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Evolving Narratives about College: Immigrant Community College Students' Perceptions of the Four-Year Degree in the Great Plains

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Abstract

A significant percentage of the enrollment growth in higher education can be attributed to the recruitment of more diverse students, including those from immigrant households. Although research on immigrant students is growing in light of changing U.S. demographic shifts, this literature is inchoate. This paper examines evolving perspectives of the value of a four-year degree among immigrants and children of immigrants. Thus, in this paper article we synthesize current dominant narratives of immigrant students about the utility and viability of a four-year degree (and the changing impact on community college enrollment) and how they have shifted over time. We observe a current pulse that questions the ideological attitude of college for all, with some noting that a four-year degree has less significance and payoff than in the past within today's changing economy. Moreover, we present our findings through an empirical study of immigrant community college students' perceptions of the viability and value of the four-year degree and the implications for research and practice.

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The prevailing narrative in the United States has been one of college for all – where students are expected to go to a four-year college or university after completing high school (Fishman, Ekowo, & Ezeugo, 2017). This expectation is well-reasoned – the benefits of obtaining a bachelor's degree are many and include, for example, higher salary earnings, less reliance on public assistance programs, and increased levels of civic participation (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Amidst the focus on promoting access to four-year institutions and increasing rates of bachelor's degree completion nationally, there are growing concerns regarding the diminishing value of the bachelor's degree, career prospects after graduation, and soaring student and parent loan indebtedness (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2014). For example, while most individuals surveyed (75%) see the value in getting a college degree, many (25%) also feel that higher education in its current state is falling short of the promise it offers (Fishman et al., 2017). Rhetorically, politicians emphasize the importance of increasing the number of bachelor's degrees, particularly in STEM, to maintain global competitiveness (National Science Board, 2018), but simultaneously reference community colleges as vocational schools that do little more than prepare blue collar workers (Kreighbaum, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to understand immigrant community college students' perceptions of the utility, viability, and value of the four-year degree. Narratives, beliefs, and perceptions about college – quality, value, and return on investment – all matter in shaping individual behaviors (McDonough, 1997). While there has been an emphasis on how immigrant students *decide between* four-year and two-year institutions upon graduation from high school (i.e., college choice process), there has been less consideration of how students who have already chosen to attend a community college conceptualize the prospect of attending a four-year institution and/or internalize broader narratives and tensions about the bachelor's degree. For many students, the choices of where to attend college is not necessarily sequential (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). That is, while the higher education landscape frames community colleges as tangential to four-year colleges, where four-year bachelor's degree granting institutions are an epicenter around which community colleges orbit, community colleges are increasingly *the* epicenter for immigrant student groups. Community college student status should not automatically be interpreted as

a function of the inability to access a four-year degree, but as a function of students' agency that is reflective of broader, conflicting, and complex narratives about college.

In this article, we present empirical findings from a study of immigrant community college students' perceptions of the utility, viability, and value of the four-year degree. In using the terms, '*utility, viability, and value*', we recognize immigrant community college students perceive the four-year degree as a viable means to a specified end. We juxtapose these findings with a synthesis of dominant narratives in academic literature regarding the utility and value of four-year degrees to illustrate a disconnect between extant framing of four-year institutions and immigrant community college students' perceptions. Two research questions guided our inquiry: (1) What is the current perspective of the utility and viability of a four-year college degree among immigrant community college students? and (2) How is the utility and viability of a four-year degree for immigrant community colleges students evolving? We purposefully situated our study in the context of the Great Plains region of the United States, including states such as North and South Dakota, Kansas, and Nebraska, as a way to illuminate immigrant community college students' evolving perceptions of the utility and viability of attending a four-year institution in a context not typically centered in either higher education or community college literatures. Attending to community college issues in specific regional contexts are urgently needed amidst national demographic and economic shifts by geographic area.

Literature review

To contextualize the importance of immigrant community college students' perceptions of four-year college degrees, we offer an overview of the broader narratives that have historically shaped student perceptions of college. We then highlight the specific dynamics (e.g., race, immigrant generational status, economic conditions) that underscore the evolving narratives about the utility of a four-year college degree. It is within these dynamics among immigrant community college student perspectives that findings unfold.

