adult is spouting, and they are giving you a load of crap.*

Challenge

Many students suggest that the existence of academic challenge in their lives played an important role in the way they operated in their educational environments. This was true for both their high school and college programs. In some cases, the lack of challenge actually led to leaving college, and the presence of challenge was a motivating factor in remaining and succeeding in college. This need for challenge was also seen previously in the section on care and support.

The voices repeatedly ask for challenge in their education. *The guy's absolutely brilliant.... He knew what he was talking about...It was refreshing. She was absolutely brilliant.... It was my first real challenge in life. Nothing had really challenged me until then. Challenge can be enjoyable and the sort of accomplishment that sort of comes with*

meeting a goal or rising to a challenge.... That's kinda influenced my life ever since then....It was great.... I learned a lot of things. I know that really being around intelligent, interested people was a first for me. The thing I did get at my high school was critical thinking, but that's not tested on the SATs. I was doing no school work in high school and getting lousy grades, but I was a national merit semifinalist.... That means you're smart... But there was no challenge [in high school classes]... It [good class in college] was my first real challenge in life. Nothing had really challenged me until then. Art and music grab my attention and engage me more than anything else. I wanted to be interested.

Relation of Self to the World

Interwoven with the theme of responsibility learned through work experiences was the theme of a new world perspective developed while out of college. Many students used words that highlighted their exploration of themselves in relation to a world that was growing larger for some but shrinking for many others as they encountered new situations. Some students were working at jobs outside their native social class and outside their level of familiarity. Other students were exploring life in other countries. For some, the world was widening with new possibilities they could embrace. For others, the world was narrowing since their new circumstances did not include the elements of support and community that were important to them. *We were thinking and examining our place in the universe. I wouldn't have learned anything [in college]. I don't think I would be prepared for the real world [without work experience]. Work was tough. Work is just work...you kind of just have to get used to it and I didn't mind the work at all. I am*

experiencing living on my own; I am having to have a job, and paying rent, and learning to budget. You learn how you work as an individual and from there you can go on in a realistic fashion.

Student after student spoke about trying to define their world. *I had these ideals that nature would be enough for me, but basically, I found that it wasn't and I found that I was bored. I have mixed feelings about society and how adults interact with each other...I felt myself separating from that while I was out of school.... The longer I was away from school, the less able I thought I would be able to do the work.... When you go outside the mainstream, and you get further out, it's so much harder to get back in.... It's harder to get back in the flow of operating among...regular people. It's hard to find something productive to do. I was just living in my little shell. They [parents] expect you to go to college in four years and then get a job, that's what they all did. Then you aren't doing it and they can't handle it! They should get used to it.... The world has changed.... I learned to put myself in my surroundings; in my time frame, in my geographical location, and my set group, as a female.*

Schlossberg's (1984) work on transitions confirms the importance of gaining a thorough understanding of the status of young adults within the context of stopping-out of college as well as the unique characteristics of this population. She maintains that factors related to a transition such as the individual's motivation and approach to learning, the decisions, and the environment are likely to determine the degree of influence a given transitional situation will have on a college student. Transition is a process that extends over varying amounts of time. The amount of time that is necessary to achieve successful integration will vary with the particular person and situation.

Implications

This study provides multi-faceted implications that are not mutually exclusive. They are interrelated and we must see them working together in order to learn from the students' stories. It is important to listen to these stories to gain a deeper understanding of the stopping-out process. If institutions of higher education are interested in seeking ways to support young adults in their educational journey, those involved with these young people must be willing to enter into their experiences and meaning making. The stories illustrate the importance of the students' home cultures and social classes on their college experiences. Many of the students interviewed discussed the importance of family support, especially in two forms: parental support in choice of college and, most importantly, parental acceptance of students' choices.

Literature on young adult development, noted in Chapter Two, provides greater depth in exploring the characteristics of young adult students at various stages of their development and emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity of the population and the complexity of the effort to facilitate adjustment to college at this stage of development. It underscores the reciprocal influence of the developmental stage and the college experience, with each contributing to the enhancement of the other. The literature also emphasizes the point that young adults are often experiencing many kinds of internal and external changes related not only to their entering and exiting college, but to other aspects of their lives. The research points to the call for educators to understand the nature of this transition process and to realize that the needs of students vary at different stages in this process.

Based on my listening to the students' stories, I emphasize the necessity of constructing any student/educator relationship with an attitude of respect for the learner and his or her experience, of encouraging active interaction of the learner within the environment, of fostering critical reflection, of exchanging ideas through open dialogue, and of facilitating a process for the student to make meaning of his or her experience. Providing opportunities for students to apply what they are learning to their own lives, through experiential learning opportunities, is important so these young adults can make changes that will enhance their likelihood of success. They can then experience growth through a cycle of reflection and action.

