“It’s a Marathon, Not a Sprint”

Final Thoughts

The mission of liberal learning in higher education should be to teach students to liberate, animate, cooperate, and instigate. Through doubt, imagination and hard work, students come to understand that they really can reshape themselves and their societies.

—Michael S. Roth, Beyond the University (2014: 195)

In 1946, Truman’s President’s Commission on Higher Education was asked to determine “the functions of higher education in our democracy and of the means by which they can best be performed.” Now, over seventy years later, it is again worth our tackling this task. College campuses are very different places than they were in the immediate wake of World War II. The substantial investment in public colleges and universities and advances in technology have made it possible to find a college classroom within miles of one’s home or even within the confines of one’s living room on a computer with internet access. We are caught in a moment of history when higher education is not only accessible but seemingly expected of nearly anyone seeking at least middle-class status. A college degree denotes both success and achievement of the American Dream, as young and older returning parents are enrolling in postsecondary programs with the hopes of improving their future opportunities. Even as tuition costs spiral upward, the student parents who are the focus of this study have decided to seek out those educational opportunities that are available to them.

However, as many researchers in recent decades have made clear and as this study affirms, not all students are benefiting from increased access. Not all students who enter college end up graduating, and too many students accrue high levels of debt with no credential to attest to their educational experience. The student parents whom I interviewed have decided to attend community colleges and state universities that are geographically close to their homes. Unfortunately, the retention rates at these public colleges and universities are often lower than those at private nonprofit colleges, which as a group are not only the most
difficult colleges to get into but also some of the most expensive colleges to attend. That said, the retention rates at public colleges and universities are higher than their usually more expensive, private for-profit college counterparts (U.S. Department of Education 2016). As a result, public colleges serve as a reliable “in between” option—they are convenient and comparably affordable for student parents or any students who are dependent on familial or local resources as they pursue their degrees.

The sociocultural analysis shared in these pages reveals just how students’ processes of meaning making are influenced by cultural logics and social institutions that enable or constrain student parents as they navigate complex gender, familial, and educational terrains. When cultural logics fail students, they sometimes reject those logics and seek out alternatives, as we saw with Cynthia and Nicole, who supplanted the logic of human capital and skills with that of credentialing hoops. We also see quite clearly how contemporary cultural logics regarding the purpose of higher education and the social value of caregiving, domestic, or educational labor, as well as student parents’ access to key resources, such as child care, financial aid, and academic and emotional support shape their educational journeys.

If student parents are to reap the potential benefits of a college education, however, several key issues need to be addressed. First, to ensure students’ access and success, colleges must accommodate the unique needs of diverse student populations, including students caring for children and family members, providing them with the child care and parenting resources that they need to thrive and graduate. Ultimately, these student parents show us how we might challenge old logics to make way for new narratives that allow for a more extensive understanding of education and for the possibility of greater gender equality in the home. If we enable them to attain their educational and parenting goals, we are helping them to fulfill their desire to become better students and better mothers and fathers. Second, we need to ensure not only that students can apply to college but that they can afford such an education without encumbering staggering debt. To that end, postsecondary administrators need to work with legislators to ensure adequate funding for public colleges and universities, which are increasingly underfunded and becoming out of reach for too many students. We also need to address the economic reality of a bifurcating job market that is with each passing year offering up more and more positions that do not pay a living wage and in which procuring adequate health care, housing, and child care is becoming increasingly costly. The effects of gendered industries, the demise of labor unions, outsourcing, and changes in technology have collectively produced rampant social inequalities and limit economic opportunity, particularly for those in the middle and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Finally, we need to acknowledge students’ varying expectations regarding the purpose of higher
education and to provide viable curricular and degree options that allow for flex-
ibility and personal growth, all while increasing economic and social opportu-
nity. In the sections that follow, I describe these three points in more detail.

**Reshaping Gender, Family, and College**

While pursuing their educational goals, many of these parents are reconceptu-
alizing what it means to be a mother or father and to value caregiving, household,
and educational labor. When student and parent responsibilities collide, these
collisions can produce discord or surprisingly harmonic opportunities. In some
contexts, student parents perceive no such discordance between their student
and parent identities. They are proud to be both students and parents and see
these identities as complementary—being a student can make them a better,
more informed parent, and being a parent has the potential to make them a bet-
ter, more focused student. As such, they are challenging the logic of separate
spheres and transforming our understanding of college, work, and family.

