Student parents' college pathways are in many ways as diverse as the student parents themselves. Rou, a fifty-four-year-old Vietnam War–era veteran, became a father later in life and now has his “hands full” as he and his wife care for Honor, their four-year-old daughter. Rou is currently unemployed, but Rou's wife works at a local group home for adults with disabilities. Her job provides the family with health insurance, but her income is just high enough so that they do not qualify for most public assistance. Having been laid off from American Airlines and a local hospital, Rou is now taking advantage of his GI educational benefits, redirecting his career goals and working toward an associate's degree studying human services at a local public community college.

When I ask Rou why he is pursuing a college degree at this point in his life, he contends that “having jobs and having a career are entirely different.” Rou possesses decades of work experience, but he believes that not having a college degree has held him back from advancing professionally and economically. “This whole credibility thing,” Rou continues, “that's, to me, that's what it's all about. If you don't have a paper, how credible are you?” As far as Rou is concerned, his vast work experience means little to others. He is convinced that a college degree will legitimize the value of his knowledge and will set him above other job applicants without a degree.

Amber, who is twenty-five years old and recently divorced, has primary custody of her one-year-old son. She always expected to go to college and is now working to earn a bachelor’s degree in English. The fall after graduating high school, Amber began studying education at a nearby state university. She opted to leave the campus dorms at the end of her first year to move in with her long-term boyfriend and, after commuting for a term, left school altogether to work and plan her wedding. After settling into her new marriage, she made
the decision to return to school, this time enrolling in a local community college where she earned her associate's degree in general studies, a degree that would allow her to continue exploring possible disciplines and majors.

Soon after transferring back to the four-year public university, Amber discovered that she was pregnant. Suffering from severe morning sickness, she withdrew from her classes and focused on her health. However, her relationship with her husband was failing and by the time she reached her eighth month of pregnancy, they decided to divorce. Amber's former husband is still very much involved in her son's life, but she is his primary caregiver. Although the past two years did not flow as expected, Amber is keen to graduate with a degree in English, a subject she loves. She expects to teach high school writing and literature and is excited about the prospect of having a job that is intellectually stimulating, family friendly, and financially rewarding.

Carol, a thirty-nine-year-old mother of three, likewise intends to teach. She echoes Amber's desire to engage in paid work that is personally satisfying, and she is convinced that attaining such a job is possible only with a bachelor's degree. Carol grew up in Jamaica and, after graduating from high school, attended a business college where she received her associate's degree in accounting and management. Because she was never able to find a job using her two-year college degree, Carol ended up working in a hotel. She recalls putting in long days, making low wages, and rarely seeing her two children, who were being cared for by her aunt. To improve her job prospects, she moved to the United States, leaving her two children with their father and under the primary care of her aunt. First living in Miami, then New York, and finally in Hartford, Connecticut, Carol met her present husband while working in a cousin's restaurant. Four years ago, she felt stable for the first time in her job and relationship, and so brought her two children up from Jamaica. Not long afterward, she became pregnant with her third child.

Carol's story is full of movement and fresh starts. Now that she is committed to keeping her children with her in the United States, she is intent on building up her educational credentials to provide economic stability as well. After taking classes at a local community college in both child care and nursing, she decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Carol strongly believes that a college degree will inoculate her against employment uncertainties. As long as she is improving herself with education, she feels confident that she will survive any job changes that come her way. Carol confesses, "I was never afraid of moving on to another job because I was always in school and I was studying and I was learning more. . . . Education is key for you to have a comfortable life."
College: The American Dream

Although the specifics of their individual life trajectories differ, these three students do not provide any surprising answers when explaining why they are in college. In the United States, we’ve come to believe that earning a college degree is necessary for success. Parents in middle and upper-middle-class communities are bombarded with information regarding the costs of college and the importance of establishing college savings plans. For most of these families, attending college is assumed and so must be planned for. At the other end of the economic spectrum, parents in economically depressed or struggling communities are heralded with Horatio Alger–like stories that focus on self-initiative and the power of learning. In those cultural narratives, resilient individuals use a college degree to escape persistent rural poverty or urban plight.

All parents are aware of prevailing cultural narratives that extol the general value of education. If they and their children expect to claim middle or, better yet, upper class status, college credentials are required (Lazerson 1998). The influence of these cultural narratives is reflected in undergraduate college enrollments, which increased 28 percent between 2000 and 2016. During those same years, the percentage of young adults between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine possessing an associate’s degree or higher increased from 38 to 46 percent (NCES 2018). Public attitude polls administered during the U.S. economic boom years of the 1990s revealed that 87 percent of respondents believed that a secondary school graduate should go on to college rather than taking a job after high school (Immerwahr 2004). A high school diploma is no longer enough to fulfill the American dream.

Rou’s, Amber’s, and Carol’s beliefs regarding the need for postsecondary education are hardly irrational. Particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century, as manufacturing jobs slowly gave way to jobs in the service and information sector, many in the United States have come to perceive a college degree as necessary to land reasonably if not highly compensated jobs. A college-level degree, so the argument goes, ensures credibility and freedom in the workplace and hence long-term financial stability. Aggregate data that frequently make their way into popular news accounts and college recruitment presentations reinforce such perceptions—in 2016, full-time workers aged twenty-five to thirty-four who had earned a bachelor’s degree earned a median salary of $50,000 a year, whereas those with a high school degree or its equivalent earned only $31,800 (NCES 2018: 249).

