

# LIBERAL ARTS GRADUATES' COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AND WORK PREPARATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

The public perceives that college attendance contributes to workforce development. Employers, however, report a skills gap or lag (Commission on Higher Education, 2006). This study explored recent liberal arts graduates' perceptions of how college experiences prepared them for the work world. The research site was Mountain State University, a public university in a southeastern state. Mountain State University's liberal arts graduates are representative of many college students today: older, spending five to seven years to complete their degrees, working part- or full-time to pay for education and other costs, and involved in family life (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Theoretical lenses employed included Kegan's meaning making (1982, 1994), Baxter Magolda's (2001) self-authorship, Chickering and Reisser's vectors of identity development (1993), and Arnett's (2004) emerging adulthood. The researcher employed qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews with 12 participants and resume analysis.

Themes uncovered from the results supported three ideas about the effects of college degree completion on graduates. First, liberal arts graduates in this study did increase their levels of human capital—marketable skills and abilities—by completing college. Second,

graduates in this study did carry a credential, one of perseverance. Third, they believed that college causes a perspective shift, differentiating college graduates from non-attendees.

The study generated seven major themes by which liberal arts graduates understand their career choices in the context of college experiences. These were 1) the direct relationship between major and career, 2) performance of little career planning, 3) the hope for enlightenment via education, 4) emphasis on enjoyment and relevance, 5) valuing of purpose, 6) focus on convenience and expediency, and 7) perception of college completion as a proverbial stepping stone to future plans. Serendipity (Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005) featured strongly in participants' ideas about career planning.

Participants believed that personal differences created both barriers and supports for the work preparation during college. Although participants reported very few college experiences such as extracurricular activities or socializing with college friends, they did cite academic experiences and assignments as sources of their development of work-related skills.

The results of the study indicated that participants did too little career planning at too late a stage in their college careers. Demographic differences, particularly age, maturity level, major, and religious convictions, affected students' ability to benefit from the college experience and their success at work world preparation. Finally, the nature of Mountain State and its place in students' lives had a significant effect on whether students participated actively in college experiences and how prepared they were to work.

**INDEX WORDS:** Liberal arts, College experiences, Work preparation, Career

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents, two of whom left primary school early to fulfill work and familial obligations, one of whom left high school for the same reasons during the World War II, and one of whom persevered to earn his bachelor's degree in agriculture and his master's degree in school counseling:

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Earning a college degree in the United States serves many different purposes. Some see college graduates as possessing more sophistication and savvy than non-graduates. Others believe pursuit of advanced study creates informed citizens. Still a different group believes college attendance serves a structural function, delaying young adults' entry into work and family settings. Employers frequently anticipate greater employment skills in college graduates. Students receiving bachelors' degrees have their own high expectations. Holding a college diploma is considered a ticket to higher paying and more rewarding work settings (Bok, 2005).

While education proponents—both inside the classroom and beyond it—can list a catalog of learning outcomes independent of preparation for the work world (Liberal Education and America's Promise National Leadership Council, 2007), college students, their families, and their future employers expect college attendance to contribute to work preparation. Actual work experience is vital, of course, but college itself is believed to impart basic abilities necessary for being an effective employee. Some degree programs are more obviously tailored to this end, including architecture, business, education, engineering, and nursing. All of these programs emphasize skill sets applicable to the appropriate profession, in addition to the history and development of the profession.

Liberal arts programs differ. Students who major in the humanities and social sciences spend more time learning about the subjects than learning how to perform a specific kind of job (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). Because so many believe college should produce employable Americans, liberal arts educators and career center personnel argue that characteristics necessary to earn a liberal arts degree do transfer to the resume. They cite such skills as oral and written communication, analytic capabilities, and understanding people and opinions (Watkins, 1979).

Classroom work is not the only element of college attendance. Work, both paid and voluntary, co- and extracurricular participation, and social or leisure experiences are also part of the “college experience.” During the time spent enrolled in college—and in the totality of the college experience—something occurs that supposedly transforms college graduates into more effective employees than their high school diploma-holding counterparts.

While college attendance is believed and expected to contribute to workforce development according to the perceptions of the public, employers report a skills gap or lag (Commission on Higher Education, 2006). This situation needs a remedy. Either the public should stop thinking of college as career preparation—which is highly unlikely—or students and schools need a more effective partnership that results in graduates who are ready to work. Some graduates are more prepared than others, landing jobs more readily and holding them more steadily. The effect of college experiences on these varying levels of preparation and performance should be investigated.

#### Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore recent liberal arts graduates’ perceptions of how college experiences prepared them for the work world. This study investigated several aspects of

this phenomenon: theories about the effects of degree completion, the interaction between college experiences and career pathways, the relationship between non-dominant cultural status and work preparation, and what college experiences liberal arts graduates cite as contributing to their preparation.

This qualitative study used interviews and document analysis to explore aspects of the relationship between college experiences and work-related preparation with the participants.

There were four research questions:

- (1) Which of the theories about the effects of college degree completion—screening/signaling, credentialing, socialization, or human capital (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)—are supported by the study results?
- (2) How do the participants make sense of the interactions between college experiences and their career paths and choices?
- (3) What effects, if any, does difference or non-dominant cultural status have on the relationship between liberal arts college graduates' experiences and preparation for the working world?
- (4) What college experiences do liberal arts graduates cite to understand their work world preparation?

#### Study Relevance and Potential Applications

Historically, higher education has not always been as open to the masses as it is today. Legislation such as the Morrill Land-Grant Acts in the late 1800s and the GI Bill in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century changed the way Americans conceptualize the college enterprise. What once was the province of the elite is now considered a personal development opportunity for the many.

Concurrent shifts in the burden for vocational training affected the role of college in society (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Rudolph, 1990).

Formerly, trades were learned by virtue of apprenticeships; status was judged by those already in the line of work. Often, lower wages marked this training period. The expansion of white-collar jobs happened in tandem with a transfer of preparation responsibility from the employer to the applicant. Today's American job seekers cannot expect significant on-the-job training (Elbaum, 1989). Instead, they must convince employers they have already had preparation, be it on a previous job or via higher education. In this light, college could be considered a high-end vocational school for white-collar workers (Goldin, 2001).

Current interest in college graduates' competitiveness and employability is obvious when measured by government indices such as the Commission on Higher Education's recent report on the expectations of what college attendance should provide the citizens of the United States of America (2006). Popular or anecdotal referents suggest that parents and students sometimes expect career services provide not just aptitude testing and vocational research materials, but a selection of desirable, high-paying job offers. This study is timely and relates directly to these concerns.

The focus on typical college graduates is another important element of this study. From popular culture and media outlets to parents and college administrators, much attention is paid to high performing students, and to low performing ones. Statistically average students, however, make up roughly 80% of the college population according to the standard bell curve. According to the National Center for Education Statistics report, "The Condition of Education 2007," 57% of the nation's undergraduate student body is female. There are almost 2 full-time undergraduate students for every part-time enrollee. About 25% of undergraduate majors were awarded in the

fields of liberal arts, English, social sciences and history, psychology, foreign languages, and philosophy. Almost 50% of full-time college students and a full 85% of part-time college students are employed. Three out of every ten full-time undergraduate students reported working more than 20 hours each week (US Department of Education, 2007). The average length of time to complete a bachelor's degree is 55 months. Attendance at more than one institution, attendance at public institutions, and lower grade point average are correlated with longer completion times (US Department of Education, 2001).

### Theoretical Perspectives

The student development theories used in this study were meaning making, self-authorship, psychosocial identity development, and emerging adulthood. Kegan (1982, 1994) developed the concept of meaning making as a way to explain developmental progress through the life span. This theory indicates that an individual uses her subjectivity to understand what is objective to her, and as she progresses through her life, she gradually incorporates what is the external into her self; in this way, she makes meaning of the world around her. Baxter Magolda (2001) uses the concept of self-authorship to describe the transition college students make from initial patterns of following external formulae to forging their own pathways through the world. Chickering and Reisser (1993) use seven vectors to identify directions in which young adults move while enrolled in college. With his idea of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) defines the time period of 18 to 25 as distinct from both adolescence and adulthood on the basis of three qualitative orientations: taking responsibility for self, making independent choices, and being financially autonomous.

For the purposes of this study, these student development theories indicate that students' college years provide them with necessary tools and understandings of the world that will help

them be better thinkers, individuals, citizens, and employees. Specifically, recent graduates' experiences should influence their work-related skills because what students do during their college years changes the way they relate to the world and themselves.

