What Students Want and Why

What do we expect from a college education? To answer this question, the Pew Research Center in 2011 surveyed a random sample of U.S. residents to find out what they believed to be the purpose of college. The researchers found that 47 percent of respondents say that providing work-related skills and knowledge was most important to a college’s mission, whereas 39 percent said that helping a student to grow personally and intellectually was most important (Taylor et al. 2011). When I asked student parents in this study what they believe to be the purpose of higher education, nearly all of them at some point framed their answers by emphasizing the relationship between education and acquiring job skills and career preparation. All of these student parents have been exposed to such instrumentalist discourse at home, at school, in their communities, and in the media. Like most of us, they have come to accept the idea that, for most people, it is just common sense that attending college is necessary to succeed financially.

That said, students in this study varied significantly in how much and how deeply they relied on instrumentalist discourse to articulate their understanding of the purpose and value of their own college education. Like the 39 percent of respondents surveyed by the Pew Research Center who said that colleges should prioritize personal and intellectual growth, 35 percent of these student parents described the value of their college experience in ways that moved beyond the mere acquisition of job-related knowledge and skills. In analyzing these student parents’ responses to my questions, I found that students tended to fall into one of three groups in regard to how they described their student identities: job seekers, practical explorers, and self-reflective learners.

In the sections that follow, I describe how each of these three groups reflects a distinct disposition toward higher education that in turn shapes the way that members of each group discuss their understanding of the college experience.
To that end, I explore students’ strategies of being—that is, how they make sense of their perceived needs and sense of self by embracing, modifying, or rejecting complementary or competing cultural logics, all in the context of their access to social resources. Such an analysis allows us to understand more fully how institutions and culture play out in student parents’ lives, shaping their processes of meaning making and their dispositions to action.

Although the three categories that I describe are distinct, I must emphasize that individuals’ cultured capacities and strategies of being emanate from a complex interplay between specific situations and cultural and institutional forces that are at any moment open to change. As Ann Swidler (2001) reminds us, “People may also develop new cultural capacities by modifying ones they already possess, or by prolonged contact with models whose styles and habits they can imitate” (p. 209). As I describe later, some students describe their former, often much younger, student selves in ways that reveal they would likely have been categorized differently years earlier. That is, students might be more or less likely to embrace particular cultural logics during different stages of their life course. However, this snapshot provides an opportunity to examine the various ways students have come to understand and reflect upon their educational motivations and expectations and then place those expressions of meaning making in the context of educational and economic opportunity.

Job Seekers

Just over a third of the student parents I interviewed discuss their educational dispositions largely in terms relating to their anticipated job. They are “job seekers,” who are focused on skill building or credentialing and completing their degree as quickly as possible with the intention of obtaining economically rewarding jobs. Job seekers may fleetingly reference the importance of taking classes to become, in their words, “well rounded,” but they do not talk with any depth about what that means or how such educational experiences might shape their sense of self beyond making them more attractive to potential employers. They rely overwhelmingly on cultural logics grounded in instrumentalist discourse to make sense of their educational motivations and expectations.

Jackie and Dave: Economic Security

Although not all job seekers are from low-income or lower-middle-class backgrounds, nine of the fourteen students who qualify for and receive Pell Grants fall into this group. It is not at all surprising that individuals experiencing economic precariousness would be more likely than those coming from more economically stable households to turn to talk of jobs and the logic of economic security. When I meet with Jackie, a thirty-one-year-old secondary education student who is living with her parents so they can help her to care for her daughter,
she never once mentions an educational motivational factor that is not focused on a job. Jackie is wholly convinced that “you have to have money or some kinds of means of support,” and that “the only way you can have more finances is with education nowadays.” Jackie tells her seven-year-old daughter, “College is not an option. You have to do it; it’s mandatory.” Because she is in effect a single mother—her daughter’s father pays child support but is not involved in their day-to-day activities—she feels particularly pressed to obtain a job that will provide security and a stable income. She is interested in becoming a high school English teacher, but her 2.7 grade point average is too low for admittance to her college’s teacher education program. Neither of her parents, who emigrated from Puerto Rico when Jackie was young, possesses a college degree. Nevertheless, they fully support her educational ambitions, viewing them as a means of attaining a steady job that will allow her to become financially independent and economically secure.

Dave, as described in the previous chapter, is a twenty-year-old father whose girlfriend became unexpectedly pregnant during his first year of college. After his girlfriend gave birth to their son, Dave found that he couldn’t balance his parenting, educational, and athletic responsibilities. In his own words, “it was kind of too much all at once.” He had been accepted to the university on a track scholarship, but after learning he was going to be a father, he found his attention was diverted. He performed poorly in his classes, was placed on academic probation, and so lost his track scholarship in the middle of the season during his sophomore year.

