"Can You Just Move the Curtain?": Stories of Women from the Educational Underclass at the College Door

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“CAN YOU JUST MOVE THE CURTAIN?”:
STORIES OF WOMEN FROM THE EDUCATIONAL UNDERCLASS
AT THE COLLEGE DOOR

A DISSERTATION

Submitted by

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DEDICATION

To the participants in this study, as well as many other people I know, who struggle and achieve every day, yet are never acknowledged or who never acknowledge themselves for their accomplishments. May you seek and find mentors and friends who recognize your intelligence and encourage your learning and development—no matter your age. And may you share what you learn as you mentor and befriend others along the way.
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out opportunities to learn and challenge themselves. Each time I watch them work through an assignment, application, cello piece, or life transition, I am incredibly inspired.
ABSTRACT

Although millions of adults with a high school diploma or GED need and want to further their education by attaining a postsecondary credential, the majority do not succeed. It is widely known that marginalized adult learners arrive at college academically underprepared and that they face numerous barriers to participation once they enroll. But very few studies look at adults’ life experiences, assets, and perspectives on college before they enroll—when they are still “at the college door.”

This qualitative study explores the stories of ten women (ages 29-56) in pre-college transition classes in the Northeast US, and how their familial, school, work, and other experiences influence their aspirations and thoughts about college. Data consist of nineteen semi-structured, narrative interviews of one to two hours in length, biographical timelines, and demographic surveys. Findings show that the participants experienced significant trauma and/or adversity throughout their lives, and that they hope that attaining further education will result in less stressful lives and more satisfying work. The reality of college, however, was hidden behind “a curtain.” Other findings demonstrate participants to be thinkers and learners with diverse interests and experiential knowledge. Together, these findings suggest that aspiring adult college students have great vulnerabilities and strengths, both of which have been underexplored in previous research.

Recommendations are provided to help adult and higher education practitioners better support academic newcomers on the threshold of college. By acknowledging the realities of learners’ daily lives and by adjusting pedagogical and institutional practices, educators and institutions have the power to improve transition initiatives while addressing educational justice in a society increasingly divided into the “college haves” and the “college have-nots” (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016).
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Today in the United States, although millions of lower-income adults need and want to further their education by attaining a postsecondary credential, the majority do not succeed (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2016, p. 17). While it is widely known that non-traditional adult learners face numerous barriers that inhibit participation in higher education, effective solutions remain elusive. This qualitative study explores the lives, experiences, and perspectives of ten women in a pre-college transition class associated with a community college and an adult learning center in the Northeast US. Very few studies of the pre-college transition student perspective have been conducted thus far in the US, so the purpose of this study is to contribute to a more holistic understanding of this population by exploring the lives, interests, experiential knowledge, and aspirations of the participants, and their perspectives on learning, “school,” and the prospect of college. This study provides recommendations to help practitioners in the fields of adult and higher education better support adult learners preparing to enter college. As well, it is hoped that this study will spur further research in and around the intersections of adult basic education (ABE) and higher education (HE).

In this chapter, I provide background information to explain broader contextual issues related to access and equity in HE and the growing need for college-level learning. I describe the research problem, how I became interested in adult learners on the margins of HE, and I discuss the significance of the study. Finally, I orient the reader to the chapters that make up the remainder of this work.

Background

In the US, as well as in many other western countries, there has been a massive expansion in HE participation since World War II (Trow, 2007). Where HE was once seen as a privilege offered
only to children of the elite, over time—especially in the 1960’s and 1970’s, as a result of political and social pressure for equal opportunities for all citizens—college came to be seen as a *right*. People who had never thought of attending college and others who had been denied access now began to participate in HE: women, Vietnam veterans, African-Americans, Hispanics, people with learning disabilities and other differences—adults with years of work experience behind them. More recently, as a college credential has become an essential *need* for almost anyone aiming for a better or better-paying job, housing security, and the many other benefits associated with a stable, middle class lifestyle, HE has evolved from an *elite* to a *universal* system of education (Carnevale et al., 2016; Merisotis, 2015; Lumina Foundation, 2017; Trow, 2007).

Almost all adults in the US now believe it is important to have a postsecondary certificate or degree and 75% associate educational attainment with a better quality of life (Gallup-Lumina Foundation, 2015). The majority of adults also believe that more education leads to improved job prospects, and this is understandable since 99% of the jobs created in the US since the 2008 recession went to people with some college education (Carnevale et al., 2016). While a high school diploma used to suffice, many now see college as an imperative.

In the US today, 25% of undergraduates are over the age of 30, and adult learners make up almost 60% of the total student body at community colleges (Soares, 2013). Among these learners are individuals from poor or working-class backgrounds, people who have been out of high school for many years, individuals with alternative high school credentials, those with limited literacy or English language skills, full-time workers, immigrants, single mothers, and many others. From the perspective of HE practitioners used to the 18-to-24-year-old full-time, residential student, these newer students are *non-traditional*, but in the big picture of HE today, they are the new normal, or as researcher Soares (2013) defines them: *post-traditional*. 

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In addition to the millions of adult learners already enrolled in community colleges nationwide (including those in developmental courses on the margin of the community college system), some scholars estimate there is a “latent market” of up to 80 million potential college students (PCS) outside the college door (Soares, 2013, p. 2). For example, 26% (46.5 million) of the working age population in the US has a high school diploma or has passed the test of general educational development (GED), and has no college credits (B. Miller, 2014; Lumina Foundation, 2017), and between 25%-50% of these individuals has already taken steps toward postsecondary level education (Gallup-Lumina Foundation, 2015). Every year there are approximately 500,000 new GED completers, the majority of whom also express the intention to go on to college (GED Testing Service, n.d.; Kallison, 2017; Rossi & Bower, 2017). And of the 1.5 million adults in adult education classes who are working on their literacy or English as a Second Language (ESOL) skills, and/or preparing for the GED, greater and greater numbers also hope to go on to college (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008; National Council for Adult Learning, 2015). Another group of individuals who aspire to postsecondary education is incarcerated adults, a group of over two million individuals, 50-70% of whom have not completed high school, but will need further education to prepare for re-entry to society ("Incarceration," n.d.). Finally, there are an estimated 27 million working age adults in the US who have some college credits, but no degree (Lumina Foundation, 2017). Whether they come from ABE, secondary education programs, or workplace settings, unemployment offices, correctional facilities, homeless shelters, or through other avenues, these potential college students carry with them great hope for what college can do for them and their families. While some HE researchers worry about a decrease in community college enrollments (A. A. Smith, 2016), the evidence presented here supports the claim that there are millions of adults who may well turn to the community college at some point in time.
The problem is that while people’s educational aspirations have grown and access to HE has increased, post-traditional students—especially those from marginalized populations—have not benefitted nearly as much as those from more dominant groups (Bush, James, Piela, & Palmer, 2014; Leathwood & Hey, 2009; Levin, 2003; Soares, 2013). In one study by the National Commission for Education Statistics (NCES), almost half of the post-traditional students left without a degree three years after beginning a community college education, but four-fifths of traditional students graduated (as cited in Soares, 2013). Soares also reports that adults who work full-time and study part-time (as is the case for most post-traditional) have a particularly high risk of dropping or stopping out of college. Six years after starting their postsecondary studies, over 60% of adult part-time students had not completed a degree or certificate and were no longer enrolled, whereas that number was just under 40% for full-time students who worked (Soares, 2013).

College, as we know it today, was not designed for learners who have complex adult roles and responsibilities, severe financial strain, little free time, and limited academic experience.

In the “latent market” category of post-traditional learners, while most GED passers express the intent to go on to college, less than five percent actually earn an associate’s degree (Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008; Rossi & Bower, 2017; Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006). And in the ABE world, although more and more adult learners say they want to go on to college, the number who actually enroll and succeed is extremely low. One study that followed ABE learners for ten years found that less than three percent of the adults who started in ABE moved into credit courses and completed a community college degree (Prince and Jenkins as cited in Jacobs & Tolbert-Bynum, 2008). So, while many adults carry a great amount of hope regarding their future educational participation—especially people from groups that have the most to gain—their chances of succeeding in the college endeavor are extremely slim. Without effective educational interventions,
millions of people will continue to be “economically and educationally stranded” (Brown as cited in Asimov, 2018), confined to what one scholar calls the “educational underclass” (Rose, 1989, p. xi).

One effort the federal government has made to boost the chances of post-traditional college aspirants is to fund pre-college transition classes for adult learners who are academically underprepared for college level work. Such transition programs are designed in response to what educators believe about incoming students and college readiness (Kallison, 2017; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). Because learners often score poorly on community college placement tests in English and math, these programs mainly address those skill areas. Because academic newcomers are not familiar with the college setting, how to apply for admission and financial aid, nor how to use the various services available on a college campus, transition programs often build this sort of “college knowledge” into their curricula, as well (Kallison, 2017). Kallison reports that some transition courses also teach about motivation and academic success strategies, such as test-taking and note-taking skills. Because program designers know that many students are working, classes may be offered at night, as well as during the day or on weekends. Studies show, however, that while transition programs may help some participants, the majority of program completers still do not succeed in transitioning to college (Kallison, 2017; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). In fact, according to one recent study of 11 transition programs in New England, one-third of the students who completed transition classes enrolled in college, but soon dropped or stopped out; one-third never enrolled in college during the four-year study; and just one-third enrolled and was still enrolled several years later (C. Smith & Gluck, 2016).

This juxtaposition of adult learners’ great hope for and belief in the promise of college and these sobering statistics is extremely distressing—for employers who require more skilled and credentialed employees, for educational institutions that lose current and future tuition dollars (and
their reputations), and especially for the learners themselves. It is a great loss to our society as a whole when the HE system, rather than contributing to a reduction in socio-economic and other inequalities, reproduces them (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

**Problem Statement, Research Purpose, and Research Questions**

Although many adult learners without a college education want to go to college, and know they need to go, many do not enroll, and of those who start, most do not complete. For this population, college turns out to be a much more precarious endeavor than the learners and some higher education practitioners and policy-makers seem to imagine. Despite all we know about what helps learners succeed in college and what barriers get in their way, we either are not responding adequately or we have “incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding” of the population (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2016, p. 59).

The purpose of this study is to build a more holistic understanding of the pre-college experience of potential post-traditional students. In this dissertation, I bring to the reader the learners’ stories, scholarly research and perspectives, and recommendations intended to enable practitioners to better prepare for and respond to the many learners who are counting on college to help them create better lives. I hope, as well, that this study will inspire further research at the growing edge of postsecondary education where ABE meets the community college.

**My overarching questions are:**

- Who are pre-college learners as whole people—both past and present, both in and outside of academic settings?
- How do these learners think about education, college, and their own knowledge and capabilities as they approach the college door?
What steps can HE practitioners take to better support post-traditional adult learners seeking further education via community college?

**The particular research questions that guide this study are:**

- What academic and other life experiences do participants believe most influence them as they enter the academic environment?
- How have participants experienced being students in educational institutions throughout their lives?
- What are the participants’ vocational goals and life aspirations?
- Who are the participants as thinkers and learners when they arrive at the college door?
- What are the participants’ thoughts about the transition class, college, and themselves, as future college students?

**Researcher Background and Assumptions**

The space between ABE and HE is a fascinating place, and this is where I have spent much of my professional life. I am an adult and college educator with years of experience teaching ESOL, intercultural communication, adult literacy, and leadership development. As well, I am an adult student who returned to the university at age 50 for a doctoral degree. Because of my academic and professional background, I am familiar with the experience of being a teacher, as well as a student. I understand something about the world of ABE and the world of HE. I also have learned a great deal about cross-cultural communication and the joys and alienation people can experience when crossing linguistic, socio-economic, cultural, or educational borders. As I developed research questions for this study, I imagined what I learned from the participants would confirm some of my assumptions and disconfirm others. Here I will share some of my initial assumptions, and in the final chapter I will revisit them alongside any related findings.
First, because of my previous experience with adult learners and the extensive reading I have done about studies of post-traditional college students, I imagined that many of the participants would report poor experiences in school when they were young and that those experiences would influence their experience of the transition class. Having the intention to go on to college after completing the transition class was a requirement for admission, so I assumed the participants would all be certain about going on to college. In addition to having vocational goals, I expected the women (like me) would have other personal and/or developmental reasons for seeking further education, as well.

Further, because of the extensive reading I had done about undergraduates creating prior learning assessment portfolios, and related research I conducted as part of my doctoral studies, I assumed that participants would have deep experiential knowledge, but that they would not necessarily recognize or value the applicability of that knowledge and their capability as learners in the college setting. Finally, I assumed that most of the participants would not have grown up around college-educated people, and that, as a result, they would be reticent about moving on to college after the transition class. In analyzing the participants’ stories, many of these assumptions were proven to be incorrect or at least incomplete in some ways. In the final chapter of the study, I will revisit these assumptions alongside the related findings.

**The Research Approach**

There have been excellent studies done about the adult student experience in college (particularly outside the US), and these are very valuable. Studies conducted with adult undergraduates have identified the multiple barriers that often come between post-traditional adult students and the daily realities of college life (Cross, 1981; Osam, Bergman, & Cumberland, 2017), as well as other transition-to-college issues, such as identity development (Kasworm, 2003, 2005,
The majority of participants were enrolled college students who had already transitioned to college to some extent. In addition, there are studies of marginalized adult learners outside of college settings (E. A. Lange, Chovanec, Cardinal, Kajner, & Smith Acuna, 2015; Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015), and these also provide important insights. Very few studies, however, bridge ABE and HE, with participants who are just outside the college door, on the brink of college. I was interested in the learners’ views from the threshold and thought students in the transition class were perfectly positioned to help academic insiders better understand some of what draws people to college and what pushes them away.

In terms of research approach, many scholars have commented on the deficit-oriented way in which the post-traditional adult learners are described (e.g., unsuccessful, unprepared, unskilled, lacking persistence), and many have called for more asset-oriented research. Many of the learners we call “academically unprepared” are so because of structural inequalities in our society. A life defined by poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, among other injustices, closes doors for millions of children who then grow up and are blamed for their “unpreparedness.” Perhaps there are aspects of the incoming learners’ lives and existing knowledge that we do not yet understand or appreciate. Perhaps there are discouraging aspects of certain processes and the culture of HE that we do not yet understand because, as academic insiders, we are too close and make many assumptions that are problematic.

The interview questions were designed to surface stories about the participants’ past, present, and future, as well as their experiences of learning both in and outside of school settings. College was not the center of the interview; rather the focus was on where school, in general, and college, in particular, fit into the overall picture of the participants’ lives. A central part of my approach was to inquire about, and welcome, stories about the participants’ experiential knowledge.
and not focus too heavily on their experiences as students. I sought to create space for an honest discussion about learning, school, and life, and not to assume that success in academic environments was the ultimate life achievement. My experience as an adult student and adult educator, and as a person with some understanding of both the ABE and HE worlds, offered me a unique position as a researcher. While participants may well have perceived me as a HE insider, in the context of the interview, my intent was to focus on their lives, learning, and interests, and validate the spaces outside of academic settings where most of their lives had been experienced.

**Organization of this Report**

As a whole, this dissertation will introduce the reader to the main concern or problem addressed in the research, and then provide the greater context of the study, the particular results or findings, and finally, a discussion of implications, recommendations, and suggestions for further research. In Chapter Two, I begin with a review of what other scholars have learned previously about the transition experiences of learners often described as marginalized and/or non- or post-traditional in HE contexts. Chapter Three provides an explanation of the methodology used to design and conduct this study, and why that methodology was appropriate. Chapters Four through Eight are the findings, which include the participants’ responses to questions relating to their life histories, specifically their previous educational and work experiences, their thoughts about learning, their aspirations for the future, and their beliefs about college, and about themselves as learners and students. Each findings chapter also includes a reflections section, which includes both a summary and a synthesis of the themes of the participants’ stories and, where appropriate, a discussion of how the findings relate to the scholarly literature. The final chapter of this study reviews this research and its findings, connects the work to the greater context of HE and educational justice, and provides recommendations for practice and further research.
CHAPTER 2 RELEVANT LITERATURE

The goal of this chapter is to bring to the reader’s attention a global conversation that is happening with regard to post-traditional adult learners and the transition to HE. Here, in the first three sections of this review, I discuss the way this population of learners and pre-college transition programs has been described, and review a selection of the literature about the student experience. The three themes within the student experience research are learners’ motives for considering or participating in further education, the benefits experienced by those who participate in education, and the barriers that, for many people (like those in my study), regularly threaten to come between educational aspiration and its achievement. Research about adult learners’ decision-making regarding their participation in higher education is included, as well. In the final section of this review, I introduce researchers whose work helps to explain and/or address educational and social inequality. These researchers’ explorations into what students know, and where and how they learn outside of school settings, stem from an asset-oriented perspective—something many transition researchers have called for in order to counter the intense focus in the higher education literature on the ways marginalized learners are academically unprepared for college.

Describing the Learners

The participants in most of the studies in this review are most often referred to as adult or mature (common in the British literature) and/or non-traditional learners. While useful in some ways, I find all of these terms to be somewhat ambiguous and inaccurate, so I will use an alternative term, thresher, for the remainder of this work (Goto & Martin, 2009). My rationale for this choice follows.

Waller (2006) writes of the great diversity in background, life, and educational experiences of the mature student and holds that human beings are “instances of social phenomena and carriers
of wider social histories” (p. 11); while any one factor (like age or economic status) might be a useful category for institutions, such terms do not help practitioners better understand and prepare for the people who actually arrive at the college door. The term *non-traditional* is regularly used to describe the growing number of college students who are *other* or different from the White, middle class 18-to-23-year-old students for whom most institutions of HE were designed. Non-traditional students are often thought to have one or more of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment in college, attend part-time, work full-time while in school, are financially independent of parents, have dependents (often a child or more), are single parents, or have an alternative high school credential (Choy, 2002).

Soares (2013) offers the term *post-traditional* in an effort to move away from “institution-centric” categorizations that see learners like those in this study as “an aberration in the demand for higher education services” (p. 2). He recognizes that this group of adult learners is extremely diverse, has a wide range of educational backgrounds, needs, and English language skills, and represents many different “life stages and identities” (p. 2). Still, neither *adult* (or *mature*), *non-traditional*, nor *post-traditional* accurately describes the differences in life experience, academic background, and learning needs of a 25-year-old, low-income, employed male immigrant preparing to transition to college and a middle class, 40-year-old native English-speaking White female returning to complete an undergraduate degree. Both would be considered *non- or post-traditional* adult learners.

Some groups of adults have more difficulty than others accessing and succeeding in HE, and this study is about one group of them. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) (as cited in Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011) used the term *non-traditional*, but altered Choy’s (2002) characteristics, which were originally developed to describe students already enrolled in college
who were struggling and unlikely to complete degrees. CCL’s new categories sought to recognize
the kinds of economic, structural, and non-material barriers and social divisions that can prevent
people from accessing HE (not just persisting or finishing college) (as cited in Hyland-Russell &
Groen, 2011). CCL included learners from low-income families, older students, recent immigrants,
people with disabilities, and Aboriginal people. Focusing on issues of power (or lack of power),
Hyland-Russell and Groen (2011) build on CCL’s definition and employ the phrase marginalized
non-traditional adult learners, which better captures the many intersecting characteristics of this
population of learners.

As I looked for research about adults similar to the ones in my study, I found them described
as first-generation,1 disadvantaged, low-income, unskilled, and other similarly one-dimensional
terms. After sitting with my participants for hours and being trusted with their life and educational
stories, I was extremely uncomfortable with these labels, which I found to be derogatory or victim-
oriented. I appreciate the combination of categories provided by Schuetze and Slowey (2002) who
move away from the institutional perspective—in which anyone not like a traditional college
student is seen as lacking—and towards a lifelong learning perspective—in which learners’ needs
and experiential knowledge are centered. While not providing a label for this group of learners,
Schuetze and Slowey’s categories include many of those previously mentioned, while also
including individuals: with working-class backgrounds, from particular ethnic minority groups,
immigrants, women, older students with vocational training and work experience, and people with
alternative educational biographies. These categories capture many of the familial, cultural,

1 A first-generation student is defined differently in different contexts, but here it refers to a
student neither of whose parents attended college (CCCSE, 2016).
educational, and work experiences of my participants while recognizing the training and/or
experiential knowledge they also bring with them to the college door.

Psychologists, Goto and Martin (2009) use the term *thresholders* to describe the ABE
learners in their study who were “considering additional education but face various challenges in
their lives” (p. 10). They were called thresholders because they were “on the threshold of starting a
new life through education” (p. 10). Because the core of my study is how participants’ life
experiences, beliefs, and knowledge influence their orientation towards learning and further
education, I chose to adopt and adapt Goto and Martin’s term. From here forward, *thresholder*
should be understood to refer to an adult with some sort of high school credential, experiential
knowledge and a complex combination of life, educational, and work experiences who, despite
facing daily challenges related to her marginalized position in society, holds out hope that HE will
lead to a better life.

**Approaches to Thresher Transition**

The goal of US transition programs is to prepare thresholders, many of whom come from
ABE programs, to move on to certificate, associate, or bachelor degree programs at the
postsecondary level (Hector-Mason, Narlock, Muhisani, & Bhatt, 2017; Zafft et al., 2006).² While
transition to college support for high school graduates has been a part of the US K-12 educational
system for many years (at least for more affluent students), the need for adult transition to college

² Not all transition learners come from ABE. For example, in my study, one came after
failing a community college course, two because they had been away from high school for many
years and wanted to brush up on their academic skills, and another was referred after scoring too
high on an ESOL test at a local language school.
has grown over the past 15 years as a result of global demographic, technological, and economic changes, and the demand for a more highly skilled American workforce (Hector-Mason et al., 2017; Zafft et al., 2006). Focusing narrowly on young people will not produce enough skilled workers to meet economic demand (Carnevale et al., 2016; Pusser et al., 2007). This realization, along with the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), has helped bring more attention to the adult learner population (Hector-Mason et al., 2017; Zafft et al., 2006).

With no single regulating body or oversight from one central authority, there is a wide variety of transition models and practices within each state and across the country. Some programs focus more on career exploration, others on college preparation, and some support both kinds of transition (Zafft et al., 2006). In models like the one in my study, for example, the goals are to build both career and college knowledge, as well as develop learners’ computer literacy, math, reading, and academic writing skills (C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). Some transition models specifically aim to help learners increase their scores on the various community college placement exams (ideally enabling graduates to take fewer developmental courses once admitted to college), and this is a goal of the program in this study as well. Programs are located in community organizations or libraries or housed on community college campuses. Some last for a semester, others for two, and some are part-time while others are full-time.

3 WIOA is legislation designed to “help get Americans, including youth and those with significant barriers to employment, into high-quality jobs and careers and help employers hire and retain skilled workers” (United States Department of Labor, n.d.).
Although there are few studies of learners in transition programs, those I found counted women in the majority (Kallison, 2017; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). Women also make up the majority of GED holders who go on to postsecondary education (Goff, 2011; Patterson, Zhang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010). Adults in adult education classes come from a variety of groups that have been underrepresented in HE, and which have the lowest rates of college success (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). One major study of nine transition programs, for example, found that participants included more racial and ethnic minorities, and individuals who were more economically and educationally disadvantaged than first-time students at community colleges or students with three or more non-traditional characteristics at any two- or four-year college (Fein, 2016). In other words, transition students are primarily low-income women on the outer margins of HE.

Because of the paucity of studies specifically about students in designated transition programs (as opposed to studies of the programs, themselves), I have included here studies of thresholders in other models of college preparatory programs more common in the United Kingdom (UK) and in countries where government support for thresholder education and research has a longer history than in the US. Beginning in the 1970’s, for example, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland established adult higher education (AHE) courses for adults who had not previously sought out or had been excluded from HE, as well as those whose individual life circumstances had contributed to their lack of educational attainment (James, Busher, & Suttil, 2015). The main impetus for AHE and related efforts stemmed from the need for more skilled workers across Europe.
and in other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)\textsuperscript{4} countries. Another reason had to do with a decline in the number of youth finishing high school and declining numbers of college students (Mercer, 2010). Social justice goals have also been part of the conversation abroad (Bowl, 2001; Burnell, 2013; Merrill, 2004; Thunborg, Bron, & Edström, 2013), and many researchers mention that European Union and UK education policies recognize that inequality between “the knowledge haves and knowledge have-nots” is not good for social cohesion, individual well-being, nor economic growth (MacBeath, 2007, p. 249).

AHE courses are usually housed in further education colleges (often compared to community colleges in the US), which are neither part of the compulsory schooling system nor HE. Most AHE students arrive without a standard high school qualification, and many are learners who underachieved in previous academic settings, come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are older, and have “highly complex and fragmented pasts” (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013, p. 17). In other words, they share many characteristics of the marginalized non-traditional adult learners I am calling \textit{thresholders}. AHE courses not only provide instruction in academic skills (academic writing, research skills, critical thinking, and self-reflection), but in specific content areas students need to progress into a university course of study (Burnell, 2013; James et al., 2015). Overall, the major goal of AHE courses is to help students learn how to learn, so that by the time they enter university courses, they are equipped with skills and attitudes for college success. In 2014-2015, there were over 1,200 AHE courses running at 336 providers in England and Wales, and 26,000

\textsuperscript{4} The OECD provides a forum where governments (most European nations, Australia, the US and other countries) come together to understand and seek solutions to common problems ("About the OECD", n.d.).
graduates went on to study at 125 different universities (Martin, 2016). Further description and critique of AHE and related approaches can be found in Burnell (2013) and Marshall (2015).

The following section of the literature review explores the research about thresholders’ student experiences. Major themes include the motives that draw thresholders toward postsecondary education, the personal benefits that result from educational participation, and the barriers that can push thresholders away from further education. Some researchers have also explored issues related to thresholders’ decision-making regarding educational participation.

**Motives for Returning to Education**

Much of the literature begins with the premise that a postsecondary credential is a necessity in the current labor market (Merisotis, 2015; Scanlon, 2008; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). The working-class, female participants in one study described their educational goals “in terms of survival” as much as anything else (Bowl, 2001). Other thresholders said they have no choice: “There was nowhere else to go [but school],” said one research participant (Scanlon, 2008, p. 30). Some working-class women, however, spoke of their desire to learn more than their need to earn; in other words, the desire for “education for its own sake” (Reay, 2002, p. 8). Thus, while financial struggle and the need for credentials are frequently-mentioned thresholder motives, there is much more to the story than economics.

Using different terms or frameworks, researchers understand thresholder motives as generally falling into one of two categories: practical or expressive. Practical motives include those related to finances or employment, such as the need for more money or to get a job or a better job. Some researchers refer to these practical kinds of motives as material (C. Smith & Gluck, 2016) or instrumental (Deterding, 2015) motives. In a multi-year study of further education participants in Australia, the most frequently-cited reason for seeking education was practical—it had to do with
career change (Bunn, 2014). Interestingly, however, when all of the motives participants named were categorized thematically, the desire for personal growth and transformation or identity change—in other words, motives in the *expressive* category—turned out to be number one. Other researchers have come to similar findings.

One study looked into the experiences of 700 low-income Black mothers whose educational lives at three community colleges in Louisiana were disrupted by Hurricane Katrina (Deterding, 2015). These women saw education as a route to greater self-sufficiency and independence, but in addition to their practical motives, they spoke of other expressive motives, such as wanting to gain the respect of others and develop more self-respect. Scanlon (2008) writes of the “deep ancillary motives” that sustain people’s efforts (p. 29). If all one wanted from college was a job or money in the short-term, for example, one might easily abandon the effort when assigned coursework that was not perceived as relevant or when thrown off track by an event like Hurricane Katrina. Despite the setbacks, however, most of the Louisiana mothers did not abandon their college aspirations. Having hope offered them a sense of direction in uncertain times and a striver identity that motivated them to keep on (Deterding, 2015; Reddy, 2012).

Luttrell (1997) also writes of the symbolic and inspirational meaning of education and how that inspired the working-class women in her study who wanted the chance “to be somebody” (p. 1). Steel (2007) reports that the female GED holders in her study were not motivated by money, but by a desire to help other people. Reay’s (2002) participants all spoke of wanting to give back, make a contribution to society, and help others—often “by drawing on their own, sometimes painful life experiences and knowledge” (p. 8). Many thresholders wanted to be role models for their children (Scanlon, 2008; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016; Steel, 2007).
The desire to continue one’s education is an expression of many different motives that change over time depending on one’s life circumstances and needs. Scanlon (2008) uses Schutz’s (1967) temporal framework to distinguish between past-oriented *because-of* motives and future-oriented *in-order-to* motives. Participants who were oriented toward the past spoke of wanting to fulfill old dreams or finish old business (e.g., the former dropout who wanted to complete school or the woman who wanted to escape the “slow learner tag” carried since childhood (Scanlon, 2008, p. 28)). Thresholders who were future-focused wanted to find a more meaningful or interesting job (C. Smith & Gluck, 2016) or please a parent who always wanted them to get more education (Scanlon, 2008). Some participants spoke of feeling stuck in the present, having lives that were going nowhere and watching others pass them by; they were motivated by their desire for new opportunities to “reconstruct their lives” or “develop a new identity and status” (James et al., 2015, p. 9). Many learners were found to have motives for education that connected both to past and future-oriented identities: moving away from past or present negative versions of themselves and toward versions they desired (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Some individuals were motivated by their desire to not become a drop-out again, and others wanted to be in school so as not to be like the fearful and lazy adults they knew who did not seek further education (Goto & Martin, 2009).

The researchers whose work is reviewed here offer a deep understanding of thresholder motives. College is attractive for many reasons, with motives described as both practical and expressive, personal and social, past and future-oriented. While participants’ very difficult lives are commonly characterized as being barriers to learning, those lives can actually serve as a “double edge sword” (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013, p. 17). In other words, the very challenges that prevented educational attainment in the past may contribute to thresholders’ resilience in the present and their desire to succeed going forward. As Osborne, Marks, and Turner (2004) conclude, “A highly
motivated cohort of mature students wishing to enter higher education exists” (p. 311). The reasons thresholders come to the college door are many, and it is important for adult and HE practitioners and decision-makers to recognize this complexity. As Luttrell (1997) observes, “Adult education is about establishing a credible, worthy self, and public identity as much as it is about getting a diploma (p. 126).

**Benefits of Participating in Postsecondary Education**

Many researchers have explored with students the benefits of participating in postsecondary education and have found that thresholders who made a successful transition into the academic setting indeed experienced many of the changes students had hoped for—and other changes they had not expected. One common result of educational participation was that participants succeeded in becoming role models for their children; they spoke of being happy with their ability to pass values on to their children, teach them good study skills, and improve their children’s chances in life (Fragoso et al., 2013; Reay, 2002). Participants said they gained more confidence to express their ideas. Rather than sitting silently in class as they did in their youth, for example, they could now disagree in class and ask for clarification when needed (Merrill, 2004). Some adults came to realize the value of their own experience, knowledge, and resilience as they compared themselves to the younger students in their classes who seemed to have few responsibilities and did not take their studies as seriously (Fragoso et al., 2013).

Bush, James, Piela, and Palmer (2014) observe that, although it may not have been pleasant, students’ struggles within HE, itself, often resulted in positive changes. By overcoming barriers, students gained more control over their lives and began to consider futures not previously imagined (Fragoso et al., 2013). As students experienced an increase in confidence and competence, and a better understanding of how the HE system worked, they felt more powerful and able to take
part in an environment that previously had felt foreign (Bush et al., 2014). While many institutions focus heavily on thresholders’ academic skill deficits, Fragoso suggests that older students often develop a *meaning orientation* to academic work as opposed to younger students who may have a more *surface approach* or a *reproducing orientation* (Richardson as cited in Fragoso et al., 2013). Some students described an experience of horizons being broadened and a new ability to think more deeply about life; as one student said, “I am always saying to myself [now], ‘What is going on here?’” (Merrill, 2004, p. 90).

Observing thresholders in Portugal, researchers found that “When some stability is achieved, there is a growth process that makes [learners] more autonomous and independent” (Fragoso et al., 2013, p. 5). Successful transition does not seem to be solely a matter of individual adjustment and change, however. An integral part of the transition process has to do with the social aspects of participating in education—something that was not mentioned as a motive, but frequently included in thresholders’ retrospective accounts of their learning experiences. Students enjoyed being with likeminded others—people like them with whom they could share aspirations and practical solutions to shared problems (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015; James et al., 2015). Where learners once felt their problems were theirs, alone, some gained comfort from realizing their personal stories were, in fact, part of a bigger story; they experienced greater connections with their classmates and a reduced sense of isolation (French, Kempson, & Kendall, 2015; Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015). Reay (2002) notes that, compared to younger students, adult learners spoke more about the academic experience as a group experience and used the pronoun *we* more often than the younger students who used *I*.

What the researchers here have found is that when thresholders participated in postsecondary education, they developed increased competence and confidence, their worlds
expanded, and they grew. The problem is, however, that too often thresholders either do not enroll in the first place or they enroll and drop (C. Smith & Gluck, 2016), never getting to experience that new ability to think critically, make connections with other learners, imagine new futures, become new versions of themselves, be role models for their children, or get that better job they hoped for. This raises the question: What is coming between thresholders’ educational aspirations and achievement?

Barriers Constraining Participation

HE leaders, like the Lumina Foundation’s Jamie Merisotis, frame participation in HE as an economic necessity: “There really is no choice when it comes to education or training after high school…almost all the decent, living-wage jobs have gone to people with degrees or high-quality certificates” (2017, para. 12). So, when one combines this economic push with the many other motives thresholders have for going to college, as well as the personal and social benefits that result from the endeavor, it may be surprising that enrollment and persistence are not higher, particularly among segments of society, which would benefit most from the upward mobility education affords.

One way researchers have tried to explain the situation is by identifying the many barriers that are thought to prevent thresholders from succeeding in a college setting. Cross’s (1981) seminal work on adult participation is cited by many researchers because of her concept of situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers (Reddy, 2012; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). Situational barriers are the logistical, financial, and other everyday problems that get between an individual and her studies (e.g., the car breaks down and a student cannot get to class or a child gets sick). Institutional barriers are those controlled by the institution (e.g., class schedules and office hours designed for people with free time during the workday). Finally, dispositional barriers are those factors related to
learners’ attitudes towards themselves or towards learning (e.g., low self-esteem, fear of failure, or a lack of interest in school).

While all of these kinds of barriers appear in studies of thresholders, research participants shared stories that painted a picture of intersecting, overlapping, and cumulative barriers that relate to people’s particular identities and positions in society. While mentioned less often in the US literature, social class is examined intensely in many of the international studies of thresholders. Researchers have also studied factors related to adults’ past educational experiences, immigrant status, gender, race, and ethnicity. The studies reviewed here are really a testament to the research participants who openly shared their life histories and thoughts with researchers, helping them develop a more nuanced understanding of why many thresholders “approach the prospect [of college]…with trepidation and uncertainty” (Osborne et al., 2004, p. 311).

**Institutional Factors** Osborne, Marks, and Turner (2004) note that decisions regarding participation are partially dependent on the options open to learners. The widening participation movement, for example, has made HE accessible to many people who were previously excluded. This is positive but, while the number of adult students has increased over the years, there has not been a significant increase among those with the lowest socio-economic status (Bensimon, 2007; Burnell, 2013; Busher et al., 2014). Some HE professionals accept that college was not created for everyone, and they place the blame for unequal attainment on the thresholders and their families, not on the institution (Bensimon, 2007; Burnell, 2013; Fragoso et al., 2013). Researchers warn, however, that such a perspective deflects attention from colleges, which are responsible for facilitating change (Bensimon, 2007; Fragoso et al., 2013).

Researchers who investigate educational participation from the thresholder perspective hear participants speak about their challenges with educational institutions. Money is a common
problem. Thresholders spoke about a lack of transparency about how much college costs, insufficient aid awards, and a combination of problems that resulted from not having the right information at the right time (Bowl, 2001; Cross, 1981; James et al., 2015; Reay, 2002). Government agencies were not thought of as offering reliable information or support, either. Students receiving state aid found themselves suddenly ineligible if they got a job offer and wanted to move to part-time studies or if they were found to be living with a parent after a certain age (Bowl, 2001; Goto & Martin, 2009; James et al., 2015; Merrill, 2004).

