Rationale

Escalating poverty rates and economic instability are creating intensifying pressures for higher education. Historically, the U.S. has relied on higher education, in particular community colleges, to help solve both problems by providing educational opportunities to thousands of individuals who would have not been able to go to college and by retooling displaced workers and thus ensuring their improved employment. As Miller (2009) points out, “Two-year colleges have been the pathway to middle-class careers for millions of Americans” (p. 24).

The current economic climate, characterized by uncertainty and a growing percentage of the populace in poverty, demands that higher education welcome the economic diversity of every student, and successfully prepare students, regardless of economic class, for a globally competitive workplace. Today’s students are coming to higher education from increasingly diverse economic backgrounds. In fact, 70% of community college students received Pell Grants in 2009–2010 (Equal Justice Works, 2011). Unfortunately, the higher education community is not as adept at serving low-income students as it is middle- and upper-income students. Recent research by the Pell Institute (2011) shows that in the past 30 years degree completion for students from...
wealthy families has steadily increased, while degree completion rates for lower-income families has remained virtually unchanged. Even at the community college level, fewer than 3 out of 10 low-income students will finish a degree or certificate within three years (HCM Strategists, 2010).

Regrettably, higher education’s understanding of how to serve low-income college students is limited. Higher education researchers routinely examine the roles of gender, race, and sexual orientation, while ignoring the role of socioeconomic status (Putten, 2001; Walpole, 2003). Additionally, while college and university practices and activities have recognized and embraced the diversity brought to campus by women, racial and ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian students, college administrators, student-support staff, and faculty are still lacking in awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the challenges faced by low-income students. Consequently, students from poverty are less likely than their more affluent peers to enroll and persist in college (Aronson, 2008; Bergerson, 2007; Oldfield, 2007; Putten, 2001; Sacks, 2003). An increased awareness of the needs and challenges of students from poverty that leads to improved campus policies, practices, and retention efforts is critical to ensure that there is sound alignment between institutional efforts and the needs of this group.

This concern about escalating poverty rates, coupled with a desire to increase the degree completion rate of low-income students, prompted a study that sought to understand the challenges, support networks, and strategies of successful low-income students in community colleges.

Summary of Related Literature Review

Prior to beginning the study, a comprehensive review of the existing literature was done. The literature review focused on three areas. The first was literature about the successes of low-income college students. This section served to point out that students from poverty have been neglected in diversity and student success research (Chen & DesJardins, 2007; Oldfield, 2007; Pearce, Down, & Moore, 2008; Putten, 2001; Walpole, 2003). This review also verified that there were virtually no studies about low-income students who managed to be successful in higher education.

Section Two explored the reasons students from poverty fail to enroll or persist in higher education. In brief, low-income students: disproportionately come from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds, tend to be older, are less likely to receive financial support from parents, and tend to have multiple obligations outside of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3).
These students are also more likely than their more advantaged peers to be non-native English speakers or to have been born outside of the U.S. Some may have dependent children or be single parents. Further, they tend to delay entry into higher education after college, attend colleges closer to home, live off campus, attend part-time, and work full- or part-time off campus while enrolled (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These national demographic factors all have a negative correlation with college enrollment and persistence.

In addition, the literature demonstrated that students from poverty experience socioeconomic barriers to higher education that are class specific (Adair, 2005; Bergerson, 2007). These barriers include restricted access and enrollment, a lack of cultural capital, limited financial resources, inadequate academic preparedness, and a lack of self-esteem. In addition, these students’ self-concept is often at odds with the culture of higher education making the initial transition into college even more difficult (Achieving the Dream, 2011; Aries & Seider, 2005; Bordieu & Passeron, 1977; Howard, 2001; London, 2006; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Watson, 2004; Payne, 2005).

The final section of the literature examined for this study evaluated an emerging branch of literature that both considers institutional characteristics that may facilitate access and success for students, and makes institutional recommendations for improvement (Engle, Bermo, & O’Brien, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Watson 2004; Pell Institute, 2011; Smith, Miller, & Bermo, 2009). This branch of research identifies and compares institutions that are more successful than their peer institutions in recruiting or retaining students from poverty (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engle, Bermo, & O’Brien, 2006; Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, & Watson, 2004). From these studies, common recommendations emerged. Each of these studies advocated improving pre-college academic preparation, identifying meaningful ways to increase the engagement of low-income students, offering innovative developmental education programs, enrolling students in orientation or student success courses, and providing students with clear academic pathways, structure, and sound advising.

What was missing from this body of knowledge were studies that explored the experiences of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are successful in higher education. This study addresses that gap.
Theoretical Framework

Dr. Ruby Payne’s framework of poverty provided the theoretical foundation for this study. Her work explains that the deficit model is a term used to describe situations where members from a more affluent group make inaccurate assumptions about those from poverty. They discredit differences as being a type of shortage, disadvantage, lacking, or handicap (Payne, 2005). Too often research, planning, and problem solving are rooted in the deficit model approach. Bergerson (2007) explained that “It is tempting to look at differences among college students from a deficit point of view and ask: how can we make up the difference in the capital in our students? However, a deficit approach ignores the goals and attributes of some students, as well as the resources they do bring to campus” (p. 116). As others have pointed out, research is needed that approaches the experiences and needs of low-income students from an assets- or strengths-based approach (Aronson, 2008; Payne, 2005). This study focused on the successes of Pell Grant recipients without mislabeling any differences as “deficits.”

Research Questions

As pointed out, the intention of the study was to explore the factors influencing the decision of low-income students to enroll and be successful in community college. To achieve this purpose, one central research question and seven subquestions needed to be answered:

1. What influences students from poverty to enroll and succeed in college?

   Subquestions for this question were:

   b. What influenced the student’s decision to attend college?
   c. What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?
   d. Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?
   e. Which individual motivations, strengths, skills, or abilities did low Socio-Economic Status (SES) students credit for their own success and persistence?
   f. Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the student’s success?
   g. Were there people who encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, how?
   h. What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?
Methods

The study consisted of interviews with 18 low-income college students who successfully persisted to their second year of study at four community colleges. The interview questions were designed around the research question and subquestions, and all participants were asked the same set of 14 open-ended interview questions. Following this interview protocol ensured respondents’ answers could be easily compared, and it minimized interviewer effects and bias. A qualitative narrative approach was chosen for this study because open-ended interview questions did not “restrict the views of participants” (Creswell, 2008, p. 213). By asking open-ended interview questions, participants had the flexibility to interpret and articulate their own unique experiences.

