“BECAUSE IT’S FREE”: INTERVIEWS OF SUCCESSFUL TENNESSEE PROMISE STUDENTS ON HOW THEY VALUE THEIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

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It is a challenge where to even begin. The pursuit of a doctoral degree has been the most difficult but rewarding experience in my life. The process from being a graduate student to finally being a scholar is the most significant change that I have seen in myself. I could not have done this alone and have many people to thank for my growth and for keeping my sanity.

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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Promise is a tuition-free community college scholarship program for high school graduates that was initiated in Tennessee in 2015. This program is part of the State of Tennessee's *Drive to 55* initiative, the goal of which is to have 55% of the state's workforce with a post-high school credential by 2025. This qualitative study was designed to learn how students who used TN Promise and graduated between 2015 and 2019 value their community college education experience. The research questions are: 1) What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free? 2) What are students' perceptions of their learning experience? 3) How do students balance school, work, and family commitments? 4) Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

Twelve face-to-face interviews were conducted with community college graduates, and the resulting data was coded into various themes. The themes identified were then used to describe how Tennessee Promise graduates value their experience. The results were grouped into the following categories: Family, Opportunities, Community, Self-Learning, and Financial Awareness. This study supports the conclusion that TN Promise graduates value much more than a degree. They value learning for the sake of learning. TN Promise is a program that provides much needed and much appreciated funding for Tennesseans to learn skills that will help them eventually provide for themselves, their families, and their communities.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

My first full-time job in higher education was in academic advisement at a for-profit university in Nevada. I had just started the position when the United States federal government began to scrutinize the money-making processes in for-profit educational institutions. Students were racking up incredible amounts of debt, amounts that they likely never would be able to pay back. The cost of for-profit education made me question how valuable education really was to students and how valuable students and their tuition dollars were to universities. Was it all worth it and at what cost? It made me question how valuable an education is to me. I was the advisor giving encouragement and making sure students stayed on track academically, not financially. I loved working with students. But once the federal government started investigating for-profit universities and the narrative on financing education in the U.S. started to change, I knew I had to leave. The educational mission of the for-profit institution became lost in finance. I applied for a faculty position back in Tennessee and actually got the job. Two months later, I made my way back home.

I was eager to start my next educational adventure as a new assistant professor at a community college in August 2012. This was the same community college I had graduated from nine years earlier. I was excited to meet my students, work with new

colleagues[1], and start "changing lives" as many educators want to do. The tables were turned and now I was the one teaching instead of watching the teacher. However, the financial narrative and subsequent battles of how to finance students seemed to follow me from Nevada. The questions came up again: is a college education really worth it? If it is, how can a college education be more affordable for students?

With this dissertation, I intend to explore how students view the value of their community college education in the State of Tennessee in the United States. Now that community college tuition is covered for students coming out of high school, the value of a college education may have changed in the view of students. Free state-sponsored tuition programs for students potentially mean job security for higher education personnel with more students funneling into community colleges. Very little research has been done to hear and to learn from students who are on the receiving end of state-sponsored tuition programs. I hope this study fills in a gap in the research by providing student perspectives in state-sponsored tuition programs.

With this chapter, I explain the purpose and scope of this study. To provide context, I begin with the history of community colleges in the United States, then move to community colleges in Tennessee. I then narrow my focus on one specific community college in East Tennessee. Next, I trace the origin and purpose of Tennessee Promise (TN Promise) and how this impacts incoming community college students. After providing this background, I then lay out the problem, purpose of this study, and the research questions driving this dissertation. I also include my positionality, assumptions, and

[1] Many of my new colleagues were former professors that I had as a student at the community college. My high school history teacher was also on the search committee that hired me.

potential biases. I conclude this chapter with an outline of the dissertation and a definition of key terms.

Context

Community Colleges in the United States

It is important to go back in history to understand the roots of higher education in the United States of America (U.S.). According to Snyder (1993), in 1900, only 2% of 18 to 24-year-olds went to college. By 1930 it was still only 7%. Once soldiers from World War II (1938 – 1945) came home, veterans were rewarded for their service with the GI Bill of Rights, which offered subsidies for tuition, books, and fees. Over two million veterans took advantage of the program and by 1949 the college attendance rate was at 15%. By 1969, 35% of the same age group was attending college. The accessibility to a variety of higher educational programs made the cost of attending inexpensive (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Tuition waiver programs are not new to certain groups of college students. Veterans, low-income students, and single mothers have had opportunities for free tuition (Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hearn 2001; Hearn & Griswold, 1994; Murphy, 1980; St. John, 2003). Workers and employees of companies often get tuition paid by their employer as long as they stay with the company for a certain amount of time after course completion.

In 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama proposed America's College Promise. This program would help make community college free to students that met certain requirements. Under America's Promise, the federal government would match $3 for every $1 the state provided towards community college tuition. Students on average

would save about $3,500 a year on tuition. In rural areas of Tennessee where the percentage of students attending higher educational institutions is low, this amount of funding support is a significant contribution to educational access and equity. While this federal legislation is still being processed and has not passed yet, Tennessee has already instituted TN Promise with funds from the state's lottery scholarship.

Tuition costs impact how students navigate college. Andrew Nutting (2014) argues that higher tuition is associated with higher dropout rates. Students drop out more in the latter part of the semester as well as later in their program. A study completed by Jeffrey Denning (2017) examined tuition prices over a 20-year period for community colleges in Texas. Texas has an initiative where students who live within a district of a community college are offered lower "in-district" tuition pricing. Denning found that reduced community college tuition did not impact the enrollment of 4-year institutions, which is a common concern with 4-year university partners. Denning also found that, while examining race and ethnicity, African-American students tend to choose community college over 4-year institutions to start their education. These students also had a higher rate of attaining an associate degree than students of other races.

Community Colleges in Tennessee

When Tennessee's former governor, Bill Haslam (2011 – 2019), came into office in 2011 only 22% of the adult population in Tennessee had a post-secondary degree or credential.[2] Being a businessman, he felt that having an educated workforce would

[2] A post-secondary credential or degree is defined as formal education beyond a high school education. This includes degrees at colleges and universities as well as certificate programs at technical colleges.

provide more Tennesseans with better job opportunities, thus having a significant impact on economic growth. Governor Haslam's statewide initiative, called *Drive to 55* strives to have 55% of the adult population in Tennessee to earn a post-secondary degree or credential by the year 2025 ("Drive to 55 Alliance", 2014). In 2018, the latest statistic for Tennessee residents is 38% percent of adults have a post-secondary degree or credential.

Under the leadership of Governor Haslam, the goal of a more educated and diverse working population was a keystone to his administration. Tennessee is the first state in the U.S. to offer tuition-free community college to all students coming out of high school. Other states are looking at Tennessee as an example of a successful tuition-free community college program. Oregon and Minnesota soon followed Tennessee's example of free community college and there are currently twelve other states with legislation for similar programs (National Conference of State Legislators, 2016). The current governor, Governor Bill Lee (2019 – present), is continuing TN Promise and looking to expand initiatives to further workforce development and economic growth by way of educational mobility. For this study, I plan to research TN Promise by focusing on one particular community college, Roane State Community College (RSCC).

Tennessee Promise

The TN Promise program started in the Fall of 2015 at RSCC. This program is a "last-dollar" scholarship and mentoring program for graduating high school seniors, meaning that tuition and mandatory fees are paid for after all other scholarships and the Pell Grant kick in. Not all students receiving TN Promise are low-income students. In fact, many students in the program are middle-class students who did not have high

enough grades for academic scholarships but fell outside the income thresholds to receive full federal Pell Grant money. The architect of TN Promise, Randy Boyd, is now the president of the University of Tennessee.

TN Promise is significant for students in Tennessee. In rural areas, people do not have easy access to educational opportunities. The most significant barrier is financial. With only 33% of adults in Tennessee with a higher education degree or credential, there is more room for college attainment. Many of these students would be the first generation to college students. Many are also low-income. The chance of first generation, low-income students to earn a bachelor's degree within six years of high school is less than one in ten. That number continues to drop. In contrast, their wealthier counterparts complete a bachelor's degree in six years at a rate of 75% (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, & Santillan, 2018).

The Problem

After TN Promise was fully implemented, I noticed that the culture of the students began shifting. The way students view college and value what they learn and what they desire to "get out of it" appears to be changing. My colleagues have felt the same change in their work with students, based on informal conversations we are having. I want to know what the educational values and beliefs of students are with the implementation of TN Promise.

This research is significant for a number of reasons. Faculty members want to know what matters to their students. It informs faculty how to plan for instruction as well as may aid them in building rapport with students. Institutions want to know more about

the students that are being served and to see if their needs can be further served. In a larger context, millions of taxpayer dollars are being spent on TN Promise. Knowing how students feel about their education, especially if college was initially out of the question due to cost, is important for the success and progression of the program. While this study is not attempting to make a grand narrative, this snapshot can provide insight to a new and expensive state program.

What is different with my proposed research is that I want to see if students attended community college only "because it is free" or if they had other factors in determining that decision. I wonder if these students had to pay or arrange for financial aid to pay for college if they would have decided to attend community college. These new student dynamics have baffled me as a faculty member. Since the implementation of TN Promise, what are students' views and values on their education? Making education accessible to all students no matter their background is socially just. The purpose of education has been to provide equal opportunity for all people. When the major factor to give students the chance to attend school at no tuition cost is provided to them, I suspect that the value of getting a college education changes.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to research and identify socio-cultural attributes of TN Promise students that enable them to navigate their community college learning experience. My research questions are:

1. What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free?

2. What are students' perceptions of their learning experience?
3. How do students balance school, work, and family commitments?
4. Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

I conducted one-on-one qualitative interviews with twelve students who received TN Promise at Roane State Community College. My student sample will consist of former[3] students who received financial assistance through TN Promise who graduated between 2015 and 2019. I chose former students primarily because they have completed a degree and have participated in TN Promise. I am interested in the cultural and symbolic value that students place on their education, whether that value is anticipated or unexpected.

Positionality

I am not far removed from being a traditional[4] community college student. Upon graduating from high school in 2002, I attended RSCC and earned my associate degree. Had TN Promise been in place in 2002, I potentially would have been a recipient. I come from a middle-class family with a professor father and a formally educated mother, both employed full-time at RSCC. They have worked in this setting in a variety of positions for as long as I can remember. Our family dinner conversations included discussions about their work at the college. Even the fact that I had time for a family dinner every night is unique to family dynamics these days.

[3] I chose former students at RSCC intentionally. I define "former" as students who have completed RSCC and are not my own former students in my classes that I teach. These students have already completed a degree and have seen the TN Promise program all the way through. These students have also never enrolled in any courses that I teach and will not take any courses from me in the future.

[4] In this context, I mean "traditional" as in what students typically do after they complete high school. I graduated high school in May and started community college in the following August of the same year. My associate degree was completed in two years and I transferred to a four-year university.

I remember my father pulling out of his closet his doctoral cap and gown every May for the graduation ceremony at RSCC. I would try the gown on, even as a young child, and pretend that I was a professor. I would "teach my class" in that gown as my parents watched and laughed. My father would take me on the RSCC campus and to his classes. His colleagues, some of whom I work with now, would call me "the little professor." My father hired the dean that I have now.[5] Going to college was never a question. It was always assumed that I would go, but I also wanted to go. I never gave one thought that college was not in my future. I knew that in my long-term planning of my life that a PhD was going to happen. It has been a lifelong goal of mine. I value higher education heavily in my life. I love it!

I have been a faculty member at RSCC for the past eight years in the Education Department. I started teaching in 2012, two years before the start of TN Promise and have continued teaching four years after its full implementation. I am aware that my role as a faculty member formulates my views on education. I enjoy learning and reading so much that I often forget that students have a difficult time with this aspect of learning. I also forget that many students are not aware of all the administrative pieces to completing a degree, such as applying to graduate, meeting with an advisor, or taking exams outside of required coursework.

Contribution to the Field

I believe that my research will adds value to community college scholarship. The way community college students operate and learn under a tuition-free program may

[5] It should be noted that my father had retired from RSCC by the time I was hired full-time.

change their motivations. Their motivation to pick a major and progress through college may have changed. Their ability or knowledge that they bring to college to navigate a complicated process may have changed. The way that they learn and make priority decisions to balance school, work, and personal commitments may have changed. Most of my students work either part- or full-time outside of school. Since TN Promise students must be enrolled in full-time hours, this can cause a hardship in balancing and prioritizing what is important to them. I explore this balance further in my research interviews.

My research adds to the body of cultural studies scholarship. Because TN Promise is a program opening up access and affordability to community college attendance, issues of equity are being addressed and questioned. This study looks at issues of power and social justice in that the state is dangling money in front of students to motivate them to go to college when college may not be an activity that students should pursue. It appears that we are turning into an educonomy where educational values are based on economic, market, and societal factors. I am not suggesting that this is negative, but it does change the way colleges move forward with educating students and making decisions for the workforce. Who really does have the power here in this scenario? I am not even sure that students realize how "free money" has power over them and their educational goals. I explore this further during interviews with students about their experiences and perspectives.

Organization of Dissertation

I include a general outline of this dissertation moving forward to help my audience understand the topics. In chapter one I lay out the problem. The context of community colleges in the U.S. and in Tennessee specially are detailed. Chapter two is the literature review. I first discuss the importance of community college in higher education and the economic impact that it holds in Tennessee. Because this research has a cultural studies focus, I provide data from cultural studies scholars that enhance my work. Chapter three focuses on my qualitative research methodology for this particular study. I describe how the theoretical framework employed is applicable and appropriate to my research questions. Chapter four presents the initial findings from data collected. Chapter five concludes with more detailed analyses, implications, a recommendation for future research, and final conclusions of this dissertation research study.

Definition of Terms

This section provides a list of key terms and definitions used throughout this dissertation. The following definitions are given to provide uniformity and understanding. Some terms may be commonly used in higher education, but others may be unusual or they pertain specifically to community college settings. Citations have been given where necessary. The terms without citations are my own definitions.

Traditional student: a community college student that graduated high school then that following fall semester enrolled in a community college program full-time the following fall semester.

Drive to 55: Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam's higher education bill to have 55% of the adult population in Tennessee to have a post-secondary credential or degree by the year 2025 ("Drive to 55 Alliance", 2014).

Tennessee Promise (TN Promise): a state-sponsored scholarship program in Tennessee given to recent high school and homeschool graduates. Tuition and fees are paid for at a community college as long as the student enrolls in a minimum of twelve credits per semester, completes eight hours of community service per semester, turn in a FAFSA application, and maintain "satisfactory academic progress" of a 2.0 or higher GPA. The program does not cover books, lab fees, personal computers, and other miscellaneous items required for completion of degree. For example, if a student is enrolled in a nursing program and is required to take nursing license exams that cost thousands of dollars, that cost is not covered under TN Promise funds. TN Promise is also a "mentoring" program where members of the community can sign up as a mentor, go through training, and be assigned to a TN Promise student to help guide through their degree program ("TN Promise", n.d.).

Rural student: Roane State Community College (RSCC) serves rural counties in East and Middle Tennessee. In all of these counties, RSCC is the only higher education institution accessible to students with on-campus classes and degree programs. In some counties, RSCC is the only place where students have internet access to complete homework.

Last dollar scholarship: Tuition is paid through TN Promise funds after all other funding sources have been used. Pell Grants, HOPE scholarship, private academic

scholarships, student loans, and employee tuition waivers must be used first before TN Promise funds will kick in and take care of the remaining cost of tuition and fees.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Community colleges serve a distinct purpose in the United States. Community colleges are embedded in many counties and small communities, making higher education accessible to those in even the most remote areas. Students have an opportunity to earn formal education in the form of a degree or post-secondary credential and possibly move up socially and economically. Attaining an education for a person can increase their financial power and social mobility in ways that they may not have without formal education beyond high school. Education can help individuals, families, communities, and the state workforce. More students in Tennessee are enrolling in campuses across the state. In this chapter, I provide a review of literature that pertains to this study, which includes cultural studies, schooling in the United States, community colleges, adult learners, and college tuition.

I begin with a description of cultural studies scholars who I utilize for inquiry and critique of my study. Next, I review what the purpose of schooling is past and present as well as equitable education and social mobility. I discuss the history and purpose of community colleges in the United States and in Tennessee. I then provide literature about adult learners in higher education. I conclude with an explanation of potential barriers or deterrents of tuition waiver programs.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies in education is the driving discipline guiding my framework and research methodology. Stuart Hall (1990) wrote that cultural studies is not one thing, but rather a set of tools to help us understand issues of power. It is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. Providing a rather general definition, cultural studies is "committed to the study of the entire range of society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices" (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p. 4). With such a broad definition as this, I focus on the belief aspect of cultural studies for community college students. I want to know what students value about their community college experience now that tuition is free using TN Promise.

The entire range of interest in this multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, even anti-disciplinary theory and practice (praxis) keeps cultural studies open, boundless, creative, and unexpected. Glover and Kaplan (1992) provides a concise description of what cultural studies scholars can do in their research. They explain "one of the real strengths of cultural studies has to be its insistence on the need to link biographies, structures, and cultures, to explore the fully social articulation of subjectivity, representation, and cultural power "(Glover & Kaplan, 1992, p. 223). This quote encompasses what this study seeks to accomplish. I am not trying to make any grand narratives or general overarching explanations of the world, but to explicate small slices of the human educational experience by interviewing some students to explore their values and beliefs.