When these (less often reported) data are broken down by gender and race/ethnicity, the median salaries are significantly lower for black, Latinx, Native American, and women students of nearly all racial/ethnic groups, but in every category, those individuals with at least some postsecondary education outearn their counterparts who possess only a high school degree. According to a 2018
report issued by the U.S. Census Bureau, college attendance rates increased to historical highs in the wake of the 2008 recession, a time marked by high levels of unemployment. When jobs are scarce and competition is high, the unemployed or underemployed come to view a college degree as the best defense to remain viable job candidates. During that time, the number of students attending any kind of postsecondary institution increased from 17.2 million in 2006 to 20.4 million in 2011. Although the number of students subsequently decreased to 19.1 million in 2015, the current number of enrolled students is still significantly higher than in 2006 and continues to increase each year (Schmidt 2018).

Keenly aware of how globalization and technological change have forever changed the labor sector, most families today have drawn the conclusion, promoted in kind by employers and colleges, that a college degree is not an intellectual luxury but rather an absolute necessity if parents and their children are to survive in this modern economy. Rou, Amber, and Carol have learned this lesson well and so are earning their college degrees.

During the first part of the twentieth century, however, very few of the student parents described in these pages likely would have considered pursuing a degree past high school or, even more importantly, been eligible or able to attend college in the first place. Amber and Carol might have considered enrolling in a teaching program at a normal school, a form of college devoted to instructing mostly women for entry into the teaching profession. At that time, teaching was a rapidly growing career opportunity and one of the few jobs available to women. The career opportunities sought by Rou could have been attained in the early 1900s without a college degree at all. Both the economy and the prevalence of higher education—and just as importantly, the relationship between the two—have changed dramatically over the past century.

To understand the contemporary landscape of our nation’s colleges and why so many of us have come to believe that a college degree is indispensable and possible, it is helpful to step back and place this moment in historical context. How is it that the opportunity to pursue a higher education emerged and evolved? How are these opportunities shaping the current experiences of all college students, not just the student parents in this study, but a vast majority of the nation’s population who had previously been excluded from higher education? Why is it that a college degree has come to be deemed as both necessary and possible for anyone desiring to live the American Dream?

**How Did We Get Here? The Emergence of Higher Education**

Just as owning a house came to symbolize personal success in the years following World War II, possessing a college degree is believed by many to be a marker of having achieved the American dream in the twenty-first century. Such a belief has been shaped profoundly by transformations in U.S. cultural, economic, and
political spheres during the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, defined in part by the shifting nature of work and educational institutions’ deepening connection to the labor market (Aronowitz 2000; Brint 2002; Veblen [1918] 1993).

Most colleges that arose during colonial times primarily served young white men from socially or politically powerful families, versing them in religion and the classics with the purpose of promoting responsible, moral leadership. Rather than providing opportunity, colonial-era colleges were formed to provide a moral grounding for the emergent nation’s future religious, business, and political leaders. High tuitions and social mores ensured that a college education would be reserved for a select group of young men, ultimately preserving the status quo of the elite, religious, and governing social classes. In accordance with prevailing ideologies, college leaders’ emphasis on liberty, not equality, masked the fact that a vast majority of people living in the new colonies—including rural farmers, slaves, free blacks, American Indians, and all women—were generally considered unfit for and hence were excluded from the college classroom.

This began to change, however, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a time when over seven hundred colleges in the United States closed their doors and the population of students steadily dwindled on many campuses. Recognizing the limitations of narrowly “preserving” the status quo, Francis Wayland, progressive educator and president of Brown from 1827 until 1852, contended that leaders in higher education needed to decide “between adopting a course of study that appealed to all classes or adhering to a course that appealed to one class” (qtd. in Rudolph 1962: 218). Wayland and others believed that unless colleges democratized education, making it available and relevant to all social classes, the college system would ultimately fail, a premonition that for a time seemed to be gaining hold in reality as college after college closed. In such a climate of diminishing college enrollments, educational progressives’ ideas regarding the need to democratize higher education slowly took hold, evidenced most clearly when a number of postsecondary institutions began to either diversify their student populations or construct segregated campuses that addressed the needs of women and racial or ethnic minorities.

Oberlin College, which offered women an education from its founding in 1833, opened its doors to free black students beginning in 1835. The oldest historically black institution of higher education, Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, was founded two years later in 1837. By 1860, women could pursue a postsecondary degree in over forty-five schools. In the following decades, a number of elite private colleges established annexes—including Harvard’s Radcliffe and Columbia’s Barnard colleges—to address the educational needs of women who qualified for entry into their exclusive institutions but had been denied entrance solely on the basis of their gender. Hampton University, alma mater of the young Booker T. Washington, in 1878 welcomed a group of formerly imprisoned American Indians, a move that marked the beginning of the University's
expressed commitment to educating tribal members from across the nation. As educational leaders successfully promoted the idea that an educated citizenry ought to be the foundation of a strong nation, the number of primary schools and colleges steadily grew.