This is not to say that their responsibilities as students and parents do not
at times cause tension in their lives. When resources are tight—child care falls
through, bills need to be paid, available time is short—or when support from
one’s family member or professor is waning, then student parents may experi-
ence conflict. However, when students know that their children are well cared
for and safe, and when family members help them with household chores or pro-
fessors at least recognize if not accommodate their needs as parents, they are
more likely to feel that their parent and student identities are legitimized and
respected. When family and friends understand the value of their educational
labor and when professors and college administrators acknowledge the value of
their caregiving labor, student parents are less likely to feel disconnected and
more likely to weave these identities into a coherent whole.

At school, student parents bring to the classroom life experiences that have
the potential to enhance their learning and increase their motivation. Older stu-
dents, in particular, describe how they are better situated than they were when
they were seventeen or eighteen years old to make sense of the historical, politi-
cal, philosophical, and scientific knowledge presented in the classroom and con-
nect it to their experiences in their families, workplaces, and communities.
And at home, these student parents’ college experiences are providing them with
opportunities to model parenting and student behaviors that they hope will
shape the life course transitions and trajectories of their children. In some cases,
their children join them at the dining room table to do homework, while others
describe how their learning influences their parenting choices and styles. Just
as the women hospital workers interviewed by Garey (1999) engaged in strate-
gies of being that provided a means to weave together their worker and parent
identities, these student parents show us how they too are merging their student and parent identities. They see their successes as students being very much connected to their successes as parents.

Additionally, these student parents reveal how the structure and demands of their student lives result in their challenging traditional gender norms and reshaping the dynamics of gendered labor in their households. When heterosexual, partnered mothers return to college, life in their household and for their male partners changes in sometimes dramatic ways. Whether these mothers were formally employed or not before entering college, they are now less likely to be available to cook meals, clean the house, or care for children. Fathers and older children, both sons and daughters, are frequently asked to step up and contribute to more of the household and caregiving labor in the home. Mothers describe how, in asking fathers to increase their share of such labor, they are encouraging their partners to reconceptualize what it means to be a good father and to model good fathering to their children. At the same time, these mothers are redefining what it means to be a good mother, which means for them expanding their cultural understanding of good mothering to include letting dad take on more of the emotion work at home while mom is being a student and engaging in educational labor.

On the other hand, some of these fathers who are going back to school find that their masculinity is challenged as they in some cases relinquish breadwinning roles to focus on their education. Extended family members, and partners in particular, may not be supportive when fathers decide to forgo the short-term economic benefits of a job for the long-term benefits of a college degree. Like the student mothers described earlier in this chapter, these fathers are challenging their partners, family members, and friends to value their educational, caregiving, and household labor in ways that conceptualize masculinity more broadly. They want their work at school and at home to be legitimized and acknowledged as good fathering.

These student parents additionally reveal how organizational cultural shapes and is shaped by social institutions. Carolyn speaks for many student parents when she calls for a deeper “understanding” of caregivers’ needs on campus. We can begin to create “understanding” by addressing the ways policies, procedures, and culture function on college campuses and in social service offices, shaping the daily experiences of students who are parents. Because 26 percent of undergraduate students identify as caregivers for children under the age of eighteen, we cannot afford to ignore their needs (Gault et al. 2014). They are a significant and important student demographic that is too often invisible in much discourse about higher education. Through examining these parents’ experiences, we are presented with opportunities for change that might result in their feeling more accepted and less ostracized on campus.
These student parents are engaged in the hard work of negotiating cultural change, embracing, rejecting, and modifying cultural logics in ways that best suit their sense of self at a particular moment in time. Further, their processes of reevaluation and reconstruction are fundamentally affected by the cultural logics available to them and of the various structural resources that influence those opportunities and choices. From this research, we gain insight as to how state policy, postsecondary institutions, and individuals are challenging or reinforcing cultural logics and organizational norms within higher education.

Most of these student parents publically share their parental status on campus only when their responsibility as a parent comes in conflict with their student identity. Sometimes, upon “outing” themselves as parents, they find that their professors, administrators, and staff respond by providing additional support, as occurred in Dave’s case with his athletic coach. Other times they are told that they must adapt to the existing organizational structure as occurred with Lucille, who left the social work program in part due to class scheduling conflicts with her son’s school drop-off hours. In both cases, these students, like many other student parents, are very much aware of their outsider status and feel that the overall culture of many college campuses and social service offices does not fully acknowledge their specific needs as parents who are students.