What is culture? There are several definitions, but I will rely on a definition of culture as a shared set of beliefs and values between a group of people. There are

traditions, rituals, customs, lifeways, social bonds, cultural expectations, and the list can go on. Culture collectively defines a group of people. Culture can be changed, be transmitted, and be renegotiated. There are subcultures and countercultures. Culture is also a social construct created by people. Tensions can arise when people not of the dominant culture have values that differ from the dominant culture. We see this in educational settings between educators and students, educators and administrators, and policy makers. We see tensions in classroom practices between different racial, socioeconomic, and gender affiliated groups. Not all tensions are bad necessarily, but they do indicate often that differences clash based on a specific set of values between the people involved. In this study I anticipated that the goals of TN Promise and the *Drive to 55* initiative would differ from the goals of the students that benefitted from these programs. The values of the dominant culture to grow the workforce may not be the same values as students and graduates who complete degree programs and enter the workforce.

Cultural studies "offers a basis for creating new forms of knowledge by making language constitutive of the conditions for producing meaning as part of knowledge/power relationship" (Giroux, 1992, p. 201). Cultural studies scholars examine the relationship between culture and power. This work is done with the purpose of creating change for a more equitable society for all people. For students who graduate using TN Promise, their values of their community college experience may not align with the values and purposes of what the state has in mind. It is clear the state wants a more educated workforce. Do community college graduates feel that they are part of this state

economic agenda or do they want something else out of their experience? I pursue this question as I speak to graduates.

Social Justice

I argue that education is good for individuals and is good for society. However, accessible and equitable education continues to be a societal struggle. Educators past and present have argued that education is the foundation for societal activism and enlightenment (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Anyon, 1980, 2005; Delpit, 2006; Fordham, 1993; Fox & Fine, 2013; Freire 1970; Giroux, 1983, 1992; Greene, 1986; hooks, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Thayer-Bacon, 2008, 2013; Tyack, 1976). Accessibility to formal education is central to education and social justice. Education is social justice. Education promotes democracy when the goals are liberation and pursuit of social learning. The TN Promise program provides an avenue of accessibility to a college education. I argue that TN Promise is a social justice program. When high school students can attend a good quality public higher education institution at no cost to tuition and fees no matter the circumstances and financial situation of the family, then that is social justice. The state's agenda does not describe TN Promise as a social justice program, but as a researcher, I believe education can better someone's standing in life and help families (present and future families).

Capital

I use the concept of *capital* as defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1989). *Capital* is "accumulated labor which, when appropriated on a private basis by agents or groups of

agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (1986, p. 241). There are various types of *capital*, but I focus on *cultural* and *social capital*. *Cultural capital* refers to social mobility, social status, and cultural knowledge within society. *Social capita*l is a type of *cultural capital*, which refers to social networks and relationships marked with cooperation and transactions between people for certain goods or services. I use this as a tool for analysis because students come to situations with certain *capital* or lack of certain *capital*. Many times students are equipped with support that they perhaps do not recognize as it is built in to their experience. If students do not have support at home, then they can get that help at the community college.

Critical Theory

For this dissertation, critical theory will be used as a tool of analysis. Henry Giroux (1992) explains how critical theory and cultural studies come together to argue that schools and societal problems cannot be siloed away from each other. Specifically, he believes that critical theory and cultural studies can be used in examining schooling in relation to social problems. In Tennessee, the state government perceives to have a problem of workforce development and having enough trained and educated people to fulfill the workforce. Adults in Tennessee need to be trained and educated to fulfill the needs of employers. The explicit goal of the state is to provide a free education to develop the workforce, not to provide lifelong learning, a well-rounded education, nor accessible education for all.

Giroux (1992) provides a framework of essential tenets of critical theory that is useful to this particular study. First, Giroux believes that defining culture is a "contested

terrain, a site of struggle and transformation" (p. 202). Critical examination of culture takes away any romantic notion that people can have about society, cultural practices, everyday life, and schooling. It raises questions about the role of race, class, and gender in history and in the present. While I focus on class within a rural community college setting, I do believe that race and gender cannot be ignored. There is a relationship between power and culture.

Second, critical theory and cultural studies "offers the opportunity to rethink the relationship between the issue of difference as it is constituted within subjectivities and between social groups" (Giroux, 1992, p. 202). The idea of agency for an individual to pursue their goals is changed once circumstances change. For many students at RSCC, taking advantage of a tuition free college program is the motivator to go to school, so does that take away from that student's agency for choice of school or program? Maybe students went where the money took them instead of going where they truly wanted to attend for a particular program or experience. Interviewing former students of RSCC provide answers to these questions.

Third, critical theory and cultural studies "provides the basis for understanding pedagogy as a form of cultural production rather than as the transmission of a particular skill, body of knowledge, or set of values" (Giroux, 1992, p. 202). Cultural production or cultural products are tangible or intangible creations of a particular culture. For example, educational practices and systems are intangible products. Students can teach me about what cultural products they are creating based on their experience in school.

Critical theory is a helpful tool I employ to analyze my research with TN Promise students. Being critical allows for open and genuine feedback, both negative and positive. For community college programs to work, we have to be honest with ourselves and understand the issues and tensions that are coming out of situations. Students play a huge role in the educational process. Using critical theory, I can offer a socio-cultural critique of how TN Promise is changing the culture of students coming to community college.

Additional Cultural Studies Scholars

There are other cultural studies scholars worth noting for my work besides the ones mentioned above. While I may not subscribe to everything that each scholar believes, I do honor their contributions in relation to my work. Because my research specifically looks at social class and socioeconomic status, the works of Antonio Gramsci (1968) and Karl Marx (1961, 1977) will help inform my analysis. Cultural studies scholarship does not necessarily fall under Marxist principles, but it usually is complementary as a social critique. Marxism alone is a form of historical materialism in relation to social class and social conflict. Social classes interact with each other and have relationships with political structures. Social class interactions are reflected in economic activities. People work to maintain their subsistence through labor. Marx says that modes of production constitute the environment itself. The labor does not create and shape the environment. Instead, work shapes the labor and reproduces and deepens the inequalities. The social organization and the labor create a mode of production. The higher the social class, the more power they have in shaping the environment.

In education, Marx viewed that state education systems produce certain ideologies that benefit the state and powerful entities. These ideologies are then used to develop curriculum and other instructional tools. Because these ideologies are coming from the state, they are deemed legitimate and perpetuated for the elite to profit. Education is thus not a great equalizer, but a hegemonic institution. According to Jean Anyon (2011), "Marx understood culture in terms of ideology – how the dominate ideas of a time and place then to arise from and legitimate the economic relationships of society" (p. 12).

Barker (2012) argued that cultural studies in relation to Marxism rests on the issues of structure and action. Marxism emphasizes that there are structures outside a person that prevent or make them do an action. However, cultural studies scholars emphasize that humans have agency to create change and to even resist structures. I emphasize action in this dissertation.

Cultural studies is a proactive and praxis-orientated framework that takes steps beyond just a theory (Freire, 1970). Gramsci's work within Marxism looks specifically at meaning and ideas that went beyond explanation in economic terms and more towards cultural terms (Barker, 2012). Gramsci particularly examines the role of *hegemony* and *ideology* in western societies. Ideology is the "binding and justifying ideas of any social group" (Barker, 2012, p. 504). Social groups within institutions have ideologies that may differ from the ideologies of the institution or other structures. Because education is full of examples of hegemony and ideology, I believe this work is a valuable tool for analysis. TN Promise has an ideology based on political principles that have trickled down to community colleges with elite business professionals telling our society that attaining a

higher education is the only road to success. While I am an advocate for higher education and have experienced how higher education has positively impacted my life, college is not for everyone. The TN Promise program dangles "free money" in front of people who have little to no financial resources in exchange for workforce development. The "promise" of TN Promise is two years of tuition-free community college education.

There are critiques of Marxism. Critics have called Marxism a reductionist, in that only one factor, the economy, is the basis for every aspect of society.[6] It is worth noting that Marx liked capitalism before he started opposing it. Stuart Hall (1986) says that there are over 57 varieties of Marxism, thus no unified belief. Hall also says that Marxism is not a "theory with substance", but more of a way of thinking in which Marx called "dialectic". It is "an awareness of the continual contradictoriness of the world" (p. 40). Marx also did not live during a time of industrial corporate capitalism so how could he really understand? He did not see and thus did not understand modern capitalism. Hall also says that Marx is wrong about "the tendency of the state to whither away" (p. 40).

A central concept in cultural studies scholarship is the concept of *hegemony*. Hegemony is everywhere, but not everyone sees it or realizes that it is there. Students who do not comply or conform to the social structure of college are viewed as troublesome or needing some kind of academic intervention. Barker (2012) defines hegemony as "a temporary settlement and series of alliances between social groups that is won and not given" (p. 68). Gramsci (1968) explains that hegemony is when the interests

[6] We can see that focusing on the economy only is not enough to sustain a nation once COVID-19 and the civil unrest following the murders of several black citizens in the U.S. A healthy economy did not prevent health and civil rights crises.

of the dominant group in a society prevails. While I critique the role of hegemony in education, I do not subscribe to hegemony in terms of the harm that it does, but instead hegemony is about awareness and a consciousness of what is really happening around a person. As I learn about student's experiences, I see how hegemony creeps in. The students who do take advantage of TN Promise have a positive outlook on their future careers. They feel optimistic about their degree plans and career choices and have little to no debt from student loans. The graduates see opportunity in their lives, but the state sees opportunity in using their expertise in the educated workforce required for employers.

This leads me to the issue of culture and *power*. Who has the power? Who should have the power? This dissertation seeks to realize how culture and power play into student's educational experiences. I realize power exists everywhere and in every situation. When someone has power, then someone else does not. Michael Foucault (1972, 1980, 1984c) believes that power is generative too. Knowledge and power are specific to particular times and places. Foucault's concept of "force relation" where people's social interactions pushes people to do something. People do not hold force and power but instead it is a complex group of forces and interactions. Force relations are always changing. I think TN Promise is a program to empower students, but at the same time may make students believe that college is the only route to adulthood or to a good paying job. Many students do not like school and struggle with it but feel that "because it's free" they should just go ahead and enroll anyway.

Equitable Education

Equitable education is of particular interest in cultural studies of education. Not only is social justice and equitable education discussed, but it is further emphasized in action and praxis. Cultural studies scholars advocate praxis to create actual change to further social justice. To start, it is imperative to discuss the social and historical context of education in the United States. I look at how this shift impacts community colleges and my institution. I conclude with ways that this shift might impact the creation of more excellent and equitable education environments.

Educonomy

The foremost scholar that I find pertinent to my work is an educational foundations scholar, Joel Spring (2015, 2016). He focuses on globalization of education and *deculturalization* of education. Spring uses his book *Globalization of Education* to describe trends in global education. He uses the terms *global corporatization* and *economization of education* as important concepts. Multinational corporations are influencing what schools all around the globe are teaching. This leads to deculturalization and *educonomy*, which is where corporations and politicians have the primary lead in deciding what schools should emphasize how schools will shape people into workers for a corporate environment. Global education focuses on teaching skills for the workplace and human capital education. Human capital education includes cognitive skills and soft skills. Human capital theory focuses on human behavior to shape corporate needs. Spring (2015) provides an Economic Education World Model with the following principles:

- Skill-based instruction

- Education to get people to compete in the economy
- Students are human capital
- Education is an investment in the workforce
- Accountability
- Economic growth and development is the point

"Skills, in economic jargon, become the new 'currency' of the global education system" (Spring, 2015, p. 14). All the consumers of education (students) seem to want to know how these skills are going to get them a job. If they do not get a job after graduation, then those skills are useless. There has to be a tangible benefit for all the hard work to develop skills. "The economization of education includes giving an economic value to social skills. Cognitive and social skills are valued according to their contributions to economic development. In other words, the goal of the economic education model can be described as producing 'homo economicus' or the 'economic human' who will fit into the work environment of modern business enterprises or becomes an entrepreneur in the global economy" (Spring, 2015, p. 43). Since Tennessee currently has a governor who is a businessman at the core, making sure that state businesses have a workforce prepared for employment is a priority. No longer is learning about personal fulfillment or enjoyment, but rather getting a job and making money.

Bernard and Mondale (2001) explain that historically many Americans oppose the role of government in education, however, "the free common school system is the most American thing about America" (p.1). It is interesting that Tennessee has two consecutive business-focused governors who, in theory, are against the role of government in

education, but have been major supporters of free community college. The concept of educonomy is instilled in American education as an alliance between public officials, corporate leaders, and educators to reform education and potentially push a social and economical agenda.

Spring's (2016) work on the history of education in the United States provides a brief overview of the "differing concepts of equality, including economic, political, culture, and language equality" in American history (p. 16). Issues that arise in society are reflected in the way schools are run. Spring argues that equality of opportunity did not take care of racial, cultural, and language inequality. Education has a "corporate culture" with "shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize workers in a global economy" (p. 141).

Children from lower-income families are taught with authority and routine, learning how to take orders as opposed to managing people. Children from upper-income homes are given more freedom and independence to work and learn how to give orders and make decisions on behalf of someone else (Spring, 2016). I still think schools do this today and especially at the community college level. Oftentimes, students come to community college without the skill sets to study or manage time so many faculty and staff feel that they must "make them" do work. I see examples of college staff and faculty believing that students cannot think for themselves so the faculty must do the thinking for them. In fact, we are starting programs at RSCC that encourage more of this hand-holding. We even now have a "parent portal" where students (who are adults) can give permission for their parents to see their grades, coursework, and student information.

Mobility

It is widely believed that education provides upward mobility for students in their careers and in their personal lives (Beller & Hout, 2006; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Oleksiyenko, 2013; Wegener, 1991). However, Bowles and Gintis (1976) believe that schools "cause occupational immobility" and encourage work-related personality traits. Adult remediation programs and training are a poor investment. They also say that financial problems are not the issue, but the lack of social capital and soft skills. Expanding the student loan program is not the answer for cultural studies scholars such as Bowles and Gintis. Spring adds that "Policy that improves the environments that shape ability may be a more effective avenue for increasing college enrollment in the long run" (Spring, 2016, p. 155). "There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education" (Spring, 2016, p. 126). From the community college perspective, the same happens to poor, native English-speaking, Whites.[7] They often do not understand academic language, body language, and other middle-class norms that put them at a disadvantage. Also, most of these students must have a job in addition to being in school. Equality of treatment is not helpful there.

[7] I capitalize White on purpose. This is a group of people. White does not include a particular group of people, but rather a large group of people. If referencing a different group, I would also capitalize. I also capitalize out of respect for all peoples and cultures. I do not believe that all people can be grouped together by race, but rather by social construct.

Symbolic Interactionism

Another theoretical lens behind my research stems from the works of sociologists Herbert Blumer (1969) and George H. Mead (1934) on symbolic interactionism. People create knowledge and interact within a culture using symbols and trying to make sense of those symbols. The self interacts in social acts with other people and symbols. Especially significant is the concept of role taking, or the ability to understand and take on the role of someone else. Social organization, culture, and community cannot exist without people communicating and role-taking. But misunderstandings, miscommunication, and power struggles exist as well, complicating interactions and interpretations of symbols. Interactions happen everywhere, but they change depending on the context and the players involved. In rural community colleges, each institution has its own culture and interactions with students taking on a major role. This study seeks to understand a small slice of that culture in one particular institution.

To narrow symbolic interactionism further, I specifically find the works of cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams (1965, 1979, 1981) to be particularly fascinating. Williams explains how cultural studies originated in adult education, but outside of the classroom. It developed a way to examine the lives and interests of people who take classes. Williams's work focuses on the working-class experience, suitable for a study in rural community college settings. Societies are interrelated and impact each other. He believes that culture could not be defined in isolation and cultural studies scholars should study ways of life in relation to each other. Williams also believes that

people's words and vocabulary have different meaning depending on the person who is using it. Meanings are never fixed and can change with context.

Williams's (1958) work is committed to learning and documenting the power from individual experiences. Individuals should interpret their own experiences. Williams looks at culture as a "way of life" (1958, p. 18). Slack and Whitt (1992) write that "Williams's emphasis is thus largely on individuals' inherent abilities to construct their own experience even though they do not originally find themselves in conditions of their own making" (p. 576). Students have a wealth of knowledge, but oftentimes they do not realize how knowledgeable they are. I learn from my students all the time. Students teach me using their stories and narratives.

Cultural studies offer an interpretive version of symbolic interactionism based on the following assumptions that I use from Norman Denzin (1992):

- People create the worlds of experiences they live in.
- People act on things in terms of meanings they have created.
- These meanings come from interaction.
- Culture is constituted as a way of life.
- There are known meanings and directions, but also new lived experiences and meanings.

Symbolic interactionism assumes that "human action takes place always in a situation that confronts the actor and that the actor acts on the basis of defining this situation that confronts him" (Blumer, 1997, p. 4). In my experience, students are the actors in a situation that is relatively new in that tuition is not a factor to worry about as they move

along attaining a degree or credential. Students may not realize how big of a role they play in a situation, but I begin to see how they perceive themselves and their learning in a setting where tuition financial obligations are paid for.