In addition to expanding the diversity of their student bodies, many colleges began to expand course subject matter to include emerging technological and scientific disciplines and to address the professionalization of occupations, including teaching and nursing. Curricula in many state institutions began to address farming, scientific, and manufacturing interests, and a general understanding began to take hold that these new technologies demanded new learning and hence training. A fruitful merging of capitalism with science provided higher education with a fertile ground for growth. And with belief in compulsory primary education gaining ideological ground, so also grew the need for more teachers and the construction of normal schools to educate those teachers.

Higher education had been steadily evolving for some time before Justin Morrill, a Vermont representative and later a senator in the U.S. Senate secured a place in history with his namesake legislation establishing land grant universities. Riding on this wave of change, Morrill put forth a congressional bill in 1857 advocating for federal investments to create a nationwide system of agricultural colleges that would offer a broad education while simultaneously imparting practical skills in farming, mining, mechanics, and the military. Congress passed and in 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed the Morrill Act into law, promising loyal states 30,000 acres of federal land per each senator and representative with the expectation that this land would be sold to finance the construction of colleges that would offer agricultural and technology programs (U.S. Congress 1862). Nearly thirty years later, legislators reinforced the law by passing the Second Morrill Act in 1890, which further funded the program and required that states, in particular resistant southern states, either allow African Americans to enroll in already established white-only land grant colleges or develop separate colleges for black students. Although access to higher education did expand over the course of the nineteenth century, a college education was not necessarily open to all without discrimination—many colleges and universities continued to deny entry to women and racial or ethnic minorities. Even those institutions and states that pledged to provide “separate but equal” facilities for African American students, as required by the Second Morrill Act of 1890, too often fell far short of that promise. Educational opportunity may have been gradually increasing, but most students attended colleges in their immediate geographic vicinity and entered classrooms serving students who shared their gender, race/ethnicity, and social class background (Thelin 2004). At the beginning of the twentieth century, white middle- and upper-class women were just as likely as their male
counterparts to reap the benefits offered by collegiate life; however, they were more often than not segregated by institution and discipline. For example, women vastly outnumbered men attending the nation’s steadily growing number of normal schools that provided entrée into the teaching profession, one of the few professions open to women (Apple 1982; Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman 2009). Further, even within ostensibly coed and racially diverse institutions, such as Oberlin College, women and racial/ethnic minorities experienced social isolation and discrimination (Baumann 2010; Thelin 2004). Opportunities in higher education existed, but in most cases they were not the same opportunities for all—segregation persisted.

**College for All? Investing in Students**

Not until the mid-twentieth century, following the humanitarian crises wrought by World War II and cultural shifts emphasizing civil rights that were later reflected in educational legislation and Supreme Court decisions, did the United States again see a significant expansion of access to higher education. In 1944, the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act, or GI Bill, was passed to manage the millions of soldiers returning home from the war and facilitate their transition, both short and long term, into the workplace. The GI Bill provided low-interest loans to veterans for housing and postsecondary educational benefits, including tuition payments, book allowances, and living expense stipends (Aronowitz 2000). The program was incredibly successful; in 1947, approximately 49 percent of students admitted to colleges were World War II veterans, and by 1956, when the program ended, nearly half of the sixteen million veterans had taken advantage of educational supports (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs 2012).

The social benefits accrued from these educational opportunities, however, were not equitably experienced. White, male veterans were the primary beneficiaries of educational resources, and so racial inequities endured and the gender parity that previously defined the college student population at the beginning of the century temporarily disappeared. Of the almost eight million veterans who took advantage of the GI bill’s educational benefits, only a very small number were women. In the postwar years men became one and a half times more likely than women to occupy a place in the college classroom, and many college doors remained closed to racial/ethnic minorities (Goldin et al. 2006; Greenberg 1997). Black veterans were shut out of segregated, white-only colleges and found few seats open to them in overcrowded historically black colleges.

These trends continued until the 1960s, when the passage of civil rights legislation and the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 began to expand postsecondary opportunities for previously underrepresented groups, including women, racial/ethnic minorities and, later in the 1970s, individuals with disabilities. Women began to enroll in colleges in record numbers beginning in the late
1960s, when a changing economy, access to birth control, and second-wave feminist movements together challenged and redefined family dynamics and women's roles in the household and workplace (Moen and Yu 2000). Women's entry into colleges was further enabled in 1972, when colleges and universities receiving any form of public financing were legally required by the federal government to open their doors to women as a result of Title IX, a landmark amendment to the HEA of 1965. As a result of these cultural and legislative changes, the proportion of women earning bachelor's degrees began to steadily outpace men beginning in 1982, a gender shift that persists and has been reflected more recently in women's predominance in master's and PhD programs (Aud et al. 2012; Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko 2006; Jacobs 1996).