Historical influences and the perception of college

Throughout the history of higher education, the utility and viability of obtaining a college degree has shifted. During the colonial era, few colleges existed and only a select few had the opportunity and benefited from attending those institutions (Cagle, 1998). During that time period, the purpose of attending college was to “to train young men for the ministry” (Cagle, 1998, p. 10). It was not until the Morrill Act of 1862, where public lands were awarded to states to provide colleges for the benefit of mechanical arts and agriculture, where those afforded the opportunity to attend college was widened (Komives & Woodard, 2003). According to Cagle (1998), the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 was unquestionably the most influential policy in shifting the attitude of the American people toward increasing college attendance. Yet, the numbers of individuals who perceived college as a viable option was small in numbers and reserved for the privileged elite (Cagle, 1998). It was not until the G.I. Bill in the 1940s, and subsequently additional federal college financing options in the 1960s, where critical masses of students were offered the necessary resources to attend college, especially for historically marginalized groups (Komives & Woodard, 2003). During that time, college was finally perceived as a viable and accessible option to ascend the socioeconomic ladder and obtain stable employment (Komives & Woodard, 2003).

In recent years, the prevailing narrative many high school students receive, including those with immigrant backgrounds, is that they should attend college upon graduation because it will help them live a more financially stable life. For example, Ma et al. (2016) summarized the benefits of higher education and placed an emphasis on how higher levels of education leads adults to earn higher incomes, are more likely than others to be employed, and increases their likelihood of moving up the social economic ladder. Furthermore, many high school students are encouraged to pursue a college degree because it will help them in other aspects of their lives, such as leading healthier lifestyles, having higher levels of engagement in the community, and being involved in their children’s activities (Ma et al., 2016; Perna, 2005). Such narratives have long fueled students’ perceptions of and pursuit of four-year institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008). However, as economic and social realities continue to present challenges to college access and success (Rudgers & Peterson, 2017), the articulation of the many promises of higher

education – particularly for immigrant communities – seems increasingly out of touch with reality. Some see the privileged majority as the beneficiaries of such promises of higher education, while the marginalized are subjected to the opportunity costs as well as the social and economic risks of attendance with no such reward (Nichols, 2015).

Immigrant students and community colleges

According to Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco (2011), “immigrant youth and children of immigrants make up a large share of the nation’s population” (p. 153) and increasing their educational attainment should become a national priority. Despite the risks of attendance and achievement gaps, the evidence indicates that immigrant students generally have high expectations for higher education (Teranishi et al., 2011). Kim and Díaz (2013) highlighted how immigrant students’ “demand for higher education exceeds the capacity of the current community college system” (p. 92) and Conway (2010) supported this claim by explaining immigrant students’ high demand for higher education can be attributed to their desire to achieve economic success. Yet, although immigrant students generally have high expectations for higher education, these expectations do not always translate into increased enrollments. In fact, “immigrant students experience lower postsecondary enrollment rates compared to their native-born counterparts” (Kim & Díaz, 2013, p. 47). Furthermore, even though upward mobility in economic status from one generation to the next continues to grow for immigrant populations, growth is at a slower rate compared to previous years due to the “slowing economic growth and the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots” (Conway, 2010, p. 211). Consequently, the perception that one needs to obtain a four-year degree in order to move up the socioeconomic ladder is slowly dissipating (Conway, 2010) and positions community colleges as a viable option for immigrant students to reach economic success (Teranishi et al., 2011).

Research on immigrant students is becoming more abundant, yet a notable deficiency is on their *evolving* perspectives of the value of a four-year degree. Teranishi et al. (2011) reported how more immigrant students are attending community colleges in comparison to any other type of postsecondary institutions. Community colleges are a viable option distinctive from four-year institutions because community colleges traditionally offer an “open access admissions process, are affordable,

and provide a wide variety of curricular functions including the development of basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics” (Kim & Díaz, 2013, p. 91). Moreover, limited research exists on immigrant students’ experiences within community colleges (Conway, 2010). Thus, without an understanding of the evolving perspectives of the value of the four-year degree among immigrant students, or immigrant students’ experiences within community colleges, we are unable to appreciate the breadth of challenges these students face let alone identify solutions. As we explore the perceptions of immigrant community college students, we begin by introducing the conceptual framework that informed our study of students’ perceptions of the four-year degree.