Economic theories do inform what makes graduates competitive in the job search process. While this economic perspective relates to the question of what college experiences contributed to liberal arts graduates' ability to secure job offers, it does not provide the central theoretical basis of this study.

Vocational literature considers such questions as the path to career development, how leisure and work both contribute to students' career development, and what activities result in skill development transferable to the working world. One major career path involves a linear, modern system; another pathway is dynamic and post-modern. Vocational development literature, therefore, offered a strong research underpinning for this study.

#### Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, *college experiences* are broadly defined. Academic experiences include classroom work, assignments, faculty interactions, and research. Co-curricular activities include leadership, activism, volunteerism, and special interest events, both on and off-campus. Employment activities include work-study awards, on and off campus jobs, and internships. Leisure activities include entertainment, hobbies, working out, spending time with friends and family, and time to read, reflect, or think. Because the study was exploratory, the researcher cast the net as widely as possible to avoid overlooking an important factor. Experiences were of interest rather than learning objectives because the nature of the study—interviews—lent itself not to measurement but to recall and interpretation of importance.

*Work world preparation* is best defined as what skills and understandings graduates possess for use in meeting job requirements. Because the study required participation by liberal arts graduates, not individuals in specific professions, the list of skills or traits is generic to many jobs. Such qualities are cited in a meta-review of literature regarding what employers deem important for their supervisees to master. The list includes flexibility, self-initiation and guidance, respectful and appropriate relationships with others, self-control, problem solving, critical thinking, active listening, self-reflection, clear written and oral communication, acceptance of criticism and feedback, dependability, professional appearance, positive attitude, ability to use time and resources well, and understanding of and adherence to the organization's policies. Those skills that faculty or leadership educators say students should have were not emphasized because they are not well aligned with employers' desires, according to the research (Badal, 2000).

#### Limitations

This study was confined to interviewing liberal arts graduates. Their academic preparation is less vocationally specific than that of other college students, such as business, nursing, or engineering majors. This provides them less direction when it comes to mastering skills necessary for post-college employment. For this reason, they were of greater interest for this study. Liberal arts degrees are not a majority of the undergraduate degrees awarded each year (US Department of Education, 2007), however, so this study has limited applicability for the general body of undergraduates in the United States.

Graduates shared their own perceptions and recollections. These may have been skewed by cultural or personal factors, leading them to be less than accurate judges of their own performance. Their recollections, which may be faulty or incomplete, and their interpretations of

how college experiences contributed to their current workplace preparation may have been colored by hindsight. In qualitative research, this is a benefit, however, because the researcher is interested in uncovering participants' meanings. Other studies may provide more externally validated data about liberal arts graduates' preparation and the applicability of college experiences; this one focuses on the graduates' own estimations.

### Chapter Summary

This study explored liberal arts graduates' perception of their preparation for the world of work, as well as inquired about which college experiences contributed to their preparation level. Theoretical lenses included Kegan's meaning making (1982, 1994), Baxter Magolda's (2001) self-authorship, Chickering and Reisser's psychosocial identity development (1993), and Arnett's (2004) emerging adulthood. The researcher employed a qualitative methodology with qualitative interviews. Results of the study should prove useful to prospective and current college students and their families, curricular and co-curricular educators, and employers of recent college graduates.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Social Expectations of College Participation

One of the widely understood purposes of college is career preparation: attainment of the topical knowledge and skills that prepare students for particular careers. The question of whether college attendees truly gain such skill sets, therefore, is a vital one. Student affairs practitioners, who take the lead in co-curricular education at many institutions of higher education, have a vested interest in preparing students for success after school. While faculty members emphasize subject-based learning, student affairs professionals emphasize experiential learning by way of programs, employment opportunities, and partnerships with faculty members.

Ensuring these outcomes is simpler in theory than in practice. Who in the higher education world feels completely confident that undergraduates are obtaining that wide portfolio of skills that will be truly necessary beyond the proverbial ivy walls? The fact that colleges and universities vary broadly in undergraduate populations served, from vocational and technical to pre-professional and graduate emphases, must also be considered. Students at community colleges or non-traditional students who have been a part of the work world may already possess career skills. At selective universities, in contrast, with their higher tuition rates and consumer-oriented clientele, younger students are often eager for ways to make themselves more marketable for employment. Publicly funded universities and colleges have responsibilities to their citizens and legislatures to produce employable, effective graduates. From each of these contexts, college graduates are expected to emerge ready for the challenges of the work world.