As described earlier, a predominant theme that emerged from my analysis of these stories is students’ feeling of displacement. In the welfare office, in the financial aid office and on campuses where child care and the presence of children are nonexistent or minimal, these students are highly cognizant of their “nontraditional” status. If colleges and universities were to provide priority registration, flexible scheduling, sufficient and affordable child care facilities, and study hall or group meeting opportunities for student parents, these institutions would be publicly affirming these mothers’ and fathers’ parenting and student identities and reaffirming the democratic purpose of our nation’s institutions of higher education.

Some universities are already doing this extraordinarily well. The Keys to Degrees Program at Endicott College in Massachusetts, for example, provides comprehensive wraparound services that include family housing, counseling, parenting workshops, academic tutoring, mentoring, and child care for single parents who are pursuing their baccalaureate degrees. Across the country, Portland State University hosts a Resource Center for Students with Children. The center is housed in the Student Union in the middle of campus and provides counseling, peer groups, workshops, academic advising, and information about child care resources on campus, both full-time and subsidized drop-in emergency care. Many student parents actually work in the center, which is funded through student activity fees.
Importantly, both of these college programs provide campus-based child care. However, as funds for public colleges and universities dwindle, campus-based resources are some of the first programs to go, and campus-based child care is no exception. As reported in chapter 3, the number of campus-based child care centers has decreased precipitously since the 2008 recession (Gault et al. 2014). One way to avert this trend would be for the federal government to reinvest in the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program, which was established during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1998 and provides grants to colleges and universities to fund child care centers for student parents. Unfortunately, support for this program has been stagnant for most of its twenty years. The CCAMPIS program was defunded by 35 percent in 2003 and remained at the same funding level, on average between $15 and $16 million, for the next fourteen years. In 2017, the secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, included the CCAMPIS program on her list of programs to be eliminated, but in 2018 legislators ensured that the program was not only retained but doubly funded (Dzigbede and Bronstein 2017; Kreighbaum 2018). Although this recent funding move is promising for centers and parents who have long advocated for increased resources for child care, it is clear that the future of this grant program hangs in the balance and remains highly competitive as the demand for affordable child care dramatically outweighs the supply. Policymakers, campus-based child care providers, and parents will be watching.

The unstable funding of campus-based child care is concerning on a number of fronts. On-campus child care centers provide not only important caregiving services for parents but also often serve as an academic and research resource for faculty and students in disciplines as varied as early childhood education, psychology, social work, and nursing. They also have the potential to serve as a central networking site for parents on campus. These centers become places where parents meet and learn about other resources that are available to them on campus or in their communities (Small 2010). Finally, the symbolic role of such centers cannot be underestimated. Seeing children on campus communicates a message to faculty, staff, and students that children and families are valued in the larger campus community.

If student parents are to feel that they belong on campus, thereby increasing their likelihood of returning to school and graduating, faculty, staff, and administrators need to acknowledge and affirm their parental identities. Providing high-quality, flexible, affordable, and dependable child care allows student parents to engage with the campus community and to succeed academically. As outlined earlier, these students are not interested in the online programs available to them that are aggressively marketed to student parents and adult students. Until our social institutions adapt to the complex needs of families and caregivers, we will not fully redress the socioeconomic and gender inequalities that persistently plague our communities (Williams 2000). At the very least,
legislators and campus administrators need to advocate for increased and steady funding of the CCAMPIS program and for increased comprehensive child care and drop-in care on their campuses. Ultimately, these student parents’ responses highlight the ways institutions and organizations can simultaneously promote academic success and inclusivity, all while communicating symbolically an institution’s commitment to supporting their identities as students and as parents, improving our campuses for all.

**Making College Affordable**

It is a fact of our times that funding has declined significantly for the public colleges and universities where these student parents are enrolled. Simultaneously, financial aid covers less of the cost of our nation’s public colleges with each passing year. As more and more students are attending college, the proportion of state dollars contributed per student has declined 23 percent since the recession in 2008, and colleges have had to accommodate these cuts through cutting services and increasing tuition (Mitchell, Palacios, and Leachman 2014). All students attending public colleges and universities are hit hard by increasing tuition, but students attending community colleges and regional comprehensive state universities have been hit the hardest. In 2013, nearly 50 percent of the students attending Connecticut’s flagship research university took out federal loans as did 60 percent of the students attending one of the state’s four regional comprehensive universities. As college tuitions rise, many students, particularly those who work while also relying on loans, are increasingly likely to find themselves deciding how best to use their limited time—studying for an impending exam or sacrificing hours at work, which they need so that they can pay for the next term’s tuition.