Around the same time that Civil Rights legislation and Title IX expanded educational opportunities for women and racial/ethnic minorities, legislators also began to recognize the need to facilitate college access for low-income students. With the implementation of the federal Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (BEOG) program, students with limited economic resources were increasingly able to pursue a college degree in order to participate more fully in the then burgeoning informational economy. Rhode Island senator Claiborne Pell in the 1970s initiated the needs-based financial assistance program for post-secondary schooling—renamed the Pell Grant program in 1980—citing the post–World War II GI Bill as partial inspiration. Pell hoped to replicate the successes experienced by many U.S. veterans through the program's provision of financial assistance to men and women who desired a college education but had been denied such an opportunity due to their limited financial resources.

Around the same time that the BEOG program emerged, Senator Pell also worked actively with Vermont senator Robert T. Stafford to establish the Federal Guaranteed Student Loan Program, later renamed after Senator Stafford in 1988, which provided low-interest loans to college students. By 2016 just under half of all first-time, full-time undergraduates were awarded Stafford Loans as a means of funding their college education (McFarland et al. 2018: 217). The Pell Grant Program, along with the Stafford Loan Program and contemporary versions of the GI Bill, have enabled generations of low- and middle-income students to pursue postsecondary degrees and continue to provide financial assistance for eligible students today.

The New Economy: Investing in Colleges and Universities

The cultural shifts that expanded college access were also made possible due to a changing economy and a governmental focus on investing in science, technology, and national defense. With manufacturing jobs slowly being transformed by advancements in technology, the rise of the service sector, and the eroding power of labor unions, the likelihood of attaining a middle-class standard of
living with no more than a high school degree became increasingly difficult. Factory jobs, including those in the powerful steel and automotive industries, had by midcentury reached their peak in regard to job opportunities and career potential. Companies began to move many of their operations overseas, or jobs in these industries were eliminated as machines took over, creating new jobs, albeit fewer of them, that required training and knowledge in the fields of technology. Wages in these industries also began to stagnate and even falter as the power of labor unions decreased, in part a result of the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which legalized right-to-work laws. These laws stunted the growth of unions, who could no longer require that all employees join their ranks, thereby limiting labor’s power and influence in the workplace (Cohen and Kisker 2010). The jobs that emerged midcentury began to reflect a changing economic landscape where service and professional occupations increasingly dominated and educational expectations for employment intensified. Between 1967 and 2010, the earning power of a high school degree alone decreased by just over 17 percent, whereas the earning power of a college degree increased by almost 7 percent (Duncan and Murnane 2011).

Further, governmental decisions to invest in science, technology, and national defense projects were easily advanced in a post–World War II era marked by Cold War fears and a desire to assert scientific dominance in the wake of the Soviet Union’s launching of the Sputnik satellite. Colleges and universities benefited from the influx of federal dollars directed toward their science and technology programs, two such examples being the National Defense Research Committee’s investments in radar technologies at MIT and the Army Corps of Engineers’ collaboration with university scientists in researching the atomic bomb (Cohen and Kisker 2010: 189). With the passage of the National Defense Education Act in 1958, the vast expansion of the National Institutes of Health, and the establishment of the National Science Foundation in the aftermath of World War II, colleges and universities could for a time rely on steady streams of funding from these federal organizations as their research functions expanded and their role in educating a scientific and technologically savvy workforce increased (Kerr 1963; Lucas 2006).

The increased access to and hence demand for a postsecondary education likewise paralleled the expansion of public college and university systems. Although an organizational structure of higher education had been emerging over the course of the century, the tiered system of community colleges and state colleges and universities that presently defines many of the nation’s public institutions is in part a product of President Harry Truman’s President’s Commission on Higher Education, formed in 1946. The Commission’s task, as outlined in Truman’s appointment letters, was to facilitate access for World War II veterans returning from war and to assess “the functions of higher education in our democracy and of the means by which they can best be performed.”
In 1948, Truman’s Commission produced a plan of action that clarified the role of community colleges, a term that commission members introduced to refer to those postsecondary institutions “designed to serve chiefly local community education needs” (vol. 3: 5). As the proposed name suggests, community colleges were intended to serve local students, in particular older, “adult” students, who sought an education that focused on the thirteenth and fourteenth years of schooling. This community college education would be free and available to all “regardless of race, creed, color, sex, or economic status” (vol. 5: 3). For those students intending to pursue careers in teaching, journalism, art, or music, the system of public colleges of arts and sciences and teachers colleges were expected to provide two- and four-year programs encompassing a broad general education (vol. 3: 17). Finally, universities and professional schools would likewise provide a broad education with the addition of offering more applied programs in areas such as health, agriculture, and engineering, along with opportunities to pursue graduate degrees. To finance such developments, the Commission proposed that the government invest over $2.5 billion in facilities, salaries, and scholarships, a significant sum of money that was nonetheless argued to be a worthwhile investment, providing both short- and long-term benefits to the nation.

As more high school graduates sought a college education and as federal spending on higher education grew, individual states began to evaluate the structure and organization of their public institutions in an attempt to meet the needs of an ever-expanding student population. Building on the Truman Commission’s vision of public higher education, former University of California president Clark Kerr in 1960 introduced his “Master Plan,” which described a coordinated state-level system of community colleges, state colleges, and research universities that served as a model for many states that were, like the federal government, investing heavily in postsecondary education. The plan hierarchically ranked three tiers of postsecondary education, with community colleges providing either vocational degrees or entrée into the more selective state colleges or the even more selective public research universities.