All participants in the study were asked the same set of open-ended interview questions. Patton (2002) argued that by answering the same set of open-ended standardized questions, respondents’ answers can be easily compared, and interviewer effects and bias are reduced (p. 349). In keeping with these recommendations, the interview guide was constructed as follows:

1. What are the factors that influenced you to continue your education after high school? (If necessary, follow up with questions about parental attitudes, parental expectations, and individual goals that are higher education-specific.)

2. Once you recognized that you wanted to attend college, how did you go about deciding where to go? (Probe into factors that the student considered. Cost? Location? Schedule?)

3. As a college student, you are eligible to receive a Pell Grant. How did you learn about the Pell Grant? Tell me about the application process. What enabled you to successfully complete and receive the Pell Grant?

4. Talk to me about expenses other than your tuition. Does your Pell Grant cover those costs? (Follow up to determine if and how much they are working outside of school. Are they experiencing stress as a result of inadequate finances? Were they surprised by costs other than tuition?)

5. How is college different from high school? Was there anything about the first semester in college that you found surprising or difficult? How did you cope with the changes? (Probe for details about advising, orientation courses, or student-support services.)
6. When you started attending your college courses did you find you were academically prepared? If yes, what helped you the most in your precollege preparation? If no, were there programs/services on campus that helped you get caught up?

7. How did you do your first semester? (Follow up with “Why did you do so well?” or “Explain what went wrong. How did you correct the situation?”)

8. Is there someone on campus (an instructor, employee, or peer) that you have been able to form a positive relationship with? Tell me about that process and relationship.

9. In spite of financial limitations, you have successfully enrolled in college and are making progress toward graduation. How do you explain your successes?

10. How would you coach new students who are also Pell Grant recipients? What advice could you give them to help them be successful in college?

11. What is a moment in your college experience that you are proud of? Please explain the significance of that experience.

12. What does the higher education experience mean to you? What do you hope to gain from this experience?

13. Have there been any other ways that a lack of financial resources has affected your education that we haven’t discussed? If yes, how? Would you elaborate on that?

14. Are there any other thoughts or feelings you might share with educators or policy makers to help them work more effectively with other students who have limited financial resources?

As shown in the table, the interview questions were designed to match the central research question and seven subquestions.
Table 1. Research Subquestions and Corresponding Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Subquestion</th>
<th>Corresponding Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. What influenced the student’s decision to attend college?</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?</td>
<td>5–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?</td>
<td>2–4, 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Which individual motivations, strengths, skills or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the student’s success?</td>
<td>3, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Were there people that encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, how?</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?</td>
<td>10, 14</td>
</tr>
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As pointed out earlier, the interview questions were meant to provide a starting point. However, both Whitt (1991) and Patton (2002) recommended the need for “emergent design flexibility” during the interview process. Whitt (1991) encouraged the researcher to develop initial interview questions based on his or her knowledge of the phenomena: “Then, as the study progresses, questions can be added as needed for clarification, such as when contradictory information is obtained, or to obtain additional information” (p. 411). Additionally, Patton (2002) argued, the researcher needs to avoid “getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursue new paths of discovery as they emerge” (p. 40). While no additional interview questions were added to the study, there were times when the interviewer had to ask participants follow-up questions to clarify or elaborate on responses to the existing interview questions.

The research sites for the study included four Achieving the Dream, Inc. (ATD) community colleges. Achieving the Dream is the nation’s largest, nongovernmental reform movement for student success in higher education (About Achieving the Dream, 2011). This reform initiative includes “160 community colleges and institutions, more than 100 coaches...
and advisors, and 16 state policy teams — working throughout 30 states and the District of Columbia” (About Achieving the Dream, 2011, para. 1). Further, ATD “is a national nonprofit that is dedicated to helping more community college students, particularly low-income students and students of color, stay in school and earn a college certificate or degree” (About Achieving the Dream, 2011, para. 1). Achieving the Dream community colleges are committed to assisting low-income college students. This commitment made these institutions compatible and ideal research sites for the purpose of this study.

National statistics on poverty were used to further narrow the potential number of research sites within the 160 ATD community colleges. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, five states in the U.S. had an estimated poverty rate at or above 17% in 2009. These are the poorest states in the nation, and they include Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia (Bishaw & Macartney, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, four Achieving the Dream community colleges in Arkansas were selected for the study based on purposive sampling. The site selection was based on the use of homogeneous sampling. Creswell (2008) advised that homogeneous sampling is appropriate when the researcher is trying to identify sites or participants that possess a “similar trait or characteristic” (p. 215). By selecting Arkansas’ ATD community colleges, which are institutions that deliberately strive to serve low-income students, and that are located in one of the nation’s poorest states, there was a greater likelihood that the students on the campuses came from impoverished backgrounds (versus if the research sites had been randomly selected).

Prior to conducting the study, the University of Arkansas’ Institutional Review Board was made aware that human subjects would participate in the study, and that the researcher did not anticipate any foreseeable or significant risk to participants. The board found the proposal to be within their guidelines for research using human subjects. Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic, and the personal nature of many of the reported stories, each participant was assigned a random numerical pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

Participants at each site were chosen using purposive sampling. The two criteria used to identify participants were that they be Pell Grant recipients who were academically successful and that they be enrolled in at least their second year of study. Pell Grant recipients were selected because the U.S. government classifies these recipients as students from “low-income” families (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This list
of potential participants was narrowed to successful students who had a GPA of 3.0 or above.

Achieving the Dream coaches, at each site, were used to garner support for the study and to identify a campus contact person who was knowledgeable of students who met the participant criterion for this study. Initially 20 interviews were scheduled; however, there were two participants who were not interviewed. One of the students did not participate due to personal scheduling conflicts; the second participant’s grades had dropped below the pre-established 3.0 standard and was therefore not eligible for participation. Thus, the study consisted of 18 total participants and interviews.

While the study did not deliberately strive to achieve or control for participant diversity, the 18 participants did come from a variety of diverse backgrounds. Thirteen of the participants were women and five were men. The study involved both traditional and nontraditional aged students; six of the participants were 19 to 29 years old, six were 30 to 39 years old, and six were 40 years old or older. Twelve of the 18 students were first-generation college students. Eight of the participants were Caucasian; eight were African American, one participant was Native American, and one was Latino. Eight of the participants had dropped out of high school and completed their GEDs prior to enrolling in college. In addition, eight of the participants remarked that this was their second attempt at college. Fifteen respondents self-reported that they required developmental course work prior to enrolling in credit-bearing courses. Thirteen of the students also enrolled in a student orientation or student success course their freshman year. Finally, three of the 18 participants took English as a second language courses.