Conceptual framework

To examine immigrant community college students’ perceptions of the four-year degree and the extent to which it represents a shift in broader discourse and narratives about the utility of a college degree, we draw on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *field* (Bourdieu, 1990). Undeniably, concepts of social and cultural capital are among the most popular sociological exports to the field of education. Yet, the use of capital as a central conceptual framework in studies examining the resources and networks that contribute to student success engender some conceptual flaws. Namely, the capitals are only part of Bourdieu’s larger theory of social reproduction. Bourdieu’s theory also included the key concepts of habitus and field to explain how, within a given social context, some forms of capital are valued over others leading to a covert reproduction of social inequity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Habitus is a concept that “calls us to think of action as engendered and regulated by fundamental dispositions that are internalized primarily through early socialization. Bourdieu speaks of the internalization or ‘incorporation’ of the fundamental social conditions of existence into dispositions” (Swartz, 1999, p. 104). Habitus serves as the social milieu or surrounding environmental influences that shape what students perceive as opportunities as well as how they fit in with those opportunities. Metaphorically, habitus is akin to the water in which fish swim, the characteristics of which shape (beyond ability and different than desire) a course or trajectory. Habitus is, then, the micro-level social context in which participants live and attend community colleges in the Great Plains.

Field, meanwhile, refers to the social spaces in which individuals act out struggles for various resources. Field would be the landscape of higher education – the broader structure of postsecondary institutions more generally. Using a sports analogy, field is like a sports field in that there are specific rules of the game that guide whether players' demonstrated efforts (a function of their various forms of training, effort, ability, desire) are successful or not. Participants' perceptions of four-year colleges are thought to be reflective of their milieu – one that is shaped by their surrounding environmental influences.

In this paper, we draw on the concepts of habitus and field to understand the “deep-structuring cultural matrix” (Swartz, 1999, p. 104) that shape participants' evolving perceptions, narratives, ideas, and beliefs about the value of a four-year degree. We discuss the ways in which, given the particular field of contested power that is higher education, such perceptions have important implications for broader discourse about the utility of a four-year degree and for individual outcomes.

This article is purposefully myopic in focusing on the concepts of habitus and field, to the exclusion of the admittedly inseparable concepts of capital, as a way to showcase the value of these concepts in explicating surrounding beliefs, narratives, and ideas that may go unnoticed and unattended to. In other words, a plethora of research has used capitals in isolation – and we use field and habitus in isolation – but do so intentionally to frame students' perceptions of the four-year degree. Previously, McDonough and colleagues (McDonough, 1997; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; McDonough, Lising, Walpole, & Perez, 1998; Perez & McDonough, 2008) have similarly utilized Bourdieu's work to showcase how the *perceptions, narratives, and ideas* students have about college are culturally and socially inscribed and, ultimately, influential in shaping students' college going behavior and access.

Positionality statement

A central part of the research process is engaging in reflection on the how individual positionalities inform the research at hand (Yao & Vital, 2016). Each of the authors occupy a role within the four-year university, which propelled our interest in understanding how community college students might view the institution we represent. I, the first author of the study, identify as Latino male and first-generation college student.

Having been born outside of the U.S. and grown up in the rural Great Plains, it is particularly important to me to document the lived realities and educational opportunities among those who share my immigrant upbringing. The second author identifies as a white male born in the U.S., whose leadership role on campus compels his interest in understanding perceptions of the institution. The study's Principal Investigator, the third author identifies as a non-immigrant Chicana female, born and raised in southern California. As such, the third author brings to this study a sociological lens emphasizing how students' sociocultural contexts shape their knowledges and understandings about what institutions are "right" for them.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger qualitative research study focusing on the career decision-making of immigrants and children of immigrants attending community colleges in the Great Plains region. An interpretive qualitative approach was selected for this article because the researchers were interested in how the participants gave meaning to their construction of reality. This is the desirable qualitative approach when observing how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their reality, and give meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study was derived from a broader study focused on examining the ways in which race, ethnicity, and/or proximity to an immigrant experience (i.e., immigrant generation) informed career decision-making within the community college context. The Great Plains region was an appropriate setting for the study in light of current demographic and economic changes that are occurring in the area – a large influx of refugee and migrant populations from traditionally and non-traditionally immigrant countries. A salient theme across all participants that emerged from the larger study – the analytic focus of this paper – was participants' perceptions, attitudes, and ideas about the value and utility of a four-year college degree. That is, while discussing their career and educational aspirations, participants shared a wealth of information about their perceptions of a four-year college degree which compelled further analysis and development.