Those student parents most affected by the diminishing value of financial aid resources are low-income parents, who are disproportionately single parents, racial or ethnic minorities, and women. Restrictive social welfare policies, in particular the decreasing access to child care subsidies or cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, negatively impact low-income student parents’ opportunities, often limiting the kinds of postsecondary education that students who are receiving public assistance can receive. Several of the student parents in this study have incomes low enough to qualify for social welfare programs that provide both cash assistance and funding for child care, but due to these programs’ restrictive regulations, case managers denied these students access to cash and child care support because they are pursuing a baccalaureate degree in lieu of pursuing full-time employment.

Additionally, low-income student parents are most likely to be affected by the reduced purchasing power of federal Pell Grants and rising college tuition rates. As public colleges see their resources dwindling, the costs for a college
education are passed on to individual students, and low-income parents are increasingly likely to find that they cannot afford to attend college. As described in chapter 2, these grants and loan programs were established to boost college access for low-income students. However, as Desiree’s and Lucille’s cases make clear, many younger, low-income parents do not qualify for these grants because their family incomes hover just above the poverty line. Also, these grants come nowhere near covering the full costs of a baccalaureate degree, even at state universities. Of the fourteen students in this study who are receiving Pell Grants, thirteen also took out Stafford Loans to subsidize their tuition and educational expenses. During the 2006–2007 academic year, when at least a quarter of these student parents were first interviewed, average annual tuition at the regional public four-year universities was $6,442—the maximum annual Pell Grant available was $4,050. Ten years later, during the 2016–2017 academic year, annual tuition had increased to $9,741, while the maximum annual Pell Grant for that same year was $5,815. Importantly most students do not receive the maximum Pell Grant amount. The average Pell Grant award in 2006–2007 was $2,482 and in 2016–2017 was $3,740, far below the cost of annual tuition for a public university in those same respective years (CCSU 2006, 2017; U.S. Department of Education 2017a).

When we examine the various financial resources that these student parents have taken advantage of, or tried to take advantage of, clear patterns emerge regarding who is most at risk of not completing their degree programs given current financial aid and college cost trends. The job seekers in this student parent sample are much more likely than both the practical explorers and the self-reflective leaners to receive Pell Grants to help finance their education. As described in chapter 4, job seekers describe the value of their education primarily in terms of the improved job prospects that a college degree can provide, and they are not strongly connected to their student identities. As a result, financial and familial supports are particularly important resources for these students if they are to remain in school and complete their degrees. Undeniably, low-income job seekers who are taking out loans to finance their education and are tenuously connected to their student identities are most at risk of leaving behind their educational goals, all while acquiring potentially significant debt and no degree. As described earlier, some of those low-income student parents have already been told by social service case managers to give up on college and instead find a job doing “anything” so that they at least qualify for child care benefits. Those student parents in particular perceive that college is not expected of them.

But substantial financial support can make a difference in whether or not job seekers persist and complete their degrees. Just as Pell Grant recipients are more likely to be job seekers, so are GI Bill recipients. Five of the eight student parents who identified as veterans are job seekers, yet these student parents who
have access to GI benefits to fund their college education feel that the financial aid systems in place and the campus-based offices that help them to navigate rules defining those benefits fully legitimize their student identities and foment a feeling of belonging in school. Three of these five job seekers—Jim, Lindsey, and Jess—are also taking out loans to cover costs such as rent, child care, or groceries since they are working fewer hours so that they can concentrate on their studies. Despite their weak connection to their student identities and their need to take out additional loans, their GI benefits, including tuition waivers in the state of Connecticut and living stipends, provide them with significant financial resources that keep them connected to their respective universities and in school.

In sum, tuition costs are steadily increasing, and financial aid resources are dwindling. If one does not choose a path in the armed services, lives in a state where tuition waivers are not provided, or is not fortunate enough to have ample family savings in reserve to cover the rising costs of college, then being on campus can feel more like a privilege than a right. To counter those trends, both federal and state governments need to resist trends toward austerity and instead reinvest in their public colleges and universities. Just as Truman’s Commission determined back in 1948 that substantial public investment was necessary to promote democracy and increase opportunity, we now need to acknowledge that recent trends toward disinvestment in higher education are contributing to increasing inequality.

