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# Leaving College Without a Degree: The Student Experience at an Urban Broad Access Institution

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Leaving College Without a Degree:  
The Student Experience at an Urban Broad Access Institution

by

Andrea Marie Garrity

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science  
in  
Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand how students who leave college without a degree, or non-completers, experience broad access institutions in an effort to shift our thinking from the student characteristics that predict college dropout to how broad access institutions can better serve students and improve graduation rates. To answer this question, I conducted interviews with former students who had recently attended a broad access institution and left without a degree. Results show that participants expressed internalized views of the traditional college student archetype, which was reinforced through their college experience. Further, participants encountered significant bureaucratic challenges and barriers, and expressed a tension between their lived experience and the messages and signals they received from the institution. Drawing on concepts of sense of belonging, stereotype threat, and Universal Design, this study emphasizes the need for broad access institutions to redesign current processes and practices to support the needs of contemporary undergraduate students.

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the ethos and political promise of access to college for all, four out of ten students who enter a higher education institution in the United States will not graduate college (Tough 2019; Wesley 2020). Situating higher education in relation to our social context, it is clear that, for many, a college degree is imperative for social mobility and for breaking the cycle of intergenerational inequality. There are 39 million non-completers—students who have attended college but left without a credential—in the United States (NSC 2022). National survey research seeks to understand the reasons why students left college and what is needed for them to return to college, yet it is also critical to understand how non-completers experienced college.

While sociologists make the connections between individual outcomes and social structures, the literature and research on college persistence often focuses on what students are lacking: finances, dominant forms of social and cultural capital, and academic preparation (Barefoot 2004; Berkovitz and O’Quin 2006; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Saunders-Scott, Braley, and Stennes-Spidahl 2018) and frame these as the reason for non-completion. This is troubling for two reasons. First, a deficit view of non-completers not only “blames the victim” (Ryan 1971), but also locates both the problem and the intervention within the individual student rather than the social structures and problems within the public education system. Second, in addition to individual interventions, the response to the college dropout problem also suggests being more selective in the admissions process. With increased state pressure to improve outcomes where funding is tied to results, it is not difficult to understand why some public institutions choose raising

admissions standards as a course of action in an effort to address their persistence to graduation problem (McNeil 2018).

Non-selective institutions, or broad access schools, are often community colleges or urban four-year universities that accept most or all applicants. Many of these institutions are also Pell-serving institutions (Whistle and Hiler 2018), which are defined as institutions with a student body that consists of at least 37% Pell Grant eligible students, which is often used as a proxy for low-income. The dilemma that non-selective institutions face is this: accept most or all applicants while knowing that many of these students will not persist to graduation or become more selective and provide less opportunities for college access. The problem is further complicated when accounting for the lived experience of students attending non-selective institutions. Contemporary undergraduate students may work, commute long distances, or have caregiving responsibilities (Barefoot 200; Settersen and Schneider 2018).

Given that the population of non-completers totals 39 million in the United States (NSC 2022), it is important to ground research on persistence to graduation in the lived experience of these former students. Quantitative data helps us understand *who* may not complete college and the differential outcomes by attributes, and qualitative research will continue to help us understand *how* non-completers experience college. Qualitative research that focuses on the lived experience of non-completers may also help facilitate institutional changes to support students' persistence to graduation. For the purposes of this thesis, lived experience while in college refers to the voice of those who did not complete college and their perception of the institutional environment.

In an effort to meet the challenge of supporting students to graduation, non-selective institutions must turn inward and understand how students that do not complete experienced the institution. The goal of this study is to focus on the student lived experience in an effort to understand how non-selective institutions can better support student persistence to graduation (Mcguire, Scott, and Shaw 2006).

To further our understanding of how non-completers experience broad access institutions, I draw on qualitative data collected from an urban serving broad access institution. The data provides critical insights into not only the student experience but, more importantly, how broad access institutions can better meet the needs of today's students. The findings from semi-structured interviews suggest that there is an incongruence between higher education and the modern and complex lives of students attending broad access institutions, which reinforces internalized views and stereotypes of who belongs in college. Students expressed challenges navigating complex systems and sometimes found themselves in a bureaucratic vortex, having to expend time and emotional labor in an effort to stay in school. Lastly, for the students I interviewed, the purpose of higher education was salient, and as students encountered internal and external obstacles, they wondered if the time and financial investment was worth it, particularly if they were unclear what a degree would mean for their future.

Below I provide a review of the literature that informs my study on how non-completers experienced college. I will then review my data and methods, outline the findings from the study, and, finally, share recommendations in the discussion section.

## THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

This study is guided by research on belonging, stereotype threat, and normative discourse, (Braxton, Brier, and Steele 2007; Jury et al. 2017; Walton and Cohen 2007a), and then turns to Universal Design (UD) (Burgstahler n.d.; McGuire et al. 2006; Story, Mueller, and Mace 1998) as a framework that may have utility in improving the student experience. Further, this study highlights the characteristics of today's contemporary undergraduate students and considers both how Bourdieu's (197) theory of social and cultural capital and contemporary student characteristics may play a role in internalized feelings of belonging in college. I use a critical lens to examine to what extent higher education is a system that is both designed and rewards those that fit the normative college student archetype.

Rather than look to the individual student and seek to either blame or change them, the Universal Design theoretical framework can be a model that institutions look to in an effort to remove and mitigate socially constructed barriers. Applying UD to processes, practices, and policies will allow for a shift from a deficit interventionist approach to change at the institutional level that better serves contemporary students. First, it is necessary to contextualize the study by providing an overview of non-selective institutions and the characteristics of contemporary students attending college today.

### *Non-Selective or Broad Access Institutions*

Non-selective, or broad access institutions, are community colleges or four-year colleges that are non-selective in their admissions process (Goldrick-Rab 2010), admitting most or all of the students that apply. Community colleges and non-selective



four-year institutions were intended to address the growing disparity in who had a college degree and who did not, and to supply the workforce with skilled employees. These institutions are often more affordable and have few barriers to entry (Crisp, Doran, and Salis Reyes 2018). Broad access institutions are often cited as the workhorses of higher education (Brint, Brint, and Karabel 1989; Goldrick-Rab 2010) because they do not have exclusive admission criteria but rather are built on a model of access, serving almost or everyone who applies.

Despite the fact that broad access institutions enroll most students, public attention is often focused on elite private institutions or top-tier state schools, which is also true of academic research, state funding, and media attention (Stevens and Kirst 2015). While there has been a more recent focus on subsidizing community colleges, the research cited is often about the poor academic outcomes of students, including low persistence to graduation, and, in the case of community colleges, low transfer rates to four-year institutions. Yet, a more nuanced perspective is in order. One, we must understand to what extent broad access schools are using an anachronistic model to educate students. Second, outside the scope of this study, but important to note for context, we must also understand to what extent broad access schools are properly resourced, funded, and supported, as compared to the more elite institutions in the United States (Goldrick-Rab 2010; Stevens and Kirst 2015).

### *Contemporary Undergraduates*

The shift in access to college from the privileged male to college for all began after the second world war and culminated in the over 1,000 community colleges and 136 broad access 4-year institutions that exist today. The increase in access to higher

education was a product of many factors, including the passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, which increased funding for research and governmental support of junior colleges (Brint et al. 1989). This is important, as the evolution of the archetypical college student is not a recent change, yet higher education remains synonymous with a student who recently graduated from high school, is enrolled and residing on campus, who has few responsibilities, and is expected to complete college in four years (McKay and Devlin 2016; Saunders-Scott et al. 2018; Stevens and Kirst 2015) —or what is often referred to as the “traditional college student.”