When I ask Dave to describe the purpose of an education, he immediately addresses the pressure he feels to provide for his family, adding, “We’re living like, we’re in a bad area. A lot of drugs, gangs—all that kind of stuff. And I see this and that happening here. And I really see the influence of it. . . . I just want to get out of here.” Later in our interview, when I ask Dave about obstacles to his education, he immediately describes his family’s financial hardships:

The bills sometimes are overwhelming and—I’m still paying the gas bill off of last winter. And the energy assistance, like the state really doesn’t help out much. Like the energy assistance, we’re still on a waiting list for that. They say they help out. They help out the people they haven’t turned off already, so we have to wait until January for that, and it’s probably not going to come through. And the Section 8 helps you pay for your rent, by your income, so you pay like a percentage, pay like 15 percent of the rent, but we’ve been on a waiting list since my freshman year, so it’s like three years. We’re not waiting for that, because there’s no limit on that—once you got it you got it. So it’s hard to get openings, and you have to get an opening in your city. If it’s in [another city], I’d have to move there, and then I can’t go to school if I’m living there. So like financially it’s hard.
Dave has come to understand the grim reality of relying on strained and bureaucratic public assistance agencies and feels the weight of living paycheck to paycheck. As described previously, Dave was one of six students to financially qualify for cash and child care public assistance, and was the only one of the six to actually receive that support because his case manager was willing to overlook his attendance in a four-year baccalaureate program in lieu of short-term job preparedness programs. In Dave’s mind, a college degree means primarily two things: an opportunity to forgo dependence on unreliable and bureaucratically complicated public assistance programs and to move his family out of poverty.

Dave feels pressure from both sides of his family to fulfill the position of breadwinner, which helps to explain why he so strongly relies on a cultural logic that conceives of the value of his education in terms of alleviating financial hardship. Upon the recommendation of his college-educated father, Dave began pursuing a degree in management, with the hope that he will later be able to go on for his MBA. Earning a business degree makes sense to Dave, a seemingly practical goal that he hopes will lead to steady employment so he can move his family out of their “bad area,” pay his bills, and become economically secure.

**Victoria and Ed: Human Capital and Skills**

Victoria learned that she was pregnant over the summer between high school and college. During those summer months she was enrolled in a college access program that provides high school graduates who otherwise do not meet a local state university’s acceptance requirements with the opportunity to take college preparatory courses that will allow them to gain admittance in the fall. She finished out the summer program and successfully completed the fall semester of her first year before giving birth to her son. After her son was born, Victoria felt particularly motivated to return to school the following fall and complete her degree because she never wants her son to have to feel financially responsible for her well-being:

> Looking at my family’s past and their education and also looking at jobs today, it’s important to have a higher education. And I want to lay a foundation—not just for him—but for myself as well. That may sound a little selfish, but I know that as I get older, regardless of our smaller age gap, there may be a situation where I get sick or something like that, and I want to know that I can take care of myself rather than putting it on him and having him stop his life in order to support me.

Like Dave and Jackie, described in the prior section, economic security is paramount to Victoria, who believes that obtaining her degree will provide her with the “foundation” or human capital necessary to get what she wants, “a good paying job.”
Victoria was nineteen years old when I interviewed her, and she was studying both psychology and criminology. She perceives her general educational courses as being “unnecessary” and confesses, “I skipped past them to tell you the truth. I took a lot of the basic classes in high school. . . . I got that all out of the way.” More important to Victoria are the work experiences and connections that college will provide. She believes, “I think you should know what you’re getting into before you get into it. As well as, have experience in it, and I think that college allows us to do that with internships with the professors. I have professors who are prosecutors, judges, and bail bondsmen and everything, so you, you experience it before you get in there.” When I ask Victoria about the purpose of an education at various points during our interview, she exclusively refers to job training and employment. Even when I ask about her son’s father and his education, she focuses solely on how his education will lead to a specific job. Her son’s father is enrolled in a local community college but is considering enrolling in a local for-profit college that offers degrees that will train him to become an auto mechanic. In Victoria’s mind, a college education ought to first and foremost develop human capital, training future workers and providing the knowledge, skills, and experiences that are necessary for landing and keeping jobs. That’s what keeps her going to school.

Ed, a twenty-three-year-old veteran who is using his GI benefits to pursue a computer science degree maintains, “You still have the other, like, general [education] classes to fill in gaps and learn some more stuff,” but he appreciates that his current track is more “focused on whatever your major is.” Ed didn’t go to college straight out of high school—instead he chose to enter the army. Of that decision, Ed claims that when he graduated high school, he wasn’t interested in his courses, was just coasting through, and thought going into the army would be “cool.” Once he was actually in the army, he found that the experience wasn’t quite what he had expected. He didn’t like the strict structure and the job he was doing, so he left after his first four-year assignment and decided to take advantage of the educational benefits offered to veterans.

Ed, who is helping to raise his girlfriend’s two children, became a serious student, evidenced in part by his accomplishment of graduating from his bachelor’s program with a 4.0 grade point average. He contends that his experience in the military provided him with a sense of motivation and discipline that he didn’t possess when he first graduated high school and entered the army. Although he works hard in all of his general education classes, he focuses most of his attention on the skills that he is acquiring in his computer classes. Whenever I ask him about education and his classroom experiences, he talks exclusively about how they might relate to a future job in computer science. As he sees it, the purpose of a college education is to “set you up and get you going in the right direction and have the skills required to actually start up and start a job.”
Cynthia and Nicole: Credentialing Hoops

Although most of the job seekers emphasize the skills that they expect to acquire while pursuing their college degree, two student parents flatly reject the logic of human capital theories that stress the connection between education and job skills. Cynthia and Nicole express their skepticism regarding the true value of the education that they are pursuing, which they perceive as disconnected from the work they hope to engage in after graduation. In discussing her educational goals, Nicole, a twenty-nine-year-old mother studying business management, exasperatedly declares, “I don’t think [education] really matters, but I guess a little piece of paper does.” Cynthia, a twenty-three-year-old psychology student likewise responds with frustration when I ask her to explain what she believes to be the purpose of education:

I don’t know. I just think it’s just really . . . ’cause I live in the real world, so I kind of see it as pointless. It’s real hard because I know you need it to get your foot in the door. Certain employers will hire you ‘cause [you have] a four-year degree, and even though it doesn’t say specifically what major you get it in, they just want someone who has a four-year degree. But once you get into the job, you really don’t use it. For most entry level jobs, you really don’t use it. So I kind of see it as pointless for students that really want to seek it. Unless they’re going to something specific like what you’re doing or like being a doctor, things like that. But for everyday skills, I don’t think it’s really necessary.