Students who get TN Promise are in a unique position. So many of their counterparts in community colleges in the nation do not have the opportunity for a tuition-free college experience. I am under the impression that this undervalues what education does for an individual and what it means for moving forward towards a degree. I am not sure that many students who come to community college "just because it is free" understand how this situation confronting them impacts their learning and educational experience. This experience is explored throughout this dissertation.

Self

I also draw on Jerome Bruner's work in cultural psychology (1990). Bruner believes that people use culture to construct meaning. The use of narratives and storytelling help people culturally shape views of themselves, of other people, and the world in which they live. Bruner also argues that there is a relationship between action and saying, which is open to interpretation.

Wilhelm Max Wundt (1916) argues instead to study the human condition in what he calls "folk psychology". Folk Psychology is examining how people culturally shape views of themselves, of other people, and the world that they live. He says that folk psychologies reflect human tendencies that humans are naturally born with, but also reflects cultural beliefs ingrained in the mind. Jerome Bruner elaborates further and says that folk psychology "is an essential base not only of personal meaning but of cultural

cohesion" (p. 137). Bruner makes clear that folk psychology is about narrative and storytelling with the support of narrative culture that includes stories, myths, and genres of literature. Culture is a symbolic system that people use to construct meaning. Psychologists want to know how this system is acquired. To understand people then their experiences must be understood and that actions are shaped by intentional means. People have beliefs and desires and that "we believe that the world is organized in certain ways, that we want certain things, that some things matter more than others" (p. 39).

Lastly, Bruner examines how the people construct their *selves* during the process of meaning making in culture. The concept of *self* is not isolated, but rather is created interpersonally. *Selves* are not created in the context of the present, but instead take on meaning from the historical context that their culture comes from and the culture in which they express themselves. We must "focus upon the *meanings* in terms of which Self is defined *both* by the individual and by the culture in which he or she participates." We must also "attend to the *practices* in which 'the meanings of Self' are achieved and put to use" (p. 116) (emphasis in the original). What is *self* should be reviewed and based on specifics about how they are to be used in action and in the discourse surrounding the action. This study examines how *self* is practiced from the student perspective.

Community Colleges

Community colleges provide access to higher education for many rural areas. Historically, community colleges are open enrollment, relatively low tuition rates, and embedded in the communities that they serve. Approximately 45% of traditional students start at a community college. Seventy-one percent of freshmen declare they will transfer

to a 4-year university, but only half of those students actually do transfer. Community college students tend to be less prepared academically for college level coursework and often require learning support (formerly known as remediation courses) in mathematics, reading, and writing. About 70% of incoming freshmen at RSCC must take at least one learning support class. Students also tend to have fewer financial resources and lower social resources and support (Hlinka, 2017). All of this is certainly true for RSCC. In our service area, two counties are in the bottom ten of poorest counties in TN (Campbell and Scott). Almost 75% of incoming freshmen must take at least one learning support class (formerly known as remedial classes). I get many students who have ACT scores of 13. Being prepared financially and academically is essential for students to progress through community college.

The literature for the costs and affordability of community college is abundant (Baime & Mullin, 2011; Beegle, 2000; Coley & Baker, 2013; College Board, 2013; King, 2004; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Lombardi, 1976; Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2006). The costs of attending college rise much faster than inflation. Tuition increases, but faculty hiring is decreasing significantly. However, administrative positions are increasing. Higher education institutions are becoming top heavy. Tuition is not the only cost of attending college. Books, lab fees, computers, technology, and supplies go along with rising cost. Between thirty to fifty percent of students who start in a community college never complete it (Horn & Neville, 2006; Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). While tuition-free college sounds great, there are other challenges to college completion that finances cannot fix.

Conditions for community college programs have changed over time to serve the needs of certain groups of people. “Every adult educational program has usually been developed in terms of more or less explicit conditions” according to the population that they are serving (Houle, 1961, p. 6). Given the quickly rising costs of higher education, it is no wonder that states are looking towards more cost-effective measures to pay for college.

Long et al. (2016) looks at ways educational racism has impacted community colleges. Some groups strive to achieve this “American Dream”, but there are some groups who cannot attain this due to “lack of education, lack of access, societal division, and limited resources” (p. 1). Completion rates for students of color and impoverished students are severely lacking. They detail the demographics in community college then explain the recommendations to fix it. These recommendations come from researchers, top community college leaders, and educators.

Long et al. (2016) explain at length about what we already know about community college students:

- Students arrive unprepared for college level work
- Completion rates are very low
- Attainment gaps across groups of students are wide

The social contrast of poverty has developed to equate poverty with persons of color. The largest number of people living in poverty in the U.S. is White. Research by the Kaufman Index of Entrepreneurial Activity (2014) says that 44% of all students attending community colleges and living in poverty were White. More community college students

are eligible to get Pell Grants than who receive aid (Baime & Mullin, 2011). There is disconnect in how to actually obtain the funds. Perhaps it is tied to students not knowing how to go about the process or the institutions make the process more difficult than what it should be. What is urgent for our community colleges is to truly be a pathway out of poverty. There are two types of poverty. Situational poverty is living on the edge of poverty or the working poor. Generational poverty is a life perspective where the person feels hopeless and upset about their present life circumstances (Beegle, 2000). Students in poverty are operating at the bottom of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. How can students focus on learning if their basic needs are not being met? College professionals indirectly keep asking students to act middle-class when they do not have the resources and experience of being or knowing what middle class is. Another problem is food insecurity. According to The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2019), about 45% of college students experience food insecurity. Students at a two-year institution are particularly at risk for food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. At the time of this dissertation, RSCC has set up food pantries across many campuses and is partnering with local food banks to supply and support on-campus food pantries. RSCC President Christopher Whaley says that about 40% of RSCC students are food insecure ("Brain Food Pantry", 2019). This situation bears asking, why is it up to education institutions, yet again, to provide more economic and societal resources when the problem is much larger than education?

A key point from Long et al. (2016) is that people go to college, but more drop out than graduate. "Every one of these dropouts thought a college education would

enhance their lifestyle when they first registered for college classes, and a problem of some kind changed their minds" (p. 5). What is the problem and what is the problem as it pertains to RSCC? The American Association of Community Colleges (2012) "believes that the unique and powerful contribution of community colleges lies in preserving access while also emphasizing student success, enhancing quality, and closing attainment gaps associated with income, race, and ethnicity. To abandon the open door would be to betray the historic mission of these institutions. Access without support for student success is an empty promise. If the door is to remain open, virtually everything else must change" (p. 4). Now that TN Promise has given the financial access to a college education, the support must be in place as well. I am talking about meaningful support.

Long et al. (2016) continues that "if 90% of students were to have completed an associate degree, the private returns would be $378 million and the public returns in the form of taxes paid would be $116 million. These values reflect the returns for just one cohort of students in just one year. Taken over a work life, the labor-market impact, not to mention the non-labor-market impact, is substantial" (p. 198). This is the reason why education focuses on skills and the workforce. Given the previous texts on global education and the educonomy, skills-based education a good thing to have for a community and society. The outcomes seem positive. Students want to see positive results once they graduate college. But the disconnect with students is the process of getting to the outcome and being successful in navigating the educational process.

Community college professionals must understand and appreciate the cultures from which our students come. Many students do not understand how to navigate the

college system, do not know how to ask for help, and basically are anxious (perhaps scared) of the process. College staff and faculty use academic verbiage that students are not used to hearing, but they are too afraid to ask for help or clarification for fear of looking dumb.

While I am not focusing on race in this study, I do believe that race and class are connected in many ways. Long et al. (2016) says that "White people in poverty especially experience the disconnection with their non-impoverished White counterparts. They report that their 'Whiteness' leads people to assume that they once were privileged, but owing to poor choices and personal deficiencies, they have fallen into poverty. And since they were once privileged, they can work harder and should be able to 'make it'" (p. 208). This is a common problem in community colleges and perhaps higher education in general. It is a haves versus the have-nots mentality where the faculty have the knowledge and capital and the students do not have it because they have not "worked hard enough" yet. But with time and hard work people will be successful, which leads to the myth of meritocracy.

Interwoven is the idea of meritocracy; the idea that no matter what one's social position is at birth that society and economics will offer enough opportunity and mobility (along with effort) to "make it" (Littler, 2018; Markovits, 2019; Williams, 1958). If you subscribe to the argument that hard work leads to success, what does that mean if you are not successful?

Adult Learners

The work of Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (1991) holds significance to understanding the context of adult learners. There are three characteristics in our society that impact what adults want to learn:

1. Adults outnumber those under 18 years of age and as they age their needs take front and center.
2. Technology has a significant impact on the economy and jobs.
3. Adults must continue to learn if they want to function at work, home, and in their communities.

Adult learners tend to be more focused on job enhancement and training. They also trend towards self-directed learning and other ways of nonformal learning than their under 18 counterparts. The mission of community colleges is to offer job training and workforce development more so than universities. Jobs require technology training more than ever. At RSCC, computer science and cyber security degrees are created quicker than other degree programs and the enrollment is high. It is no wonder that Governors Haslam and Lee, chose community colleges for the TN Promise program. Not only is it cheaper to the state to cover community college tuition, but the more people can develop skills for business across the state. More educated workforce can boost the economy even further. A better economy boosts the middle class. A larger middle class creates more financial stability for families and communities. Our rural areas in the state could use an economic boost and stable environments for families.

There are several forces in a student's life that can serve as motivators to help students succeed in community college settings under programs that involve waiver of tuition. There are several students in my classes that are grateful for the opportunity that TN Promise provides. Many recognize that they are in a unique and fortunate position that many people before them have fought for. Many students are also motivated by the prospect of getting a better job once they graduate.

The people that students meet at the college can be motivators. Weinstein (2010) determined that adult students are often motivated by their professors in their desired field of study. Those professors were knowledgeable and passionate about their field. It is worth noting that younger adult students see enthusiasm as more important than knowledge from the professor to stay motivated in the course. Older adult students tend to value the professor's knowledge more than enthusiasm.

Having students working with their peers in the same field is also a motivator. Many students take the same classes together and can move through programs at similar rates. They can collaborate and commensurate together. In courses that are difficult, such as math, working in groups can help students learn easier and more comfortably. Students tend to be less stressed when they are with other peers that are having similar experiences (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2013). Talking to a professor about a problem is sometimes overwhelming and many students are simply afraid to approach the professor.

Many adult learners have families or want to have families one day. They often express that they want to provide a good life for their families and to make life better than what they had it. My female students often express that they want to be a role model for

their daughters and show that they can be a mom and a student at the same time. My male students often tell me that they want to be the provider for their families.

Brookfield's (1987, 1993, 2001) work in adult learning uses critical theory as ideological critique. Adults learn to recognize the presence of ideology in everyday thoughts and actions but can especially be useful in higher education. He offers seven "learning tasks" as part of critical theory: 1) challenging ideology, 2) contesting hegemony, 3) unmasking power, 4) overcoming alienation, 5) learning liberation, 6) reclaiming reason, and 7) practicing democracy. I use critical theory in terms of adult education to see how participants view themselves while using TN Promise. Adult learners that I encounter frequently express directly or indirectly the learning tasks listed above by Brookfield.

Potential Barriers or Deterrents of Tuition Waiver Programs

The first potential barrier is financial. It costs a lot of money to pay for the tuition costs associated with going to a 60-credit program. It costs more when a student does not complete a degree within 60 credits due to failing or withdrawing from courses as well as changing majors. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2017) published a brief report on students changing majors. A third of first-time college students change their major at least once within 3 years of starting college. Students who start in the math and natural science fields are more likely to switch majors than any other field. One in ten students, no matter the field, change their majors twice ("Beginning College Students Who Change Their Majors Within 3 Years of Enrollment", 2017). At Roane State, the average student changes their major at least three times during

their time there. Goldrick-Rab and Kelly (2016) argue that tuition and fees "are the price of access – living costs are the price of success" (p. 56). Goldrick-Rab and Kelly also state "when large numbers of people can't afford college at all, the system is broken" (p. 56). The price for community college attendance is getting higher and higher, even with TN Promise. Living costs are steadily climbing. Students must work longer hours to cover the costs of living, which takes away from school attendance and studying. Federal loan limits are not keeping up with the rising cost of school attendance and cost of living. The size of the Pell grant has not kept up with tuition, fees, and living expenses as well (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2014).

Pete Wheelen (2016) believes that free tuition is not enough. Despite free money, community college completion rates as a whole sit at thirteen percent. Balancing work with school and a lack of understanding which classes to take are main causes working against student success. Wheelen outlines three ways to improve outcomes for community college students. First, colleges need to map out guided pathways. Second, certain courses need to adopt a corequisite model for remediation. Last, students need to have a student success coach provided.

Discussions and Implications

The research shows how important cultural studies is to the scholarship on education. Education is a social justice issue because unequal experiences happen to students based on social class, race, ethnicity, and certain capital. Power dynamics play into the purpose of providing a tuition-free college education in order to build a more

educated workforce and enhance state economic goals. The culture of students has an impact on classrooms and how they value an educational experience.

What is clear is that community colleges serve a valuable function in American education. Rural communities with a college campus provide much needed accessible educational opportunities and community development. As an alternative to a university, community colleges provide additional support and training to adult learners. I am concerned that the value of opportunities and experiences that a college education provides to a student may be lost or taken for granted "because it's free." This is what I learn more about through interviews of former RSCC students.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempt to provide a review of literature pertinent to this particular study. As is reflected in this review, student perspectives are largely left out of the conversation. Since TN Promise is still a new program there is not much research to be found, especially on students who participate in the program. I have established the need to do this study and help fill this research void. In continuing this dissertation, chapter three discusses the methodology and theoretical framework that is employed for this study.

CHAPTER THREE
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In this study, I wanted to learn how graduates value their community college education given that it is tuition-free. My goal was to ask graduates what they think about TN Promise, and learn from them directly how this funding opportunity impacted them. With this chapter, I provide an explanation of my theoretical framework, which uses community college graduate interviews to describe their experiences while a student at RSCC. Given that I am looking for values that tie in culture and socioeconomic status, I wanted to interview students in person. The interview questions sought to understand the graduate's two years of experience at RSCC, not their current university or employment setting.

The purpose of this study was to research and identify socio-cultural attributes of TN Promise students that enable them to navigate their community college learning experience. My research questions were:

1. What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free?
2. What are students' perceptions of their learning experience?
3. How do students balance school, work, and family commitments?
4. Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

I start with an explanation of what qualitative research includes in general and how it pertains to this study. I then describe my theoretical framework and how qualitative work is applicable and chosen for this study. I also discuss various qualitative

scholars and how education and cultural studies fit into this study. I conclude this chapter with a description of my data collection and analysis processes.

Qualitative Inquiry

This study is qualitative. I believe that if research is done on humans, then the research methodology should take a humanistic approach. Humans live life through their own social reality. Their experience is true to them, but may not be true for others, even in similar circumstances. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) believe that the researcher should bring to life the meanings that people have about their experiences. They also believe that life is socially constructed. By conducting a qualitative study, I learned how my participants socially construct their own reality using TN Promise as their means to an educational end. That is, the TN Promise program is a tool or mechanism for the students to obtain college enrollment and graduate with an associate degree. TN Promise is a tool that is useful and helpful for students to use to gain access to a college education.

Qualitative Interviews

I start with how I came to the decision to conduct qualitative interviews. During my doctoral coursework and in reviewing the literature on community college settings, we simply do not speak with the students enough. My institution has conducted focus groups and surveys, but they have not researched student experiences in more depth. My institution does speak with students one-on-one during administrative meetings, but not with methodical and structured interviewing and the kind of depth analysis that I seek to

provide here. From my experience, students love to talk about themselves and share their experiences so let them!

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism as a theoretical lens worked well in this study. This research uses the interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fossey et al., 2002; Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). The driving theory behind this paradigm begins from the works of Herbert Blumer (1969) and George H. Mead (1934) on symbolic interactionism as sociological theory. People create knowledge and interact within a culture using symbols and trying to make sense of those symbols. The "self" interacts in social acts with other people and symbols. Especially significant is the concept of role-taking, or the ability to understand and take on the role of someone else. Social organization, culture, and community cannot exist without people communicating and role-taking. But misunderstandings, miscommunication, and power struggles exist as well, complicating interactions and interpretations of symbols. Interactions happen everywhere, but they change depending on the context and the players involved. In rural community colleges, each institution has its own culture and interactions with students taking on a major role. This study seeks to understand a small slice of that culture in one particular institution.

Paul Rock (2001) explains how symbolic interactionism and qualitative inquiry work together. He provides the following assumptions:

- Thought is interpreted as practical and intentional. It is an activity.
- The activity itself is a symbol and is "defined by interactionists as action towards an object which is rehearsed in the imagination" (p. 28).

- Thought is emergent and moves in stages
- Thought is a constant interaction between the mind and the environment.
- Thought and action are situated.
- Thought is reflective. People interpret reality about them.

Additionally, Rock explains that "what makes human action distinctive is the capacity of people not only to understand the world symbolically but also to understand themselves and others as symbolic and symbol-using beings. People respond to themselves and others, and their responses are mediated in part by a vicarious imagination of the other and his or her responses, by what has come to be called taking the role of the other" (p. 29). People can never fully understand themselves and other people, which makes this work interpretive.