Belonging is another issue thresholders discussed. While welcomed by teachers and staff to a transition or AHE class, for example, some learners did not feel included in the larger college community. Students were disturbed when they realized they were not entitled to the same benefits or support services as enrolled college students (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Some AHE students felt like second-class citizens when their teachers (called tutors) appeared burned out and tired in the evening AHE classes after having given their best to the so-called regular students who came to class during the day (Bowl, 2001). On the other hand, the AHE or transition class, itself, could become a barrier (Murphy & Fleming, 2000). While transition instructors had good intentions, Merrill (2004) reports that some thresholders got stuck in a “horizontal learning career” when they became dependent on caring teachers and the safe learning environment of the AHE class (p. 86). Doubting their readiness to advance, some students remained where they are rather than progressing to the HE level.

Students were also dissatisfied at times with faculty member’s unspoken expectations or the transition curriculum. A great deal of anxiety was experienced with essay writing, for example. Having been away from school for many years, thresholders did not know what was expected and they were shocked and humiliated when a first essay came back with poor marks (Murphy &
Fleming, 2000). When instructors taught *about* college-level skills, such as notetaking, but did not actually have students practice the skill or apply their knowledge to a real task, learners did not feel they were being adequately prepared for college (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007).

When learners did progress from one level to another, there were barriers there, as well. Transition and AHE classes are designed to provide a good amount of one on one contact, but some students did not know how to approach teachers once they were in bigger classes or more anonymous settings (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). In the US, there is a lack of alignment between ABE and the community college curricula, so thresholders often found there was a large gap between what they needed to know to pass the GED or complete a transition class and what was required in the college setting (Goff, 2011; Reddy, 2012; Steel, 2007). Murphy and Fleming (2000), writing about thresholders in Ireland, hold that adult learners are essentially caught between two educational philosophies: “the adult education philosophy—with a student-centred, experientially based learning process, with an elevation of subjective knowledge as the generator of other knowledges; and the HE philosophy, with its subject-centred processes and focus on objective factual data” (p. 87).

O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) find that power is a very important issue for thresholders, who often feel like educational outsiders to start with. Making choices is a political act, and decisions institutions and teachers make about class times, due dates, and late assignment policies can reflect an understanding (or lack of understanding) about learners’ lives (Busher et al., 2014). For example, when a well-meaning institution offered time management workshops for academic newcomers, thinking that if students just made better schedules for themselves they could get their work done on time, the institution had misdiagnosed the students’ problem. An inability to attend to
schoolwork was often not a personal time management issue, but rather a structural one related to poverty, social class, and/or gender (Bowl, 2001).

Some scholars comment on the fact that certain feedback and evaluation procedures were also very discouraging or threatening to new learners with low self-confidence in the academic setting (Fragoso et al., 2013). Professors expected students to arrive already knowing what they thought about an issue and having the capability to express an opinion freely in discussion, but that may have been something thresholders had not experienced before; they may not have felt confident speaking up in a public setting (James et al., 2015; Reay, 2003). Bowl (2001) uses Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic violence* to describe the negative impacts on students (especially immigrants, non-native English speakers, and working-class learners) when their way of speaking or their cultural perspectives and experiences were assumed to be inferior in the academic setting (p. 153).

Instructors often commented on students’ inability to write using proper language, but often that language was unknown to students with little academic preparation.

**Personal Factors** In addition to the institutional factors that may affect thresholders’ attitudes towards education and participation, Osborne, Marks, and Turner (2004) hold that *personal* factors weigh heavily on adult learners. The issue of identity is something many researchers have written about extensively. Reddy (2012) found that her ABE participants were committed to the idea of going to college, and they described a strong *striver* identity, which they believed would enable them to succeed. But she found that they lacked a *student* identity. Participants in her study described themselves as being on a journey to a better life, and they believed their strong work ethic and proven resilience would carry them through. Many had already experienced—and survived—poverty, immigration, disabilities, language or literacy challenges, illness, as well as great disappointments or tragedies. Going to college was envisioned as just one
more challenge along the road. Until they entered a real college setting, many thresholders had no concept of the kind of cognitive work professors would expect of them. Some researchers found, for example, that it was common for students to believe that “writing” meant being able to fill out job applications (French et al., 2015). Reddy (2012) claims that the striver identity was not sufficient; if a thresholder hoped to succeed in college, she needed to develop a student identity, which would involve mastering “a new code, culture, and expectations related to learning” (p. 147).

While more people than ever have access to college now, not everyone comes to the door with the same amount of power. Ball and Vincent (1998) explain that while people from less affluent families may have cold knowledge (the formal information colleges provide to the public), they lack access to hot knowledge (knowledge based on actual experience with HE), and this can prevent them from even aspiring to HE. Vaisey (2010) and Bok (2010) disprove the idea that poor families do not aspire, however. Poor parents wanted their children to go to college and have a “good” job, but they just did not see the connections between getting an education and achieving the “good” life (Bok, 2010). One needed “a map of a journey into the future,” and thresholders did not have that map (Appadurai as cited in Bok, 2010, p. 2). French, Kempson, and Kendall (2015) explain that “becoming a student” is actually a “third shift” of work thresholders had to take on, in addition to managing all of their roles and responsibilities outside of school and their studies (p. 8). Unlike well-supported middle class students from educated families who went on to college because they were expected to, thresholders had the additional psychological and social burden of charting their own, individual path into the foreign world of academia.

**Social Class** Even after successfully transitioning into a college setting, there were still hurdles for thresholders. Some said they felt caught between two cultures, feeling they must monitor their behavior so as not to seem uppity to people who knew them before they were students.
Becoming a student caused conflict and distanced them from family and friends (Mercer, 2010; Merrill, 2004; Waller, 2006). For example, Mercer (2010) reports how old friends were not interested in talking to their friend-turned-student about ideas she discussed in class. Lynch and O’Neill hold that working-class students had to “abandon certain features of their background class…in a way that is not really true for other socially mobile groups…Their defining identity in social class terms is automatically changed by virtue of their educational success” (as cited in Burnell, 2013, p. 86).

To learn about how thresholders’ family and friends perceived college students, some researchers interviewed adults who were not students. In one study, for example, working-class adults living near a further education college in the UK (like a US community college) said that when they were growing up, they were accustomed to seeing neighborhood people go to the college each day as workers, but never as students (Waller, 2006). Some working-class men were of the opinion that education was not “real work” (Merrill, 2004, p. 89). One team of researchers found that people who had bad experiences in school as children sometimes formed negative associations with the whole idea of “school” and consequently, had no interest in college at all (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003).

Gender While many of the challenges described here affected thresholders of all genders and identities, some researchers have explored the way issues combine to impact female thresholders, in particular. Women make up the majority of the thresholder population in the US,5

5 Women also make up the majority of the thresholder population in the UK and other countries where this research is being conducted (Bush et al., 2014; Fragoso et al., 2013; French et al., 2015).
and because they often put off their education until their children are older, there are more female students 35 and older in community colleges than there are male students in the same age bracket (Herideen, 1998; St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Having been away from school for many years, and in and out of the labor force, women often are unsure of their academic abilities and their capacity to take on the new role of student (Herideen, 1998).

In addition, parents are often told that children of educated parents will be more successful, but when thresholder women turned their gaze away from the home and family and focused on themselves and their own educational lives, they often felt guilty, anxious, and/or personally inadequate (Reay, 2002; Steel, 2007). When childcare was not affordable, could not be found, or when arrangements fell through, some mothers had no choice but to bring their children to class with them—especially single mothers (Merrill, 2004). Fragoso et al. (2013) find some mothers struggled with double transition periods when, for example, the mother had an assignment due at the same time her child was starting a new school and needed her mother’s support.

Some of Merrill’s (2004) participants said their male partners reacted negatively to their participation in education; for example, one participant said, “Because I’m doing something for myself and not for him” (p. 87). Being a student can cause intense pressure at home, and even result in domestic violence. The conflicts between demands, responsibilities, and aspirations can lead to emotional and physical overwhelm and an ongoing diminishment of hope and self-confidence (Reay, Ball, & David, 2002). Reay, Ball, and David’s participants reported giving to everyone, but themselves, thus they refer to them as “uncared for carers” (p. 17).

**Decision-Making about Participation**

The various factors explored above were part of “a complex interplay of experiences, constraints, and identity” that, along with institutional, governmental, and labor market factors
make it very difficult for thresholders not only to cross the border into the world of college (i.e., gain access), but to succeed in finding a livable home there (i.e., persist) (Crossan et al., 2003, p. 64). Most of the researchers cited in this next section of the review take a more holistic view of thresholders, HE, and society as a unit. They argue that thresholders may be marginalized and disadvantaged, yet they are also active thinkers, constantly weighing the pros and cons of participating in HE (Osborne et al., 2004). Deterding (2015) finds there are many participation decisions to make—about whether to apply to a program, whether to enroll (if accepted), whether to persist, and whether to complete. And, too, just because students did not complete a program of study in a specified period of time, it did not mean they had given up hope or abandoned their educational goals (Deterding, 2015). Adult educational trajectories are less predictable and less linear than young people’s (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013), so “Educational attainment should be seen as a process that unfolds over time” and interacts with other aspects of learners’ lives and development (Deterding, 2015, p. 287).

A number of researchers challenge the idea that thresholders even have real decisions to make regarding education. They hold that the dominant discourse surrounding adults and HE centers on the connection between educational attainment and salary increases (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). Thresholders are told that more education will result in increased socio-economic mobility, but what they are not told is that most of the “new jobs” or jobs of the future require at least a bachelor’s degree. Many thresholders—both in the US and abroad—are directed toward shorter-term certificate programs that are less respected, less flexible, and often do not lead to higher level degrees (Burnell, 2013; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). Further, what some researchers characterize as the neo-liberal perspective assumes that people are able to move anywhere, access information any time, and continually recreate themselves according to market demands and opportunities (Reay,
2003; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). Often, there is no recognition of the constraints facing thresholders (particularly women) whose lives are less malleable due to constraining roles and responsibilities, the effects of adverse life events and traumas, and intractable economic realities (Bowl, 2001; Deterding, 2015; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011; Luttrell, 1997; Reay, 2003; Steel, 2007; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). Many researchers are concerned that, rather than widening participation and creating a more cohesive democratic society, current governmental and institutional policies and practices simply reproduce social and economic inequalities that have existed for centuries (Bowl, 2001; Levin, 2003; Reay, 2003).

Overall, it is clear in the literature that “the decision to enroll is not taken lightly” (Fragoso et al., 2013, para. 15). Being a student requires many things to go right; a thresholder needs adequate information, opportunity, financial, practical, and emotional support, confidence, academic skills, knowledge about how higher education works, adequate health, and enough daily stability to attend scheduled classes and meet deadlines. New student identities are tentative, fragile, and experimental and, when things go wrong, learning careers can go backwards (Crossan et al., 2003). When money is tight and/or conflicts flare with family, employers, and others, it is often school—the extra activity—that has to go. Returning to study is “a situation redolent with opportunity and constraint” (Scanlon, 2008, p. 30). Thresholders “see hope in education, yet it is a hesitant hope” (Herideen, 1998, p. 55).

**Toward Asset-Oriented Research**

Whether a transition class in the US or an AHE course in the UK, the most common goal as described in the scholarly literature is to teach students the skills and knowledge they are assumed to have missed, never learned, or forgotten, so they will be better prepared to fit into existing college structures and succeed in college. This understanding of transition as *induction* into the
existing structures of HE has its roots in a deficit orientation that focuses on learners’ lack of academic preparation—without acknowledging their strengths (Gale and Parker, 2014). Many researchers claim that this remedial approach to transition has not achieved its intended goal. While more people are accessing HE now than in the past, there has not been an increase in the number of learners from groups that traditionally have been most underrepresented (Bensimon, 2017; Bowl, 2001; Burnell, 2013; Levin, 2003; Reay 2003; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Yosso, 2005).

This section of the literature review explores scholars whose equity-related work resides at the intersection of social class, economics, culture, experience, and education. First, I look at Bourdieu’s analysis of social and educational inequality, which many of the researchers mentioned in this review use as a theoretical framework for their studies. Next, I introduce the work of several other scholars who go beyond explaining educational inequality and actively address gaps in educational attainment through asset-oriented research and pedagogy. The perspective and approaches of these researchers provide a model for this study of diverse women at the community college door.

**Understanding Educational Inequality**  Many of the studies in this review refer to French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, and his theory of *capital*, which he created to explain why some people in France succeeded in education while others did not (Bourdieu, Passeron, Nice, & Bottomore, 2014). Briefly, Bourdieu (1986) holds that, although the term *capital* is typically associated with economics, there are actually three different kinds of *capital* held by individuals and groups, and mediated by various social institutions. *Economic capital* refers to money which, through the power of legal institutions, may become converted into property rights, for example. *Social capital* refers to the social connections or networks to which one has access. This type of capital may be institutionalized in the form of a noble title (in the European context, for instance.)
The third kind of capital is cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge, skills, perceptions, and abilities held by individuals and groups in society who are socialized together in particular environments (or fields) through interactions with family, community, and educational systems (Bourdieu, 1986; James et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005). People in any field develop certain ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving, which Bourdieu calls habitus (James et al., 2015). Dominant groups retain their power when only certain forms of capital are valued in a society and when access to those kinds of capital is limited (Burnell, 2013; Yosso, 2005). Many transition researchers use Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to explain why and how thresholders are disadvantaged when they arrive at the college. Because they were not raised in fields where they had the same exposure and access to the dominant forms of cultural capital, thresholders do not have the accepted habitus to function well in the college environment where middle class students often thrive.

Several scholars lament the fact that, in some circles, Bourdieu’s theory has been applied in ways that actually pervert his intent and disempower non-traditional students. From Bourdieu’s egalitarian perspective, everyone has cultural capital, but some forms are valued more highly in certain societies than others. Those with the “right” cultural capital are more likely to succeed in educational institutions while those lacking it will often fail. Yosso (2005), Burnell (2013), and Straubhaar (2013) claim that some scholars and other educational leaders now take a “nouveau-Bourdieuian theoretical approach” (Straubhaar, 2013, p. 95) and characterize certain communities as inherently “culturally wealthy” and others as “culturally poor” (Yosso as cited in Straubhaar, 2013, p. 95). Because academic attainment is lower for people of color (POC) than for Whites, for example, these nouveau-Bourdieuian scholars assume that POC lack the necessary social and cultural capital needed to become socially mobile. This simplistic understanding of good and bad cultures threatens to lock millions of learners out of higher education. The research in the following
section provides examples of how some scholars and educators are addressing educational inequality through their theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical work.

**Addressing Educational Inequality** Yosso (2005), a critical race theorist, holds that if theory can be (mis)used to justify and maintain exclusionary structures, theory can also be used to challenge those structures. A more asset-oriented way of looking at POC, she holds, is to consider that there are many kinds of capital students bring with them to the college door. According to her theory of *community cultural wealth*, there are six kinds of capital held by POC: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). Together, these forms of capital, respectively, provide POC with the ability to hope and imagine possibilities beyond their current circumstances, use more than one language (and culture) to live each day, care beyond themselves for the broader community, use their social contacts for practical and emotional support, maneuver through social institutions, and resist dominant discriminatory practices by replacing the negative societal messages about themselves with more positive ones. All of this cultural wealth can be used to help in the transition to college, for example, if it is acknowledged and recognized. While Yosso specifically writes about POC, her theory has been applied to other marginalized groups, as well.

Moll, who writes about Mexican-American youth, holds that diverse forms of capital contribute to *funds of knowledge* that all learners bring with them to any educational endeavor—funds from which they can draw as they transition to the academic environment (J. M. Smith & Lucena, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Because of deficit-oriented attitudes towards marginalized students, however, these assets are often invisible, not only to institutions of HE, but to learners, themselves (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016; J. M. Smith & Lucena, 2016; Yosso, 2005). J. M. Smith and Lucena’s (2016) research applies the funds of knowledge concept to low-
income, first-generation (LIFG) students in college engineering programs in Colorado. LIFG students often are less successful in engineering and the researchers were interested in whether “belonging uncertainty” (associated with students who feel out of place in certain institutions or social settings) was a factor (2016, p. 1). As professors, J. M. Smith and Lucena had worked with LIFG students and appreciated their unique ways of thinking about and approaching engineering problems. They considered many of their students to be “invisible innovators,” with various funds of knowledge (2016, p. 3). One student had invented an irrigation system on a family ranch. Another was adept at fixing broken machinery on a family farm. Often, however, LIFG students believed their less affluent backgrounds were a sign they were less prepared or less able or that they did not really belong in engineering.

As part of their study, the researchers interviewed participants, observed them at their various workplaces (almost all of the participants worked in addition to being students), and shared with them the funds of knowledge concept (J. M. Smith and Lucena, 2016). They then invited participants to work collaboratively to solve traditional engineering problems using the students’ own particular backgrounds and experiences. In their findings, the researchers provide many examples of how students came to recognize and value what they already knew because of, not in spite of their socio-economic backgrounds. As participants acknowledged their strengths and were validated by professors and others in the educational institution, their sense of belonging increased, as did their confidence and self-efficacy.

Another team of asset-oriented researchers, Hagan, Hernández-Leon, and Demonsant (2015), conducted a five-year study to learn about the “total human capital” of Mexican migrants who traveled back and forth between Mexico and North Carolina. Although they had a low level of education and were regularly described as “unskilled,” these migrants were found to have “sets of
technical, social, and cultural competencies” learned informally through observation and on the job (2015, p. 9). The participants used the knowledge and skills they learned in the US to help themselves, their families, and communities when they were in Mexico, and brought back to the US the total human capital they had developed in home, community, and work contexts in Mexico. Although they are described in traditional scholarship only as either skilled or unskilled, the researchers discovered that, over the years, many migrants advanced from apprentice-level skills to semi-skilled and even highly skilled jobs. Until these harder to measure skills are recognized more broadly, the researchers warn that migrants will remain in a social category considered undeserving of living wages, acceptable working conditions, and labor rights.

The literature in this final section of the review focused on researchers whose work addresses educational and social inequality by actively seeking out, identifying, naming, and valuing the learning, knowledge, and skills of diverse individuals and groups across the US. Collectively, these scholars point to the need for individual, institutional, and social change. The research in the earlier sections of this review focused specifically on the experiences and perspectives of thresholders who aspire to HE. Taken as a whole, this body of literature provides a foundation for my study, which explores in a holistic way, the lives, challenges, motives, hopes, and assets of ten women preparing to enter community college. With this review as a base, it is my hope that readers will understand the findings of this study as an expansion of an important, global conversation—not only about thresholders at the intersection of adult and HE—but about the intersection of adult HE and social and educational justice.
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodology that informs the design and implementation of this study. Here, I outline the approach I chose for the research, and explain why it was appropriate for this study. Further, I review the research questions, describe the research setting, the participants, the methods used to gather and analyze the data, and the steps I took to ensure that the research would be conducted in an ethical manner and that the findings would be valid and credible. Limitations of the study are included, as well. As the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), it is important to be as transparent as possible about my interests and background, and how that influenced this study. I start, then, with an explanation of why I became interested in the subject of thresholders at the college door and how my background and worldview have influenced the design of this study.

Researcher Background and Methodological Approach

As mentioned previously, a recent study of outcomes for students in pre-college transition classes found that approximately 30% of transition class completers did not enroll in college (during the multi-year longitudinal study), 30% enrolled and dropped, and 30% enrolled and were still enrolled at the end of the study (C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). Low enrollment and completion rates are not good for the institution’s bottom line nor its reputation, and they do not bode well for US global competitiveness, either. But my main concern is how the lack of educational progress impacts learners. What does it mean to thresholders to be poised at the college door? What is at stake for them, their families, and communities, if they do not progress?

To understand why I care so much about adults like the thresholders in this study, some background about my life and career is required. For years, I taught leadership development, ESOL, and literacy in several different adult community education programs. I read my students’ writing
and conferenced with them to share feedback and encouragement. I learned about their lives, their past experiences in school, and their families. Their immediate concerns were to learn to communicate better and maintain enough stability in their lives outside of school so they could keep coming to class. My immediate concern was to create a learning environment that was inviting, inspiring, and safe enough that the learners would want to keep coming. I believed that if I chose high-interest topics and structured lessons well, and if students’ lives allowed them to come to class, they would experience achievement and keep coming back for more. For the most part, the approach worked, and I saw growth and improvement in my students.

Due to family responsibilities and other issues, I left my last teaching position to explore other creative educational work, and later took an administrative position in a large state university. It soon became apparent, however, that administration, for me, was too far from learning, teaching, and students. If I wanted to teach at the college level (which I did), I would need a terminal degree. In 2014, I applied to and was accepted into the Lesley University doctoral program in Educational Studies with a concentration in adult learning and development.

Being in a formal learning environment—as a student—proved to be much more jarring than I had imagined. Here I was, a 50-year-old woman with over 20 years of experience as a teacher and a professional, suddenly entering an environment where what I knew, how I thought, and how I communicated was being examined and graded. I thought back on my time teaching adult literacy, and remembered how I had to bring a box of Kleenex with me into new student intake interviews because so many people wept as they explained why they had walked through our doors. With their hesitation and tears, they described years of humiliation and frustration, living in a culture where they were seen as, and often felt, deficient. If coming into the HE environment was so hard for me with all my privilege and power as a White upper middle class woman with a master’s degree and
years of recognized experience as a professional, what would it be like for learners like my former students when they entered college? It was this frustration, compassion, and curiosity that brought me to the questions that are the focus of this study.

Qualitative researchers acknowledge that, not only do they come to their research with particular experiences that influence their choice of research topic, but they bring worldviews, which inform the design of their studies, as well (Creswell, 2014). As a social constructivist, I believe that people base their understanding of themselves, their daily lives, and the world on their experiences, and that those experiences are not just individual, but involve other people with whom they interact within particular cultures and historical periods. In other words, context matters. I wanted to learn about the thresholder experience and I knew that would involve an exploration of learners’ experiences, past and present, including experiences with schooling, the kinds of work they had done, how and what they learned outside of school settings, and many other topics. Like researchers with a transformative orientation, I am also concerned with the great inequalities that exist in society, with some groups having more power than others (Creswell, 2014). I see educational systems as being implicated in creating or reproducing those inequalities, so it was important to me to conduct research with great care so as not to further marginalize participants. It was my hope, in fact, that the experience of participating in this research might even be experienced by participants as empowering.

In addition to my perspective as a researcher, I also have a certain orientation to teaching, which Pratt (2015) describes as a developmental and nurturing perspective. What this means in practice is that I believe learners’ conceptions of knowledge, learning, and themselves, are malleable and evolving, and that my job as a teacher is to start by understanding what learners already know and believe. From the developmental perspective, “Teaching is a process of adapting
the teacher’s knowledge to the learner’s level of understanding” (p. 59). Developmental teachers have “a profound respect for learners’ prior knowledge” (p. 59). Teachers with a nurturing perspective recognize that learning is greatly impacted by a learner’s sense of self-efficacy and self-concept. For learning and development to occur, students need to feel capable of approaching and learning new material and they need to believe that the learning will be useful and relevant. Trust and safety are central in this perspective, so there is a focus on building solid relationships between teacher and students, and among students.

I did not start with one particular theory to prove; however, this study did emerge from my own assumptions about research and teaching, and was designed to enable me to observe and speak directly with participants, ask open-ended questions, and gather data consisting of stories, perceptions, feelings, opinions, knowledge, and experience (Patton, 2002). Rather than studying participants from afar (through a large-scale survey, for example), I used a more relational approach (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) in which I, as a researcher, was “within the research process rather than above, before, or outside of it” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). The approach placed participants at the center and I sought to understand them in an inductive way, from inside their own experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Scotland, 2012; Wertz et al., 2011). I assumed the participants to be both learners and knowers (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011), and while I imagined some participants might not think of themselves in those ways, the interview questions were designed to offer them the chance to consider themselves in this light.

Research Questions

Researcher and educator, Mike Rose (2015), writes that “Few studies take us in close to people’s lives…” where “the statistical table [blends] with the portrait of a life” (para. 21). My goal with this qualitative study was to collect data and make interpretations to expand understanding of
the thresholder experience, and to provide recommendations for HE practitioners. As explained in Chapter One, there were three overarching questions I hoped to answer by conducting this study:

**My overarching questions are:**

- Who are pre-college learners as whole people—both past and present, both in and outside of academic settings?
- How do these learners think about education, college, and their own knowledge and capabilities as they approach the college door?
- What steps can HE practitioners take to better support post-traditional adult learners seeking further education via community college?

**The particular research questions that guide this study are:**

- What academic and other life experiences do participants believe most influence them as they enter the academic environment?
- How have participants experienced being students in educational institutions throughout their lives?
- What are the participants’ vocational goals and life aspirations?
- Who are the participants as thinkers and learners when they arrive at the college door?
- What are the participants’ thoughts about the transition class, college, and themselves, as future college students?

**Site Selection and Description**

To find adults at the community college door, a longtime adult educator friend referred me to a transition program (TP) she thought might work for my study. After I read about it, spoke with the director, and secured the director’s cooperation and support, I created a site agreement that outlined the goals, methods, and timeline of the study. Once the plan was agreed to by the college’s
Assistant Vice-President for Adult Basic Education and Workforce Development, I was ready to begin.

TP was a free, non-credit, grant-funded program associated with a community college and ABE center in a small city in the Northeast US. TP classes were intended to help adults aged 18 and over identify a career path and/or prepare for postsecondary education. Classes included academic preparation in English reading and writing, math, study strategies, and basic computer skills. In addition, the program offered help with college navigation, career advising, and tutoring. At the time of this study, there were several class options, offering students the opportunity to attend during the day or evening, and to go for just one semester, a summer term plus a semester, or for two semesters. Two of the class options required six hours per week of class time, while the other required 16 hours per week.

Classes were offered at two locations: the adult learning center in the heart of the city and at the community college, a short drive away. TP at the community college location had a staff that included a part-time director, part-time teacher, and part-time career advisor. TP at the adult learning center had a part-time director, full-time teacher, and part-time career advisor. The greater metropolitan district from which TP drew its learners was made up of almost 700,000 people, of whom 83% were White, 5% African American, and 11% Hispanic/Latino (United States Census Bureau, 2010). In the city where the classes actually took place, however, the population had almost an even split between Whites and Hispanics/Latina(o)s (48 % each), and 29% of the city’s population lived below the poverty line.

Adults came to the TP program in various ways. Some were referred by a career coach or advisor who determined the student was not ready for college classes. Some students heard about the program from friends or relatives who had previously participated. Requirements for
participation included having passed either the GED or high school equivalency diploma (HiSET) test, being at least 18, and planning to enter college to pursue a certificate or degree after completing the program. As for the demographic makeup of TP students, the director estimated that about 55% were Hispanic or Latina(o) (mostly Puerto Rican); 65% were female; 80% would be the first in their families to go to college; 70% had high school diplomas; and 30% had passed the GED or HiSET. Students typically ranged in age from 19-61, with an average age of 32. Before coming to the TP class, most students had taken part in ABE programs, including ESOL, literacy, and/or GED or HiSET preparation courses. A small percentage of students had taken college courses before, either in or outside of the US. While roughly 25% of students requested accommodations for a learning disability (LD), TP teachers suspected the LD population was higher. Typically, fewer than 50% of TP students were employed.

**Participant Selection and Description**

I was interested in learning about the experience of adult learners as they anticipated the college experience. I wondered how college looked and felt to them, and what they hoped and feared as they prepared to apply. While many thresholders enter directly into college with no pre-college preparation course, I had the good fortune to have access to a class specifically designed for adults who were not ready for college (as determined by the college placement test or a previous unsuccessful attempt at college) or who felt they were not ready (due to a long absence from academic work). By purposefully choosing this program, I was able to learn not only about the students’ previous experiences and knowledge, and their expectations of college, but also about their current experiences being in an academic learning environment after being away from one for many years.
In qualitative research, the goal is to gather “a wealth of detailed information” (Patton, 2002, p. 14) about a small number of people in order to create “in-depth understanding” (p. 46) of the phenomenon at hand. In this case, the phenomenon was the experience of being a thresholder. Unlike quantitative research, which calls for gathering data from very large randomly-chosen samples in order to generalize to the greater population, the qualitative approach calls for a small sample of “information rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). The size of the sample depends on the rationale and purpose of the study, and in this case, my purpose was to illuminate a range of experiences, thoughts, and motives, as well as the experiential knowledge of individuals who are rarely studied in HE contexts (Reddy, 2012). I aimed for a sample of between 10-15 participants.

As I planned my recruitment strategy, I sought a heterogeneous sample that would include participants from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds; different educational backgrounds; and different marital and employment statuses. In addition, I hoped to include participants of different sexes, some with children and some without, some living in urban areas, and others from more rural areas. In terms of age, students between 18-24 are normally defined as traditional students, and my interest was in non-traditional adults, so I restricted the sample to TP students over the age of 25.

To recruit participants, I visited all three TP classes (day and evening) where the teachers generously allowed me ten minutes to introduce myself and describe the project. I told the students I was interested in their stories and thoughts about life, work, and school because I wanted to make college a better experience for adults like them. I described the time commitment required (two interviews, the first lasting two hours and the second one, several weeks later, lasting just one hour). Before I left, I handed each student a half-page summary of the project (including my contact information), sent sign-up sheets around the room, helped people who needed assistance, and
finished by thanking the class and the teacher. In the days following these class visits, I texted, emailed, and/or called the students who had signed up. Some responded right away, some I needed to reach out to several times, in several different ways, before they responded, and several never responded to my outreach. When I succeeded in reaching a prospective participant by phone, I asked pre-screening questions to ensure heterogeneity of the sample, and then scheduled the first interview.

Table 1 (below) includes demographic information and educational characteristics about the ten study participants. While the majority of TP students are female, I had sought to interview both men and women for this study. The semester I recruited, however, there was an unusually small number of male students, and although one man expressed interest, he did not choose to participate. Because there were so few men in the program, because the majority of thresholders in the US (and in the UK, and other studies included in the literature review) are also women, and because the group I had recruited was otherwise heterogeneous, I decided not to return to the recruiting stage, and to instead focus the study on women.
# Table 1

## Demographic and Educational Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Marital Status/Children</th>
<th>1st Gen</th>
<th>Educational Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>White, Latina, Brazilian, immigrated at age 27 (ESOL)</td>
<td>Divorced with 1 child, newly remarried; husband has grad. degree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 6th grade; got Brazilian GED; 3 years of aviation school; 1 college class at age 25; ESOL classes in Brazil and US in her late 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Hispanic, Puerto Rican (on the mainland since age 2) (ESOL)</td>
<td>Divorced with 2 grown children</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>HS; 1 unsuccessful semester of college at age 20; phlebotomy certificate in early 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>White, American</td>
<td>Divorced with 3 grown children and 1 teenager</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 11th grade; passed GED at age 25 (with no prep classes); CNA certificate at age 26; began, but did not complete EMT training at age 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White, American</td>
<td>Married with 5 children aged 7-16</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 9th grade; HiSET prep classes; passed HiSET at age 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>White, American</td>
<td>Divorced with 2 grown children, lives with boyfriend</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 9th grade; GED prep classes &amp; passed the test; CNA and home health aide certificates (all in her early 40s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Hispanic, Puerto Rican (born and raised on the mainland) (ESOL)</td>
<td>Separated, no children</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 8th grade; GED prep classes at age 26; passed HiSET at age 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Ghanaian, immigrated at age 32 (ESOL)</td>
<td>Married; 3 young children; husband has grad. degree</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>HS in Ghana; night school to prep for professional business school; started professional business school (all in Ghana in her 20s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White, American, Single with no children</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 9th grade; passed GED at age 20 (without prep classes); participated in professional development for her job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanashi⁶</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Divorced; 2 grown children</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Completed 9th grade; Passed GED and completed certificate (lead abatement) at age 33; attempted dental asst. certificate at age 40; CNA certificate in her early 50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yumzaa</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Ghanaian, immigrated at age 29 (ESOL)</td>
<td>Married; 3 young children; husband has PhD</td>
<td></td>
<td>HS in Ghana; computer &amp; bookkeeping training at age 19 in Ghana; HiSET prep classes and passed HiSET in the US at age 39; various adult education classes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HS – High school; ESOL – non-native English speaker

⁶ Wanashi did not respond to attempts to schedule the follow up interview, so I was only able to interview her once.
Data Collection

The sources of data for this study were 19 one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting between one to two hours each (see Appendix A for interview questions), biographical timelines each participant made to guide our conversation in the first interview (see Appendix B), and demographic surveys (see Appendix C).

Interview Protocol  The interviews took place wherever it was most convenient for the participants. I met some in their homes, others in university or community college libraries, and two in unused classrooms of the adult learning center before the start of their evening TP class. The first interview lasted between two and two and a half hours. The follow up interviews took place between three to four weeks after the initial interview, and lasted between one and one and a half hours. Each interview was audio recorded (with the consent of the participant) and transcribed.

I wanted to provide participants with an opportunity to speak about themselves, their lives, and their thoughts not only from their perspective as TP students, but from other identities, such as being a worker, a wife/mother/girlfriend/aunt, a high school drop-out, a future certificate or degree-holder, or even a future college failure. My research questions were designed to gather data that would inform adult and HE practitioners about thresholders’ early life experiences, motives, fears, academic struggles, experiential knowledge, thoughts about college, their intellectual and creative interests, and the role college might play in their lives.

The interviews began with my explanation of the research and my interest in the subject of adult learning and development. I then went over the consent form in depth, emphasizing the participants’ freedom to participate as much or as little as she desired, including choosing not to participate at all if she felt uncomfortable at any time during or after the interviews. Participants either chose their own pseudonyms or asked me to choose for them. I assured them their
Confidentiality would be protected throughout the process, and that their actual names would never be connected to their stories. The graphics below (Figure 1 and Figure 2) show the foci of each interview and the questions I asked.

Q1. Create a timeline of school, work, and other experiences that you believe most influence you as you consider becoming a college student.
Q2. Describe yourself as a student (K-12).
Q3. Why TP now?
Q4. Imagine a typical day in college.
Q5. Thoughts and feelings about college?
Q6. What should future professors know about you?
Q7. How has life prepared you for college?
Q8. Imagine your life 5 years from now.
Q9. What is your Plan B?
Q10. What advice do you have for your younger self (i.e., What have you learned from your life)?
Q11. Demographic survey.

*Figure 1. First Interview—Questions and Related Time Periods*
To start the interviews, I asked each participant to create a timeline that included events or memories from her early years in school, her time after leaving school, as well as any jobs or other education or training she may have had. I invited her to add anything else she thought was important to who she is now. In particular, I told her I was looking for the school, work, and other life experiences she thought significantly influenced her as she returned to the TP class and/or to college. I showed her a sample timeline to give an idea of how to go about the task (e.g., make a line, create a list—whatever she wanted). The idea, I explained, was to provide us both with some sort of life map because, afterwards, she would walk me through it. I had to reassure some of the participants that spelling and exact years did not matter to me; I was not looking for perfection. The stories and memories were the goal; the form was not important.
There were particular reasons I chose to use the biographical timeline to start each interview. In addition to structuring the conversation and assisting the participant and researcher in deepening their joint understanding of the participant’s life (Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011), researchers describe other benefits of using timelines, as well. Using timelines can help to mediate power imbalances between the participant and the researcher (Kolar, Ahmad, Chan, & Erickson, 2015). In this study, for example, the timeline offered the participants the chance to lead the interview for the first hour. This kind of biographical approach is supported in the qualitative literature because biographies offer researchers an understanding of how participants make sense of their lives and options, and why they take particular actions in their particular contexts. As Merrill (2004) explains, “Although biographies are individual and personal, taken together they reveal common experiences in terms of class, gender, and race, as they highlight the inter-relationship and interaction between private and public lives and structure and agency in shaping lives and learning experiences” (p. 78).