With the government investing money into higher education and with Truman’s Commission on Higher Education and Kerr’s Master Plan providing blueprints for the development of a tiered public college system to accommodate the influx of students with varying academic abilities, economic resources, and educational goals, college enrollment in public institutions increased dramatically across the United States. At the turn of the twentieth century, postsecondary institutions awarded approximately twenty-nine thousand degrees. By 1950, that figure had increased to over half a million, and over 2.3 million students were enrolled in a college or university (Lucas 2006: 247). By 1990, approximately 10.5 million of the then 12.5 million postsecondary students attended public colleges or universities (Lucas 2006: 249). In 2010, approximately 76 percent of the over eighteen million students attending degree-granting postsecondary institutions
were enrolled in public colleges or universities (Aud et al. 2012). The expansion of public colleges and universities transformed the educational landscape, and for a time, increased access to higher education as had been envisioned by Morrill, the Truman Commission, Kerr, and so many others who saw higher education as necessary to alleviate inequalities and provide for a thriving economy and democracy.

The Twenty-First-Century College Student

The myriad cultural, political, and economic changes described above have shaped current student demographics and in one way or another facilitated the growth on college campuses of the overall student population. As the system of higher education expanded and the economy shifted, adults who might have otherwise directly entered the military or job market upon graduating high school began to rethink their post–high school options. They both have the opportunity to attend college and have begun to feel the pressure to pursue two-year, four-year, or postgraduate degrees.

Today, of the over twenty million students enrolled in colleges or universities, almost nine million are over the age of twenty-five (NCES 2016). The National Center for Educational Statistics found that between the years 2000 and 2009, the enrollment of students over the age of twenty-five increased by 43 percent, and the center predicted an additional 23 percent increase during the next decade (NCES 2011). Importantly, a distinct majority of those students are women (see table 2.1). In 1970, 28 percent of the college student population consisted of students age twenty-five and over, and 63 percent of those students were men.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2.1</th>
<th>Percent of Students Enrolled in Degree-Granting Institutions by Age and Gender, 1970–2010 (Percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages 24 and Under</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ Age 24 Women</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≤ Age 24 Men</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 25 and Older</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ Age 25 Women</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ Age 25 Men</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By 1990 the total percent of the college student population age twenty-five and over had increased dramatically, and the gender proportions had reversed. In 2010, almost 40 percent of all college students were age twenty-five and over, and 60 percent of those older students were women. The gender disparity between men and women has consistently been higher for students age twenty-five and over than for those under the age of twenty-five. In 2010, approximately 8 percent more women than men under the age of twenty-five enrolled in college, whereas the gap between women and men age twenty-five and over was 20 percent, with women vastly outnumbering men.

It is true that possessing a college degree is likely to improve one’s position in the labor market, and the rewards in terms of future income are on average higher for those with a college degree, particularly a graduate-level degree, than for those without. That is one important reason why more individuals are enrolling in college—enrollment increased by 28 percent between 2000 and 2016 and is predicted to increase another 3 percent between 2016 and 2027 (NCES 2018). Goldin and Katz (2007, 2009) find that the value of a college degree in terms of earning power is higher today than it was during the latter decades of the twentieth century. The economic value of a college degree actually decreased between the years of 1910 and 1980, but as the supply of college graduates has leveled out, the monetary return for possessing a degree has steadily risen since the 1980s.

Economists, however, cite concern for future college graduates because the proportion of middle-class jobs that can provide a sustainable living wage is decreasing. Recent studies reveal that job prospects are best for those individuals in the highest- and lowest-paid fields, with jobs in the middle sphere steadily being replaced or significantly altered by computerization (Autor and Dorn 2013; Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006). Further, not every student who enters into the world of higher education ends up leaving with a degree, and those who are most likely to slip away are those with the fewest resources and the greatest needs. The six-year graduation rates for students pursuing a bachelor’s degree, a typical benchmark for most bachelor’s degree–granting institutions, reveal significant gaps along the lines of race, gender, and institutional selectivity (see table 2.2). College retention rates for all students pursuing baccalaureate degrees are highest in nonprofit private colleges, both selective and nonselective institutions, which are often smaller and more likely to have low student to faculty ratios than most public colleges and universities. Retention rates are lowest in for-profit private colleges, which are best known for providing online programs that are particularly attractive for working adults (Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner 2010; McMillan Cottom 2017). Finally, the low retention rates of black, Latinx, and Native American students have been a persistent problem facing many of our nation’s colleges and universities of all levels and types over many decades (Harper and Reskin 2005; Ross et al. 2012).
Beginning in 2008, student enrollment levels in private institutions steadily outpaced enrollment in public colleges and universities, primarily a result of highly successful online programs offered by for-profit colleges. Between the years of 1998 and 2008, for-profit colleges increased the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded to students by over 400 percent (Staklis, Bersudskaya, and Horn 2011). Although the vast majority of students in the United States attend nonprofit or public colleges, nearly 10 percent of all postsecondary students are now enrolled in for-profit institutions, and since many of these students qualify for federal financial aid, some legislators who have become keen on either cutting college costs or federal assistance programs (although the two are not always mutually exclusive) have come to agree that for-profit universities warrant careful observation.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2.2</th>
<th>Six-Year Graduation Rate of Students Seeking Bachelor’s Degrees Beginning in 2009 by Gender, Race, and Institutional Selectivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public—All</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Selective*</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Selective</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit—All</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Selective</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Selective</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-Profit—All</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* “Least Selective” refers to colleges that are open to all applicants due to their open admission policies and “Most Selective” refers to colleges that accept fewer than 25 percent of applicants.