The students' voices actually created alternative interpretations for understanding responsibility, authority, choices, resiliency, and themselves. They told their own stories of self-understanding and a bigger socio-cultural story of identity, responsibility, autonomy, care, and support which their stories reflected. Their stories were part of a larger social discourse about the culture of expectations, hopes, dreams, and fears of the young adults within it. The students provided pictures of their process as it evolved so we could understand how they once were, but were no longer. Their stories reflected many issues faced by this population regarding college, work, families, and friends, which were re-negotiated in their tales of failure and embarrassment. This was the construction of stories assembled with various meaningfully made self-reflections.

The process of growth described by most of the students involved a rethinking and rewriting of self in a combined cognitive, social, moral, and psychological process. It is not to be construed simply as a progression toward a developmental end goal. The students' words show how they re-figured the meaning of their own past and present

actions. Their words also describe the way they re-visited and re-directed their goals in a process involving both reflection and action. At first, external and societal forces, such as parents, teachers, and friends, seemed to drive the plot of the stories. Eventually, there was a shift to more self and intentionally driven actions. I see this as more than an internal psychological change separate from context, but a complex interaction between the students and their socio-cultural surroundings.

I began this study by referring to my own reaction when two of my children stopped-out of college. I was stymied by the decision of my oldest son to leave college, but was more understanding when his younger sister stopped-out. Just as these eight students told their stories of explorations and discoveries, I also explored new perspectives and discovered new horizons to make sense of my children. I listened, watched, reflected, waited, supported, and cared as two of my children carved their own paths and struggled with their own pressures and challenges. I was the object of their rejection and the cause of much of their personal pressure and adversity. When I could finally listen to what my children and many of my students were trying to tell me about their decision to stop-out of college, I could better understand what their experiences meant to them and how they made meaning from those experiences. I hope that these eight stories will provide a richer understanding of the stopping-out process for readers of this study. Research, literature, and theory are all important components of good educational practice. Yet, we must not ignore the students themselves as vital sources of information. I am a different parent and professional since listening to their voices.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Could you tell me about your initial experience of coming to enroll in college?
Prompts: parents, teachers, friends, relatives, readings, feelings (fears, hopes, dreams, worries)
2. Can you tell me about any experiences that brought you to leave college?
Prompts: reasons for leaving college, goals, needs, feelings, impact of others
3. Was there anything that *anyone* could have done that would have changed you stopping-out of college?
4. Can you tell me about your experiences while not enrolled in college?
Prompts: Feelings, family, friends, employer, support, community, social life
5. Could you tell me about the experiences that brought you back to college?
Prompts: Reasons, emotions, hopes, dreams, fears, changes, reactions of others.
6. Can you tell me about your experience as a returning student?
Prompts: Changes, staff, faculty, students, friends, family, academics, support, lifestyle, feelings
7. What would you tell other students about the college process; at any stage?
If you could, would you change anything about your college experience?
8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that we didn't mention?

APPENDIX B

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete this form and return it by e-mail or during your interview. Thank you.

Name: _____ Age: ___ Female ___ Male ___

Address: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail _____

Name and location of the first college you attended

_____ Date(s) attended _____

Name and location of current college or where you completed your degree

_____ Date(s) attended _____

Total number of semesters you attended college classes

_____ Full-time (12 credits or more) _____ Part-time (less than 12 credits)

Length of time out of college _____

Current Employment status

_____ Employed full-time _____ Employed part-time _____ Not currently employed

Family status

_____ Living at home _____ Living away from home _____ Number of siblings

Mother's profession _____

Father's profession _____

Names/relationship of family members who **attended** college but did not finish

Names/relationship of family members who completed college

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Diane Simpson Webber, M.Ed.
44 Oakcrest Road
Needham, MA 02492**Informed Consent**

My name is Diane Webber and I am a doctoral student at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. I am asking for your participation in a research project. The purpose of this research is to find out how students make meaning of the experience of entering, leaving, and later re-entering college.

The results of this study may benefit other students who are making decisions about leaving college and returning to college, and may provide insights to those students' families as well as to some college personnel. I will use an audio tape recorder during the interview, which will take approximately two to three hours to complete.

Your answers will be kept completely confidential. In the telling of your personal story for this project, a pseudonym will be used, so your name and identity will not be used or seen by anyone except me.

I also ask you to complete a questionnaire with demographic information which will also be kept in the strictest confidence.

Transcripts of your interview will be available for you to see at any time; please contact me for a copy. If you have any questions about this project, please call me, at 781-449-4709 or my advisor at Lesley University, Dr. Bard Hamlen, 617-349-8479.

Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw from participation at any time. You may decline to answer any specific question(s) for any reason. You will receive no compensation for participation. By participating, you may be contributing to the general body of research on this topic.

By signing below, you are acknowledging receipt of this information regarding the study and agreement to participate. You will be given a copy of this form. My signature indicates my intent to follow all of the guidelines as stated.

 Signature of Participant

 Date

 Signature of Researcher

 Date



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