Each participant took ten minutes or so to create her timeline, and then she walked me through it. I asked clarifying questions, but mostly I listened. Next, I moved on to the questions I had prepared based on my original research questions. Questions focused on school and work experiences, the participants’ interests and experiential learning outside of school settings, self-concept, motives, their experiences in the TP class, and their thoughts about college (see Figure 1 and 2, and Appendix A.) If a participant became emotional or began to cry during the interview, I turned off the recorder and only restarted it when she felt ready. To wrap up the first interview, the participants filled out the demographic survey, and I gave them information about the free wellness service at the college (in case anything we had discussed had upset them and they wanted to seek support). Finally, we scheduled our follow-up interview to take place several weeks ahead.
After the first interview, I listened to the audio recording, took notes about what I had not understood, noted any skipped questions, and prepared a personalized follow up sheet to guide the second interview. At the start of the second interview, I again sought to communicate to participants that they were experts teaching me about their lives. I began with the clarifications and skipped questions, and then circled back to ask in more detail about topics about which they had spoken with confidence in the first interview (e.g., their knowledge of their job, a hobby, or a house project). I asked them to speak about ideas or activities that interested or inspired them, and about people with whom they had interesting conversations. I then proceeded on to the new questions, which focused on their experiences in and thoughts about the TP class and their expectations of college. My final questions asked participants to compare learning inside and outside of academic settings, and to talk about whether they thought their lives had, in any ways, prepared them to be college students. The second interview ended with my expressing deep gratitude for the time and stories the participants had shared with me. I offered to send each participant a copy of her timeline, a written transcript of both interviews, and a summary of my work at the end of the study.

**Data Analysis**

Once I had the interviews in written form, I read through them, listened again to the audio, and began taking notes, which consisted of my initial impressions, interpretations, possible themes, and emerging questions. My analytic work was informed by Boyatzis’ (1998) thematic analysis (TA), which he describes as a way of thinking and a series of procedures that assist the researcher in her “search for insight” (p. vi). TA enables an interpretive social scientist to start with the raw data (stories), and then move toward identifying, naming, and communicating findings in ways that are both systematic and creative. The goal is to write about the findings in ways that help others enter the world of the participants and the researcher, and to see what the researcher saw.
TA requires the researcher to first sense themes by observing the data while being very mindful not to interpret it or judge it. As a woman, mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend, mentor, and adult student, myself, there were times both during and after the interviews when I related to the participants and felt my experience was very close to theirs. There were also times when the differences between our lives, experiences, and ways of thinking were glaringly divergent, and the distance between us more apparent to me. In the early part of the analytic process, I made a consistent effort to focus on reading and listening from the participant’s perspective, neither relating to the stories nor assigning meaning to them (Boyatzis, 1998). Early codes consisted of non-interpretive categories, such as family or school. Later, I went back again (and again), noting additional categories and subcategories, such as early childhood or middle school. As did Hyland-Russell and Groen (2011) in their study of marginalized adult learners, I “treated each participant’s text as its own narrative while looking for themes and patterns that emerged across all the interviews” (p. 87). I reached “down to fundamentals, up to abstractions, and probed experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 135), as I moved toward more interpretative themes, such as trauma or lack of connection to school.

As I had done throughout the data collection phase, I continued to create audio memos on my phone, and written memos in my journals. Timelines and demographic surveys were consulted as needed to supplement the information in the transcripts. Often, I created graphical depictions of what I thought I was understanding about processes or experiences participants described. I looked specifically at gender, at immigrant-related experiences, at the 50+-year-old participant responses as compared to younger participants, and at differences between the perspectives of parents and participants with no children. I believe Anderson’s characterization of heuristic inquiry as “an
emotionally-connected scientific inquiry” best describes my overall research approach (as cited in Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1572).

Validity and Credibility

The purpose of this qualitative study was to increase understanding of the essential experience of being a female thresholder at the community college door. Rather than conducting a quantitative study, the findings of which would be generalizable to the larger population, I used a qualitative methodology, specifically intended to highlight particular stories and themes in the context of a specific population and site (Creswell, 2014). There are numerous ways to judge the quality of such a study, and I focus here on two central issues commonly described by social scientists: validity and credibility (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Validity, in this context, refers to “how accurately the account represents participants’ realities”—the stories and perspectives of those individuals who are inside the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 124). Credibility, on the other hand, refers to how believable and trustworthy the study is found to be by individuals outside of the project. Here I describe some of the steps I took to ensure both validity and credibility.

To ensure that my findings were accurate, one strategy I used was to collect data from multiple sources (ten participants), using multiple methods (biographical timelines and interviews, semi-structured interviews, and demographic surveys) (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). To ensure I had accurately understood participants in the first interview, I brought to the second interview any questions or observations I had, and offered participants an opportunity to correct my understanding or add further information. As I formulated the findings, I stayed committed to exploring, not only those findings that fit nicely with my interpretations, but those that provided “contradictory evidence” (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). I included outlier perspectives and experiences in my reporting.
As I wrote, I tried to amplify the participants’ voices and bring the reader closer to the participants and the research setting by using thick description (Geertz, 1973), which Denzin describes as “deep, dense, detailed accounts,” not just facts (as cited in Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128).

In terms of ensuring the credibility of the study, I took additional steps. Since qualitative researchers assume the researcher is not an objective observer and that she is also the primary instrument in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2002), I took care to disclose my biases and offer clarity regarding my worldview insomuch as I imagined it may have impacted the inquiry (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In Chapter 1 and also in this chapter, I have included information about my background as a teacher and researcher, and throughout the report, I have offered other information intended to demonstrate my “reflectivity” (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). Miller (2008) writes of the researcher’s duty to create an audit trail to help the reader follow the breadcrumbs the researcher followed. That is what I have done by explaining in detail my methods of data collection and analysis. Finally, I have used “peer debriefing” which involved seeking interpretations beyond my own (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). Two respected colleagues—one who teaches adult undergraduates inside the college door, and another who teaches GED students just outside the college door—read and provided feedback on the findings. Both confirmed that the stories, findings, and interpretations resonated with what they know about thresholders and increased their understanding of their students. Throughout the study, my dissertation committee also provided useful and challenging feedback, which assisted me in the study design and implementation, as well as my efforts to effectively communicate in writing.

Limitations

This was an in-depth study of the experiences and perspectives of ten thresholder women in one pre-college program. While there was significant diversity within the sample, there are
limitations related to the relatively small size of the sample, the fact that men did not participate, and that I restricted the study to one program in one geographical area. I offered no compensation to those who volunteered to participate, however it may well be that those who stepped forward had more time than non-participants or a desire, need, or inclination to tell their stories. Some, as identified in the findings, expressed a deep desire to help others, so it is possible that this study may have attracted an altruistic kind of person.

In addition, while the first interview with each participant took place approximately one month to six weeks into the semester and the second interview, three to four weeks later, it was not a longitudinal study. Participants’ understanding of college and their self-concept as students may have evolved during the course of the transition class and I may not have captured those changes. Finally, as an educator who has spent most of her career working with ESOL and ABE learners, I brought a certain compassion to my interactions with the participants. While this enabled me to quickly establish relationships in which individuals chose to share personal, often painful, stories, it is possible that my prior knowledge of adult learners and my deep commitment to supporting their growth may have influenced the findings in ways of which I am not yet aware.
CHAPTER 4 THE PARTICIPANTS

The following five chapters include the findings of this study. In this first chapter (Chapter Four), I provide demographic information about the research sample, as well as additional background related to the participants’ educational attainment, employment, and economic status. I then introduce each participant individually through a holistic profile. In the subsequent chapters of findings, I will share stories about the participants’ previous experiences as students; their goals and aspirations; their personal interests and experiential knowledge; and finally, their experiences as students in the TP class and their thoughts about college and themselves, as potential college students. At the end of each chapter, I include a reflections section in which I summarize the findings, reflect on particular issues of interest, and, where possible, place the findings within the context of the existing literature. Together, these chapters of findings paint a portrait of a very diverse group of women whose difficult lives and great hopes for a better future have combined to bring them to the transition classes.

Demographic and Related Information

Ten women participated in this study, each of whom was a student in one of three free pre-college classes offered at the local adult learning center or community college. As shown in Table 1, the participants were between the ages of 29 and 56 at the time of the first interview. Two described themselves as Hispanic/Puerto Rican, one as African-American, one as Latina/White/Brazilian, two as Ghanaian, and four as White. Three were born outside of the US and immigrated between the ages of 28 and 32, and one was born in Puerto Rico, then moved to the mainland with her family when she was a toddler. The other Puerto Rican participant was born and raised on the mainland. Five of the participants spoke a language other than English as their first
language. The two Ghanaians said that parts of their education had been conducted in English, however.

Four of the participants were married at the time of the interviews, one was separated from her husband, one lived with her boyfriend, one was in a relationship with a woman, and three were single. Four had previously been married, then divorced. One, who had not been married, spoke with sadness about past “failed” relationships. In terms of children, two of the participants had none while eight had between one and five. Four had their first child between the ages of 18 and 21, three gave birth for the first time in their mid to late 20’s, and one had her first child at 31. Seven of the women had between one and three children, and one had five, two of whom (a niece and a nephew) she adopted when her sister passed away. Five of the participants had teenagers and/or younger children, and four had only grown children.

As for their families of origin, five had single mothers who struggled to provide for them, and four had no connection to their fathers. Six of the participants came from very large families of five or more children. Two of the participants reported moving every year of their childhoods, and four spoke of disruptive and disturbing moves that came in response to family crises. Five of the participants said a lack of safety was a concern in their childhoods, either at home, in their neighborhoods, or at school. Two were sexually abused, one witnessed the aftermath of the homicide of a childhood playmate, and two spoke about being afraid when walking alone near their homes. Of the ten participants, five mentioned depression and three of those indicated they had thought of suicide in the past.

Nine of the ten participants mentioned responsibilities for taking care of people beyond their nuclear families, whether that meant providing physical care or financial support. Four cared for their parents; five, for their siblings or other relatives; and one, for her girlfriend’s mother. These
responsibilities began and ended for some participants when they were quite young, while for others, caretaking had played a significant role throughout their adult lives.

In terms of educational background, seven participants left high school between ninth and twelfth grade, and later passed the GED, HiSET, or the equivalent. One participant had a US high school diploma and two completed high school in Ghana. One of the Ghanaians also got her GED after immigrating to the US because she doubted the quality of her Ghanaian education. All of the participants had engaged in some sort of education or training beyond high school, whether that meant a GED preparation course, a short series of professional development workshops, or a formal certification course. Five had training related to health care support. Two participants started, but did not complete other training programs due to life crises. Before coming to the US, the Brazilian participant went to aviation school for three years (although she did not get her pilot’s license) and also took and passed a non-credit college humanities course. Both of the Ghanaians took professional business or computer classes in Ghana before emigrating. Two of the participants in their 50’s reported unsuccessful attempts in college, one when she was 20 and the other just the year before the interview took place. Although only one participant had a parent with a college education, the majority had some exposure to HE through their siblings, spouses, other relatives, or friends. In terms of learning, three of the participants mentioned significant struggles. One had received an official diagnosis of ADHD, dyslexia, and hyperactivity when she was very young. The other two suspected they had learning disabilities, but they had never been tested.

As for employment status and work history (see Table 2 below), three of the ten participants were not working at the time of the interviews. Two of those indicated they were looking for jobs, and one was in the last trimester of pregnancy and not planning to work anytime soon. Of the remaining seven, four worked full-time and three part-time. Six of the participants were working in
health care support or had in the past—four as CNAs, one as a companion for an elderly person, and one, as a phlebotomist. One participant just recently secured employment as a housekeeper at a nursing home and another had two concurrent jobs at non-profit human service organizations. Four mentioned with pride the fact that they had been promoted in previous jobs. Overall, the participants described a range of work experiences. One mentioned no jobs, four had a history of shorter-term jobs, and the remaining five had developed specific skills and valuable experiential knowledge as a result of working 10 or more years in the same profession.

**Table 2.**

*Employment Status and Work History*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Work Status</th>
<th>Past Work Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Short-term jobs (seamstress, factory work, ironed clothes, assistant house painter, Mary Kay salesperson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Yes, FT Phlebotomist</td>
<td>Bank clerk (5 years. Laid off.) Phlebotomist (22 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Yes, FT CNA</td>
<td>Dietary aide at a nursing home <strong>promoted</strong> to Head Cook. CNA (18 years).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra</td>
<td>No (looking)</td>
<td>Short-term jobs (hostess in a restaurant, substitute at school kitchen, home health aide, CNA for father (four years, but only paid for one year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Yes, PT CNA</td>
<td>Factory work (9 years); factory work (17 years, then laid off. “Wrongful termination.”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>No (looking)</td>
<td>Informal internship in the restaurant of a family friend (two years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Yes, PT companion for elderly person</td>
<td>Salesgirl <strong>promoted</strong> to sales rep at a houseware store (Ghana)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>Yes, FT at non-profit organizations</td>
<td>Several mall retail jobs; closing manager at McDonald’s; assembled devices at aerospace manufacturing plant; hourly manager in retail store <strong>promoted</strong> to set-up and remodel supervisor (laid off after 10 years – “wrongful termination”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanashi</td>
<td>Yes, PT CNA</td>
<td>CNA; waitress; bartender; warehouse sorter <strong>promoted</strong> to live-in resident advisor at a drug rehab. program; housekeeper <strong>promoted</strong> to head housekeeper at drug rehab. center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yumzaa</td>
<td>Yes, FT Housekeeper</td>
<td>Secretary and accounts clerk (Ghana); Custodian (USA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

60
While participants were not asked directly about their socio-economic status, all spoke of past financial strain and said that strain continued to press on them in the present. Both Ghanaian women were married to men from Ghana who had acquired graduate degrees in the US and now worked in education—one as a high school teacher and the other, a college professor. Despite their husbands’ success, both women spoke of ongoing financial hardships. The Brazilian participant had recently married a highly-educated American man who was considering going on for doctoral work. Although they lived in a nice home and she did not need to work, the participant indicated that because her husband made a good salary, she would not be eligible for college financial aid, and that meant they might not be able to afford college for her.

**Participant Profiles**

Thus far, we have looked at participants as a group, specifically their backgrounds in terms of demographics, education and training, employment, and economic status. Too often in research, individuals’ lives and stories go unseen as a result of the intense focus on statistics. It is important for those making decisions about adult and HE, however, to read about the people behind the numbers, and to understand more about their histories and aspirations, their humor and heartbreaks, their challenges and resilience. In these profiles, as well as in the chapters that follow, my goal is to provide an opportunity for the participants to speak for themselves as much as possible. Many direct quotes are included from the interviews.

**Anita** I parked in the driveway of Anita’s home after having found my way through a very tidy series of streets in a quiet neighborhood. She opened the garage door and invited me to enter. After putting her little dog in a crate and offering me juice and cookies, we sat at her kitchen table and talked. Before we started the interview, Anita explained that her husband would like to read the
consent form before she signed it. I said she could keep the forms and show them to him, and if he was comfortable, she could mail them back to me. Then we continued.  

Anita, age 29, described herself as a Latina, White, Brazilian. She and her toddler son came to the US from Brazil about a year and a half before I met them. Our discussion began at the start of her timeline when she was three and her mother and father broke up. Because her father “was gone,” and provided no support, her mother went to work. Anita spoke about babysitters who hit her and her sister and made them do work in the house. There were times when there were no babysitters at all. Her mother would just “lock the door and we alone all day long.”

Early school years were a bit better, and Anita remembers loving to read: “I like day school. I like because I learned to read and I love get book and read [to] my mother. (She laughed.) I read to her for show I know [how].” That was the end of happy memories of school, however. Anita said, “It's like my mother, always she moving one house to another. Like, we need start one school and finish in another school. And it's the whole time.”

In fourth grade, Anita started fighting at school and she was written up dozens of times. At one point, her mother left Brazil to find work in Portugal and sent the girls to live with their grandmother. Anita said, “I live there six months, but they treat us so bad, so bad, so bad! I can't stay there.” Her aunts hoarded the money her mother sent, and they all fought, so, at the age of twelve and a half, Anita left, and rented a small room on her own. She began working after school as a seamstress (something her mother had taught her when she was six), but Anita never had enough money. She had to repeat seventh grade three times, and ultimately, she left school altogether.

7 I received her signed forms the following week.
At seventeen, she saw an ad for a school for adults where she could take a test to complete seventh and eighth grade: “So, I get some books and I study.” She passed the exam, and over the next year or so, Anita worked on modules to complete her high school studies. As for that form of education, Anita asked me sarcastically, “It's a good education? A good way to learn? Alone? It's not! Imagine!” Everyone in Anita’s family was either a seamstress, tailor, or mechanic, but she loved ships and airplanes. When she started dating an older, divorced man, he offered to help her through pilot school, so she went to school for two years. They had thick textbooks and a lot of reading, and she did well there. When she was close to finishing, however, she fell in love with one of the flight instructors and left her supportive boyfriend.

To get her pilot’s license, Anita would have needed to accumulate hundreds of flight hours, which meant finding pilots who would take her up. Her new boyfriend, however, was “So jealous, so jealous. He doesn't let I do nothing. Nothing. He doesn't let me try get one work because he say all the time that people wants be with me in the airplane. (As she said this, Anita placed her hand on my knee, indicating her boyfriend thought other pilots would have approached Anita sexually.) Soon, Anita became pregnant and moved in with the flight instructor on an isolated farm where she had no friends and there was nothing to do. Her boyfriend used her car to go to work and she was stranded. “I lost two years and a half with this guy,” she told me angrily.

Eventually, she left that boyfriend and brought her son to the US where she hoped to work with her aunt (also a seamstress) and learn English. In a very short period of time, Anita ended up meeting a kind, well-educated, American man with whom she is now married. Anita was eight months pregnant when we met for the first interview, and close to giving birth when I arrived for the second interview. About the TP class, she explained that, although she was happy to be learning more math, TP was really not the right place for her. She said, “I feel really stupid to talk because I
know I’m talking wrong…The first step is I need to talk right, you know? I need to write better.”
What she really needed, she said, was an English as a Second Language class. Then she wanted to
go to college and become a pilot. When I asked her if she had any fears about college, she replied
matter-of-factly, “I think I have a good luck. Sometimes, I start the things and I stop, you know?
But after I have the chance to start again, then I think it's will happen with me because my husband,
he is very helpful, you know.”

Debra  Debra’s apartment was very quaint—part of a welcoming, Tudor style complex set
back from a main road. As I entered her place on an early winter morning, I noticed she kept the
apartment quite dark. There was just one candle burning inside. On the walls were pictures of her
sons and, next to the couch where we sat, was a crochet project—something she later spoke about
with a smile.

Debra, a 51-year-old, Puerto Rican woman, was the youngest of six children. Her mother
and siblings moved back and forth several times between the mainland and Puerto Rico when she
was a baby and toddler, but mostly she grew up in the Northeast of the US. Debra spoke warmly
about her early years on the mainland, especially the years when her grandfather lived with them.
She said, “He used to sit in the balcony with his, you know, his Puerto Rico shirt back in the day—
Guayabera—we called them. And his straw hat and his guitar, and he would serenade all day out
there, smoking up a storm.”

On her timeline, Debra indicated that she had good grades in elementary school, but that
things “went downhill” in sixth grade when she started to be bullied by other girls. A quiet,
sensitive person who minded her own business, Debra explained, “I don’t look for trouble, but
trouble finds me.” As she considered her timeline, Debra commented that her sadness had actually
started much earlier than sixth grade—when she was about five. That was when her mother went
back to Puerto Rico to attend Debra’s uncle’s funeral, and her mother’s boyfriend stayed in the house with all the kids and the grandfather. One night, the boyfriend came into Debra’s room and molested her. “And that's something that stays in my mind,” she said.

Going back to her timeline, Debra said the bullying at school continued in high school, and she struggled with homework. “I couldn't comprehend what I was reading,” she said. “I had to read it over and over and over again. And with geometry, forget it.” Debra felt very alone in class. She graduated, but does not believe she should have. “They kept passing me year after year. Barely,” she said. Debra recounted in some detail the accomplishments of her many siblings, including the degrees they each had: bachelor’s, master’s, and one had a PhD. She was the only one who had not gone to college, and she carried around that knowledge like a heavy load.

Debra liked office jobs and thought she would study business management, so a couple years after finishing high school, she enrolled in a local community college. She did not do well there though, so she left. Happily, she got job at a bank—“A good job. A 9-to-5 job. Monday through Friday. I loved it!” In under two years, however, the bank was sold and she was laid off. Just around that time, Debra met her husband, married, and had her two boys. (“Love my boys,” she wrote on her timeline.)

When her first child was just a few months old, she and her husband began to have conflicts because Debra started talking about going back to school. Although she really wanted to be a nurse, she knew she could not succeed at that because of “the comprehending stuff,” so she wanted “the next thing:” phlebotomy. Debra’s husband was a police officer and was going for his bachelor’s in criminal justice so, there was no money for her education, he told her. She persisted, and managed to complete the phlebotomy program when her first son was just a few months old. Again, she told me she did not know how she made it through school. “They just passed us,” she guessed.
Although her marriage did not last, her phlebotomy career did. Debra has successfully worked in the field for the past twenty years. Now, though, she said she was burned out from the daily grind at the busy inner city location where she drew blood from an endless line of drug addicts. Debra would like a quiet job in a back office “behind the scenes,” so she was considering going for the Billing and Coding certificate at the community college. The problem was that in the TP class, she was having the same issues comprehending and retaining information that she had in high school. She enrolled in the TP class because she wanted “to properly learn how to speak…Like when you’re writing, you want to write intellectually…I can’t think of words sometimes.” Debra’s son had ADD, and since her ex-husband was “so smart,” she often wondered if their son may have gotten his learning disability from her. She talked to her TP teacher about getting tested for disabilities and the teacher told her she needed to do it through her doctor. Debra told me she had been meaning to ask her doctor about it, but she kept forgetting to bring it up.

**Katherine** Katherine, a 46-year-old White, single mother had four children, three of whom were grown. Throughout both interviews, she emphasized that she “loved school and was always very curious. I felt like I was really smart.” She recalled being “just a really good student [who] did what I was supposed to do.” Seventh grade was a very hard year, though; she moved to a huge regional 7th-12th grade high school that was “very scary,” her parents split up, and she moved with her mother from one state to another.

Katherine always knew she wanted to be a nurse, but since the vocational high school she went to did not offer that option, she followed her friends into the culinary track. In May of 11th grade, her mother suddenly sent her across state lines again to live with her father, but that “didn’t work out,” so Katherine moved in with her 19-year-old brother and his girlfriend. She described that period as “a lot of fun…no parents telling me what to do.” Enjoying her freedom and not seeing a
reason to continue school, Katherine planned to drop out in the fall. That summer, though, her brother was killed in a car accident and, because she knew how much he had wanted her to stay in school, she moved back across the state line again to where she had lived before, and in with a friend.

It would be a very rocky year for Katherine. Things did not work out with the friend, so Katherine moved in with her boyfriend, and stopped going to school just three months before graduation. She then got pregnant. Katherine said that while she had really enjoyed her “newfound freedom” before her brother died, she later felt very isolated and alone. She said, “There's no guidance. There's nobody telling you, ‘This is how you do it.’ There was nobody to talk to. There was no support system basically. There wasn't anybody in my life. It was just me.”

By age 23, Katherine had three boys, and on her timeline, she labeled the next two decades, “22 years of hell and dysfunction.” Her husband was “a narcissist,” and although she got her GED, became a CNA, worked, and took care of her kids, most of her energy went towards trying to appease her husband and save the relationship. Several years before our interview, Katherine (at the age of 43) finally succeeded in extricating herself and her kids from the marriage. She then set about helping her family come to grips with what they had just lived through, and she also began planning to move forward with her education.

As a result of her many years working with doctors and nurses as a CNA, Katherine had numerous supporters rooting her on. She enrolled in the TP class to get back into the school mindset, and she was anticipating taking her “nursing pre-reqs.” Although she had not been in a formal academic environment in many years, Katherine loved learning and looked forward to her nursing classes. She spoke excitedly as she told me about *The Anatomy Coloring Book* she had recently ordered online: “I was like, ‘This is gonna’ be so fun!’ *(She laughed.)* That's how I learn! I
don't know about anybody else, but if you can draw it or you can color in it or you can make a connection for the words to the picture, that's how you're going to remember it!"

There was just one more thing standing between Katherine and her education when she and I spoke. For the past six years, she had been caring for a man with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). Much more than a client, he was Katherine’s mentor and her “biggest fan.” He was the one who found the TP class for her in the first place, in fact. But they both knew that Katherine was not yet free to start nursing school. As she explained, “It's either him or school…I couldn't be involved in the nursing program and take care of him at the same time. Especially right now when he's...you know, got probably less than a year to live. So,…this is like (long pause), this is the beginning [for me] because this is the end for him.” Before continuing, she thought, paused, and then whispered, “My God. That's so sad.”

**Kyra** At the end of a long, dirt driveway off the main road, beyond the power lines and a “no trespassing” sign, I came to Kyra’s house. As I parked, I noticed old farm equipment in the yard, a fire pit, trampoline, and an old wood stove sheltered under a topless gazebo. This quiet spot was where Kyra, her husband, and children had lived since they moved a year and a half earlier from the Midwest. The transition had not been an easy one for the family.

Kyra, a 34-year-old White woman, warned me when I first called her on the phone that I had better be on my game when we met; otherwise, she said, she could get us lost in her saga— “like therapy.” When we did meet, however, she started her story without emotion, very matter-of-factly narrating her timeline that began with, “Birth, 1982,” and jumped right to, “Had a baby girl, 2002,” and then, “10th grade, dropped out of H.S.” Kyra quickly added that dropping out was not because of the pregnancy: “I dropped out of school because I was...uh...stubborn, I guess. I mean, just strong-willed. I just didn't think school is something I needed. *(She laughed.)*”
Although most people she grew up around had not gone to college, it was expected she and her siblings would finish high school. “I was the black sheep of the family…The only one who dropped out,” she said. Responding to my desire to know more about her school years, Kyra explained that she “never really liked school. Never enjoyed it.” Grade school was fine, but as far as middle and high school, she explained, “I just went to my classes. I didn’t even do my homework. I probably had the potential to get good grades, but I didn’t have the drive to do that. Seriously, I was just a rebellious, little snot who did not think I needed to go to school. Seriously.”

Kyra may have been the black sheep in terms of academic success, but it became clear as we spoke that she was a very sharp thinker. On several occasions during our interviews, she began answering my questions before I had even finished posing them. It was as if she anticipated where I was going with my thinking before I got there, myself. In addition, what emerged from many of the stories about her family was a picture of her as the one with common sense. Unlike other family members, Kyra knew “how to pay bills, how to be responsible, how to maintain your car.” And she knew how to plan and prepare in advance for a family barbeque: “Just things that…our parents just didn't teach us.”

Beyond being a quick and clear thinker, however, Kyra had taken on her family in very meaningful and committed ways. She said, “My mom wasn't super nurturing, so I feel like a lot of people kind of look to me for that. That nurturing side.” When her sister died, Kyra adopted her sister’s son and daughter. When her father became a paraplegic in 2010, she helped care for him until he died four years later. None of these qualities helped Kyra get work in the Northeast, though. As she explained, “It's hard to get a job out here. I mean, I don't have work history. I don't have a high school diploma. (She laughed.) I'm practically a bum. (She laughed again.) I fill out applications. I mean, I have a house and address, but that's about it…”
That was really not all there was to Kyra, however. She yearned to learn and she had a critical ear. She told me that she enjoyed listening to TED Talks and to NPR (rather than to other “news”) because, “I feel like it's a little more, just debate, and kind of more educated than just top stories to get your attention. I feel like news is just...impulse. Very impulsive, so you listen.” To improve her ability to secure work, she took GED prep classes and passed the test. Then, the GED teachers and a career coach at the community college “just really felt like this [TP] program was something I should get into.” She enrolled, but the truth was that she did not really see herself following through with the commitment TP students were required to make when they registered: to go on to college after the TP class. Kyra explained,

I want to be super engaged, but I'm definitely distracted by outside stuff, and so I just don't want to set myself up for failure. I just know my capabilities. I know myself and I know my priorities, and they're not going to be put forth to college right now. So, I think it's good for me to be true to myself and wait. And I think that there's always a time to go to college.

Whether or not she chooses to enroll in college classes after TP, the TP class had a significant impact on Kyra. She told me her teachers had taught her valuable lessons. She learned, for example, “that college is attainable and that it's ok if you're not strong in one subject. You're still a good person. Just 'cause you struggle in math, you're still a good person.” And she was emphatic as she talked about the importance of college for her children—something she had not considered much before they moved from the Midwest: “I talk about college with my kids all the time… every one of my kids. I don't want them to not think. I just never thought about it. It never crossed my mind. [College] never occurred to me.”

Lily I found Lily’s home in a quiet working-class neighborhood of a semi-rural town. I parked in the driveway, and caught a glimpse of her very large, unfenced backyard before reaching
her kitchen door. Lily, a 55-year-old White woman with two grown children and some
grandchildren, met me at the door accompanied by two sweet, little barking dogs, and her shy, but
warm boyfriend, Dan. Dan soon left to go upstairs, the dogs settled down, and Lily and I sat in the
living room surrounded by Christmas decorations. There was a whole wintery village on the mantle,
colored lights strung carefully around the tree, and winter scene pictures on the wall that lit up when
Lily flicked a switch.

After I introduced the study and went over the consent form, Lily quietly worked on her
timeline. As she handed it to me, I asked how the experience had been for her, and she replied,
Hmm…(She paused.) Yeah sorta. I guess it could hurt sometimes. I guess, thinkin' like when
I got burned when I was younger by a pot of hot water, which set me back some because I
missed school for three months… And being a female too, you know, you grow up with
scars all over your chest. (She pulled back the top of her shirt to show me massive scarring
on her shoulders and upper chest.) So, you know, you grow up with kind of insecurities and
depression. (Tears.)

Lily was in first grade when she was burned. The next item on her timeline read: “5th
grade. House burned,” and Lily narrated, “We lost our Chihuahuas and some kittens, and started over
again into another school in another town.” When I asked about specific school memories, Lily
replied, “I was, like, a rebellion-type person, skipping school and doing all the things that everyone
else was doing. I don't know, I guess I just didn't care or something. And I don't know, my whole
childhood was just, I don't know, probably stuff that you just wanted to forget, so… (She laughed.)
I was struck by how often Lily used the phrase, “I don’t know.” I had the sense she had been
inundated by life events she could not process. Later, when I transcribed the interviews and counted
the number of instances that phrase appeared, it came to 92.)
In terms of her parents’ educational background, Lily said her father had been a truck driver who was not “stupid, but he didn’t learn, like, how to spell properly,” whereas her mother “spelt pretty well.” Neither parent finished high school and only one of her eight siblings graduated. Lily’s timeline indicated that she had quit school in tenth grade. She commented, “I guess with eight of us they just gave up after a while. (She laughed.)” Lily’s mother got her a fake birth certificate so Lily could start working at seventeen. Over the next nine years, she worked at a paper mill, had two children with two different men, and eventually took a leave to care for her mother who was dying of cancer. After her mother passed, Lily never returned to her previous job, but she found a new one at another paper factory.

Over the next seventeen years, Lily worked hard there and sustained injuries on the job. She said, “I used to work there 12-hour days, and I’d make one gigantic roll, pushing on the machine. And I'd make, like, ten rolls, and I'd have to break them apart. And when I was breaking them apart, I'd be holding the rolls and slamming them, not realizing I was damaging my wrists.” When the workload increased and she was expected to use the computer to order supplies (something she did not know how to do—and never learned, she added), she was encouraged by her co-workers to speak to a supervisor. It would not only benefit her, but them, too, she thought. Lily spoke to the supervisor about the workload, and while she was there, she also “complained about the maintenance guys that they were, like, belittling to me as a female. Instead of listening to me when I said I had a problem with my machine, they'd call over this boy—like I was a stupid person, when I probably knew my machine better than he did!” Not long after her action, Lily was fired.

She tried to bring a wrongful termination suit with the help of her neighbor, a nurse who was “very intelligent” and knew how to type well. Lily said her neighbor helped her “for hours and hours on end: exhibit A, exhibit B…She was typing it, because I don't know how to spell that
properly and she knows all that ‘redundant’ and ‘egregious,’ and all these words that sound so…”

The suit never went anywhere, and Lily could not pursue it further on her own. Lily had not worked full-time since she lost that job. While she was a CNA when we met, she only got about 18 hours of work each week, which was not enough to live on. And that was why she had come to the TP class. Lily was very uncertain about the value of the class, however: “Sometimes I'm thinking, at age 55 (tears) and knowing cancer's in my family—my mom died fifty-six—how much time do I have left? Do I want to go to school for four years? Or maybe, I thought, oh maybe, I can go try and take a civil service test. Or... I'm trying to think of ways out of having to waste my time...(Tears.)” At the end of the second interview, Lily again looked back on her life situation and added one final comment: “It's tough. That's why I voted for Trump this year. You get tired of the same old same old, you know? We need change, you know? We need somebody that's going to pick us up and get us somewhere. (She laughed.)”

Marie Marie, a 30-year-old Puerto Rican woman, was born and raised in various small cities in the Northeast. We met for both interviews at the local community college library. Marie’s TP class met at the college, but she had spent more time on that campus compared to the other participants. For one thing, she had free time since she was not working when we met and she had no children. For another, though, Marie’s older sister had been a student at that college, and she and Marie used to meet regularly between or after her sister’s classes. Marie mentioned several times that the college was a much safer place than the inner city, urban neighborhood where she lived. She liked being on campus.

Marie’s timeline began with her “graduation” from Head Start, then continued onto first grade where she had to stay back a year because of “basically being lazy. I didn’t want to write the right way. I was just doodling.” She then mentioned a “graduation” ceremony to send the fourth
graders onto fifth and another “graduation” as eighth graders moved onto ninth. These social events and markers of completion seemed very important to Marie, perhaps because those were times when she felt part of something—and when she completed something at school. As she explained, “I was always the new kid in class. Always. My mom had to have it that every year, she would move around somewhere different.”

Marie called herself “a loner” and “a quiet geek.” She explained, “I would always stay to myself, you know? Keep quiet, just try to get through my classes. And that's when I really noticed that I had a thing for reading, writing, and math. I was basically the geek of the class.” Throughout her school years, including her time in the TP class, Marie experienced “a constant battle” with herself. One internal voice told her, “You're dumb. Just say the answer that they're asking you for. And the other one was like, ‘Oh, don't be a show off.’” No matter what she did, however, she always felt judged—even just for her looks. She described herself as “always the tallest or the biggest.”

In eighth grade, the regional vocational school came to Marie’s middle school to recruit students, and she was impressed with their presentation. She said, “They are not only focused on who I am physically; they’re interested in who I am in knowledge.” She decided to go to that high school, but at the beginning of ninth grade, Marie’s mother was hospitalized for an extended period, and with her older sisters gone and her father rarely on the scene, Marie felt it was up to her to be with her mother. She said, “You know, my mind was, ‘Once I get outta [school], I have to walk home, get to the house, grab some clothes and go to the hospital. So, my mind…at one point, I just gave up. The way I thought about is, ‘I'm too young to lose my mom. If I lose my mom, I could end up in the system.’” Marie dropped out of ninth grade, started again, but then dropped out for good partway through the year. She was fifteen.
Aside from getting married, then separated, Marie did not talk much about her life during the eleven years between when she left school and when her mother actually died. She did mention doing some online academic work, however, “to keep [her] skills sharp.” Starting in 2012, she began taking GED prep classes, and in 2016, after one failed attempt, she passed the test. When we spoke, Marie said she was dreaming about the culinary arts certificate program she had applied for at the community college. She formed “mental pictures of how am I gonna look in my uniform.”

Marie thought college classes would be “fast,” and she said she wanted her future professors to know just “how hard is it for me to actually sit for the amount of time that they're asking me for…Without losing, you know, the interest in what they're teaching. You know, it's not easy. Especially when you got so much going on in your life.” Nonchalantly, Marie then explained that she had been diagnosed with ADHD when she was eight or nine, and went through “a whole process,” including therapy and counselors. They taught her different “coping” strategies, and Marie said she knew she could get more support with her learning disability at the college.