Data collection

Individuals were enrolled in the study if they attended community college and identified as either a first-generation (foreign-born), one-and-a-half generation (foreign-born but emigrated to the U.S. as children), or second-generation (children born in the U.S. to at least one foreign-born parent) immigrant. Participants were recruited via snowball and purposive methods (Lichtman, 2010). A total of 31 semi-structured interviews with the students were conducted, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. All audio recordings of interviews were later transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, participants were asked about the significance of their social identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identification immigrant generation), academic factors (e.g., enrollment status, community college services), and other environmental factors (e.g., financial situation) in informing their community college experiences and career decision-making.

Participants

Out of the 31 study participants, 14 (45%) identified as Hispanic/Latino, 10 identified as Asian (32%), three identified as Black (10%), and four identified as Middle Eastern (13%). Twenty of the participants identified as female (65%). Fifteen identified as first-generation immigrant (48%), five as one-and-a-half generation immigrant (16%), and 11 as second-generation immigrant (35%). Ten participants were on a community college path to complete credit and then transfer to a four-year college (academic transfer) in order to complete a Bachelor's degree (36%), five were on a path to complete the Associate's degree and then transfer to a four-year college (18%), 10 were on a path to complete the Associate's degree and find employment in their chosen field (36%), one was on a path to complete a vocational or professional certificate and find employment (3%), and three were on another career path (10%). A demographic summary of the participants is available in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant demographics (N = 31).

<i>Participant (Pseudonym)</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Student Status</i>	<i>Major</i>
1. Angela	Hispanic/Latino	Female	Full-time	Elementary Education
2. Esperanza	Hispanic/Latino	Genderqueer	Full-time	Spanish and English
3. Sarah	Hispanic/Latino	Female	Part-time	Criminal Justice
4. Carina	Hispanic/Latino	Female	Full-time	Human Services
5. Veronica	Hispanic/Latino	Female	Part-time	None—I plan to transfer
6. Julia	Asian American/Biracial (Asian & Latino)	Female	Full-time	Nursing
7. Michelle	Hispanic/Latino	Female	Part-time	Culinary Arts
8. Joe	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Full-time	Auto Body Technology
9. John	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Part-time	Chemistry
10. Sam	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Full-time	Criminal Justice
11. Antonio	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Part-time	Information Technology
12. Frank	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Full-time	Information Technology
13. Mark	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Full-time	Information Technology
14. Oscar	Hispanic/Latino	Male	Part-time	Business
15. Angeline	Asian/Asian American	Female	Full-time	Academic Transfer
16. Pink	Asian/Asian American	Female	Part-time	Medical Assisting
17. Tara	Other (Nepali)	Female	Full-time	Nursing
18. Yanek	Asian/Asian American	Male	Full-time	-
19. MJ	Asian/Asian American	Female	Full-time	Accounting
20. Jenna	Asian/Asian American	Female	Full-time	Nursing
21. Bree	Asian/Asian American	Female	Part-time	Pre-health
22. Yvonne	Asian/Asian American	Female	Full-time	Geo Info Systems
23. Stephanie	Asian/Asian American	Female	Full-time	Human Services
24. Tai	Asian/Asian American	Female	Part-time	English
25. Jason	African American/Black	Male	Full-time	Energy Generation Ops
26. Gina	Other (African)	Female	Full-time	Business
27. Lukfomi	African American/Black	Female	Part-time	Early Childhood Education
28. Abbad	Other (White)	Male	Full-time	Aided Design Drafting
29. Amal	Other (White)	Female	Full-time	Aided Design Drafting
30. Siam	Middle Eastern/North African	Female	Full-time	Biochemistry
31. Stacey	Middle Eastern/North African	Female	Full-time	Nursing