The Meaning of a College Degree

As Clark Kerr watched his Master Plan come to life in the 1960s and access to college continuously increased, a number of scholars began to actively criticize the role that higher education had come to serve in our rapidly evolving civil society. These scholars were wary of the ways in which colleges and universities had come to legitimize their function in the social landscape.\(^8\) They rejected instrumentalist framings and “human capital” theories put forth by economists that encouraged politicians and university administrators alike to view education narrowly as a means of investing in one’s future occupation and as a vehicle for improving the economy.\(^9\) Individuals who invest in a college degree, so goes the argument of human capital theorists, will gain the necessary skills and knowledge to reap the rewards of that investment in regard to higher earnings. Such a view was perceived to be not only shortsighted but disingenuous according to the critics of human capital framings.

Scholars criticizing instrumentalist, human capital framings argued two key points, offering up words of caution as college and university systems rapidly expanded. First, they expressed concern that colleges and universities were increasingly focusing their stated missions on job training and producing narrowly skilled employees at the expense of advocating for a broad-based education that allowed for the holistic intellectual development of a knowledgeable citizenry. Second, some of these scholars contended that most colleges, particularly baccalaureate-granting, elite institutions, were not and never had been particularly interested in the process of job and skill training anyway. They were instead concerned with credentialing and maintaining or increasing the value of the credentials they had to offer to students. Ivy League and highly selective small liberal arts institutions have traditionally emphasized and continue to promote general learning, not job-specific skills, within their baccalaureate curriculum (Mullen 2010). These institutions instead rely on the reputations of their institutions and prestigious networks of alumni to ensure the continued value of their credentials to provide access to jobs, successful careers, or graduate school, where students will acquire additional credentials and more job-specific knowledge. In sum, these scholars criticizing instrumentalist appeals highlight the disjunctions between discourses surrounding higher education and their reality. Whether colleges and universities were promoting job skills or credentials, institutions of higher education found instrumentalist appeals to be beneficial in that they ensured a steady increase in their student enrollment.

Certainly, instrumentalist framings continue to resonate with many twenty-first-century college students in various ways as I will elaborate in later chapters. The narrative that college is necessary for a successful career has firmly taken hold in the public imagination, and for many people it represents attainment of
the American Dream. Most of the students whom I interviewed also recognize the credentialing function of higher education in the contemporary economy and culture. They may not consciously distinguish the difference between acquiring job skills and a credential, but they understand these distinct yet related educational objectives. We see this framing of higher education reflected in the opening of this chapter when Rou rhetorically asks, “If you don’t have a paper, how credible are you?” Rou has held many jobs and possesses a number of skills, but he has never obtained a degree that validates his knowledge via an educational credential. Many younger students like Amber, who have less work experience than older students like Rou, explicitly address a desire to acquire both job skills and a credential. She expects to acquire practical knowledge regarding curriculum content, class management skills, and a degree that will credential her to teach high school students.

Just as students talk about the economic and cultural value of job skills and “a paper” or degree, most political discourse that addresses the purpose of public education in the twenty-first century also highlights and conflates the credentialing and job skill development functions of colleges and universities. Policymakers who otherwise occupy opposing positions on the political spectrum nevertheless tend to come together in the way that they articulate the value of public higher education in regard to skills, credentials, the economy, and jobs. Within the political sphere, the instrumentalist rhetoric of human capital reigns, and increasing job-skill development and credentialing are presumed to predict the future success of our contemporary economy.

In his 2014 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama reasserted his commitment to making college affordable for all and to strengthening a particular kind of education that leads to the development of human capital and employment. To reinforce the connection between college and jobs, he maintained, “We’re working to redesign high schools and partner them with colleges and employers that offer the real-world education and hands-on training that can lead directly to a job and career.” We are surrounded by public discourse that links going to college with getting a job, and so, unsurprisingly, such discourse shapes the way many individuals have come to conceptualize not only the purpose of pursuing a degree but also, as Obama’s statement suggests, the kind of education that should be provided in our institutions of higher education.

When politicians express these perspectives, their words are often tied to policy-based initiatives and funding that can ultimately influence the educational opportunities that are available in the public sphere. In 2012, Governor Rick Scott of Florida challenged his state’s public colleges and universities to charge lower tuition for degree programs with high job-placement rates for their graduates. Governor Scott’s call for change was not taken up by Florida’s state colleges, but his proposal incited heated public discussion regarding the kind
of programs and curricula that colleges ought to provide. Scott’s challenge reflects the idea that college is intended to develop an educated workforce in this twenty-first-century economy and that the value of college programs that are not directly connected to identifiable jobs ought to be questioned.