I draw on symbolic interactionism using the works of Raymond Williams (1958) and Norman Denzin (1958) based on their ideas about symbolic interactionism and cultural studies. Williams's work focused on the working-class experience, suitable for qualitative study in community colleges. Cultural studies offer an interpretive version of symbolic interactionism based on the following assumptions that I use for this study (Denzin 1958):

- People create the worlds of experiences they live in.
- People act on things in terms of meanings they have created.
- These meanings come from interaction.
- Culture is constituted as a way of life.

- There are known meanings and directions, but also new lived experiences and meanings.

For this study, I seek to interpret the way a student creates meaning from their experience in community college when tuition obligations are met are interpreted. Additionally, I also examine a small slice of the culture within a community college and where my participant fits within that culture is also examined.

Ontology and Epistemology

In looking at ontology and epistemology, I use Prasad's (2005) explanation of what each means to this study. Ontology seeks a theory of existence. What is the nature of human experience? What is known to be truth? Instead of one absolute truth, there are multiple truths in seeking to understand human experience. In interpretivism, reality is constructed, always changing, and uses different frames of reference (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2014, p. 15). Epistemologically speaking, what are the ways of knowing? How is truth known to be so? What is true? (Prasad, 2005). Knowledge is created by a "democratic process, involving both researcher and research participants" and using multiple perspectives (Brundrett & Rhodes, p. 15).

When I discuss my ontological beliefs, I refer to what community college education is to me. I look at the world through a socio-cultural lens. As a social constructivist I believe individuals learn and develop in ways that are socially situated. People learn through interactions with others. People and culture combine take a large role in learning values and beliefs. In community college settings, I believe that students take on the value systems of the communities they come from. This can at times conflict

with the value system of higher education. College tends to teach to middle-class values, but in rural communities, many students are not middle class. What students value in life may not be the same values that the college or the faculty have. Tensions can arise in these situations, both positive and negative.

When I discuss my epistemological beliefs, I espouse a constructivist perspective. People have their own "truth" based on their experiences and beliefs. People use their own truths to lead their lives. Students have learned a culture of education from their own previous experience. Their beliefs and truths that they hold in school may differ from other students and even faculty. When looking at student experiences, I do not believe in a single truth or that someone's perception is right to wrong. I recognize how personal student's experiences and thoughts are and believe they should be valued.

Data Collection Process

One-on-one interviews with participants was how I collected the data. This method was chosen so that participants could give their own answers without the possibility of being influenced by other participants as well as allowing them the time to respond to each question. During the transcription process, it was clearly noted when the participant was speaking and when I was speaking. Establishing rapport with my participants was important so that they felt like they could open up to me more. I was also able to read their body language. Conducting one-on-one interviews and transcribing the interviews was time intensive. I recognize that my own bias in my questions and how I asked those questions can be implied during the interview.

Based on present literature, there is not much one-on-one interviewing with students is generally lacking. Since TN Promise is a new program, not much research in general has been done. In consultations with the RSCC Department of Institutional Research, focus groups and surveys have already been used to seek student input, but are used primarily for institutional purposes only. These methods examined institutional practices and how the students felt whether those practices were or were not effective. The focus groups and surveys that have already been done do not examine how students value their education and do not relate to my study's research questions. I would have had no problem getting student focus groups together, but I wanted to give individual students my time and attention to learn from their experiences. My interview questions also required personal stories and narratives that may be lengthy and not appropriate for a focus group. I had the ability to conduct a survey, however, surveys do not provide the depth and richness in experience that I was hoping to get from participants. While interviewing, I wanted the chance to ask clarifying questions if a response arose that was interesting or difficult to understand at first, but the focus was on the interview questions that I brought to the interviews.

Conducting a case study was considered, but not chosen as the methodology to answer the research questions. I wanted multiple participant experiences, not a single individual's experience. Even though I learned and identified themes in the participants' stories, I did not feel that all the experiences could necessarily be grouped together as a case study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the key to identifying a case study is that the study can be defined or bound within certain parameters, such as specific place

and timeframe. RSCC has nine campuses and I was not able to get participants from all campuses.[8] The experience of a participant at the main campus will vary significantly from an experience at a satellite campus. Also, these participants attended community college at various years since the inception of TN Promise in 2015. Participants were not in the same major program together, as well. Creswell and Poth also state that a solid qualitative case study would include interviews, observations, and additional documents. No observations were conducted, and no additional documents were requested nor received. Lastly, case study research is usually conducted during current, real-life cases that are in progress so that researchers can "gather accurate information not lost in time" (p. 97). All of the participants in this study have graduated and are no longer at a community college and not currently receiving TN Promise. Their experiences were described to me from memory, not in progress.

Other methodologies were considered but did not fit the scope and purpose of this study. This is not a comparison study. I am not studying a particular phenomenon. The experiences of multiple students using TN Promise is not a phenomenon. The purpose of conducting face-to-face individual interviews was to simply talk to the participants and hear their stories. As was made apparent during my doctoral program studies, there are not enough studies advanced where we talk to the students, especially one-on-one.

[8] The campus location of each participant was kept confidential on purpose. Many participants were campus workers, participated in campus activities, and graduated in specialized majors that would have given away the identity.

Participant Sampling

This study used purposeful sampling that was built on existing professional contacts with RSCC's Advising Resource Center, faculty, and campus site directors. The goal was to identify ten to fifteen former RSCC students who have graduated from RSCC. I was able to recruit twelve participants total. By using existing contacts and networks from faculty and staff, I ensured that the students interviewed were not current students and do not have the possibility of becoming a future student in the classes that I teach or a past student that I have had. This will protect their anonymity. No given names are used. This population decision was made in an effort to learn about common (and potentially uncommon) experiences. I chose RSCC graduates because they have completed all institutional requirements and have navigated through the TN Promise process. I chose participants that completed RSCC only and not participants from other community colleges. I am a professor and a former student at RSCC. As an invested educator at RSCC, I seek to learn from those that have RSCC experiences from a student point of view. In order to keep this study concise, the experiences of the participants will be shared and particular to that particular location and time frame. I do plan on being at RSCC for the long-term and want to understand students' perceptions to assist in RSCC's future.

Data Collection

This dissertation uses only face-to-face interviews with participants.[9] I chose not to utilize any video conferencing or web-based service providers (such as Zoom or Skype) because I wanted to meet the participants in person. The longest distance I traveled was two hours each way. My hope was that they would be more open to talk to me and so I could read their body language. One participant wore a RSCC shirt from the department they graduated in and said before the interview that those are his favorite shirts to wear.

Upon IRB approval, I contacted the potential participants and informed them in writing the purposes and procedures of this study. Participation was voluntary with the option to drop out at any time if they so desired. The participants were over eighteen years of age and I did not exclude participants based on race and/or social class. I was not looking at gender specifically, but I did have a mix of genders in my sample. I did not offer an incentive to the participants for their time. In determining a location for the interview, I was flexible with the participant's availability and accessibility to meet. I gave each participant the option to first tell me where they felt comfortable meeting with me. If the participant did not have a suggestion, then I offered options. Eleven of the twelve participants were located on a university campus so in the event the participant did not have a suggestion for a meeting place, I offered the university library at the campus

[9] The interviews were conducted during October and November of 2019. I was fortunate to have completed my interviews as well as any follow-up contact with the participants before the COVID-19 pandemic and campuses closed in March 2020. I did not want to interview over Zoom or other video conferencing as many of the participants live in rural areas where internet access would have been difficult.

where they were located. I met with one participant in a coffee shop. I scheduled library study rooms to offer privacy, but still be in a public space.

After initial contact had been established, participants were given an informed consent document over email ahead of the scheduled interview so as to give participants time to review the document and ask questions ahead of time if they needed. Once participants agreed to participate, their approval was documented via signatures on the Informed Consent document that I collected the day of the interview before the interview recording started. (See Appendix B). I also offered a hard copy of the form for the participant's records. None of the participants said they needed a hard copy. Verification of confirmation of approval was also included in the interview and transcribed. Once these forms were collected, the interview began and recording started. The interviews ranged between forty-five to sixty minutes long. I came prepared to the interview with a semi-structured interview guide with set questions (See Appendix C). However, I did ask open-ended questions to allow the conversation with the participant to flow organically. I believe I got a thicker and richer description by having questions prepared but also having flexibility to ask more or get clarification on what the participants meant in detail. This thick and rich description came by learning about each participant's school, family, and home life. In other words, I was able to capture a holistic view of each participant's life during the two years that they were a student at RSCC.

Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. Saturation is defined as the point where the data collection process does not offer any new findings. Before data collection started, I looked to the literature for guidance on sample size for qualitative

interviews. Depending on the qualitative methodology, the same size guidance ranged from five participants to fifty participants (Bernard, 2000; Bertaux, 1981; Creswell, 1998; Mason, 2010; Morse, 1994). This range was too wide and not helpful for this study. Qualitative research cannot have a "one size fits all" approach to research design and saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Ness & Fusch, 2015). I chose to follow the guidance Charmaz (1990, 2006, 2014) provides in qualitative research. Instead of stating specific sample size numbers, Charmaz (2006) explains saturation as "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories" (p. 113). The main driver behind determining sample size for qualitative studies rests on the research study's aim and research question. Qualitative research methods are used to gain a deep understanding of a topic, problem, or group. In-depth interviews do not attempt to generalize the larger population. Reaching the point of saturation in interviews is inductive and emerges during the process of data collection (Dworkin, 2012). Once I saw the same themes and similar stories come through the data, I reached a point where conducting further interviews would not produce more new themes. Charmaz (1990) describes that saturation occurs when evidence is repeated and when categories are completely explained by the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) believe that saturation is a "matter of degree" (p. 136). The longer that the researcher dives into the data and becomes familiar with the data then there is the potential for "the new to emerge" (p. 136). The process is iterative. Data collection can become redundant and counterproductive. If nothing new can be added any more to tell a story, then collecting more data is not helpful. It is not a

lack of data, but instead too much data. For this study, once the twelfth interview was completed, saturation was met. The data did not reveal any new ideas and did not add to the stories that I was trying to capture. Dibley (2011) argues that instead of sample size the focus should be on the thick and rich. My data collection reached the point of rich and thick in the way that is described by Ness & Fusch (2015) as "the easiest way to differentiate between rich and thick data is to think of *rich* as quality and *thick* as quantity. Thick data is a lot of data; rich data is many-layered, intricate, detailed, nuanced, and more. The trick, if you will, is to have both" (p. 1049). The twelve interviews for this study are both rich and thick. The interviews captured are quality in that the interviews tell stories. The interviews are thick in quantity as no new data was revealed after the last interview was completed.

I had the study's interview guide in front of me as I asked each question during the interview. Field notes were taken during the interview, including noting time stamps if participants said something of particular interest. Once the interview concluded, I thanked each participant and gave them a timeline of when to expect a transcript of the interview for their review. Each participant had two weeks to follow up with any revisions and questions. After the interviews I had a long drive home so I listened again to every interview from the recorder to help recap the interview. Additional documentation from participants were not required and none were given to me.

Each interview was digitally recorded using a small recording device that was stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. Each participant was made anonymous and given a pseudonym to which they were referred in both the transcriptions and this

dissertation. Transcription were completed by an online transcription service (www.rev.com) that is IRB approved. Once the transcriptions were completed, the original audio files were destroyed. Transcriptions are saved as Word documents on my password-protected computer and the data identified in coding was thematically analyzed. Signed informed consent documents and research data was stored in locked cabinets in my home office.

The participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts. Transcripts were electronically mailed to each participant for their review. In this way, participants gave me a chance to clarify anything that was said and to make sure that the transcripts reflect what they wanted to say. I also got clarification to any remaining questions I had from relistening to the interviews on my drive home from the interviews and from completing and reviewing my researcher memos.

Institutional Review Board Approval and Recruitment

Upon IRB approval through the University of Tennessee (See Appendix A) I began contacting my colleagues to recruit participants.[10] No participants recruited had been former students of mine in either advising, declared major, or in the classes that I taught.[11] I felt that asking my colleagues for recruiting participants would be helpful and supplied recruiters with a recruitment letter (See Appendix E). These colleagues had established a rapport with graduates and kept in contact with them after graduation. I also

[10] The participants are graduates of RSCC and are no longer enrolled in the institution, therefore an IRB application through RSCC was not required.
[11] It should be noted that one participant (Catherine) did not major in education while at RSCC, which I teach, but she did disclose after the interview that she is interested in education and may be contacting me in the future to come back to school for education.

felt the graduates would more likely speak to me if someone they trusted recruited them. The colleagues that helped recruit were faculty, advisors in the advising center, and campus site directors. Because my colleagues had established relationships with graduates, recruiting participants for this study came rather quickly. I was able to get twelve participants contacted, interviewed, and followed up within a two-month timeframe. I decided not to use a formal social media announcement or a campus-wide email distribution to recruit participants. I did not think social media would produce many results and most graduates do not check their school email. All participants were contacted over text message or Facebook messenger. The recruiters had the phone numbers of all the participants and obtained the potential participant's permission, either over text message or verbally, to share their contact information with me.

Unexpected recruitment assistance came from the participants themselves. Half of the twelve participants were recruited by previous study participants. The student recruiters told me that they felt very strongly about the research topic and that they wanted to help me. Many of the students were friends with each other outside of school or were involved in the same campus activities. I was concerned that these student recruiters would speak about the interview to other recruited participants. I did not want the participants to be influenced by the recruiter's discussion and responses of the interview. However, after interviewing the participants recruited by students, I determined that their responses were still valuable and worth including. Many of their answers were similar to other participants, but they also included some surprising insights and shared different experiences.

Reflexivity

Being the interpreter of the interviews, responsibility of the stories shared falls on me. Upon arriving home from each interview, I documented my thoughts and impressions in analytic memos. While writing memos, I described the thoughts I had during and particularly after the interview. This allowed me to remember the key insights and feelings that I had before, during, and after the interviews. I was also able to address my own biases that I may have had during the interview. Memos provided valuable insight in the preliminary data analysis process.

I am a faculty member interviewing graduates from the institution where I teach. All of the research participants knew that I worked at RSCC, but I clarified that this study was for my dissertation and not for RSCC research purposes. I made it clear that if the participants were to use names of past or current RSCC employees that anonymity would be protected, even if they had family members at the institution and even if their statements were positive. I recognize that I came to the interview with certain biases as a faculty member. I also tried to maintain professionalism when the participants discussed negative experiences regarding other faculty members. The interview transcripts do not include any names of employees and I did not even include any pseudonyms for employees. I let each participant know that I was not going to share with the person who recruited them for the study what they said or if I even met with them. I left it up to the participant to share if they were interviewed. I did not knowingly encounter any conflict of interest or ethical dilemmas during my research. Some of the participant recruiters

asked how the interview went or if I spoke to the recruited graduate to participate. In response I said I could not answer either way.

Process of Analysis

Coding

The interview transcripts were loaded into *NVivo* and several cycles of descriptive coding took place. Saldaña (2009) writes that "a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). A code is meant to symbolize the data according to how the researcher interprets or "translates" the data (Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2014, p. 13). *NVivo* codes "help preserve participants; meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 109). I organized the data by looking for patterns and themes.

Analysis

Once the data was coded, I reviewed and organized codes into categories using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes. In this way I took repeated words, similar phrases, and unique answers and tied these to the research questions to create themes. Creswell (2018) describes themes (also called categories) as "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186). Once the themes were created, I then interpreted meanings and representations of the participant experience.

Validity, Generalizability, and Limitations

Qualitative work is interpretative. Meanings are socially constructed and often situated within a particular place and at a particular time. Questions arise in qualitative research on validity. I employ validation strategies outlined from Creswell and Poth (2018) by clarifying my researcher bias and engaging in reflexivity, seeking participant feedback by reviewing their transcripts, and generating thick, rich descriptions.

These findings are not an attempt to generalize and group all TN Promise recipients together in that they all experience community college the same way. Instead, the findings attempt to bridge common experiences while maintaining the uniqueness that each participant brings to the study. I try to stay true to the goal of providing "thick, rich descriptions" that is essential for qualitative work (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described my theoretical orientation and defended the use of qualitative interviews for my study. I discussed the research design, analysis process, and how I maintained trustworthiness. Looking forward to chapter four, I will let the data dominate. I will start by reviewing the research questions, then describe the background of the participants in this study. I will then discuss an overview of the findings and the themes that were found.

CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

As described in chapter one, the purpose of this study is to research and identify socio-cultural attributes of TN Promise students that enable them to navigate their community college learning experience. My research questions are:

1. What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free?
2. What are students' perceptions of their learning experience?
3. How do students balance school, work, and family commitments?
4. Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

In this chapter, I present the findings of this study as it relates to the research questions above. I start with providing background to the twelve participants in this study. I then describe the key thematic categories and subcategories as found in the data.

These categories and themes come from the interviews and not from my personal views on free community college. I try to steer away from views that stem from my role as a faculty member and community college graduate. The task to stay as objective as possible and listen instead of sharing my story was difficult. In working with students in my role as faculty, I try to share pieces of my life so that students can relate to me and know that I have "been there, done that". But as a researcher and interviewer, I realize that this work is about the participants' stories, not my personal narrative. Essentially, I had to learn to stop talking, be quiet, and listen carefully. In the transcripts of the

interviews, any mention of my background as faculty and RSCC graduate is an attempt to establish rapport with the participants.

