# The "Traditional" College Student: A Smaller and Smaller Minority and Its Implications for Diversity and Access Institutions

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What happens when a norm of behavior becomes the exception numerically, yet the social construction of that norm remains prominent? When such a situation occurs, those who do not conform to that norm tend to be marginalized despite their existence as the collective majority. Conceptually, they become, in essence, a *marginalized* majority. This is exactly what has occurred for the majority of postsecondary students in the United States.

#### The Other Half

Our conceptions of the typical idealized college student are based on traditional notions and an imagined norm of someone who begins college immediately after high school, enrolls full-time, lives on campus, and is ready to begin college level classes. Yet, such an assumed norm does not reflect the diversity of today's college students.

Although the community college sector is often treated as an adjunct to U.S. higher education, it...constitutes the first stop for roughly half of today's college students.

Rebecca Cox (2009)

In contrast to the popular image of what a college student is, enrollment data reveals a different picture. Over the past half-century, the greatest opening up of access to higher education has occurred through the doorway of community colleges, which have grown and expanded far faster than the four-year sector. Since the mid 1960's undergraduate four-year institutions have doubled their enrollments, yet two-year colleges have expanded at more than twice that rate, and now their enrollment is approaching half of all undergraduates (Cox, 2009; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006).

In fact, as *Table 1* (below) displays, there are just as many undergraduates in community colleges (44%) as they are in four- year public and four-year private not-for-profit institutions combined (43%). And a rapidly growing four-year for-profit sector now enrolls the next largest proportion of students (7%), with all for-profits enrolling 12% of students overall (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009, Table 74). It is apparent from this table that focusing our lens on the traditional four-year sector as the norm is quite dismissive of a clear majority of our

nation's students and the institutions that serve them. They are the relatively neglected *other half* of U.S. higher education.

Table 1: Headcount of students enrolled as a percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in U.S. institutions, 2008-2009 academic year (23,668,037 students)

4 year institutions (50%)	2 year institutions (47%)	1 year institutions (3%)
4 year public	2 year public	1 year public
(30.6%)	(44.2%)	(.4%)
4 year non-profit	2 year non-profit	1 year non-profit
(12.5%)	(.3%)	(.1%)
4 year for-profit	2 year for-profit	1 year for-profit
(7.2%)	(2.8%)	(2%)

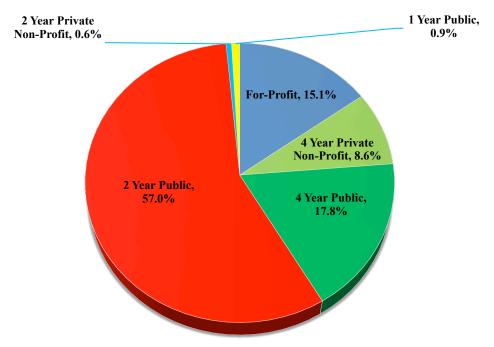
When only first-year students are considered, the freshman class is even more distributed away from traditional four-year contexts, as *Table 2* shows (below). The majority of first-year students (57%) are actually enrolled in community colleges while only slightly over a quarter (26%) is enrolled in four-year non-profit and public colleges and universities. And the growing popularity of for-profit four- year colleges is reflected in their 15% share of all first-year student enrollments (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010, Table 241).

Table 2: Percentage of first-year undergraduates in each type of U.S. postsecondary institution, 2007-08 academic year

4 year institutions	2 year institutions	1 year institutions
4 year public	2 year public	1 year public
(17.8%)	(57%)	(.9%)
4 year non-profit	2 year and 1 year non-profit	
(8.6%)	(.6%)	
2 year to 4 year for-profit		1 year for-profit
(10.6%)		(4.5%)

Figure 1 (below) graphically illustrates the same distribution across institutions types.

Figure 1: Percentage of first-year undergraduates in each type of U.S. postsecondary institution 2007-08



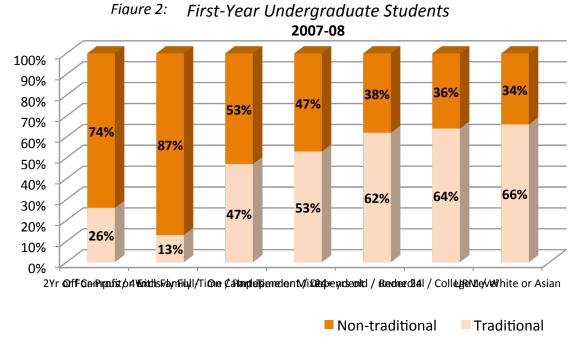
First-Year Undergraduate Enrollments 2007-08

Clearly, the dominant role of community colleges and for-profit colleges as an entry point for almost three-quarters of our nation's students is out of line with the attention that the traditional four-year sector institutions receive as bastions of opportunity. In addition, even among those students beginning in a four year college, only half of those entrants maintain continued enrollment in a single institution, with many swirling between the four-year and two-year sector (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). The realization that *the other half* is actually more *the other three-quarters* of undergraduates entering higher education, makes the extreme marginalization of this majority especially troubling. Such marginalization perhaps contributes to marginalizing policy actions, such as the movement of the funding allocated to community colleges by the Obama administration from the Department of Education to the Department of Labor as workforce development funds. This shift occurred despite the known fact that an overwhelming majority of community college students, for decades, have and continue to desire bachelor's degree goals (Dougherty, 1994).

# In short, the traditional college student is no longer the typical college student

(Rebecca Cox, 2009)

The model of the ideal student is certainly no longer typical, and in fact, many non-traditional characteristics are now more prevalent than traditional ones. Further considering incoming first-year students in college credit classes, *Figure 2* (below) shows that well over a third (38%) are now aged 24 or older. More than half (53%) are *not* enrolled exclusively full-time. Instead they attend part-time or part-year. Almost half (47%) are financially independent, and half of those (25%) have financial dependents of their own. A shocking mere 13% of beginning students live on campus, while about half commute from off-campus, and close to a third live with their parents or family (NCES, 2010, Table 240).



The degree to which students are prepared for college level coursework is another dimension of diversity, arguably the most critical, within undergraduate populations. More than a third (36%) of all beginning college students has taken remedial/developmental courses in college. Interestingly, although the vast majority of all remedial students are enrolled at public two-year colleges, the percentage of first-year students at public *four-year* non-doctorate institutions who have taken

remedial classes (39%) is almost as high as the percentage of first-year remedial students in public *two-year* colleges (42%) (NCES, 2010, Table 241). And these percentages are relatively low, since they exclude those referred into remedial level classes who chose the option to forego those classes. At many community colleges, more than 80% of students test into the remedial/developmental level, as is the case in the CUNY community college system (Jaggars & Hodara, 2011).