**Data Collection**

The study involved an initial pilot test to confirm that the interview questions were easy to understand and to determine an estimate of the time necessary for the study’s actual interviews. Next, prior to the in-depth interviews, the 18 participants completed a 10-question demographic survey. Finally, the interviews were scheduled and conducted. To fully engage participants in dialogue, minimal notes were taken during the 1-to 2-hour interviews. However, the interviews were both audiotaped and videotaped and then transcribed. Immediately following the individual interviews, initial reactions and reflections were recorded in a research journal.
Once interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed. Personally transcribing the data from the audio recordings facilitated an evaluation of the tone of voice and nuances used during the interview and the ability to detect emerging similarities and differences early in the research process. Seidman (1991) explained that “Although there are computer programs that can sort out and combine all the text in which a particular word appears, a computer program cannot produce the connections a researcher makes while studying the interview text” (p. 85). In keeping with Seidman’s recommendation, the hand analysis method was used. Once the data from the audio were transcribed, the videotaped interviews were reviewed, and the research journal was consulted for consistency.

Following Maxwell’s (2005) guidelines for cross-case analysis, the data were examined on a question-by-question basis. This analysis process allowed the researchers to conceptually organize the text data, divide it into manageable text segments, and discover overlapping themes (Creswell, 2008). As themes emerged, they were assigned an individual color. Each transcript’s responses were color coded in an effort to identify emerging themes and differences. Key participant quotes that supported emerging themes were circled (p. 252).

**Participant Descriptions and Findings**

The participants varied in age, race, educational backgrounds, gender, and in the nature of their poverty. Prior to presenting a summary of the participants’ responses to the research question and subquestions, it is essential to include a description of several participants and to provide some of the details of their personal struggles and triumphs. This is critical because the emergent and dramatic life stories of the participants heighten the significance of the students’ unlikely college successes. The ensuing descriptions provide details about the participants’ backgrounds, family life, the nature of their poverty, and the life circumstances that make their stories particularly unique or inspiring.

Participant 1 was a student who was African American and nontraditional. She married in 11th grade when she found out that she was pregnant with her first child; she is now the mother of eight children. While she did not graduate from high school, she did complete her GED. In addition to caring for eight children, she was, until recently, the sole care provider for her elderly father. After six of her children were in college and her father had died, she decided to return to college. As she explained, “up until now, well it’s been about taking care of everyone else. Now it’s about taking care of me. It is my turn.” She hoped to complete
an associate degree in business, and then transfer to a four-year institution. She was dependent upon governmental housing, TRIO, Career Pathways, Pell Grant, WIC, and student loans. Participant 1 indicated that it will take her 6–10 years to pay back her current student loans. She has maintained a 4.0 GPA since her first semester and will graduate in May. This was her second attempt at college. This participant grew up in poverty and meets Payne’s (2005) criteria for generational poverty.

Participant 2 was a 20-year-old, African American male. He was a high school graduate, but this was his second attempt at college. He initially started college at a private institution. However, during the summer following his freshman year, his father, a police officer, was killed in the line of duty. Shortly after, his family lost their house. Within a few months of his father’s death, his mother also passed away. This participant quickly became a victim of situational poverty (Payne, 2005).

Having lost both parents, he realized he could no longer afford private school and dropped out. He said, “I had to make a choice to do something different or just stay there and decay. I had a situation that really woke me up; I knew I had nothing left. It’s a process. I had to just sit and think about where did I want my life to go.” He identified his current community college as being his only viable option, and he moved in with his aunt. In addition to relying upon his aunt for housing, he received Pell Grants, academic scholarships, and worked at The Home Depot and in a work-study position on campus. Unfortunately, during his first semester of community college, his time was consumed with providing documentation of the death of both of his parents and completing the paperwork needed to receive much needed financial assistance. In spite of his personal loss and hardships, he had a 4.0 GPA, and he planned to transfer to a four-year institution after his May graduation. He hoped to become a high school counselor and mentor other students from similar backgrounds.

Participant 3 was a nontraditional, Caucasian, single mother. She grew up in poverty and was physically, sexually, and emotionally abused throughout her childhood. In an effort to escape this abuse, she dropped out of high school in 10th grade and got married just to get out of her parent’s house. However, her husband became abusive early in their marriage. This participant’s background meets Payne’s (2005) description of generational poverty. Participant 3 acknowledged that her whole life had been spent in the “vicious rut and cycle of poverty.” She explained that she had made a life of struggling to survive:
It’s just day to day. You’re poor; all your problems could be solved if you had money to throw at them. You are poor. You can’t get out of it. I have to pay the bills, so I have to keep a job. And that is what you do; you just take one job after the other, and when you are in that cycle you attract other people that are not good for your life, toxic people. So you just keep making bad choices, choices that keep you where you are. That’s what happened to me for 30–35 years of my life.

This participant completed her GED and immediately enrolled in an associate degree program. She received academic scholarships, Pell Grants, support from Career Pathways, and had student loans. She planned to transfer to a four-year institution, but had not determined a major. She hoped her example would set a new standard of college graduation for their family, and that higher education would free her and her 12-year-old daughter from the poverty cycle.

Participant 5 was an African American, single mother of four children. Reflecting upon her experiences, she described herself as an “A” honor roll student throughout high school. Her parents had become parents at a young age, dropped out of high school, and entered the workforce. As an 18-year-old, she initially enrolled in a private college. However, she dropped out her first year when she became pregnant. She had since had three more children. She delayed returning to college until her first two children were enrolled in public school. When she decided to return to college she said, “I had to search for a college that was budget friendly; I knew I couldn’t go back to the private school I went to earlier.” Not only did she need a college with affordable tuition, but she also required governmental housing, food stamps, and Career Pathways’ help for childcare for her youngest two children. While this participant was raising four children and working 20 hours a week for UPS, she maintained a 4.0 GPA, and was on schedule to graduate in May with an associate degree in accounting. Participant 5 was eloquent in saying that poverty, not academic ability, had been her greatest barrier to higher education:

It has been empowering to earn straight A’s in college, but really I knew I would have no problems with the courses. I was a model student in high school. It was other things that was blocking my success. I don’t want to be on government assistance and get food stamps. It can be embarrassing. The way I look at it though is that I can take advantage of all the free money and help that is out there. Career Pathways is designed to help you get your education. I can get this help and government help for the next four to five years,
and I can get on my feet. Or, I will be like those people that need government assistance for a lifetime. I think it is better to just use it to the full advantage for four or five years. Then, I can support myself and my family. All I want out of college is a better tomorrow for me and my kids.