Both Cynthia and Nicole are aggravated by what they perceive to be the credentialing hoop propped up by colleges and universities and reinforced by employers who can then use it to narrow a pool of applicants to those individuals who have acquired, if not specific job-related skills, at the very least a degree. They acknowledge the credentialing function of education, a role highlighted by researchers in the 1960s and 1970s who were critical of the ways that an ever-expanding system of higher education was legitimizing not only its social function but growth (Berg 1971; Collins 1979; see also Bills and Brown 2011).

Nonetheless, Cynthia and Nicole, like all the job seekers, persist in pursuing their education to get a job. Their strategies of being reveal how individuals can turn to competing or alternative logics, yet nonetheless end up reflecting the same overall disposition as the other job seekers. It is clear from Cynthia’s earlier comment that she is not at all convinced by the logic of human capital and skills. However, she adheres to the logic of economic security, believing that having the degree is necessary to “get your foot in the door” and obtain a job that will allow for upward mobility. When I asked Cynthia why employers might require a degree, she allows, “Well I guess they can sort of see that you’re dedicated to something. You can actually push through and do four years of school
and you’re literary—you can read and write. Maybe they see you as more competent than someone who doesn’t have an education.” Cynthia believes that the degree that she is pursuing will not necessarily provide her with specific knowledge or skills that she will use in the workplace, but the degree will communicate to potential employers that she is among the educated—she is capable of acquiring the status of college graduate. She fully understands the credentialing function of degrees in the current job market. In this “contest mobility” system of education (Collins 1979), she will have moved up to the next level, and her degree will reflect that accomplishment.

**Practical Explorers**

Twenty of the students in my sample are more expansive in how they describe the value of their education than are the job seekers just described. These practical explorers appeal to a variety of logics that very often are rooted in a desire for economic mobility but also explicitly emphasize social mobility and status. Practical explorers don’t want to have to worry about money and hope that their college degrees will help them to land financially lucrative jobs, but they are also interested in acquiring the respect and confidence that accompanies a rise in social status when one enters the college “club.” These students further differ from job seekers in regard to their strategies of being in that they value intellectual curiosity and express a genuine interest in learning more about themselves and the world. Rather than primarily focusing on the end result, practical explorers are for the most part enjoying the ride, relying on cultural logics that allow them to view their education as an experience and not just a hoop, an opportunity and not merely a bureaucratic requirement.

**Amber, Jose, and Charlie: Opportunities and Fulfilling Work**

Amber is a twenty-five-year-old student studying English with the expectation that she will go on to obtain her master’s degree in education so that she can teach high school. As described at the beginning of chapter 2, she and her husband divorced fourteen months ago, and her son, for whom she has primary custody, just celebrated his first birthday. When I ask Amber about the purpose of a college education, she first highlights the career opportunities that higher education can provide that allow for a “better life,” opportunities that have been denied to her parents who did not pursue an education beyond high school. Amber reflects, “Neither of my parents went to college, and I see them and they have decent jobs. They pay the bills. They’re just not happy. I mean they go to work ‘cause they have to. It’s not because it’s something that they want to do.” Of becoming a teacher, Amber proclaims, “This is something that I want to do. I want to have a job that I wake up and look forward to going to every day. And to me being a teacher would be that job. So I have to do that.”
Although Amber talks about the career benefits of earning a college degree, she is also very clear that the college years should be a time to explore subjects and learn more about the world. She contends that college students ought to express a “willingness to learn and openness,” and laments the fact that so many younger students feel pressured to link their college experience to specific jobs or careers. In mulling over her educational journey, Amber reflects, “You’re in high school; you have to decide what you want to do when you grow up. That’s a big decision. And half the time it doesn’t even turn out that way. You’ll go start doing that and you go to law school and realize, Hey I want to be a painter [laughs]. Just doesn’t work out right.”

Like most of the older student parents whom I interviewed, Amber’s educational history is rife with stops and starts. In chapter 2, I describe how she temporarily left school during the second semester of her sophomore year to finance and plan her wedding and then how she was essentially pushed out halfway through her junior year when she discovered that she was pregnant. She did not believe that continuing with her degree was possible as she prepared for the birth of her child and navigated a failing relationship with her new husband—they ended up divorcing in her eighth month of pregnancy. No one on campus followed up with her when she disappeared, and her family encouraged her to focus her immediate attention on her son. Fortunately, Amber has a strong familial network who encouraged her to resume pursuing her educational aspirations and help her out with child care, and although she has primary custody of their son, she describes her ex-husband as being an “involved dad.” Looking back over her educational career, Amber believes that having had the time and opportunity to take a variety of classes has both made her more “open” and helped her to develop and understand her love of English. She expresses a passion for reading and learning and is confident that she has selected a degree that will allow her to move into a teaching career that will allow her to continually stretch her intellect.