Data analysis

Given our analytic focus on immigrant students' perceptions of the four-year college, the research team engaged in an initial round of coding to identify thematic and conceptual categories in students' perceptions, writing analytic memos throughout this process to make sense of these

categories. Following initial coding rounds, the team sought confirmatory as well as refuting evidence of the initial themes through a secondary round of coding. During the final stage of analysis, the team then examined nuances across demographic characteristics and the extent to which students' perceptions aligned with previously documented perceptions, per our literature review, and/or larger narratives or beliefs about four-year colleges. A combination of member checking and peer debriefing were employed to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

Findings

Our analysis yielded several important findings regarding participants' perceptions of two-year and four-year institutions. Namely, participants rhetorically positioned community colleges as being *above* four-year institutions, both in terms of their own educational pathway and in terms of an observed, broader societal shift. That is, they provided a number of reasons why the community college is – and should be for everyone else in their generation – the more desirable educational pathway. The degree to which participants described four-year institutions as outdated or archaic, while juxtaposing community colleges as viable, diverse, affordable, welcoming, and offering more direct pathways toward desirable and well-paying careers was telling and moving commentary that reflected the broader academic debates about the viability of both institutions. We highlight participants' reflections or narratives on the value and viability of a four-year degree, in contrast with that of a community college education, in terms of alignment with career goals, concerns about labor market returns, perceptions of differences between two-and four-year environments and affordability.

Academic and career alignment

In describing their career goals, participants shared how their interests had evolved from the end of high school to the start of college, indicating that the community college context allowed for refinement of their goals. For example, Stephanie, who identified as a second-generation daughter of immigrants and Asian woman, described how in high school she was interested in majoring in international business. Since

her local community college did not have such a program, she planned to go to “school to be a transfer student.” She explained that her high school counselor was instrumental in guiding her toward other options. She stated:

As time went on, I ended up changing what I wanted to do. So instead of international business, I wanted to get a business management degree. I sat down with an advisor and we kind of mapped out where I would be to get a degree. After we mapped it out I ended up going to [local community college] to get an associate’s degree.

Stephanie discovered that obtaining an associate’s degree would align with her career goals. She was exposed to and agreeable to the idea presented by her high school counselor. Stephanie, like many of her peers, started at the community college with a broad impression of what she wanted to do and narrowed her career interests based on feedback from institutional agents, in this case a high school counselor. Her family, including immigrant parents, played a significant role in shaping her career aspirations. She said:

I first wanted to be a fashion designer and then I wanted to be a doctor and then a lawyer. My parents were like, ‘You should be a doctor.’ I’m like, ‘Okay I’ll be a doctor.’ Then my dad is like, ‘Maybe you should be a lawyer.’ I’m like, ‘Okay I’ll be a lawyer.’ Then that changed when I got to high school and I took a criminal justice class for fun and I actually liked it. I went to the prison as a field trip and I got to talk to a police officer. I got to job shadow a forensic scientist teacher all throughout high school and I just wanted to go into that field. And seeing a lot of bad incidents happening on TV inspired me to work as a police officer.

Stephanie’s educational journey in the community college was centrally informed by career goals; goals that were fundamentally shaped by those who were around her and the ideas that she was exposed to. Another participant, Sarah, who identified as a second-generation daughter of immigrants and Latina, described how her career choice was informed

by direct personal experiences and explained how the community college would prepare her to take that first step in her career. She stated:

I've had some experiences; some family members have been to prison and some friends and I think that's part of the reason [she's pursuing criminal justice]. They're still people, they make mistakes and once they come out it's back to normal... I know some of them [desired employment positions] do require bachelor's degrees, but I think I would start out being a correctional officer and then maybe start off exploring in some of the field where they only require an associate's degree.

Through the coursework available in the community college, the experience of visiting a prison, the influence of mainstream media, and personal experiences, Stephanie landed on the aspiration of being a police officer and Sarah is pursuing an associate of arts degree with hopes of becoming a correctional officer. Ultimately, the extent to which Stephanie's and Sarah's aspirations aligned with the community college setting were informed by the academic and social environment, consistent with the other participants in the study. This strong alignment, in turn, very much shaped participants' perspectives of the community college in a positive way and contextualized the sometimes more negative perceptions they had of four-year institutions and the utility of a bachelor's degree.