Instrumentalist framings also informed debates over fifteen years earlier as legislators discussed reforming social welfare programs for low-income families. U.S. welfare reform in 1996 notoriously shifted the focus of the former entitlement program—which provided public assistance to low-income families—limiting access to higher education and instead emphasizing paid work. Thereafter, cash support was given only to parents, mostly mothers, who worked toward high school or short-term degree or certificate programs that were directly connected to the local job market. Little or no support was provided to parents seeking baccalaureate or graduate-level degrees. Such a dramatic shift was easy to make in a world in which the central function of higher education is perceived to be job preparation.¹⁰

Both Scott’s and welfare reformers’ proposals are grounded in the belief that the primary purpose of a college education is to provide students with the skills and training necessary to succeed in a specific job. When articulated in this way, any educational experience that is not directly related to a job is evaluated as less essential and hence, according to Scott’s proposal, ought to cost more for the student desiring that educational experience, or, according to the drafters of the 1996 welfare reform, should not be a program-supported option for those mothers or fathers receiving public child-care or cash assistance. Such policy debates reveal that not all college programs are considered equal when job training is determined to be the foremost function of higher education.

According to current welfare policy in most states, a low-income mother will not receive public support if she pursues a baccalaureate degree in philosophy, but she may receive assistance if she instead enrolls in a short-term program to receive her certification as an electrical technician or early childhood educator. The logic guiding political discourse resulting in the construction of such policies works in part because it remains perfectly aligned with instrumentalist framings that narrowly define the value of an education as access to jobs. Who knows what access to jobs, if any, that a degree in philosophy from a state university may promise, but a certified electrical technician is likely to find work in construction or repairs, and there are plenty of positions available in the relatively low-paying but growing field of child care. In this way, politicians can argue convincingly that, for those individuals receiving public assistance, only certain kinds of degrees ought to be allowable and that linkages between degrees and specific jobs must be clear.

What we expect from a college education very much shapes the kind of education that is available in the twenty-first century. Educational initiatives and
political discourse that reify the relationship between education and the economy have long come to shape the way that many Americans have come to articulate their perspectives regarding the purpose of higher education in their lives. Perhaps even more importantly, such instrumentalist discourse can substantially influence the educational opportunities available to public colleges and universities and segments of the population that are most dependent on local and state-provided funds and resources (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2017). And those students who are most dependent on needs-based financial aid are most likely to be targeted by for-profit colleges and universities that promise job skill development and upward social mobility but have been shown to have extraordinarily high dropout rates and credentials with questionable social value, particularly given their high price (McMillan Cottom 2017).

A symbiotic relationship between higher education and the marketplace has been growing for over 150 years, but as access to institutions of higher learning increased, students’ expectations and college experiences became more diversified and stratified. How we conceive of and talk about the purpose of higher education, both in political venues and in our homes, absolutely matters in regard to access and opportunity.

**Bringing “Heart” Back into the Conversation**

Instrumentalist logic and framings, however, have been challenged in recent years. In 2013, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (AAAS) published *The Heart of the Matter*, authored by the Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS), a diverse group of college administrators, politicians, company representatives, and artists, including the cellist Yo-Yo Ma, former Supreme Court justice David Souter, and Adobe Systems chairman of the board John E. Warnock. The Commission formed in 2010 at the behest of several members of the U.S. Congress to respond to political and popular discourse that had been targeting college degree programs and even specific courses, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences that were not perceived to be directly connected in any clear way to the economy. U.S. senators Lamar Alexander and Mark R. Warner expressed their concern quite clearly in a September 27, 2010, letter addressed to the AAAS: “Our strong tradition of research and scholarship in the humanities and social sciences—in history, jurisprudence, philosophy, foreign languages, cultural studies, sociology, and economics—is, in large part, responsible for our nation’s unique ability to evolve with historical circumstances. We are concerned that this great tradition of humanistic teaching and research is at risk, and as a result, puts the unique American character at risk as well” (qtd. in CHSS 2013: 63). Just over two months later, representatives David Price and Thomas E. Petri likewise shared their apprehensions regarding the fate
of a liberal arts education in college curriculum: “As other nations race to adopt the American system of liberal arts education as a foundation for economic growth and geopolitical competitiveness, our nation’s own humanistic research enterprise is shrinking as a result of growing financial challenges as well as a diminished interest in our national history and shared values” (qtd. in CHSS 2013: 65). These letters expressed bipartisan support for the Commission to address the public assault by various political leaders on the humanities and social sciences within our nation’s colleges and universities.

In addition to addressing the concerns conveyed by Republican and Democratic members of Congress, *The Heart of the Matter* was published to complement, if not in part to counter, reports produced in the last half century by organizations including the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. These reports have continuously emphasized the need to invest in science and technologies, including the National Academy’s 2007 publication *Rising above the Gathering Storm*, which advocated the strengthening of research and education in science, technology, engineering, and math. In the same spirit as these prior publications, *The Heart of the Matter* seeks to clarify the need for a general education and for courses in the humanities and social sciences in order to “create a more civil public discourse, a more adaptable and creative workforce, and a more secure nation” as well as to provide “a source of national memory and civic vigor, cultural understanding and communication, individual fulfillment, and the ideals we hold in common” (CHSS 2013: 9).