Some, especially those in the career counseling fields or secondary School-to-Work programs, have identified this as the skills gap, so named in 1991 by a report from the United States Department of Labor entitled, “What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000.” Hyslop-Margison termed it a values gap, a variation on the concept that graduates lack what employers desire (2001). By either name, this idea emphasizes the important relationship between education and workforce development.

### The Effects of the Skills Gap

The United States Commission on Higher Education recently released a report on the perceived state and proposed future of the undergraduate experience. In it, they noted bluntly, “Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever” (2006, p. 2). Later, among a list of five desired outcomes for the American higher education system, item four was “We want a higher-education system that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy” (p. 3). This problem is not restricted to the United States of America; such gaps have also been noticeable in Taiwan (Lin, 2005) and Canada (Hyslop-Margison, 2001). Whatever the terminology or the geography, the outcome is the same: many graduates from high schools and colleges are unprepared for work.

Even observers in the popular media have noticed the problems that result from such lack of preparation. Some link the phenomenon to the concept of delayed adulthood, and worry about the effects of prolonged adolescence upon the long-term success of this generation of Americans. Such critics range widely, from parenting expert John Rosemond (2005) to a Christian cultural observer (Mohler, 2005) to a *Time* journalist (Grossman, 2005). Mass media attention points out

that this issue of work preparation is not restricted to the small world of higher education; it is an issue that has attracted the attention of the wider American audience.

The basic premise of the recent attention on the path of adolescents to adulthood—and the work world—has focused on several fronts. First, more Americans seek college education, which delays the traditional adulthood milestones of marriage, work, family, financial independence, and parenthood. According to a University of Chicago poll, most Americans believe adulthood begins at age 26 (Irvine, 2003). Once graduates do reach the employment arena, they face a highly competitive economy. Combined with their hopes for a standard of living like that of their parents, graduates have difficulty coping with the realities of low-end starting salaries and jobs that do not fulfill their passions (Gray, 2005; Heckert & Wallis, 1998).

Their parents, once ready and sometimes happy to end their primary parenting duties upon children's emancipation or graduation, are changing their ways. Hyper-invested baby boomer parents prize their children's emotional fulfillment over their educational attainment and financial independence. In many ways, parenting has been professionalized, resulting in parents who over-identify with their children and who perceive any shortcomings as their own failures (Paul, 2003). The increasingly more common combination of high rents, a soft job economy, and greater American ethnic diversification that brings different expectations of where students live after college has resulted in increasing numbers of young adults returning home (Paul; Gray, 2005). This generation has also experienced less unsupervised play, and is therefore more reliant on adults or authorities to mediate their disputes (Schultz, 1999). Employers may not appreciate this dependence, preferring instead to hire workers who can resolve their own problems.

Some suggest that young adults have every reason to avoid adult responsibility in light of the differences between the college world and the work world. A catalogue of disparities

between the two arenas highlights the dissatisfaction young adults likely have for the process of entering the world of work. According to one website that caters to “quarterlifers,” life after college involves “lots less vacation time, ... work every day, including Fridays, daily commute, success ... not measured by grades, no excuses for late work, independent living (and expenses), no drop/add for employers, answer[ing] to at least one boss, [and] ... work with people of all ages” (Hansen, n.d.). Even if they were prepared, there is genuine concern about whether today’s students, protected from the pressures of work life by their parents, would even want to participate in such an enterprise.

### Cognitive, Psychosocial, and Cultural Theories Related to Work Preparation

#### *Cognitive Theories*

Kegan’s theory of meaning making (1982) and Baxter Magolda’s theory of self-authorship (2001) have offered insight into what kinds of developmental changes occur within college students as they graduate and leave the tertiary educational environment. Kegan considered development from an evolutionary perspective. That is, he maintained that development is lifelong, a process of meaning making, and marked by periods of stasis and change. As a corrective measure for the gendered dichotomies of some theories, Kegan focused on the dual needs of inclusion and independence. As individuals transition through Kegan’s stages 0 through 5, the self becomes increasingly differentiated from the environment, then increasingly interdependent on others, and finally increasingly self-administered and self-mediated.