Despite pervasive views of a traditional life course for college students, in actuality, students that follow this life course are becoming the minority (Barefoot 2004; Levine and Cureton 1998; Tough 2019), and college students are increasingly adults returning to college, working students, students that have been in and out of college, and/or transfer students (Levine 2012). Further, today’s students have a multitude of responsibilities outside of college, either because of where they are in their life course when attending college (Schneider 2018), and/or because it is increasingly necessary to work in order to afford attending college. This is critical because research and policy are often centered on a misconception of who today’s students are, especially the students attending broad access institutions are (Stevens and Kirst 2015; Tough 2019). The privileging of normative college students and elite institutions is problematic because it elevates the narrative of not only the so-called “traditional” student, but it also esteems residential research (e.g. prestigious state schools) and elite liberal arts institutions over broad-access institutions in terms of resource allocation and status.

The financial challenges contemporary students face cannot be overstated. Over the last several decades, students have had to take on higher amounts of debt in order to afford college (Goldrick-Rab 2016). State governments across the country have cut state funding to higher education, which results in institutions increasing the cost of student tuition (Goldrick-Rab 2016). Federal aid in the form of grants has neither matched the pace of rising cost of tuition nor the increased costs of food and housing. The cost of a college degree coupled with the increased cost of living means students are often facing increasing financial burdens and challenges (Goldrick-Rab 2016). Housing and food insecurity are more prevalent amongst college students than the average US household: more than 50% of college students at four-year institutions experience food insecurity, and more than 10% of these students face housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab 2006).

Many of the students who are experiencing financial stress are working yet are still unable to have their basic needs met while attending college. The cost of a college degree is increasing faster than any other cost in the country, including that of healthcare (Gates Foundation 2021). The implications of this picture are particularly significant when considering that it is more likely that you will earn a four-year degree if you come from a family in the top income quartile, with 90% of college students from this quartile graduating college with a four-year degree (Tough 2019). In contrast, 25% of college students born into the bottom quartile of the U.S. income distribution will graduate within six years (Tough 2019). Money matters, and while we can understand the significance of financial stress on academic outcomes, it is important to also understand how this stress impacts students' sense of belonging.

As we consider how broad access and non-selective institutions can meet students where they are at, we must have a holistic view of who is accessing higher education. Next, I will problematize the discourse used in both research and in institutions that implicitly and explicitly focuses on what students who are unlikely to graduate are lacking.

*Normative and Non-Normative Discourse: Challenging Deficit Framing*

Research on student persistence to graduation is often imbued with deficit language and thinking. Models of student persistence often identifies what students are lacking, or fail to have, when entering college (McKay and Devlin 2015). Language and labels reinforce a dichotomy between those students who have the desired traits and those who do not. Consider the usage of words such as non-traditional, underprepared, and first-generation. The discourse both implicitly and explicitly is centered on what is lacking or missing within the student in terms of background, privilege, and cognitive attributes (Smit 2012). Higher education institutions, which purport to serve students from all backgrounds and are today far more diverse than ever, have for the most part changed little over the last several decades in how they serve students. The Covid-19 pandemic, of course, is one significant exception that has led to more flexible course options.

The image that many have internalized is a normative view of a so-called traditional college student despite actual student populations that reflect either a life course that includes a delayed or return to college (Settersen and Schneider 2018) or a multitude of obligations students have outside of school. As outlined, contemporary college students are older, more diverse, and have more demands on their time than the

archetypal college student (Barefoot 2004; Goldrick-Rab 2010; NSC 2022). This has implications both when considering that historically academic institutions (Wilder 2013) were designed for a privileged class in terms of time, money, and knowledge of higher education systems—and that today’s college students may internalize what a college student should be like. Broad access institutions, while intended to improve access and differ from elite institutions in terms of their mission, were still modeled after traditional colleges. This has implications in considering the student experience and the extent to which broad access institutions are serving today’s students.

Traditional and nontraditional students have been defined by researchers and the department of education (Beam 2020); yet rather than being an objective understanding of college students, the use of *traditional* becomes a normative standard against which other students and the institutions that serve them are compared and evaluated as less-than. The experience of today’s college student is vastly different from the internalized ideals we have of the four-year residential college experience (Stevens and Kirst 2015). The non-linear experience of college students and the evidence cited that problematizes breaks from college and time in and out of college, while accurately showing that such patterns are less likely to lead to college graduation, again puts the focus on the student rather than on how contemporary students attempt to earn a degree. Attending college for four years out of high-school without having other significant obligations is a privilege that is afforded to students that are less likely to attend broad access institutions. Rather than predicting how likely one is to graduate based on divergence from traditional full-time pathways, we can ask, instead, to what extent broad access institutions are serving contemporary students.

### *Social and Psychological Impact of External Environment*

While the culture of “college for all” is a departure from the college for the elite model, the fundamentals of higher education have not been wholly adapted to serve contemporary undergraduate students. It becomes necessary to understand to what extent the college environment reinforces socially constructed and idealized views of who goes to college. While data on disparate outcomes provides sufficient data that college reproduces privilege rather than being a path to social mobility (Gregg et al. 2017; Thurston et. al 2011), it is important to understand just how inequity in social structures are internalized and play out in higher education by reviewing the literature on belonging and stereotype threat.

During times of change and transition, it is normal to have feelings of unease and uncertainty as we consider our place within a new environment (Yeager 2017). Going to college, a milestone for many, is complex; there is both a quantifiable cost of time and money, and an emotional element as students reconcile their decision to attend school. As stated earlier, given the rise in economic insecurity, going to college becomes even more challenging as many students struggle with food or housing insecurity while balancing multiple priorities such as school and work (Goldrick-Rab 2016). As students navigate a bureaucratic institution and face academic and institutional challenges, students may wonder if they belong. This is referred to as a “sense of belonging,” and while there is extensive research on the relationship between social psychological factors and student outcomes, there is less research on how students experience belonging at broad access institutions and how this may affect their decision to leave school without a degree. Bean and Eaton (2000) and Braxton et. al. (2004) both acknowledge that external factors such

as family support and obligations outside of school impact a student's sense of belonging and decision to stay in school.

A sense of belonging is about connection. For college students, it is the perception of feeling connected to the institution, to their peers, and to faculty and staff (Strayhorn 2017). Students who have a sense of belonging will both feel and think that they belong in college (Strayhorn 2017). It is important to note how a related concept, Claude Steele's theory of Stereotype Threat, can affect sense of belonging (Steele 2010). For example, a college student's identity as a woman, Black Indigenous Person of Color (BIPOC), working student, older student, or single-parent student may become more salient in a college setting. An older adult returning student that struggles to navigate bureaucracy in financial aid may interpret that experience as confirmation of the stereotype that they are too old for college. The intersection of stereotype threat with the concept of sense of belonging is that these experiences can reinforce to a student that perhaps they do not belong in college, and as students encounter challenges, these challenges reinforce to a student that perhaps college is not for them.