To that end, several concrete changes can stem the current tide. First, federal and state social service offices should revise TANF legal guidelines to include long-term educational plans as a viable means of fulfilling program participants’ “work participation” requirements. Allowing low-income student parents to use their hours working toward their bachelor’s or graduate degrees will then provide them with access to cash benefits and much-needed child care so that they can focus on completing their degrees. Doing so will not only enhance the prospect of improving their family’s economic standing but will also provide them with an opportunity to serve as positive role models for their children as they daily demonstrate the value of education.

Maine’s Parents as Scholars (PaS) program is already doing this. After welfare reform in 1996, the federal government fundamentally altered the Aid to Families with Dependent Children public assistance program, transforming the funding process from being federally managed into block grants that are internally controlled by each state. In the wake of those legislative changes, Maine developed the PaS program in 1997, using maintenance of effort funds so that low-income parents who had been pursuing their associate’s or bachelor’s degrees could continue with their education while remaining eligible for TANF benefits. Although successful in graduating thousands of parents over the years, the PaS program has faced several challenges. It has never been able to attract
as many student parents as are eligible—the program is capped at two thousand participants per year but has never served more than nine hundred student parents at any one time. Adequately promoting and staffing the PaS program requires additional funding resources, but like many state governments, such resources are scant so many of Maine’s leaders have been looking to downsize and not increase the state workforce. Further, because of changes resulting from TANF’s reauthorization in 2005, which significantly narrowed eligible work participation activities that states can consider toward their reporting of work participation rates, students enrolled in PaS are not considered by federal funding offices as engaged in qualifying work activities. As a result, Maine has struggled to maintain the necessary work participation levels to continuously receive current block grant levels (Bone 2010). Until the federal government expands its definition of acceptable work participation activities to include all levels of higher education, states will continue to find it difficult to implement programs such as PaS.

In addition to altering welfare laws, states and the federal government need to increase resources for students to ensure that college is affordable and potentially debt-free. States, such as Tennessee and New York, and cities, including San Francisco, are already promising debt-free community college for their residents (Berndtson 2017; Siner 2017). At the time of this writing, nine states had introduced College Promise legislation in response to President Obama’s proposal in 2015 that community colleges be tuition free (U.S. Department of Education 2015a). To facilitate free college, the U.S. Department of Education needs to increase Pell Grants, which have not kept up with inflation, so they at the very minimum cover the tuition costs of attending public colleges and universities. Finally, states and the federal government need to invest directly in public colleges and universities to ensure that tuition is more affordable, while maintaining a high quality of education that can compare to private for-profit and nonprofit postsecondary counterparts. Such a commitment to investment in public institutions ensures equal access without sacrificing quality of educational experiences. At various moments in U.S. history, we have committed to maintaining access and affordability of higher education—we are again at such crossroads and must decide whether or not we have the will to change our current course and reverse growing inequality.

**Managing Diverse Expectations: Culture and Inequality**

In this climate marked by decreasing state funds and increasing tuition and student debt, educational narratives relying on cultural logics that equate the value of college in terms of job outcomes resonate strongly with politicians, voters, and students. Politicians invoke such a narrative when presenting educational initiatives or supporting legislation that emphasize the job skills that higher education can or ought to provide. Despite the prevalence of narrow
instrumentalist logics in public discourse, researchers and educational theorists studying U.S. higher education have long challenged the idea that a bachelor’s degree provides job-specific skills. A college education may impart some job-specific knowledge and skills, particularly in applied fields such as nursing or engineering, but for most people and many employers a college degree more often signals possession of general knowledge, transferable skills, and status, not job-specific skills. Earning a degree allows one to enter the “club” of college graduates, signaling that one has the self-discipline to complete that degree and that one has acquired wide-ranging knowledge about the world and its processes, systems, cultures, and people. The major one selects is often less important than the prestige of one’s college or university and finishing that degree.