## The Norm of Multi-Dimensional Diversity

Diversity in higher education is too often framed narrowly as the inclusion of non-white students into America's elite private and public colleges and universities to create a more "multicultural" student body. The framing of this pursuit decries a scarcity of such "diverse" students. However, in many of the broad access public universities and small, private, less selective colleges, a diverse and multicultural student body is present and growing. In fact, currently, in the *other half* of higher education, such diversity abounds, and this abundance occurs along multiple dimensions, not just racial/ethnic and SES. In this sense, diversity is the norm, not the exception.

In addition to SES, gender, and race/ethnicity, parameters of non-traditional diversity that need to be seriously considered include, among others: the type of institutions students are accessing; on or off-campus residence choices and commuting patterns while enrolled; patterns of full part-time and part-year attendance; age; financial status as dependent, independent, and independent with dependents; and level of college preparedness. In fact, each dimension of diversity in the list reflects greater proportions of non-traditional status among undergraduates than does race/ethnicity (figure 2, above), which makes attention to them even more compelling. For example, under-represented minority students are disproportionately underprepared, which make this dimension of their college experience inextricably linked for that subgroup. Latina/o students and low SES students are concentrated disproportionately in community colleges and broad access universities, so any analysis or discussion of this subgroup must contend with this set of conditions. Patterns of work and parenting while enrolled will inevitably affect students of different ages differently. Which students are more likely to commute, live with family, or be financially

independent? Are older students more likely female with children?

These dimensions of each student's college experience cannot be extracted, and institutions serving these students are compelled to respond in ways that address these multiple dimensions of diversity. Several decades ago, feminist scholars of color discussed their insights on how race, class, and gender cannot be disentangled because each is simultaneously relevant in lived experience. Similarly, higher education scholars should be unwilling to continue to ignore the fact that diversity is so common as to be considered a norm in all but a minority of higher education contexts. It is the water in which open and broad access institutions swim. And the diversity extends far beyond race, class, and gender, and so should our frameworks and the scope of our research efforts.

Unfortunately, the discussion of diversity in terms of scarcity at the top reifies the notion that larger systems of inequity can be addressed by focusing on inclusion into the more elite four-year sectors. Such a focus overshadows the ways in which access to college is inherently structured to exclude the broader majority, which masks the inequities inherent in the stratification of higher education institutions and opportunities. Discussions of diversity and equity need to be broadened to address who has access to what institutions and resources, and how elite institutions and their students benefit from this structured inequality (Labaree, 1997). Limiting the "diversity agenda" to a narrow focus on letting underrepresented minorities "in" to the top tiers of higher education once again excludes and renders invisible the realities of the vast majority of non-traditional students with non-traditional pathways who are worthy of inclusion in the diversity agenda – the other three-quarters flooding the gates of entry into our postsecondary institutions every year.

#### Who Counts?

A conceptual overemphasis on a student ideal that predominates as if open and broad access institutions, their students, and their faculty and administrators do not exist, can operate surreptitiously to exclude and de-prioritize. Yes, to be fair, we do acknowledge that they exist, but there are ways in which our professional behaviors (our speaking and writing) exclude or section off the broadest access contexts and their students as something separate. This sends a signal connoting that they 'don't really count.' In reality, community colleges, other private two-year colleges, for-

profit colleges, and four-year commuter institutions, all do count in the larger equation of postsecondary access, funding, the instructional labor pool, the wider economy, and our societal mission of opportunity that higher education fulfills. Our parameters for considering issues of diversity need to expand to recognize postsecondary institutional diversity and the diversity of students and diverse college-going behaviors within the *other half* of higher education. It is important for scholars to be self-conscious enough to understand how our own language and framing contributes to the marginalization of the other half and the continued reification of the traditional college student and traditional college-going patterns.

As an example of what tends to 'count' in our conceptual popular imagination and what does not, I will utilize an example from one of the most recent widely discussed acclaimed and important books published on U.S. colleges, *Academically Adrift* (2011). (*Please note this book is a valuable and stellar piece of work by successful researchers, so I feel comfortable 'picking on' these outstanding scholars for whom I have greatest respect*). The book focuses on traditional-age students beginning at four-year colleges and universities. Despite the narrow specificity of this sample, this book begins in the first 19 pages with a commentary on "U.S. Higher Education," "colleges and universities," "undergraduate learning," "undergraduate education," "student cultures," "the college professoriate," and "the higher education system," that excludes and ignores community colleges (and other non-traditional institutions) altogether, and it frames "college culture" as the culture of residential college life for traditional-age students engaging in a peer culture dominated by social activities and fraternities and sororities. They find professors do not expect undergraduates to work very hard to earn good grades, and undergraduates are more focused on social experiences than they are on academic achievement.

The entire discussion of these topics revolves around public and private four-year colleges and research universities, without even a hint of apology or acknowledgement that half of all institutions and *well over half* of today's undergraduates have been excluded from the discussion. Yet, because of our the prioritizing of four-year traditional notions and the marginalization of other college-going patterns, it seems entirely appropriate to a reader to begin reading a book about

"college" without a single mention of community colleges or other two-year institutions or forprofit institutions. It also seems entirely reasonable that esteemed professor and scholar, James
Rosenbaum, would suggest this book "might be the most important book on higher education in a
decade." However, it would rarely, if ever be deemed appropriate, or publishable, to write a book
(or article) about community colleges and discuss their history, student culture, faculty composition,
and system of funding for more than the first tenth of the book as if the content represented or could
speak for *all* of higher education. In fact, most of the time, qualification about the institutional focus
appears in the title or abstract (see the work of Bailey, Bragg, Dougherty, Laanan, and Perin).

To further emphasize my point, when the sampling for the Academically Adrift study is discussed on page 20, the authors state that they carefully considered the representativeness of their student sample from the twenty-four colleges included by comparing it to "of U.S. Higher Education more broadly." Yet their comparison extends only to traditional age students in four*year institutions* nationwide, as if this was an adequate representation of the entire population of students and institutions in the U.S. higher education system. Despite this narrowing of who "counts" as a college student in this study, the rest of the book continues to frame discussion as relevant to the "college student life" generally (e.g., p 81) and the experiences of the "typical college student" (e.g., p 88). The methodological and statistical rigor of the study and its sample is sound, yet the book suffers from an ailment common to most of us – the prioritizing of a traditional college student ideal and the inappropriate transference of that ideal onto the conditions of today's higher education system and its students. This habit, I argue, marginalizes, and sometimes renders nearly invisible from the conversation, the functions and circumstances of the other half of our postsecondary institutions and students. Multiple studies have shown that students commuting to two and four-year colleges and non-traditional aged students do not prioritize the social aspects of campus life, and in fact, often actively avoid them in order to preserve time to focus on their academic obligations and other work, family, and community obligations. Where do these students, and the instructors and faculty who work very hard to teach them, fit into this framework?