In each of Kegan’s (1982) orders of consciousness, there is a subject. This subject is “embedded in, fused with” the self (Debold, n.d.). As a person progresses to the next order, or stage, that subject becomes object. In other words, it “can be looked at, related to, reflected

upon, engaged, controlled, and connected to something else” (Debold). Kegan’s (1982) first stage, Order 0, is the Incorporative. Objects exist for infants, from birth to age two, only when a child perceives them. The subject is reflexes, meaning the child’s existence is synonymous with his reflexive responses and needs. From there, an individual moves on to the Impulsive, Order 1, from age 2 through 7. The subject in this stage is impulses, or perceptions. A child of this age understands objects have permanence, but only as they are currently conceived. Order 2 is the Imperial Stage. Children aged 7 through adolescence subjectively experience their own needs, preferences, and enduring dispositions. They are still unable to consider the views or feelings of others, however. Order 3, young adulthood, is called the Interpersonal. An individual in this stage works on interpersonalism, mutuality, and consciousness, but cannot divorce the essence of himself from what happens to him.

Order 4 is the Institutional stage, when adults work on authorship and self-regulation. At this point, truth is recognized as relative and one can create her own value systems and meanings. The self, however, can still be threatened by disorder. The final stage, Inter-individual, is not attainable before one’s 40s, according to Kegan (1982). At this point, the subject is the interpenetration of selves with the other. The effects of external influences become recognizable and controllable, and the individual self identifies entirely with the world.

Kegan himself re-evaluated the ideas set forth in his 1982 text when he published *In Over Our Heads* in 1994. In this more recent book, Kegan built upon his theory of meaning making, augmenting his evolutionary perspective with an applied one. Specifically, he tackled the concept of the “hidden curriculum,” those tasks adults are expected to handle but for which they may lack the requisite development. It can be argued that while students may be at or close to Kegan’s (1982) second (Imperial) order of thinking when they arrive at college, professors

demand that they operate at order three (Interpersonal). Specifically, college requires critical thinking, self-directed learning, co-creation of culture, and taking personal charge of concepts and ideas (Ignelzi, 2000).

The work of college is also, partly, the work of learning to meet the demands of the hidden curriculum students will encounter once they join the wider world. Specifically, Kegan (1994) suggested that workers are expected “to invent and own our work,” “to be self-initiating, self-correcting, self-evaluating,” “to be guided by our own visions at work,” “to take responsibility for what happens to us at work externally or internally,” “to be accomplished masters of our particular work roles, jobs, or careers,” and “to conceive of the organization from the ‘outside in,’ as a whole; to see our relation to the whole; to see the relation of the parts to the whole” (pp. 152-153). In fact, these kinds of skills require Stage 4 thinking, which only about 21% of the general population will ever reach (Kegan, 1994). Most recent college graduates may simply be cognitively unable to function at the levels expected of them; such proficiency requires time and experience they lack. Businesses’ bottom lines require, however, that college graduates be able to perform effectively, despite their developmental challenges.

In a similar effort to describe how it is that people move from lower levels of cognitive complexity and competence to higher levels, Baxter Magolda (2001) related Perry’s (1970) intellectual development theory and Kegan’s (1982) idea of self-authorship to her own research interests. In 1986, Baxter Magolda launched a longitudinal study. She generated a four-stage progression of adult development throughout a person’s college years through the 20s and early 30s. Her first book, *Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students’ Intellectual Development* (1992), described four stages of epistemological development through

which undergraduates, like the 101 she interviewed for her research, advance. As indicated by the title, the first three of four stages had gender-related patterns associated with them (1992).

Returning to study the same participants once more as they emerged from their late 20s and early 30s, Baxter Magolda (2001) observed progression from reliance on external ideas to a crossroads precipitated by dissonance. Throughout their youth, individuals are taught to rely almost exclusively on the authority of others. They find epistemological and psychological comfort in doing things the way they are told by authorities, by their parents, textbook authors, professors, or employers. At a certain point, external formulas begin to conflict, either with each other or with the tentative voice of personal authority that is developing. Baxter Magolda labeled such a time of conflict the *crossroads*, where a student must leave the safety of external formulas for the unknown wilds where external formulas conflict, do not apply, or do not even exist.