Participant 7 was an adult, African American who was the mother of four children. This participant endures an ongoing battle with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. She grew up in a violent household. She revealed, “My mom was a victim of domestic abuse. We had to move around a lot. We had to be able to get packed up and get gone quickly.” Consequently, she changed schools frequently as a K–12 student and had a shaky academic foundation. Participant 7’s first attempt at college was unsuccessful. During her first year in college, she was robbed at gunpoint while working in a fast-food restaurant. Soon after, she dropped out of school.

Fortunately, her second attempt at college was successful. She credited a network of support services and financial aid for this success. The most memorable aspect of her story centered on her inability to “walk” at graduation. She disclosed:

The moment I am most proud of is receiving a letter saying that I’ve met the requirements to graduate. Unfortunately, I will not walk across the stage for the simple fact that my anxiety prevents me from walking across the stage. I will pick up my certificate. My son graduated from sixth grade this past year also. One Saturday we come back up here in our caps and gowns on, and we took our pictures in front of the college and in front of the college sign. It was just exciting. We posted the pictures on Facebook, and our family has just emailed and messaged us so much when they saw our pictures. That was my graduation. My son is going to think outside of the box. I want to give my children the motivation to go to college. They can say, “My mother did it, so I have to at least try.” I want them to go outside of that box.

Participant 8 was a 29-year-old, African American woman who had planned on making a lifetime career in the military. She had been in the military for nine years, but “was forced out because of a liver condition.” Participant 8 explained that she had a comfortable way of life when she was in the military because she had a steady income, military housing, and health insurance. However, now that she is not on active duty, she was experiencing greater financial stress. This unexpected change in her
income is consistent with Payne’s (2005) description of situational poverty. According to Participant 8:

As of right now, I am not working outside of school, and I have really had to cut back. I get a temporary check from the military and unemployment, but it’s just not enough with the three kids. You got to cut back on a lot. I get WIC for the milk for the baby. I used to shop for things like new clothes and any groceries I liked, but I just can’t do that anymore. Maybe that will change after college. I hope.

One particularly remarkable situation in Participant 8’s story was when she described having her third child during the previous fall semester. Prior to having her baby, she planned and worked ahead diligently on assignments, so that the birth of her child would not delay her academic progress. As she revealed:

I’m really proud I’ve made it this far and I haven’t dropped out. I mean even when I had the baby. I had the baby and I went back to class the next week. I only missed that one week, and then I was back. Before I had the baby, I came in and did all my work for the next lesson. I was ahead. So, when I came back they were just getting to the lessons I already did. The questions I had on those chapters, I got a chance to still ask them. They were truthfully moving a little slow for me.

This participant was planning to graduate in May with an associate degree in medical office technology, but hopes to transfer to a university to complete a bachelor’s degree.

Participant 9 was a nontraditional African American woman, who had grown up in poverty. Her story was demonstrative of Payne’s (2005) description of generational poverty. In December, she had not broken this generational pattern, but she was hopeful that her impending May graduation would radically improve her financial status. In her words:

I’d been out of school 13 years when I decided to go to college. My momma had nine kids and a sick husband. We was poor, and we all had to help out. I do remember she went and got her GED, so she was a good example for us kids. But, there was no focus on school; we was just trying to get by and take care of the other kids and her husband.

I knew I do want to go to college, but I got pregnant with my first child when I was 16, so I had to drop out when I was 16. I am proud that I got my GED the same year I was supposed to graduated from
college. I do want to go to college after my first child, but then I had my second, and my third, and then my fourth. But, my oldest child is deceased now.

As early as high school, she knew that she wanted to go to college, but it was the loss of her son that finally prompted her to action:

I lost my son in October of 2009. I needed something to keep my mind off of it. It was a major reason I come back to school. There were mornings I did not feel like moving. It was coming up close to my son’s birthday, and I was in depression mode. I would not move, I would not eat, and I just withdrew. I knew I had to keep going to set a good example for my other kids. I made myself snap out of it; I enrolled in classes, and I learned from that. I always wanted to show my kids that they could accomplish going to college, so I just put one foot forward and the other foot forward. So, that is why I come back.

Not only did this participant have to cope with the loss of her son, but securing money for college and managing financial hardships was a never-ending process:

SSS and Career Pathways always trying to help me out. Plus, there is Mrs. Beverly that is over (in) the math lab. She is like my momma; that is what I call her. She’s always like, “You smart; you can go to school; there is all kinds of help out there.” So, I got Pell and gas vouchers and childcare through Career Pathways. But there’s so much to pay for. Books. I was shocked. Seems like they are more than the tuition. It is a major point to have your books for class. Almost more important to have your book than the pencil. Then there is fees like lab fees and publication fees. You know I cry when my car breaks down. Really I just sit and cry, and my car breaks down a lot. My car gets me from point A to point B. Car repairs are expensive, and you never know when you are going to have them.

In spite of growing up in poverty, the death of her child, and ongoing financial hardships, this participant will graduate in May. Her long-term aspiration was to earn enough money to be “a little more comfortable,” and then she would like to explore the possibility of earning a bachelor’s degree.

Participant 10 was a nontraditional, Caucasian, single mother of three children. Two of them were children with special needs. As she described her life experiences, it became clear that she was enduring situational poverty (Payne, 2005):
I was married 13 years, and my husband made good money. I quit work after I had my third child. We ended up getting divorced, and I ended up in the position my mom warned me about. I had no husband, no job, no nothing. I think that fueled my decision to go to college a lot. I went from having a house with a pool and all that, and now I’m living in low-income housing. I’m trying to shuffle money that doesn’t exist to pay bills. I can’t take it. Watching my kids go from being able to go out to McDonald’s with a friend, and I could take them, to not even being able to invite friends over because we have to budget how much money we have for food in our home, and we can’t afford to feed anyone else. I don’t like living like that, and I am not going to do it for long. I want to do it on my own. I take a lot of pride doing it on my own, and I don’t want pity. Don’t feel bad for me; just give me a minute.