Students who face historical and institutional forms of oppression may struggle more with their sense of belonging than their white peers (Means and Pyne 2017; Strayhorn 2018; Walton and Cohen 2007), and these experiences in college may lead to a recursive cycle. For example, if there is a lack of representation amongst faculty and staff, and if physical signs and pictures of honored scholars or experts in the field fail to represent diversity, and as students from marginalized backgrounds encounter challenges, they may interpret these challenges as evidence that they do not belong in college (Walton and Cohen 2007). Further, instances of experiencing friction or barriers in

college will only reinforce this notion to the student; the student may think, “this is another sign that I shouldn’t be here.” In academic environments such as the classroom, vulnerable students may be more likely to experience uncertainty in their belonging and think, “maybe people like me don’t belong here” (Strayhorn 2018; Walton and Cohen 2007).

Student persistence to graduation is often only studied within the context of the institution. In other words, researchers do not also consider how experiences outside of college relate to leaving college without a degree. Yet, both daily obligations and life events can disrupt a student's academic journey (Cox et al. 2016). One study that examines the relationship between life events and college graduation rates found that over half of the students studied had experienced at least one event in their personal lives that was either financially challenging or psychologically traumatic (Cox et al. 2016). By better understanding how students who did not complete college experienced a broad access institution, institutions will have an opportunity to better position themselves to support student persistence to graduation.

### *Social Psychological Impact of Dominant Social Capital*

As I have outlined, contemporary undergraduates come to college with a diversity of lived experiences and at a different points in their life course. Research into college graduate rates repeatedly shows that the family one is born into is predictive of one’s future success, with clear differences in educational attainment by socioeconomic status, yet the narrative is often one of individual responsibility rather than systemic barriers (Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). Students that arrive at college without the same knowledge of the inner workings of higher-education may interpret challenges as a



reflection of their belonging in college rather than as a larger structural issue with bureaucracy.

This inner knowledge of higher education is often a product of family background and is a form of capital and part of Bourdieu's (1971) framework of cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to norms, familiarly with systems, values, and knowledge of society that is obtained from one's family (Bourdieu 1971). Everyone has cultural capital, but some forms of capital are privileged and dominant over other forms. As Coleman (1988) articulates, family background is a culmination of resources and capital, which have an influence on academic performance.

Lareau's (2003) research and study of families across different classes underscores the importance between capital and access. Families that have the financial resources and institutional knowledge have the means to invest more in their children, providing access to tutors, extracurriculars, and books, than families with constrained resources (Lareau 2003). This investment and parental style, that Lareau refers to as concerted cultivation, is highly valued in American society. In other words, the dominant form of cultural capital that is developed through concerted cultivation is the currency that the system of education requires to navigate both academics and bureaucracy.

This notion of dominant cultural capital has relevance to belonging and stereotype threat. I argue that there is a relationship between the internalized feelings of who belongs in college and the privileging of dominant forms of cultural capital. For example, as Lareau (2003) outlined in her research on concerted cultivation, families with institutional knowledge or dominant forms of cultural capital are more likely to enroll their children in extracurriculars and preparatory courses for colleges entrance tests.

Thus, those children who have dominant forms of cultural capital conferred upon them through their family background also implicitly understand that this preparation is for college, the natural next step in their life course. Conversely, children who do not have access to dominant forms of capital have likely been tracked into lower level classes and arrive to college with internalized of who belongs in college (Lucas and Berends 2002).

The discussion on dominant forms of cultural capital is often framed as an explanation to differences in college graduation rates because of what students may lack. However, it my goal to further contribute the research by reframing the discussion on dominant forms of cultural capital from something that needs to change at the individual level to looking at how broad-access institutions reinforce internalized messages of who belongs in college by privileging dominant forms of cultural capital. Why is it necessary to understand the inner workings of college systems or know the right questions to ask in order to successfully navigate? As we will see in the findings, the participants often demonstrated remarkable resilience and self-awareness, characteristics that research has elevated as part of the shift in viewing other forms of cultural capital from a deficit position (Dance 2002).

### *Universal Design and Higher Education*

There is a tension in institutions of higher education between the transformative change of who has access to higher education, technological advances in education and practices, policies, and culture that feel anachronistic in modern day society. Some scholars even go so far as to say that in higher education one would find that little has changed: if Rip Van Winkle were to wake up today after sleeping for 130 years, probably the only thing he would recognize in our social world would be the typical school

classroom (Ramage 2011). While hyperbolic, the point that higher education models are outdated provides a helpful context for understanding how students are experiencing institutions. The disconnect between today's students and higher education systems has been a problem that has been studied by researchers (Barefoot 2004; Goldrick-Rab 2010; Ramage 2011; Tough 2019) and problematized by administrators. Yet, as I previously discussed, the focus has been on how to intervene or change the student to integrate them into higher education systems.

Of course, there have been changes and innovations in higher education, specifically with pedagogy. Universal Design or UD principles (Burgstahler n.d.; Erdtman, Rasmus-Gröhn, and Hedvall 2021; Story et al. 1998) have been used to shift how curriculum is approached so that students have little need to receive exceptions or accommodations; rather, the course is designed to be accessible and inclusive to almost everyone taking the class. Inclusivity and access are the underpinnings of Universal Design that can be applied beyond curriculum and to the design of higher education systems writ large.

Universal Design has its roots in architecture, with Ronald Mace using the concept as a principle for designing spaces and products to be accessible for all (Hamraie 2017). The principles of Universal Design, which I will outline below, have been expanded in their applicability to include not only all people but also all services, environments, and processes (Hamraie 2017; Wilkoff & Abed 1994). The original intention of UD was to not only resolve how disabled persons accessed and used space and products, but to proactively make use of design to meet their needs (Hamraie 2017; McGuire et al. 2006). Mace's approach to design evolved to become more inclusive of the

needs of other diverse persons hence the universality of UD. A common example that is used are classrooms with desks that are accessible by different ages, bodies, and ability. The following principles of UD can be applied to the higher education context (Mace and Mueller 1998; Hamraie 1027; McGuire et al. 2006).

**Equitable use:** Higher education is useful and accessible to a wide range of students that is equivalent, if not identical, when necessary. Value is added for as many students as possible.

**Flexibility in use:** There are a range of choices available that can accommodate students with different backgrounds, levels of ability, and needs.

**Simple and intuitive use:** Unnecessary complexity or bureaucracy is removed. College is “straightforward and predictable” (McGuire – Scott – Shaw) regardless of lived experience.

**Perceptible information:** Information systems and/or instruction is designed to be easily understood and accessed.

**Tolerance for error:** Variation in ability and knowledge is anticipated and expected.

**Community:** The system and environment of higher education is designed to foster communication, interaction, and a sense of community.

**Climate:** The environment, signals, and atmosphere are inclusive. Students, regardless of background, are expected to achieve their goals.

These principles, while initially intended as a supportive framework for faculty in their pedagogical practices, also incorporate the definition from The Center for Universal

Design at North Carolina State University: ‘design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design’ (Connell et al. 1997). We can recast this definition to consider how processes, practices, policies are designed, to the greatest extent possible, to support all students. It is also critical to note that this incorporation of UD in higher education is grounded in reflectivity and in the notion that while UD anticipates diversity in learners it does so without compromising academic standards (Mcguire et al. 2006),

While our ideas of what it means to be an educated person have changed little (Mitchell 1981; Ramage 2011), who is accessing education has changed. Universal Design can be the lens at which we understand our systems of higher education. Just as technology, policy, and demographics have resulted provided greater access to higher education (Ramage 2011), the principles of UD can improve how systems of education are designed to support students’ persistence to graduation.