To provide a better picture of the participants for this study, I start with the participant backgrounds. Not only did I want to establish rapport, but I also wanted to see if their backgrounds had any influence on their perceptions and values of their experiences. As I interviewed the graduates, I felt a range of emotions. While hearing their stories about resilience and triumph during their college experience, I could not help but feel proud to work for an institution that has had a positive impact on them. I also felt optimism about where the state of higher education is going. I also heard experiences of hardship, sadness, and loss. At those moments I did not feel like a researcher, but more like an intruder. I was listening to these personal experiences where the participants described pain and vulnerability, knowing that it was difficult for many of these stories to be shared with me. But I learned that these graduates are brave and optimistic.

Participant Backgrounds[12]

This section provides understanding of the participant's background. I attempt to provide rich descriptions of their experiences while at RSCC. These backgrounds are also an attempt to understand their position in an educational setting. All of these students completed an associate of science (A.S.) degree in a particular field. All A.S. degrees are transferrable degrees to a university program if the graduate chooses to transfer and continue their education at a university. All names given are pseudonyms. After each

[12] The participant backgrounds are discussed in the order the interviews were conducted. All initial contacts, interviews, and the participant checking in and review of interview transcripts were completed within a month and a half timeframe.

interview was completed, I offered each participant the chance to choose their own pseudonym or I would choose for them. None of the participants chose their own pseudonym and all expressed verbally that I could choose on their behalf. Keeping participant information anonymous is essential. This study will be available to my colleagues as well my college's administration. I did not want the possibility of anyone outside the study to be able to connect the information learned from the interviews to a particular former student. No names of college faculty, personnel, or administration is given at any time. Instead, I use generic job titles if a college employee was named during the interview.

An important point when reviewing the participant backgrounds is that the participants are all White. Given the time frame to complete the dissertation as well as accepting any potential participant that was willing to speak with me, I did not ask specifically for diversity in terms of race and ethnicity. This study is not framed using a critical race theory lens, but rather in terms of social class. The overall ethnic and racial makeup of RSCC is mostly White. As of fall 2019 semester, there were 5166 White students enrolled compared to 223 Hispanic students, 13 Alaskan/Indian students, 144 Black students, 6 Pacific Islander students, and 142 multiracial students. In terms of gender as of fall 2019 semester, there were 1973 males compared to 3888 females enrolled at RSCC ("RSCC Institutional Effectiveness & Research", n.d.).

Table 1: Tennessee Promise Participant Attributes

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	RSCC Major	Post RSCC	Recruitment Mode	Interview Location
Reagan	Female	General Studies	University student	Friend of the researcher	Researcher work office
Jeremy	Male	Business/General Studies	University student	Referral from Reagan	Campus conference room
Catherine	Female	Business Administration	Employed	RSCC faculty referral	Coffee shop
Aaron	Male	Electrical Engineering	University student	RSCC employee referral	Campus library room
Stella	Female	Anthropology	University student	RSCC faculty referral	Researcher work office
Nancy	Female	Pre-Allied Health	University student	Referral from Aaron	Campus conference room
Benjamin	Male	Fine Arts	University student	RSCC faculty referral	Campus library room
David	Male	General Studies	Online university student	RSCC faculty referral	Campus conference room
Tausha	Female	Agriculture	University student	RSCC employee referral	Campus library commons
Jodi	Female	General Studies	University student	RSCC faculty referral	Campus library room
Diana	Female	Political Science	University student	RSCC faculty referral	Campus conference room
Allison	Female	Nursing	Nurse/ online university student	RSCC faculty referral	Campus student lounge

Reagan

Reagan is a White female who graduated from RSCC with an A.S. in Psychology. She was an active member in the Phi Theta Kappa Honors Society Chapter. While at RSCC she did not have employment but stayed at home to save money and focus on her studies. She lived at home with her father, mother, and two younger siblings. She describes herself shy, studious, a perfectionist and "pretty persistent." When she first started RSCC she felt intimidated, but she "got over it". When she needed help, she did not hesitate to ask questions and oftentimes went to her professors to receive assistance, especially for math. She rarely missed class, and if she did, it was for an honors convention or honors meeting. For fun she enjoyed working on honors projects, crafts, and music. She is currently in her senior year at a university majoring in psychology. She is working with a faculty member on a research project and she is excited about it! Her future plans are to get a master's degree in school psychology.

Jeremy

Jeremy is a White male from a small "close-knit" rural town. Church and being close to family and community is important for him. He originally planned on attending a large university straight out of high school, but Jeremy had a family member employed with RSCC that convinced him to attend RSCC instead. He added that he "didn't want to get lost in the shuffle" of attending a large university. He graduated RSCC with an A.S. in Business Administration. While a full-time student he worked as a part-time RSCC employee, peer mentor under a grant program, and a Learning Center tutor for biology, chemistry, algebra, and statistics. He also participated in the RSCC student government

organization, study abroad, and Phi Theta Kappa honors society. He is currently a student at a four-year university and majoring in environmental biology.

Catherine

Catherine is the only participant that is not currently enrolled in a university program. She is a White female from a small town that is over an hour away from the campus she attended. She went to church with a RSCC employee who convinced her to attend RSCC instead of the community college that is closest to her (and where she also completed dual enrollment classes while in high school).[13] She graduated with an A.S. in Business Administration. She started out in radiology but changed her major to business since she did not know what she wanted to do for a career. Her parents did not graduate from college, but her older brother did. During her time at RSCC she did not have any employment. Church and family are important for Catherine. She is currently a Sunday School teacher at her church, where her father is the pastor, and she works as a secretary for a local business.

Aaron

Aaron is a White male who graduated in 2019 with an A.S. in Electrical Engineering. He was a temporary RSCC employee in the financial aid office and is very familiar with the processes and qualifications of all types of financial aid. Aaron also was in the honors society and for a time held a position as an officer. While attending RSCC he lived with his mom and his dad. He describes himself as “extremely studious”, but

[13] Dual enrollment is a program where high school students take college level coursework and earn college credit and high school credit at the same time.

usually studies for classes the night before an assignment is due and rarely studies on weekends. Being a good student “came to me pretty easily. It’s not something that I had to really work too hard at.” He enjoys UT football and basketball games, playing basketball, and Netflix. He is currently attending a large public university working towards a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering, specifically in power and energy. His future plans include internships at national laboratories and potentially a master’s degree.

Stella

Stella is a White female who graduated from RSCC with an A. S. in Anthropology. She is a first-generation college student from a small, rural town who did not want to leave home right after high school. When determining where to attend college, Stella completed a “cost analysis” and determined a community college is better financially. During her program, she was employed for full time hours in customer service jobs and a caregiver. Stella opted for RSCC because she had a family friend recommend it over a sister community college that is significantly closer to her home. She also liked that RSCC was friendly when she asked questions. She is currently at a small liberal arts college majoring in archaeology and psychology. She chose the college because there is an onsite field school for archaeology. One of the most enjoyable RSCC experiences for her was participating in the Southwest Field Trip, a 3-week camping and hiking excursion visiting national parks in the desert southwest. The trip “was some of the most, like, mind blowing, greatest experience in my life and it helped kind of like solidify, yeah, I’m doing this for the rest of my life.”

Nancy

Nancy is a White female who graduated from RSCC with an A. S. in Pre-Allied Health. She chose that major because initially she was going to pharmacy school but changed her mind. She is currently at a university majoring in chemistry. She is from a small, rural town and felt that RSCC was the best fit for her after high school. Her parents both have a college education and her older brother is currently a graduate student. She decided to attend RSCC because she "can get a good degree for free tuition" and she was "not ready" to leave her home and family. She valued the time to stay home during that time because she currently lives alone and gets scared sometimes. She considers herself a "diligent" student and a "hard worker" with some "OCD and perfectionist" tendencies. During her first year she did not have paid employment, but after a visit to the Learning Center for a class, she decided to get a job as a tutor during her second year. She was also involved with the Baptist Collegiate Ministry and Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society.

Benjamin

Benjamin is a White male who graduated from RSCC with an Associate of Fine Arts degree. His hometown is a small, rural community where he describes that not a lot of opportunities for the arts and music was given to him. A self-described musician, he is a first-generation student who lived with his father and stepfamily while at RSCC. He started RSCC as a fast food employee, but after a semester became employed as a student worker in the campus theatre as well as the local theatre in which RSCC has a partnership. During his last year, he was nominated and hired as a peer mentor (his first "office job") through a grant program in which he helped other students navigate the

educational process. He did “not know how to describe“ himself as a student, but later described himself as “not a bad student”. He was not focused on getting that 4.0 GPA, but he cared about “getting a grasp” of what he was doing and “knowing” what he was doing. He chose RSCC because it was convenient, but also because he did not feel comfortable going to a university for music right away. RSCC was a “stepping stone” for him. He also participated in the study abroad course to Europe with the music and vocal professors. He is currently a junior at a regional university majoring in vocal education. His goal is to become a vocal education teacher, but not sure what grade level yet.

David

David is a first-generation college graduate from a tiny “community just up the road” from where he attended RSCC. He graduated with an A.S. General Studies. While at RSCC he was employed at the local movie theater part time and a substitute teacher when he could. He is currently a teacher’s aide in a special education classroom and works at the movie theater. He is also working on an online bachelor’s program in dual teaching licensure in elementary education and special education so that he can become a special education teacher where his “heart is.” While at RSCC he lived at home with his parents and siblings. They also live next door to his grandparents that he is very close to. He loves “leaving church and just riding over the mountains and that is my peace time.” Church is important to him and says that he is “a praying person” and that he “wants to be guided” on where his life should go.

Tausha

Tausha is a White female from a small rural town where she attended one of the smaller RSCC campuses. She graduated with an A.S. in Agriculture because she grew up in agriculture" her "whole life". She lived at home with her parents and two younger sisters. She did not have continuous employment while a student, but she did do odd jobs with her father. She said she did not work because "my parents are really good about… understanding that I want to put my education first. So they're really good about letting me focus more on it than having to focus on a set job and try to work all of that into the same schedule." She is currently at a four-year university going into agriculture management (changing from agriculture education). Because her university is not far from her home, she frequently visits her family.

Jodi

Jodi is a White female who grew up on a farm outside a small rural town. She is a first-generation college student. She lived at home with her parents and older sister. She graduated from RSCC with an A.S. in General Studies with a 4.0 GPA. During her first year at RSCC she worked in local shoe and pet stores, then in her second year worked part-time in a hardware store adding that "I've paid all my bills since I was 16." She was part of the work study program where she helped the campus staff with administrative tasks. She was also active in the Phi Theta Kappa honors society and was a peer mentor. She is currently at a large four-year university working on her bachelor's degree in social work and working full-time at a hardware store.

Diana

Diana is a first-generation student, White female from a small rural community where she lived with her parents and younger brother (all of whom she is very close to). She graduated with an A.S. in Political Science. She participated in Phi Theta Kappa (and still does when she can), student government organization, even making the All-State Academic team. She was a peer mentor and a paid work study where she helped with administrative tasks on campus. A dedicated student, Diana said that one time she was at Universal Studios and Disney World "filling out discussion posts while I was waiting in line." She is currently at a four-year university several hours away majoring in political science with a minor in international relations and history. Eventually she would like to get her master's degree in education and possibility get graduate school hours in the social sciences so she can teach at a community college.

Allison

Allison is the only RSCC graduate in this study from the nursing program. She is a White female, first-generation college student from a small rural town where she lived with her mother and two older sisters and one younger sister. She held employment at a fast food restaurant during her first year, then during her second year and third year in the nursing program worked in assisted living and hospitals. She was also involved in the Phi Theta Kappa honors program and the Baptist Collegiate Ministry, where she enjoyed the weekly meals provided to students. Allison is very proud of her nursing and RSCC accomplishments and adds that she is "balancing a million things." She is currently an Intensive Care Unit nurse and is working on her online bachelor's degree in nursing.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study aimed to learn how community college graduates value their education given that it is tuition free. Interview data was transcribed by a transcription service using the website www.rev.com.[14] I reviewed the transcripts and listened to the interviews again while checking the transcripts again for accuracy. The codes identified were grouped into broad categories: Family, Opportunities, Community, Self-Learning, and Financial Awareness.

In the Family category, the themes identified were: taking strain off family, staying home, and felt like home. In the Opportunities category, the following themes were identified: working with faculty, new experiences, and career networking. In the Community category, identified themes were: serving others, growing together, employee referrals. In the Self-Learning category, the themes included: lifelong learning, learning to learn, and "stepping stone". In the Financial Awareness category, the key themes were: gratitude, saving money, and free tuition (see Table 2). I address below the categories and themes in the order in which they impacted the student experience.

[14] The IRB application was approved prior to my decision to use www.rev.com. To verify that this service aligned with IRB guidelines and requirements for protecting identity, confidentiality, and encryption I consulted the IRB office. The IRB office confirmed this service is approved to use without having to update my IRB application.

Table 2: Categories and Themes

Family	**Opportunities**	**Community**	**Self-Learning**	**Financial Awareness**
Take strain off the family	Working with faculty	Serving others	Lifelong learning	Gratitude
Staying home	New experiences	Growing together	Learning to learn	Saving money
Felt like home	Career networking	Faculty/staff recommendations	"Stepping stone"	Free tuition

Family

This section discusses how participants valued being close to family or connected to family while in college. Family included immediate and extended family as well as the community college environment feeling like a version of extended family. All of the participants described how family, in one way or another, was considered during their experience. The themes contained this section include taking strain off family, staying home, and felt like home.

Taking strain off the family. Many participants describe how their families, particularly their parents, benefitted from TN Promise. Diana says:

"I feel like it did take the strain off my parents because even though I did have the college fund, stuff does happen… You're going to have overages eventually. It did help because that's $2,000 I wouldn't have had otherwise if it hadn't been for TN Promise that would've had to come out of my fund to be used here. So it did help financially, with my

parents, in the end. It didn't look like a lot at the time, but now that I'm at a university and I'm gonna be there for two years, it's a lot."

In asking Jodi how TN Promise helped her family, this is what she describes: "I think it's helped my family view themselves as like people that are smart. Like, because like before my mom and my dad always like kinda make like self-deprecating jokes of like, 'Oh we're just, you know, dumb hicks or whatever.' But once their daughter went and got a degree, they were like, you know, maybe, you know, if she turned out this well maybe we had a part to play in that. So I think it definitely helps them feel better about themselves and the way that they raise both me and my sister… So like I think without that they would've been like 'Man, we couldn't even send both daughters off to college.'' She continues on that her parents brag about where she is attending university now.

Stella says that TN Promise took "a huge weight off of their shoulders and it's going to help my sister when she eventually goes." Without TN Promise, Stella described the alternative, which is "I would have started taking out student loans way quicker and I honestly don't know if my sister would end up going, but we probably would've picked between the two of us on which one of us was going."

Staying home. All but one of the participants lives in a home with at least one sibling (younger and older siblings). The desire to stay home stems from two reasons: participants want to be with their siblings and/or parents longer and it is cost effective to live at home and not pay rent and utility bills. Reagan says "it was close to home so I could stay there." She adds that "I could stay close to home… while I tried to figure out a

little bit more of what I wanted in a major later." Jeremy describes laughingly how his mother convinced him to stay home and attend community college:

"So, she had quite a bit community college experience and I think she, you know, steering me that way because she knew that like… she wasn't ready for me to leave. So, she was like, keep me for a little bit longer."

Nancy and Stella expressed safety concerns as a reason to stay home. Nancy says:

"I really value that time because that I was able to live at home, and I didn't have to worry about like where I was living or my safety whenever I got home. Like 'cause at my apartment, I have to walk in the dark to get to my building. So I didn't have to worry about that. Um, like I knew I had a roof over my head. I had people… my parents."

Felt like home. Allison explains how the Baptist Collegiate Ministry near campus positively impacted her experience:

"So all of us nursing students would go over there and eat together. So we have like a social interaction over there together, which is always fun…So everybody would carpool over there, and hang out, and talk, and we learned about Jesus… And they always had activities… But I just think they are good at plugging you in and getting you feel like you're a part of the family there… like you've grown up with them or something."

Opportunities

The next category found in all participant's stories is Opportunities. Participants found value in opportunities that the college experience afforded them. The themes within this section are working with faculty, new experiences, and career networking.

Working with faculty. All participants shared stories and experiences of working with faculty. All of them also value the connection and learning that comes from faculty. Jodi says:

"If it wasn't like for all the great professors, like I would not have liked college as much as I did 'cause that was like the first time I ever felt like smart before 'cause I didn't feel that in high school from like my teachers or principals, but then when I got to college I was like 'you know, maybe, maybe I do have something in this head and mind, like maybe I'm not all that empty.'"

New experiences. Benjamin says "college is what you make of it. The opportunities that you're given can give you anything. It can give you access to helping develop your own community. It can give you access to getting a better job, um, learning new skills that are more important in life, um, anything. So, just go in and treat college like it's, you know, high school or just another job, you know, it was just the absolute easiest way to fail college."

Career networking. Participants valued the opportunity to complete service hours or internships in their intended career fields. In this way, participants learned more about their field and were able to see the various types of jobs within their field. Stella described how her faculty advisor "pushes" her "to meet everybody and constantly" and "it was everybody here kind of pushed you to meet everybody." Stella also connected with an archaeology volunteer position through her faculty advisor.