From this crossroads, young adults emerge with internal foundations that eventually translate into a reliable pattern of self-authorship. Internal foundations represent the pattern of values, meaning-making, and style unique to each individual. External events can still buffet an individual, but the anchor of internal foundation ensures a solid grounding and offers a deterrent to straying too far from one's course. Finally, people learn to self-author their own lives—to create and assign meaning internally to events, and to find comfort and peace within this self-determination. Baxter Magolda (2001) identified this as an orientation that began in the late 20s and early 30s for most of her participants, and hypothesized it would continue throughout their lives. This parallels with Kegan's (1982) third and fourth orders of consciousness, in which the self improves its ability for mutuality and begins to effectively administer relationships with others.

Both Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001) wrote about *good company*. Good company means focusing on what individuals need to grow and develop. It entails both challenge and support. Although young adults need to do the bulk of developmental work themselves, they require guidance from trusted mentors—in the college context, faculty and staff members. Truly embodying the concept of good company may also require significant changes on behalf of faculty and administration members, such as taking time to advise students not only on course selection for upcoming terms but also on differentiation from parental interests or exploration of career interests.

Good company also offers a framework for effective interventions to address the issue of preparation of college graduates for the world of work. Baxter Magolda used a metaphor of riding in tandem on a bicycle. “The educator could offer guidance and advice as appropriate, help fuel the ride, yet still allow the learner to take the lead in directing and managing the journey. Learning the captain’s role would invite the self into the direction and leadership of the journey” (p. 332, 2001). Many college students have experience in pedaling and following the lead of others. To be desirable employees, they also need practice with making decisions and implementing strategies to reach their destinations. One example of this might include a college educator encouraging a student to formulate a career exploration plan, no matter how tentative, and then returning to that plan regularly in conversation to determine progress, re-assess direction, and make room for the student’s developing voice. As Baxter Magolda said, “giv[e] students real responsibility in the counseling/advising relationship” (p. 311, 2001).

The span of an undergraduate college experience, from four to perhaps six or eight years, is not all that long a time to progress from a self who is controlled by external formulae and focused on selfish needs to one who can maturely and consistently operate in a self-created

meaning system. This is exactly what college students need to become, however, from a vocational perspective. Allowing students to make their own pathways could resemble a lack of appropriate customer service, which may be expected by parents or other constituencies. Good company might also be employed differently in contexts where students need much more external support, such as those who represent their first college attendees in their families. Successfully incorporating good company concepts into the college experience also requires educating the public regarding this additional goal for higher education.

### *Psychosocial Theory*

Chickering & Reisser (1993) presented a student development theory based in the psychosocial school of thought. Concerned primarily with individuals' personal and social interactions and ego development, psychosocial theories investigate the interplay between individuals and others via relationships. Younger college-aged students spend time and effort working on the initial four vectors: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy to interdependence, and developing mature interpersonal relationships. Developing competence is often considered to involve theoretical or abstract concepts, but Chickering and Reisser imagined competence development occurring in physical and manual tasks as well.

Movement, or growth, along each of the vectors is often uneven, happening in fits and starts, or at rates disproportionate to progress on the other vectors. For example, one can imagine a student feeling quite confident about managing emotions while in a steady, mature interpersonal relationship. The dissolution of that relationship, however, could lead to some regression in the progress toward interdependence as the individual reacts to feeling rejected.

Taken as an ensemble, the first four vectors contribute to growth along the fifth trajectory, establishing identity. Chickering and Reisser (1993) postulated that establishing

identity is the key psychosocial task undertaken by college students. Surely, the flexibility implied by vectors, rather than the rigidity of stages implied by other theories, is one of the most useful aspects of Chickering & Reisser's construct. Establishing identity is not an accomplishment one checks off a list, similar to doing the laundry or even climbing Mount Everest. Establishing identity is a recursive, iterative process, and the vector format used by Chickering and Reisser allows student affairs professionals to leave plenty of room in their calculations about student development for advances, retreats, and major revisions in the psychosocial identities of the college students with whom they work.

Once a substantial amount of development has occurred on these initial five vectors, individuals can dedicate effort to the final two vectors of psychosocial identity development, developing purpose and developing integrity. For the purposes of this study, the vectors of greatest interest are developing competence in the work world, establishing identity as a graduate and worker, and developing purpose as an individual committed to working.