Five years from now, after finishing the certificate program, Marie imagined, “Owning my own restaurant. Having my grand opening. I can see myself walking out from my business, locking up and going home.” She would also like to help teens like ones from the street where she grew up: “To get them convinced that that's not the only way that they can live…You know, I'm really starving to get where I see myself—to be able to say, ‘I did it!...It took all this time, but I did it.’”

Mary Mary, age 43, emigrated from Ghana when she was 32. She and her Ghanaian husband currently have three young children, although only two live with them at this time. When we met for the first interview, it took Mary some time to start creating her timeline. She was very concerned about her spelling, getting the dates exact, and about providing me with answers to my
questions. I told her I was not concerned with spelling nor with exact dates, and that seemed to relieve her concern somewhat.

Mary came from a very large, blended family in Ghana where she had 11 siblings. Her father was a biochemist, which made her the only participant in the study who was not a first-generation student. Mary told me she liked everything about school when she was a child: “I go to school with my siblings. And my father was always home, encouraging us that school was important…I liked my teachers and my friends.” Although she described herself as a good student, who “absorbed everything,” Mary said, “it was not as I wanted.” After school, “I had to work a lot—like cooking with my stepmother, washing, doing housework—so, by the time I finished, I would be tired.” What Mary learned, she learned in class. She never actually studied; there simply was no time.

Not far into Mary’s narration of her timeline, death and loss made striking appearances. On a holiday when Mary had gone to stay with one of her half-sisters, word came that their beloved father had died. Because her sister’s children were pre-teens like Mary, it was decided that Mary would stay there with the sister rather than go back home. Not long after that, however, her sister’s husband got sick and passed away, which prompted her sister’s mother (whom Mary referred to as her step-mother) to move in to help. Within a relatively short time, her step-mother also “fell ill” and she, too, died. Despite the intense amount of loss Mary had described, she told her story with relatively little emotion.

Mary said that after all the caretaking she had done, she thought of becoming a nurse. After high school, however, she “happened to get a job” at a company, and so, she changed direction. Thinking practically, Mary decided it made the most sense to get more education in the field she was already working in: business. She took classes at a professional business school but, unable to
afford the second phase of the program, she discontinued her studies. Meanwhile, Mary had met her husband and gotten married. When her husband left Ghana to start graduate school in the US, the plan was for Mary to join him once he got settled. She would continue her education when she joined him in the States.

Just after her husband left Ghana, Mary found out she was pregnant with their first child. After the baby boy was born, her husband thought it best to leave him with family in Ghana. Mary would come to the States, get her Green Card, and her education, and then, they would bring over their son. After she arrived in the US, however, they realized college would be much too expensive for them to afford, and getting a Green Card turned out to be an extremely lengthy process. Mary’s husband completed his master’s degree and got a full-time position in the US teaching high school science. Meanwhile, they had two more children, one of whom, Mary explained with tears, was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. For reasons I did not understand, they never succeeded in bringing their first child over from Ghana. This, in fact, was Mary’s greatest regret in life. I turned off the recorder for several minutes when she stopped speaking and then began to sob after telling that part of her story.

Mary enrolled in the TP class because, “I wanted to start from…scratch because I've been away from school for long.” Despite her deep sadness about her long separation from her son and various other ways in which her life had not turned out as planned, Mary was very motivated to get her education, and become a nurse. She told me she really wanted her future professors to know one thing about her: “I've been through a lot and I'm ready to learn in college.”

Reese On my drive to Reese’s apartment, I passed an elderly man driving a small tractor filled with brush, and various signs related to the upcoming presidential election: “Clinton for Prison,” “Clinton/Kane,” and “Trump.” Past the Baptist church, there were homes with the
occasional plastic-wrapped boat, and flagpoles waving American flags. Behind the house Reese shared with her landlord lived a few horses and some goats. Two yappy dogs met me as I approached the gate, and much to Reese’s surprise, both were quiet and snoozing next to me on the couch within about 15 minutes.

Reese was a 36-year-old, White, gender-nonconforming woman with no children. She started her timeline at sixth grade when she and her classmates were “involuntarily transferred to jr. high” because of an elementary school renovation project. She was “unprepared” for the change and it “totally disrupted her school flow.” At the same time, her home life was “pretty tough.” She, her mom, and two siblings lived in low-income housing, and they did not get along. When her brother starting to drink and use drugs, everything “got exponentially worse.” Reese often stayed in her room or went to her aunt’s apartment to do homework. When she was around fourteen, however, her aunt died, and from then on, when school got out, Reese would drop her stuff off at home, and go right out again. “Anywhere but home,” she said.

As she spoke, she critiqued and reflected on the situation at the same time: “It's amazing to me how I got through without being, like, identified by Child and Youth Services or something. What a failure of the system to not identify people who might need stuff. That was not a safe home for me. I should have gotten taken away.” But then, immediately reacting to her own comments, Reese added, “And then later you're working with kids who have been removed from their homes, and I'm wondering…I wonder if that actually didn't work out to my benefit…that I didn't get taken away.”

In the middle of tenth grade, Reese was told by a school administrator that she was so far behind, she might as well drop out. Tears accompanied her words as she explained: “I'm a really smart person, and it wasn't that I couldn't do the work or didn't want to, but I got to this place where
I didn't care about it. Like, the system wasn't caring about me and I didn't care about it.” Reese
started staying at Denny’s (which was open all night) and often slept at the apartment of one of the
waitresses who opened her place to troubled (but drug-free) teens.

Finding work never presented much of a problem for Reese. She told me about several retail
jobs in the mall, being a closing manager at McDonald’s, assembling complex devices at an
aerospace manufacturing plant, and then managing the set up and remodeling of retail stores for a
chain. At each job, she was “scooped up,” promoted, and given more responsibility because, as she
put it, “I’m a pretty great catch! Whatever I have tried to do, I've been good at it. Construction? Got
you! I just learn it. I'm pretty smart. I'll figure this shit out.” The trouble was that most of the jobs
never paid much, and often she had two or three at a time.

After working and saving their money, Reese and a former girlfriend (both high school
dropouts) succeeded in getting a loan and buying a house together. Owning a home and fixing it up
became a major source of pride and pleasure for Reese. Unfortunately, when the relationship ended,
Reese was unable to buy the house from her ex-partner; she tried not to weep as she spoke about it.
Reese said she really wanted to own a house again.

She also longed to have a healthy relationship and find meaningful, well-paid work (or at
least well-paid enough, so she would only have to have one job at a time.) She also yearned to have
time to work on creative projects. Reese loved having interesting conversations with people that
helped expand her perspective. The people she connected with most, she told me, were college
graduates. She believed that, as a group, they were “really friendly and really well-spoken…able to
get their ideas out to other people.” People who hadn't been to college, on the other hand, “are just
kind of doing whatever with their time. Just sort of twiddling their thumbs and going through the
motions of life and working to pay their bills.”
Reese respected formally educated people and would like a degree. She would like to keep working in nonprofit organizations, or maybe teach vocational education since she loves working with her hands. But she mentioned a couple big barriers, which may prevent her from achieving her goals. First, she could not imagine how she would go to school and work at the same time. And, as she told me in no uncertain terms: “Not working does not work for me.” In light of her history, it was extremely important for Reese to keep up with her bills and keep a roof over her head. In addition, she worried about whether she really had what was necessary to be a real student:

I’ve never really taken the reins on doing what I wanted to do…I’m not sure that I can actually prioritize things well enough to get an associate's degree and then work on a bachelor's degree. To have a long-term goal is such a new concept to me that, like, phew! I still don't know that I can do it. Like, I’m prepared for all things at all times, but I'm not prepared to sit down for two hours and read.

**Wanashi**  Wanashi is a 56-year-old woman with two grown daughters. Her TP teacher gave me her name because I was looking for one more participant and the teacher thought Wanashi would want to tell me her story. When I first contacted Wanashi on the phone, she was upbeat, saying, “Hold on a minute, Sugar.” Her answers to my brief demographic pre-screening questions were mostly long. To the race and/or ethnicity question, for example, she responded, “French-Canadian, Irish, Blackfoot Indian, but raised in the African American culture.”

We arranged to meet at the adult learning center where her evening TP class was held; it was a 45-minute bus ride from her home to school, she informed me. On the day of the interview, she stepped out of the elevator, pulling her books and dinner behind her in a Jansport rolling suitcase.

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8 Wanashi is a Blackfoot name her grandmother used for her.
Wanashi was indeed so anxious to tell me her story that she contributed pieces of it even as I introduced the study and explained the consent form. When I told her I hoped to give professors a more complete picture of adults like her, she told me how frustrated she had been when she went straight into college the previous year without first taking the TP class. She spoke of crying in the hallway and having a breakdown when she failed English: “What I found out is what they're looking at when a person comes into college—an older adult comes into college—that they're prepared. But we're not!” Wanashi said she felt “jilted,” saying, “I wasted a whole year because…These [TP] classes I'm taking right now…I should've had these right from the beginning!”

At various times throughout our interview, Wanashi described her life as "crazy," "colorful," and "chaotic." She told me I was lucky I found her now and not two years ago because now she would talk, but before “I always felt that if I told my past, I'd be judged by people…I kept everything to myself because I'm not going to have you judge me 'cause of my past… I am not my past.” Anger, frustration, and bits of enthusiasm were interlaced throughout her storytelling.

Wanashi was born to a teen mother who “had a lot of men in her life and these men felt as though that they could do whatever they wanted to us.” She and her siblings were sexually abused by numerous men from the time she was three until she was fifteen. Life was “very dysfunctional; a lot of problems within poverty ’cause I remember wearing shoes that were too small for our feet.” Wanashi “loved” school, though—especially music class and English— “’cause I'm an avid reader,” she said.

When Wanashi was thirteen, her grandmother took her away from her mother and siblings and had Wanashi move in with her in another part of the city in a different school system. Although she loved her grandmother dearly, she was devastated by being separated from her twin and her
other siblings. Her grandmother explained her actions by telling Wanashi she wanted her out of that scene because Wanashi had “a special heart.” Wanashi agreed about her heart, and told me, “Because I am… I'm a very loving person. Life, on the other hand, has kind of... put a little clamper on that.”

At sixteen, life at her grandmother’s house got too hard; Wanashi fought a lot with her aunt, ended up getting pregnant, and dropped out of school. Although she had a miscarriage, she did not go back to school again. Her life from there on included a stint at Job Corps; a baby at twenty; another baby at twenty-three; an abusive, womanizing man; and a failed attempt to keep her girls out of “the system.” Meanwhile, she worked as a personal care attendant, a waitress, and a bartender; started, but did not complete a dental assistant program (she was on the Dean’s list, but had to stop because her boyfriend broke her arm); completed a lead abatement training program where she spoke at the graduation ceremony; got her GED; moved from place to place; used drugs; got injured on the job; had depression; reunited with her grown children; and got her CNA certificate.

Wanashi’s story included a series of “turn-arounds.” She said she often got tired of how things were and she just turned things around. Her goal now was to get a certificate in counseling or something related to that. She wanted to get a job doing: “what I know, what I’ve experienced. I'm 56 years old. I don't got a whole lot of time to be spending all my time at school. I want to be able to pass that on now. Because my lifestyle and... the things that I've seen can help other people to overcome and get through whatever it is they're dealing with. Because I know the struggles.”

Yumzaa Yumzaa was a 40-year-old Ghanaian immigrant with three young children and an academic husband, also from Ghana. For our first interview, Yumzaa and I met at a university library near her home on a quiet Sunday afternoon. She started her timeline by telling me she did
not know how to read until she was in seventh grade. Her father was a farmer and a carpenter, and her mother was a “trader” who brought other people’s goods to market to sell. Neither parent was literate, but she had an uncle who went to university and his presence in her life turned out to be very significant.

The story of Yumzaa’s school years in Ghana revolved around one concept: lack. There was a lack of teachers, furniture, paper, books, labs, curricula, supervision, and recourse. She was beaten three times by a teacher with a cut-off hose: the first time, “because I couldn't pronounce ‘help’ [in English],” and the second two times because she arrived late to school. For 300 students in her high school, there was just one teacher. High school was marked by bullying and teacher strikes. In the end, Yumzaa and her classmates scored much lower on national exams than kids in the more affluent cities.

On holidays, Yumzaa spent time in the very international compound where her uncle lived. Because many of the people there spoke different languages, they used English to communicate and that was where much of Yumzaa’s learning about the world really took place. After high school, Yumzaa’s uncle sent her to a school to learn Word, Excel, and basic accounting. As a result, she found bookkeeping work at several schools, and was able to send money home to support her two younger siblings. In 2002, Yumzaa married and, in 2003, she and her husband had a baby. The next year, her husband moved to the US to work on his PhD. The plan was to stay six years, then return to Ghana. Money was very tight during that time, however, because the stipend her husband was paid was not enough to cover their living expenses. The couple had two more children in the States, and when Yumzaa’s husband finished his degree, he applied for jobs in Ghana. They waited and waited for a response, but because of bureaucratic and other problems, eventually, their visas...
expired. With the help of her husband’s advisors, they were able to pay their rent and survive, and
luckily, her husband secured a teaching position in the Northeast.

Neither Yumzaa nor her husband had ever attempted a long trip in a car, and the journey
turned out to be harrowing. After two car accidents and navigational miscalculations, they finally
arrived on the East coast—by way of Mississippi. Once they settled in, again money was tight, but
Yumzaa managed to find free adult education classes. Although she had technically finished school
in Ghana, she had no confidence in what she had learned there, and she started preparing for the
GED. Yumzaa successfully passed the test, went on to take several other free courses offered at the
school, and then was referred to the TP class.

Yumzaa wanted to be a nurse so she could “go back to help my community” in Ghana. She
worried that she was too emotional to be around suffering people, however. Plan B might be to
explore a certificate in “billing” because she had seen a lot of advertisements online for jobs related
to that. She had also considered a CNA program, but one of her teachers advised against it since it
would only pay one dollar an hour more than her current housekeeping job. Yumzaa deeply wanted
to stop “working myself to death” at “odd jobs” just for a tiny salary that immediately disappeared
into groceries. She wanted to help her family and other people.

Reflections

For this study, ten diverse women spent several hours reflecting on and telling stories about
their lives—their families, schools, learning, jobs, disappointments, and hopes—and the role college
might play in their future. There was great variety in the participants’ backgrounds and in the routes
they had taken to the TP class, but there were similarities in their stories, as well. As I listened to,
and later transcribed and analyzed the interviews, I was struck by the amount of trauma and/or
adversity in these women’s lives. Sexual abuse, violence at home, the death of supportive loved
ones, parents divorcing, struggling single mothers, neglect, serious injury, being bullied or even beaten at school, depression, poverty, being removed from one’s home, losing one’s home and pets in a fire, moving to a new home and school every year. Stories about such experiences were elicited in response to my request for the participants to create a timeline that included “some of the important events or memories from school, work, and your life, in general, that have had an important influence on who you are as you imagine walking into a college class at this time in your life.” (See Appendix A for this and other interview questions.)

Before I conducted the pilot study that preceded this research, I had created my own timeline to try to prepare myself for the interviews. My timeline started with my mother sending me to Kindergarten a year early because, as my mother exasperatedly put it, “Everything you said required an answer!” In fifth grade, after seeing a friend (who was two years behind me in school) do math problems I had never seen before, I asked my parents if I could “go to Peggy’s school.” While my life has not been perfect, I did not believe that any trauma or adversity I had experienced really affected me as I walked into my doctoral classes. Basically, my timeline consisted of social, emotional, and intellectual experiences through which I had learned about the world, about myself, and what I wanted to do with my life. My parents stayed married. We moved once. It was a stable life and my education was a priority.

The contrast between my timeline and the participants’ timelines was striking, and that should not have come as a surprise to me. Previous studies describe thresholders as arriving at the college door with a history of childhood hardship and a sense of alienation from school and formal learning (Bowl, 2001; Merrill, 2004; Reay, 2003). The details of those hardships, however, are rarely described in the HE literature, and this is a problem. It is one thing to know thresholders have had hard lives or to be aware that life has often interfered with their educational attainment. It is
altogether different to actually hear (or read) about the real life stories of thresholders, to acknowledge the emotions embedded in their educational biographies, and then to find innovative and effective ways to respond.

For thresholders with complicated past and present lives, returning to school as an adult is not just a matter of making a rational, economic decision in response to the changing requirements of the current labor market. Returning to school is a challenging, often painful, endeavor that can bring back memories of past traumas, disappointments, failures, and regret. Adding school to one’s life further complicates already complicated lives. As more thresholders participate in college, it is important for higher education practitioners to read student accounts like those shared in this study and sit for a while with the stories. Although it is not explored much in the thresholder literature I found, some scholars hold that nearly one-third of the adult population arrives in the classroom with “a history of abuse, neglect, developmental chaos, or violence that influences their ability to learn” (Perry, 2006, p. 21). Adult literacy researcher Horsman, claims that “Experience of trauma and its aftermath—whether in childhood or adulthood—is likely the present reality for many, if not most, literacy learners” (1998, p. 8). In a study of adult learners like those in this study, Canadian researchers found that it was rare for students to check off only one event on a survey about whether students had experienced homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, poverty, violence, chronic illness, disability, or war (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011).

Whether these adverse events happened when people were young or in adulthood, the scars remain, and they influence how learners think, feel, and learn. Community college students have experienced more lifetime, more severe, and more recent adverse life events than students at four-year universities and, those with the most exposure report greater levels of general distress, less satisfaction with life, poorer health, and lower GPAs (Anders, Frazier, & Shallcross, 2012). The
findings in this chapter, supported by the research on trauma, adversity, and learning, suggest implications for some sort of trauma-informed response from higher education institutions, and this will be discussed further in Chapter Nine. There is much more to know about the participants than that they have had difficult lives, however, and in the chapter that follows, I will present stories and findings that provide a closer look at their experiences as students, both in childhood and throughout their adult lives.
CHAPTER 5  PAST EXPERIENCES AS STUDENTS

One of the original research questions in this study was: How have participants experienced being students in educational institutions throughout their lives? I wondered what role school had played in their lives and how they would recount their educational biographies. My assumption was that what students had experienced in school environments would likely affect how (and whether) they would approach classroom learning later in life.

What follows are the participants’ stories about their academic experiences, both when they were growing up and after leaving the K-12 system. (Their experiences of the transition class are included in Chapter Eight.) The stories are multi-layered and emotion-laden. Having identified certain patterns when analyzing their accounts, I organized their K-12 stories into the themes of *A Positive Start, School and Family Intertwined, School as the Problem*, and *It Was Just Me*. These stories span a range of experiences, from enjoying school when very young, to losing interest in school because of disruptions at home, to having problems at school, to feeling abandoned by the adults in their lives who should have been guiding them.

Themes identified from their post K-12 stories include *This Isn’t Anything Like High School!, Doubt, and Starts and Stops*. For some participants, being back in school as adults was affirming and encouraging—nothing like what they experienced before. For others, their educational participation as adults left them feeling confused or resentful. While they may have passed the GED, for example, some doubted their supposed knowledge, the quality of the institution that had certified that knowledge, or the value of the certification, itself. The most common experience I heard, however, was about the frustration and disappointment when, once again, life got in the way of the participants’ educational efforts. Together, these stories help the reader understand the ways participants experienced being students throughout their lives.
The K-12 Years

As mentioned previously, I began the interviews by asking participants to create a timeline starting from their K-12 school years and going until the present moment. Based on the stories I had been told by adult literacy and ESOL students in the past and the reading I had done, I expected participants to talk about issues, such as inexperienced teachers, poor school systems, large classes, discriminatory practices in the classroom, and/or struggles with learning disabilities. As shown in Table 3 (below), however, poor experiences in school were just one of many issues participants described when they thought back on their K-12 years.

A Positive Start  I was quite surprised to hear over half of the participants speak of positive beginnings in school. Mary said, “Well, I like everything about school, and I like my teachers and my friends.” Debra said, “I was going into kindergarten. And I liked…those years. You know, I was doing well. I had friends.” Kyra reported that she “did well in grade school.” Wanashi said, “What I loved…was music class…I'm a music person. I love music!...and I loved [English] 'cause I'm an avid reader.” Anita (from Brazil) had fond memories of Kindergarten: “I like day school. I like because I learned to read and I love get book and read [to] my mother. (She laughed).” Reese explained, “I always had high marks. And I always had books…So, I did well in English…Science, I was super interested in. Always. Especially earth science.” For these participants, early positive experiences with school were relatively short-lived.

School and Family Intertwined  Katherine, too, spoke positively about school at first, yet her words illustrated the essential intertwining of family and school issues that emerged from many of the women’s stories. Katherine said, “I loved school. I always…but I'm not sure if I loved school because it was easy to get away from home—the dysfunction at home—or if it was that I really
loved school.” She continued, “I think when your mind is distracted by, like, problems and trauma or drama…it tends to impact where your focus lies.”

Katherine explained that in seventh grade, she entered a new school—an enormous regional high school she described as “scary.” That same year,

My parents separated, and I moved to [a different state]…So, I was there until eleventh grade. Which again, you have to keep in mind the whole…the whole time in school, I’m dealing with a lot of chaos at home. A lot of dysfunction. And…my mom had seven kids, so I’m one of seven. So, then in eleventh grade, I moved back [to the state where I grew up] to live with my father, but I ended up living with my brother who was 19.

Living with her brother was actually “a lot of fun,” Katherine said. No one was telling her what to do. Katherine was having so much fun, in fact, that she was planning to drop out of school. Her plans changed, however, when her brother was killed in a car accident that summer. Because he had been against the idea of her dropping out, Katherine decided not to stop school, and to move across the state line again and go back to her old school in the fall. She had to push the administration to allow her to prove she could handle twelfth grade since she had not technically completed eleventh. They gave her some tests, she passed, and re-entered school as a senior. That spring, though, Katherine “just sort of stopped going to school a couple months before graduation.” All the moving, disruptions, and loss had been too much, and Katherine dropped out.

Reese also spoke about a jarring school transition and chaos at home. On her timeline, she wrote, “Students were (all 6th grades town-wide) involuntarily transferred to Jr. high 6th grade for renovating elementary school.” Reese said she was “unprepared” for the change and it “totally disrupted her school flow.” At the same time, her home life was “pretty tough.” She, her mom, and two siblings lived in low-income housing, and they did not get along with each other. When her
brother starting to drink, use drugs, and be violent, everything “got exponentially worse.” Reese often locked herself in her room and played her guitar or went to her aunt’s apartment to do homework.

When she was around fourteen, however, her aunt died. Reese said, “And I know that I pretty much stopped doing homework because I didn't think I had a…I didn't feel like I could actually sit still somewhere and be able to focus on it.” In the middle of tenth grade, a school administrator told Reese that she was so far behind, she “might as well just quit.” Reese explained, “And they may have been saying, ‘Quit this school year and redo it,’ but I was far enough in the hole where I just was like, ‘Fuck it.’ So, I just stopped going.” Reese wiped away tears as she said, “I'm a really smart person and it wasn't that I couldn't do the work or didn't want to. But I got to this place where I didn't care about it. Like, the system wasn't caring about me and I didn't care about it.”

Anita, who had started out happily reading to her mother in Kindergarten, explained, “It’s like my mother, always she moving one house to another. Like, we need start one school and finish in another school. And it’s the whole time!” She described living in very unsafe neighborhoods next to prostitutes and drug dealers. When she got to fourth grade, Anita began to get in fights at school; one year she was sent to the principal dozens of times. At one point, without telling Anita where she was going, her mother left Brazil to find work. Anita and her sister were then sent to live with their grandmother and aunts in another state. The schoolwork there was much more advanced than what they had seen before, and Anita could not keep up. Meanwhile, her relatives were hoarding food, as well as the money her mother had sent for her and her sister. When the situation became unbearable, Anita left. Her grandmother contacted Anita’s father (whom Anita did not know) and he took Anita to live with him, but, as Anita explained, “He’s alcoholic. I only live with him two weeks. And I
fight and I leave the house. And this time, I rent one house for me.” At less than 13, she found a room to rent and went to work sewing clothes (her mother and other relatives were seamstresses and she had learned to sew when she was six). Anita said, “I start working the morning and study in the afternoon.” Ultimately, though, she struggled in school and only working part-time, Anita not able to earn enough money to pay her rent. She left school after three attempts to complete seventh grade.

Wanashi, who loved music and reading early on, explained that her mother was in high school when she had Wanashi. There were, “A lot of problems within poverty, you know... 'cause I remember, as a child—a young girl in elementary—wearing shoes that were too small for our feet.” When Wanashi was 13, her grandmother forcibly took her away from her mother, twin sister, and other siblings in order to get her out of an unsafe situation. Wanashi elaborated: “My mother was very, uh, how should I say? Just say promiscuous. She had a lot of men in her life and these men felt as though they could do whatever they wanted to us.” Unhappy at her grandmother’s, however, Wanashi ran away, was arrested, and put in jail until her grandmother came and got her out. School played almost no role in Wanashi’s story after the trauma of being taken from her home and siblings. A few years after moving in with her grandmother, Wanashi got pregnant and left school to go to a special program for pregnant teens. Before she entered the new program, however, she had a miscarriage. And Wanashi never returned to high school.

Mary described a solid home life in her early years in Ghana. Her father (the only participant’s parent with a college degree) was very supportive of Mary and her many siblings, and he valued education. Mary explained,

He always encourages me to go to school because he would say, “School is important. And that’s where you get knowledge.” So, sometimes I would say, “I want to spend time with
you” because he kind of answered my questions…I used to talk to him a lot. And he would say, “Go to school! Today is Monday. Tuesday. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday. Then, you have me at home.”

But Mary’s father died when she was about ten and it was decided that she should move in with her much older half-sister who had children Mary’s age. Soon, her half-sister’s husband died and later, Mary’s step-mother passed away, as well. Mary took on more and more caretaking and household chores, which left little room for schoolwork. She said,

Studying was a little harder because I can’t study at home. When I come home, I have to work a lot. Like, cooking…and washing, and doing housework. So, by the time I finish, I’ll be tired. I didn’t have much time to study. So, I learned from class when my teacher is teaching classwork. I absorbed everything, but…not as I wanted.

Mary graduated from high school, but life had gotten in her way. She regretted that she was not able to learn as much as she had hoped.

Marie’s accounts of her school years were, like Mary’s, a complex mixture of her desire to learn and numerous personal and familial factors getting in her way. When she was around eight or nine, Marie was diagnosed with ADHD. Although I found her thinking somewhat challenging to follow during the interviews, she did not describe her learning differences as being a major impediment in school. She got a lot of support from therapists and counselors who taught her learning strategies, and that helped immensely. She had other issues to face, however. Marie said, “My mom had to have it…that every year, she would move around somewhere different. Me and my sister were always the new kids in class.” It was hard to make friends. She described her school experience this way:
Since I was the new girl, I had to figure out ways to basically blend in with the class and find ways to communicate with other students [other] than to—you know—put myself out there…I learned that at a very early age—just from being around in the neighborhood—to then, carry that into school…Nobody notice me if I don't talk. If I don't act like the smart one, they would just leave me alone. [It was] a constant battle with myself. One [side] was saying, “You're dumb. Just say the answer that they're asking you for,” and the other one was like, “Oh, don't be a show off.”

Marie said that at the start of ninth grade, “It was a lot of things happening to me at that time…that weren’t about school.” Her mother became very ill and was hospitalized. Marie said, “My mind was elsewhere. You know, my mind was, ‘Once I get outta here, I have to walk home, get to the house, grab some clothes…and go to the hospital.’ You know, there was always trying to figure out a way on how to get around, so that staying focused…so my mind, at one point, I just gave up.” Marie dropped out of school in ninth grade, came back for a month or so, and then dropped out again for good. There had been just too many disruptions, and she did not see school as something she could hang onto.

Lily, too, told a story about how her life at home influenced her drift away from school. In first grade, a pot of boiling water spilled on Lily, and she had to be out of school for three months to heal from the burns. Reflecting on that event, she said, “Being a female, too, you know, you grow up with scars all over your chest. (She moved her blouse off one shoulder to show me the scarring.) So, you know, through the years, you grow up with, kind of, insecurities and depression.” The next event Lily narrated on her timeline occurred in fifth grade: “The house burned, you know? Lost our Chihuahuas and some kittens, and started over again into another school in another town.” Lily said that at that point, she started hanging around with kids who were partying: “I was, like, a rebellion-
type person, skipping school and doing all the things that everyone else was doing. I just don't remember [the school part] that well…Yeah, because I just, I don't know, I guess I just didn't care or something…”

Table 3.

**K-12 School and Family Factors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive Start at School</th>
<th>Poor School</th>
<th>Single Mother Struggling</th>
<th>Frequent or Significant Move(s)</th>
<th>Unsafe Environment</th>
<th>Lack of Adult Guidance Support</th>
<th>No Parent w/ College Education</th>
<th>Bullying</th>
<th>Learning Disability</th>
<th>Grade Completed</th>
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<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

*At school  *Never tested, suspected

**School as the Problem** Although this was not the dominant story told to me, two participants named school, itself, as a major cause of their problems. Yumzaa did not speak about trouble with her family or at home. Rather, her problems centered on what happened—and what did not happen—at school. Yumzaa really wanted to learn at school, but she and her classmates were thwarted by a weak, unfunded, and unregulated educational system. Her timeline did not even begin until fourth grade. In the years prior to that, there had been no furniture in her school and no teachers. The children simply lay on the floor and drew on each other’s faces with chalk. Once or twice a month, a teacher would stop by, tell them a story, or sing them a song.

At the fourth grade mark on her timeline (see Appendix B), Yumzaa wrote: “I got beaten by a teacher because I couldn’t pronounce ‘Help.’ I didn’t know how to read.” Next on her timeline came sixth grade, where she wrote, “Late at school assemble [sic] and was whipped [with] a rubber
cane on my back and legs. My skin started bleeding. Couldn’t know how to read again. Lack of
teachers.” Yumzaa’s parents had been extremely upset when she came home with wounds inflicted
at school but, as she explained to me, her parents were illiterate farmers; what power did they really
have to advocate on her behalf? By seventh grade, Yumzaa had still not learned to read, but with the
help of her uncle (who had gone to college), she moved to a new school, then later enrolled in a
boarding school, which they hoped would be better. There again, however, there were not enough
qualified teachers and support structures. The older girls bullied and humiliated the younger ones,
and there were long periods with no classes when teachers were on strike. Yumzaa finished high
school, but “didn’t do well” on her final exams, and that meant she could not go on to college.
School, for Yumzaa, had been a site of pain, waste, and frustration—a great disappointment.

Like Yumzaa, Debra associated school with pain, as well. While she was never physically
abused at school, she experienced much bullying and struggled with academics. She said, “The girls
wanted to fight me. I couldn’t understand why. You know, I’m a short, Puerto Rico girl. I don’t
look for trouble, but trouble finds me.” She had no social life and in middle school, her grades went
downhill. Debra explained,

I wasn’t comprehending a lot of stuff…, you know? Like reading, I couldn't comprehend
what I was reading. I had to read it over and over and over again. I did somewhat good in
math, in algebra—the beginning of algebra—but then, when it started getting complicated,
I…I just…I didn't do it. Yeah, geometry, forget it.

It wasn’t until many years later when Debra’s son was diagnosed with ADD and her niece with
ADHD that she began to wonder if her own academic problems might have something to do with a
learning disability. At the time she was in the K-12 system, however, thinking about disabilities
“wasn’t big.” Debra said, “I thought I wasn’t smart enough…Teachers, they…it just went on like normal.”

**It Was Just Me**  Another theme from the participants’ stories had to do with the absence of adult support and guidance. Many of the women said they were left on their own to figure things out. Wanashi, who ended up dropping out of high school, said, “See, my mother wasn’t really never there. She was working all the time or going to school, herself. You got to remember: my mother was young. She was a child, herself, when she had us!” As for her father, Wanashi explained, “We don’t know our father. Never met him.”

Katherine, who had loved to read her mother’s nursing books when she was a little girl, described the sense of aloneness she felt and how she lost her connection to school over the years. After her parents divorced when she was 12, she had very little contact with her father and she described her mother as not “supportive” or “communicative.” Katherine said, “There was no support system, basically. There wasn’t anybody in my life. It was just me…”

Debra, too, spoke of being alone. She and a few other participants believed that their parents’ lack of education was one reason why they did not pay enough attention to their children’s educational lives. Debra explained, “My mom didn’t finish school. I think she dropped out in…middle school or even before that, so she wasn’t much help, you know. And I was the youngest, so the oldest ones were doing their own thing. They were going off to college or the military and stuff like that. So, I didn’t have any support.” Anita explained that no one in her family had much education. About her mother, she said, “My mother, I think she did until the [eighth grade]…but she never care very much about education. You know, she never think it’s, you know, important…She *never* help us with things.”
Lily said that she and her sister used to skip school a lot. Eventually, “our father and mother just let us quit, you know, instead of trying to pursue it. I guess with eight of us, they just gave up after a while.” Reese also described skipping school. She said, “I really was inconsistent about even going to school. And it didn't feel like anybody cared about that.” Her mother had graduated from high school, and she wanted Reese to graduate, too, but Reese believed her mother did not actually care about Reese’s education. She just forced Reese to go to school because it was the law.

Unlike the other participants, Kyra reported no major dysfunction at home, no trauma in her youth, and no problems with school. All of her siblings managed to finish high school; she was simply “the black sheep of the family.” Kyra attributed her lack of a high school diploma to her own personal failings. She said, “I was present at school, but not really. Like, grade school was fine…but middle school and high school, it just…I went to my classes and didn’t even do my homework…I went to school, but you know, I really didn’t see the point…Academics didn’t matter to me.” And while many of the other participants openly critiqued their parents’ parenting and drew lines connecting their parents’ lack of education to their own lack of success in school, Kyra was careful not to speak ill of her parents. What she did say about them, however, led me to believe that she had been on her own—without guidance. She said, “They weren't bad parents…They were just kind of hands-off parents. Like really hands-off parents.”

The Post K-12 Years

Seven of the participants left high school without a diploma; the other three completed high school, but without feeling educated. No matter their K-12 experiences, however, each woman sought additional education, training, and/or credentials after exiting the compulsory school system (see Table 4 below). The stories that follow are about the participants giving formal education—and themselves—a second (or third or even a fourth) chance. They illustrate the many complex factors
that contributed to the participants’ evolving relationship with educational institutions and with themselves, as students.

The main themes that emerged from the women’s post K-12 stories include *This Isn’t Anything Like High School!*, *Doubt*, and *Starts and Stops*. Two of the participants spoke of experiencing school (as adults) in a new—more connected and affirming—way compared to their earlier school experiences. Four of the participants, however, had adult experiences with school, which left them doubtful of the knowledge they had acquired and/or of the educational institutions they had trusted to educate them. No matter how the participants experienced or felt about school during their adult years, though, the most common experience they described had to do with educational efforts started, then interrupted by life events beyond their control.

**This Isn’t Anything Like High School!** Yumzaa’s story of her K-12 education in Ghana was one of pain and disappointment. While some of the other participants described losing interest or not caring about school when they were young, Yumzaa said she had always longed to learn. Growing up in the area of Ghana where she was raised, there simply were not enough teachers, and the ones she had beat her. Later, she was bullied by older students and no one was held accountable. After she completed high school, however, Yumzaa’s learning career slowly, but steadily evolved.

First, her uncle sent her to computer school where she learned Word, Excel, and typing. Later, after arriving in the States, she took ESOL classes for several months at the university where her husband was a doctoral student. When they moved to the Northeast, she signed up for the HiSET prep course, and after passing the HiSET test, she went on to take several other free courses: a six-week, pre-STEM class (offered in collaboration with the community college), an intensive math course, and a health class at the end of which she was certified in CPR. Yumzaa said she leapt
at every educational opportunity she was offered at the adult education center. She explained that having a relationship with her teachers was a new and very meaningful experience.

Yumzaa: Now I'm exposed to a teacher whom I can meet face-to-face, express my concern, then she will help me. But for the past, I can't do that.