## CURRENT STUDY

My study uses the theoretical frameworks that span disciplines and include social and cultural capital, sense of belonging, and stereotype threat to make meaning of how students who did not complete their degree experience college. By engaging in qualitative interviews, we can understand the nuance and circumstances behind commonly cited reasons for leaving college without a degree. More importantly though, the frameworks provide a way to disrupt the narrative that focuses on student attributes and instead calls attention to how institutions can themselves improve in an effort to serve more students and reduce the number of those who do not finish college. Next, I will outline my approach to this study.

## DATA AND METHODS

### *The Study*

For this study, I used semi-structured interviews to identify themes that expose how the institution could have better served students. Given the modern phenomenon of swirling (Schulte 2015), or students' movement in and out of college, I invited former students who were un-enrolled for at least two academic terms (rather than one term) in effort to capture those in the non-completer population versus a student taking a term off.

Research on college persistence and dropouts is often focused on student attributes and predictors of student persistence — namely family background and academic preparation, which are interrelated. To disrupt this narrative that places the burden and onus on students, my study is focused on a broad access institution that is non-selective and accepts many students with lower incoming GPAs, does not require standardized achievement tests, and has a high population of Pell-eligible students, which is a proxy for low SES. To be Pell-eligible students must have a total family income of less than \$50,000, although most students that receive Pell grants have family incomes of less than \$20,000. Further, like many community colleges and other non-selective institutions, the institution in which the study took place has limited on-campus housing options and is considered by students and faculty to be a “commuter campus” or “non-traditional.” Given that non-selective institutions are more likely to serve students that are less likely to fit normative student profiles, and students from low-income backgrounds that are less likely to have dominant social, cultural, and financial capital, I aim to shift the focus from a deficit model to the institution's role in student persistence to graduation by limiting my study to a non-selective institution.

Urban serving institutions are four-year colleges and universities committed to research and are physically located in cities with a population of at least 450,00. The institution in which this study takes place is considered a typical urban serving broad access institution and serves a student population with the following characteristics:

- Average age 26
- 46% percent Pell recipients
- 21% percent BIPOC
- 37% percent first-generation college student
- 50% work at least 20 hours per week
- 25% percent with caregiving responsibilities
- 60% transfer students

Interviewees were selected from a population of students who left college without a degree and the institution studied (n=2053) that met all of the following criteria: 1) they were previously enrolled in college and left college without a degree and without transferring or later enrolling in a different higher education institution at the time of interview; 2) they left college within the last two years; and 3) they do not have a bachelor's degree or higher (i.e., post baccalaureate students). I emailed a sample of this population using a randomly generated list of 615 that were representative of the total non-completer population and extended an invitation to meet with me over Zoom for a one to two-hour recorded session. Respondents (n=19) were compensated with a \$30.00 gift card for their time.

The sample that this study focuses on reflects a multitude of lived experiences that cannot be expressed through simple demographics. Qualitative research was critical in understanding holistically the many identities and experiences that the sample population holds including adult returning students, students who had been raised in foster care, students with children, students living in multi-generational homes, first-



generation students, undocumented students, students with learning disabilities, students from rural areas, students who had experienced food and housing insecurity, and more. During the interviews, as the students shared their experiences, any number of these may be more salient, and these identities and experiences were shared naturally as students shared their stories in the interview.

The sample was fairly representative of the racial and ethnic demographics of the non-completers population, but a clear limitation is the lack of Asian and Pacific Islander representation. Transfer students were also overrepresented as compared to first-year students. Several of the respondents had either specific or vague plans to return to college, and I suspect that those who have plans or intentions to return may have been more likely to respond to my request to interview. I note that those who do not intend to return are a critical group underrepresented in this study and recommend additional research in learning how non-completers without plans to return experienced college.

Interviews were semi-structured, centered around the student experience, and designed to be fluid so as to not constrain the respondents' stories. The questions were informed by the literature and sought to be oriented to how the institutions could have better supported students who did not complete college. While my initial interview guide did not include questions that asked specifically about traditional vs nontraditional students, I did probe further when respondents used this language unprompted and in relation to their own experience. After several instances of respondents using the verbiage "traditional" and "non-traditional" in relation to their identity, I adapted my interview guide to ask respondents generally about their identity as students.

As a first-generation high school and college graduate, I was careful to avoid deficit language in my framing of questions. For example, while I asked about family background and early academic experiences, I did not ask respondents if they were first generation or underprepared for college. Indeed, any statistical model used to predict the probability of my own likelihood to graduate with a four-year degree would have flagged me as unlikely to graduate or at high-risk for dropping out, which informs my preference for surfacing questions on grit, determination, and resilience when it made sense to do so. As an example, when students related accounts of taking breaks and returning to school, or being in school for many years, I asked questions about motivation and determination as this again shifts the discourse from what the student might lack to their strengths.

I recorded the interviews via the Zoom platform and the interviews were initially transcribed by a reputable online transcription service, Temi. I subsequently reviewed and corrected all transcripts to ensure accuracy. I used pseudonyms for all participants as well as any specific individuals or offices mentioned during the interview process.

### *Data Analysis*

I coded transcripts in three stages using MAXQDA software. First, I coded transcripts semi-inductively using a process and pattern coding framework (Saldana 2019) - in which I coded respondent actions and patterns that were either directly related to their college experience or outside experiences that may have led to their leaving college without a degree. Second, I coded for emotions (Saldana 2019), as I felt it particularly critical to draw out how respondents felt about their experience. Third, I created a series of closed codes that reflected the themes I discovered in my analysis from

the first two rounds of coding, which were guided by my overarching question that explores the relationship between the experience at college and why students leave without a degree. I refrained from including in my closed codes any themes related to the pandemic and the challenges of 2020 and 2021 that were critical but outside of the scope of this study. The closed codes represent the themes from my analysis and which I outline in the next section.

## RESULTS

What follows are three critical findings from the interviews and subsequent analysis that I suggest address the question, how did those who left college without a degree experience a broad access institution. Findings from the interviews illustrate how the institution often implicitly reinforced internalized socially constructed views of who a college student is, and the label and status of a so-called non-traditional student becomes more salient. Second, messaging and signals from the institution did not reflect the diversity of lived experiences of the respondents which contributed to some students feeling isolated and as though the institution was not for them. Next, I will discuss these findings and then conclude with possible recommendations.

### *Traditional campuses and contemporary students*

The image that the media puts forth and that many have internalized is an idealized view of a traditional college student, despite student populations who reflect changing norms including a delayed start or return to college (Settersen and Schneider 2018). In interviews with participants, many used the language “traditional” and “non-traditional,” to describe their experiences. When asked to explain how they would define a non-traditional student, one young participant, Mika, who had transferred from community college and identified themselves as a non-traditional student, said this about what they meant:

I guess just kind of anything that's not the super standard “graduates high school goes straight into four year school and graduates within four years”. I mean, I feel like almost very few students fit into that anymore, especially after the whole year with the pandemic. There's just a lot of other factors now if people take gap years or have credits from honors

classes or are working full-time or part-time while they're in school. I know a lot more people are starting to do community college first and then transfer into a four year university later. Also, any older students or returning students who maybe took a break for a while. I guess that seems more non-traditional to me.