Community

This theme focuses on how participants valued community during their college experience. TN Promise requires eight hours of service per semester. Students choose where to complete service hours and report their completion of service hours to the college. Failure to complete this requirement every semester results in loss of TN Promise funds. All participants felt positively about the service and the impact they felt it serves to others. It makes sense that at a community college, students value the connections that come from a community setting. The subthemes found within this section are serving others, growing together, and faculty/staff recommendations.

Serving others. Jeremy said he had "strong feelings" about this experience. He said that he knew many students who would procrastinate completing their hours the weekend before the hours are due. He felt that "if there is a stronger correlation between volunteering and receiving the scholarship, I think that there would be, like, more appreciation." When I asked him if eight hours of service per semester are enough he replied "I think that that if it was increased to the point of where you kind of have to do it more regularly where you would think about the volunteering , I think it would kind of make you appreciate it a little bit more." He laughed and added "I don't know what that number should be… I hate raising it, but it just kind of seems like it's a good deal."

Benjamin says that "the purpose of education to me is just so that you can be more of a grounded individual in society, in general, and just kind of contribute as opposed to experience and honestly do both at the same time." He adds that "you're not just going through and being given, you know, everything in life or you're being given

things, but you are also giving out any equal measure. You're benefitting other people's lives because of, you know, the knowledge of things that you've gained through what you've been taught."

Growing together. Many participants felt that the community college setting allowed students to feel like they were "in this together." Tausha describes her experience at RSCC as "amazing". Her biggest takeaway was that "the people that was there that was just willing to help you. It was like, you was family… and everybody was just really willing to help and that's just really what I loved about it."

Faculty/Staff Recommendations. Many participants came to community college on the recommendation of an employee of the college through church or friends of their families. Two of the participants live in counties where there is another community college other than RSCC but chose RSCC based on recommendation from a RSCC employee. Stella visited another community college closer to her home, but felt that "they were so just, they didn't care about you and you could see it and how they reacted to you." A family friend who is RSCC faculty recommend she try RSCC. Catherine took dual enrollment classes in high school at another community college, but a friend through church suggested she try RSCC.

Self-Learning

This section discusses what participants feel is the purpose of education for them and their experience. The themes in this section include lifelong learning, learning to learn, "stepping stone". All participants felt that the purpose of education was in some

fashion about their own personal growth and learning. No participant described education's purpose as getting a job or other job-related outcome.

Lifelong learning. Many participants felt that learning does not stop in college. A degree and starting a career is only a catalyst to continue to learn and cultivate curiosity. David said that education is "to me it's to better yourself… you can always learn something."

Learning to learn. Aaron described that before coming to college he always got straight A grades. Then when he came to RSCC his "first semester kind of gave like a false sense of reality". He added that "it was a good thing to have a wake-up call like that and my second semester and not wait 'til I got to (current university) and then have to deal with 'oh, no, now I've got a C, what do I do?'" Later in the interview, Aaron said that the purpose of education is to "help you to understand that to learn because you have to take all the classes you have to take in, like understanding how to learn academically… to encourage learning. Just be like a learner."

"Stepping stone". Some participants describe education as being a time to build a foundation in their lives to build upon for the future. This is a common phrase from participants. They worry about transitioning in two areas: transitioning from high school to college and transitioning from living at home and being dependent on parents to living independently and making their own life choices. Jeremy says:

"I just, I really, the more and more I thought about it, it was like, well, do I want to go and do okay at a university of do I want to go and excel here, where it's a smaller

environment. It's a, you know, kind of a good stepping stone from being in such a small high school."

Jodi states:

"I really see education as like… we take care of our bodies. We are like, we're used to anyway, we are used to… we eat right, and we go exercise when we work these jobs. But it's like when, with education, we're taking care of our minds as well as our bodies… So I think that's really what education does is like, even if you're not gonna use it for a job and you're not gonna use your degree for any specific purpose, like you have it and it's yours. I do have this intellectual ability. I do have a set of skills or whatever. I think it really just gives people like a foundation to fall back on."

Nancy says that her experience was "an easier transition to become an adult" and that "you're getting a taste of college life, but you're not fully there, which is a good thing for some students. Like I realize I was not ready to go to a four year like at all."

Benjamin says that education is about "bettering yourself. You know, you can always learn something… I'm still learning. I need to better myself and how to handle these meltdowns (talking about his current job), you know, how to redirect, how to, you know, even the paperwork. You know, education is about bettering yourself, learning more."

Financial Awareness

This category discusses how all participants expressed gratitude for their experiences. The themes included are gratitude, saving money, and free tuition. After

analyzing the context of how the financial aspects of college were being described, I realized that the participants often talked about money and gratitude together.

Gratitude. Every participant expressed gratitude in some fashion, using terms like “grateful”, “a blessing”, or “I’m so appreciative.” Benjamin says that he “would most likely be in student debt right now, avoidably student debt” without TN Promise. He adds that “coming out with a fifth of what most people do and it’s just gonna be a blessing in itself.”

Saving money. All but one participant knew that they were going to transfer to a university and continue towards a bachelor’s degree. The one participant who is working full time is still considering going to a university, especially since she has no student loan debt. Diana offers “it’s what you make of it. If you have the money, save it.” Aaron said that during community college “make that the time that you save money up if you in any way can.” Stella said that she “did a cost analysis between a two year and a four year (college program)” and “decided that that was just not feasible.”

Free tuition. For most participants, money and finances are the driving motivators for attending community college. All but one participant decided to continue to a four-year university. While planning ahead for the cost of future tuition, including for a future bachelor’s degree and in some cases a future master’s degree, participants feel that they can still get the education they desire and transfer into their program of choice at a university with little to no financial aid debt. Reagan says:

"So I, after high school, decided to come here mostly for Tennessee Promise and because I didn't know, um, what I wanted to major in exactly when I was gonna go to four years."

Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the rich stories that I learned from the interviews. I have described the backgrounds of twelve RSCC graduates who received TN Promise. I have also detailed the categories and themes with how the participants value their educational experience given that it is a state-supported tuition program. The participants describe a positive experience in which they are grateful to have the opportunity to get an education and graduate debt free. While the free tuition may not have been the driving factor to attend community college in the first place, it certainly had an impact on decision making. While some participants did say that they came to community college "because it's free", the majority of the participants hold other attributes at higher value than money. Family, opportunities, community, learning about self, and financial awareness shined through the data as values these twelve graduates have about their college experience.

In chapter five, I provide further analysis of the study's findings. I also attempt to tie in the findings to the bigger research picture as described in chapters one and two. I discuss how the findings relate to cultural studies and adult learning. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of the study and what the future may hold to continue this research work.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter discusses the experiences of Roane State Community College (RSCC) graduates who received Tennessee (TN) Promise. I begin with an overview and research questions and report my findings. I outline and explain the themes shown through the data, which are Family, Opportunities, Community, Self-Learning, and Financial Awareness. I then connect those themes to the literature as well as to cultural studies and community college research. I discuss my findings and what I perceive to be pertinent implications of those findings. I then reflect on my role as the researcher and my connection with the participants in this study. The limitations are discussed and recommendations are addressed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of future considerations and a summary of the study.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to research and identify socio-cultural attributes of TN Promise students that enable them to navigate their community college learning experience. The research questions were:

1. What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free?
2. What are students' perceptions of their learning experience?
3. How do students balance school, work, and family commitments?
4. Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

TN Promise is a tuition-free community college scholarship program for recent high school graduates.

Findings

In this section, I am going to start by answering each research question. Each question will be answered by staying true to the data. Next, I will move to discussing insights and interpretations relating to each of the five themes found within the data. I then will discuss how many of the themes intertwine with each other. This section will close with final thoughts on the results.

The first research question sought to discover what value TN Promise students place in their education given that it is tuition free. Upon completion of the data analysis, I put the themes and subthemes color coded on to a dry erase whiteboard to get an overview of the five values that shown brightly through the data. I wanted to make sure that the overview represented the participant sample. As I stood over the board, I realized that these students are incredibly "with it" and cannot be generalized the way that young students are often characterized in mass media and in many faculty trainings. Millennials and Generation Z students are often characterized as selfish, entitled, and lazy. When I look at the five values listed, only one of the values, Self-Learning, focused solely on them. The other four values show that these graduates are anything but selfish, entitled, and lazy.

The second question sought to learn about participant's perception on their learning experience. All participants described their learning experiences as mostly positive. There were instances of barriers and trials, but the participants did not dwell on

the negative. Maybe they did not want to speak negatively because they all knew I worked at the college. Participants were candid about events that were negative. I did not dive into personal traumatic experiences that happened during their community college experience, but there were implications that I will discuss later in the chapter. Participants felt that they had a purpose in earning a degree.

While most participants did not feel that community college felt like "extended high school" or the "13th grade", this sentiment did come up across a couple of interviews. Jodi said that students did not call RSCC the 13th grade, but some faculty at her satellite campus expressed this view. Jodi recalled one professor telling her class that "this place is notoriously the 13th grade." It was not until she started attending classes at a larger campus that she felt her professors acted like community college was not 13th grade. For some participants, there were certain classes where it felt like the 13th grade because the content was taught in high school and the course felt like a review. But the overall experience was an actual college experience.

The third question attempted to learn about how participants prioritize their school, work, and family commitments. How did they balance it all? The majority of the participants went to school, had at least part-time employment, and contributed to their home and families. They helped with younger siblings and several helped their parents with household tasks and family businesses. Many also were involved in the honor's society and campus activities. It would be difficult for anyone to balance all these activities. It seems that the more engaged in activities they were the better they were able to manage their time to fulfill all their duties, which is a finding supported in the research.

The participants who did not include campus activities told me they wished they had been more involved. I take this as meaning they would have made the time to include extra activities or clubs because it is meaningful and relevant to their experience. They see the value in involvement now that they look back on it.

I did not see from the data that there was a hierarchy in which aspect was most important. While Family was a major theme found in the data, that is not to say that family always took priority over school and work. It greatly depended on what was needed immediately or if there was a pressing deadline. Only two participants were indifferent about being close to family during community college, but that was not to suggest they did not value family time. I did not have any participant explicitly tell me that they were adamant about leaving home immediately after high school.

The final research question sought to learn where education fell in their list of commitments. At first this question appeared to be related to the third research question, however, I am going to argue that this question deserves its own response. All participants described sacrifices made in order to complete their degree. Many participants had examples of missing out time spent with friends or partners. Many missed sibling ball games. Participants were fully committed to completing their degree even with sacrifices. Their sacrifices now will have greater rewards later. Their identity was tied to being a college student.

Family

It was no surprise to me that the participants valued family in one form or another. Making a transition from high school to college is a big step for most students. Even

before the interviews, I recognized that many students go to community college to stay closer to family.

What did surprise me was how much families experienced emotionally from the participants earning a college degree. It is common (and no surprise to me) for parents to be proud of their child when they earn a degree. But many participants indicated that because they earned a degree, their parents and some siblings got the motivation to go to college as well, participating in either TN Promise or TN Reconnect. Some participant parents got a confidence boost in their own abilities to raise a child who can complete college, despite living in poverty and in rural communities.

These participants were also aware of the strain that college attendance can be for families, especially financially. Several participants considered going straight to a university from high school, but when the time came to make a final decision, most participants chose community college to help the family. TN Promise provided the opportunity for participants to stay home with family, particularly with siblings. Only one participant shared that he did not consider family as part of his decision to go to community college.

Even though family was overwhelmingly cited as the main source of support, family was also cited most frequently as a barrier. Many participants described how family members would try to talk to them during study time or ask them to pick up younger siblings from school and activities during scheduled class time. It did not matter if the family members had a college education and understood that study and class times were important for the student's success. Metheny and Mcwhirter (2013) found that

social/family status and family support both have an impact on college and career path choices and success. Family as both support and barrier shows how central and valuable family is to students in general.

Many of the participants described experiences where certain family members changed their behaviors towards the participant once they earned a degree. Allison, for example, described how her mother and younger sisters and brother all changed their attitude towards her upon Allison's employment as a nurse. She described how her family would make comments about her acting like she was "better than them now that she has a good job". The family started asking Allison to pay for more household items and bills. When I asked Allison why they changed their attitude towards her, she attributed it to "jealousy". Allison also shared that her family believes she can still just take off work and go on a vacation or take care of younger siblings at any time and at the last minute. When Allison explained to her family that she cannot take off work all the time and cannot call in often, her family attributes Allison as "stuck up" and not wanting to help.

This example demonstrates a power differential within the family unit. Now that Allison is the only one in her immediate family that has a degree and a good paying job, she is expected to contribute financially more. The experiences Allison described of jealousy and not understanding her situation demonstrates the tension that having a college education can create in a family dynamic. Allison is supportive of her siblings to go to college, even helping a sister in her pursuit to become a nurse. But when her sister does not make the grades nursing programs requires and Allison gives feedback on the grades, her sister gets defensive.

David also described generational differences in education. A college education was not an option for David's grandfather. David's dad attempted to earn a university degree by working nightshift, but eventually had to drop out. His grandfather was a coalminer and his father worked in construction. He shared a story of how hard his father had to work physically and encouraged David to earn a degree so that he did not have to hurt his physical body like he had saying that "you won't have to come home like me". David also described how he did not want to feel like he had to do a laborious type of employment due to not being able to get a degree. Physical freedom was his reward for getting a college education. When David felt like quitting college at times, he reminded himself that "look at my dad and my grandpa, you know, when I get to be 65, 70, I still wanna be able to enjoy my life." He added that "they still work harder than I probably ever worked." As I listened to his story, I could sense a tone of sadness from David. Even with his feelings of accomplishment and success in his own educational endeavors, David felt the generational pain of seeing the strenuous work and its effects on his father and grandfather.

Jodi and Stella both explained that TN Promise allowed both their sisters and them to go to college. Their parents did not have to decide between which siblings were more worthy of a college education. It was not *either one or the other* that had the opportunity to go to college. The male participants, instead, described how they could attend college *as well as* their siblings. Even in our current higher educational structure families often still must choose which child can go to college.

The context of the interviews looked at how participants interacted in their current family dynamics. No questions were asked about future families. The potential of TN Promise helping their future families was not brought up. None of the participants are married, but a few were in relationships. None of the participants had children. Given that TN Promise helped significantly in their present family dynamic financially, I can only assume that their future families will benefit from less financial college debt and an outlook of employability. A follow up study of participants in the future could address this assumption.

An interesting outlier that falls under the Family category that I did not include in my findings was that two female participants revealed safety as a concern. They felt that staying home with family and not living in the dorms was their best option so that they did not live with strangers in dorms or live alone in an apartment. One participant indicated that she had gone through traumatic experiences previously and felt being closer to family was her best option for her mental health.[15]

Opportunities

I asked each participant what they would have done differently if they were to go through college again. All the participants said that they would have been more involved in campus life. This included campus clubs, organizations, special events, and gaining more experience in their intended career path. Patricia Cross's (1985) work explains that community college should include services to individuals and organizations. Lectures,

[15] This study's interview guide did not have any questions about traumatic experiences. The participant indicated on her own that she had gone through tough personal issues. I chose not to ask further questions on that particular because it is not relevant to the study's research questions.

seminars, concerts, plays and other activities are all part of a college experience. It also builds a collegial community and comradery amongst the larger community.

It was surprising to learn how much the participants valued working and collaborating with faculty, especially faculty teaching their major classes (business, anthropology, etc.). As a revealed bias of mine, I did not think that many students wanted to work more with faculty. I realized that I, as faculty, did not provide any opportunities for them to collaborate with me. Instead, the learning opportunities came *from* me and not *with* me. If faculty instead worked with students, then perhaps the power dynamics would shift. Power would still be present as faculty are grading and evaluating student progress but working with students would foster more mutual understanding and relationships. I have always thought that teaching is about relationships but the participants made me reflect: what I am doing unintentionally to hinder relationship building with students? This revelation in the data has taught me to evaluate how I am in my own classroom.

Participants were concerned about getting employment in their field after graduation, however, all were optimistic about the job market. At the time of the interviews, the economy was doing well. Unemployment was low across demographics and the prospect of job security seemed high. With the current situation of COVID-19 and subsequent plummet of the economy, I am not sure that this sentiment would be the same for participants if I were to interview them now. I know that Reagan was looking forward to presenting at a national research conference for her degree field, but that opportunity was canceled. She wants to attend graduate school so not having a research presentation under her name could impact her professionally. Perhaps the thriving

economy pre-pandemic created a false sense of security and opportunity in the job market.

All participants expressed the desire to learn new skills and have new experiences based on their interests. For example, even if a student is learning new skills in classes as a Business major, they often have an interest in the arts or travel. They want to experience classes that are not part of learning business, such as piano or a study abroad class. But depending on the degree, TN Promise only covers classes that are included in the student's declared major. If a degree program has little room for electives, then the student has little room to have new experiences based on interest. TN Promise requires students to be full-time students, which is twelve hours a semester. Once a student registers for twelve hours of coursework as outlined on their degree plan, then they can take an additional class that is not on their degree plan. Taking classes students have an interest in is not barred, but it is certainly a challenge. A typical associate degree is sixty hours, but if a student requires learning support in reading, writing, and math (which the majority of RSCC students need) then that adds classes required to the degree, but learning support is not counted as hours towards a degree. RSCC also requires COLS 1010, a college success course in their first year, which is a 3-credit course. Now a student is looking at 4 courses beyond the 60 credits that a typical associate degree requires. If a student wants to graduate within two years, then they must take summer classes or take beyond 12 credits each semester, leaving little option to take any classes as part of personal interest.