It is true that elite colleges and universities are attractive to those who have access to them in part because their retention rates are much higher than those at nonelite universities. To a certain extent that is because those institutions are highly selective and admit only those students who are academically strong and intellectually connected to their student identities to begin with. Students attending elite colleges and universities understand that their degree will be publicly and positively recognized and can provide access into circles of students and alumni from that university and from similarly elite educational institutions. Importantly, many students attending elite colleges and universities expect to go on to graduate school for more job specific training and so do not expect a curriculum or undergraduate educational experience narrowly defined by instrumentalist discourse—in fact, most elite institutions explicitly promote their commitment to a broad liberal arts curriculum (Mullen 2010).

However, the student parents interviewed for this study are not attending elite universities, and most are either not cognizant of nor concerned with the prestige of their current institution. Nonetheless, they are very much aware of the status that a college degree can confer in the economic marketplace and in their communities. The students whom I identify as job seekers are primarily concerned with the marketplace value of their college degree. They want and expect a job at the end of their educational journey and will do what they must to earn that degree. Job seekers don’t talk at length, or in some cases at all, about their learning and perceive college to be an experience to “get through” in order to increase their economic standing. Cynthia contends that she sees college as “pointless” unless a student is going on to be a professor or a doctor. She continues, “For everyday skills, I don’t think it’s really necessary.” Cynthia is generally correct in her assessment. Most job skills in most work places are attained on the job. However, Cynthia also recognizes that to escape from a life limited by low-wage labor opportunities, she is going to need a credential, not necessarily job-skill training, and so that is why she is continuing to pursue her degree.

Practical explorers likewise expect their educational experience to pay off with a job but are additionally interested in what sociologists refer to as social
and cultural capital. Leslie specifically addresses the workplace benefits of acquiring cultural capital when she insists, “Having interesting things to talk about and 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.” But Leslie also describes how earning a degree represents a personal and social accomplishment. She adds, “[Getting a degree] just gives you a sense of I’ve done something. I’ve finished. I finally completed something and earned it.” Drew also discusses the opportunities to meet diverse people and develop social capital. In describing the value of going to college, he discloses, “You want to meet other people and network yourself. I mean, that’s kind of a business thing, but you know, network yourself.” For these practical explorers, acquiring a degree that will allow them to embark upon a career after graduation is important. However, these students are additionally motivated by their desire for the rise in status that comes along with being a member of the college “club.” They come to value the learning that takes place in a classroom environment because it provides them with an opportunity to become conversant and knowledgeable about a variety of subjects while meeting diverse people as they move up the social ladder.

Finally, self-reflective learners are those students whom Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University, would want attending his elite liberal arts college. Self-reflective learners are in college to be inspired and informed—they wish to learn more about themselves and others and to be actively involved in civil society. They wish to engage in creative and integrative thought so that they can fully understand their world and participate in it culturally, socially, and politically. Lucille explains how she values education by stressing, “It’s your hope that there’s a chance for the future. It’s not all about just, you know, I got an A. I graduated cum laude, la dee la. Yeah. It’s so not about that. I’ve realized that I really don’t care what I got in class. I care if I learned something.” These self-reflective learners are intellectually curious and passionate about expanding their understanding of life. Of all three groups, the self-reflective learners’ perspectives are most in line with contemporary advocates of a liberal arts education. They are concerned with the “heart of the matter.”

Of all three groups, I was most concerned about the job seekers. These job seekers are on average younger, lower in income, and more likely to be single parents than are the other students in this study and so are more likely at risk of not graduating with a degree. Those job seekers who are older, partnered, economically stable, or possess strong support systems will likely make it through—they tend to choose majors that are more applied or skill specific, such as computer information systems or criminology, and have the supports necessary to make it through to graduation. However, we ought to be concerned about those job seekers who are young, low-income, single parents, and/or lacking in support systems. It is this latter, more vulnerable group that is targeted by recent
welfare reform legislation that limits the educational opportunities supported by state and federal programs to short-term or vocational degrees. As McMillan Cottom (2017) reminds us, this latter group is more likely to comprise women, minorities, and minority women, all of whom are often targeted by for-profit colleges offering “risky credentials.” This latter group of job seekers is also likely to leave school altogether with no degree and likely some level of debt.