The implication is that traditional is normative (Settersen and Schenider 2018) and to be non-traditional is to be different from the “standard,” even though “very few” students might actually fit that archetype. The tension between traditional and non-traditional or “fit” was less about actually being different from other students than it was about the internalized narratives as to what is normative, which implies a relationship between identity and the experience of non-completers in college. For example, one respondent, Noreen, expressed that she was non-traditional because she is a mother to two young children, stating, *“I'd say really [the school] has no support for parents and maybe no support for people that are older. I mean, I know there's nobody here that is like me, but then who is though? You know, it's like, I'm, I'm older, I've got these two little kids.”* For this respondent, her identity as a mother was salient and she was aware of cues that signaled whether or not she fit into college. For example, she shared that she was aware of only one other student parent in her class and that she was an *“older, non-traditional student.”* Other respondents, such as Melissa, a veteran student, also shared experiences that she used as examples to explain how being a non-traditional student was isolating.

I think because of my own life experiences and like me being older and everything, it made it difficult for me to relate to the people at City State, whether it was a teacher or a student. I did try to go into, uh, I can't remember what's called right now, but like the veteran hangout area, I can't remember. I tried hang out there a couple times figuring that, you know, I'd feel like somewhat okay there...Like I think that was more a reflection on me [feeling isolated].

Noreen and Melissa expressed not being able to “*relate*” to others while attending an institution where close to 25% of the students have children and that serves many veteran students. Proponents of student interventions would have looked to their lack of integration into the institution to explain why she ended up leaving without a degree. Yet another way to view this is that the institution itself communicates and is embedded within a traditional social frame. For example, when asked to express how parents could be better supported in college Noreen responded:

Just some kind of [information], like “here's some common issues that parents have”. There might be some different issues if you're older or if you have multiple kids, or if you're a single parent, you know? And I think maybe even meeting with other parents that are like that or if there was a group? I mean, it'd be so different...

Many mechanisms to promote integration into institutions tacitly require students to not only have inside knowledge of college but also the privilege of time. For a parent or a student who works, it often feels as if college is not designed for *them*, which may add to the internalized narrative of traditional versus non-traditional students. Several respondents referred to their need to work as an explanation for how their experience was “*unusual*” or “*not normal*.” For example, one respondent stated, “*I had to work one, two..two jobs while being in school full-time and so academically wasn't...couldn't be at my highest potential. So that was just...it wasn't fun for me.*” Another respondent said, “*I took a little bit longer than traditionally,*” when explaining that she worked while attending community college.

Respondents, particularly those that were first-generation college students, often shared experiences of not understanding how the system of college worked. These students may have engaged in programs that were intended to teach them

how “to do college”, and while helpful, the feelings of college as “gatekeeping” and internalized feelings of failure persisted. While participants did not explicitly name dominant forms of cultural capital as being essential to navigating college, they spoke to not knowing the “system” in relation to their background. For example, Aliyah shared “and like I said, like college wasn't something that was even talked about in my household” and provided this example of her experience in college support program:

I was part of like programs that really helped low income students or students who are first gen and really didn't understand the system because like, without it, I would've been probably still in school right now trying to figure it [college] out through trial and error. But like having that help and guidance of people who already been through it and could like lend their expertise just helped me a little bit better. But still, for myself wasn't enough, to like do whatever the timeline was. I still need to figure out for myself...

Aliyah explained that while she did well in school academically, she often felt like a failure for not knowing that she could ask for flexibility or work with her instructors on misunderstandings.

During my first term of anatomy, like my first exam I got a C and like that devastating cause I'm like, oh my gosh, if I got a C on my first exam, how am I gonna get like an ‘A.’ And so I shifted my focus, just working on that class. And like, I didn't take all my other classes as seriously. I was putting a lot of hours, but at the end I was like, oh, okay. I got an ‘A’, but then I got really thrown off when I got a ‘B’ in my typing class. And then when I found out the reason why I got a ‘B’, I was like, oh, so this was preventable. And I could've gotten an ‘A,’ if I would've talk to you...but for me, I felt like I was failure.

Another respondent, Anna reflects that her parents talked about college in an effort to encourage her to attend, and that contributed to her grit and determination to hopefully finish at some point, despite the challenges she experienced with working 6

days a week and going to school full-time. Yet, while college was encouraged at home, she did not really know what it “*entailed*.”

My parents, they always told me like, oh, you're gonna go to school. You're gonna go to college. Um, I didn't really know what that meant. I never knew what that meant or like what that entailed. I just knew that I was gonna go to college cuz my parents wanted me to and you know, that's something they've always told me that you have to go to school cause to them, that's a way of like, you know, that is social mobility to them, you know, like this is how you move up in the world, you gain education, you get a good job. And to me that's basically what it was, is just like my parents telling me, you know, like go to college, go to college. Cause you don't wanna be working, you know, like physically laborious jobs where you have to be like outside all the time or you doing things you don't really like. So they've always encouraged me to go to college...

Anna, who first attended a community college and participated in a program to teach those from migrant farming families how to navigate college, frequently spoke of how little she knew of how college worked and while she viewed it as “*gate keeping*” like Aliyah and many of the other respondents, she also internalized her not knowing how to get help as something she was lacking. The programs intended to support students who come to college motivated and determined but with a different form of cultural capital may be helpful but why are they even necessary? Is there an opportunity to make the system of college simple and straightforward for all students so as to eliminate support programs that seem to be oriented to providing access to dominant cultural capital.

While I am arguing that higher education institutions have not fundamentally adapted to modern students, it is clear that there are both programs and services created to serve students. The question, then, is whether the programs created to serve contemporary students meet their needs. For the respondents, the answer was mixed. It



was evident that a student's background played a role in how they experienced the university. For one student of color, Jordan, she likened her experience to the microaggressions she regularly faces: *"It's like, 'Great, you made it here', kind of feeling. It's like when I walk into a Whole Foods, for example, and all the cashiers are looking at me. It's like, how did you stumble up here? That's the impression I got from City State University. It's like, how the hell did you get here?"*

Mika identified as non-traditional because she was a transfer student and had taken a little longer to find her way into a four year institution, and revealed in the interview the deep knowledge she had of higher education. When asked about this she explained that she came from privilege and expressed how much her parents influenced her ability to find supports:

Oh, man. I don't know, it is something my parents have just always encouraged, to be very independent, to not give up until you find what you're looking for. Because I know those resources are there and they should be more accessible to students just like, I don't know, use bigger fonts or something? It's like I know they're here. And so sometimes, it meant just showing up in a building and asking like, "Hey, can you help me find the person that I'm looking for?" I think they're the one who can help me.

In contrast, other respondents found a disconnect between their identity and their experience in that they felt alone in their lived experience as student parents, working students, or students of color. These students either had no idea that resources even existed or if they were aware, they felt uncomfortable accessing them. They described their experience navigating the institution as challenging. For example, one respondent shared, *"So honestly, I feel that higher education is just a whole bunch of different little hoops that you have to jump through to get where you need to be."* This respondent was

highly motivated to complete a degree and yet found the process of college surprisingly difficult - not academically but as a bureaucratic space with unknown rules that were unnecessarily complicated.