Janet: Aha. So, that's a first -- is here (pointing to the part of her timeline when she was in the Northeast of the US) kind of the first time you've had that experience?

Yumzaa: Yes! Yes! Yes, the first time I had a experience. If I'm having a problem, maybe word problem, if I don't understand what it is, the teacher will say, “Oh, I will like to meet with you. We discuss, sit face-to-face, sit with you.” Or maybe I will sit with a teacher to share a brief snack…But that's something I've never seen in my life before.

Reese also had surprisingly new experiences as a student when she became an adult. Her story was about discovering the possibility that she could actually be a good student. Reese glowed when she recounted her experience in a five-day professional development training for her non-profit, mental-health related job. She said,

And then I first walked into that classroom, well, first I was coming to a college...and I was like, “Ok, whoa. I’ve actually never been in a college.” And then I go into this classroom and it wasn’t set up in a traditional way at all…We all just sat at round tables…And I remember being like, “Oh! This isn’t bad.” It had, like, carpet on the floor. This wasn’t like a regular classroom at all. So, it wasn’t intimidating to me…We had a big book—like a spiral bound book that was maybe an inch or an inch and a half thick, and I don’t know. Being able to make it to class every day, on time, be there, sit through whatever it was…We were not only being lectured, but we were also participating in activities and like, other things, and um…going through that whole experience made me say, "You know, geez, I can
go somewhere and learn every day! That’s kind of cool.” And also, like, “College isn’t anything like high school” was my thought…Maybe I had this whole college thing wrong?

Maybe I can do this!”

Table 4.

High School Credentials and Further Education or Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>High school credential, age of attainment</th>
<th>Further education and/or training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>Alternative credential (Brazil), age unknown</td>
<td>Aviation school*, ESOL, 1 non-credit college class, 1 non-credit college class* (Brazil); ESOL (USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Diploma, 18</td>
<td>1 semester community college (at age 20)**; Phlebotomy certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>GED, 25</td>
<td>Certified Nursing Assistant; EMT*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra</td>
<td>HiSET, 34</td>
<td>HiSET prep; Home Health Aide Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>GED, 52</td>
<td>GED prep; Certified Nursing Ass’t; Home Health Aide Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>HiSET, 30</td>
<td>HiSET prep; misc. online skill work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Diploma (Ghana), 18</td>
<td>Professional business school* (Ghana)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>GED, 20</td>
<td>Professional development mental health-related trainings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanashi</td>
<td>GED, 33</td>
<td>Certified Nursing Ass’t; Lead Abatement Certificate; Dental Assistant*; 1 semester community college (at age 55)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yumzaa</td>
<td>Diploma (Ghana), age unknown; GED, 34</td>
<td>Computer skills training (Ghana); ESOL, various adult education classes (including CPR training), HiSET prep (USA)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Did not complete.
** Failed.

Doubt In addition to these stories about new and affirming experiences with school, some of the women spoke about student experiences that actually left them feeling less sure of themselves as students and/or lacking trust in the schools that had evaluated their knowledge. For example, although passing the GED or HiSET is typically seen as a great accomplishment, several of the participants expressed confusion about their supposed achievement, and what it represented.
Kyra said that for many years, she believed that, because she had dropped out of high school, she did not know much and hence, she would never be able to go to college. So, while she later succeeded in passing the HiSET, she did not rejoice; Kyra did not believe the test proved anything. She explained, “The [HiSET] is just kind of generalized education…I still kind of feel like I don't know more than I did [before I passed that test]. I don't even know what that test meant. I don't know how I passed that test.” She returned to this point later in the interview, adding, “And even taking my HiSET, I still don't do math well! I don't know how I passed the HiSET math part, but it's all word problems, so I just read. You just, like, used common sense to kind of…like, in multiple choice, you can just guess.” In Kyra’s mind, the fact that she had passed the test did not mean she had actually learned or that she was actually ready for college-level work.

Lily also talked about the disconnect between what she believed about her own knowledge and capabilities, and passing the GED test. She said, “And I don’t know how I passed, but...I don’t know if my age—they gave me some kind of, uh, you know, like, ‘Ok, since she’s so old, we’ll give her a break…’ I didn’t feel confident at all, but when I opened it, it said, ‘Congratulations! You passed!’” And Reese, too, described feeling confused by her GED “achievement.” She described her experience this way:

Eventually, I did go and I took the pre-test and passed. And the person said, “I don't even think you need to take the classes. Just take the test.” I took it. And what showed up in the mail? Not a GED, but a [high school] diploma. I got my diploma with honors. I don't know how that happened, because it was supposed to be a GED.

That experience left Reese feeling like a liar; she knew she was not a high school graduate, yet she was told she was one. Like Kyra and Lily, Reese felt something was not right, that something was dishonest about what the piece of paper indicated to the world. For these learners, passing the
GED/HiSET was a disempowering experience, in a way; it left them doubtful of their own knowledge. They felt like educational imposter.

Debra, too, did not believe the credentials she had acquired accurately represented her knowledge. Her story communicates not only self-doubt, but doubt of the teachers or institutions that evaluated her learning. Debra suspected she had a learning disability and she reported continually struggling to comprehend material—both in high school and in postsecondary settings. One of only three participants in this study who had graduated with an actual high school diploma, Debra qualified her accomplishment by explaining that she had “barely” passed. Her high school teachers had simply looked the other way, she said. Debra had a similar perspective when describing her experience in the phlebotomy certificate program she participated in many years later. She explained, “I don’t know how I made it through there, but I did. Well, I mean, we would do the work. We would have tests. And I don't know if she scaled the tests, you know…But I don't know, I think they just passed us.”

Lily and Wanashi doubted the institutions that had awarded them credentials. They were not only cynical about the certificates they had received, but frustrated by the amount of time and money they had spent on school—unnecessarily. When Lily got her CNA certificate, her teachers recommended that she get the additional Home Health Aide certificate, as well. She paid for the extra class, got the books, and passed, but she said, “I don't understand why because, now that I'm out in the world, I'm wondering…what's the difference between a Home Health Aide and a CNA? I still make the same amount of money as the others: CNA or Home Health Aide.”

Wanashi also had an experience of getting a certificate that did not benefit her. She went through an entire lead abatement training program and learned, “How to build a containment unit…how to do a test, an air test—all of it. How to do the licensing, the paperwork. Everything. I
graduated. As a matter of fact, I spoke at the graduation at City Hall.” Afterwards, however, she was never actually able to use the certificate: “It was like, why did I even…do the program? Never had an opportunity…They wouldn’t hire me.” What Wanashi later discovered was that, although everyone had to change into and out of their protective clothing on the job site, there were no private spaces where the women could change. There had been issues where men were going into the women’s areas, so “Some companies didn’t want the hassle, so they didn’t hire women.” Wanashi’s disgust and disappointment came to the surface when, the following year, the certifying agency called her about renewing her license for $500. To the caller, Wanashi said, “Are you kidding me? You know what? I’m going to hang up the phone now because the way I’m feeling…I’m feeling some kind of way right now!” While some of the participants’ stories in this section were about self-doubt, and others were about doubting the value of the credentials and/or the integrity of the educational institutions that had provided the certifications, it is important to note that five of the ten participants in this study expressed a definite reticence about being students.

**Starts and Stops**

No matter how they felt about their own knowledge, their credentials, or certain educational institutions, the participants’ stories communicated their great hope for themselves and their deep belief in the importance of furthering their education. Unlike traditional college students who move straight from high school to college, these women’s educational trajectories were not linear and they played out over the course of many years. The participants described many starts and stops—a sort of one step forward, one step back kind of disjointed educational experience. No matter how much they wanted to complete a program, too often, they were thwarted.

Katherine started by describing her attempt to apply to a nursing program at the local community college when she was 25. First, she went to the college and took the GED test—and
passed—without studying or taking any prep course. (She described herself as “super whizzy” when it came to nursing, so she was not overly surprised that she had passed.) Then, Katherine started the application process for the nursing program. She got all of the necessary letters of recommendation, passed the knowledge qualification test, and filled out the application. Somehow, though, the college never received her GED certificate, and she could not figure out how to remedy the problem. As she went back and forth trying to negotiate between the GED office and the admissions office, the deadline passed. Katherine missed her chance, and said, “I was heartbroken because I went through so much to get in.”

Not deterred for long, Katherine then decided to go to CNA school. She was thinking, “Well, I might as well get my foot in the door in nursing. I'll go back to nursing school the next year.” Although becoming a CNA was not her first choice, Katherine was impressed with the program and happy with what and how she learned. She said,

It was one of the longest [courses] that I've ever been through....I'm so glad I went through that one, because nowadays they just push you through with all of this stuff. Very easy, you know? Just pass, and get through. This one was very thorough...I loved the teacher...She was a really, really good teacher. She was a nurse, obviously. She really made you think. She didn't just say, “Here, this is what you're supposed to know.” This was like, “Oh, here, this is why you need to know this. This is why you need to do this.”

Although Katherine thought she would apply to nursing school the following year, it would take another 20 years for her to start down that path again. Four children, a very difficult marriage, and CNA work with clients who needed her time and energy all came between Katherine and her education.
Anita described a rocky educational journey, as well, and like Katherine, she remained committed to her goal over many years. After passing the equivalent of the GED test in Brazil, Anita went to aviation school for several years. She shared with me many details about the levels of training she went through in order to learn to fly small planes, both by sight and using instruments. She enjoyed the program, but a bad decision derailed her, she explained. Anita fell in love with one of the flight instructors and left her training to live with him far out in the countryside and away from everyone she knew. Soon, she got pregnant.

Later that year, Anita thought she would get a taste of college by starting with one non-credit college course. Airline pilots were beginning to be required to have college degrees in Brazil, so she enrolled in a “Portuguese Letters” class. She said, “So, we talk about literature, philosophy. Everything, you know? Like, be very…make your culture more rich. So, I really like this.” She passed the course and registered for the second half the following semester. Sadly, she had to drop the second course mid-way through the term when she broke up with her boyfriend, and needed to spend a great deal of time and money on lawyers trying to get back the money he had stolen from her. About school, she said, “I don't want to give up when I'm there, you know?” The class had not been too much to handle, she explained, but her life had been.

Mary had not done as well as she had wanted on her final exams in high school in Ghana, so she needed to study more in order to go on to college and become a nurse. Mary got a job at a big company, and to prepare for college, she then went to night school for two or three hours after work every day. Later, however, she realized that, rather than nursing, it would make more sense to take business-related classes since she was already working in a business. Mary discontinued the college preparation courses and enrolled in classes at a professional business school. Financial issues prevented her from continuing there, however. She explained, “I…finished the, um, the first stage
program. I didn't continue because the fee was a little high...Because if I have to go on the higher level, I will have to pay, um, pounds.” Since Mary could not afford to pay her tuition in pounds, she stopped school again. In the ensuing years, she continued working, got married, became pregnant, and then followed her husband to the States for his graduate education. Mary was academically successful in all her postsecondary educational endeavors, but financial and familial concerns prevented her from completing her studies.

Marie’s story of returning to school was both complicated and emotional. After she dropped out in ninth grade to care for her mother in the hospital, she later returned to school in an evening program intended for adults preparing for the GED test. Marie described the people in the class as not really being “adults,” however; they were teenagers who were not serious about their education. The situation was “chaotic.” As Marie put it, “Going to school at night was worse than actually going in the morning for me to a public school.” Sometimes, she would lose her temper and start yelling in Spanish. On occasion, the security guard (who knew Marie) would come into the classroom to try to calm her down, but one night, Marie snapped. She explained, “And certain things happened that, to this day, I regret. I don't like being physical with nobody. I even cry when I'm fighting. I cry. I don't like hurting nobody. I know how it feels to be hurt, so I don’t like hurting nobody.”

Many years later, when she was 26, Marie enrolled in a HiSET prep course at a local community college where she said, “I had a great time!” She tested into level three math and did not need to take any other classes. She did not move through the program quickly, however, and Marie explained why: “I met somebody through that program, a female friend, and getting really close and actually being able to conversate (sic) and relate to her, I kind of knocked myself down by wanting to stay in the program until she got to my level. And that was the biggest mistake I did because me
and her even stopped talking because of it.” Marie decided to leave the class and move on without her friend. She took the HiSET, failed by one point, retook it later, and passed. It had been four years between the time she started the prep course and when she passed the HiSET.

Debra’s start-and-stop story was about her first try at college. Her story was brief, but told with a great amount of sadness. Debra enrolled in the community college when she was 20 (more than 30 years before our interviews), because she wanted to study business administration and work in an office. Once she got to the college, however, she was overwhelmed by the size of the buildings and the classes, and she soon began to experience the same comprehension problems she had had in high school. Debra said, “I didn't do very well. Again, I felt by myself because…I didn't have any support…I dropped out.” Debra went on to marry, have two children, and then enroll in and complete her phlebotomy certificate. And when we met, after almost 20 years working as a phlebotomist, she was preparing to try college once again.

Wanashi struggled to remember all of the trainings she had participated in over the years, and when she had taken them. She got her GED in 1993, and had also been in a dental assistant program. At first, she could not recall why she dropped out of the dental program, but then she suddenly remembered: “Oh, I know what happened here (she pointed to the timeline)! Boyfriend broke my arm…He threw me out the back door, and I landed on my arm—like this. Full body. Full body. He was drunk. And I had to drop out because it was my right arm. I couldn't do the typing. I couldn't do nothing.” Wanashi spoke with anger and frustration as she explained, “Even my teacher called and the Dean of [the program] sent me a letter telling me, ‘Please come back’ because I was on his Dean list.”

There were other trainings, too, for Wanashi: a certificate program in lead abatement and a CNA training. She succeeded in both, but the outcome was very different when she went to
community college the year before our interviews. Wanting to work in human services, she enrolled in a community college, and went straight into classes without having the proper advising. Wanashi struggled terribly in math, but passed with a C-. English, however, was a different story. Although she did not know how to write a paper using the computer, Wanashi said she discovered that she really liked doing research. She explained, “Now, when it comes to research, naw, I can *research* some papers!...My first English teacher…said she loved my writing because I—when I get onto something, I hook my teeth into something (she laughed) and I have to back off!” Although Wanashi was interested in some of the articles she read for class, she became completely overwhelmed by all the new academic language and expectations. Wanashi ended up failing English, crying in the hallway of the community college, and feeling defeated at age 55.

**Reflections**

In this chapter, participants described the many ways in which they had experienced being students throughout their lives, as well as how their lives outside of school impacted their lives in school. While many participants had positive school experiences very early in childhood, turbulence at home carried over into their school lives as they got older. Many felt abandoned by the adults they expected to guide them. Whether their traumas and adversities occurred in or outside of school, the result for most of the women was that they stopped caring about school and they dropped out. Even those who completed high school indicated that they had graduated without feeling they had been well-educated.

Despite their difficult K-12 years, however, all of the participants continued seeking further education. Some were happy to discover that being an adult student was nothing like being a high school student; being an adult student was much better. Although many acquired educational credentials, several carried with them great self-doubt—unsure about their knowledge and/or the
meaning or value of those credentials. Two also described a lack of trust in the institutions that had certified them. The most common story of their adult years as students, however, was one of starts and stops as they tried to balance complicated lives with educational participation. The collective story of these thresholders was indeed complex. These were not people who gave up easily; they were extremely resilient and committed to building better lives. Overall, however, their school-related efforts had been thwarted.

As I reflected on the participants’ stories about their experiences as students, one word kept coming to mind: disruption. When discussing their K-12 school years, the majority of the women talked more about their lives outside of school than their lives in school. In the post-K-12 years, their school-related stories were characterized by starts and stops. Aside from brief episodes of positive learning experiences when, for example, Reese realized that she might actually be able to be a good student, Wanashi found out she could do research, or Yumzaa sat down for a snack with a supportive teacher, the participants had a history of regular interruptions in their educational lives. Between experiencing adversities and being caretakers, mothers, and wives who put other people’s needs before their own, most of these participants simply did not have opportunities to sink deeply into an assignment, develop meaningful relationships with teachers, or become effective writers.

When practitioners think about helping thresholders transition to college, it is imperative to go beyond the academically underprepared diagnosis (which leads to pre-college classes focusing heavily on math, writing, and computer skills, for example) and explore the implications of these learners being academically inexperienced. When school participation is broken up by constant moves or starts and stops, or when a student’s ability to concentrate on schoolwork is overtaken by her need to focus on economic, psychological, or physical survival, it is unlikely her connection to herself as a student will be established.
A positive student identity—knowing oneself to be competent in an academic setting—helps students persist in school. But it is a catch-22 really, for, while many of the researchers cited in the literature review list student identity development as an important benefit of participating in higher education, having that strong identity may well be a pre-requisite for thresholders hoping to transition to college. Perhaps Reese put it best when she said, “I think that me and the rest of the people in the [TP] class…the way we were feeling about school and our abilities—like, whether we were confident or under-confident—was way more important than whether we knew how to use a computer. Like, we needed to know that we could, in fact, learn.”

In her article on academic momentum and community college students, Goldrick-Rab (2007) writes that “the most successful interventions appear to be those that meet students ‘where they are’” (p. 25). In this chapter, we have gained an understanding of where the participants were in terms of their experiences as students. In the following chapter, we both expand and focus our gaze, exploring the women’s reflections on their past, their current vocational and educational goals, their future aspirations, and the connections between all three.
CHAPTER 6  REFLECTING ON THE PAST, ASPIRING FOR CHANGE

This study builds understanding of thresholders, not just as students, but as complex human beings with rich lives. Having shared the women’s personal, work, and educational biographies in the previous two chapters, I turn here to their reflections on the past and their hopes for the future. Like many of the researchers cited in Chapter Two, I wanted to better understand why the participants were at the college door. In addition to learning about their educational and vocational goals (what some researchers call instrumental motives for returning to school), I wondered what else the women were hoping to achieve in their lives, and why.

As a result of my prior experience as an adult educator, learner, and student, as well as the reading I have done in the field of adult development, I assumed that the women in this study were evolving human beings who were continually learning from their lives. As Kegan (1994) writes, contemporary culture, itself, can be thought of as “a kind of ‘school’ and the complex set of tasks and expectations placed upon us in modern life [is] the ‘curriculum’” (p. 3). While I believed the participants likely had particular vocational and educational goals, which had brought them to the college door, I also believed that acquiring a credential was not their end-goal, but rather part of a greater self and life-improvement plan. In our discussions then, I approached the participants not as students, but as engaged lifelong learners.

To explore both their instrumental motives for returning to school and their broader aspirations for growth and development, I invited the women to engage in three tasks. First, I asked them to look back on their timelines and share what they had learned from their lives. Their responses coalesced around two themes: The Importance of a Staying in School and Self-Respect. I also asked them about their vocational and educational goals and about the kind of lives they hoped to be experiencing in five years. All of the women expressed hope that getting more education
would lead to better future lives, and their visions of the future centered on themes of doing *Meaningful Work* and experiencing some *Relief*. Their words in this chapter tell a collective story about thresher women in a transitional place in life, simultaneously propelled by the past and drawn by the future…with college floating somewhere in between.

**Learning from the Past**

When I asked the participants to reflect on their timelines, those who had dropped out of school said they wished they had not done so. Some believed their lack of educational attainment resulted in missed opportunities or unnecessary adversity. In addition, whether they had completed high school or not, many of the women wished they had shown themselves more self-respect.

**The Importance of Staying in School** When participants were offered the chance to advise their younger selves (i.e., share what they had learned from their lives), the most common response was that finishing school was important, and they should have completed. Most shared the belief that if they had just stuck with it and remained in school (meaning high school for most, and college, for one), their lives would have been better. Lily immediately ordered the young Lily to “Finish school. Definitely. Stick it out.” Skipping school and partying got in the way of her diploma, which “Put a damper on me getting places…I kind of regret that now ’cause I would have had [my high school diploma] done.” Marie, too, said she would tell her younger self, “You should never have quit school. Keep moving forward. It’s hard and it’s gonna be hard, but it’s all worth it…You'll be so much further and so much happier at the end.” Other participants went beyond wishing they had simply completed their education; they spoke about wishing they had shown themselves more self-respect by valuing and listening to themselves more when they were younger.

**Self-Respect** Debra (who finished high school, but dropped out of college after one semester) said she would tell her younger self, “Stay positive. Focus and things will happen if she...
really wants them to happen. But don't give up. I dropped out. I didn't think I was going to get anywhere.” When we spoke, Debra said she believed she might have a learning disability that had gotten in her way all along, but when she was in high school and college, she just thought she was not smart. What she regretted, beyond dropping out, was lacking faith in her abilities. Going forward, that was something she wanted to change.

Kyra wanted me to know that she did not leave school because she was pregnant; she left because she did not think school or a career was important. Although she wished she had finished school, what she regretted most was not thinking about herself and her future. As for advice for her younger self, Kyra said, “I'm going to tell her to stay in school and to focus... ‘Your twenties are a time for you to discover who you are, you know? Explore. Like, what do you want to do with your life?’ And instead, I had a baby, so it wasn't about me at 19. It was already not about me.” In the second interview, she returned to this topic, saying,

I missed the window, I'm telling you. There is a window and I missed it. And so now I'm advocating for my children: “Don't miss that window.” Here I am—34 years old. Still trying to figure out what did I want to do? What was I passionate about...? When someone says, “What did you want to be when you grow up?”

**Janet** - You never thought about it.

**Kyra** - *Never* thought about it...

Now, Kyra was thinking about it.

In the first interview, Anita, too, said she wished she had finished school rather than moving out of her grandmother’s home at age 12, going to work, and then dropping out. Between the first and second interview, however, she reconsidered her advice to her younger self, and at the second interview, Anita explained that she had left her grandmother’s (and then dropped out) because her
living situation had been unbearable. She now accepted that part of her past. What she identified as more important in her life trajectory was that, years later, she had chosen a man over her own goals and needs. To be with her new boyfriend, she abandoned flight school and her plans to study English in Canada, and it was *that* she regretted. If she could, she would tell her younger self, “Don't go behind him. Don't be with him and forget what *you* want to do.” Anita told me her American husband understood she wanted to be a pilot and he was supportive of her goals. She was determined not to abandon herself again.

Yumzaa, too, wished she had paid more attention to her own needs when she was younger. She was beaten and bullied at school, and just took it. In terms of advice for her younger self, Yumzaa said, “I will…I will tell her she should stand up for herself because…I didn't stand up for myself. That's why I had that struggle. She [should] stand up for herself in class. Shouldn't let people take advantage of her.” It was not good to be shy and quiet, Yumzaa said, and that was something she was continuing to work on. In the second interview, in fact, Yumzaa proudly recounted a recent triumph in which she had stood up for herself at her new job when a colleague had treated her poorly.

Wanashi was the only participant who had dropped out and did not include staying in school as part of her advice to her younger self. Where her life went off track, she said, was not when she left school, but much earlier than that: when she was 13 and her grandmother took her away from her mother and siblings. Wanashi took a deep breath and sighed as she struggled to articulate her advice to her younger self:

What I'm saying is, when my grandmother took me away from my mother, and…she took me away from everything that I knew, and kept me away…, if I'd have thought for *myself* instead of listening to my grandmother about that situation, I would have said to my
grandmother, "Grandma, no! I need to see my brothers and sisters! I want to see my brothers and sisters."

Wanashi, like Debra, Kyra, Anita, and Yumzaa, expressed her belief in the importance of valuing herself, listening to her own inner voice, and taking more control over her life rather than just going along when things felt wrong. Beyond their thoughts about school, what these five participants learned from life was the importance of respecting themselves, valuing their own needs, and acting on their own behalf.

Two of the participants demonstrated their desire to respect themselves and value their own needs by moving away from regret and towards acceptance of their past. Katherine started by saying she could tell her younger self, “Don't have kids early” or “Go to school,” but such advice would have been ineffective, she knew, because she had had numerous problems when she was young. Unless she had had a strong support system that could have actually helped her stay in school, just telling her younger self to stick it out would have been thoughtless advice that ignored her younger self’s lived reality. Katherine said, “You need a really solid piece from the beginning and you need support and guidance and no stress. No drama. No dysfunction.” And those were the very things Katherine said she was working on developing for her kids and herself when she and I met for the interviews.

When considering her timeline, Reese, like many other participants, also started with the stay-in-school advice. She quickly became emotional, however. Her middle school and early high school years had been marked by her mother’s neglect, her brother’s violence at home, her aunt’s death, and the unpredictability of everyday life. Although she enjoyed learning, she was unable to stay in school and she had always blamed herself for that failure. But as Reese spoke, she actively worked to shift away from her “shame-based identity” and move towards greater self-acceptance.
and compassion (Walker, 2017, p. 368). Dropping out was something she now believed actually saved her. Reese explained,

Yeah, because I think…I looked at [dropping out] as a failure on my part. But I feel, like, I lost a lot of time in that, you know? It took me a long time to come to a place where I realized that no, I did what I needed to do. Like, I quit school because that was what I needed to do to survive. I mean, I quit school, I started taking care of myself…I'm not at the place where I can be super proud about it, but I am at the place where I am honest with myself...

Being honest and kind to herself was one of Reese’s goals. She was learning to stay committed to her own best interests and not judge herself too harshly. For Reese, self-compassion was even more important than finishing school.

Mary’s thoughts about her past were different from the other participants because, for one thing, she had successfully completed high school. Like the other women, however, her story was tinged with regret and a lingering sense of something unresolved. The critical incident that affected her most was leaving her first-born baby in Ghana with her family when she and her husband came to the US for her husband’s graduate program. Mary struggled to answer my question about sharing what she had learned from her life by advising her younger self. She started with telling the younger Mary to plan better, then said she should have simply adjusted to reality, and finally, she ended with no real advice—just a resigned sort of acceptance. (Our dialogue is included here because Mary’s answers during the interviews were often short and factual, and I needed to probe a bit to better understand her thoughts.)

Mary - Like, you've got to plan well in life. And learn…
Janet - So, for example, why are you saying that? When you think of your life, what are you thinking about planning or...do you think you didn't plan or that you did plan or...?

Mary - I think I did my best, but situation changes. In life, you won't get everything you want. Things happen that you sometimes reach in life...So, I know you can't go back, but if I should go back, then I would learn from my mistakes.

Janet - Do you think that there were mistakes?

Mary - I don't think any of them are a mistake, but then, if there are corrections to make, I would make those corrections.

Janet - Aha, that's an interesting distinction. You made choices. You feel like you made choices—that maybe you would make different choices if you did it again?

Mary - Yeah.

Janet - So, it's not a mistake because you didn't know. But if you could live your life again...what different choice would you make?

Mary - Like, I wouldn't have left my son...

Mary was struggling with how to move forward with such a heavy sadness weighing on her.

Overall, like Katherine and Reese, she seemed to be telling herself that the most respectful way she could deal with herself was to accept the past and move on.

In the section above, the stories focused on what the participants had learned from their lives—namely, that a school credential was indeed valuable and that their own voices and needs were worth listening to. In the following section, we learn about the women’s vocational and educational goals, and the hope they have for their future. At the core, they believe that furthering their education will enable them to live more stable, less stressful lives, and do meaningful work.
**Imagining the Future**

When the participants imagined their lives five years in the future, many associated acquiring a certificate or degree with moving towards a better life. They hoped to be able to choose their work rather than doing whatever jobs they could find. They spoke of wanting jobs that truly interested them or doing work that would allow them to use their experience and knowledge to help other people—something other researchers have found is common, especially among female thresholders (for example, see E. A. Lange et al., 2015; Reay, 2003; Steel, 2007). The majority yearned for meaningful work.

Table 5 illustrates the participants’ thinking about the academic preparation that would help them move forward. Eight of the women expressed a strong desire to work in a particular field and some had clarity about the related educational pathways. Anita planned to return to aviation school and then go on for a bachelor’s degree, Marie was aiming for a culinary arts certificate and a restaurant of her own. Debra, Katherine, Mary, and Yumzaa all hoped to go to nursing school and become nurses. Reese had ideas about work she would enjoy, but she did not know how college could help her achieve her goals. Kyra and Lily were unsure of their goals, and were mainly motivated by a strong need for more money.
Table 5.

_Educational and Vocational Goals_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Educational Goal</th>
<th>Vocational Goal</th>
<th>Plan B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>ESOL, then Aviation school, and a college degree</td>
<td>Commercial airline pilot</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Certificate in Billing and Coding</td>
<td>Work for an insurance company</td>
<td>Stay in phlebotomy, but less stressful workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Nursing degree</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Stay as a CNA, but with benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Unsure, find a job</td>
<td>Cut hair? Be a CNA?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Unsure, find a better job</td>
<td>Go back to factory work? Civil service test?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Culinary Arts Certificate</td>
<td>Chef, Restaurant owner</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Nursing degree</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Work with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Continue to work in non-profit organizations, but at a higher level</td>
<td>Become a vocational education teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanashi</td>
<td>Certificate in Counseling</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>Drive a bus for the disabled?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yumzaa</td>
<td>Nursing degree</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Social work? Billing and Coding?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because so many thresholders do not complete the educational programs they start in college, I was curious to know whether the participants had considered alternatives to their stated goals. Interestingly, Anita and Marie (both age 30 and not working) were so confident about what they were aiming for in terms of career that they had no Plan B. Debra and Katherine, however, (both over 45 and employed in fields they enjoyed) suggested a Plan B that would offer them at least some improvement over their current positions even if it was not their ideal outcome. Kira, Lily, Wanashi, and Yumzaa seemed driven by their need to make money and/or escape their current jobs or unemployed status; their Plan B career choices did not necessarily relate at all to their Plan A goals. The stories that follow delve beneath the information provided in Table 5 and provide a
window into the women’s thinking about work and the more stable future lives they hope to achieve.

**Meaningful Work** When she thought about her life five years from when she and I met, Anita imagined herself as a commercial airline pilot. Flying was something she had wanted to do for a very long time. She explained that, at first, she wanted to be in the military (in Brazil) because she was “so in love with the ships,” but she never got a good education, she had no contacts to help her, and then she just got too old for the military. Ultimately, she turned her attention to flying. Anita did several years of flight training in Brazil, which she loved, and she remained committed to doing whatever it would take to get her pilot’s license here in the US.

Yumzaa expressed great frustration because, since she had immigrated, she found the same lack of opportunity in the US that she had experienced in Ghana. She said that in the future, “I don't want to be working in odd jobs. So, at least maybe if I get a degree, I'll get a better job, instead of working myself to death.” Yumzaa had a “passion” to be a nurse, and she said, “If I had the opportunity to be a nurse, at least that would impact some people life.” She explained that in Ghana, “There are lack of nurses in the community…we don't have pediatricians in our country.” Women stand in long lines with their babies, and are given just Tylenol or Ibuprofen when they finally get to the front of the line. If Yumzaa became a nurse, she explained, she would like to return to Ghana to “help my people.”

Mary, too, spoke about her love of “taking care of people,” and I wondered if her experience caring for her brother-in-law and step-mother as they were dying contributed to her desire to become a nurse. In nursing school, she hoped she would learn more about disabilities, like her son’s autism. If she knew more, she said, “I'd be able to help others who are disabled. Use the knowledge I gain to help them, too.”
Katherine was also very committed to becoming a nurse in the future because, as she said, “That's been my dream since I was a little girl. That's the only way I can put it. It's what I've wanted.” Katherine had been a CNA for almost 20 years, and she said,

Right now, I'm not, I'm not...allowed to do certain things because I'm not certified or qualified to do them...Like give shots, give medicine, take, like, controlled care of a person....I just kind of want more responsibility...to be challenged more. I want to be able to really make a difference.

Reese was working two jobs when we met—one with adults in a peer counseling program, and one with homeless children. She enjoyed the work and found it extremely fulfilling and meaningful. She explained, “I do know that I'm really good at...at leading groups and supervising people. I've done it for years and years and years, so I'm happy to be in that sort of role.” When Reese thought about her future, she was adamant that any work she did would need to align with her values. She detested her previous job where she felt she had just worked to “line someone else’s pockets.” One thought she had was to become a vocational teacher, so she could do work she liked and respected and help kids. She smiled as she imagined that possible future: “So, if that's what I want to do, then I can combine working with my hands—things that I really love to do—with my job. And that would be, like, ideal, right?”

Marie’s great passions were food and cooking. She wanted to own a restaurant and be a chef. For the previous two years, she had been helping out at the restaurant of a family friend, and she was really interested in the business, as well as the ways math and science went together in cooking. Beyond her intellectual interests, however, Marie had an emotional connection to cooking; it was a way to express herself. When she spoke about the culinary arts certificate she was aiming for, Marie mentioned several times her desire to “help and to teach.” She wanted to “Take a certain
group of...teens off the street, and get them convinced that that's not the only way that they can live.” Marie said she wanted to show street kids (like she used to be) that “there's so much more that you can see from the world that's not all bad. There's so much beauty in the world...you can find happiness in the most minimal thing at home—[like cooking.]”

Within five years, Wanashi, too, yearned to be able to do meaningful work she cared about and that helped other people. She wanted to get a certificate in counseling, so she could “be working with people, helping them to understand that, you know, we all make mistakes in life, but we don’t have to live in them. We don’t have to stay in them.” She wanted to “Help them to understand they're not alone. Help them to understand that they have hope. That there is a way.”

Kyra was similar to many other participants in that she longed to do work that meant something to her and that helped others. She was different, however, in that she spoke extensively about the conflict she experienced between needing to work for money and wanting to raise her five children in an intentional way. Being a caring and attentive parent was the most meaningful and important work Kyra could imagine. Since her family had moved to the Northeast from the Midwest, however, they had been struggling financially, and Kyra knew she needed to get a job outside of the home.

Having adopted her sister’s two children after her sister passed away, and then caring for her paraplegic father during his last few years of life, Kyra had a good amount of caretaking experience. But when she thought about working, she sounded dejected: “I’ll probably do a CNA [certificate] because I have that caring compassion...” But, she did not want to do that sort of work at all, she explained. Kyra wanted to keep having the conversations with her kids that her parents never had with her. She wanted to support her daughter, so she “doesn’t get lost in adolescence,” “goes to college,” and does “not sell herself short.” Kyra’s job (as a mom) was very meaningful to her, and
she was able to help other people (e.g., her kids); the problem was just that parenting paid nothing. Kyra said *her* future would not actually come within *five* years; it would only start after all her kids had finished high school.

**Relief** As part of their visions of their future, many of the participants spoke of their deep desire for relief from what Herideen calls *fatigued realities* (Herideen, 1998). After years of financial stress, disappointments, dislocations, and various struggles, many participants longed for financial and emotional stability. They wanted a chance to recover—to exhale. The stories in this section offer the reader a glimpse at some of the emotions embedded in the participants’ deep desire for life change, and how their past experiences led them to the college door.

Wanashi explained that she was under great pressure to move to a different line of work. Years before as a CNA, she had injured her back trying to lift a client, and she never fully recovered. Now, at age 56 and single, she said she needed work that was less physically demanding. She explained, “I'm by myself. I have nobody supporting me, but me.” Her life story included many moves, educational starts and stops, domestic violence, mental and physical health challenges, and drug abuse. She needed a job, more money, and stability. When I asked how she hoped to *feel* five years in the future, she laughed almost in disbelief, and replied, “Hopefully at peace…Hopefully at peace.”

Throughout both interviews, Lily spoke extensively about health and financial concerns, and was actively trying to calculate how she could reduce the pressure that had been building up in her life for years. She described a series of physical injuries and emotional offenses she had experienced over her 17 years at a factory, all of which culminated with the pain and shock of her abrupt dismissal from her job. She also talked about the CNA work she moved onto after the layoff, and how disrespected she felt in that position, as well. In the future, Lily wanted to feel
“appreciated” at work, and be “more secure with the medical (tears). You know, all the benefits that I needed to survive, you know?...It'd be nice to have a job that every year, I’m ok.” When I asked about her future, she replied, “I don't know. I really can't even imagine that. (Laughs.) To do what I enjoy—what makes me happy or whatever.”