As outlined in chapter 6, job opportunities and the potential for upward economic mobility are constrained by numerous factors, including gendered economic and manufacturing trends, the demise of labor unions, and changes in technology resulting in jobs being eliminated or outsourced. In the face of these trends, earning a vocational or skills-based degree has been put forth by many policymakers as a solution to poverty, but as I reveal in chapter 6, such a solution is narrowly conceived. It is worth noting that two job seekers, Sam and Allie, took that short-term vocational route many years ago, earning associate’s degrees in heating, ventilation, air conditioning, and refrigeration (HVACR) and early childhood education, respectively. Jacqueline, another job seeker and a single mom, earned a cosmetology degree back in high school. These student parents were able to obtain jobs upon graduation, but the jobs then available to them proved to be unstable, uninteresting, and/or physically demanding and are no longer what they want. Yes, we will always need plumbers and early childhood educators, but such work is physically demanding, and many entry-level technology jobs quickly change or disappear when a computer can do the job better for less money. Limiting the educational opportunities of low-income parents to a vocational education cannot solve the problems of an economy that is constantly evolving and that disproportionately serves those in its upper tiers. Certainly a vocational education is a viable and even preferable choice for some, but it should not be the only available option.

If we provide free community college as I recommend earlier, and if those community colleges can link with local industries to provide high-quality skills training, then students who prefer such an education can avoid paying tens of thousands of dollars as did Sam when he pursued HVACR certification at an expensive for-profit institution. When community colleges are provided with the necessary resources to respond efficiently to local labor market needs, those students who desire such an education and their surrounding communities can potentially thrive.

Further, we must ensure that the opportunities provided by our public colleges and universities offer flexibility so that individuals can build upon prior credentials, particularly for those graduates of programs that offer job-specific and vocational training. As described in chapter 6, it is not unusual for student parents to move in and out of higher education, and the more that colleges and universities can do to ensure that students are building upon prior knowledge and skills and moving forward, the easier it is for students to reach their
educational goals. When policymakers focus merely on providing more short-term vocational or job-training programs, they too often presume that these students will not want to continue on to pursue an associate’s or baccalaureate degree, and research has long documented that black, Latinx, and low-income high school students are most likely to be tracked into short-term vocational programs and targeted by for-profit colleges offering job-specific certifications or degrees (Holland and Deluca 2016; McMillan Cottom 2017). As these stories reveal, student parents seek options and should not go into debt while exploring their options.

I acknowledge that none of these solutions confronts the problems caused by the credentialing function of higher education. We can certainly advocate for increased access to debt-free higher education, but so far I have left the credentialing function itself unquestioned. As the practical explorers in particular make clear, the credentialing function of higher education is firmly embedded not only in our economy but in our culture. These practical explorers value the opportunities for personal growth and the exposure to cultural and social capital that a formal college education provides—and they recognize and value the boost in social status that possessing a college degree promises. Researchers have long shown us that there is no getting around the status hierarchies that fundamentally inform our higher education systems and the process of credentialing (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Berg 1971; Collins 1979; Mullen 2010). We live in a social world defined by credentialing status inequalities—graduates versus dropouts, Yalies versus state university students, vocational certifications versus academic diplomas. I am convinced that moving beyond the race for numerically more or increasingly selective credentials will require a cultural transformation that is just not possible within the current system of education.

So what can we do? Changing culture is often slow going. Yet there is a way forward, and, although difficult, change is possible: we must start with the economy. As Allie and Joy found out, their credentials in early childhood education did not lead to lucrative jobs in a pink-collar service industry plagued with low wages and few if any health or retirement benefits. Legislators and employers need to ensure that the wages and benefits provided by all jobs will indeed provide a livable wage. Until minimum wages can actually lift a family out of poverty and citizens have access to affordable health care and housing, education alone cannot be expected to solve the problems of increasingly unequal wages and benefits. To that end, we must advocate for increased federal minimum wages and stronger union representation—the Fight for $15 movement, begun in New York City in 2012, provides a pathway for creating change on these fronts.¹ Until we structure an economy that at the very least provides more equitable wages and benefits, it will be impossible to truly redress the inequalities produced by credentialing in the cultural sphere. Only when the economic gaps between those with the most and those with the least are narrowed might the
cultural prestige that is associated with possessing a college degree be challenged in the larger social sphere. When students like Cynthia and Nicole, job seekers who are weary (and wary) of jumping through credentialing hoops, can access good-paying jobs without degrees, the value of those credentials will likely lessen. Inequality will not necessarily go away, but we will be closer than we are presently to creating a more just and equitable economy and society.