I will elaborate another example of how our scholarship marginalizes the diversity of

institutional type inherent in postsecondary attendance while prioritizing one sector. I will then discuss how a broadening of the focus to include diverse institution types can enrich our analyses. The research involves on one of our most compelling issues of diversity – the experiences and challenges of under-represented racial/ethnic minority males, possibly the most at-risk subgroup in U.S. higher education. Only slightly more than a third of all African-American and Latina/o undergraduates are male (NCES, 2010, Table 74).

Over the last decade in particular, research on the pathways, attainment, and experiences of African American and Latino males has been developing into quite an extensive body of research. Some studies analyzed enrollment, persistence, and attainment gaps (Aborna & Nora, 2007; Bowen, Chingos & McPherson, 2009; Fry, 2002; Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; King, 2010; Ryu, 2010; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008), while others examined institutional policies and practices (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008; Zell 2011) and qualitative student narratives regarding identity, racism, and organizational experiences (Baber, 2010; Donovan, Schawartz & Guido-DiBrito, 2009; Harper, 2009; Harper & Davis III, 2011; Harris III and Harper, 2008). All of this research, however, tends to focus on students attending four-year institutions, despite the fact that 43% of all African American male college students and over half of all Latino male college students are enrolled at community colleges (Table 74). In fact, 60% of Latinas/os begin their postsecondary education at a community college (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Padilla, 2005).

Studies that include minority males who are *not* attending four-year institutions have been less prevalent (Harris III &Harper, 2008) yet extremely valuable in providing some empirical evidence that African American and Latino males at community colleges behave in ways that are distinct from their four-year counterparts and distinct from females of the same race/ethnicity. For example, in contrast to African American males attending four-year institutions, those at community colleges are less likely to talk with faculty outside of class time, meet with an academic advisor, or participate in co-curricular activities. (Flowers, 2006; Pope, 2006). Latino males in community colleges are less likely than Latinas to engage 'help-seeking' behaviors, such as utilizing academic services and participating in learning communities (Saenz, Lee, Kim, Valdez,

Bukosi, and Hatch, 2010). Further findings indicate that, net of other factors, African American and Latino male students who perceive a supportive campus environment are more likely to persist to degree completion (Hagedorn, Maxwell & Hampton, 2001), and more diverse institutions, such as Hispanic-serving community colleges, are positively associated with Latino males' perceptions of support (Perrakis & Hagedorn, 2010; Nunez, Sparks & Hernandez, 2010). Similarly, Perrakis (2008) finds that both African American and White male students attending racially diverse community colleges in Los Angeles feel more positively about campus climate and their ability to complete coursework and degree requirements in comparison to males in less diverse colleges. Finally, more qualitative work offers an interesting twist. Zell (2009) reveals Latinas in community colleges who credit their partners (including husbands, fiancés, and boyfriends) for their role in their successful persistence through college. The women studied described partners who themselves did not have a college degree, and in some cases, these men had put their own college goals aside in order to support their partner. Clearly, attention to minority males outside of four-year college contexts has been a scarce but valuable addition to our knowledge on such an important topic.

## **Re-conceptualizing the Perceived Norm**

What are the other inherent problems with drawing from "traditional" theories to understand this collective majority of students? A major consequence is that those who don't fit the mold are framed as deficient in some respect. By using traditional theories, students are measured against the parameters of a traditional norm of college-going that is actually no longer a behavioral norm. Not surprisingly, nontraditional students are found wanting. Our centering of the traditional student norm focuses attention on remedying the deficiencies of the deficient students rather than on remedying the deficiencies of institutions that are failing to best serve the new collective majority. By deconstructing assumptions about this fictional ideal student norm, we can perhaps better focus attention on the ways in which postsecondary education is structured to perpetuate inequities.

I will use theories of college student persistence to exemplify the limitations of operating under this perceived norm. Traditional theories of student persistence, as many have argued, were

founded on a norm of college-going for predominantly white 18-23 year olds, enrolled full-time, residing on campus, and, for the most part, beginning with classes at the college level (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). Critics rightly denounce Tinto's framework in particular for assuming a disconnection from a home community must occur before integration into a college community can happen, which discounts the experiences of students whose racial/ethnic community of origin remains salient (e.g Guiffrida, 2006; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1992, 1999). Furthermore, frameworks that originated with traditional residential students in mind, most readily discount the experiences of *more than half* of our undergraduate population -- two-year college students and four-year commuting students who enroll in college while *remaining* in their communities of origin. This has left a void in our understanding of how integration – a sense of connection, belonging and congruence with the college community – happens for commuting students who do not break former connections in order to forge new connections in some semi-isolated residential college social world.

However this does not render such theories completely useless. Neither theories of college persistence nor other traditional theories should be dismissed completely. As Deil-Amen (2011) and Karp, Hughes, and O'Gara (2010) contend, aspects of these frameworks, such as the concept of integration, can be expanded to include the realities of students traditionally marginalized by such theories. In particular, their experiences challenge the dichotomous notion of integration occurring along purely academic or social lines. Instead, commuting two-year college students described "socio-academic integrative moments," which were events, activities, interactions, and relationships in which academic and social elements combined simultaneously to enhance learning, information acquisition, procedural knowledge, feelings of college belonging, college identity, connectedness, and intellectual competence. Often times these moments occurred within and just beyond the classroom, which is often the most common place where commuting students meet other students and the faculty, develop a sense of belonging, become involved in opportunities for engagement, and learn success strategies (Hughes, Karp & O'Gara, 2009).

Unlike more "traditional" student expectations, purely social relationships were often

devalued by two-year college commuters and even described as unwanted obstacles or distractions (Deil-Amen, 2011). Other studies also find that nontraditional college goers view the social aspects of college life as distracting and reinforce their motivation and commitment to their college goals through a clear sense of purpose rather than through social ties with college peers (Zell, 2009). Subjective college experiences that cultivate the development of a "college-going identity" and validate the pursuit of college goals are also important for non-traditional groups in ways that may not be as salient for students already originating from social class communities with strong college-going norms (Collatos et al., 2004; Saunders & Serna, 2004). These findings are consistent with what other researchers have found regarding the importance of feelings of community and belonging for community college, commuter, and Latina/o students in particular (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Deil-Amen & Rios-Aguilar, 2011; Karp & Hughes, 2009; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Torres, 2006).