Debra, the third participant in her 50s, was a phlebotomist in an extremely hectic office frequented by drug addicts. When I asked about the future, she said she desperately needed a break from the stress: “There’s days that I don’t even want to get out of bed, but you know, I have rheumatoid arthritis, that doesn’t help...It’s hard, especially in the wintertime, and that’s why I want to go down south.” She described her ideal future as getting a certificate and moving to Florida where “Everything’s so beautiful, so green, and so blue. And the apartments are nice.” There she could “work for some sort of insurance company” and “work from home.” She was really wanting more peace and quiet.

Katherine described her present and future as a time to recover from the 22 years she spent in an emotionally abusive marriage. She said it was like coming out the other side of “a hurricane or a tornado.” At the time of the interview, Katherine’s life was “all about healing and, like, just moving forward in a better direction, basically.” She said that in five years: “Well, I’m definitely going to be in the nursing field and have my own home...My own home where my kids and I can just be together.”

Reese’s overarching goals centered on financial, housing, and emotional stability. She was trying to recover from past traumas and recurring disappointments. A roof over her head was one basic need that was extremely important to Reese. She explained, “My big dream was to have a house. I had never had one. Grew up, you know, in, in [public] housing and always feeling like the roof was going to get, you know,…[blow off.] So, bought a house.” But when Reese and her
girlfriend broke up, Reese was not able to buy the house. She was devastated by the dual loss of the house and the relationship. She also spoke about another harsh blow: being laid off from the job where she had worked diligently for ten years. Five years in the future, Reese hoped her life would feel more steady. She wanted to work only one job (instead of two or three), and own a house again.

Mary’s life had been challenging since she immigrated to the US, and she, too, was looking for relief. After reluctantly coming to the US, she and her husband realized that life would be much harder and more expensive than they had imagined. They moved three times after arriving in the Northeast and, for various reasons I did not completely understand, had not been able to bring their oldest child to the US. Meanwhile, they had two more children, the first of whom was diagnosed with autism. Over time, things stabilized some for Mary. Her husband had a solid job teaching high school science, and recently Mary got her driver’s license—a significant accomplishment and something that afforded her more independence. She was really looking forward to going to college, becoming a nurse, and having more money. But when I asked how she imagined her life five years in the future, Mary’s answer revolved around relieving one lingering pain. She paused, then said, “The most happiest thing for me in five years is seeing my son.” And then she broke down in tears, and I turned off the recorder.

**Reflections**

In this study, the participants reflected on their past, present, and future lives, and shared stories that illuminated some of the motives that brought them to the TP class. They regretted educations started, and not completed, and they wished they had been able to persevere when they were younger rather than dropping out of school. Some realized they had not valued their own needs, and they wished they had respected and focused more on themselves when they were younger. Some were tired of blaming and judging their younger selves, and said that what they most
needed was to accept the past and just move forward. Looking to the future, the participants’ vocational and educational goals centered on acquiring specific knowledge, training, or credentials, but their larger vision was to move themselves towards more meaningful work and more stable, less stressful daily lives. Many longed for some relief from years of struggle.

The findings in this chapter confirm much of what other researchers have found—that, in addition to their economic, vocational, and educational goals (sometimes called instrumental motives), thresholders arrive at the college door with other, perhaps less explicit, motives formed in response to their particular life experiences (Dominicé, 2000). In addition to moving towards new jobs and more meaningful work, the participants wanted to move away from past, negative versions of themselves (as school quitters or failures) toward more positive versions of themselves (Babineau & Packard, 2006). When they spoke of wanting to listen to their inner voices, to stop shaming themselves for past failures, or do meaningful work, they were speaking of their desire to develop new identities and reconstruct their lives (Bélanger, 2016; James et al., 2015). A majority of the participants in this study also expressed the desire to do work that helped other people, something other researchers have heard, as well (E. Lange, Chovanec, Cardinal, Kajner, & Smith, 2010; Reay, 2003; Steel, 2007).

Many researchers acknowledge that thresholders have experienced hard lives (Herideen, 1998; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011; E. A. Lange et al., 2015; Reddy, 2012), but I did not find much in the literature about learners’ deep yearning for relief. Motives like this are important to understand in this exploration of the thresholder transition, especially since so many learners who embark on transition classes (or enroll straight into community college) do not actually complete the certificates or degrees they came for. The participants in this study did not envision the educational credential as the end-goal; rather, they described it as a central strategy they were
counting on to move their lives forward and stabilize. When seen this way, the epidemic of low completion rates takes on a different hue. Educational attainment was not just about success in school or even about social and economic mobility; in many of the participants’ minds, it was integral to their imagined future experience of basic well-being.

There are many reasons why thresholders do not begin, persist, or complete their studies, and admittedly, many factors are not under the control of any educational institution. Barriers abound. But whether learners can come to school or not is not the issue here. What this chapter has explored is why thresholders come. Their educational goals are an expression of their personal and overall life goals, and they are literally in transition between who they were and who they want to become. Educators can help create “an evolutionary bridge” to help learners move in the direction of their dreams (Kegan, 1994, p. 43). Scholars have found, in fact, that when students engage with learning tasks in which their explicit goals (e.g., to get a credential) are aligned with their implicit motives or their affective needs (e.g., to develop competence and increased agency), the learning experience is pleasurable, more rewarding, more meaningful, and as a result, students are more likely to persist (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2009; Moss, 2016; Nash & Kallenbach, 2009).

In addition to offering insight into the participants’ goals and aspirations, this chapter pointed to the important role adult education can play in adult development. Thresholders are coming to college wanting and needing much more than a credential. As Herman and Mandell (2004) put it, “Adult students want their learning to make them more powerful in the world beyond the academy” (p. 1). If we, as educators, fail to understand what moves them and what frightens them, what encourages participation and what deters it, we lose an opportunity rich with potential. We need to know where thresholders are and how they think about their lives in order to help them
get where they want to go. In the following chapter, we will meet the participants as thinkers and learners, and continue to extend our understanding of them as whole people.
CHAPTER 7  THINKERS AND LEARNERS

In the previous chapter, we saw that the women in this study had many reasons for seeking further education. They were aiming not only for new, better, or higher paying jobs, but for the chance to do work that mattered to them (and/or to others), and to experience some relief from years of stressful, unstable lives. Whereas before we saw the participants as reflective seekers with goals and aspirations, in this chapter, we come to know them as thinkers and learners with multiple interests and deep experiential knowledge.

Most often, thresholders are studied within the context of HE where they are described as academically unprepared, low-achieving, and lacking in confidence (Herideen, 1998; Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2003). Some researchers claim that low-income adults are not interested in learning, and that all they want are credentials (Werquin, 2018). Too often, participants like those in this study are defined by what they lack (e.g., academic experience and achievement, time, the right kind of cultural capital, college knowledge, and so on) rather than by who they are, what interests them, what they can do, what they have learned, and what they already know. It is important, however, to look at thresholders outside of academic settings because that is where they have spent most of their lives and that is where they know themselves best. As Marie said, “Most of my learning, I did it outside of school, you know? Yeah, I wasn't able to get my education, but life, itself, taught me a lot.”

To get to know the participants outside of the school setting, I asked them to describe two things: first, their interests (what they liked to explore, discuss, or do on their own time), and second, something they had learned outside of an academic setting. The women’s stories are organized below under the categories of Thinkers and Learners. As Thinkers, their stories coalesced into two themes: Expansive Conversations they had with other people, and Personal Interests,
which inspired them to learn and create on their own. As Learners, the women described both Work-Related Learning and learning for Personal Development. Together, these stories show the participants to be individuals with varied interests and skills—people who enjoyed thinking and learning about a wide variety of topics and problems.

**Thinkers**

I was curious to explore the participants as whole people outside of school settings because I assumed that if they were interested and able to learn and conduct personal projects outside of school, most would also be able to learn in school, as well—if the conditions were right. The stories shared below came in response to my question about interesting conversations the women remembered or particular interests they had, and they are organized here into two themes: Expansive conversations (with people different from themselves) and Personal interests (pursued on their own). What was particularly remarkable was the way joy crept into so many of the women’s stories. They smiled and sat up straighter as they spoke about gaining exposure to new ideas and people different from themselves or using their minds when they engaged their hands. Here, rather than talking about their past or their future or even about education, they were just people talking about their natural desire and ability to think, learn, and grow. And they were happy.

**Expansive Conversations** When I asked about interesting conversations she had had, Katherine (a CNA) immediately thought about her client, Tom. She described him as extremely “intelligent and non-judgmental,” and she said, “He knows a lot of stuff about life. He was in the military. He went to college—twice.” Before he got sick with ALS, Tom had been in the business world, and had been an athletic coach for community kids, among other community involvements. Katherine said, "He just has a wealth of information. He's very smart. He's a good resource for me." Katherine reported that after she talked with Tom, she always felt "supported and confident."
Yumzaa, too, said she was drawn to interesting people and new ideas. When I asked about interests or things she enjoyed doing, she replied, “Hanging out with people of different language backgrounds. Different cultures.” This was something Yumzaa had experienced, both in Ghana when she lived with her uncle, and since immigrating to the US where she was often in contact with the academics associated with her husband’s doctoral work. So little actual learning had taken place in Yumzaa’s schools when she was growing up that she had become an expert at learning from any person of any culture in any interaction. People were Yumzaa’s living textbooks.

Reese also mentioned expansive experiences she had learning from and with other people, namely her girlfriend, Maggie. She explained, “She works with, um, developmentally disabled kids and adults, and is just super, super fascinated by autism and all things that go along with that. So, I love talking with her about, you know, different ways of being in the world...Like a neurotypical person.” When I admitted that I had never heard the term “neurotypical” before, Reese explained,

A neurotypical person—like, somebody…who doesn't have an autism diagnosis. I mean, um, so you and I could interpret body language and things in an emotional way that perhaps someone on the autism spectrum can't. And so, they have to…they have to actually use their intellect and intelligence to try to discern what people are thinking and feeling...So, conversations like that, are really interesting to me.

Marie said she really enjoyed conversations with her nephew whom she had helped to raise. He told her about “videos and blogging” (about which she knew very little) and about what he did in school, and she would “sit there and ask him a thousand questions.” She worried he might drop out of school like she did, so she talked to him about her experience in the TP class and about how his mother (Marie’s sister) had finished high school even though she had been pregnant with him.
For Marie, it was extremely important to know who her nephew was and to mentor him and inspire him to stay in school. Plus, she believed they truly learned from one another.

**Personal Interests**  Like some of the other participants, Kyra was also interested in expanding her understanding of people and her place in the world. Rather than doing that with conversations, however, Kyra followed her personal interests alone, in the quiet of her own home. When I first asked her about her interests, it took a bit of work to help her think about *herself* and *her* interests rather than those of her five children. A recent transplant from the Midwest of the US, Kyra explained how shocking it had been to move to the Northeast, where life was so expensive and everyone talked about the importance of a college education all the time. She said it had often been disorienting and she referred to that period of her life as her “age of awareness.” Then, she offered this as an example of something that interested and helped her understand more about herself and the world:

I listen to NPR a lot. I listened to that in [the Midwest], too. So funny because when I listened in [the Midwest], some things didn't make sense to me. But, now that I'm here [in the Northeast], a lot more things make sense to me about that radio station. So, it's just like, I see more out here. Like, I came from a very Republican area. And, so to live out here, it's *not* Republican. It's very Democrat. So, I think NPR has a Democrat slant to it…

Kyra also mentioned enjoying listening to Ted Talks on numerous topics.

Mary, Anita, and Marie all had very clear ideas about the kind of work they wanted to do: Mary wanted to be a nurse, Anita, an airline pilot, and Marie, a cook and restaurant owner. When I asked them about other interests beyond their vocational ones, however, they were somewhat slow to answer. In her soft voice, Mary gently offered, "I would like to know more about children with disabilities." She said that she had not known anything about the topic before her son was diagnosed
with autism when he was five, and she hoped she would learn more about it in her future nursing program.

Anita wanted me to know that she, herself, was not interested in doing this as a job, but she found law really interesting. Before she came to the US, she had not had much exposure to legal matters. Once here, however, she observed her new husband helping her aunt with immigration issues, and he and Anita also worked with a lawyer to get custody of Anita’s son from a previous relationship. “I like the idea [of] lawyers, you know?” she said. “I love when we think we don’t have any rights, and people say, ‘No! We have rights!’ I think it very interesting, this job!”

Debra and Lily described interests that involved using their hands and being creative. Debra said she enjoyed making beautiful things, such as crochet blankets and stuffed animals. She explained, “I put myself in an after-school program when I was, like, 10…and learned arts and crafts and stuff like that—instead of being out in the streets. And I was intrigued. And that’s where I learned to crochet…and sewing…another stress relief.” Debra had a very hard time socially and academically in middle and high school, but she had no trouble learning to crochet. She explained, I had to learn how to follow patterns. I had to learn how to read crochet—a bunch of different stitches. You had to learn abbreviations and stuff like that…So, in that aspect, I feel good that I know how to do something—even though sometimes I don't feel I'm smart like other people or my siblings, but I'm smart in other ways that they're not. 'Cause they don't know how to do this! (She laughed as she held up her latest crochet project.)

Lily, who had told most of her life stories with great disappointment, frustration, and sadness, suddenly lit up when she talked about the many intricate holiday decorations adorning her home. “Oh, my God, I'm crazy about decorating and stuff,” she bubbled. Then, she continued, “I just like lights. I love color, and I don't know, I just enjoy all of that…Every year, I'm getting a little
more creative with my hanging my lights. *(She got up to show me photos of past projects on her phone.)* Let's see...like, I did, like, a little witch [for Halloween] slamming into a tree...” After looking at numerous photos of Lily’s various holiday decorations from past years and hearing how she had made them with materials acquired from the Dollar Store and the Good Will, I successfully directed us back to other interview questions. And that is when I noticed Lily’s smile quickly starting to fade.

There were some similarities and also great diversity in the participants’ stories of themselves as engaged thinkers. Many enjoyed thinking with other people whose ideas, perspectives, or life experiences expanded their own horizons. Some preferred thinking or creating on their own—by listening to the radio or working on craft projects. I was struck by the tone of the women’s voices both at the time of the interviews and later, when I listened again to the recordings during the transcription process. Happiness infused so many of their stories.

Learners

Beyond inquiring about interesting conversations and personal interests, another way I explored the participants’ experiences and capabilities was to ask them about learning outside of an academic setting. As shown in Table 6, the stories the women shared involved learning to cook, draw blood, fix a car, among many other skills and activities. Five of the participants described *Work-Related Learning*, while four spoke of learning for *Personal Development*. In the majority of the stories, the participants learned with the support or involvement of another person, but three of the women described learning on their own and one described wanting to learn but being thwarted. Overall, as they shared their stories, the majority of women expressed a sense of confidence and competence.
Table 6.

**Learning Outside of School**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Something they learned</th>
<th>How they learned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anita</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>By guessing, trying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Phlebotomy</td>
<td>By practicing, using eyes and hands together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>Medicine/nursing</td>
<td>By watching, practicing, trusting her intuition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyra</td>
<td>Parenting, anger management</td>
<td>By confiding in a trusted mentor and practicing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Running factory machinery</td>
<td>By trying and asking for help (but thwarted).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Mechanics (fixing cars)</td>
<td>By watching, asking questions, using her hands, getting dirty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Doing inventory, being part of a business</td>
<td>By watching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>Researching, building, caring for animals</td>
<td>By researching, planning, experimenting. By using her hands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanashi</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yumzaa</td>
<td>Communication skills, self-advocacy</td>
<td>By taking a risk and asking for help.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Work-Related Learning** Debra’s voice grew louder, more confident, and joyful when she described learning to be a phlebotomist. She said that her knowledge did not come from the phlebotomy course she took, but from her many years on the job. She knew she was very good at what she did because “nobody complains” and patients say, “I want her.” Debra explained that she got better and better because she had so much practice. Then, she showed me how she used her eyes and her hands, together, to draw blood. She said, “…when you put the tourniquet on, the vein pops up. But it doesn't pop up instantly, you know? You have to keep touching it to make it pop up. So, you know, you just have to know what to look for.” She put her own fingers on the inner crease of her arm and invited me to do the same. “Feel it?” she asked. I put my fingers where hers had just been, but I could not feel what she felt.

Mary was not as enthusiastic as Debra, but she spoke with confidence about the learning she had done on the job back in Ghana. There, she worked at a Walmart-like
company where she learned “stock-taking.” She said, “…every department has to know their things that they sell and their quantity and their shortage and their damages. So, I got to know that.” It was a very clear process and one with exact instructions and specific answers. When I asked how she learned to do the job, Mary replied, “Yeah, they showed us.” She knew she was good at it because she was promoted. She explained, “They thought I have knowledge of it. That's why they choose me. Because, I'm always up to date with my supplies and my sales.”

Katherine, like Mary, spoke with confidence about what she had learned on the job and what she knew. A CNA for 18 years, she said a great deal of her learning had come as a result of caring for Tom (her client with ALS) over the course of six years. She said, “And so…as his health has declined, I've had to learn to do many, many different things.” She described learning to use cough-assist, suction, and chest physical therapy machines, as well as learning to communicate with Tom in new ways as he lost the ability to speak. Katherine explained that some things she knew even though she was not sure how she knew them. She said, “I’m like, super whizzy at nursing stuff. Like, it almost feels like it's just natural to me.” Occasionally she faced problems when her intuition would kick in, and she knew to trust that. Twice she noticed something subtle was wrong and she called 911, which had been the right thing to do. As Katherine spoke about what she had learned through her work with Tom, she moved from intellectual excitement to sadness, for she truly cared about him and she recognized that her knowledge had only grown as a result of Tom’s decline.

Yumzaa pondered my question about something learned outside of school and then described some recent events at her workplace. When we met, she had just gotten a new job as a housekeeper in a nursing home. Yumzaa explained that one of her co-workers had been treating her very badly, but Yumzaa did not want to rock the boat since she was still so new in her job and in the
probationary period. She was afraid she was being targeted because of her race. “I was the only Black there,” she explained. But after enduring years of abuse and bullying in school in Ghana, Yumzaa could no longer bear the pain of her own silence in the face of humiliation. Despite her fears, she pushed herself to speak with a co-worker and then later approached a man in a suit (who turned out to be her boss). The administrator listened to her, told her he would help, and then spoke to the offending co-worker. After that, things improved, and Yumzaa spoke with confidence and hope as she recounted her success in learning to advocate on her own behalf.

Lily’s story of work-related learning was very different from the other participants because hers was actually about learning thwarted. She began by talking about her many years working on a factory production line where she was very confident about her skills and knowledge. She said, “I was very good at mechanical in work… I'd go fast and… I wanted to do a good job… I had to learn calipers and different measurements and stuff… That was a little tedious to learn, but I learned it.” But when she had a mechanical problem that she could not fix by herself, she would sometimes ask one of the “set-up guys” for help, and that had never gone well. She explained,

Of all the guys, [the set-up guys] treated us like we were women. We don't know anything. But if, if they really gave me the benefit of a doubt, I was smarter than, I think, some of those young ones that they'd tell to come over and run my machine… I felt like saying, “You know, it's my machine and I'm here. And I do know how to run my machine!” It's kind of hurtful… It's like, it was always degrading… I wasn't appreciated, you know? Never, you know, acknowledged that I have a brain and I do know what I'm doing…

Lily wanted to learn, but she was treated as if she were incompetent and uneducable. Asking for help led to humiliation. She said, “There was a lot of times that, yeah, that I just struggled to learn
just so I didn't have to deal with attitude.” As Lily spoke about her former job, her energy and body language fizzled, turning from confident to dejected.

**Personal Development** The stories in this section are about individuals learning for personal development. Marie and Reese spoke about learning just for fun, enjoying bringing together their intellectual interests and their desire to use their hands. Kyra and Anita on the other hand, described learning as a necessity—for Kyra, to handle her anger as she parented her five children, and for Anita, to survive living on her own at a very young age.

Marie described learning “mechanics” when she was a young girl. She explained that she was the biggest “tomboy” of the three girls in her family, so she was the one who spent the most time with their father. She said, “He was into mechanics and all car detailing. So, little things that he knew, he would show me and then other things that he didn't know, he would take me around people that did know about it just so I could ask some questions and actually get my hands onto it. So, I learned how to mess with cars.” Marie said she learned how “to fix a timing belt” and other automotive repair tasks and that her knowledge came in handy numerous times when she and her mom “got stranded.”

Reese told many stories about learning throughout the two interviews, but the example she used in response to this particular question about learning outside of school concerned a project she had done just for fun. Reese sparkled as she told me about her “vivarium” project. She began, “I've always loved animals…and I love plants.” Then, she pointed out the terrarium in her living room and said that once she saw on Craigslist that someone was trying to find a home for tree frogs. She said, “I was like, ‘Wait! People have pet frogs? What sorcery is this?’ And so, it really sparked it, and they were so cute and I really wanted them and…so, I just sort of set about looking up, like,
what to do and I…went on tons of web sites…I kept watching videos on, like, people building
different vivariums…”

When I admitted that I had never heard the word “vivarium,” Reese explained the concept to me
like a seasoned educator.

She said, “So, I knew what aquarium was because I was keeping fish at that time. So, that's
an aquarium. (She pointed to one across the room.) And a terrarium is where you have dirt and
plants. And then I learned when you put a live animal in it, it is now called a vivarium. And I
thought, ‘That's so freaking cool!’ I'm like, ‘I want a vivarium!”’ Reese described how she went
about her project: “I found out…the [local] Herpetological Society goes and represents itself at
these…lizard and reptile…shows…a huge convention for people who like frogs and reptiles. I
thought, ‘That's really cool!’…I made my decision about six months before this convention…and
I…had this list of everything I needed to buy.” She went, got her supplies, and, over time, figured
out the best way to design and build her vivarium—and keep her frogs (named Houdini and Snoop
Frog) from escaping. About her out-of-school learning, Reese said, “I was realizing that if I'm
interested in something and I want to know about it, I can learn it and be successful at it. People see
this thing and say, ‘Oh my God! It's beautiful!...How'd you learn how to do that?’ And I'm like, ‘I
don't know, I just did it. I just learned. I just researched it.’”

Kyra’s story about learning outside of school was one about learning to be a better parent to
her five children. She explained that she needed to learn how to parent because, “I mean, I love my
mom. She just wasn't very nurturing…So, figuring out how to be a mom was really challenging for
me.” Kyra said she had learned from a mentor at her church about “being slower to my anger, and
being more understanding.” The mentor told Kyra, “Put yourself in time out. It's not about your kid
right now. Put *yourself* in a time out and *you* calm down and then reassess the situation." That, said Kyra, had been excellent advice.

Anita’s story was quite different from the other participants’, for it was about learning in order to survive. At the age of twelve and a half (when she still lived in Brazil), Anita had moved out of her grandmother’s home and rented a room on her own. She soon realized that she desperately needed to learn to cook, but she had no one to teach her. She explained,

> I have to cook. I have to cook. *I have* to do this...I don't know how to cook…So, I eat…I eat noodles and I...I eat, like, mashed potatoes. With ham. The only thing I know to do because I put in the pan, I cook, and I smash mashed potatoes, and that's it. And, I eat this for *many* years.

Anita’s story was about learning on her own. By trial and error. Learning to survive.

**Reflections**

In this chapter, the women talked about their interests in medicine, crafts, intercultural understanding, business, parenting, and learning disabilities, as well as law, cooking, communication skills, mechanics, earth science, zoology, and politics. They described conversations they had with other people and interests they pursued quietly, alone. They described learning at home and at work, in the kitchen and the garage, in a factory and a medical clinic, in a warehouse and a nursing home. They learned to perform techniques, to nurture, to create something from nothing, to be accountable, to notice when something was wrong, to stand up for themselves, to connect with others, to fix a car, to calm down, and to be more independent.

The majority of the participants learned, not by reading or writing, but by watching, listening, practicing, and trusting people to help or teach them. Often, they took risks and just tried something they had not done before. These women wanted or needed to learn, and in most cases,
they had been successful. Often, their capabilities had been acknowledged and affirmed by others. Reese’s friends were amazed by her vivarium. Debra’s phlebotomy patients asked for her by name. Katherine’s client and the nurses who supervised her trusted her to make life or death decisions about Tom’s health. For most, whether or not their knowledge had been recognized by others, the learning they did outside of school had left them feeling empowered and competent.

Stories of thresholder thinking, learning, and experiential knowledge are hard to find in the scholarly literature, yet it is extremely important for higher education researchers and practitioners to gather and discuss such stories. Too often in this country, a lack of educational attainment is associated with a lack of learning and knowledge. As Rose (2012) explains, “The cognitive content of occupations is given short shrift” (p. 137) because many people hold a “tight cluster of culturally transmitted assumptions about cognition, knowledge, academic achievement, and social class” (p. 136). Especially in the world of academia, knowledge is thought to live and grow within the walls of universities rather than in living rooms, garages, and factories. What the participants’ stories in this chapter communicate is that they, like most adults, think and learn all the time and in many locations, not only—in fact, not usually—in school settings.

If we, as educators, want more thresholders to approach the college door, enroll, and persist to completion, we need to approach them as curious people and capable learners who have gained knowledge that is not only useful in their lives outside of school, but can be applied to their learning in school. The findings in this chapter suggest that the realm in which most researchers come to know thresholders—the academic realm—may be the realm in which thresholders are least experienced and least competent. To get a more complete baseline understanding of thresholders, it is imperative to appreciate them in more than just a scholastic context. With this understanding of the participants as thinkers and learners, we now move on to Chapter Eight, where we learn about
their experiences in the TP class, and their thoughts about what is assumed to be their next step: college.
CHAPTER 8  THOUGHTS ABOUT THE TRANSITION CLASS, COLLEGE, AND SELF AS FUTURE COLLEGE STUDENT

Much of the research about thresholder transition centers on program outcomes. Such studies look at how many completers go on to enroll and persist in college and what factors affect those outcomes (Kallison, 2017; C. Smith & Gluck, 2016). This study differs in that it did not look at transition program outcomes, but at students in transition—their experiences and their perspectives. Chapters Four, Five, and Six offered insight into the participants’ personal, work and academic histories, their reasons for seeking further education, and their life aspirations. Chapter Seven explored the participants’ as thinkers and learners outside of academic settings. In this chapter, the focus shifts to the participants as students with one foot inside the community college door.

The stories here are about the women’s experiences of the TP class, and their thoughts about college and themselves, as future college students. While intending to enroll in college after completing TP was a requirement for acceptance into the free class, the stories in this chapter indicate that near the final weeks of the pre-college class, half of the participants were unsure about whether college would be the best, or even a possible, next step for them. This chapter ends with the participants sending a hopeful message to their future professors. Although they said it in many different ways, what I understood them to be communicating was this: “We have had complicated lives and we want to learn and to change. Please know us. And work with us.”

The TP Class Experience

At the time of the second interview, when I posed questions about their experiences in the TP class, the participants were in the final two weeks of their semester. As I analyzed their stories, most seemed to fit into two general categories: Affirmation and Struggle. The majority of
participants reported a positive experience overall and spoke of an increase in confidence. Two of the participants mentioned classroom activities that had sparked intellectual and emotional engagement. These stories are shared here under the theme of Affirmation, for they represent the women’s experience of feeling they were in the right place as students—that they belonged. Five of the ten participants also described difficult experiences that led them to question their capabilities as students and/or their belonging in the TP class. Their stories are presented under the theme of Struggle.

**Affirmation** Most of the participants were grateful for the TP class and thought they had benefitted from it. Mary said, “All that I learned in the transition college is, like, helping me to move forward.” Wanashi, who had failed college the year before, was relieved to have found the class, and found the work relevant. She said, “These classes I'm taking right now, I should've had these right from the beginning before I went into regular classes.” Marie (who often focused on the social aspects of school experiences) said that everyone in her class “was on their game.” From her perspective, she and her classmates were all in it together, all were in the right place.

Katherine said, “It was basically like a confirmation of some of the things I've already known, like how important it is (*long pause*), you know, to be educated and go to school. And um, it feels really good to be there.” Kyra agreed that the TP class had been useful and affirming. She said, “Way helpful. Way helpful—just to even think about college ’cause I never did…” In addition, she reflected, “What I took from the TP program is just enlightenment—that college *can* be for me. I *can* do college. And, you know, it’s attainable. And that’s a good feeling, alone.” Reese also spoke of being encouraged in the class and feeling competent there. She said, “I’m not nearly as far off from being able to be a successful college student as I thought I was... I think that...I am
more capable than I knew…of like, understanding what was being taught and, like, of doing a good job at it, and being able to ask questions and things like that.”

Yumzaa, too, spoke of gaining confidence and developing a better sense of herself as a student and of her teachers’ expectations. She said that at first, she had no idea whether her work was good or not. Then she provided an example, saying, “I can’t tell until maybe they’ve given us an assignment, then the teacher will approach and say, ‘Oh, actually you have done well.’ But if left to me, no, I can't say.” Yumzaa also came to see herself in a new light by comparing herself to other students. For example, she said she did not know she was good at math before but, “In class, [the teacher] will let me teach, like, the basic [math]. She will let me teach my colleagues.” Yumzaa’s first language was not English, but she said that she even taught grammatical rules to her native English-speaking classmates and also told them about the resources on the Khan Academy website. Her natural leadership tendencies emerged in the TP class.

Beyond the overall impact of the class, two participants mentioned specific assignments or class activities that met an intellectual and emotional need, affirming them as students. Katherine wanted to be a nurse, and she was fascinated by an article her teacher had assigned about a Parisian doctor who not only invented the incubator, but devised an ingenious way to raise money to manufacture more of them. Mary (from Ghana) said she liked, “Sharing with the whole class. Like, a paper, a comprehension paper that we, um, the teacher, we all discuss about it, and then answer. That is what I'm kind of interested in.” When I asked for an example, she searched through her class binder and then lifted her head with a smile. Offering no details, she pointed to some printed pages. After I probed for more information, Mary told me that the story they had read was about a girl and the different kinds of Spanish people spoke around her. I wondered why that was of interest, and Mary
explained that she liked how the author “was able to come out and say what's...happened to her.” Mary indicated that was something she, too, would like to learn to do: tell her story.

**Struggle** While the majority of participants described ways in which their TP experiences had affirmed them as students, some also reported having experiences that frustrated and/or confused them, causing them to question their capabilities as students and/or to feel they did not belong in the TP class. Many of the stories had to do with struggles with *Math and Writing*, and several spoke of difficulty with *Learning* in general.

**Math and Writing.** Reese said that although her confidence increased with math overall, it remained an ongoing struggle and she sometimes doubted her competence. She did not have enough time to learn the material before the teacher moved on, she said. Further, she explained, “There’ve been concepts and things that we’ve been going over in class...and I’m like, ‘Wait! Wait! Wait! No, I’m not ready!’ And like, we’re moving on...’cause that’s what we do. And I’m like, ‘Shit!’” Other participants talked about the fast pace, as well. Wanashi explained, “For me, in order for math to stick with me, I have to continuously keep doing it, keep doing it...but in the classes, they move (she snapped her fingers repeatedly) like that...and when I finally figure it out and I get it, they’re onto something else.”

Lily and Debra—both of whom suspected they had learning disabilities—also spoke about not understanding the math. They also talked about not remembering what they learned. Lily said, “Right now, the math is confusing because, you know, like with the fractions, you forget...It’s like, once you have it, you switch and it’s like trying to wrap my head around what does what.” Debra also struggled, saying, “I haven't done much of the math because I can't remember how do it. I have to learn my time tables all over again. I have to start, like, from scratch one...I get it when I’m there, but once I’m home, it’s like...I
can't get it.” Debra knew about the tutoring center at the community college, but the office was always closed by the time she got out of work.

In addition to math, two participants described difficulties with the writing process. Kyra talked about trying to write a “thesis paper.” She called her nephew (also a college student) and asked if he had one she could look at. She explained, “I didn't know what that looked like and I'm more of a hands-on learner, so if I can understand how the flow is supposed to look, I don't have trouble writing. I can write and I could probably write a book, but I needed to understand the flow.” Further, she explained,

I didn't like forming my topic…You could pick it, but I just couldn't figure it out, because it had to researchable, but not too researchable…It couldn't be too broad, but it couldn't be too narrow that you couldn't write a paper about it…I picked top careers for, um, the state…but that was a very broad, very broad subject. And so, I had to rewrite my thesis statement three different times and I was so frustrated with it, trying to figure out…I just got too overwhelmed….It was awful! I hated that. And then, that's why I think, "Is that like what you do in college? Because if so, I don't want to do that anymore.”

Reese also described her difficulty understanding a writing assignment and how her struggle with it made her question her competence as an independent learner. She explained,

We were supposed to write about an obstacle that we've overcome. And the way I was thinking about obstacles, I just was like, you know what? To me, an obstacle suggests, like—running into an obstacle—suggests that I was on a path and I'm walking, and then a boulder fell into my path, right? But that's not how I've been living my life! Like, I walk through huge fields, right? Because I'm not on a specific path. Boulders are everywhere. I just freakin' walk around them, so they're not really "obstacles." They're just, sort of, things
that are there. So, I don't understand. I don't even know how to pick out an obstacle because I haven't had a goal, right?

Reese said she finally asked her girlfriend for help on the paper, which made a big difference. But like Kyra and several others, Reese ended her story feeling frustrated and disappointed with herself. She explained, “So, I wrote my obstacle paper…, but I couldn't come up with it on my own…” Reese, who prided herself on her ability to learn independently (e.g., the vivarium project) seemed to believe that there was something weak or dependent about needing help with academic work. As she later told me, “Not knowing makes me feel not competent.”

**Learning.** Beyond math and writing, two participants spoke about suspected learning disabilities, and another struggled because her English language skills were not sufficient. Lily described herself as “lost” and continually questioning whether she was retaining anything at all from the TP class. She said, “I just feel like I learned, but I didn't learn…I don’t know why I’m not getting it…I don't know. It's a lot to absorb.” She also mentioned having trouble with time management and organizational skills. She said, “It’s tough to keep up with everything, and then it’s like…I hope I wrote [assignments] in a book. Sometimes she’ll give us a paper with [homework] on there and my books will get all mumbo jumbo, and ugh…” Now in her fifth decade, and with health and financial issues, Lily seemed to be losing hope in her ability to succeed as a student. She commented sadly, “I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around these transitional classes, you know? I just feel unsure about it all…”

Several times Debra also mentioned her difficulty remembering and understanding things in class, as well as finding the words to express herself. She explained that over the years, she had begun to identify more and more with her son who had struggled with ADHD through his school years. She imagined he had probably “gotten” his disability from her since her ex-husband was “so
smart.” About the TP class, Debra said, “I get really distracted when there's a lot of people there, you know? So, I can't concentrate. And I keep reading the stuff over and over and over again.”

Debra’s TP experience made her extremely reticent about being a college student. She said, “I know what I have to do, but um (she began to weep), I still struggle with um, comprehending things. So that's my fear…”

Anita’s story differs from the others. She said she had benefitted in some ways from the TP class, but the class was not the right place for her. As a recent immigrant with a limited knowledge of English, what she needed most was an ESOL class, and TP was not that. In the TP class, she said, “They only make me write better, you know? I can’t write better because I don’t know the basics part!” Anita said it was very hard when the teacher encouraged class discussion and students made jokes or used slang that Anita could not always follow. Sometimes she just felt humiliated. An advisor at the community college had suggested she enroll in the free TP class, but what Anita discovered through her experience was that the advisor had been wrong. Anita did not feel she belonged and every day, she realized it more and more.

Thoughts About College

The following section includes stories about the participants’ thoughts about or expectations of the college experience. Once again, there was a wide range of perspectives—and several themes. While some of the women expressed Enthusiasm about college, the more common theme was Stress. How, the participants wondered, would they be able to meet all of their obligations and responsibilities while getting assignments done on time and working their classes into their schedules? A final theme that emerged from the interviews had to do with the women’s Perceptions of Preparedness and Readiness for college. Based on what they knew and what they believed about themselves and the requirements of college learning, four of the participants reported feeling both
Prepared and Ready. While some of the remaining six said they felt prepared for college in some ways, as a result of previous academic failures, they also described being Afraid to Fail (Again).