We must also directly confront another often unspoken cultural reality. As long as powerful positions in society are primarily held by those with elite credentials and as long as college degrees continue to be perceived as social accomplishments deserving of respect, we cannot simply encourage those who do not have access to high-prestige credentials to cease hoping to move up the credentialing ladder. Doing so only preserves those inequalities. Students like Cynthia or Nicole may well be satisfied to forgo higher education as long as their economic needs are met, but those like Leslie, a practical explorer interested in learning more so that she can feel that she has “done something” and believes that “the more education you have, the more respected you are,” will likely want to continue with college. As long as a college degree denotes social status, albeit a level of status that varies according to one’s local social circles as well as the larger economic and political spheres, we cannot consider solutions to address the rising cost of college that are unidimensional. We cannot focus narrowly on solutions that only conceive of postsecondary education as providing access to good jobs. Good jobs are certainly an anticipated and hoped for outcome, but for most students, good jobs are but one of many expected outcomes.

We must acknowledge that students like Rose and Lucille, both self-reflective learners, gain so much more than a credential when they go back to school. Rose now has access to language and ways of meaning making that allow her to understand her husband’s gambling addiction and to communicate with others about her religion and culture. Lucille continued on to earn a master’s degree in higher education and, at the time of this writing, is working as a director of diversity at a flagship state university, a long way from the grocery store bakery that fired her when she was pregnant with her son. She regularly returns to the state university campus where she received her degrees and participates in community forums about student parenting and, more recently, masculinity and sexual and interpersonal violence. Rose and Lucille have earned more than credentials. Rose’s daughter and young sister-in-law and Lucille’s two sons are learning along with them how to navigate their student and parent lives. Rose and Lucille are empowered parents with increasingly strong voices, both at home and in their respective communities.

Ultimately, these student parents’ narratives reveal that not a single discourse prevails when students begin to talk about why they are in school and what they expect from their college education. Their stories and perspectives bring to light a more nuanced and complex portrait of how culture functions in
our lives and influences our understanding of the role of higher education in the twenty-first century. This finding should not be surprising. When we look back at the history, we see that the purpose of higher education has been a subject of debate for hundreds of years. However, in recent decades, instrumentalist discourse that focuses on jobs and the economy has become so central to how the purpose of higher education is conceived of and funded that alternative discourses have become marginalized in the public sphere. We have lost sight that college, like K–12 education, ought to be a public good and not a privatized privilege. Terms from the marketplace—return on investment, the bottom line—more often enter our discussions of higher education than do terms that have traditionally defined a liberal arts education—creativity, critical inquiry, and social responsibility. In such discourse, we see culture at work.

In the words of educator Mike Rose (2012), unless we expand our philosophy of education, “those seeking a second chance will likely receive a bare-bones, strictly functional education, one that does not honor the many reasons they return to school and, for that matter, one not suitable for a democratic society” (pp. 185–186). In examining the experiences of student parents, we see how they are embracing, rejecting, and modifying the cultural logics available and useful to them in ways that challenge competing understandings of what it means to be a student or what it means to be a parent at this historical moment. Ultimately, this study sheds light on how culture is not only reproduced but, even more importantly, how it can evolve. When institutional factors such as flexible academic schedules alter one’s ability to engage in domestic or caregiving labor at home, an opportunity for cultural change emerges. Change is not promised—the status quo is strong—but change becomes possible. Students who do not feel constrained by finances or by the pressure to become breadwinners may not find economic security to be a defining logic determining their disposition toward education.2 Again such change is not promised but becomes possible when both institutional and cultural resources align.

ALTHOUGH THE ODDS may at times be against them, the students in this study, who represent a variety of income levels, cultural backgrounds, and family social structures, are continuing to pursue their educational goals. Importantly their experiences reveal how a commitment to reinvesting in public higher education and institutional supports can make their path at school and at home and with loved ones much easier to traverse. For many of these student parents, college can provide a way out of traditional ways of acting, thinking, and being. This is particularly true for the practical explorers and the self-reflective learners described in these pages, who are motivated by more than the promise of a credential—they desire knowledge and self-growth and find that their college learning enriches their understanding of self, their families, and their communities.
These students’ varied experiences offer us new ways of understanding their evolving needs and the potential value of higher education. They provide us with understandings that are more comprehensive, creative, and inclusive of all students. Understandings that legitimize caregiving, domestic, and educational labor. Understandings that can produce greater gender equity at home, in our schools, and at work. Understandings that can improve their lives and our world.