### *Belonging*

The signals and messages that an institution puts forth, whether in the classroom or more broadly, can reinforce internalized feelings that some students are *other* and that perhaps college was not for them. These signals are often not explicit or intentionally meant to *otherize* students and yet many respondents in this study recounted experiences where their identity as a “non-traditional student” (Steele 2011) was salient. For example, Inessa, a 44 year old first-generation, non-white, transfer student recounted how a comment in the classroom made her feel like the instructor assumed all of the students were recently in high school. In this instance, her age and status as an adult returning student was salient and under threat (Steele 2011).

I visited before the fall term of my first year and just walking in there was very, I felt like I was an imposter and that feeling never went away. It just got stronger and stronger as I was there because I could not conform to the, the um, the task of being at [school] or being in university because I think this is [a] thing that you go through, especially being a minority....And that also adds to feeling like you don't belong. And when you're sitting in a lecture hall where a professor is like...he's telling us off on the fact that he felt we should have either learned this in high school or we should have had a preparatory class before we took this class...to me like there are 300 plus people sitting in this auditorium and you think all of us just got outta high school.

Inessa shared that while in school she continued to struggle with feeling like she didn't belong in school and has given much thought to what she might have to give up if she decides to return. She expressed that she felt that her lived experience did not matter and

that it was more important that she conform and use the right words and language to fit in.

Anna, a 22 year old Latina and first-generation college student, described the subtle ways she felt excluded and isolated while attending school. We were discussing what would have helped her feel more connected and as she was speaking about how she might have been involved, she paused and shared that it wouldn't have mattered because she worked long hours at a fulfillment center after her classes and any event that she might have attend would mean she might not be able to pay her bills.

So I feel that even if I had that opportunity [to participate in extracurriculars], I would probably turn it down just because knowing how busy I am...that is a big barrier for a lot of people, especially for me...if you're always trying to be ready and pay for the next bill that's coming your way, you're always gonna turn down something that you don't need to do in order to pick up another shift. And that's what I was basically doing, you know, on my free time I was just working, picking up as many shifts as I could to make sure that I wouldn't fall back on rent...but that significantly cut time out of like school and things like that or, you know, prioritizing my sleep.

Anna also shared those invitations to athletic events or clubs were things that a traditional student could participate in and that even though she was maybe “*considered a traditional student*” “*people like her*” could not be “*fully invested*” in extracurriculars. Time and money are critical to all students, but for Anna activities that required her time reinforced to her that she needed to work and she attributed some of the isolation and loneliness she felt to what she described as her inability to fully invest. Like the earlier example with Inessa and the instructor, it is highly unlikely that the intent was to reinforce normative standards of who a college student should be like, and instead extracurriculars are meant to foster belonging and community.

For example, when I asked participants how they would want to engage with school, they did not express interest in extracurriculars, but instead shared both examples of greater flexibility and support with future goals. In responding to these needs institutions have an opportunity to disrupt prevailing social and internalized views of who belongs in college. Simply recognizing that students work and need to interact with the institution outside of work hours is one example of how institutions might do this. Tyler, a 27 year white student, left school with two classes to graduation and yet does not intend to return; he needs greater flexibility and shared *“because if you work full time, but you still want a degree, like how is that a possibility if you [student services and instructors] have office hours during a normal work week.”*

Respondents were looking for both flexibility in and out of the classroom, and while they expressed needing greater flexibility, some were able to share examples of times they felt the institution met their needs. For example, Brandon, a student parent and transfer student, shared that his instructor *“would YouTube all sessions. So if you could join in at that time, you were allowed to, but if you couldn't, you could just re-watch his little YouTube channel. That was really great. I prefer the self-paced because [it] allows greater flexibility with a hectic schedule.”* Flexibility to Brandon reflects a desire to integrate school into his life; his instructor designed the class so that most could “show up” and participate in the way that made the most sense for them. In this example, Brandon did not feel different or have to reconcile priorities between work and school.

In another example, a participant details how her chronic illness was salient because not only was she denied flexibility, the instructor implicitly signaled that the student was not being forthright by requiring *“proof”* of her illness.

I got sick and sent an email immediately, I was like, look, I'm sick. This is a chronic health problem. I have this all the time, but I'm sick. All I need is 24 hours. I can get it [the assignment] to you. I just need to get over this spell right now. And she [the instructor] sent me an email and I still have those emails, where she tells me she needs to see a receipt from the pharmacy, a note from the doctor, some proof of me being sick.

While this former student had the “proof” that was requested, this experience became one of many that she internalized as others viewing her as “lazy.” Note that she worked full time while attending school, and as she encountered additional obstacles, she stopped attending the course, sharing: *“That didn't make sense to me. That didn't make sense in my head. So I was like, well, I'm over it. I'm done. I don't care.”* She did care though, as was evident in her recounting the example, and she talked about plans to return to community college before trying a four-year school again.

Respondents also shared that flexibility and support with future goals shows that institutions “cater” to students like them. I argue that this type of support also would implicitly normalize the lived experience of students that have obligations outside of school and signal that they do, in fact, belong in school. The theme of career support that came up in the interviews may not, at first, seem to connect to the literature on belonging in higher education. Yet, understanding how students want to engage is, in fact, critical to feeling a sense of belonging. Many of the respondents had been deeply motivated to earn a degree because they wanted to achieve something more than what their parents had had the opportunity to achieve. They spoke of this in terms of the career opportunities that a degree would provide them. This reason for being in school was important and yet there was a disconnect between their purpose and the support available to them. Students expressed sentiments such as wanting a meaningful career but not sure what they should

be doing in school in order to achieve their goals. There was confusion expressed about what options would be available to them and how to translate interests into school.

For example, one respondent expressed a desire for early support in identifying a career that would be both meaningful and provide security. This resonates with Bourdieu's (Bourdieu 1971) framework in that the respondent's upbringing did not provide this student the currency needed to navigate a path from college to career, sharing, "*I [was] in construction all my life, my parents are in construction, whole family's in construction. So it was a kind of an anomaly when I said, 'I think, I am going to college?' They all kind of looked at me like, 'why'?*" As some participants made progress and found themselves closer to graduation, they grappled with feeling like they were missing something, and rather than continue to invest time and money in their education, they opted to take a break, or to, as one respondent said, "*figure it out.*" Dominant *social* and cultural capital will be discussed further in the next section as I use this as a lens to examine the bureaucratic challenges that non-completers faced.

### *Bureaucratic Vortex*

Respondents not only faced external challenges that posed barriers to their persistence, but the institutions themselves were bureaucratic, inflexible, or required significant labor to navigate. This showed up in two ways: either the respondents were unaware of support, or they had challenging interactions with staff and faculty that ran the gamut from unhelpful to inflexible. Underlying this was a sense of isolation, and while some respondents were able to make connections with either peers, staff, or faculty at the different institutions they attended (many were transfer students), others reflected

that they had to figure out the system or were on their own and “*flying blind*” as one respondent put it.

The obstacles students faced often were unnecessarily complicated. For context, several respondents reported having last attended an institution located near the border of the state, which means that while they were residents of the state, circumstances at times necessitated them to live in situations that did not conform to resident and non-resident standards. As an example, one respondent frequently moved and was able to secure housing for herself and her daughter but had her mail sent to a relative. Her relative being on the other side of the state border meant that she was now considered a non-resident, and she was billed out-of-state tuition, which resulted in her quickly running out of financial aid. This situation affected not only her ability to stay enrolled and her status as a non-resident student but had implications on her personal life and family: in order to afford school, she began working multiple jobs and commuting during evening rush hour traffic to take evening classes. She explains,

So at the time I had my mail being sent over there because I lived in a tiny home in City Town and there was no mailbox. So I told that to the staff person, doing the intake when I was initially doing the transfer paperwork and she signed me up as an out of state resident, even though I didn't even have an idea at that point and was told I had to pay more than everyone else. So I did that until I ran out of funds. So now I'm like at max, like, no, you only got like, literally like a thousand bucks left [of financial aid].