Enthusiasm  For Anita, the idea of college brought back positive memories. In Brazil, she had completed one general education college class in “Portuguese letters,” in which they had read literature and discussed linguistics. Although she had to drop out before the end of her second semester (for reasons not related to academic ability), she remembered college as a time of intellectual and social engagement. The day before the second interview, Anita and her TP class had visited the local state university. She expressed her excitement about it when we met, saying, “We very much like doing this [tour] because we…really want to go to college, you know? [My classmates] look and [say], ‘I want [to] be here!’"

Katherine described college as “a different world” with “a whole different way of thinking, a whole different life,” and while she had concerns about entering such an unfamiliar place, she also expressed great excitement about the prospect. Katherine said,

[College] is an opportunity. It was an opportunity for me to help you [with your research], but also an opportunity for me. Do you know what I mean?...I mean, if you want to stay in your own little bubble, you don't really get very far, but if you open it up and, you know, take the first step, that step leads to another step. That's kind of what I mean about the whole new world. It's like you're being exposed to different ideas and different ways and different things. But I think the more you do something, the more you face your fears, the easier it is for you. It becomes normal for you. It becomes okay. It's like, "Oh, I'm a part of this."

For Marie, too, college represented opportunities—and support. Marie believed she knew a lot about the community college because she sister had been a student there, and Marie often spent time on campus “just to avoid everybody out there” in her neighborhood.
She described sitting in on classes to “test the waters.” Further, knowing she had ADHD and dyslexia, Marie spoke enthusiastically about “tutoring and the math center,” saying, “Yeah, if you jump to the opportunities that you’re given by going to those resources, there’s endless possibilities.” And like Anita, Katherine, and Marie, Yumzaa, too, was excited about college. She had been so disappointed for so many years about “the opportunity we didn’t get [in Ghana,]” that she was really looking forward to moving her education forward.

**Stress** While some of the participants saw college as a welcome opportunity and expressed excitement about it, the vast majority associated college with a great increase in stress. With jobs, families, financial, health, and other concerns, and numerous roles and responsibilities to attend to, it is well known that adults find it difficult to add college to their lives. The women spoke of concerns about how they would manage their lives and relationships once they added college to the mix. Some also worried about not feeling comfortable on campus once they moved beyond the safety of the TP classroom. Seven of the women were working at the time of the interviews—five of them full-time (one had two jobs), and three part-time. Four had young children, one helped care for a parent on the weekends, and everyone had additional responsibilities to consider. The first word Yumzaa uttered when she thought about a typical day in college was “overwhelming.” For Katherine, it was “all-encompassing.” Marie imagined it would be “nerve-wracking.”

As described previously, Marie had dyslexia and other learning issues, but she did not seem very concerned about learning (since she knew there were so many resources on campus). When I asked her to imagine a typical day, however, she said, “Very, like, fast. It’s gonna be (she took a deep breath) not too much shouting, ‘cause there’s—I doubt there’s gonna be a lot of, you know—chaos going on.” When I asked for clarification about “shouting,” Marie explained that she was comparing being in culinary classes to volunteering in a restaurant where the chef and owner used
to yell orders and reprimand errant cooks. She imagined most of her classes would take place in the cafeteria, and that she would be “Constantly moving and barely sitting.” Having had poor experiences in chaotic school settings before, Marie hoped the community college class environment would be different.

Wanashi’s life (as described using her timeline) had been very turbulent and disrupted; she had spoken of drug addiction, depression, numerous moves, losing her children to “the system,” and domestic and sexual abuse. She remembered clearly what it had been like for her when she added college to her life the previous year. She explained,

I have to work and go to school, and for me to do work and go to school full-time doesn’t [work]…definitely a no-no. I’m not going to stress myself out like that [again]…I look at my past at what can happen when I’m stressed out…I know what will trigger me, and I'm not going that way. I've been down that road. I don't like it. So, I’m not going back again. You understand what I’m saying?

Katherine, who worked full-time as a CNA and still had one of her four children living at home, also associated college with stress. She said,

Even what I’m just doing right now with [TP]…Like, I’ve got homework, you know? And I’ll be racing off just…it just seems like it’s very stressful. Like, you still got work. You still have a family. And now you’re trying to go to school. I mean, I’m like, doing my homework, eating chips, and you know, I’m like, not exercising as much as I should be because I’m so busy with other things…

Many of the participants found it daunting to think about adding more work to their lives and losing control of something as essential as how they spent their time. They worried about changes in their weekly schedules, as well as their ability to get to class and turn assignments in on
time, keep up with the pace of schoolwork, and have enough time for the important people in their lives. Other time-related worries included considerations about when would be the appropriate time of life to start college, how long they would be willing to spend in school, and, for one participant, concern about whether college would be worth any time at all.

Reese said, “I’m hoping that [college] won’t be as many hours physically in class, because [in TP] I’m in class for, you know, 20 hours a week. Plus the traveling I’m doing…It’s gotten tough for me working. I’m still working full-time.” Yumzaa, too, had no idea about the amount of time college classes would require. She said, “Then a lot of classes…because the one we’re attending now [TP], I do it two days a week. And maybe in college class, is maybe four days a week.”

Katherine was concerned about getting to class on time. Already in the TP class, she experienced conflicts between her job and school. About leaving Tom (her client with ALS) to get to the TP class, she said, “It's hard to leave somebody who relies on you to take care of them and who wants you to stay and not to leave. It's like, ‘But, I gotta go,’ and, ‘Ok, but I need one more thing,’ and I'm like, ‘But I gotta go!’ So, that's hard and I was late [to class]...at least 6 times.” Other participants also mentioned anxiety about having to choose between college and people they loved. Reese explained, “…One of my hang-ups for going back to school is the fact that I'm going to have way less time. I'm going to have to be prioritizing that over my relationship, which right now—it's a good relationship.” And Kyra spoke about her family, saying, “[My son] is like, ‘I don't want you to go to college because you're going to be studying and not have time for me.’”

Mary was an outlier in the sense that her image of her daily life as a college student seemed doable to her. Her husband was a high school teacher, and while they needed more money, she did not seem as concerned about that as most of the other participants. Mary imagined she would work part-time while in school in order to earn money to buy new clothes for college and to maintain her
car (so she could get to school). She knew it would be “busy…and a lot of work,” but she imagined that a typical day would flow as follows: “Get ready, get the children ready to school. Then, I'll also go to school. I'll come back and get ready for them. And then I'll study in the evening. Make sure they do their work. Their Dad will help with it. And then, [I will] go study, and then go to sleep.”

Some of the participants spoke about what they imagined it would be like to move out beyond the TP class and onto the campus. Many believed the college environment would be less friendly than the TP class. Mary said, “Um,…it's kind of going to be a large class in college…And [the TP teacher] understands you,” implying that college professors would not. She said she had heard that “some professors will close their door if you…If you're not there on time, you won't get to go inside.” Debra also contrasted the TP class with college classes, saying, “I don’t think it’s the same ’cause I feel comfortable [in TP]. Everybody, we all work together. We all try to help each other. (Or they try to help me!) (She laughed.) The teacher understood where I was coming from ’cause she was one of those [LD] kids [like me.]” Again, the implication was that college professors would not understand where thresholders were coming from. For Lily (whose TP class did not take place on the college campus), imagining even going on the college campus was daunting. She said, “I don’t even know the whole college atmosphere. I’d be lost [there].”

By the time of the second interview, Reese had already stepped beyond the safety of the TP community to register for college classes, and she described her brush with campus culture as utterly disorienting and discouraging. She said she and her classmates had been supported by their TP teachers when they first put in their college applications, “But as soon as the college got hold of it, like, things just started happening.” She described her registration experience as follows:

I walk into these offices. Like, there's Admissions, Financial Aid, Student Records, all these things. And I'm just like, "Whooooo does what?" I walked in with my diploma—they
needed a copy of it. I went to Admissions and she was like, "Oh that's great, that's great."
And then I had this other letter they gave me and she was like, "Oh no. I don't think you go here. You have to go over to Student Records." And I was, like, "Wait. What?" And then I have got to go talk to Financial Aid...and I'm like, "Really?" But it's like I'm expected to know this and I don't know it…I don't have an advisor assigned, yet…Like, I'd really like to be working with somebody. (She laughed)...And I've been told I'm not getting an advisor! I think people need to have somebody that they can go to and figure this out, like, right away. Like, from the moment they walk in because I'm…I'm still so intimidated.

After Reese finished, I shared with her my confusion about something. Earlier in the interviews, she had spoken about her knowledge of construction—renovating the house she once owned—and other hands-on projects. I was trying to understand why she felt so capable when it came to building something, but so incapable when it came to constructing her education. The following interchange inspired the title of my entire study.

Janet - The reason why—one thing I find interesting about that is because—I keep picturing you, like, in a Home Depot, let's say.

Reese - (Laughs.)

Janet - And finding your way around. "I need nails that look like this," and then there's something about it being school, it being an academic place that feels like it's harder to navigate.

Reese - Totally.

Janet - Like it's a completely different situation.

Reese - It's not nails and screws. It's not concrete things that fit into one another…It's, like, it's so malleable. It's almost all intellectual and it's almost all fluid and whatever, that I can't
make sense out of it. Or I have a hard time making sense out of it. [At Home Depot], I don't have to ask the associates for things I need. I can just go and find them myself, right? But this is not Home Depot…you have to talk to this person and explain what it is you need and try to make them understand!

**Janet** - And you don't know what you need, yet.

**Reese** - And maybe I don't know. I can't see all my options! Well, how am I supposed to pick that one if I don't know all my options? "Well, which class do you want to take?"

"Well, I don't know!"

**Janet** - You don't even know what's in the store!

**Reese** - I have no idea 'cause I can't see it! You know? And also, that person will say, "Well, I can't help you with that. You're going to have to talk to this person about that." And I'm like, "What? What?" Or, "Well, that would be in this other window. You need to go to..." and I'm like, "But, can you just, can you move the curtain? Can you just...? So, I can see?"

Through dialogue, in this co-creative way, Reese was able to describe so clearly how something like registration (so straightforward to academic insiders) can strike a newcomer as incredibly frustrating and disempowering.

**Perceptions of Preparedness and Readiness** With all of the stress and negative predictions about the college experience, I wondered what the participants were thinking about themselves as future college students. I asked them if they could think of ways in which their lives or past experiences had prepared them for college. Most reported feeling prepared in some way(s) as a result of either a previous positive academic experience or simply their deep desire to succeed. Some focused on the practical aspects of going to college (e.g., having experience with doing
readings and completing homework assignments) or spoke about being emotionally ready to handle school (e.g., self-regulation). Once again, there was a split with four of the women describing themselves as prepared and ready\textsuperscript{9} for college, and the others expressing serious concerns about their ability to make the transition. Being afraid to fail (again) was a common theme among most of those who had dropped or failed out of school in the past. The stories here illustrate the complex ways in which one group of thresholders considered the fit between college and themselves.

\textbf{Prepared and Ready.} Marie, Anita, Yumzaa, and Mary all said they felt prepared and ready for college. Marie, who had ADHD and the benefit of therapy and disability support services during her early years of school, explained that she felt prepared because she had learned how to self-regulate in academic settings. She said, “[I learned to be] more calm. Learn how to be more humble. Learn how to be more patient with [schoolwork].” Anita said her past academic experiences had prepared her for college. She mentioned she had done well in the course she took in Brazil years ago. Also, before that, in the flight training program she had participated in for several years, she had learned how to do homework and how to act in class (something she said a lot of TP students had not yet learned). She had done reading and math assignments as part of her coursework before, and had used a “thick” textbook, so she was familiar with that kind of academic work. Anita believed she simply needed to learn English and then she would be ready to move on to college.

Mary believed her life experiences were what had prepared her for college. She said that everything that had happened to her made her “strong.” From Mary’s perspective, she had just not

\textsuperscript{9} I use the term “ready” here not as practitioners use it (to describe the cognitive and non-cognitive skills thought to be needed to succeed in college), but rather to describe the participants’ own sense of \textit{feeling} ready to proceed on to college.
learned enough in school when she was growing up, plus it had been a very long time since she graduated, anyway. She did not doubt herself or express concern about being ready for college; she just needed opportunities. Yumzaa felt the same way. She believed the power of her determination was what was going to fuel her college efforts, and since she had been making steady progress moving through various levels of adult education classes since arriving in the US, she felt confident to move on to college.

The rest of the participants, while they may have felt prepared in some ways, had mixed feelings about their actual readiness for college. As a result of previous experiences of academic failure or non-completion, many feared failing again. The stories in the following section describe the concerns and very mixed feelings of six of the ten participants whose deep determination to improve their lives was in conflict with their fear of academic failure.

**Afraid to Fail (Again).** Katherine said her determination to just “keep moving” prepared her for college, and she also said she had many supporters rooting for her. She felt more prepared—and ready—for college now than ever before. On the other hand, many years ago, she had quit two academic programs: high school and an emergency medical technician certificate course. Katherine said, “What scares me about going to school and doing this stuff now…I don’t, I don’t finish. It doesn’t seem like I finish.”

Reese too had mixed feelings about her readiness for college. She explained that by experiencing success in a professional development training for work, she had gained the knowledge and confidence that she could, indeed, “sit in a class and learn a thing, and take a test, and come, and do really well.” That and some of her experiences in the TP class made her feel prepared. But having dropped out of high school many years before, Reese expressed concern about
quitting school again. She said, “My hope is that I’ll be able to stick with it and not quit.” She explained how she thought about her life priorities:

I know I've been able to stick with, you know, my jobs…It’s something I'm getting paid for and it's inextricably linked to my ability to keep surviving. School, I would place in a different category because, like, if things got too hard, and I had to choose between school and paying my rent, I'm going to pay my rent.

Reese was not certain she would be able to stick with college.

Wanashi, at first, said that nothing in her life had prepared her for college, but she then added that actually in more recent years, she had learned “how to deal with people” and “how to do research.” Those skills would help her, she thought. But she had taken two college classes the year before our interviews and had failed her introductory English course. Her unsuccessful college experience had left her shaken and she was unsure about her capabilities, nervous about facing college again. Earlier, she had told me that professors think students are “prepared” for college, but “we’re not!” Then, she explained what had happened to her in college the previous year.

Wanashi thought of herself as “an avid reader” who would happily read anything; “I can read two to three books in a week…If they’re good,” she said. But in her introductory English class, her professor had given her a paper to read, and then an assignment, both of which were beyond her reach. She explained, “[The article] was that thick. (She showed a half-inch space using her thumb and index finger.) It was about neodiversity…I spent more time in the dictionary, looking up these words. (She laughed.) I told [my professor], ‘I’m a simple writer and a simple reader.’ I said, ‘That, right there, gave me a headache!’” Wanashi did not want to read the article, but she did read it, and she actually found it interesting. Then the professor asked the students to write about the article.
Wanashi explained, “Yeah! We had to do a report on it. The hardest thing was to do…what do you call it? Pree-c. Rhetorical pree-c.” Wanashi looked at me as if I should know what she was talking about, but I had never heard the term. Then, she spelled it out for me, raising her voice: “P. R. E. C. I. S.” and she explained, “A rhetorical precis is—you take this whole paragraph…It took all this (she showed me with her fingers again) and put it into 3 or 4 sentences.” As she spoke, she was still visibly shaken by the experience. She never understood what a “rhetorical precis” was nor what her professor wanted, and she failed the course. Wanashi said her fear about going to college was related to “not succeeding…Because, ok, I have a great fear because my first experience [in college] was horrible.”

Debra said her determination had prepared her for college because, as she put it (while pointing to her timeline), “I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to be this person. I want to achieve more.” But she had tried college 30 years before, and she had failed. Like Wanashi, her experience had left her feeling sad and defeated, and she worried about a repeat experience. Debra said, “I know what I want and I want to go for it, but at the same time, I'm scared and I feel like…like, I won't make it.” Debra said she had not told any family member or friend that she was even taking the TP class. She said, “Um, a lot of people don't know that I'm going to…this [TP] program because I don't want to tell them because if I don't (long pause)...if I don't do well, I don't want to feel that like, you know, like, stupid, because I didn't make it through.”

Kyra, like many of the other participants, said her life had prepared her for college by making her “driven” and “determined” to continue her education. But that was all before she, her husband, and five children moved to the Northeast from the rural Midwest 18 months before our interviews. Since the relocation, that “drive” had disappeared, and she said, “And now I'm just kind of like...lost. (Tears.) I'm lost.” In addition to the situational issue of feeling uprooted and unsettled,
Kyra’s TP experience also made her doubt her readiness for college. She explained that she—and a lot of her TP classmates—said they wanted to go to college, but many of them did not even complete the small assignments they were given. She admitted that “I'm sometimes one of those people that went, ‘I didn't write my paper. I totally, instead, sat in front of the tv with my husband for an hour…’ That experience told me my commitment level was not quite where it needs to be to start college.” When Kyra thought about enrolling, she was afraid. Having dropped out of high school many years before, she still carried around a great deal of regret and shame, as well as self-judgment. She said, “I'm wicked bad about starting stuff and not finishing it—like, wicked bad…I just don't want to set myself up for failure.”

Overall, what made many of the participants feel prepared for college were previous successes in academic settings and/or their determination to create a better life. Willing to work hard and being very determined to succeed despite significant barriers, they had the striver identity—something Reddy found to be very common among her sample of thresholders (2012). Interestingly, some of the participants who felt prepared for college also carried within them a significant amount of self-doubt when it came to feeling ready to move on to college. Six of the ten participants spoke of their fear of failure and expressed serious concerns about their readiness to enroll once the TP class ended.

Lily was the outlier of the group in that she could not think of anything in her life that had prepared her for college, and she was struggling so much in the TP class that college was beyond what she could imagine. She said, “Sometimes I'm thinking at age 55 (tears…pause) and knowing (pause) cancer's in my family…my mom died fifty-six. How much time do I have left? Do I want to go to school for four years?...I'm trying to think of ways out of having to waste my time...(tears).”
What the Participants Wanted Their Future Professors to Know

As my conversations with participants moved from question to question and topic to topic, the women moved through a wide range of emotions. Sometimes they were pensive as they reflected on the past or on topics they had not considered before. Other times, they spoke quickly and easily, with confidence, clarity, and joy. Occasionally, some wept when they spoke about past events, regrets, fears, and/or perceived inadequacies. One interview question that offered the women a chance to exert some control over their educational futures—even if only in a hypothetical way—was, “What would you like your future professors to know about you before they even meet you? What could they know about you that would help them teach you better?” Most of the participants seemed surprised by, but very receptive to this question, and their responses fell into three thematic categories.

Some of the women wished their professors would slow down because Learning Takes Time. Some wanted their future teachers to have empathy and compassion, because Learning is Emotional and Learning and Language Differences matter in terms of how students are able to respond to assignments. And several of the women shared the belief that it would help if their professors knew more about the students’ Commitments, for their lived realities outside would, no doubt, influence them in school.

Learning Takes Time Lily and Katherine both wished their professors would slow down. Lily wished they would have patience with her, as well. She explained, “You know, sometimes I'm better with hands-on stuff. Even when I learned my job, it took me a while because sometimes people…because they know it, they explain it [fast]…And it's like, ‘Uhhhh, slow down a little because I’m not getting it.’ But once I get it, I got it, you know?” And Katherine also spoke of needing time. She said,
Like once I have information, I kind of, like, have to let it—I have to be able to process it in my own time. Stuff that I get right away, I'm fine with, but stuff that I don't…, I need to let it, like, soak in, and I need to think about it. Because it has to make sense to me. It kind of has to mean something in order for it to stick. And sometimes I think people…they moved so fast. Like, “Okay, we did this, we did this, we did this,” and I'm like, “Wait, but I'm still trying to understand this, and you've already moved!”

**Learning Is Emotional**  Wanashi and Reese spoke about the emotional aspects of learning. Wanashi said, “I would want them to know to have some empathy…You know, be a little bit more attentive…If I don't get it or understand, can you please be more specific and explain it, and not embarrass me in front of the classroom?” Reese said, “I get emotionally overwhelmed really easily. But I will figure it out. Like, I don't need somebody to problem solve it for me. Sometimes, I just need to be like, ‘Waaah, I can't do this!’ And then, you know, the next day I'm like, ‘Ok! Yeah, I'm good. I'm writing this paper now.’ But…I cry pretty easily, so…”

**Learning and Language Differences Matter**  Three of the participants said they would want their professors to know they faced particular challenges in the classroom. Marie (with ADHD and dyslexia) wanted teachers to understand how hard it was for her to sit still and concentrate. She had developed strategies that helped her and she wanted professors to know that she was engaged in learning when perhaps it did not always look that way. She explained, “If it’s something I’m really, really interested in to learn, I kind of, you know, bounce my foot when I’m sitting, so I can actually stay still and focus. Or if not, I have my hands pinned underneath me…or I’m listening and I’m looking up at a certain point, but I have to draw something—to stay focused.”

Debra also spoke of difficulty focusing. She said, “I get really distracted when there's a lot of people there, you know? So, I can't concentrate and I keep reading the stuff over and over and
over again.” She said she would also like to get tested for ADHD “because with that, you know, it will follow me, so I will be…I will have a little more help. And I can probably finish that way.”

Anita had no trouble with learning, per se, but English was not her native language. What she described was a kind of double vulnerability: not only was she hesitant about her knowledge (like many students), but she was concerned about the way she expressed herself. She said, “Sometimes when I say things and everybody look at me, I can feel my face, like, burning… So…now, it's like I, all the time, I feel really stupid to talk because I know I'm talking wrong.” She wanted her professors to take her non-native English speaker status into consideration when they taught her.

**Commitment** Two of the women felt it was important for professors to know how very committed they were to succeeding in college. Yumzaa said, “Well, I want to tell them the challenges that I face and the hope I have for myself before entering the class. I didn't give up. I'm still pursuing my dream because I want to be the first person in my family to have a college degree.” And Mary, too, said she wanted her professors to know how deeply she wanted to succeed. She said, “Yeah that I'm ready to learn. I've been through a lot and I'm ready to learn in college.” Kyra and Marie, on the other hand, wanted teachers to know that their commitment to school was influenced by other responsibilities and daily realities. Kyra said, “They should probably know I'm really more committed to being a mom than I am to being a student…” She needed “some push,” she said. Marie, who lived in a tough neighborhood, explained that it was hard for her to concentrate on school sometimes “especially when you got so much going on in your life.” As a group, the participants’ stories communicated their desire to be known as people who were working hard to succeed, not only as students, but as adults with multiple roles and responsibilities.
They had strengths and vulnerabilities, and it would help them if their professors would acknowledge and respond to both.

**Reflections**

The stories included this chapter help to answer research question #5: What are the participants’ thoughts about college and about themselves, as future college students? Most of the participants were encouraged by their TP experiences, and several mentioned intellectual and emotional connections to some of the material. Academic learning and processes, particularly with math and writing, were experienced by some of the participants as abstract and confusing compared to the hands-on learning to which many were accustomed outside of school. Struggles related to learning disabilities (diagnosed and not) were present in three of the participants.

Participants had varied conceptions of college, most of which were based on negative past experiences or what they had heard from others. Some imagined college as a place of opportunity and support, while others associated it with alienation and confusion. As a future experience, everyone imagined college would be stressful—something that would put pressure on their already busy and complex lives. Most of the participants saw some way(s) in which their previous experiences had prepared them for college. Some said a prior academic experience had left them feeling hopeful and capable, but others reported that previous failed attempts at high school or college had left them very worried about future failures. Five of the ten indicated they had strong doubts about their readiness to enroll in college after the TP class ended. When the participants were asked what their future professors could do to help them learn better, they all expressed the desire to be known and seen—not just as students in a classroom, but as whole people with lives, families, thoughts, and aspirations that went beyond the academic world.
The participants’ stories in this chapter both confirm findings from other studies and raise new issues that require further exploration. Here I will discuss some of the overarching issues relating to gaps in understanding—participants’ understanding of college and practitioners’ understanding of thresholders.

College draws thresholders in because of what they believe it promises: a better life, more options for meaningful work, and increased stability and security, among other benefits. But, as this chapter showed, what college study and learning actually is, remains a mystery to academic newcomers. As I listened to some of the participants speak about college, I had the sense they were describing the wrapping paper of a gift, but saying very little about what was actually inside the box. As I tried to see college as they described it, I was reminded of the Vermont college president who asked prospective non-traditional, first-generation high school students in New York City about their college expectations (Gross, 2017). She, like I, was very surprised by the students’ comments: “There was no mention of academics…Nothing about college readiness” (p. 5). One of the students simply asked, “Can you see the stars at night?” (p. 5).

While transition programs try to introduce students to some aspects of college, “becoming an undergraduate is still filled with the unknown and the unknowable” (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 317). Many researchers have found that post-traditional learners lack knowledge about college, as well as the language of the academic world they plan to enter (Crossan et al., 2003; French et al., 2015; Herideen, 1998; Reddy, 2012). French, Kempson, and Kendall describe college as “hyper-real” for the thresholders in the UK transition program they studied and report that narratives of stress, risk, and pressure were common (2015, p. 18). How can we be surprised that persistence and completion rates are so low when there are so many barriers to participation, so much stress
associated with college, and learners not really understanding what they are signing up for nor what it really takes to succeed in college?

Most of the participants in this study said they felt prepared by the difficult experiences they had survived (e.g., if I can handle that, I can handle college) and/or by previous academic experiences where they had proved to themselves that they could generally succeed in school (e.g., I can go to class, sit, learn, pass tests). Reddy found that the participants in her study of thresholders described a similar line of thinking, which she calls the *striver identity* (i.e., students with goals, a strong work ethic, determination, and focus) (2012). Reddy claims that having a striver identity is not enough to carry thresholders through college, however; in order to succeed, they need an *academic identity* (i.e., an understanding of the analytical and critical thinking skills required in college, as well as the necessary learning strategies). As I thought about all of this, I wondered how the participants could possibly know if they were prepared and/or ready to move on to college without knowing what college level work would actually entail and require.

Other researchers have found discrepancies between learners’ expectations of college and their understanding of their preparedness, as well. In a study of almost 70,000 community college students, it was found that 86% believed they were academically prepared, yet almost 70% had to take at least one developmental education class (CCCSE, 2016). Similarly, 61% of the study respondents believed they would meet their academic goals within two years but in actuality, only 39% earned a degree or certificate within six years. According to researchers, this reveals “a disconnect between [students’] perceptions of college readiness and their actual preparedness” (p. 8). Again, the question in my mind is: how can learners with little academic experience know what to expect and what is required in college before they get there? How can they assess whether they are ready or not?
There is, indeed, a disconnect between what learners know or believe about college and what they believe about themselves and their readiness, but there is also a disconnect between what HE practitioners know and believe about aspiring students and the reality of their students’ potential. Thresholders are academically underprepared, but many also have prior knowledge and experience that HE practitioners do not notice or value. How would we, as educators, ever know about learners’ vivariums, medical knowledge, or ability to fix complicated machinery if we only gave them Accuplacer tests? And if we only gave them Accuplacer tests, how would the learners, themselves, ever know that there are many other indicators of college readiness aside from their standardized test score results or their feelings about themselves and their academic capabilities?

We need a much more holistic and comprehensive way of learning about college aspirants when they approach the college door. And, we also need an approach to transition that helps thresholders develop a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the college experience and their own strengths and vulnerabilities in the new environment. A further exploration of these conclusions and recommendations will be provided in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 9  IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Millions of people in the US aspire to further their education and improve their chances for a better life, but for adults with limited academic experience, college remains elusive. There are many explanations scholars give to explain the gap between aspiration and achievement, and far too often, those with the least actual power to effect change are blamed for their position (Levin, 2003; Reay, 2003; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). Thresholders are held up next to traditional college students, and described and defined by how they are different—and deficient. If they had been raised in families and communities where college-going was expected and common, they would do better in college. If they had better academic skills, they would be more successful. If they went to school full-time rather than being continually drawn away from their studies by their family and work responsibilities, they would persist more and complete certificates or degrees.

While all of these if-statements might, in fact, be true, the goal of this study was to go beyond this deficit-orientation and better understand what it is like to be a post-traditional adult learner on the threshold of college. I wanted to help HE practitioners see education, learning, and college as some thresholders do. In addition, I hoped to help practitioners see the learners as the learners see themselves, and to highlight some of these learners’ assets. Finally, I aimed to make recommendations about how we might better learn from, plan for, and respond to the millions of thresholders at the college door, whether or not they are in formal pre-college transition classes or programs. In this chapter, I review the original research questions, summarize the findings, discuss implications, and make recommendations for practice and for future research.

Review of the Study

For this study, I conducted 19 in-depth interviews with ten women enrolled in a pre-college preparation course associated with an adult learning center and a community college in the
Northeast US. By responding to my questions and in reflecting on their experiences, the women spoke about their lives—past and present—and about their aspirations for the future. They considered their experiences with educational institutions, their learning in and outside of school settings, and also shared their thoughts about college and themselves as future college students. The participants’ stories along with a review of the literature, and a discussion and analysis of the findings helped offer a more holistic picture of these women’s lives and the issues they faced in the pre-college endeavor. The recommendations I make are intended to support the work of both adult basic education and higher education practitioners who work with learners on the threshold of community college.

There were three overarching questions that inspired this study. First, I wanted to learn more about pre-college learners as whole people—both past and present, both in and outside of academic settings. Specifically, I wondered how these learners thought about education, college, and their own knowledge and capabilities as they approached the college door. And finally, I was interested in making suggestions that might assist adult and HE practitioners better support post-traditional adult learners at the community college door. In the section that follows, I review the original research questions, summarize the findings, and where applicable, discuss ways in which the findings challenged my assumptions.

**Review and Discussion of the Findings**

1. **What life experiences do participants believe most influence them as they enter the academic environment?**

   The participants described hard early lives, often marked by family instability, financial struggle, frequent moves, loss of or separation from loved ones, and/or a lack of safety or violence. Trauma and adversity were common in the majority of stories, and many of the participants
believed that their lack of educational attainment resulted, in part, from a lack of adult support and guidance. In describing their adult lives, some of the women talked about disappointments, such as failed romantic relationships, immigration-related hardships, and work lay-offs, among other issues. Many also described various caretaking responsibilities (whether for children, other relatives, or others), which had taken precedence over their own educational needs or desires. In addition to the trauma/adversities, many of the participants also spoke of their resilience and their progress in terms of overcoming some previous challenges. Discussing their lives and the positive role college could play proved to be an emotional experience for many of the participants, for while hope was palpable, they all carried with them a good deal of disappointment, wounding, and uncertainty as a result of the difficult lives they had lived.

2. How have participants experienced education and educational institutions throughout their lives?

Seven of the ten participants dropped out of high school before graduating and two who graduated believed their educations had been deficient. While several spoke of liking school when they were very young, most formed no meaningful connection with schools or teachers when they were growing up. Except in one case, school was experienced as a place they went because it was required, and not as a place of authentic learning and growth. One of the participants was beaten at school and several reported being bullied, but despite any negative experiences, all of the participants continued to seek further education/credentials beyond the K-12 years (e.g., HiSET or GED preparation classes, other adult education or professional certificate programs). The majority of the women reported having positive experiences in professional development or other post-secondary courses, as adults. But starting programs and not completing them was a common story, because educational efforts always had to be fit into the participants’ lives rather than their lives and
responsibilities flexing to accommodate their educational pursuits. Several of the women doubted the integrity of the educational institutions they had attended, the value of the credentials they had achieved, or the knowledge they had supposedly acquired or demonstrated. All but one of the women continued to believe strongly, however, in the benefits of further educational attainment.

As stated in the introduction to this study, before I conducted the interviews, I had imagined that many of the participants would report poor past experiences in school and that those experiences would have negatively influenced the women’s feelings about returning to school as adults. I was surprised to hear, however, that many of the participants had enjoyed school-based learning in their early years and some in their adult years, as well. I was also surprised about the variety and amount of trauma and/or adversity most of the participants reported, and how that, combined with the lack of adult guidance and support, had affected them. Leaving school had not been so much a result of what had happened in school, but what had occurred outside of school. Further, while family problems caused several participants to lose interest in school and/or give up on themselves, at least in two cases, participants described their decisions to drop out as an act of their will to survive. For them, leaving school had not been about giving up, but rather about standing up for themselves.

Further, it was fascinating to hear some of the participants evaluate the adult education courses they had taken, and to remark on the differences between ones they believed had been useful and effective and those they had experienced as lacking substance, integrity, or having been poorly taught. There has been so much written about thresholders’ lack of academic preparation for college, but I do not believe I have come across any research about learners’ judgments of or disappointments about the academic preparation with which they were provided. In a related vein, I was struck by several of the participants whose passing of the GED or HiSET had left them feeling
like educational imposters. Getting the right score had not jibed with their own evaluation of what they had learned and what they believed about their own knowledge. How confusing and frightening that must be to be passed through a checkpoint without feeling at all confident that one is actually ready for the journey.

3. What are the participants’ vocational goals and life aspirations?

About half of the participants had a particular vocational goal in mind: to become an airline pilot, a restaurant owner and chef, or a nurse. Some were focused on what kind of work they would like and what truly interested them, while others thought more about their need to find a better or better paying job, and quickly escape their current circumstances. The majority of the women shared the desire to have more financially and emotionally stable lives, less stress, and more opportunities to do meaningful work about which they really cared. Many also mentioned the desire to help other people and share with others what they had learned through their lives. Another compelling goal was to complete interrupted educations and feel like full-fledged, respectable adults in a society that privileges academic achievement to such a great extent.

One of the requirements for admission into the free TP class was that students have the intention of enrolling in college after the semester-long transition course. Because of this requirement, and also because adult learners at community college are so often described as being vocationally-oriented, I assumed that the participants had come into the class with a defined vocational and related academic goal. This, in fact, turned out to be the case for six of the ten women (Anita, Mary, Marie, Katherine, Debra, and Yumzaa). Even among that group, however, there was great variety in terms of each learner’s understanding of the career, itself, and the educational pathway that could lead her there. Reese and Wanashi had a general idea of their areas
of interest, but lacked clarity about how they would pursue them in college. And Lily and Kyra had no solid ideas at all; they just knew they needed to do something to earn money—and do it soon.

One of the participants told me she felt guilty about being in the class when she really wasn’t sure she wanted—or was ready—to go on to college after the class. Several of the others who were openly exploring careers and college expressed similar misgivings about being in the class. It seemed to me that there is a difference between wanting to go to college, in general—to feel like a bonafide adult (as many of the participants described) or to earn more money—and wanting to go to college to meet a particular career goal (to become a nurse, for example). Those with specific career goals had more of an understanding of why they were in the class, and perhaps more of a commitment to finishing, than those who were unsure of their future paths. All of this left me wondering about how transition classes are marketed and designed, and whether there should be different tracks for learners at different points in their vocational and educational development.

4. Who are the participants as thinkers and learners when they arrive at the college door?

When the participants talked about their personal projects, interesting conversations they had had, and learning done outside of school settings, they mentioned a wide range of topics and disciplines, from earth and animal science to law, from medicine to politics, and from the restaurant business and food science to crafts and design, among many others. The majority of the women described the learning process outside of school as involving watching, practicing, experimenting, or working beside a co-worker or trusted mentor. Often, whether for work or personal projects, they reported using their hands, as well as their minds. Most spoke with a sense of self-efficacy and competence when they described their out-of-school learning and knowledge.
I have done quite a lot of reading about undergraduates creating prior learning assessment portfolios, and as a result, I assumed that participants in this study would have deep experiential knowledge, but that they might not recognize or value the applicability of their experiential knowledge and their capability as learners in the college setting. This turned out to be true, overall. As I listened to participants’ stories, I easily saw how the ability to research and build a vivarium or make decisions about an ALS patient, for example, demonstrated the ability to think critically, creatively, and analytically. But their success as learners outside of school did not seem to give many of the participants confidence that they could, in fact, learn in school. This suggested to me that a major goal of a transition course could be to help academic newcomers discover themselves as capable learners in an unfamiliar (academic) setting. I explain this further in Recommendation #4 below.

5. What are the participants’ thoughts about the transition class, college, and themselves, as future college students?

Several participants spoke enthusiastically about college, and looked forward to the “opportunity” it promised. All of the women, however, associated becoming a college student with an increase in stress and further disruption to their already busy and difficult lives. Their experiences working the TP class into their days had already given them a taste of what college might be like. They also imagined the college environment to be less friendly (more anonymous) than the TP class. Several had already had poor experiences with college, which had left them reticent about moving ahead, as well.