Most of these practical explorers spoke about the perceived purpose of education in similarly multifaceted ways. For one, like Amber, they rarely clung to one logic when describing their educational motivations and expectations. Instead they moved between narrative threads that focused on varying dimensions of their educational, job, and general life experiences. These practical explorers not only articulate their concern with securing a job that will provide economic stability, they also express a desire to obtain jobs that are intellectually or emotionally fulfilling. They are not solely moved by “practical,” job-related concerns; they additionally describe their appreciation of learning that promotes self-growth and enhances their comprehension of the world and their place in it. They are internally motivated to broaden their knowledge base and to demonstrate to their children the value of learning and continuing their education in life. These practical explorers overtly share their concern with obtaining a job that will furnish at the very least a middle-class standard of living, but they
perceive of their college and career experiences as part of a larger journey to be appreciated and not just as means to ends that must be endured.

Jose, a forty-five-year-old father of three who is majoring in history, believes that his college education will allow him to engage in work that aligns with his sense of self. When asked to describe a successful student, Jose recounts some advice that he provided to his college-aged son who was at the time struggling in his first year of college. He advised his son that students need “to know that [being a student] is really what they want to be and what they want to do.” Jose stresses that he does not care what kind of job his son obtains upon graduation; he states that if his children want to “to pick cans” for a living, that is up to them to decide. What is important to Jose, however, is that his children feel fulfilled by their educational experiences and eventually obtain college credentials.

Jose himself lives by this maxim. He left a steady job as a social worker, making $50,000 a year with only a high school diploma, but claims he did not like the work. As he describes it, “in his heart” he wanted to become a teacher, and so he left his job in social services to return to college and work part time as a paraprofessional in an elementary school classroom. Jose to some degree wishes that he had pursued this educational and career path sooner, but he also values his life experiences, which allow him to engage in class discussions armed with information that he did not possess over twenty years ago when he was a young college student. Although Jose is certainly job-focused in his current educational quest, he is also intensely concerned about his quality of living, which is not defined by income alone. He describes teaching as a “calling” and perceives himself to be a “teacher.” He has even obtained classroom experience as a long-term substitute in a fifth grade classroom but lacks the education and formal credentials that will allow him to follow that career pathway. There is no doubt that Jose is concerned with the exchange value of his college education in regard to obtaining a job, but he is also driven by the belief that the degree he will receive will allow him to obtain work that will fulfill his sense of self.

These older student parents have been working for a number of years and many, like Jose, desire a change and so seek an education that will provide them with a job that will foster their intellectual curiosity and provide continued learning and growth. Charlie, a thirty-four-year-old veteran and father of two is excited to be enrolled in a local community college’s computer information systems program. When I ask why he is choosing to pursue his associate’s degree, Charlie opens his explanation by deriding some of his younger college classmates, whom he claims are only there to “get a good job,” an objective that he claims to understand even though he finds his classmates’ perspective somewhat limited in scope. He dismisses their single-minded focus on money and emphasizes that his own motivation to return to college runs deeper. After years of performing what he refers to as “mediocre jobs for minimal pay,” he would like to earn a decent salary, but more importantly he hopes to create a
future in which he will “be able to get up in the morning, to go to work, and to be happy to do it. To not really look at it as a job, but look at it as an experience . . . to learn.” He sees his younger classmates as motivated purely by the potential income that might come with a degree in computer technology and not excited by the learning that is taking place in the classroom. In addition to sharing his appreciation of his classroom learning, Charlie expresses his need for work that is intellectually challenging and that will allow him to continue to learn.

Leslie and Drew: Social Status and Self-Confidence

Another dimension of the value of higher education described by many practical explorers resulted from their developing sense of confidence and satisfaction now that they are resuming and potentially completing a degree that they started many years prior. Leslie attended a regional state college over fourteen years ago following the birth of her son but then withdrew because balancing school and an infant was just too much to handle at that time in her life. She recently returned to a local community college to pursue again the music degree that she had begun so many years earlier. When I ask her about the purpose of an education, Leslie launches easily into a lengthy description of her family’s educational history and goals, admitting, “At my age [what is important] is confidence. It just gives you a sense of I’ve done something, I’ve finished. I finally completed something and earned it.” She confides that having a degree contributes to “feeling good” about herself, and she is eager to fulfill her educational goals.

Such self-confidence, however, is not wholly internally derived; Leslie also acknowledges the value of a college degree within the context of social interactions. In short, Leslie desires the societal status that a degree can confer, a fact made clear when she shares, “I’ve worked in factories. I’ve worked for lawyers. I’ve worked for private corporations, oil companies, the Danbury hospital, boutiques, retail stores, and I think the more education you have, the more respected you are. And more people treat you differently.” Not only does Leslie believe that pursuing her education will boost her self-confidence but it will likewise boost other people’s confidence in her as well and will provide her with increased social status. Leslie unequivocally adopts the language of human capital theory as she explains how all of her classes will serve her long-term career goals, discussing the job-specific skills that she will acquire in her general education courses. However, she also refers to what many sociologists refer to as cultural capital, when she states that her courses will provide her with “interesting things to talk about” and that “being well spoken is going to help you in any line of work, whether you’re teaching or in business or a public speaker or a professor.” It is not just job-specific skills that colleges and universities are expected impart, but also knowledge of culture that is deemed valuable in the context of
conversations and social interaction with others who share that knowledge. And such knowledge will not only help her in her chosen career but will also garner social respect in her community.