This respondent did not know she could try to appeal the residency decision, even though she came directly from a community college where she was paying in-state tuition and both lived and worked in the state. This is not to suggest that the respondent was lacking in knowledge, but to call attention to both the complexity and lack of transparency in practices and processes that are necessary to stay enrolled in college.

Conversely, another respondent, Charlie, was aware of how to navigate the process and yet nonetheless faced challenges:

I was staying with a friend, so I didn't really have the documentation to show anything. It was kind of disruptive, you know, they [the staff] were saying like, you have to take a year off and demonstrate that you're living in City Town, not just for educational purposes to take advantage of our low tuition. Um, it would've been nicer if they had been able to better explain it to me. I eventually did get it figured out, and I was able to work through it. And I'm not sure if that's cuz they relaxed the rules or I just got better at dealing with the system. But yeah, that was probably the most difficult part. I kind of wish that it would be easier or more clear because if I couldn't get it, I'm sure a lot of other students don't either [get it].

Charlie recognized that other students would have a difficult time “dealing with the system” and that there was a need for him to “get it”. These experiences illustrate barriers that were unexpected and significantly impacted students' lives both in and out of college. The system could be designed so that information was clear and accessible and the policy itself could be flexible and not require documentation and emotional labor to demonstrate residency. Another respondent, Wren, recounts how she learned she could take her classes for a pass or no pass grade rather than a letter grade, and she subsequently lost her tuition discount because it was not communicated to her this would impact her GPA.

I didn't have a GPA at the end of the term. So I lost my [discounted] rate. I had like insufficient grades even though I passed all my classes. I was just like SOL cuz there was no way that I could pay for any more classes at the rate that was being given to me. That was really hard, to like have that happen and not really be aware of the situation until it was “Okay. You have to pay like \$4,000 and also like your entire tuition for next term.”

Wren tried to get help and explained that while she did not have a GPA ,she had passed her courses with a “pass,” which was a change made to increase flexibility during the



pandemic. As she explained her situation, staff were understanding and “nice” but either did not have the time, willingness, or ability to make an exception. Wren described school feeling unnecessarily complex and that she did not have family who could help her with an “overwhelming” experience at college. While she recounted positive experiences with faculty, she couldn’t afford to stay in school and plans to take a break and then attend a smaller institution that she feels will be an easier transition for her.

Not every experience that the respondents told me about was wholly unsupportive, but these situations that I outline were critical to the respondents being able to stay in school. One respondent who had made it clear to me several times over the interview that her background and family support made it easier to navigate college, still struggled off and on with depression and anxiety and was unaware that support services existed at the two colleges she attended. Yet, even after she learned of these services, the support available didn’t meet her needs. She explained how she felt, stating that *“it was like ‘oh, well we’re not actually here for you the way it sounds like we’re here for you.’ That was kind of confusing to me. And then obviously, it makes sense, but it was also hard to run into a wall when you’re really struggling.”* This respondent needed information and support beyond what she already had access to but because of staff constraints was given a list of external resources she could contact.

There were also examples of institutions offering support that on the surface supported students' learning and academic career but in reality, were burdensome or unhelpful. Several respondents had examples of needing accommodations in the classroom only to have faculty be unresponsive to those needs. None of the respondents were able to find resolution to these situations and recognized that any further effort to

have their needs met would require more labor and energy. One respondent, Mia, recalling her experience, became visibly distraught and told me:

I needed those accommodations for classes. It's all on that system with the accommodations office. And I felt like, like embarrassment and whatever surrounding it and was like, I didn't wanna talk about it. And so I needed to, like, approach certain professors where I feel like I'm not getting what was acknowledged that I needed. I felt like my grades were suffering [...] it was just hard, and it just felt like the effort wasn't worth the battle, like this will just be too much for me mentally, whereas I'll just do the assignment and have it be late and have it just not get the points or something because that was just simpler.

There seemed to be little recourse for respondents who encountered unexpected barriers or challenges. I find it critical to note that these experiences were *in addition to* balancing work and school, being a student parent, mental health challenges, and more. And while in this instance there was a disconnect between the student and her instructor, this experience is illustrative of how the institution did not meet the needs of contemporary students. For many of these respondents, they were either unaware of how to find resources or felt, as one respondent stated earlier, that “it wasn’t worth the battle.” Jordan experienced what she considered retaliation in the classroom when she was told by staff that she would have to “*prove it,*” and ultimately she “*felt worse*” after raising the issue with the department. This experience has had a long-lasting effect on her:

So now I'm just scared about it [speaking up about racism]. And now I just, unless it is really something that is, is wrong, which I, I had had that experience online with somebody recently...but unless it is something that really irks me, I just put my head down and do the work and get a grade on it. And then I'll complain about it later. But me trying to say something against something that is wrong? It didn't work to my benefit at City State University.

For these students, persisting in college was about more than their academics. Indeed, they found themselves needing to expend significant time and energy only to encounter more obstacles, frustrations, or staff that “*were not nice, not helpful.*” Going to college also meant opaque information, inflexible policies, hard to find resources, or supports that did not meet their needs.

The lived experience of the students I interviewed problematize the issue of access to higher education in the United States. While obvious, access to college alone does not achieve social mobility, yet the journey from accessing higher education and obtaining a degree is fraught with challenges. Students bring to college internalized notions of traditional college students that is reinforced by the design and structure of the institutions that they attended. Messages and processes often did not reflect the diversity of students lived experiences contributing to feelings of isolation or that maybe students like them do not belong. Finally, students encountered bureaucratic policies and faced obstacles in obtaining the support they needed to do well academically and stay enrolled in college.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature by shifting the focus from a deficit frame that focuses student attributes and background to the institutions of higher education in addressing how we might serve more students and reduce the number of students who leave college without a degree. The United States has embraced an access to education model in which broad access institutions exist and commonly serve students that do not fit the normative college student archetype. In an effort to better understand how non-completers experience college, I draw on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. In understanding the lived experience of non-completers, we can begin to think fundamentally about how to improve the student experience and improve graduation rates — in particular for marginalized or traditionally underrepresented student populations.

Concepts of belonging and stereotype threat is critical to interpreting the findings in relation to the characteristics of contemporary undergraduates. Belonging makes clear that as students encounter challenges —because of an anachronistic system — they internalize messages that they are non-traditional or in some way *other* than the normative college archetype. Many of the students that attend broad access institutions work, and/or have some obligations outside of being a student. This created a tension between being a college student and balancing other priorities and for students that questioned if they belonged, often resulted in leaving the institution without a degree.

As participants encountered challenges, while believing a college degree to be of value, also questioned if the institution was right for them or if they belong. Universal Design is a lens that institutions can apply to not only curriculum, but to practices,

policies, and processes in an effort to mitigate the hidden curriculum of college and reflect the diversity of lived experiences.