A reframing of our view of diversity in higher education reveals even further how the conceptual practice of confining the diversity agenda to a discussion of "getting in" to selective institutions is limited at best and absurd at worst. No, we don't want to render the word diversity useless or ridiculous by including so many subpopulations, and this fear often leads to the confining of diversity to particular vulnerable (often legally defined) subpopulations. However, is this practice of drawing boxes around a targeted set of diversity characteristics the most effective approach? What if we took the definition of diversity to its logical extreme and attempted to map it and its interrelationships more carefully? What if we made the study of these interrelationships and their impact on opportunity the focus of a research agenda centered on equity? This exercise might effectively make visible the invisible majority. It might reveal with more clarity exactly what institutions "need" to increase diversity and which (the majority of institutions) do not. The uneven playing field is not only about SES and underrepresented minority student status. The discussions of the uneven playing field need to be about *the uneven playing field* and how that shapes trajectories into and through the hierarchy of higher education. By limiting diversity to only particular student characteristics without acknowledging other dimensions of diversity — including diversity in

institutional type – we are shortchanging the equity agenda.

There is *no doubt* that diversifying the student body and the faculty and administration of this nation's most elite colleges and universities is a valuable and necessary task. However, the diversity agenda needs to expand to recognize that privilege is structured, and the need for equity shifts as the context of the institution shifts. For instance, there is almost no discussion of how non-selective, non-prestigious four-year colleges and universities have increased their racial/ethnic minority enrollments drastically. We assume this spells opportunity, but one study reveals how such an institution's career center responded to pressures to preserve its reputation and legitimacy with employers by mitigating inequality for some while reproducing inequality for others, namely African-American and Latina/o students, regardless of their qualifications (Damaske, 2009).

# Where Subjectivity Meets Objective Diversity

Some of the most meaningful aspects of students' diverse backgrounds are difficult to quantify and categorize. For example, the ways in which students given meaning to their college pursuits in the context of their family relationships can vary substantially, and the more elite institutions tend to reward students who fit only one particular mold in this regard. For instance, in my study of low income students in a university context, many of them (mainly Latina/o) consider interdependence and mutual obligation between family members to be of high moral value in family dynamics. This is not unlike prior ethnographies that detail the interdependent systems of families surviving and functioning in contexts of poverty (Stack, 1997). Students who separate from their families to attend college on-campus experience the psychological and emotional stress and anxiety of removing themselves from this interdependent system within their family and extended family. They feel guilty about any additional financial burdens their absence might cause. Rather than feeling entitled to the financial support of their families, hard-working, committed, high achieving students are concerned and uncomfortable about their "selfish" pursuit of college for individual gain while their families are struggling (Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, Irwin, & Gonzalez Canche, 2010).

Students with this perspective differ sharply from our notions about millennial generation

students and their "helicopter parents," which are based on middle and upper class norms. Therefore, these nontraditional students find themselves operating within a university context that privileges one set of norms over another, with university staff keeping parents at arms-length, encouraging separation from presumed 'overly-involved' parents rather than welcoming and educating those parents who are not as familiar with college life and helping students deal with the pressures of feeling obligated to continue helping their families. As a result, the lower-income students and Latino students were left alone with the pressures of trying to straddle school with helping and remaining present their families and informing their parents of the expectations of college work and life. One low-income white female student said:

My family has a lot of financial problems, so that's another stress that I'm constantly dealing with. I have to call them like, "Mom, are you gonna be able to pay rent this month?" ...My dad...he's security, so he only works weekends, and then my mom keeps getting less and less hours. So, I've actually used some of my loans to help them pay their rent this year.

A commuting Latino male who lives with his family is asked if they are supportive and he said:

I think they try to be, but a lot of the time, because they were so used to me being there all the time, and always helping out, always doing this and that, it's sort of hard for them to, I guess, deal with the fact that I have ten papers to write, three books to read. And they're like, "You need to get these things done," and I'm like, "I know. I'll do them in the morning, but I can't do them now." And it's really hard for them to understand that I have all these teachers, and all these things that I have to do.... Sometimes it's with help like, like moving a lot of stuff since we're downgrading since we can't afford anything, so we're selling a lot of stuff, so it's moving things or um, or just little things like going to the store for them. Just simple things, because they're busy too.

Another Latino male who talks to his mom twice a day on the phone explained:

I'm the first person to go to college in my family so they don't really understand the time and dedication I have to put into this so sometimes they get upset when they invite me somewhere and I have to say no but they get over it or they're kind of adjusting to my schedule too. Like I'm usually at school or if I have any time left over that's when I go visit them. But they're adjusting.

A Latina whose father left school after the third grade and whose mom completed secretarial school after high school explained her predicament with her parents who "just didn't like" the idea of her living away at an in-state college:

Well, at the beginning I had this problem where...I would do stuff and my family would be like, "Why are you doing this? You really don't need to do this." So that

was really frustrating for me, because I'm over here and they're over there. ...and I just kind of had to deal with it until they learned. So that was the major family situation thing. (Interviewer asks, "So what were some of the things you were doing?) It was um, staying here when I could go back home. ...I had homework to do and I had other stuff to do. For them, it wasn't that important. They just couldn't believe that it would take me a whole weekend to do homework. ... And then it's just also the financial situation... coming here I kind of had to ask for more money, and they were just like, "Why do you need all this money?" And I'm like, "Well, it all adds up. Textbooks, food, and everything." So it's just little stuff like that that, became like a big deal in our family.

Finally, another Latina expresses her guilt about living on campus and not being available for helping her parents and her 9 year old little brother, who is now alone for hours upon hours after school while her parents work multiple jobs:

It's horrible. I used to cry myself to sleep just saying, "I'm not there, and I'm not being good to my parents. They've given me so much, and they've always been there, and now I'm not home." Especially my little brother (tears)...I'm his big sister, and it makes me so sad not being there for him.

Another example of a more subjective, yet very meaningful aspect of diversity that is difficult to quantify involves the work of Naffziger and Rosenbaum (2011). Their study shows how goals and expectations for college vary by SES, with lower SES and working class students viewing college as means to acquire the skills they need to avoid an undesirable job, while middle to upper class students define college as a space for personal exploration. Brint and Rotondi (2008) similarly discovered that middle class undergraduate interviewed viewed the meaning of college as extending beyond the value of the degree to the chance to participate in "the full college experience," which includes "a style of life in which opportunities to spend time with friends, participate in campus activities, and 'enjoy life' were abundant' (p. 15).