Drew, a twenty-three-year-old father studying communication, additionally describes the value of acquiring social capital, a concept that refers to the social relationships that an individual forms that can enhance one’s social and economic opportunities. When asked about the purpose of education, Drew maintains, “You really want to learn as much as you can about yourself, about the world, about where you belong in the world and what you want to do. I would say probably that and you really just, you want to meet other people and network yourself. I mean, that’s kind of a business thing, but you know, network yourself and enjoy your time of being away and having an environment that’s open.” Over half of the practical explorers acknowledge the value of acquiring cultural and social capital in college and highlight the respectability that possession of both types of capital can confer. When Leslie states that a college degree “helps you in life as far as being respected,” she echoes Randall Collins’s (1979) observation that, a “college education, once an incidental accompaniment of high status” had become by the latter part of the twentieth century a “prerequisite of mere respectability” (p. 129). These practical explorers are seeking entrée into the college “club,” and they fully believe that a college education and degree will procure that access.

Practical explorers are very clear that they are in school so that they might pursue jobs that are otherwise off-limits to them because they lack a college degree. However, these students are in most cases highly engaged in their studies and interconnect their classroom learning and what they hope to do as a career with various dimensions of their sense of self. They may question some individual curriculum requirements—for example, Diane, a thirty-four-year-old mother of three, is not convinced that she needs to take calculus if she plans to become an elementary school teacher. Another practical explorer, forty-two-year-old Sam, questions the value of taking a history course as he works toward earning a degree in physical therapy, even though he frequently mentions how another general education course, Introduction to Psychology, has fundamentally transformed the way he perceives learning and approaches parenting.

Overall, these students find value in most of the classes that they take and link what they are learning with experiences in other classes and in their lives. Practical explorers are concerned with acquiring skills and knowledge that will benefit them in the job market, but they more broadly define that which might benefit them to encompass cultural and social capital. They expect that from their college experience they will secure knowledge that will enhance their self-confidence and their attractiveness on the job market, all while gaining the respect of potential employers, friends, and family.
Self-Reflective Learners

Six student parents rarely if at all mentioned jobs when discussing the value of education. These self-reflective learners instead emphasized abstract skills, such as the importance of creative and critical thinking, introspective inquiry, and exploring diverse perspectives. They expect that good jobs will come their way in the long term, but at this moment in their academic career, they most value the opportunity to exercise their minds and to grow intellectually.

Joy, Molly, and Sara: Personal Enrichment and Growth

When asked about the purpose of education, Joy stops for a moment before working her way toward the following answer: “Wow, that’s an interesting question. Well, you know, first, honestly what comes to mind for me is not self-improvement so much—although I think it does lend itself to that—but just enriching. It’s so enriching. I love being in school. I really do. I could, I could be a student forever. I just love to learn. Learn, learn, learn, learn, learn, learn about all sorts of things.” Joy already possesses a master’s degree in early childhood education that led her to a job in a preschool that she eventually left because it did not make financial sense for their family for her to continue working full time while paying for child care. After many years working as a massage therapist, she is now interested in returning to college to pursue a degree in counseling. However, she mentions this career goal only once during the course of our interview; instead she spends much of our time together describing in very abstract language what she expects from her educational experience—she values her time in school, describing it as “enriching” and appreciates the sense of “fulfillment” that her experience as a student provides. Like so many of the practical explorers, a job for Joy serves a practical function in her life, but unlike them, she does not articulate self-fulfillment primarily in the context of the job she expects to attain.

Molly and Sara similarly describe their educational experiences as personally enriching, and highlight moments when their awareness of the world and their place in it grew. When asked about the purpose of education, Molly replies:

I think [the purpose of education is] to get out of your comfort zone and your egocentric little world, because I think that the one thing that I’ve learned is that there’s a whole big world out there. I probably could have stayed very contentedly in my little house with my little job and my little family and really not have had my eyes open to anything. But being here I think has just given me a sense of how small the world really is and that the possibilities are endless and that you need to think more about community and other people besides yourself. I come from a family of people who really haven’t gone that far, geographically or in any other way. So I think that it was kind of eye opening to get into a college atmosphere
and university atmosphere and just kind of the diversity on campus and things like that.

Molly then shares an anecdote from an anthropology class that challenged her to “think in ways that I never did before.” Her professor had the students read and discuss a book about whiteness, and she confessed, “I’d never thought about things like that and never pictured myself to be prejudiced . . . and then you kind of realize that inherently we kind of all are, whether we want to be or not. . . . And he just put things into perspective really.” Along the same lines, Sara reasons, “If you just get stuck in this closed up mind where, ‘Oh, well, I know what I know, and that’s all I need to know,’ then you don’t really learn anything. You don’t grow. There’s just so much to learn and so little time” [laughs]. Sara admits that “if it were up to me and I had all the money in the world, I would never leave school.”