Students spoke of the challenges they faced both in and out of the classroom. These challenges and obstacles speak to the need to reimagine how broad access institutions serve *all* students. Universal Design principles, applied in the higher education context can be the mechanism that shifts interventions and the focus from changing students to instead changing institutions. Despite the fact that broad access institutions are intended to serve all or almost everyone that applies, the experiences of the participants illustrate that at this institution the students faced obstacles in navigating administrative processes and sought greater flexibility in the classroom and with policies.

Rather than seek to confer dominant forms of capital or “teach” students how to do college, institutions can adopt a design for all approach. Much in the way that Universal Design mitigates the need for individual accommodations for disabled persons, the UD framework can reduce or eliminate the need to have insider knowledge of bureaucratic and anachronistic processes. As respondents encountered significant bureaucratic challenges and barriers, it is clear that Universal Design can be a useful framework to reduce the time and emotional labor needed to navigate administrative processes.

The principles of UD are salient when considering the needs of contemporary students, especially experiences that have traditionally required a student to have a certain amount of social, cultural, or financial capital. UD can inform policies, practices, and culture that are supportive of all students so that family background is no longer a proxy for likelihood of college attainment. Further, an institution that intentionally seeks

to serve all students will also communicate to students through the campus climate that they belong in college. For instance, service hours that are available in the evening or events that include children will signal to students that the institution recognizes the diversity of lived experience.

While this study is helpful in elevating the lived experience of non-completers, it is important to note the limitations of this paper. First, the study is constrained by those that responded to the request to be interviewed and given the timing of the interviews — is the midst of the 2020 pandemic—the experience of those that did not respond is critical. Further, this study was limited to one institution. Further research should seek to understand the experiences of non-completers at other broad access institutions including both community colleges and four-year colleges.

### *Recommendations*

The dissonance between identity and the institution I have outlined was expressed using the frame of lived experience and the messages and practices embedded in the institution. Here, I argue that broad access institutions should adapt to today's college student by applying Universal Design to practices, policies, and processes that would not only better serve students but support students sense of belonging. For example, flexible student service hours would signal to students that the institution recognizes the diversity of student obligations outside of school. Students might be invited to engage in ways outside of events and pragmatically in terms of career preparation. Faculty panels, career questions and answer sessions, research opportunities, program level open houses are just a few examples of how we might reconceive of student engagement. This does not require significant financial investment but rather an investment in transforming culture.

Further, labels and normative views of traditional students and non-traditional students can be isolating even though students rationally recognize that many if not most other students do not fit the college archetype. The very word non-traditional suggests to be something other than normative. Viewing students as a heterogeneous rather than a monolithic group of traditional versus non-traditional students would be a start to changing our discourse. Participants self-identified as non-traditional based on a range of attributes and experiences such as being first in family to attend college, being older, and/or working. Rather than categorize students in ways that reinforce otherizing, broad access institutions should communicate the diversity of lived experiences —both in who goes to college, and who works and teaches at broad access institutions. For example, open house events, orientations, and academic events should explicitly include children and families when possible, signaling to students with children is normative. In the classroom, instructors might consider pedagogical practices at the start of the term or semester that foster inclusivity and belonging. Further, institutions should make it a practice to continually communicate to staff and faculty the diversity of the students that they serve. This may disrupt normative views of who attends college

Yet, I would suggest that language and views are only part of it. The larger question is if and how institutions are adapting to serve students rather than expecting students to invest significant time and labor to navigate bureaucratic institutions in which information is hard to find and with policies that are outdated and inflexible. Students recounted experiences of encountering barriers and having difficulty in resolving issues that would impact their ability to stay enrolled. Universal Design could be a lens at which institutions apply to practices, policies, and processes — starting with those that are

within the purview of the institution and impact many students. For instance, policies in and out of the classroom that impact the ability to stay enrolled should be reviewed and subsequently updated, modified, or annulled as needed.

Students changed jobs, moved, and made other changes in an effort to be a successful student. These students did not lack motivation or grit, but did experience uncertainty and were tasked with not only figuring out how to pay and navigate college but needed support in connecting to the institution. It then becomes incumbent on institutions to consider how the practical purpose and meaning of a college degree can be embedded in both the curriculum and programming. This will help provide a sense of purpose and help support students in the ways that they want to engage and belong. A student may not have the time to attend an athletic event but they may feel belonging to their discipline. Ultimately, it is my position that to improve graduation rates and reduce the number of those who do not complete college, we must begin with understanding the lived experience of the students an institution seeks to serve and then adapt to meet students where they are at. This is both within the institutions ability to control and critical if we are truly embrace access to higher education in a meaningful way.



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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me to talk about your experience at PSU! Your feedback will help our school better understand the student experience on campus. As we're talking today, it's important that you're as honest as possible in your responses. The information you give will never be associated with you - it will always be treated as an anonymous part of a larger dataset for the purposes of our research. Do you have any questions about that?

Okay then, some technical logistics before we begin:

This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. All identifying information we collect will be replaced by a pseudonym.

Audio files will be uploaded to a university owned, password-protected computer. All of your electronic data will be stored under these conditions using a pseudonym.

Before interview - collect demographic questions and ask collect pronoun information.

1. Are you currently taking college courses?
2. How did you come to attend college?
3. As needed ask about the transfer experience.
  - What was that decision making process like?
  - Did you have other family members who went to college?
4. What was your relationship with school prior to attending college - I'm thinking of K-12?
  - What were your academics like?
  - What was your relationship with teachers and administrators?
5. What was positive about your college experience; what went well?
6. Please tell me more about your experience in college, what was different than you may have expected?
7. How did you stay resilient and motivated while in school?
8. What has been the hardest part of being a college student?
9. What do you wish you had known before starting college that you know now?
10. If you needed help or had a question, what would you do?
11. To what extent did you have personal connections?
12. Did you feel connected to school as a place?
13. We all have different identities that intersect? (provide my example) What were your identities as a student at PSU?
14. Tell me about your experience navigating college, what offices or departments did you interact with. Tell me more about how easy or difficult it was in interacting with those departments.
15. Tell me about your academic experience. What were your classes like?

16. What led to your decision to take a break or leave college (interviewer to adapt based on respondents' previous answer)?
17. Did you have any obligations in addition to college such as working, caregiving, or both?
18. Is there anything significant come to mind as you reflect on your experience in college?
19. Did you tell anyone in your personal life about your decision?
  - If so, how did they respond?
20. Did you connect with any offices on campus?
  - If so, what was your experience with those offices?
21. What are your feelings about higher education in general?
  - In other words, what do you think is the purpose of higher education?
22. What is one thing your college could have done to improve your experience?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Pseudonym	Age	Race	First-gen	Student parent	Worked	Transfer student	Low - SES	Care giving responsibilities	Rural
Noreen	47	Hispanic/Latinx	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
Charlie	41	White	0	0	1	1	N/A	0	0
Mia	29	White	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Jordan	29	Black, Multiracial	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
Mika	21	White	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Aliyah	23	Black	0	0	1	1	n/a	1	0
Anna	22	Hispanic/Latinx	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
Brianna	22	Black	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
Wren	25	White	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Leslie	25	Hispanic/Latinx	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
Jeff	39	Native American, Multiracial	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
Mark	34	White	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Tyler	27	White	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
David	36	White	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
Brandon	32	White	1	1	1	1	1	0	
Riley	26	Hispanic/Latinx	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Melissa	29	White	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
Inessa	44	Black	1	0	1	1	1	0	0
Grace	20	White	1	0	0	0	1	0	1