Primacy of immediate labor returns

Participants repeatedly and passionately described that the four-year model of education is increasingly becoming obsolete as community colleges increasingly provide a more direct path to employment and labor opportunities. That is, participants were primarily concerned with earning money and upward social mobility. The fastest way to do this, they felt, was through the avenues for careers created by the community college. For example, Gina, who identified as a one-and-a-half generation immigrant from Africa, described her perception of how the traditional model of higher education does not work for everyone. She expressed the following reflection:

I love school, but I don't love traditional schooling... And a lot of those jobs you still don't acquire because the generation before us, they have those jobs in place, and not many are going to be retiring soon. So for you to get this degree and hope that you're going to get this high-level position that someone's been at for 20, 30 years and doesn't think that they're going to be going anywhere anytime soon, you're just kind of like stuck. Because if you have the degree but the job openings aren't there, what do you do? And that's why I think, I think this generation's awesome because they're really creating their own opportunities and building their own brands. Instead of waiting for someone to hire them, they're like, "I'll be my brand and you'll want to hire me." You know? So I just think that's cool.

Gina expressed how traditional schooling, where students are expected to go to school full-time, acquire knowledge, get their degree, and then get a job is an outdated model. For her, she believes there is a generation of students eager to start their own business ventures and create their own entrepreneurial opportunities. This is perhaps reflective of Gina's immigrant background in that, as an immigrant, she has high expectations for upward mobility and, like many immigrants, sees entrepreneurship as a means of achieving economic success (Fairlie & Lofstrom, 2013).

When asked follow-up questions about whether or not they see any difference in the prestige of a community college education versus a four-year bachelor's degree, participants reported that prestige is meaningless if they cannot make money after graduation. As Gina further expressed:

I don't think that having a degree from a prestigious college would make a difference to me. I feel like I know, I feel like I'm learning the business side of almost any industry well enough to create my own stream of revenue. And I definitely want more than one stream of revenue as well, so it's just kind of working the ins and outs, but also our generation in this time has an advantage because there's other ways to make money than just having a regular nine to five job. There's also social media where you can make money, and take advantage of those occupations.

As Gina describes, for some students, career aspirations and the necessity of immediate labor returns evolve into an unexpected experience of building a personal brand and creating innovative partnerships to generate revenue streams. Frank, a Latino male and second generation son of immigrants whose parents migrated to the United States from Mexico, shared a similar thought process when it came to the value and viability of a four-year degree and how the current model of higher education does not work for everyone. He shared that:

It's not sustainable anymore, really. There are certain degrees that you would have to have a four year degree, like I guess like your degree at [the local community college] for psychology wouldn't be as highly touted as from [the local four-year college], things like that. I guess in my specifically mind, I think it's more beneficial to me as an older person to go to [the local community college] rather than [the local four-year college]. I want to start my career sooner rather than later and usually the other people that are switching their careers and stuff like that, they have a family and they're at [the local community college] and they're going that route. They've already had a career before. They haven't been jobless for 50 years and then they're starting now. I just want to be able to get my foot in the door now rather than later instead of going another three years.

For Frank, obtaining the credential necessary for his specific area of study is more important than the experience of a four-year institution. Also, as an older student, attending the community college allows him to make progress towards the credential he desires while at the same time gain valuable experience through internships and work experience.

Comparisons of two-year and four-year environments

Participants – both those who had previously attended four-year institutions and those who had only had experience with community colleges – shared their perceptions of community colleges as more welcoming and diverse than four-year institutions. Consistently, participants indicated that they perceived community colleges as more welcoming to students with diverse backgrounds, including representation of broader age range, varied educational experiences and aspirations, and ethnic

diversity. Amal, a first-generation immigrant originally from the Middle East, described her difficulties with learning English and how the community college allowed her to make progress. She stated:

I go to take a test to discover my level [English proficiency]. They said I am in the five level. So, I took classes for five level and above. Last month I made the test again and now I'm in level eight. I made progress, three levels. I will try again maybe next year.