This year is my year. I’m going to graduate. I love that my kids have watched this. I’ve gotten really good scholarships. My daughter actually went with me to our big AAUW scholarship luncheon. I may cry a little bit, but this weekend, in my speech, I pointed out to her, “You’ve seen how hard I work. I’m sorry I don’t have a lot of time to spend with you, and I’m sorry we don’t have a lot of money right now to have nice things and have fun. I want you to realize that getting your education and working hard does pay off. It is going to get better.”

This student explained that she had worked diligently to “stack scholarships.” She also received an American Opportunities Grant, Pell Grants, and worked over 30 hours a week. In spite of these efforts, her family still faced great financial hardships:

Everything it costs to do this takes away from my kids. My kids haven’t had glasses in I couldn’t tell you how long. My oldest two both broke their glasses years ago, and I don’t have the money to go out and buy them new ones right now. They suffer a lot for me to go to school. I just want to make sure my kids are taken care of. That there is food in the house, and gas in the car to take them back and forth to school. I budget when food is low in the house. Food doesn’t last long with a 15-year-old boy. I get an EBT card, but still with three kids it’s hard. We have a lot of evenings where it is a can of chicken noodle for all of us or peanut butter and jelly. The kids are okay with it because they think “Yay, no dishes.” But, it’s depressing as a parent to have to do it. But I tell you what, we have the
countdown going until mom gets out of school and things change. My kids have a calendar, and they are counting down until May.

At the time of the interview, she was planning to receive an associate degree in accounting, and was hoping to find full-time employment once she graduates.

Participant 12 was a 40-year-old, white male with three children. He dropped out of high school and had been working in a coffee shop since then. His local community college was the only feasible higher education option because it was both affordable and conveniently located. As a student, this participant had balanced school with extreme family and financial stress. During his first semester of college his third child was born. This child had a serious heart defect:

It was one of those things that you are just in shock. He had blue hands and feet. He had to go to the children’s hospital; I was like, “wow your whole world just come crashing down.” They flew him to children’s in the helicopter. He was in ICU for two-and-a-half weeks. The doctors were great; they fought and got it done.

During this time, I only missed two classes. I was taking night classes. I still had to work just to be able to pay our bills. I stayed the first week, but then I just got to stay on the weekends, so I could work. We couldn’t afford to drive back and forth or the food when we got there. We would just pack sandwiches, and we had to trust the nurses and doctors to take care of him when we weren’t there in the week. You can’t imagine what it’s like to leave your newborn baby several hours away in someone else’s care.

I made all As though. Who would have thought a high school dropout would become an overachiever? I made a 4.0 even though we had everything happen with our son. I usually just get four hours of sleep a night, but my family motivates me, my kids especially. I just want to make a good life for them.

This participant’s wife was currently enrolled in the nursing program, and they believed her forthcoming graduation, coupled with his, would radically change the family’s financial status.

Participant 13 was the most intriguing student involved in the study. She was a Native American student who was in her 20s with two children. She was forthcoming about her conservative, Pentecostal upbringing, her extensive stays at a psychiatric hospital for mental health issues, and her limited fourth grade education. What was most unexpected about this
student was that she had been accepted by both Harvard and Columbia Universities, and she was waiting on a response from Yale University.

This participant explained that her parents had a limited education and were highly religious, so she was not allowed to go to public school. Her mother had a sixth grade education, and her father had a 10th grade education; they homeschooled her until fourth grade when the curriculum became too challenging for them to teach. Because of this upbringing, the participant described that she had an inferior academic background and limited opportunity to develop her social skills:

The way I was raised was different from how almost everyone else is raised. My parents are good parents, but misguided. When I was growing up I couldn’t be very social. I was not allowed to go to birthday parties or swimming, or anything that wasn’t part of the church. I wasn’t very social. My parents would not let me cut my hair. I had to wear jean skirts all the time. I couldn’t exercise or ride a bike. Other kids didn’t accept me; I did not have the opportunity to be social.

My only goal was to marry a man in the church. To have his children, raise his children the way he wanted me to, to clean his house, and that was it. Women don’t have careers. They worked to help support the family if needed, but our goal is to be the husband’s “handmaiden;” that is what we are referred to is the “handmaiden.” We are never to question the husband. Never, ever, ever do you question the husband. It was a challenge for me to overcome those things I grew up believing. I thought I was incapable. I found out I was quite capable, quite intelligent, and able to do things. I always wanted an education, but I always thought it was out of reach, just not an option.

After fourth grade, when her parents were no longer able to teach the homeschool curriculum, the participant explained that she read a lot and taught herself through the ninth-grade curriculum. This participant admitted that she was socially awkward and academically underprepared when she arrived on campus; yet, she managed to maintain a 4.0 GPA every semester and was even elected president of the college’s Phi Theta Kappa chapter. This success was not without sacrifice and hardship. She noted that she did not have “time for fun,” and that at times she felt guilty for putting school in front of her family. However, her greatest obstacle had been enduring poverty as both a mother and a student:
I never thought my life would allow me to take this path, from my background to my financial issues. You know, I have taken out a loan every semester I have been here. I have had to. Already, I owe $30,000 in student loans. Already. I haven’t been able to pay any interest on them. Every loan the interest is compiling and compiling. I don’t have the income to pay the interest and stay in school. Sometimes I have to call people and say, “Can I have $10.00 this week so I can go to school?” We get food stamps, and the food stamps don’t cover all the food cost.

While many Americans believe that higher education is the remedy for poverty, this participant’s future was uncertain. She had been accepted by several Ivy League colleges; yet, her ability to transfer and her future may be restricted due to her financial status. She was fully aware of this uncertainty:

I’m just trying to keep a house afloat, a relationship afloat, and take care of children. Um, then you factor in can I even afford to transfer? Can I even afford to take the next step? Because, I do not know if I will have the money to do it. It is really trying at times, and you just want to throw your hands in the air. This just isn’t working out for me. But, so far so good, and I’m almost done with my associate. I will know about the Jack Kent Cook scholarship in February or March. That is solely what I am basing my next step on. Unless I get a full ride to another institution, then I can’t go. If I don’t get that scholarship, I will have to find something that is cheaper.

A lack of talent, intelligence, or drive, or even the admissions’ criteria of elite universities did not limit this student; rather, it was a lack of income that may derail her academic future.