**Rose and Lucille: Emotional Empowerment**

Two self-reflective learners speak poignantly and very specifically about their education being emotionally empowering. Rose, a twenty-five-year-old psychology student, talks at length about her Islamic identity and her current difficult familial situation. She began our interview by sharing her family story, which spilled from her steadily as she shared her frustrations and self-analyzed the complexities underlying her emotions and well-being. Rose moved to the United States when she was fourteen years old and is now trapped in an arranged marriage with a man who she believes will never grow to love her and who is dealing with a debilitating gambling addiction. She knew from the beginning of her marriage that there were problems—although she didn’t yet fully understand the depth of his compulsions. Her parents convinced her that she could change her potential husband, tame his wild streak and make him a good family man. Her family tried to support her, providing shelter and resources in times of need, but she felt her life was crumbling around her—she was financially and emotionally dependent on an addict, who seemed to have little respect or love for her. She had hoped that having a child together might change their relationship for the better, but instead she is finding that her husband is withdrawing even deeper into his addiction.

When Rose talks about the purpose and value of higher education, it soon becomes clear that being in school contributes to her feeling more hopeful and liberated. Rose credits her classes with teaching her how to open up and express herself:

**ROSE:** This year I took this psychology class, but it changed my life. You know, I’m more open now, more expressive, can express my, my feelings, my ideas. You know I’m more . . . I’m working on it. You know I’m not like perfect right now but, yeah I think I have a feeling that I’m going there. It helped me with my relationship with other people as well, outside school.
FIONA: How so? Can you remember a time?

ROSE: Anything. As I said, I’m more expressive now. Before if people said stuff to me, I would just like keep it in me and have that sad face—just keep it in you. But now I can say, “Oh, that kind of bothers me,” you know, like, “Hope that you don’t do it or say it anymore.” I’m more open, more talkative, more communicating with people.

Her interest in communication, culture, and behavior ultimately led her to major in psychology, and she is now considering a career as a high school counselor. Rose’s parents are first-generation immigrants from Turkey who did not attend college and adhere to a system of traditional religious beliefs, but she feels that they very much support her educational and professional goals, in part, she confides, because they feel guilty that they pushed her to marry her husband. Her husband’s family is also supportive of Rose and her educational goals, but they are rarely in the United States. They recently visited for six months to prepare for and celebrate her brother-in-law’s wedding—her brother-in-law and his new wife now live with Rose and her husband.

With her sister-in-law now living in the same household, Rose feels responsible for her well-being and is pushing her to become more self-reliant and economically independent. Even though Rose believes that her sister-in-law is not as educationally motivated as is she, Rose admits, “She’s learning. She’s a teenager, you know. I can’t expect more from her . . . . She realizes I’m supporting her. She even tells that—she even tells to her mom. She’ll be like, “Oh Rose is really like telling me to go to school, really encouraging me to go to school.” That is nice that she realizes that.” Rose feels “stronger” as a result of her education—learning how to reconcile varying strands of her identity as a woman, as a Muslim, and as a wife—and she hopes to pass on these ideas to her young sister-in-law and daughter. She expresses some regret for not waiting a few more years before giving birth to her daughter and pursuing her college education sooner—she finds it difficult now to balance her classes and duties at home. This belief is in part what is driving her to help her sister-in-law not to fall into the same predicament and to encourage her own daughter in her schooling.

Going to college has been a particularly liberating experience for Rose—as her words below reveal, she has gained strength from the communication and analytic skills that she has developed over the years:

Education makes you a better person I believe. So you’re not ignorant, you know? I believe with that I’m stronger. I can defend myself . . . . Because I’m Muslim, I cover up. People think, “Ah whatever,” you know? They don’t think that I could accomplish something . . . . Because everybody thinks Muslim people stay home, cook, clean and that’s it . . . . Some people think that I don’t even speak English, you know? People speak slow or whatever.
I mean covering up—it doesn’t make me old fashioned. But being modern, what is it? Being modern is wearing short clothes or showing your body, showing your hair? Is it being modern? I think people tend to think that way. I think being modern is in your mind. What is in your mind? How are you? Are you ignorant, or are you more accepting, more acknowledging about other cultures, you know? More understanding. This person may do something. Why that person did that, you know? There’s always a reason behind, maybe cultural, maybe religion, maybe personal. Try to understand about the person, just like not judge it right away. . . . That’s what I have become, you know, more acknowledging. If I see something, I just draw a conclusion or I stop and think, “Why, why does this happen?”

In addition to being afforded opportunities to refine and gain confidence in applying her analytic skills, she was able to access and make use of counseling resources on campus, and that alone changed her life tremendously. All of these experiences resulted in her feeling more empowered in both her personal and her public life.

In another section of our interview, Rose describes a moment in one of her psychology classes, when she learned about a study regarding gamblers and addiction, which helped her to understand more comprehensively the nature of her husband’s ailments. Throughout our interview, Rose interweaves discussion of her home life with that of her classroom and campus experiences, exposing the deeply ingrained interrelations between her conceptualizations of self, family, and education. She mentions her career goals once when I explicitly ask her to share them—she would like to become a high school counselor, a goal that she determined only recently, toward the end of her junior year. She is propelled to seek financial independence, so she can potentially leave her husband, but she primarily conceives of the value of her education in very abstract terms, focusing most of her discussion on the importance of expanding one’s understanding of oneself and the world.