All participants believed that the purpose of education is to be a life-long learner or to learn how to learn. None of the participants believed that the purpose of education is to get a job. But, the purpose of TN Promise is to create a state-wide employable and skillful workforce. Limiting course options for a degree is problematic. There is little to no room for self-exploration. If a student changes their major during their time in college (the average student changes their major three times) then the course count increases further so that no coursework can be taken according to personal interest. I am not suggesting that students take any course they want, when they want, because I have seen many students self-advise and not understand degree requirements. What I am suggesting is a balance of working towards the TN Promise purpose of being *employable* as well as the student's purpose of college education being *enjoyable*. Benjamin found his passion for the arts through taking elective courses. Nancy's theater class stood out to her during her time at RSCC, even though she does not consider herself "artsy". As a Business Administration major, Catherine took a video editing class as an elective. On the side she created videos for people at church. When interviewing her, she became alive talking about video editing, but did not have that same passion when talking about business administration. Since she was undecided about what she wants to do for a bachelor's degree program, had she taken the video editing class earlier in her educational journey, would she have changed her major and found a career that she truly enjoys?

To trace back the purpose of higher education in our nation's history, the focus was not on preparing a workforce. As Diane Ravitch (2013) states, higher education was a time to explore one's interests, unfold people's natural curiosities, and to study under

scholars in the field. “It is a time in which to gain the political, historical, and economic understanding that was not contained in high school textbooks, to explore issues that were once thought settled, and to acquire and exercise the critical perspective that prepares people to become actively involved in civic life and democratic policies” (p. 82-83). The participants certainly reflected the historical values of curiosity, exploration, and working with faculty.

Community

The smaller the campus, the more close-knit participants felt with fellow students and campus staff. The feeling of community and comradery is an asset to community colleges students as transitioning from high school to college can be a scary experience for many students, especially for those in smaller communities. The addition of campus activities helps bring together students that would not have been brought together.

Many participants felt like they were in the experience together. I am not sure this feeling is unique to community college students, but the power of collective experience brings people together. In a society such as the U.S., where individualism is valued and emphasized, it appears that collective experiences are valued by these participants. Feeling included in a community of other students going through the same struggles certainly appears to be a major source of positive experience for TN Promise graduates. Even the participants who described themselves as shy and introverted still felt like involvement with other students was necessary.

Making connections is part of the educational process if one wants to be successful. Connection is learning about people and resources around the college to help

with success. Connection is a soft skill learned mostly outside of the classroom. "If you're smart, you've already made connections" says Benjamin. When I asked why he believes that he replied "Because that's also what got me here. If it wasn't for the connections that I made, I wouldn't feel as established now as I do." Not only is community college education about collective experience, but also about connection.

No participant described TN Promise as a mentoring program. Also, no participant described their assigned TN Promise mentor as a significant source of support. The TN Promise website describes the program in terms of scholarship and mentoring. All TN Promise students are assigned a mentor who will call/text/email updates on deadlines, encouragement, and general support. Anyone in the community can be a mentor if they complete training sessions. As I have learned from this study, students want to make connections and value a community feel to a college education. Mentoring can be an added dimension of community.

Self-Learning

While Benjamin felt that education is about learning and serving, he also felt that his mindset is not the same as the mindset in his home community. He described how "parents tell their kids to go to college so that you can get a better job and get that money." Here is perhaps another ideological struggle. Benjamin attributed the differences in mindset as generational. Parents want their children to have skills to provide for their lives and have a "good paying" job and tell their children to go to college to get a *better job*. None of the participants expressed that their parents or families advised them to go to college for the pursuit of their own personal happiness or to be a *better person*.

Two of my participants were business majors. None of them described the purpose of education in terms of jobs, employment outcomes, or economic progress.[16] Both explained education as personal endeavors linked to be a better individual overall. Jeremy explained "the business mind in me wants to say that… education is so you can raise your income and the career that you have." But his final response is "to understand different perspectives of people, honestly."

Many participants felt that the purpose of education included lifelong learning. Their perspectives may be due to where they are in their lives. They do not have children and do not have marriage partners in which to care for or financially support. They also did not indicate that they had current family members in which they were the primary caregivers. They have the leisure time and leisure dollars to engage in activities that benefit themselves. Perhaps if they were the main caregivers this perspective would be different.

Financial Awareness

This category initially was called Gratitude. But as I reviewed the data several times, I recognized that anytime a participant mentioned money, finances, or the ability to attend college because of the tuition freedom that they experienced, the participants expressed gratitude. Money and gratitude often came together in the data. Even if participants discussed how other students went to community college "just because it's free" and did not take classes seriously, their statements were also coupled with that those students need to be more grateful.

[16] I am sure my business faculty colleagues may cringe at this finding. Sorry, not sorry.

Nancy and David were the only participants who called TN Promise a scholarship program. I am not sure if most people understand that TN Promise is a scholarship program. It is interesting that graduating from community college provided some participants and their families with the idea that they are "smart", like Jodi, for example. Had she realized that TN Promise was a scholarship program earlier, would she have felt "smart" earlier? People tend to believe themselves as how others perceive them so had students learned that they earned a scholarship, would that have brought more confidence?

While the purpose of this study is not specifically on student loan debt, the data revealed participant's college debt and savings information. Only three of the twelve participants as of December 1, 2019 are carrying a student debt. (See Table 3). This is significant for these graduates. The U. S. national average student loan debt is $32,731 ("Student Loan Debt", 2020). In Tennessee, the average student loan debt is $25,252.

Table 3: College Indebtedness with Tennessee Promise

Participant	College debt as of December 1, 2019	Tennessee Promise Enabled Savings	Student Status December 1, 2019

Reagan	None	Yes	Public university
Jeremy	None	Yes	Public university
Catherine	None	Used extra money for gas	Employed
Aaron	None	Money in savings and a separate college savings account	Public university
Stella	Approximately $30,000	No excess funds due to taking 20 credits each semester	Private liberal arts college out-of-state
Nancy	None	Spent extra money on gas and gifts	Public university
Benjamin	None	Yes, also has family inheritance. Plans to have less than $20,000 college debt by the time he graduates with a master's degree.	Public university
David	$3,000	Yes, plans to have no more than $15,000 by the time he graduates with bachelor's degree. Anticipating a loan forgiveness program.	Employed, online non-profit university student
Tausha	$2,000 bank loan	Yes, plans to have no more than $7,000 in loans by the time she earns bachelor's degree.	Public university
Jodi	None	Yes, and receiving full university scholarship.	Public university
Diana	None	Yes, with parental set up college fund	Public university
Allison	None	Yes	Nurse, private, non-profit, online student

Nine out of twelve participants explicitly said they saved money during their time at RSCC. It is clear students are aware of financial debt related to going to college. They are also aware of the long-term financial commitment for college and planned to prepare for the cost of education. Stella described that before she started college, she did a "cost

analysis[17] between a two-year and a four-year" and decided community college was the better option. She also described examining the value of a university program based on the "price tag." Instead of researching a university for its academics, credentials, and prestige, students now determine the price tag as a significant evaluative piece.

While a primary barrier of cost of tuition was taken away by TN Promise, participants still experienced some type of situational barrier. According to Carp, Peterson, and Roelfs (1974) adult learners experience any three types of perceived barriers to learning: 1) situational barriers, 2) institutional barriers, and 3) dispositional barriers. Situational barriers include tuition, books, transportation, etc. Institutional barriers include courses not scheduled at a convenient time, strict attendance requirements, too much red tape in getting enrolled, etc. Dispositional barriers include not enough energy, feeling too old, do not enjoy studying, etc. Tuition was not a problem, however, home responsibilities, job responsibilities, and most cited transportation issues, were the most common barrier revealed by participants. A few participants did reveal that they experienced the dispositional barrier of not enjoying studying, but they were able to overcome that obstacle. The data did not reveal any institutional barriers.

Cultural Studies

I still believe that education is a powerful tool for social justice. As we have seen time and time again, social justice work is slow and painful. All the participants described in one way or another that they wanted to serve their communities and help others. They

[17] I am sure the personal finance professor that recruited Stella to RSCC would be proud of her cost analysis.

recognize that they have educational capital and other privileges that allow them to be active.

All TN Promise students are required to complete eight hours of service each semester. I argue that in the long run, this requirement helps community college graduates engage in issues that impact their communities, thus working towards social justice. Community college can be a gateway for students to become "engaging individuals as agents for social change in a participatory democracy" (Boyles, Carusi, & Attick, 2009, p. 30). Many participants felt that increasing the service requirement would be beneficial, but a couple also felt that the requirement could be developed further to be more meaningful and impactful. I did not have a participant tell me that the service requirement should be eliminated. Either the requirement stays as is or the number of hours is increased.

Revisiting Gramsci's (1968) concept of hegemony, ideologies are both a lived experience and a group of systematic ideas. "Ideological hegemony was the process by which certain ways of understanding the world become so self-evident or naturalized as to render alternatives nonsensical or unthinkable" (Barker, 2012, p. 465). The community college campus is a site of ideological struggle. For these participants, the aim of education is to be a better person, but the overall goal of TN Promise is economic development. Even though these goals differ, it appears that everyone benefits. Students lean and become employable and the state gets an employable workforce. The struggle may be ideological, but it does not appear to be a bad thing, yet. This struggle has negative implications if graduates put in all this work for a college education and could

not find employment or even employment in the career field in which they chose. This critique is clearly not over with this study.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a lens for understanding educational practices within sociopolitical contexts. How people view education is constructed in and through people's cultural and social interactions and "are shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics" (Fischman & Haas, 2009, p 569). Certainly, TN Promise is the sociopolitical context here and learning about each participant's experience helps understand the dynamic within community college. Participants clearly felt empowered by being college educated, but many also felt a sense of duty to return to their communities to do good deeds. In this way, the community college was the medium for graduates to learn skills that benefited both their future careers and livelihood, but also to benefit other people.

Critical theory also lends itself to examining the "intrinsic relationship between educational and social transformations, keeping in constant view new means of breaking down all forms of oppression" (Fischman & Haas, 2009, p. 569). The participants did not indicate feelings of oppression from TN Promise. It is clear the that primary purpose of education for these graduates is for personal growth, not to sustain an employable and educated workforce for the sake of state economic growth. That is not to say that employability is not a purpose. I instead interpret employment as necessary to living, but not necessary to living an enjoyable life.

Educators, especially teachers, have a role in maintaining or challenging educational institutions. TN Promise participants revealed that they value networking with faculty and creating connections. If faculty are perpetuating any views of educational oppression, then students may adopt these same principles and take them as truth. The values of faculty can then become values of their students. Henry Giroux (1993) believed that teachers then become "transformative intellectuals". Throughout the interviews, I heard some educational jargon come from the participants that is not everyday language. For example, when I asked some participants to describe themselves, one of the first attributes they gave was that they were first-generation college students. Many also labeled themselves as Millennials, but based on their birth year, they fall in Generation Z. The purpose of this study was not to examine the relationship between faculty and student, but there were hints of faculty/student dynamic that fit the idea of transformative intellectualism.

Out of all seven of Brookefield's (2001) learning tasks, participants showed learning in three learning tasks. The first is challenging ideology. While participants may not feel that they are challenging ideology, they certainly described it as education's purpose is about learning and personal growth, not to get jobs. Jeremy probably demonstrated this thinking the closest by acknowledging that the business major in him wants to say jobs is the most important part to get a college education, but his final answer was "understanding different perspectives". The second learning task in the data was learning liberation, which is to liberate from dominant ideology, both individual and collective. Since the U.S. society tends to lean on individualism, many participants broke

from that thinking and felt that collective participation in community college helped in their success. They acknowledged that working together and serving others benefited their college experience. Lastly, the third learning task is reclaiming reason. This task focuses on deciding what values one should live by, which is really the intended purpose of this study. Participants valued family, opportunities, community, self-learning, and financial awareness. This study is not to suggest that participants did not learn all seven of Brookfield's learning tasks, but these three outlined above were the most prominent and meaningful to this study.

Educonomy and Equitable Education

Is TN Promise consumer driven for a knowledge economy to churn out more workers? Decreasing or getting rid of knowledge for personal growth? What the participants want out of a college education is a *want* for learning and personal growth, even though it is understood that they *need* to be employable after graduation.

TN Promise and similar programs are reshaping economic and political relations all in the name of the state being economically competitive in the global economy. The purpose of tuition-free college programs is about access and equity, but without added investment into the social conditions and daily life, then equity takes a backseat. Access does not always mean successful equity outcomes. Going back to Joel Spring (2015), he writes that "skills, in economic jargon, become the 'new currency' of the global education system" (p. 14). The measurement of a successful society are the skills being developed. There is a tangible benefit for all the hard work to develop skills by getting a job after graduation. But what if graduates do not get a job after graduation? Or if they

get a job that is not in their field of study? Is the education earned considered worthless at this point?

During his last ninety days in office, former TN Governor Bill Haslam reflected on his governorship. When speaking on *Drive to 55* and TN Promise, he called the state's community college graduation rates "miserable" and "really embarrassing." In 2018 the overall community college graduation rate was 28% ("Community College Graduation Rates", 2018). He was right. It was embarrassing. Haslam did acknowledge that his administration learned rather quickly that free access to an education is not going to work if people are not prepared when they arrive at community college. He learned what educators have known all along. Access to education is not enough. Families must have resources and stability at home to support community college students during their educational journey. Otherwise, students are not able to take advantage of the access.

As of this writing, there are slow improvements in TN Promise. The University of Tennessee Alumnus magazine ("Changing a State", Winter 2020) updated the latest data that the 3-year graduation rate for TN Promise students is 34% compared to 13% for non-TN Promise students. The retention rate is 68% for TN Promise students and 58% for non-TN Promise students. A 13% graduation rate for non-TN Promise students is terrible and especially hurts this group as many do not have any financial support like TN Promise does (they may be eligible for Pell grants and other scholarships).

The returns to attaining a college education are increasing, but the opportunities available to those without a college education appear to be decreasing. The bachelor's degree is slowly becoming the new high school diploma. While participants did not feel

that college is for everyone (as do I), participants indicated frequently that in order to have a *good* life, then a college education is needed. This view has been transferred from parents who do not have a college education as well as business leaders in the community.

Reflections as a Researcher

This study grew out of my interest and experience working with community college students. I remember starting my college teaching career in 2012 when the statewide program of TN Promise had not been implemented yet. Instead, community college students in certain counties in the state were benefitting from TN Achieves, a similar program offering tuition-free community college education. Once TN Promise was implemented, I did see an increase in the number of enrolled students in my classes. But I also saw an increase in the number of F grades from students. That pains me.

There are several questions that are left unanswered and could not have been answered during this study. This study taught me that participants advise other students to get involved with the college and join clubs and/or network more with faculty. But as a faculty sponsor of a club on campus, I realized that funding for those activities are very limited and not seen as an investment to student success. Instead, the college focuses on applying for grants and funding that benefit advisement and other administrative departments to help the college function. While these departments are essential to student success, based off the participant responses, I would like to investigate in depth the role of campus activities as part of student success.

These participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences. I wonder if I framed my questions in a way that would have elicited mostly positive responses. I do wonder if they were filtering their answers because all the participants knew before the interview that I was a faculty. Even though each participant was emailed the Informed Consent form ahead of time to read and offered a hard copy after they signed it, I am not sure if many fully understood that the study was for this dissertation and not for RSCC use, although they may have known that the study might be read by RSCC employees and others. When I asked at the end of every interview if they had any questions it usually pertained to my role as a faculty member.

My interview with Jodi moved me to tears. Learning about how her K-12 teachers and principals talked down to her and how she overcame that during college is extraordinary. She was very open and honest about her upbringing and family life. She described how she learned about herself and how resilient she was. She said that at RSCC was the first time she "felt smart" and her parents "felt smart" once she graduated RSCC. To feel smart for the first time means that Jodi went almost twenty years of her life not feeling "smart" and even longer for her parents. What does that say about her K-12 education and even experiences outside of school? I would love to study Jodi and her family further. I had many unanswered questions about how Jodi's success helped her family.

I also had more questions about TN Promise students who were part-time RSCC workers. I had to be careful in this dissertation to not disclose the campus of each participant because I had several participants who were student workers. One participant

in particular, Diana, described how she would often bear the responsibility of having difficult conversations with students when those conversations should have been given to the full-time RSCC staff. At what point does the role of student worker/ambassador stop?

Limitations

This study has limitations shaped by issues related to the research design as well as issues related to the researcher. The research design included a small sample size and a limited attempt to recruit participants. Researcher issues included dissertation time constraints and bias.

There are strengths and weaknesses to this study. The most important strength of this study is that the students were interviewed one-on-one, given an opportunity to share only their story. Other studies used surveys and focus groups, not in-depth interviewing techniques. I spoke with graduates who had various experiences while at RSCC and different goals moving forward.

A limitation of this study is there are no experiences from people of color. While the focus of this study did not use race as a lens, I would have liked interviews with students of color. For the purpose of getting the data collection completed in a timely manner for the dissertation, I did not ask participant recruiters for graduates of any particular race nor gender. Eight of the twelve participants were female. This study did not examine gender, but gendered experiences did show through in the data.