The authors of *The Heart of the Matter* foresaw that in calling for general support of a liberal arts education—the kind of education that is not provided in most lower-prestige vocational programs but that continues to define the curriculum in the nation’s most prestigious colleges and universities—they would likely be confronted with accusations of elitism. Their attempt to preserve interest in and support of the arts, humanities, and social sciences could be interpreted as a means of preserving the culture of the ivory tower status quo. In anticipation of such a condemnation, the Commission explicitly counters,

*How do we understand and manage change if we have no notion of the past? How do we understand ourselves if we have no notion of a society, culture, or world different from the one in which we live? A fully balanced curriculum—including the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences—provides opportunities for integrative thinking and imagination, for creativity and discovery, and for good citizenship. The humanities and social sciences are not merely elective, nor are they elite or elitist. They go beyond the immediate and instrumental to help us understand the past and future. They are necessary and they require our support in*
challenging times as well as in times of prosperity. They are critical to our pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, as described by our nation’s founders. They are *The Heart of the Matter.* (CHSS 2013:13)

The authors here invoke the phrase that ultimately became the title of the report, driving home their support for disciplines that do not serve explicitly utilitarian functions in the larger economy. They also reject the charge that integrating learning that is not job specific is elitist—quite the opposite, they argue that denying students the opportunity to engage in creative and integrative thought can limit them from fully understanding their world and engaging in it culturally, socially, and politically.

The spirit in which this report was conceived aligns with arguments presented by several contemporary critics who have expressed concern over the fact that so many students can only conceive of their education in economically utilitarian terms. In *College: What It Was, Is and Should Be*, Andrew Delbanco (2012) argues that at its essence, a college education ought to teach one “how to enjoy life” (p. 32). In making this point, Delbanco quotes another of his colleagues, Judith Shapiro, former president of Barnard College, who, in advising her students regarding their college expectations, tells them, “You want the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life” (p. 33). Ken Bain (2012), in *What the Best College Students Do*, similarly describes a liberal arts education as providing students with the opportunity to expand their experience of living. Bain writes, “What is life after all? It is experiencing reality over time, but if you can take any moment and enhance it, know it in historical context, explore its social context, dissect it and all its many voices, and integrate it into your experience, you can derive far more out of any one time and place. You can extend your life” (p. 204). CNN host and best-selling author Fareed Zakaria (2015) argues that “a liberal education gives us greater capacity to be good workers, but it will also give us the capacity to be good partners, friends, parents, and citizens” (p. 151). All these ideas very much reflect traditional arguments regarding the role of a general education and the liberal arts in contemporary universities. According to these lines of thought, a general education provides students with exposure to diverse disciplinary perspectives, enabling creative connections and thereby enhancing their understanding of the world and themselves. These debates regarding the purpose of higher education have existed in the United States since its founding but have become even more pervasive as both the availability and the cost of higher education have increased in recent decades.11

When I asked student parents to explain their educational motivations, all of them at some point resort to discourse that emphasizes their job and career goals; in other words, they readily turn to instrumentalist framings and logics. Yet, as I describe later in chapter 4, all but fourteen of these student parents
additionally rely, with varying influence, on framings that reflect “matters of the heart.” These students describe the importance of becoming open to diverse perspectives, earning social respect, developing self-confidence, and experiencing intellectual enrichment and empowerment. Although purely instrumentalist discourse regarding the value of higher education is clearly inadequate to reflect the complex and varied lived experiences of most of these students, such discourse has a firm grasp on our collective and political consciousness. We see all around us just how deeply ingrained are framings that emphasize skills, jobs, and national security, which shape the formation of cultural logics and public discussions of policy and, ultimately, the future of higher education.

AS A NATION, we have grown to accept and perceive as natural the relationship between formal education and success. We accept the idea that a college degree ensures one’s place in society and increases the likelihood of not only having a job during economically unstable times but a job that one enjoys and finds challenging—like owning a home, possessing a degree symbolically represents one’s having achieved the American dream. U.S. educational systems and their financing mechanisms have over the years grown to accommodate this perceived need for a college degree, a perceived need embraced not only by individuals hoping to attend college or university but by many legislators and employers, who like generations of their predecessors have expressed their belief in the value of higher education. The Morrill Land Grant Acts of the late 1800s and the GI Bill following World War II represented but two moments in our national history that clearly marked movement toward open access and opportunity, all while cultivating a relationship between institutions of higher education and industry.

All the student parents in this study—like Rou, Amber, and Carol—believe that their education will provide them with a better job and their families with a better life. For now, these student parents are surviving and hopeful. They are not among the high number of students who will drop out of the community colleges and state universities that they attend. These student parents accept the ideas and world views that have emerged from our nation’s history of higher education, which draw linkages between the economy, a college education, and the American dream. So having been provided with access and a belief in opportunity, how do they select a college, finance their education, and navigate campus? Ultimately, what do their experiences as they attend college reveal about our system of public higher education in the twenty-first century? I now turn to those questions in the following chapter, exploring the various structural and cultural factors that shape the campus experiences of these student parents.