For Amal, the community college setting is welcoming to students like her and indicated how, as a result of her experience, more students who are friends with her enrolled at the community college. Similarly, Frank articulated that he valued both seeing variation in age and backgrounds among his peers as well as the ways in which the community college setting accommodates students from “different walks of life.”

There's people having to be able to do only night classes. They're well into their life and into their family and that'd be the only time that they have to spare and stuff. With the slower pacing, it's a lot of times for them because the teachers sympathize with them because they have families too. I understand also because you're doing full time and you might not have time for a class because family is the most important thing.

For Frank, community college was a desirable option for him based on many of the same factors articulated by Stephanie (e.g., family, institutional agents, etc.), but he also articulated how the community college works best for people who may not be of traditional college age or have families. Frank was interested in business and/or nursing as a career path and described his experience in a tightly-knit program where instructors made him feel wanted and cared for as a student. Frank had previously attended the state's land-grant institution where he experienced a different dynamic with instructors. Through various stop-outs (periods of enrollment followed by bouts of non-enrollment) at both two year and four-year colleges, he felt that the campus environment of the community college was much more diverse and welcoming of diverse students than the four-year context.

The context of affordability

The value of the community college versus the four-year college cannot be sufficiently examined without the context of affordability. Many participants perceived community college as a logical financial and academic pathway. In terms of pursuing academic transfer (starting at the community college with the intent to transferring to a four-year degree), the general coursework is perceived as being either equivalent at each institution or irrelevant. One participant, Esperanza, who identified as a first generation immigrant and gender queer, summarized the general discussion and her recommendation to other students considering the academic transfer route:

I would recommend a lot of people that are either going to go to a university it's way cheaper to take the academic transfer. You find out the hard way. A lot of people do and I've met some people who are going to [four-year college] and they have to take general education classes and they're paying crazy amounts of money for a class that they could take for half the price. It's hard. You do want to go to university and be like, "I'm a university student." And feel really good about it but sometimes you can't. You can't afford to do that. I would recommend people to take the academic transfer if they ask me.

For Esperanza, there is no difference in quality or value of the education received. What is simply necessary for the credential and the least expensive and obstructive path is more logical. Participants also referred to how inexpensive the local community college was by comparison and that the local four-year college would accept all transfer credits. A student named M.J. said he wanted to "...save a little bit of money compared to going straight to the university." Overall, though, and quite unexpected was that participants seemed to describe this issue based on the sticker price of college credits without reference to financial aid eligibility.

Participants also viewed the cost (i.e., their price) of college as a necessary burden to obtain a credential in their desired field rather than, overall, something to be valued as an investment in their future. Siam, who identified as a second generation daughter of immigrants and

Middle Eastern woman, spoke about general coursework was "...a waste of time and a waste of money." She spoke about not wanting to focus on general coursework but rather her major. Moreover, participants discussed the value of different programs and the choice process on studying vocations, such as that of a plumber, electrician, and an auto-mechanic, or the social sciences, such as sociology and psychology. They spoke about being discouraged from the social sciences compared to the immediacy of a vocational program and then being able to work your way up, such as being an auto mechanic and moving up to be a head-mechanic and earning more money. Frank stated the following:

I heard that plumbers make \$2,000 because it's a trade and it's easy and not really a lot of people want to do it and there's high demand. I guess a lot of people that don't know or that don't really have a passion for a lot of things, I'd say that [local community college] trade is a, I probably would have done it myself too if I didn't really enjoy or if I wasn't good at the [Computer Information Technology] program. Because it's a very, you come out with, everybody needs a plumber or needs [an] electrician. You come out two years and make really good money for your family.

Furthermore, participants also discussed the general struggle of paying for college and being able to afford it. It became evident that sometimes students suffer alone without seeking help or financial aid, perhaps not knowing of its availability or if their immigration status might prevent them from being eligible. For example, Esperanza shared the following:

I've seen a lot of people who don't feel as supported as I feel. A lot of times, the information doesn't get across as well as I think it should. I just recently met a girl that I was working with that she thought she had to pay for school by herself because she didn't know you could get financial aid. She didn't know that people can give you money to go to school. So, there's a lot of information that is not getting across to a lot of people. I think we could do a better job on getting this information to the people who need it and not only the people who need it the most, just everybody who needs it. Not

everybody can get financial aid, but if you know about it, at least you know about it.