Perceptions of the "college experience" are the same as they were 30 or 50 years ago, particularly among middle and upper middle class college students. However, as nontraditional students become a numerical majority, is this old model of college as a separate place and space to explore identity and possible career interests giving way to a new model of college as a tool or instrumental pathway to a better job or career future than what your social origins would dictate? A higher education system that is truly responsive to these forms of diversity would welcome and

support such diverse perspectives rather than expecting a different approach.

## **Unexpected Diversification**

In a somewhat bizarre, yet logical shift, community colleges across the nation are currently diversifying their campuses by adding on-campus housing. In colleges where the vast majority is commuting, students who live on campus are now a small, but growing minority. When viewed from this perspective, diversity is turned on its head. The relative absence of the "ideal" traditional student makes their intentional "inclusion" a mechanism for diversifying the clientele community colleges serve. In the wake of the huge recession we have experienced, those student groups who had traditionally attended four-year campuses are now turning to the more affordable community college as an option. This option is becoming particularly popular in rural communities.

Along with several other SUNY community colleges, Onondaga Community College in central New York is a good example. On their website, their admissions page boasts in the second sentence, "Over the past five years, we have invested over \$50 million in improvements including three new residence halls..." This same page includes an attractive photo of the residence buildings and the text, "Living on Campus" with the subtitle "the total college experience." The college's "residence halls" link leads to another page that claims, "Onondaga is a residential campus! Our state-of-the-art residence halls offer students the opportunity to affordably experience the benefits of on-campus living. Students live in a single, double, or triple room within an attractive suite, complete with comfortable living room, full kitchen, and access to technology." A picturesque slide show of the living options is accompanied by the option to view a virtual tour, and this is followed by an explanation of "The Benefits of Living on Campus" which includes, among other benefits, "Greater Academic Success" and reads, "Studies have shown that resident students have consistently achieved higher grades than their nonresident counterparts." The list of other community colleges incorporating on-campus living options is growing rapidly, including the following colleges: Coastline Community College in southern Fountain Valley, California; Edmonds Community College in Washington; Hinds Community College in Mississippi; Miles Community College in Montana; New Hampshire Technical Institute; Dodge City Community

College in Kansas; Lawson State Community College, Southern Union State Community College, and Gadsden State Community College in Alabama; and Lamar Community College in Colorado.

# **Multi-Dimensional Diversity**

This wealth of studies described noted has much to contribute to the discussion of diversity and interrelationships of gender, nontraditional family dynamics of support, perceptions of support, frameworks of understanding, and college behaviors that are clearly relevant and prevalent once the full diversity of postsecondary contexts are considered. *Figure 3* compiles the dimensions of diversity discussed in this paper and a few more obvious components that have not been discussed.

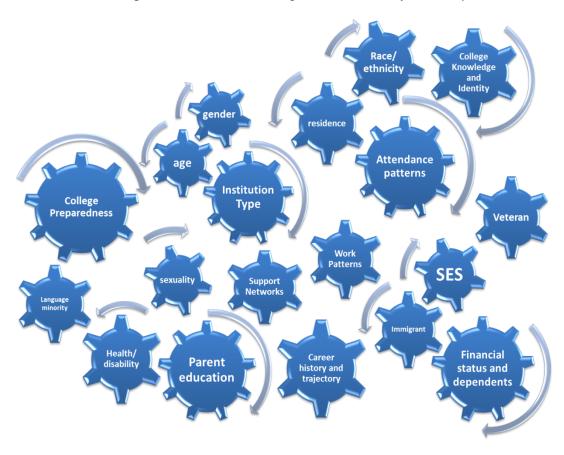


Figure 3: Interactive Multiple Dimensions of Diversity

The dimensions are configured as a system to represent the idea that they operate interactively as connected realities for students, not as disembodied characteristics. Research efforts should make every effort to address how multiple dimensions of diversity operate for individual students in multiple college contexts. Dimensions pictured include: the type of institutions students are

accessing; on or off-campus residence choices and commuting patterns while enrolled (residence); patterns of full part-time and part-year attendance (attendance patterns); age; financial status as dependent, independent, and independent with dependents; and level of college preparedness; frameworks for understanding the relationship between family and college (family dynamics); college knowledge; college-going identity, networks of support; SES; parent education; race-ethnicity; disability status; sexuality; gender; patterns of work; career history; career trajectory; veteran status; immigration status; language minority status.

# **Broader Societal Impact**

Understanding how each dimension in *figure 3* can operate in concert with other dimensions can help broaden the theorizing of student pathways beyond students and their characteristics and behaviors within institutions. For instance, the inclusion of work patterns and career trajectories matters not only for understanding how they shape individuals' pathways through college, but also for understanding the larger labor market context in which higher education operates. Saenz and Ponjuan (2008), for example, discuss the potential impact of Latino male workforce patterns generally, including the participation of Latino males in alternative (non-college) career pathways, the military, and prison to understand the college participation patterns of Latino males. Deil-Amen and DeLuca (2010) describe how two-year colleges may provide trajectories into and through particular selective majors and career fields that lead to greater market rewards for students.

Another broad societal impact to consider involves wider societal norms and perspectives on higher education and college going behaviors. Given the low rates of retention in two-year and for-profit colleges, the overwhelming predominance of first-year students in these institutions is troubling. Consider a) the disproportionate enrollments of low income and underrepresented minority students in two-year and for-profit institutions, b) the social and residential segregation of our neighborhoods by race/ethnicity and by social class, c) and the high rates of college stopout and dropout among lower-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students, where more than two-thirds do *not* succeed. These three realities combine to form, I hypothesize, a dominant

norm across whole communities where those who go to college usually leave without completing a degree. The existence of such a pervasive cultural norm in which the idea of going to college is so coupled with the reality of *not finishing college* can have serious repercussions for how non-traditional students make decisions about going or not going to college, where to go, and how to finance it. In essence, the idea of attempting college and not finishing becomes normalized. Such subjective understandings will inevitably factor into these student's decisions about how to manage the financial and other risks of going to college or staying in college (Deil-Amen & Goldrick-Rab, 2009). Our frameworks need to better address such cultural forces.

# **Taking Affirmative Action**

There is much to learn from cultural wealth and cultural integrity approaches, funds of knowledge, and theorizing about alternative forms of capital (Moll, Amanti, Neff, González, 1992; Villalpando & Solorzano; Yosso, 2005). These frameworks shift attention from student deficits to a view of the strengths inherent in underrepresented racial/ethnic minority students' homes and communities as well as the skills and dispositions they have developed to survive and thrive in those contexts. The work of Sedlacek (2004) contributes systematic ways to assess the non-cognitive characteristics students possess that lead to college success – better measures than the SAT and other standardized measures alone can predict. These approaches provide a foundation for framing the strengths and positive attributes of traditionally underrepresented populations in the absence of overt affirmative action policies. Utilizing these frameworks to shape research agendas is a way of taking action by using our technical skills to provide evidence to better affirm what works to promote success for students who have traditionally not been as successful in higher education relative to more privileged groups.