The six self-reflective learners all similarly emphasize their desire to learn and the empowerment that can come from gaining knowledge. Lucille, who is introduced in chapter 3, is a thirty-three-year-old mother of two young boys. She shares, “Education for me is learning the skills that I need to make change.” Lucille is a student who is politically motivated to enact social change and is more concerned about the knowledge that she acquires in her classes than she is about the grade she receives. She admits, “I have to care to a certain extent ‘cause . . . that’s the way I get my financial aid. But when I walk into a class, I don’t care if I get an A or if I get a C. I just want to know that I learned something.” She describes learning as “building up your artillery” and argues that “you’ve got to have all your tools and everything in line.” Like Rose, Lucille attests to the many ways that she has grown due to her experience in the classroom—she feels more knowledgeable about herself and the world, and the information that she has
been exposed to encourages her to believe that she can improve her life and the lives of those around her.

As described previously, Lucille's educational journey has been fraught with diversions and obstructions. Lucille returned to school after a ten year absence, optimistic and eager to finish up what she had started. However, the transition was not so easy and when I met with her, Lucille was experiencing some tough times. For one, she was negotiating the educational needs of her autistic son who was enrolled in a public school that was not providing the resources that he needed to succeed. In addition, she was working two jobs because her husband had been laid off unexpectedly. Despite these everyday hardships, Lucille found the time and energy to become heavily involved in campus life, eventually serving as Senior President during her final year as an undergraduate student. She delivered a powerful speech regarding social justice and education at commencement in front of an audience of thousands. For Lucille, education confers a “state of mind” and an “artillery” of “tools” that she can then use to improve her own life and the lives of others.

These self-reflective learners embody the values espoused by public commentators defending the core of a liberal arts education (Roth 2014; Zakaria 2015). These students are motivated internally to expand their understanding of themselves and their world. They believe that their education is enriching their relationships and making their lives better, not just in terms of increased opportunity but in terms of their intellectual and emotional engagement. Easily drawing connections between their classroom lessons and their lives, these students are invested personally and deeply in their education.

**Why Understanding Cultural Logics and Strategies of Being Matters**

Attending college requires a significant investment of time, money, and emotion, and so the reasons why students attend college are predictably complex. Although all students are familiar with and generally accept the argument that possessing a college degree will increase their chances of achieving financial success, their educational expectations differ due to variations in how they come to understand the value of their education. As I describe earlier in this chapter, some students are primarily concerned with acquiring skills that they expect will secure future jobs. Others additionally express interest in acquiring cultural or social capital and value a college degree because of the social mobility it promises, not only in economic terms but also in regard to the level of respect or status that a degree garners in the context of social interactions. And yet others are very much internally driven to take advantage of the learning opportunities that a college education can provide, opportunities that contain the potential to lead to self-fulfillment and a greater knowledge and appreciation of their local and global communities. This latter group may indeed consider the career and
social status benefits of acquiring a college degree, but they alternatively articulate their motivations in terms that reflect a deep concern with self-growth, a desire to impact positively the lives of others, and emotional empowerment.

Because cultural logics are embedded in individual and sociohistorical contexts, both micro- and macrolevel social factors shape whether or not students will embrace, reject, or modify particular logics, emphasizing aspects of their individual identities that reflect the dispositions of a job seeker, practical explorer, or self-reflective learner. In my sample, the stability of a student’s household structure and access to financial resources are frequently connected to a student’s strategy of being—as is one’s age (see table 4.1). The ranges of students’ ages are similar for each of these three typologies; however, as a group, the job seekers are younger and less likely than the other groups to be in a stable relationship with a partner, which has the potential to negatively affect their financial stability.

Several of the practical explorers and self-reflective learners, particularly the older student parents, describe their former student selves—which for most of them existed in a place and time before they became parents—in ways that reflect the dispositions of job seekers. That is, they may have started out their student lives as job seekers but became practical explorers or self-reflective

<table>
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<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>Student Parents’ Educational Dispositions by Household Family Structure, Age,† and Income Status*</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Job Seekers</strong></td>
<td><strong>Practical Explorers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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<td>21*</td>
<td>26*</td>
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<td>23*</td>
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<td>31*</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
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* Numbers refer to age in years.
† Students who are receiving Pell Grants.

Source: Author.
learners over time. Heather, who began her college career at a selective non-profit private school over twenty years ago as a premed student, admits, “You have to want to be there, like back when I first started, I didn’t.” She dropped out after a semester and then jumped around from community college to community college until she had her first child and then turned her attention to family. As Heather describes her prior student self, her reflections reveal that she possessed the disposition of a job seeker—she chose premed primarily because she desired a stable income and was only in school because she felt that was what was expected in order to succeed financially. Heather now reflects the disposition of a practical explorer and is studying psychology as she weighs options for graduate school. She describes the opportunities that an education can provide and expresses the belief that college “has to be something you’re passionate about. What you’re studying, you have to really want it.”

Of the three typologies of student parents described in this chapter, those students who are most likely to be disenchanted with their college experiences and classroom learning are the job seekers. The job seekers in this study value the degree they intend to acquire but often question the value of their college learning experiences, particularly those experiences that they do not see as being directly related to their anticipated jobs. As a result, they are less connected to their student identities than are both the practical explorers and self-reflective learners. The hope that job seekers will graduate is no doubt diminished by the fact that they are less intellectually engaged in many of their classes than are their peers. Further, given the relatively large number of job seekers in this study who are single parents and whose low incomes result in their being eligible for and receiving Pell Grants, we ought to be highly concerned about their educational futures as a result of their more precarious social and economic contexts. Low-income students have the most to lose in regard to socioeconomic status if they should either not complete their education or see their educational credentials go unrewarded in an economy in which middle-class jobs are steadily dwindling (McMillan Cottom 2017; Mettler 2014).