Participant 14 was a nontraditional white male who had been out of high school for 10 years. As a student in high school he prioritized athletics over academics. After high school he had a successful career as a welder, and he had planned on being in that profession until retirement. Welding required him to be away from his family for extended periods, but he had a stable annual salary of $50,000. Tragically, while he was away, the family’s childcare provider molested his 4-year-old son. This father was in college because he was desperate for employment that would allow him to stay closer to home and protect his family.

This participant’s experiences as a student were characterized by working significant hours, while trying to balance family and academic responsibilities:
I’ve got family at home. I work at Sears 40-plus hours a week, and I go to school full time. There is never enough money. I rent a house and there is a car payment. And school is a full-time job. I don’t care what they say, in and of itself, school is a full-time job. I don’t have a clue how I do it. I manage. Family is number one. I get a lot of support from my wife; if it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here at all. I study late at night. I hardly ever get to sleep. I have break periods in between classes, so I study then. I get to school before classes so I can study, and I set up my schedule so I have study time in between. I have to schedule in those break periods for studying.

In spite of the financial hardship, and the appalling abuse endured by his son, this student had managed to be very successful academically. He could not help but smile as he discussed his GPA and recent scholarship awards:

I was fixin’ to take out loans, but I became SGA president and things started to fall in place. I got the SGA scholarship, and bigger than that I’ve got an Academic All-Star Scholarship. It is a full ride to any four-year college in the state. I worked my tail off to get that. It includes community involvement, grades, participation in school. I was picked (as) the top finalist in our school to get it. It is a big deal [laughter]! I will go to Henderson or ULAR. ULAR has sent me an additional scholarship. It is incredible! You are telling me! I never saw this coming!

Once this participant graduates in May, he planned to transfer and complete a bachelor’s degree. He wanted to become a public school math teacher.

Participant 15 was one of the few students interviewed who was a traditional age college student who had started college immediately after high school graduation and was being successful in his first attempt. This participant was a Caucasian male who had spent his recent years in foster care. He had to grow up quickly and had become completely self-reliant at a young age. He faced different pressures and had greater “adult responsibilities” than his peers from more affluent families where parents could provide financial and academic support. Participant 15 was aware that his situation was unique compared with many of his peers, and he articulated that his path had not been an easy one:

My family dynamic doesn’t exist, so I have been in foster care. Being on your own is hard. Rent, electricity, water, buying my own food,
gas, car repairs—it’s not easy. Not only the costs, but just getting up in the morning on my own. It’s not easy.

If I budget right, I can get by but not save much. With work-study and my other job, I work 55 hours a week. I work at a call center. Everybody is worried about me, and they wonder how I am going to do it. I don’t have a choice. If I don’t work and go to school, it is on me. I don’t have anyone to bail me out. If I don’t, I don’t have food or electricity. I don’t have family support. I just don’t have any other choice; it is self-survival.

Unlike some of the other participants in the study, this student explained that he simply did not have time to be involved in campus organizations. Balancing academics with work consumed his time. He explained that sometimes he got depressed and even jealous of his peers:

There are days when I just want to be normal. You know, have time to hang out with friends, or go home to a family and have dinner, or see a movie. I don’t have that. I work, I budget, budget, budget, and if I am lucky I use Sundays to sleep and work ahead on my homework because I work during the week. This is not how people my age live.

This young man was very driven and planned to transfer after he graduates in May. He was completing the general education plan of study and had originally planned to earn a bachelor’s degree in business. However, as he neared graduation he was exploring his career options in the sciences.

Participant 16 had returned to college after dropping out of a junior college 10 years previously. Her higher education options were limited because of her past academic record and blemished transcripts. Therefore, in her second attempt at college, she enrolled in her local community college, which had proven to be a wonderful opportunity for redeeming her academic transcript, developing her math and English skills through remedial courses, and getting prepared for transferring to a university. She was an African American woman who spoke candidly of trying to balance her relationships with her husband, children, school, work, and financial stress.

College had clearly helped this participant find direction in life, but pursuing higher education had not been without its struggles, stress, and sacrifices. Like many of the other participants, she described the financial challenges she had faced each day as a student and parent:
It has been so stressful. My kids need new winter clothes and jackets, or do I spend the money on gas to get to school? I have to budget money for my family, but I also need things for school, like paper and backpacks. I couldn't afford the graphics calculator. I actually made a friend that let me borrow her calculator. I try not to stress, but it is inevitable. But, I try to keep it from interfering with my school or family. It is hard. At night I talk to my husband and ask, “How are we going to do this?” We make ends meet, but by the end of the month when we pay the bills and buy the diapers, it’s pretty much gone. You have to really budget, and prioritize, and think about what is most important and what can wait until next month.

Between the interview and her May graduation, this participant indicated that she would be actively applying for scholarships and undoubtedly taking out additional student loans to pursue her dream of becoming a math teacher.

Participant 18 was a nontraditional Caucasian male. He was the father of five children. Immediately preceding high school, this participant enlisted in the military. He explained that no one in his family went to college, and the expectation was for him and his siblings to get a job and move out as soon as they turned 18. He felt that the military was his best option, and he knew little of the higher education processes. He commented on his limited understanding:

I knew I needed to go and wanted to go even if it was when I got out of the military. It took my wife’s support and experience, but I still had to learn a lot on my own. No one helped me. I have learned a lot through poking and hoping, just finding it out by myself. I have learned that there is all kind of money and scholarships out there. That is something high school needs to know. You can go to college without relying on parents’ support. Kids like me need to hear that, but seems like no one is talking to kids like me about college.

While this participant has been able to obtain a work-study position, and support from Pell, TRIO, Career Pathways, and local scholarships, he explained that he still endured financial limitations and hardship:

We live paycheck to paycheck. It worries me a lot. I have no savings, no insurance. I would like to go to the doctor, but if something is wrong with me I can’t afford to fix it.

I have five kids; I try not to let my kids see financial worries. I hate December. Christmas time comes around and you are broke. I don’t let my kids know that we don’t have some of the things other fami-
lies have. But there are certain things my kids want, like money for books at the book fair. They ask for $10.00 for books, and I just have to say, “No, not this week.” But, it really wouldn’t matter what week it was.

This student plans to transfer to a university. He wants to earn a four-year degree and work at the Smithsonian, in a museum, or teach history.

Responses to Interview Questions

A major portion of the study was devoted to a summary of participant responses to the 14 open-ended interview questions. Direct student quotations that were poignant, colorful, and shrewd were obtained for each interview question. The following section provides a very brief insight into the 108 pages of the study’s findings.

Sub question A: What are the factors that influenced the student’s decision to attend college?