On the positive side, all the interviews were conducted during the fall 2019 semester, and completed face-to-face, before COVID-19. I did not have to utilize any Zoom and Skype technology to meet with participants. I wanted to avoid virtual

meetings. I was able to read body language and help make “awkward pauses” less awkward. The main reason to stay face-to-face was so I could establish some rapport before the interviews as well as having a casual conversation afterwards. While establishing rapport, I told each participant who recruited them for the study and chatted about people we knew in the college. I feel that participants felt more comfortable and opened up to me more as a result. As I learned by going completely online to teach my classes due to COVID-19, many community college students get anxious working with technology (they may be proficient in working the technology, but it can still cause anxiety). The thought of sharing personal experiences over technology probably would have made the participants not as comfortable to speak with me.

Researcher bias is a limitation, but it is anticipated in qualitative research (Creswell, 2018). I am a current faculty member at the institution that the graduates come from. I am also a graduate of the community college and had a positive experience. As a proud alumna and faculty of the college, I hoped that all participants had positive experiences. While the participant experiences using TN Promise were positive, the participants did share negative experiences as detailed earlier in this chapter.

Implications

Based on the participant experiences shared, TN Promise is a program that benefits students and their families. I have found success with people who have taken advantage of TN Promise. This is a good program and should continue and even expand to make a community college education more accessible, especially in rural counties.

Students value networking and personal development. With the smaller class sizes of typically no more than thirty students in community colleges classrooms, the opportunities for faculty to work closely with students can be expanded. This study also shows how much students want to learn the most they can about their future career field. This implies that there is more room for job embedded opportunities or internships.

There are critical implications for services and assistance that extend beyond the college. Several participants mentioned the use of therapy and mental health services. I did not dig into where participants were receiving these services, but services offered through the college where mental health and education can be synthesized into a holistic form of therapy would be beneficial. I am not versed enough in mental health in education but knowing that some participants and several of my students need counseling is enough to argue there is more to be done here.

Every participant had a mentor, but none of them described their mentor as a source of support. Perhaps the mentorship model as it is currently is not robust enough or students do not recognize the value that the mentor is for their success. There is room for improvement here.

Recommendations

Community College

Community colleges have more to offer students than what is currently being done. This study shows that students value networking opportunities. I recommend that networking for students should be expanded. We should capitalize on the student's

motivation to learn as much as they can about their profession and provide more opportunities to learn hands-on.

I also recommend that community college need more faculty professional development or in-service speakers to discuss how to draw on the strengths of students. Far too often in faculty trainings and in-service workshops, the speakers talk about Millennial and/or Generation Z students as entitled, selfish, and lazy. These types of presentations then lead to faculty sharing stories that illustrate these behaviors, which then leads to complaining and a feeling of defeat for the start of the semester. This study shows that the students I talked to are anything but those attributes. When students value education the way that these TN Promise students did, then students will work hard and be mindful of those around them. I recommend starting the semester off with the ideas that students have much to contribute to education and offer suggestions for how faculty can work with their students' strengths.

I also recommend more training for faculty for awareness on factors outside of college that contribute to barriers for students. Food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are real problems that have an impact on student success. From my perspective as a faculty member, I know these issues exist, but not in the context of my community and students. It seems that it is an administrative problem, not a faculty problem. When the food pantry opened at RSCC, I did not see it coming. Students usually do not ask for help. So far, the only "training" I have received on issues impacting students outside college is "well, if you see a need, contact the RSCC

Foundation about financial help." Faculty work closely with students and can be the first point of contact to get services for students.

As discussed above, the graduation rates between TN Promise and non-TN Promise are quite different. Are there aspects of the TN Promise program that could be utilized for non-TN Promise students to help degree completion? While none of my participants mentioned their assigned mentor as a support, perhaps there is a case for mentorship of all students. I did not ask specifically about their assigned mentor. I hoped that participants would volunteer that information in answering questions about who helped them and who did they turn to for support. We see more often that mentors are assigned in places like college programs and employment. Perhaps having a mentor that students can turn to for support, ask questions, and get reminders on deadlines will be helpful to all students, not just TN Promise students.

A few of the participants were involved in a student mentorship program at RSCC. This program was a grant-funded pilot program where students applied and were hired for a stipend to peer mentor fellow students. I recommend we need to expand this program to all students, either by hiring peer mentors or building it into existing programs. Research has identified that low achievement in the first year of college can lead to students dropping out (Bradburn & Carroll, 2002; Horn & Neville, 2006). There are university programs where seniors as part of their capstone class must mentor a first-year student that is going into their same degree program. This can be done at a community college level where second year students mentor first-year students. I know students go to other students for help because it is often scary or anxiety-provoking to ask

questions of people they do not know or trust. The student then becomes the teacher. Not only does the first-year student benefit by having a designated mentor, but the second-year student benefits by affirming their knowledge and experience as a college student.

Beyond College

This study shows that there are still larger problems going on in our communities that formal education by itself cannot fix. As I mentioned above about food insecurity, housing insecurity, homelessness, and mental health, much work is to be done here. I argue that community colleges may not be the solution, but the campus can be the agent towards solutions. The close-knit nature of the community college, especially in the rural counties and small satellite campuses, aids in the connection of community resources to student needs. Community colleges as sites of support for remediation and intervention are supported by previous research (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Schmid & Abell, 2003). I recommend that community partnerships be strengthened.

Future Work

Because TN Promise is a recent program and not studied in depth yet, there are many future research studies that I see coming out of this dissertation. The most pressing new study would be to interview those TN Promise students who dropped out of college altogether. Given that their education was tuition-free, there must be other factors that impacted their decision to leave a college education.

Because this dissertation found that networking and making career contacts for students was important, I suggest a study to dig deeper on this topic. What kinds of the

opportunities and access do students have to cultivate networking? For those students who do not have the social capital at home, how can these students meet professionals in their degree area? What are institutions doing to create more access to networking? How much can education programs and college access accomplish if people do not possess the relationships, social networks, and abilities that allow them to take advantage of opportunity?

I believe that "community" in community college is a crucial piece to the educational opportunities provided. How does community impact upward social and professional mobility and inequality? Earning a college education is only a piece of the puzzle to upward social and professional mobility. We see time after time where college graduates gain employment that is not in their intended career field, leaving many graduates disillusioned with what an education does for someone's professional goals. How can community connections and networking help in upward social and professional mobility?

This study focused on TN Promise student values. To take this study further, a comparison of student values between TN Promise and non-TN Promise students would be helpful. Depending on where students are in their lives and maybe depending on their generation, there may be different ways of viewing educational value. Experiences of students who have different values may have a different perception on what a college education does for their lives.

Adults returning to community college may be eligible for a tuition-free program called Tennessee Reconnect (TN Reconnect). I interviewed a graduate who participated

in TN Reconnect and not TN Promise (her recruiter got the two programs mixed up). I interviewed her anyway because she was gracious with her time and to see if I could learn from her experience. While my interview questions did not always pertain to her, two questions elicited two very different responses from my TN Promise participants. In response to the what the purpose of education is, she replied that it was about getting a good-paying job and had nothing to do with learning about themselves or for the sake of learning. In response to my question about why she chose to attend community college she replied "well, why the hell not? It's free." Based off this person's responses, I believe that the values of TN Reconnect students may differ from TN Promise students and is worth exploring.

The University of Tennessee now has UT Promise, modeled after TN Promise. A study on the values of UT Promise students would add interest about the program. The experiences of a university student are clearly different from a community college student. Universities have campus housing, Greek life, more degree programs, etc. I wonder if the values, particularly of Family, would stay the same with UT Promise students.

A longitudinal study following a TN Promise recipient would be an interesting addition to the body of knowledge. The study would start during the participant's first year and follow their journey to graduation from a four-year institution or up to their first job/graduate program after earning a bachelor's degree.

Based on a suggestion from my participant, Benjamin, I should also interview faculty and how they are changing or modifying their degrees and certificate programs

based on the population that they are getting because of TN Promise. Benjamin indicated that the faculty from his RSCC degree program are seeing a shift in the type of programs the incoming and prospective students are asking for and are brainstorming ways to make certificates and concentrations to meet student demand.

Lastly, another type of tuition-free community college that is growing in Tennessee is Middle College. This is a program where high school students complete their junior and senior year high school requirements concurrently with community college coursework and can enter a university program as a junior. They graduate with a high school diploma and an associate degree. This program also allows Middle College graduates to take advantage of freshman level scholarships at the university. As a faculty member I have had Middle College students in my classes and have heard them talk about negative and positive experiences. I would like to learn more about how these students look at education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to learn what TN Promise graduates value given that their community college education is tuition-free. I interviewed twelve graduates who received TN Promise in a rural community college. I attempted to listen and learn about each participant's journey and stories in order to share their thick, rich experiences. So "just because it's free" to earn a community college education does not mean that the experience is worthless. Participants in this study recognize and appreciate the significant value of a tuition-free community college education.

This study supports the conclusion that TN Promise graduates do value much more than a degree. They value learning for the sake of learning. TN Promise is a program that provides much needed and much appreciated funding for Tennesseans to learn skills that will eventually provide for themselves, their families, and their communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
IRB Approval Letter



September 19, 2019

Susanna Cody Miller
UTK - Haslam College of Business - Graduate and Executive Education

Re: UTK IRB-19-05345-XP
Study Title: "Because It's Free": A Promise Students Can Keep

Dear Susanna Cody Miller:

The Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) reviewed your application for the above referenced project and determined that your application is eligible for **exempt** review under 45 CFR 46.101.

Your application has been determined to comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. This letter constitutes full approval of your application (Version 1.1).

Approval Information:

- Downgrade to Exempt Category 2
- 15 participants
- Written informed consent
- UTK Knoxville Main Campus IRB Application – Version 1.1
- Consent Form - Version 1.1
- Transcriber Pledge - Version 1.0
- Research Recruitment Letter - Version 1.0
- Miller Dissertation Interview Guide - Version 1.0

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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In the event that volunteers are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB.

Any alterations (revisions) in the protocol must be promptly submitted to and approved by the UTK Institutional Review Board prior to implementation of these revisions. You have individual responsibility for reporting to the Board in the event of unanticipated or serious adverse events and subject deaths.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane

Colleen P. Gilrane, Ph.D.
Chair

Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement
1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
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Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

"BECAUSE IT'S FREE"

INTRODUCTION

My name is Cody Miller and I am a Cultural Studies of Education doctoral student in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. You have been invited to participate in a research study. I am interested in student perceptions on their experiences in rural community colleges using Tennessee Promise.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY

Your participation in this interview should take approximately 45 – 60 minutes to complete. The interview will be recorded for transcription, but your identity will remain confidential. This interview will be conducted at a location agreed upon between you and the researcher, Cody Miller. During the interview, the researcher will ask about your perceptions on your experience in community college while using Tennessee Promise. You may decline to answer questions at any time throughout the interview. You may also decline to have the interview audio recorded.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information discussed within the interview will be kept confidential. Only the researcher, Cody Miller, and other approved research personnel will have access to your information and the data will be stored in a secure, password-protected computer that is owned by Cody Miller. There will be no specific identifiers left on the data upon its collection. All data will be destroyed by May 1, 2020.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty at any time. You may also decline to answer any specific or individual questions. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty and without any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before the data collection is complete, your data will be destroyed. Your research information may be used for future research studies and/or other purposes or shared with other researchers for use in future studies without obtaining additional informed consent from you. If this happens, all of your identifiable information will be removed before any future use or distribution to other researchers.

RISKS

While there are no perceived risks associated with this interview, talking about memories from school or events related to your educational experience can evoke feelings or emotions. We can skip any questions or terminate the interview at any time. You can also move or discontinue the interview with no penalty. The risks related to your participation in this study are no greater than those you would encounter in daily activities.

Participant's Initials _____

BENEFITS

While there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study, information gathered will add to the body of research on helping to understand how students perceive their own educational experiences. There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions about the interview, or you experience adverse effects as a result of your participation you may contact the following researchers:

Cody Miller	Dr. Barbara Thayer-Bacon
Principal Investigator	Co-Investigator
svillarr@vols.utk.edu	bthayer@utk.edu
865.221.1564	865.974.9505

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research study or have concerns about the treatment of research participants, please contact the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville at either 865. 974.7697 or utkirb@utk.edu.

CONSENT

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I can keep a copy of this document after I sign it.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name (please print)	Participant's Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher's Name (please print)	Researcher's Signature	Date

If you agree to allow the interview to be recorded, please sign and date below.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name (please print)	Participant's Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher's Name (please print)	Researcher's Signature	Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

INTERVIEW TOPIC

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE USING TENNESSEE PROMISE

SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Cody Miller and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee – Knoxville. I am currently working on a research study as part of my dissertation requirements for my doctoral degree program. The interview will last 45 – 60 minutes. You are invited to take part in the research study as part of my dissertation. It is completely voluntary. If at any time you are uncomfortable or wish to terminate the interview, please let me know, and I will stop immediately. I am recording the interview for transcription purposes, but your identity will remain confidential. Do you understand what I have said to you? Are you ready to start?

Research Questions

1. What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free?
2. What are students' perceptions of their learning experience?
3. How do students balance school, work, and family commitments?
4. Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

Purpose Statement

Many studies on student success in community colleges focus on the financial burden of tuition. Now that Tennessee has created and implemented Tennessee Promise, tuition is no longer a hindrance to attend community college, especially for rural areas in East Tennessee. The purpose of this study is to research and identify socio-cultural attributes of TN Promise students that enable them to navigate their community college learning experience

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself
    a. Brief self-history
    b. Jobs?

    c. How they were as a high school student
    d. ACT score as self-disclosed
    e. High school GPA/ college GPA as self-disclosed
    f. What degree they have. Why that degree?
    g. Transfer to a four-year or go to career?
2. How would you describe yourself as a student?
3. Why did you want to go to community college in the first place?
4. How would you describe your experience at RSCC in general?
5. Tell me about your first year at RSCC.
    a. What stands out?
    b. Who helped you?
6. How was your first year of RSCC different from your second year?
7. What kinds of barriers did you experience while in school?
8. What kind of help did you get along your journey?
9. What were your study habits? How did you study for classes?
10. Scenario: It's the weekend or your days off from work/classes. What can you be found doing?
11. What did you do for fun or recreation during your time at RSCC?
12. How did you pay for any additional educational costs not covered by TN Promise funds?
13. Tell me about your experiences with the community service requirement with TN Promise.

14. How do you think TN Promise has helped your family?
15. In your own view, what is academic/college success?
16. Think about other classmates that were successful in college. What did they do different from you to be successful?
17. What is your perception about failure in college?
    a. From your experience, what is the outcome when failure happens?
    b. What did you learn?
18. How has your life changed after graduating?
19. When you look back, what would you have changed or done differently while at RSCC?
20. What do you think is the purpose of education?
21. Long term plans/career goals?
22. Is there anything else about your experience that you feel I should know?
23. Are there any questions you have for me?

Appendix D

Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality

Transcriber Pledge of Confidentiality

I have been hired as a transcriber for a research study. I understand that I will be hearing recorded confidential interviews. The information contained in the recordings have been given by the research participants on good faith that the interviews will remain confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to maintain confidentiality and honor this confidentiality agreement. I agree to not share information from the interview recordings with anyone else except the primary researcher of this study, Cody Miller. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards. Consequences of this breach will be followed as outlined in policies from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and the UTK Institutional Review Board. I pledge to maintain confidentiality and not breach ethical standards.

_____ _____

Transcriber Date

Appendix E

Recruitment Letter

Hello!

My name is Cody Miller and I am a doctoral candidate in Theory and Practice of Teacher Education department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am recruiting potential interviewees for the dissertation research, which will investigate how Tennessee Promise students value their educational experience. Specifically, I will be looking at how students value their education when tuition is no longer a stress factor. I plan to do so by conducting interviews of graduated Roane State Community College students who completed their degree using Tennessee Promise. This study will involve face-to-face and/or web-based (e.g. Facetime) interviews approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What value do TN Promise students place on their education given that it is tuition-free?
2. What are students' perceptions of their learning experience?
3. How do students balance school, work, and family commitments?
4. Where do students place their educational commitments in their lives?

If you think that you might be interested in participating or have any questions regarding this study, please contact me at svillarr@vols.utk.edu or at 865.221.1564.

Thank you for your time!
Cody Miller
PhD. Candidate, Theory and Practice of Teacher Education
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
svillarr@vols.utk.edu
865.221.1564

VITA

Cody Miller is originally from Rockwood, TN. She began her higher education journey at Roane State Community College and earned her Associate of Science degree in General Studies. She then went to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah for her Bachelor of Arts degree in History. Missing Tennessee, she came back and earned her Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction as well as her Secondary Social Studies teaching license from Tennessee Technological University. From there she moved to Las Vegas, Nevada and worked as an academic advisor for a university for 2 years. She then moved back to Knoxville, TN for a faculty position at Roane State Community College Oak Ridge Branch Campus teaching introductory education courses and has been there for the past 8 years. During her time at Roane State, she has won the Faculty Service Learning Award. She was a finalist in 2019, nominated by her peers, for the RSCC Sarah Ellen Benroth Award for Outstanding Teaching, RSCC's highest teaching honor. Cody's research interests include community college research, sociology of education, cultural studies in education, international education, equitable education, social justice, and service learning.