Such a reorientation of the framework of meritocracy is one of the only ways currently to subvert attacks on affirmative action. This reorientation is one of a two-part method to acknowledge diversity in ways that increase opportunity. The other half of the equation involves changing the structures directly. There is no way true opportunity will result if the funding structures that starve

both community colleges and broad access four-year public universities continue to operate. There is no way true opportunity will result if the underfunding and the teacher and administrative turnover inherent in under-resourced K-12 schools continue. There is no way true opportunity will result if health needs and labor market needs are not included holistically in efforts to improve education and job outcomes. There is no way true opportunity will result if the enterprise of educating our poor is not allowed to be innovative with successful efforts supported and rewarded.

The lack of fundamental structural change is linked the failure of our postsecondary colleges of education to teach teachers, administrators, and local and state policy-makers how to (structurally and instructionally) improve the success of students who are multiple grade levels behind. Our entire teacher education and educational leadership curricula are void of such content. Yes, teachers learn to be culturally sensitive, do behavior management, and teach students skill sets. However they do not learn specifically how to improve a student's skills within a particular time frame when the student is behind a grade level or more. They do not learn how to enter an under-resourced context and aggravate change that will actually enhance student learning to generate this type of improvement in achievement for the students who demonstrate a need for it. These need to be essential components of our teacher education and educational leadership curricula.

A national network of research faculty and equivalent research personnel based in our education schools and related "centers" needs to be funded in *coordinated* state level and national level efforts to observe and share what works in such K-12 school contexts to improve student achievement and improve and support student transition into a variety of college contexts. I put emphasis on the fact that this effort should be coordinated. Researchers and faculty waste valuable resources operating as silos to advance the interests of our profession, our careers, and our institutions by competitively seeking funding, writing academic and other publications, and the important work of partnering with educational practitioners (call it outreach or service) working with students in the K-20 pipeline too often rests as a third priority at best, and more likely, researchers dedicate about 5 hours of time to such efforts in any given week at most.

Who are these school practitioners to be centrally involved in this coordinated effort?: K-12

teachers and school leaders; school counselors community college instructors, administrators, and district leaders; school boards and community college district boards; local government officials; and college administrators and decision-makers. In addition to K-12 practitioners who work with students on a daily basis, we also need to recognize and incorporate the ground-level organizational knowledge about how institutions are experienced by students in the day-to-day negotiation of post-secondary educational contexts. There exists a range of "managerial professionals" (Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997; Rhoades, 1998) who advise and coordinate college and university outreach and recruitment efforts and students' transitions into college. These positions have grown particularly prevalent as universities attempt to improve student retention and graduation and now constitute about a third of all professionals at four-year public universities (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002).

Managerial professionals are higher education employees who are neither faculty nor administrators, but professional staff who perform many of the functions that faculty used to be responsible for, including undergraduate academic advising and teaching unit-bearing classes. Managerial professionals "... share many characteristics of traditional liberal professions-a technical body of knowledge, advanced education (and in some cases certification), professional associations and journals, and codes of ethics. Yet they also mark a break with the liberal profession of faculty, being more closely linked and subordinate to managers, and indeed being very much managers themselves" (Rhoades & Slaughter,1997: 22). Too often research efforts examine students, faculty, or administrators while neglecting these important players who are highly educated and manage and enforce organizational policies and procedures directly with students and therefore witness first-hand the impact of particular policies on students and their decisions and behaviors. They also witness first-hand the diversity of circumstances and challenges students face and the differential impact organizational policies and procedures have on different students.

The missing piece in our efforts as researchers and "thought leaders" is lack of an incentive structure to work in a *coordinated multi-stage* fashion that incorporates the work of all of the school and college/university practitioners noted above. This coordinated effort, outlined in *Table 3* (below) and *Figure 4* (below), is compatible with the four themes noted in Stanford University's

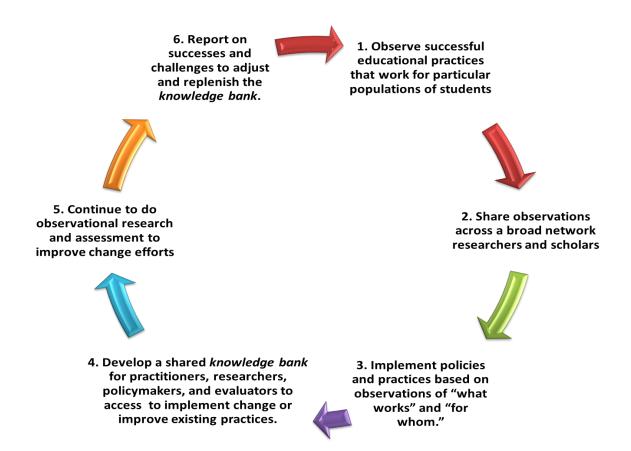
ambitious goal to build a new framework for research on broad access higher education.

#### *Table 3:*

## COORDINATED MULTI-STAGE RESEARCH—PRACTICE LOOP

- 1. Observe successful educational practices that work for particular populations of students
- 2. Share such observations across a broad network researchers and scholars
- 3. Implement policies and practices that forward these observations of "what works" and "for whom."
- 4. Develop a shared *knowledge bank* of sorts that can be easily accessed by those practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and evaluators involved in implementing change or trying to improving existing implemented practices.
- 5. Continue to do observational research and assessment to improve change efforts
- 6. Report on the successes and challenges that rise to the surface based on this continual research and evaluation in order to adjust and replenish the *knowledge bank*.

Figure 4: Coordinated, multistage, research-practice loop



These coordinated efforts resemble a loop of activity and behavior that can come full circle in true efforts to affect change in a way that involves scholars as leaders, experts, and resources in

the enterprise. The loop can be entered at any point by any participant due to the fact that it is an ongoing loop of linked knowledge and implementation. Many individual departments, colleges, or research centers may be engaging in something similar on a smaller scale. For instance, the Community College Research Center (CCRC), in their research on developmental education and dual enrollment, provides a working, limited attempt at such a loop, on a smaller scale. They have noted and documented what programs and efforts are happening within institutions and the degree to which they have been empirically assessed. They have performed their own assessments and also incorporated a sense of the organizational and administrative roadblocks, the resistance, and the financial limitations preventing more effective or wider implementation.