The most frequently referenced reason for enrolling in higher education was the desire for stable employment and the opportunity to escape the vicious cycle of poverty. In fact, 16 of the study’s 18 participants indicated that they were attending college to create new job opportunities for themselves. Participant 10’s comments summarized the group’s motivation:

Bottom line, I want a better way of life. I have gone to college to get a better job. I want to have the competence and confidence to do a good job. I want to get job prepared in my classes. I want to improve my financial worth. I want to have confidence and skills. I want to be able to sell myself, and most of all I don't want to let anyone down.

The 16 participants with strong vocational motivation believed that higher education would lead to improved employment, an outcome essential to their families’ financial stability and quality of life. Eleven of the students explained that they were motivated to attend college because they hoped to set a positive example for their children. Finally, five participants had major life-defining events or tragedies that prompted them to enroll in college. Such events included the death of immediate family members, personal health issues, and job loss.

Missing from the above listed factors were positive references for parents or K–12 educators. Unfortunately, none of the participants credited
these individuals for positively influencing or encouraging their decisions to attend college.

**Subquestion B: What facilitated the student’s successful transition into higher education?**

Not one of the participants said that they felt prepared for college. They were ill-prepared because they lacked the confidence, financial resources, or academic skills necessary for success. Therefore, self-determination and a network of support systems were necessary to help them adjust to college life. As they described their experiences, it was apparent that student motivation, positive relationships with campus faculty and staff, and campus resources had played a critical role in assisting them to make their transitions into higher education. Participant 9’s sentiments capture the way many of the other participants regarded their instructors:

> Out here you have instructors and advisors that show you concern. It’s like a mother-daughter or father-daughter communication. It’s a communication thing. You can communicate with your advisors and instructors here. They are understanding. Mrs. Harper, my instructor, will ask me if I need any help in her class. If I do, she will set up a time when I can come meet with her and ask questions. She tells me, “If something happens and you can’t make it to class, please notify me and inform me.” She cares about us. So, it’s different from high school that way.

> It was common for students to use the phrases “family,” “like a parent,” or “mother” when describing their relationships with faculty and staff members. They felt these positive relationships were essential in facilitating their transitions into higher education.

**Subquestion C: Did financial concerns affect the student’s college experiences, and if so, how?**

Financial limitations affected every aspect of all 18 participants’ college experiences. To begin with, costs were the predominant consideration in the students’ college selection process. These students had to select an institution with affordable tuition that was within a financially feasible commuting distance from where they lived. Their socioeconomic status prevented them from engaging in a “true” college search, and it prohibited them from having institutional choices.

> Once students selected an affordable institution, their financial limitations continued to affect their daily college experiences. The students in
the study consistently mentioned feeling overwhelmed, embarrassed, depressed, marginalized, or stressed due to their poverty. Participants shared common worries; all 18 participants complained about the daunting expenses of textbooks. Sixteen of the participants mentioned inadequate housing or a lack of money for food. When these basic needs were unmet, it was difficult, and at times impossible, for the students to remain focused on their education. As Participant 13 explained:

As a student, if you are going to be in college all day, you are going to want to eat at some time in that day. You can eat here or drive somewhere for food, which is more gas money. You have to think about that. It’s not cool to sit out here hungry all day. That has happened a few times.

Sixteen of the participants were also worried about reliable transportation or money for gasoline. A lack of transportation often interfered with regularly attending class, or students worked additional hours outside of class in an effort to pay for transportation.

Due to a lack of financial resources, many of the participants had no choice but to apply for student loans; this debt also had a negative impact on their student experiences. As one participant explained:

Student loans are where all my nervousness comes from, right there. The truth is I can’t do this [school] and work full time. I tried to for the first three semesters. It was just too much, so I took out loans. Yeah, it gives you money to get by, but it also gives you something to constantly worry about. The expense and the loans actually terrify me. I know it is crazy, but I stay up so many nights worrying about my loans and how to pay for them. Then I go to class without any sleep. I know without school things can’t get better, but I also know things can’t get better as long as I have all that debt. How will I pay that back?

Subquestion D: Which individual motivations, strengths, skills, or abilities did low SES students credit for their own success and persistence?

When students responded to this interview question, there was noticeable overlap between the participants’ motivations, self-identified strengths, and skills. The greatest motivation behind their decision to enroll in college, and do well was their desire to set a positive example for their children and break the cycle of poverty by improving their job opportunities. In addition, students credited a number of personal
strengths for contributing to their successes and persistence. There was consistent overlap when the participants described their strengths. In fact, 13 of the responses shared the phrases, “hard work,” “dedication,” and “determination.” Finally, the participants’ emotional intelligence and self-management contributed to their successes and persistence. None of the participants credited a specific academic skill set for facilitating their accomplishments. Rather, four participants mentioned the importance of their evolving social skills, and they believed their ability to work well with their peers and teachers had contributed to their successes.

Every participant involved in the study identified the importance of being able to self-manage and having good student skills. Each response consistently combined the recommendations of “don’t procrastinate,” “study,” “attend regularly,” “utilize available resources,” “take notes,” and “stay focused on your goals.” Their responses were rooted in common sense, practicality, and focused almost exclusively on soft skills and strong emotional intelligence.

Subquestion E: Were there any college programs or interventions that contributed to the students’ success?

A combination of college programs and interventions supported their abilities to participate and succeed in higher education. First, they unanimously indicated that they could not have even enrolled in higher education without the financial support they received from their Pell Grants. Students also mentioned the importance of a variety of scholarships that helped supplement their Pell Grants and made college participation a possibility.

Another critical intervention, referenced frequently by participants, was the Career Pathways Initiative (CPI). This is a program in Arkansas that serves low-income, adult caretakers who have a child under the age of 21. Participants must be receiving Transitional Employment Assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid, or have a family income below 250% of the federal poverty level to qualify for the Career Pathways program. The program attempts to remove barriers to community college education by providing textbook, transportation, and child care vouchers. CPI provides participants with coaches who serve as academic and career advisors (Arkansas Career Pathways, 2012).

In addition to financial support, many of the students often required academic support. Almost every student identified remedial education
programs, student success courses, and campus tutoring labs as being fundamental contributors to their successes.

Subquestion F: Were there people who encouraged or supported their academic achievements, and if so, who were they, and in what ways did they assist?