Some of these job seekers will indeed graduate and locate positions that provide a viable income and economic mobility, in part due to the familial and social resources that are helping them to navigate college life. Even though Ed, a job seeker, primarily views his college education as consisting of a series of requirements to “get through,” he understands that he needs to do well in all his classes. He is a good student whose college-educated family members support his educational goals, especially his father, who teaches adjunct classes at the university that Ed is attending and can therefore help him to search out and make use of campus supports and offices when necessary. Ed also credits his military experience as providing him with the discipline to forge through classes that he might not enjoy but that he feels are necessary to complete to achieve his long-term goals. Further, the military provides him with tuition
waivers and a living stipend, so he feels he can afford his education at this particular time in his life. With all of these resources available to him, Ed can focus on his educational goals and hopes that the skills that he acquires in his computer information technology classes will aid him in landing a job in the burgeoning field of network security.

However, as I also describe in this chapter, another job seeker, Jackie, is struggling in many of her classes, and her goal of being accepted into her university’s education program and eventually becoming a teacher is not looking likely. Jackie’s parents do not possess college degrees, and although they express support for their children’s educational goals, they have few experiences of their own to draw upon when providing guidance to them in regard to their college education (Rondini 2016). Jackie’s younger brother was the first in her immediate family to graduate from college and now teaches at a local high school, while also pursuing his master’s degree. According to Jackie, “He’s basically the American dream,” and she hopes to follow in his footsteps. However, she is at this moment struggling academically. If she were to leave school, she is not convinced that the cosmetology certification that she received from her vocational high school, a much more narrowly focused and lower-level credential than a baccalaureate degree, is going to lead her to achieving financial independence, much less the American dream.

Ed’s and Jackie’s stories reveal the complex interplay between structural forces, such as financial resources and familial dynamics, and their educational dispositions as job seekers on their potential for success in college (Wells and Lynch 2012). Although Jackie’s parents provide her with a place to live and reliable child care, they cannot help her to navigate campus life in the way that Ed’s father can. Additionally, Ed’s partner is the primary caregiver of their two children, whereas Jackie is her daughter’s primary caregiver, and she receives only intermittent financial help from her daughter’s father. Ed is also granted significantly more federal and state financial support than is Jackie due to his GI benefits. Although both these job seekers are primarily interested in the job opportunities that their degrees may provide, for Ed, that may be enough to maintain his educational engagement and get him through his degree program. For Jackie, it’s not so clear—because job seekers are less connected to their learning experiences and student identities than are practical explorers and self-reflective learners, their access to supportive resources that will help them to stay in school is particularly important. Ed’s and Jackie’s stories demonstrate that students’ strategies of being do not function deterministically. How the effects of a particular disposition play out in a student’s life is highly dependent on the social supports and resources available to that student.

HOW STUDENTS MAKE SENSE of the value of their college experiences varies widely and reveals their reliance on cultural logics that reflect key dimensions
of long-held instrumentalist and liberal arts framings. The distinct dispositions that subsequently emerge are themselves embedded in an intricate web of social relations influencing action and potential success. For job seekers, education is a stepping-stone to paid work and, hopefully, a financially secure existence. These job seekers express motivations inspired by utilitarian framings that are only tenuously connected to their student identities. Practical explorers likewise seek economic security but also desire the prestige and social respect that possessing a degree can confer—a degree provides access not only to an advantageous income but to a desirable status and career that they expect will be intellectually and personally satisfying. Self-reflective learners identify first and foremost as students, who through their learning will gain insight about themselves and their world and hence control over their futures. Less concerned with the specific job skills that they might attain, self-reflective learners believe that education emotionally empowers people and in following their passion, they will become successful in all dimensions of life.

These educational dispositions, however, tell only part of each student’s story. Educational access and opportunity are tempered by a variety of institutional, economic, and cultural forces that are shaping their everyday actions and college pathways. As a result of the obstacles described in chapter 3, some of these students, particularly those job seekers with the fewest supportive resources, are at risk of not making it through and graduating with degrees—the obstacles they face are many and high. Other student parents are nearly assured of succeeding due to the value that they place on their student identity or their strong support networks and resources. Most, however, loom somewhere in between.

If student parents are to have the opportunity to realize their goals, they need sufficient financial, familial, and academic resources, but they also need policymakers and administrators to acknowledge the diverse cultural logics shaping their educational dispositions and expectations. Public colleges and universities were established to address the varied needs of communities, and we are now in the position of deciding whether or not those institutions are obliged to service those needs in all their complexity. A more full and nuanced understanding of students’ dispositions reveals that most students are not only concerned with their place in their local economies but also with the well-being of their minds, families, and communities.

In the following two chapters, I adjust the focus of this analysis to explore how more ideologically common, or broadly accepted, cultural logics function in students parents’ lives shaping their family and work experiences in the context of their educational journeys. An exploration of these moments reveals how students forge new meanings, particularly when a firmly entrenched cultural logic fails them. I now turn to these students parents’ home lives, to see how their educational experiences and dispositions shape their strategies of being outside of school.