My recommendation is consistent with scaling up such enterprises to participate with colleagues nationally in this shared effort. In order to realize the knowledge bank in an effective manner, an intentional effort to participate in a national dialogue and decision-making to build consensus about what works would need to occur. This intentional effort could <u>not</u> simply be realized by the uploading and sharing of papers generated from multiple players. The success of the "loop" would need to involve designated staff and professionals who would work with the national network of scholars to devise knowledge bank documents tailored to practitioners for implementation and appropriate evaluation of practice and policy efforts.

Furthermore, the "for whom" component is relevant to the issue of diversity. For too long, it has been assumed that what works for the dominant and more elite groups can work in under-resourced contexts with differing challenges. This is simply a hypothesis that thus far has not been born out in reality. Resource rich schools with great pools of upper middle class parental capital and assistance function very well for those students. The same structure has not been shown to function very well in the absence of such parental support. In fact, I would argue that our public schools are structured to succeed dependent upon parental resources. It makes little sense to expect the same school structures to operate effectively for families in low SES circumstances and their children. Perhaps examples of schools over the past several decades that seem to have experienced some success can be assessed and utilized for the knowledge bank. The work of Bud Mehan and

other reform efforts would be ideal candidates for inclusion (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006).

There are a multitude large and small success stories in states and cities across the nation. We know what doesn't work, but there is a dearth of shared information about what has worked.

#### **Re-Prioritizing**

Similarly in higher education, if we are to shift our thinking from a framework of hierarchy based on selectivity to one that favors a horizontal view treating access as a positive value, then our view of what works also needs to shift. As Arum and Roksa (2011) would suggest, we need to give teaching and learning more serious priority. Likely, it is in open and broad access institutions that intentional efforts to improve teaching and learning are being applied. Rather than accountability systems that prioritize degree completion, we need to move toward one that *prioritizes learning* and progress.

Recent agendas pushed by state boards of trustees, legislatures, and governors tend to focus on increasing output and efficiency in public colleges and universities, like the National Governors Association's (2010) *Complete to Compete* initiative. Measuring success solely in this way (particularly when it is unfunded) leads to the de-prioritizing of the learning that takes place in broad access institutions, and it will always increase pressure for broad access institutions to do one of two things – increase selectivity or shortchange access (and high academic standards) in the interests of higher completion. By engaging in the loop detailed in the section above, scholars and researchers will be in a better position to lobby for an agenda based on what works in real practice, with a contextualized sense of what is feasible in terms of scale and within particular resource parameters. We will also be in a better position to advise resource allocation.

Winston's (1999) unique economic perspective on what he describes as the complicated and unusual industry of higher education may be informative. He argues, in part, in this industry "the production of education depends to some extent on peer effects generated" (Winston, 1999, p.14). He posits that elite colleges benefit from the peer interaction that occurs between the student-consumers themselves because these institutions are able to control the selection of students into

their college. In other words, elite colleges depend on their own customers to supply an important input to production. An elite institutions strive for a reputation of academic excellence as a measure of instructional quality, yet such institutions can cut corners instructionally because part of the quality of the college experience an elite college can offer involves interaction with other 'quality' students. Therefore, they are not compelled to offer small classes or instructional techniques that prioritize learning outcomes because students are able to interact with other high quality peers on campus, and that aspect of their education creates valuable learning and engagement opportunities. This is consistent with what is described in various ethnographic and historical studies of elite colleges (Karabel, 2006; Soares, 2007; Stevens, 2007).

Utilizing Winston's framework, I would suggest that open access community colleges and broad access four-year institutions have considerably less to no control over student quality, so the benefits of peer interaction with 'quality' peers is not part of the educational goods and services such institutions can offer. If selectivity as a metric of value is to be 'traded' for access, and perhaps diversity as a positive value as well, then the economics of how selectivity operates to 'subsidize' higher achieving and more desirable students who gain admission to more elite institutions would need to be addressed. Furthermore, the ways in which more open access institutions invest in and achieve measured *learning* gains, particularly for more diverse and lower-achieving students, would need to be rewarded in a way that translates into organizational subsidies to further such efforts (in the same way that donors subsidize the education of students in elite colleges).

To progress with such an agenda, the collection of data on such measurable learning gains would need to be prioritized at the level of each classroom or series of systematic course offerings or programmatic interventions in order to best contextualize each instructional approach or academic support effort. However, research would also need to focus on the value that students see in particular instructional approaches and peer interactions in this very different context. In broad access institutions, students may highly value socio-academically integrative opportunities within and outside the classroom, with other students, with instructors, and with managerial professionals in ways that do not mirror the integrative preferences and behaviors of more traditional students

(Deil-Amen, 2011). What students in more selective institutions perceive as valuable may not be as relevant to students enrolled at broad access institutions. The integrative moments valued by commuting, older, and lower achieving students situated in local communities may differ drastically based on their learning needs and their expectations about what college life will entail (Deil-Amen, 2011). How 'selective' or how involved in campus life their peers are may not be as important as how helpful they can be. The sheer magnitude of available peers may not be as useful as finding a few key matches with whom to connect and mutually benefit in meaningful socio-academic ways, especially given the more transient nature of commuting students (Deil-Amen, 2011).

The issue of racial/ethnic diversity is salient here as well. Unlike underrepresented racial minority students who live on four-year campuses and tend to seek commonality along racial/ethnic lines, racial minority commuting students may *not* view campus as the ideal place to interact with same race peers. Many come from already segregated high schools and neighborhoods, and, while enrolled in college, their primary social/cultural life remains off-campus, where they engage in same-race, same-ethnicity community interactions through their friendships, churches, and other community involvements. They therefore (with the exception of highly racially homogenous commuting colleges), may likely expect their time on campus to be an opportunity to interact *across* racial lines (Deil-Amen, 2011). In this respect, they are ironically like white students who come from highly segregated predominantly white schools and neighborhoods who seek a particular level of diversity in their campus experience. However, commuting students differ in that the dominant purpose of such interactions is more likely to be academic than social (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Again, this subjectivity of students and how they value, understand, and negotiate their open and broad access college contexts are a severely understudied area of inquiry. Most scholars – from economists to sociologists to education researchers to those with organizational behavior expertise – have some common understandings about what more traditional students seek in a "college experience" and what they value. Less understood is how the *majority* of students experience and find value in a college experience that involves commuting to campus and incorporating that experience into their work and family life. Less understood is how students who struggle

academically interpret their pursuit of college. All of this is about the sociology that is at the heart of Tinto's persistence framework, which is how students perceive a normative congruence between their own expectations and what their college offers (Deil-Amen, 2011). Without drawing from persistence frameworks directly, the work of Rebecca Cox (2009) superbly elaborates these dynamics by describing how the fears of community college remedial students shape their actions, interpretations of, and response to remedial instruction.