Responses to the first interview question revealed that earlier in their lives the participants did not feel encouraged or supported by their parents or K–12 educators; however, as adult students, most of the participants had spouses, children, college peers, or educators who provided encouragement and support. Participant 9 smiled as she talked at length about her advisor and instructor, Mrs. Harper:

Mrs. Harper is the type of teacher that comes to class upbeat and positive. A good example is when she had to have surgery on her knee. Here she came to class, hopping around on crutches, her knee swollen. She (was) determined to teach anyway. She has a positive outlook on everything. If she is that determined to teach us, we should be that determined to learn. . . . Again, it’s just like a mother-daughter thing. All girls look up to their mothers, and that’s how it is with her. We all look up to her. She talks to us if we seem down, or when she see us on campus. She helps us with our future and always tells us we can do it.

The students repeatedly described the educators they had formed relationships with as being “family,” “proud parents,” or “friends.”

Subquestion G: What advice do students from poverty have for other students, policy makers, and educational practitioners?

Recommendations for students. When offering advice to other students, there was little variation in the participants’ responses. They simply recommended that other students should develop and employ the same student survival skills that contributed to their own successes. These tips included attending class regularly, scheduling and managing time wisely, developing effective study skills, using available campus resources, and remaining focused on and committed to long-term goals.

Recommendations for policy makers. Participants had strong convictions when making recommendations for policy makers. First, participants consistently believed that elected officials fail to understand or even recognize the implications of poverty. They felt ignored by policy makers,
and they believed that policy makers needed to “spend more time in the community” and “walk in our shoes.”

In addition, they made recommendations about the funding of various higher education programs. First, those involved in Career Pathways pleaded for the program’s continued support; they were aware of budget cuts in other areas of academia, but deemed Career Pathways as being essential to the success of those from poverty. There were also recommendations for greater Pell Grant funding. Students argued that elected officials needed to have an increased awareness of how other students abuse the existing Pell Grant system, and that policy makers should reconsider the availability of Pell Grant funding for summer courses. They pressed for greater accountability for those who receive Pell Grant funding and misuse the system by dropping out immediately after receiving their Pell checks. Participants believed that if policies were in place to prevent the current misuse of the Pell Grant system, then there would be increased funding available for more serious students throughout the school year.

Recommendations for educational practitioners. Finally, students also made a variety of suggestions to educational practitioners. They often mentioned that teachers should avoid “dumbing down” their courses. These participants wanted to be adequately prepared for the workforce or for college transfer. They expected instruction to be both real-world relevant and challenging.

The most consistent recommendation from participants was for improved relationships between students and faculty. Ten of the participants explained that teachers needed to be “more understanding,” and that they should “get to know” their students. The participants mentioned that they sometimes felt “invisible” or like a “number” to some of their instructors. They complained that their teachers could not relate to their situations, and that they felt negatively stereotyped because of their poverty. The students were uncomfortable disclosing their work obligations, family responsibilities, and financial hardships to some of their instructors. In fact, many of the participants made a considerable effort to hide their poverty from their teachers.

Conclusions

According to Ben Franklin, “The only thing more expensive than education is ignorance.” America simply cannot afford to fail at educating its citizens who are in poverty. Educational practitioners and policy makers should use students’ feedback, like the responses from this study, to make
more informed decisions about how to serve this marginalized population. With this in mind, the following conclusions and recommendations are made:

1. The personal demographics of the study participants were consistent with the national profile.
2. The educational barriers faced by the participants were comparable to those common barriers described in the deficit model studies.
3. The desire for improved career opportunities motivated college enrollment and persistence for low-income students.
4. Location and cost were the two most important variables in the college selection process of low-income students.
5. Pell Grants alone did not meet the financial needs of low-income college students.
6. K–12 education failed to adequately prepare low-income students for the rigors of college.
7. Forming a positive relationship with a campus faculty or staff member was important for the college transition and persistence of students from poverty.
8. Students from poverty overwhelmingly credited their self-motivation and determination for their successes.
9. Financial limitations were an ever-present and daunting source of stress for low-income students.
10. Planning and decision making in higher education often failed to consider and meet the unique needs of low-income students.

**Recommendations for Improved Practice**

**Recommendations for Institutions:**

1. The higher education community needs to have a more involved partnership with K–12 systems so that low-income students receive better academic preparation for the rigors of higher education, and so that students from poverty are recruited actively for college.
2. Colleges must be mindful of low SES students’ motivation to obtain a stable job. This suggests a need for sound advising and support services that assist with postgraduation job placement.
3. Many of the study’s participants indicated their plans to transfer to
a university following their community college graduation; but none of the students had actually applied to a four-year institution. These students were so focused on surviving the present, they failed to do the footwork for the next academic step. They did not have an awareness of application deadlines or transfer processes, and they had not explored funding for their continued educational plans. Community colleges must review the effectiveness of their college transfer advising processes.

4. Institutions must be cost conscious and courses, student support services, and campus activities must be scheduled at times that meet the unique needs of low-income students.

5. Educational practitioners and policy makers need to be aware of the effectiveness of the Career Pathways program. This program demands continued support in Arkansas, and services like this should be made available to low-income students in other states.

**Recommendations for Policy Makers:**

1. Policy makers need to sponsor early intervention programs in predominately low-income K–12 schools, which inform students of their higher education options and which help them to develop the skills necessary for college success.

2. Stricter penalties must be established for those who abuse the existing Pell Grant system.

3. Policy makers need to review and reconsider making Pell Grants available in the summer for low-income students who benefit from being continuously enrolled.

4. The availability of needs-based scholarships that encourage the enrollment and persistence of low SES students must be increased.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

1. The research included a population of students from a single impoverished state; community college students in other states should be interviewed so that additional similarities and differences between low-income, successful college students can be identified.

2. Many of the students in this study frequently referenced feeling like an outsider or being different from their more affluent peers. A study is needed which focuses exclusively on the self-concept and marginalization of low-income students in the higher education
setting.

3. This study was limited to the community college environment. Research that identifies and explores the experiences of low-income students in four-year institutions is needed.

4. Participants in this project mentioned that they often tried to hide their poverty from their instructors, or they did not feel comfortable disclosing their financial hardships to college personnel. Future work should explore faculty and staff awareness of, and attitudes toward, low SES students.

5. It is important to have additional research that focuses on the successes, not the deficiencies, of low-income students. Instructors must know classroom best practices that bolster student learning and persistence for this population. Further, there should be additional conversations with students from poverty so that campus activities and services may appropriately target and fit the needs that are specific to this group.

References


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