Having recent success in academic settings (e.g., the TP class or other professional development classes) and/or having a very strong determination to work hard and succeed helped some of the women feel prepared to succeed in college. Most reported feeling affirmed in the TP
class—pleasantly surprised that they could participate and perform in the academic setting and
happy with what they had learned about resources at the community college. Those who described
struggling in the class, however, questioned their readiness for and/or interest in continuing on to
college. When asked about the TP coursework, math was the most common topic, with half of the
participants reporting increased facility with the subject and an equal number reporting significant
struggles. Those who spoke of struggle (whether with math, writing, the English language, or
learning, in general) questioned whether they would be ready, able, and/or willing to move on to
college post TP. Although the intent of the TP program was that students would build their
academic skills and college knowledge and then enroll in college after completing the course, half
of the participants in this sample expressed serious doubts about their ability and/or desire to do so.
Finally, if they did move on to college, all of the participants believed they would learn better if
their future professors knew more about them as people, in addition to knowing them as students.
Their assumption (and mine, since I was the one who posed the question) was that if teachers knew
about their life circumstances and the hope the participants had for college, those teachers would
adapt their teaching approach to the needs and/or students’ lived realities.

Before I spoke with the participants, I had assumed that, because they were almost all first-
generation students who had not grown up around college-educated people, they would be
unfamiliar with college culture and reticent about their readiness to enroll in college. This
assumption proved to be only partially accurate. Many of the participants had seen siblings,
husbands, or friends go through college—something, which seemed to have encouraged some, but
frightened or intimidated others.

The participants’ assessments of their own readiness to move on to college surprised me, as
well. For example, two of the women who were extremely articulate and self-reflective, and who
demonstrated critical and analytical thinking in the interviews (i.e., likely to enjoy a good college discussion, I thought) did not perceive themselves as being ready to move on to college. Both had other constraints on their time and finances, as well as beliefs about their own capabilities as compared to college students, which made them doubt their readiness for college. Interestingly, some participants who answered my questions about college preparedness in a more literal, straightforward fashion or who needed continual prodding to go deeper into an issue (i.e., perhaps more likely to struggle with analysis in college, I thought) were very confident about their readiness to move on to college. The participants’ academic self-concept often seemed to be determined more by their emotional state or their assumptions about “good” college students than by an informed understanding of the kinds of skills and abilities required at the college level.

**Implications for Practice**

Despite their great hope for and belief in the power of education to deliver them to better, more satisfying lives, the fact is that most thresholders in the US do not transition to college and, as a result, many may never have the chance to become seen or to see themselves as “fully educated” people (Quinn, 2010, p. 123). For thresholders, a failure in HE may be experienced as another failure layered on top of previous perceived or actual failures. I conducted this study because I believed some ABE and HE practitioners could better understand thresholders and that we can and must do better in meeting these potential college students where they are, helping them transition to college and succeed in using education to move their lives forward. As I proceeded through my research, however, a question kept arising in my mind. What exactly do we mean when we use the term *transition*?

In Chapter Two, I reviewed some of the literature on *pre-college* transition programs. There is much more research on transition approaches for *enrolled* college students, however, one article
not only helped expand my thinking about transition, but also suggested a way forward. Australian researchers Gale and Parker (2014) reviewed the college transition literature and identified three implicit models of transition: the induction model, the developmental model, and the becoming model. The *induction* model uses methods, such as orientation sessions, to teach academic newcomers the language, culture, and expectations of the institution, so they can adapt and fit into existing structures. The *developmental* model offers academic newcomers opportunities, such as service learning and peer mentoring, which assist them in developing a new student identity. The goal is to become people who think and act more like others in the academy. The *becoming* model of transition adds something different to the conversation about transition because it goes beyond helping newcomers adapt to existing academic structures and mindsets, and requires the institutions, themselves, to change and adapt “to the realities of students’ lives” (Gale & Parker, 2014, p. 735). In the becoming model, it is not only academic newcomers who need to learn to navigate change in an unfamiliar setting, but HE institutions, themselves, that also must adapt to unfamiliar students. As I read Gale and Parker’s review, I noticed that the majority of the studies I had reviewed on thresher transition programs described the *inductive* model. While effective in some ways, it is likely that approach is insufficient, in that it is designed to make newcomers fit into existing institutional structures without acknowledging the realities of thresholders’ lives and their developmental needs as learners and students.

Bensimon’s work (2007) is built on the *becoming* model and brings the issue of institutional change directly to the practitioners who inhabit and run our institutions. She holds that community colleges perpetuate social injustices when they apply structural solutions (e.g., accelerated courses or prior learning assessment) to problems like college completion without combining such approaches with others that actually challenge the minds and hearts of the human beings who work
with learners. In her study of community college students who successfully transferred to selective universities from an open admissions community college, every student talked about “institutional agents” who had inspired, supported, informed, and engaged with the students, as well as advocated on their behalf to facilitate their transfer (p. 443). Whether faculty members, staff, deans, or others, these individuals transmitted to students the “knowledge and resources that are particularly characteristic of the social networks and social ties of the middle and upper classes” (Stanton-Salazar as cited in Bensimon, 2007, p. 443). These equity-minded practitioners did three important things: they shared their cultural capital with students and they focused on students’ funds of knowledge as assets rather than emphasizing learner deficits. Beyond their individual, interpersonal efforts as higher education professionals, however, they also participated in Bensimon’s research, which helped them see the ways in which certain existing institutional practices and policies contributed to educational inequality. As I move on to offer recommendations for thresholder-responsive practices, I acknowledge my belief that we need more than traditional models of inductive or developmental transition-to-college programs. We need to use multiple approaches to transition, including those based on the becoming model in which institutions and practitioners move toward those learners who are trying so very hard to move toward them.

Essential Principles and Recommendations for Practice

I propose that there are three essential principles that inform a thresholder-responsive approach to college transition, and they are that:

- Thresholders arrive at the college door as resilient, multi-dimensional individuals with significant strengths and vulnerabilities;
- As academic newcomers, their interactions with the college need to be both affirming and orienting; and
The transition to college is a relational endeavor requiring the active participation of academic insiders.

Thresholders are complex individuals who bring with them a wealth of experience and prior knowledge, numerous interests, as well as their deep aspiration for life change. They are, and they must be seen and treated as, more than academically underprepared vocational and/or credential seekers. In the greater context of their lives, they are developing adults who want to use the college to move and improve their lives—to heal from past wounds, chart better futures, and in many cases, help others. Thresholders believe that increased educational attainment will lead to better, more stable and satisfying lives. Their step toward the college door is an expression of their great hope.

Because they arrive with a history of life and/or educational disruptions, however, that hope is often accompanied by great fear. It takes courage to approach an institution and a culture that is powerful, unfamiliar, or that may bring back painful memories of past educational starts and stops or failures. If one has experienced significant trauma and/or adversity, taking risks to try something new can be extremely frightening. The women in this study described daily lives that were very difficult. Many of those who had jobs were looking for a way out of them, and those who were not working hoped to find a way in. As a group, they yearned for less stressful, more stable lives, and while they saw promise in college, most anticipated that going to college would actually increase their stress levels. While college is indeed an opportunity, and the benefits of participation and completion are numerous, institutions and practitioners must acknowledge that thresholders arrive with one foot on the gas—eager to move forward and create new lives—and one foot on the brake—wanting to avoid additional stress or a repeat of past academic failure. Being on the verge of college is both an exciting and precarious place to be.
Many of the women in this study spoke of their experience in the transition class as being affirming. Because they could (usually) get to class on time, do the assigned homework, and participate in class discussions, for example, most believed—or were beginning to believe—that they could, in fact, succeed in an academic environment. This is very significant for learners with little academic experience. There is a great difference, however, between succeeding in a transition class and succeeding in a college class. The basic goals of the transition classes the participants were in were to boost students’ reading, writing, math, and computer skills, and introduce them to the various services and offices on the college campus. All of this is extremely important and valuable. In order for thresholders to really know they are ready for college-level work, however, they need to understand more about what that work actually might entail—and why they would be asked to do it.

Thresholders need to get experience reading syllabi and looking at journal articles with citations, for example, so when they are given their first real syllabus, they know what it is, and when they are asked to use MLA citation style in an introductory English class, they know what that means. They especially need to learn to seek help when they do not understand something. Thresholders are preparing to enter and function in a new culture with a different language, but without experimenting and practicing with college-like work, college-like materials, and college-like academic strategies, I fear many students will leave transition classes with a false sense of their college readiness. Transition efforts need to both affirm thresholders where they are and orient them to what is to come.

As facilitators of the transition to college, it is the job of practitioners, as academic insiders, to look for and respond to both the strengths and vulnerabilities of thresholders, and to design curricula that help learners develop a more comprehensive and accurate understanding about what
they bring to the academic environment, and what they will need to learn. It is not only practitioners, however, who have responsibility for seeing, affirming, and orienting incoming students. Returning to school is a deeply personal, emotional, and relational undertaking, and who thresholders meet and how they are treated as they move throughout the institution greatly influences their educational trajectories (Bensimon, 2007). A thresholder-responsive approach to transition requires extensive preparation by the institution and the active participation, not only of practitioners and the thresholders, themselves, but of already enrolled, more established students who can serve as guides and role models for those who arrive after them. Staff members also need to think of themselves as mattering in terms of student success. As UK transition researchers French, Kempson, and Kendall (2015) put it, “Transition is a complex social practice requiring a whole community, partnership response” (p. 1).

The strategies that follow have their roots in one or more of the three essential principles described above. It is my hope that the ideas offered here might supplement those, which practitioners have already designed and developed for their particular students and circumstances. The goal is to create a campus culture that is more just, safe, inclusive, and inspiring—one where thresholders learn more about themselves, learning, the institution, subject matter, and the world beyond the college, and where the college, its practitioners, and students learn more about thresholders.

**Recommendation #1 – Become a trauma-informed institution**

Adult educators commonly report hearing stories of trauma/adversity (TA) from their students (Horsman, 2004; Horsman, 1998) and as mentioned in Chapter Four, community college students have been found to experience more adverse life events than students at four-year universities (Anders et al., 2012). Many of the participants in this study said they felt affirmed and
comfortable in the TP class, but expected the college at large (beyond the class) to be cold and unwelcoming. And one of the participants had already had an extremely poor experience with registration that left her feeling “so intimidated” and in doubt of whether she truly wanted to enroll in college after all.

The topic of TA and its effect on adult learners is not a commonly-addressed issue in the literature on thresholder transition. While it may be true that there is nothing any institution or individual can do to directly heal much of what the participants in this study experienced in terms of TA, institutions can take steps to ensure that their people and practices do not throw salt into the students’ existing wounds. According to the Director of the Traumatic Stress Institute of Klingberg Family Centers, people with histories of TA are actually retraumatized when they interact with institutions whose policies and/or practices are “punitive” or are perceived as “powering over—” rather than sharing power with—individuals seeking services (S. Brown, personal communication, January 19, 2018). Brown explained that “one size fits all solutions” or practices that “treat people like numbers” push people away from the very institutions that intend to help them.

There are pro-active, organization-wide steps practitioners can take to communicate to students that the college is a safe and trustworthy institution and that its people are committed to helping students meet their academic, vocational, and other goals. Becoming trauma-informed (TI) is one very powerful action. In a TI organization, everyone, from the admissions receptionist to the President, participates in trainings to develop an understanding of how students’ TA experiences impact their lives and their ability to seek information, take risks, respond to problems, advocate for themselves, and learn. When an approach like this is in place, “every interaction is consistent” with the goal of promoting growth (Elliott et al., 2005). As Brown explained it to me, “TI training helps organizations construct services that are more likely to be healing than harming” (personal
communication, January 19, 2018). I strongly recommend HE institutions, especially community colleges, follow the lead of many K-12 schools, mental health, and human service organizations and bring training in TI care to their campuses (Elliott, Bjelajac, Fallot, Markoff, & Reed, 2005).

**Recommendation #2 – Minimize unnecessary stress to make college more doable**

Amarillo College (AC) in Texas implemented a different sort of campus-wide initiative to support students facing significant barriers to educational participation. Suspecting that many of its students were not persisting because of issues related to poverty, AC conducted a survey of student needs and identified the top ten problems (Amarillo College, n.d.). It then devised a “holistic focus” to address many of them. Making connections with local social service agencies, AC set up a one-stop advocacy and resource center on campus. There is a food pantry, a mentoring program, a legal clinic, and a counseling service all in one office on the college campus. Struggling students can get gas cards or bus passes if they are short on money and cannot get to school temporarily. They can get a bag of groceries if they do not have enough money to shop one week. Scholarships (especially for adults with children or other caretaking responsibilities) are available, as is assistance with the cost of textbooks and tuition. This kind of initiative communicates to students, as well as everyone who works at the institution, that the college wants each student to succeed and that there is almost no reason that anyone who wants to go to school should not be able to attend. AC claims this “no excuses” policy and approach has directly contributed to increased persistence and graduation rates. Each college would need to conduct its own study to determine the needs of its particular students, but AC provides a promising model.

Both the trauma-informed approach and the one-stop support office aim to reduce stress and make students’ complicated lives a bit easier. This is extremely important for learners like those in my study whose lives were very difficult to begin with, who did not have a history of solid
connections with educational institutions, who were tentative about returning to school, and who specifically said they were yearning for less stress in their daily lives. Further evidence for the importance of a more compassionate campus culture comes from Raisman’s (2013) report on the cost of college attrition. Examining seven studies done with 2,400 former college students (six months after dropping out), Raisman found that the top two reasons for departure were: the “college doesn’t care” and “poor service and treatment” (p. 6). Strategies, such as one-stop support centers and trauma-informed training can communicate to students that the college understands—and cares about individual student well-being and academic success.

**Recommendation #3 - Foster authentic connections between thresholders and academic insiders**

One major finding of this study is that the participants were making decisions about college without having a thorough understanding about what college entails. The majority of the participants only had very general ideas about college, namely that it would require a lot of time and a lot of work. Some of their impressions of college people indicated that they perceived them as a different, perhaps better breed. Reese told me college graduates are “really well-spoken” and they had their lives together unlike people who were not in college and were just hanging around. Lily just knew that college graduates had cushier jobs than she would ever have and that they wore nice clothes and sat behind the window at her doctor’s office, working on computers. Kyra believed that because she did not always do her homework, she was not dedicated enough to be a college student. Other participants had various ideas about college people, and while some seemed confident about moving on to college, others believed they did not have what it would take to become a college student.
Thresholders would benefit from opportunities to learn about college through authentic relationships with peer mentors—people like them who are just further along in the academic process. I imagine pairs talking with each other about their various writing assignments, for example. How encouraging would it be for the thresholder to hear that her peer mentor struggled to come up with a thesis statement, too? Or to hear that the peer mentor (who came from a similar socio-economic or other) background was not only surviving college, but loving a class? The mentor could show the thresholder how she registered, what classes she chose, and why, thereby modeling skills and understandings the thresholder needed to develop. They could discuss what each was interested in and where those interests fit into specific disciplines. What is sociology, anyway? What do you actually learn and do in the culinary arts certificate program? The thresholder would have a glimpse at her possible future and might more easily imagine evolving into a newer version of herself.

Another idea for a way to show thresholders that college people are more like them than they might imagine is to invite faculty and staff to interact with thresholders in intentional and authentic ways. The University of California has a system-wide FirstGen Faculty campaign to encourage first-generation instructors to identify themselves to new students during the first week of the school year. According to the system president, professors wear FirstGen t-shirts or buttons and offer guest lectures or use other means to “foster a sense of belonging and ownership” among the first-generation student population, and to ensure that the university serves as “an engine of economic mobility” for their diverse student population (Flaherty, 2017, p. 1). Relationship-building efforts like the ones described here can forge connections that make college less foreign or intimidating. They communicate care to thresholders. They send the message that people like them not only have a place in the college setting, but succeed there.
Recommendation #4 – Re-engage thresholders as capable learners in an academic setting

In the interviews, the majority of the participants reported not having sufficient support and/or guidance when they were young, and most said that was a major cause for leaving school early. While they enjoyed speaking about their interests and their learning done outside of school and were quite confident about their experiential knowledge, half of them displayed great self-doubt once they entered the academic setting of the TP class. Because of past failures or non-completions, some doubted their ability to succeed in academic settings. Many struggled with math and several with learning differences. When one takes all of this into consideration, it is clear that the transition teacher has an extremely difficult and important job to do: to re-engage each learner in an academic setting, and do so in a way that is welcoming, encouraging, and orienting. A poor experience in the TP class may influence whether students continue on to college or not. For people whose lives have been so difficult and who have not had the luxury to focus for long on their own educational attainment, teachers must help academic newcomers experience themselves as capable learners in the academic realm. What follows are various ideas about how to accomplish this.

Create learning autobiographies and associated skill and knowledge inventories. Part of what happened in the interviews in this study was that the participants took stock of themselves. They looked back on their lives, projected forward, and considered the role family, education, work, and learning had played in their lives. It was emotional because they were trying to integrate and understand their lives and imagine their way to a better future. As students in a transition to college and careers class, they were in the process of learning academic skills and what the community college offered, but they were also learning about themselves. Most of the participants reported feeling affirmed in the class, but half of the group was unsure that college would be their path
forward or that they were college material. In the interview, participants seemed to appreciate the opportunity to take stock of themselves and to reconsider some of their beliefs, both about learning and about themselves. The interview process seemed to open doors in their hearts and their minds. At the end of our time together, for example, Yumzaa said, “I want to thank you very much for this opportunity to participate in your research. I've learned a lot because…if you didn't ask me something about what I've experienced and what motivated me to go back to school, I wouldn't have [been] able to express myself. But with the help of you, I think I'm able to express myself, and my voice has been heard by you.”

There is a long history of using educational biography with adult learners, and many educators have written about the ways in which students benefit from the process (Brown, 2001, 2002; Dominicé, 2000; Michelson & Mandell, 2004; Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010). Among these benefits are an increase in self-knowledge and self-confidence, an appreciation of what and how students learned in work and other settings, and “a new sense of…personal empowerment to achieve future goals” (Brown, 2002, p. 235; Stevens et al., 2010). Michelson and Mandell (2004) describe their use of learning biography (as part of a broader prior learning assessment portfolio) as an “academically rich” way “to welcome new learners and new experiences into the academy” (p. 25). It encourages learners “to find a voice and become active participants in their learning and in their schooling,” something which seems crucial for the participants in this study as they prepare to leave the safety of the TP class for the college campus (p. 25).

Incoming students could be taken through the kind of process I used in the interviews in order to identify past learning experiences and interests. They could then, with the help of a teacher and a list of skills and knowledge-awareness, check off the many assets they were bringing with them to the college door. Participants in this study did not see the ways in which building a
vivarium, fixing a timing belt, or making life and death decisions about the health of a client
prepared them to be college students, but a teacher could help them make those connections. In
addition to building the student’s self-knowledge and confidence, this activity would also help the
teacher know what her students were interested in and capable of. Together, the teacher and student
could identify areas of strength and those needing improvement, and use the document to track
future activities and development. And even if a student decided not to go on for further education
at that time, at least she would leave with a better understanding of her knowledge and strengths,
and the sense that education can be enlightening and growth-inducing, and that the college (and/or
the teacher) cared.

Employ effective alternative approaches to teach math. Math education was a problem for
many participants, and they are not alone. There is an immense amount of research on the
“developmental math crisis” in the community college world (Silva & White, 2013). Teachers and
researchers know that little good comes from combining students who are unsure about their ability
to learn in the academic setting with a subject and/or teaching method that disorients them and has
no relevance to their daily lives. Innovations abound in this area, and should be considered in
transition and developmental education programs.

The Carnegie Math Pathways initiative, for example, focuses on teaching math instructors
about how students learn, about growth mindset (Dweck, 2008), and how to make math more
relevant to students’ daily lives (Korbey, 2016). Some colleges are also using the ALEKS online
platform, which uses adaptive questioning to quickly determine what a student knows and does not
know while providing an individualized form of instruction that moves at a pace appropriate for
each student ("What is ALEKS?," 2017). If math is going to be taught in re-engagement courses, it
must be done in a way that encourages and empowers students rather than one that confirms their worst fears: that they are not smart or that they cannot learn.

**Plan for the widest diversity of learners, learning styles, and abilities.** The director of the TP program told me that probably half of the students had some sort of learning disability (LD), and three of the ten participants in this study spoke about learning difficulties in the interviews. While one had been diagnosed as a child and had learned some strategies, which supported her in school, she did not disclose her challenges to her TP teacher and told me she found classes to be “mentally draining.” Two other participants suspected they had LD problems, which affected their ability to learn and/or retain information from class and they sounded dejected by their inability to learn. Both were understandably hesitant about continuing on for further education post TP.

It is challenging to identify learners who may have a LD because, as was apparent in this study, students may not want to disclose a known problem or be singled out. Some students who struggle may simply assume their problem has to do with their intelligence rather than their brain. One approach many colleges are taking is to train faculty in *universal design* (UD) (Burgstahler & Cory, 2009). Rather than being a reactive approach that sees “disability as an individual’s problem,” UD is a proactive, social justice approach that sees “inclusion as a responsibility of the institution” (p. 12). In addition to being helpful to learners with particular LDs, UD makes learning more accessible for ESOL students and other post-traditional adult students. Overall, UD in HE is a promising framework that addresses diversity by creating educational materials and environments that are “welcoming, inclusive, and usable for everyone” (p. 17) no matter one’s learning style, gender, socio-economic status, age, race or ethnicity, and so on.

UD teaches the educator to plan for and adjust to the needs and preferences of any learner rather than expecting the learner to adjust to a limited teaching approach. Just a few of the many
ways an instructor might incorporate UD principles in her teaching are: to present information in various ways (not just lecture or in text, for example) and to invite students to make choices about how to respond or demonstrate their knowledge/understanding (Burgstahler & Cory, 2009).

Professors of a graduate course at Harvard, for example, offered students a choice of two cognitive neuroscience textbooks: one thick book that was very text-heavy and another thinner book with many more graphics and images. Students were encouraged to look at both books and see for themselves which helped them more and in what ways. There are numerous ways to adapt materials and entire course designs using UD principles. Landmark College (n.d.), for example, offers regular online trainings in UD, which I, myself, plan to take.

This section has provided ideas about ways practitioners can communicate to thresholders that the community college understand, cares, and is committed to student success. Whether at the institutional, program, or classroom level, it is essential to acknowledge that thresholders have now, and for many years may have had, very difficult and complicated lives that prevented them from achieving what they hoped for themselves and their families. Along the way, they have also learned a great deal, and developed a wide array of skills, knowledge, and awareness that can be applied and built on in college. If we want academic newcomers to come, learn, and stay, the college cannot be perceived as yet another confusing or obstructive institution or experience. While thresholders re-arrange their entire lives and schedules to accommodate the institution of college, the college, too, must re-arrange itself and its’ practices to meet thresholders where they are.

Further Research

I envision this study as a kind of digitally animated graphic of one group of thresholders at one community college door. Readers have the ability to click on various words or concepts, such as educational background or aspiring for change and jump to a new window that offers a more in-
depth view on these women’s lives and perspectives. There is much more to explore, however, than what could possibly be included in this particular graphic. As I analyzed stories, I imagined entire studies that focused just on one individual, for example. While some might scoff at such a miniscule sample size, such research would no doubt surface new issues, perspectives, experiences, and findings that could inform our understanding of the thresholder experience and suggest directions for institutional, pedagogical, and practitioner change.

There are so many studies others can do in the future to expand this conversation. For example, there were interesting similarities and differences between the immigrant participants and the native English speakers in this study. Is it more painful or difficult to re-engage with an educational system one perceived as wounding and ineffective (e.g., Reese) as compared to engaging anew with a completely different system in a different language and country than where one was raised (e.g., Yumzaa)? What is the significance of the kinds of work and experiential knowledge one brings to the college door in terms of how a thresholder sees herself and her capabilities in the academic setting? What happens to students who complete the transition class and move on to college and what happens to students who complete the class, but do not continue on to college? What options for work, healing, further learning, and development exist for them? How did the transition course impact them and their beliefs about themselves and college? This study was about women, so a study of other genders would expand understanding, as well. So, too, would studies of younger learners in their twenties.

In order to gather ideas and improve on or expand the kinds of transition programs and curricula currently in use, researchers could search the literature—and beyond—for successful designs and pedagogical approaches used to re-engage adults in further and higher education. A recent article in Adult Education Quarterly, for example, highlighted a successful career-oriented
nonformal transformative educational program designed “to provide new direction and hope” for South African adult learners whose lives were characterized by high levels of “stress and disruption” (Cox & John, 2016, p. 305). As I read, I found many ideas for courses or modules, which could be effective with learners like those in my study. Another angle is to look at successful alternative college degree programs, such as those at the University Without Walls at the University of Massachusetts (UWW, 2016), SUNY Empire State College (SUNY Empire State College, 2018), and College Unbound (College Unbound, n.d.). All have developed very different, but successful approaches that, among other strategies, use mentoring and students’ prior experiences to introduce and orient adult learners to college-level work—and to themselves, as developing college students. Researchers and practitioners can work collaboratively to think outside of the traditional adult and higher education boxes to both find and disseminate inspiring and relevant thresholder interventions.

In terms of method, I would like to see (or conduct) a study in which large numbers of thresholder participants were trained to gather stories from their peers and others about their past educational experiences and the role they imagine college might play in their lives. It would also be fascinating to follow participants over time in a longitudinal study to learn about how their past experiences, experiences in transition classes, and circumstances of their current lives interact and influence their beliefs about learning, college, and their capabilities. If some of the recommendations in this study were implemented, researchers could track the experiences of and impacts on students, faculty, and staff, as well as suggest new, promising pedagogical approaches and institutional responses that support institutional culture change and thresholder engagement.
Conclusion

It seems everyone in the US is being told that if they want a decent job, they need to get some sort of college credential or degree (Carnevale et al., 2016; Merisotis, 2017; Pusser et al., 2007; Reddy, 2012). The country lacks skilled workers and unless institutions of HE produce more qualified graduates, the US will not be able to compete in the global economy. Many researchers and scholars focus on low completion rates and what is described as a major “crisis” in HE (Complete College America, n.d.; Price & Tovar, 2014). I am, of course, influenced by such studies. Rather than being so concerned about the effects of the crisis on the economy or on educational institutions, however, I think more about the effects on the adult learners, themselves. As an educator, I am inspired to act.

Millions of adults dream of furthering their education both for economic and personal reasons, and many of them—like the ten women in this study—have already taken the bold step of approaching the college door. They are here. I realize they do not have the academic skills and life experiences many educators expect college aspirants to have, but as someone who came from the world of ABE and who has taught leadership development in ESOL and adult literacy contexts, I have a different perspective. Give me people who want to learn, give me space, time, and committed colleagues, and I believe educators can help people learn and change—and succeed in furthering their education.

As HE practitioners, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to meet thresholders at the door, to welcome them, and to listen to them. If we hope to increase enrollment and completion rates, we have to focus on the learners and the learning. And we, ourselves, must be willing to change. We need to find ways to help people who were not steeped in the culture of HE to find threads they can follow into the fabric of the college learning community while staying connected to
their daily worlds outside of the academic setting. The participants in this study described futures in which they would have more options, do meaningful work, help other people, and stand up and speak up for themselves. It is our job as practitioners to respond to these aspirations, to help people reframe past “failures,” (re)invigorate their love of learning, and create the conditions in which thresholders can experience themselves as capable learners in a college setting that is nourishing, enlightening, and inspiring.

Further, we need to push our institutions to acknowledge that when experiences of trauma, adversity, and ongoing stress characterize the lives of incoming students, it is crucial we present the institution as a trustworthy and supportive place, committed to making the college endeavor pleasant and doable. Our success with thresholders will have a direct impact not only on them, but on their families, communities, our institutions, and our society as a whole. In addition to producing graduates or qualified workers, institutional leaders must commit to supporting the learning and development of aspiring adult students who have long been denied access to educational engagement and dialogue. Educational justice should be the goal—learning, empowerment, and completion the natural outcomes.
APPENDIX A  INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview #1 - Introduction

As I told you before, I am working on my PhD and part of what I am required to do for my degree is to conduct a big research project to try to answer some questions that have been nagging at me for years. I enjoy helping people learn, and ever since I taught adults in an ESOL program, and later in a literacy program, I have wanted to help people who wanted to go to college get there. This research project is designed to help me gather stories from adults like you so I can better understand how TP students think and feel, and hopefully, so I can help design better programs or practices that help adults be successful in college. So, I am going to ask you some questions today so I can learn more about you, your past experiences—especially with school and work, and about your future goals and hopes.

Timeline

Here is a timeline that shows one person’s life history organized around significant life experiences, starting with childhood and coming into the present. (Explain the timeline.)

I’d like you to take some time to draw your own timeline and then to tell me about it.

As you do create this, please include some of the important events or memories from school, work, and your life, in general, that have had an important influence on who you are as you imagine walking into a college class at this time in your life.

(After they finish.)

How was that experience for you—creating this timeline?

Can you tell me now about the events you included on this timeline?

Questions

1. (Pointing to the school period of the timeline.) How would you describe yourself as a student during this time?

Can you tell me something that you enjoyed about school? Something that interested you? How about something you that you struggled with?

2. Can you tell me about a time – either in school or in the years since then - when you were not a student, but a sort of a teacher – when you taught another person how to do something you knew how to do?

What did you teach them? How? Can you describe how the experience was for you?

3. I’m curious to understand how you decided that college was the next step for you at this time. How did you happen to come to the TP at this time of your life?
4. Would you please describe how you imagine a typical day might be for you when you are taking college classes? (Start in the morning and take us through a day.)

5. I’m wondering, now, as we are talking and you are thinking about going to college, what thoughts or feelings come up for you? Hopes? Any fears?

6. If you could tell your future professors anything about you before you enter the classroom, what would you tell them?

   Why is it important for them to know that about you?

7. Can you describe for me ways in which your past experiences (both in and out of school – pointing to the timeline) may have prepared you for this new experience of being a college student?

8. Imagine it is five years from now. How do you think your life will be different then compared to today? (What will you be doing? Where will you be working? How will you feel?)

9. So, millions of adults are going to college and getting certificates and degrees now and millions are going and not completing, as well. Sometimes people decide college is not for them or maybe they get a job and don’t have time for school or something else comes between them and school. If for some reason, you do not complete what you’re aiming for now, what would be your plan B? In other words, what other paths you can imagine taking if college turns out not to be the path for you now?

10. (Pointing to the timeline.) If your current self could talk to your younger self now, what would you say?

Demographic Survey

Finally, would you please fill out this sheet, which gives me some of the information you may already have told me, but all in one place? (Again, I will not use your real name when I write up my findings.)

I want to thank you so much for sharing your stories with me today. I know this may not have been easy for you, and I want you to know that I will learn a lot from this interview and the other ones I am conducting. And I am so grateful for your time and honesty.

Remember: ASK AGAIN AT END IF THEY STILL GIVE THEIR INFORMED CONSENT.

AND GIVE THEM THE COUNSELING FORM.
Interview #2 Questions

A. Clarify anything unclear or missed from 1st interview

B. New questions

Learning and Knowledge Gained *Outside of School*

11. What is something you had to learn how to do on your own or something you figured out on your own? (moving, parenting, immigration, etc.)
   - How did you learn about it?
   - What problems did you have while you were learning?
   - How did you respond when you got stumped or had those problems?

12. Do you think past learning (from life, work, previous school) will help you in any way in college? *What connections can you make between your experience learning XYZ (or creating XYZ) and what you might be asked to do in a college class?*

13. Can you tell me about someone you have really interesting conversations with or questions that really interest you? *(Who, about what, why interesting, how do you feel when you talk with this person? How do you after talking with him/her? What effect does it have on you when you have these kinds of conversations or think about ideas that excite you?)*

Learning and Knowledge Gained *in School*

INTRO: Now, I’d like to hear about ways in which participating in the TP may have affected your understanding of your abilities or your beliefs about yourself, and your aspirations/goals/future.

14. TP
   - What is something you have done or learned or discovered in the TP that excites you? Scares you?
   - Are there things you have realized you are better at than you thought?
   - Are there things you are having trouble with in TP?
   - Can you tell me any stories about something you learned in the TP class that felt really important to you or that changed the way you think about yourself, your life, the world, etc.?
   - What is something you wished you had learned in TP, but haven’t?
   - In what ways is the TP class similar to how you imagine a regular college class will be?

15. Who do you talk to about class/school/homework, etc.??

Wrap up

16. When you think about learning throughout your life (show timeline), how describe the kind of learning or the quality of the learning you do *outside of school* compared to your learning *in school* (in the TP)?
Debra’s Timeline

APPENDIX B  SAMPLE TIMELINES

Childhood

1959/1960

I was the youngest of seven kids. I lived in a small town in Texas. My parents worked hard to support us. My dad was a farmer, and my mom was a homemaker. We lived in a small house with five other kids. Our life was simple, but we were happy.

Elementary School

1962

I started first grade at a small school in the countryside. It was a good experience, and I made many friends. We played outside and had fun.

Middle School

1978

I entered junior high school. It was a big adjustment, and I struggled to make friends. I was shy and didn’t want to stand out. I felt different from the other kids.

High School

1984

I graduated from high school. I didn’t have many friends, and I felt isolated. I had a hard time fitting in and felt like I didn’t belong.

College

1996

I went to college for four years. It was challenging, and I had a tough time adapting to college life. I worked hard, but it was difficult.

Post-College

1998

I worked for a year after college. It was tough, but I learned a lot. I met new people and made new friends.

Jr. High, 1980s

I struggled in school. I didn’t fit in, and I felt like I was different from the other kids.

1991

I had a difficult time figuring things out. I didn’t know what I wanted to do for the future.

1980

I worked at a factory to help support my family. It was tough, and I felt like I was stuck in a rut.

1970

I was a single mother who worked hard to support my children. It was difficult, but I did it for my kids.

1960

I was born in Detroit, Michigan. It was a tough time in my life. I worked hard to support my family.

1950

I was born in the United States. My parents were immigrants, and I grew up in a small town in Texas.

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Yumzaa's Timeline (page 1 of 2)

- 1980: I decided to make up the yr.
- 1981: High school (Secondary School)
- 1982: I got broken
- 1983: I was married
- 1985: My child left my basic education
- 1986: My child couldn't continue my community school
- 1987: I couldn't pronounce a rubber car
- 1988: I was whipped and expelled
- 1989: My child left school
- 1990: My child
- 1992: Today

I had to teach myself 1st.

I didn't have a teacher.

I had to teach myself to read better.
1991
My brother, his English teacher, set me up with a mentor in the school. We did well in school.

1992
Finished school. 12th grade.

1993
Science, Chinese, Math.

1998
Graduated HS.

Final yr in HS, preparing to go to college.

Note: As a cook for the kitchen staff, I did the dishes and fetched water at night. No time to study. 8th grade.

1999
No time to study.

1999
Jr. year, very bullied. 8th grade.

1999
Senior year, very bullied. 8th grade.
APPENDIX C  DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. First name and pseudonym: ____________________ aka ____________________

2. If you’d like me to send you a copy of our conversation, please give me your full name and mailing address:

3. Town of residence:

4. Age:

5. Gender:

6. Racial or ethnic background:

7. Native language:

8. Country of birth:

9. How long have you lived in the USA?

10. Do you have dependents (children, parents, or others you are responsible for)?
    If so, how many, and ages?

11. Are you single, in a relationship or married?
12. Are you working right now?  
Yes  
No  
If yes, how many hours each week?  
What kind of job(s)?

13. Do you have your high school diploma or your GED/HiSET?

14. When was the last time you were in school before TP?

15. Have you ever taken college classes before?  
If so, what did you take and when?

16. Has anyone in your immediate family taken college classes?  
If yes, who and what did they study?

17. Has anyone in your immediate family completed a college degree?  
If so, who and what type of degree?

What about other close relatives or friends?  
If so, who and what type of degree?
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