Studying student subjectivity in context is also valuable for understanding how students from very similar demographic backgrounds may respond to challenges in uniquely different ways. Recent research shows students may frame and interpret the same challenges quite differently, which thereby influences how they choose to act in the face of those challenges (Deil-Amen & Goldrick-Rab, 2009; Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2011). The classic sociological exploration of where and how agency and structure intersect is relevant in this regard, and more developed theories of resiliency in higher education are needed (Everett-Haynes & Deil-Amen, 2011).

# From Margin to Center

I will use remediation (developmental education) as a final example of this marginalizing of the majority. Our conceptual categories tend to measure, categorize, label, and therefore frame remedial students as the deviant exceptions to the rule while "college-ready" students are framed as the norm. In other words, being underprepared for college is marginalized while college readiness is normalized. This greatly delegitimizes community and other two-year colleges, for which serving remedial/developmental students is now a *central* function, with approximately 60 percent of community college students entering college demonstrating a need for at least one developmental course (Adelman, 1996; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey, 2006) and some community colleges serving mainly low-income and minority students enrolling a student population of which upwards of three-quarters need remediation (McClenney, 2009).

Normalizing college-readiness while treating remedial students as a distinctly different group, creates a non-remedial/remedial dichotomy that downplays the tremendous *lack* of college

readiness throughout postsecondary education, not just on the borderlines of remedial testing and placement (Deil-Amen, 2011). When we consider more broadly the vast number of two-year *and four-year* students who are not referred to or enrolled in remedial classes, yet are, for the most part, equally unprepared for the rigors of their college classes, the underprepared student group swells to a majority in higher education overall. The non-remedial/remedial dichotomy masks an important reality – underpreparedness for college is now a norm in our higher education system.

This dichotomizing also marginalizes the study of underpreparedness to narrow comparisons of the outcomes of remedial students with comparable samples of non-remedial students within the same types of institutions. Many studies have analyzed the relative benefits or disadvantages of participation in remedial coursework by using complex and precise statistical tools and quasiexperimental approaches to account for selection bias and differences in the placement of students into remedial coursework (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Bailey, 2009; Bettinger & Long, 2009; Calcagno & Long, 2008). Their purpose is to compare similarly prepared students exposed to different remedial 'treatments.' These important studies have shown mixed effects and some modest positive benefits from exposure to remedial coursework but no strong evidence that access to remediation in community college substantially facilitates or hinders credit or degree completion. However, taken together, the most striking yet underreported finding from these studies and similar studies is that nearly all underprepared students – both those who are enrolled in remedial/developmental classes and those who are not – struggle to persist, are at-risk of non-completion, and are significantly delayed in their acquisition of a college credential. As a whole, underprepared students (remedial or not) are more similar to each other than they are to college-ready students, yet our research tends to focus on differences among the underprepared.

In addition, a marginalizing of remediation tends to locate discussion of it in the community college sector, which has several consequences. First, this results in community college remedial students being doubly marginalized, sectioned off in our conceptual realities as if they were so fundamentally different from the rest of postsecondary students. Second, it renders invisible the experiences of four-year college and university students who face the challenges of remediation and

underpreparedness (more broadly defined) within very a different, yet similarly challenging, institutional contexts. Those beginning in the four-year public sector, for instance, may be just as vulnerable as those in community colleges, especially given the contexts they face – huge lecture classes with hundreds of students and workloads and grading standards often strikingly different than their high school standards.

While those students – especially those lower-income, racial minority, and first-generation college students – who gain access to universities are often viewed as the success stories relative to those who enroll in community colleges, my research reveals that these students are similarly vulnerable to failure, particularly if they find themselves underprepared to succeed at the university and their attempts to cope intersect with other relevant components of diversity. They struggle with GPA's low enough to lose their financial aid, stereotype threat (Steele and Aronson, 1995), doubts about their ability to succeed academically, fears of being stigmatized, and reluctance to ask for help (Deil-Amen, 2011; Martinez & Deil-Amen, 2011). The words of one underprepared (non-remedial) African-American male university freshman sum up this combination of fears, particularly the fear of being the example of the low-achieving minority student that his peers and instructors expect:

A lot of time I feel pressure to be a successful black man, seeing as a lot of black men are in jail, dead, at my age, especially where I grew up... There is a lot of pressure, too much sometimes. You think about it like, "Man, I don't want to be the dumb black kid in the class." Just because he's black, he's not smart enough. I want to prove to them we can do it too... All the time I wonder if I got this grade because they are like, "Oh he can't think at this level, so all his papers can only be a B, or all his papers can only be a C" or "Oh, this is the black kid's paper. Looks like he tried, but he's not as smart as the white kid." I think about that all the time. I want to prove everything that people hold against black people wrong. Like they're like, "Oh the black person always needs help. Oh he's not smart, they're not smart enough." And like, to an extent, I am kind of afraid to ask for help, and all the time I think to myself, "Man, am I smart enough? ...Am I not smart enough as a person? Am I just not that smart?" or would it be, "Oh, he's black. It's ok. He's just not that smart." You know what I'm saying? Man, that's just annoying. (pressing his hands to his forehead) Got to get it by yourself. Got to understand this....I feel ostracized a lot.

Conceptually dismantling remedial/non-remedial dichotomies can motivate a broader approach that encompasses the common challenges faced by all underprepared students, regardless

of their institutional label/designation as remedial or non-remedial, and in light of the different institutional contexts. In fact, the work of Adelman (1999; 2006) supports this idea, as he highlights the prominence of high school academic rigor over remedial placement and institution type in influencing bachelor's degree completion. Bailey (2009) also moves in this direction by emphasizing underpreparedness rather than remedial designation. He describes how students are entering college "with academic skills weak enough in at least one major subject area to threaten their ability to succeed in college-level courses" (Bailey, 2009, p. 13).

#### **Future Directions**

Future scholarship should consider the extent to which theories and conceptual frameworks are driven by the marginalization of the majority (the nontraditional *other half*) and the prioritization of the minority (idealized traditional models) noted above. Analyses should also consider how the flow of money and resources is guided or supported by this prioritization and marginalization. Attention should be focused on how policy and practice decisions are made within the context of this framework of prioritization and marginalization? Such understandings should be juxtaposed against the findings from the integrated loop of research-practice described above.

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