For Esperanza, familiarizing students with available financial aid options would increase the perceived levels of support students need to persist. Also, Esperanza's comments reveal how many students, including those from immigrant families, endure challenges when it comes to paying for college even though solutions to ameliorate those challenges exist.

Discussion

In this study we explored the current perspective of the utility and viability of a four-year college degree among immigrant community college students. Moreover, we explored how their perspectives were evolving about the utility and viability of a four-year degree. We found participants in this study shared their beliefs that a four-year model is becoming increasingly obsolete and that the community college was the most viable option toward reaching their goals. They talked about community colleges as a superior means of securing a viable career when compared to a four-year degree. Four-year degrees were portrayed as a relic of the past; participants cited a host of reasons ranging from affordability to being unwelcoming of diversity. There was much talk about all of the ways in which colleges are unaffordable and ineffective institutions that grant degrees that translate less and less into the careers students want. Of our 31 participants, only 10 said their goal was to transfer to a four-year institution.

There is a national imperative to increase the number of bachelor's degree holders, particularly in STEM (National Science Board, 2018). Our study provides evidence that students are not only aware of macro-level narratives regarding the viability and utility of four-year degrees, but they espouse such narratives in ways that translate into their decision-making. While students were fans of the community college, the field of higher education is not one in which community colleges are privileged in terms of funding, status, resources, or prestige. Future research might consider how, in a given field in which certain forms of capital are valued or not, immigrant students' forms of capital are

activated or transmitted. Furthermore, future research might explore further implications for policy, research, and practice – how politics and/or trending views are shaping immigrant students' perspective on the four-year degree.

Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of habitus and field endures as a useful theoretical tool to understand and contextualize observed perceptions among students. Participants described themselves as *ending up* in community colleges largely through happenstance. They relied heavily on their surrounding academic and social environments to understand various career options and pathways to get closer to entering these careers. That is, their decisions both in entering the community college and once in the community college were principally informed by their habitus, comprised of their family, peers, media, and some institutional agents. For example, Gina's emphatic belief that she could become a famous YouTube personality can be understood as an aspiration that she arrived at from a variety of influences. Namely, her proximity to an immigrant experience imbued her with what sociologists refer to as an immigrant optimism, a belief in U.S. institutions as vehicles for upward social mobility. The profound influence of social media – what she described as a zeitgeist unique to *her generation* – highlights the ways in which a social milieu and series of influences inform one's decision-making. Future research might consider ways in which traditional ways of thinking of habitus may be shaped by social media influences.

Community college practitioners should consider how they explicitly support the needs of immigrant students who may have different beliefs and attitudes (i.e., habitus) about the nature of their educational trajectory than later generation students. While they might be an easily overlooked population for espousing optimistic attitudes, educators should use caution in subscribing to the notion that these students are not in need of support. It would behoove community college leaders and educators to understand that within the varied pathways of the community colleges, participants may make meaning of these pathways in different ways. Students' extant knowledge of the available routes and pathways – particularly in regional contexts like the Great Plains where there are unique dynamics of race, ethnicity, and immigrant generation – may inform their decision-making in ways not readily understood by majority populations in these contexts.

Conclusion

This study focused on immigrant community college students' evolving perceptions of the utility and viability of a four-year degree. The focus was intentionally placed on the perceptions of participants who had made their decision to enroll in a community college because these perceptions inform the broader narratives people believe and eventually adopt. Moreover, this study focused on immigrant community college students' perceptions because they inform policy and practice. Our findings highlight the reality that rhetoric around college is confusing and conflicting, particularly as it pertains to community colleges in the landscape of higher education. Recommendations to conduct further research, especially when it comes to policy and practice, were offered. However, one thing is clear: the hierarchical role and power differential between four-year and two-year colleges. The students' narratives in this paper, though, challenge this broader discourse, emphasizing the advantage of community college to meet their needs. Yet, it is simultaneously important to recognize how these perceptions are informed by a particular social milieu in upholding these beliefs. And for all the great things participants said about the community college context, their perceptions may or may not translate into upward mobility.

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