### *Cultural Theories*

While many college attendees are not traditionally aged, more than half of them are still under age 25 while enrolled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Several new concepts have been employed in attempts to explain the development of Americans at this age, including the quarterlife crisis, millennial generational theory, and emerging adulthood. Robbins and Willner (2001) and Arnett (2004) defined the quarterlife crisis and emerging adulthood positively. They posited the 20s as a time for exploration, self-definition, and experimentation with responsibilities. Howe and Strauss (2000) also provided insights about this generation of Americans.

Transforming their own experiences and those of their friends as wandering college graduates with no sense of what to do next or why, Robbins and Willner (2001) coined the term “quarterlife crisis” to explain the difficulties encountered by many in the first years of their adult lives. Their book, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*, is less a prescriptive guide than an assurance that others share the experience of directionless existence after college. Many non-scholarly books and articles followed the trend Robbins and Willner began; this popular take on young adulthood has garnered much attention in the mass media.

Howe and Strauss’s (2000) theory of millennials highlighted the role of parents in making their children feel special and sheltered. Millennials, the generation of Americans born between 1982 and 2002, often identify closely with their parents and their parents’ values. This generation is defined by seven traits: special, sheltered, team-oriented, confident, pressured, achieving, and conventional.

Recent scholarship about emerging adulthood offers alternative ways to consider the developmental tasks and pressures on Americans at this age. Arnett (2004) argued that the time from age 18 to around age 25 is not the same as adolescence, nor is it the same as adulthood. Five factors distinguish emerging adulthood from those two states. It is the age of identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities. Arnett pointed to industrialized or post-industrialized societies as fostering emerging adulthood with delayed marriage ages and extended educational periods, two elements that create the greater gap between adolescence and adulthood.

Despite the links between life tasks and emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) did not discover that life milestones of marriage, jobs, or parenthood were the markers of adulthood for the emerging adults in his study. In contrast, three qualitative orientations to the world were the

biggest markers of maturity. They are “taking responsibility for yourself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent” (Arnett, 2004, p. 209).

If Arnett’s work is reliable, a traditionally aged college graduate who enters the work force is an emerging adult. By Arnett’s definition, this graduate would not yet consider himself an individual who is responsible for himself, ready to make his own decisions, or be financially independent. Yet according to Kegan’s (1994) suppositions, the world of work will demand that the graduate take responsibility for what happens, have self-initiative, and be accomplished.

#### Career Counseling and Development

Because of this study’s emphasis on college experiences and work performance by liberal arts graduates, the field of career counseling seems a natural reference. Upon review of both primary source and meta-analytical materials, the researcher discovered that many career counseling and development theories focus on decision-making or aptitude, not on actual performance.

For example, Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, & Peterson (1999) divided career theories into two main categories: structured and unstructured. Repeatedly, the language used to describe the functions of each theory was consistent. Parsons (1909) focused on “occupational choice” (p. 12). Roe & Lunneborg (1990) sought factors related to “vocational choice” (p. 12). “How persons choose occupations” informed Holland’s (1997) typology theory (p. 13). While Super (1990) focused on the lifespan of career development, he too was interested in “occupational choice” (p. 13). According to this summary, Mitchell & Krumboltz’s (1996) “career self-efficacy means that we believe we can successfully conclude a *career decision-making* activity” [emphasis added] (p. 15). Tiedeman and O’Hara (1963) explained the two-part “deciding”

model (p. 15). Of the eight major assumptions of Peterson, Sampson, and Reardon's own work (1991), more than half use the word "choice" or "decision" (p. 16).

Other authors have relied on the same language. Patton and Creed (2001) explored application of Crite's (1973) career maturity inventory to Australian teenagers. They defined career maturity as "the individuals' readiness to make informed, age-appropriate career decisions and cope with career development tasks" (p. 336).

These examples illustrate the researcher's perspective that career development and counseling concerns itself with career choices, not an individual's actual performance once on the job. Human resources officers and supervisors deal with work performance. In contrast, career counselors focus on identifying a field of interest and utilizing technical skills, such as resume writing and interviewing techniques, to obtain that job. For all these reasons, career decision making itself—as understood by current researchers and used by current practitioners—is not a major underpinning of this study. The way in which career choice relates to college experiences and work preparation, however, is of central interest.

### Vocational Psychology

The field of vocational psychology, within which the spectrum of career literature may be found, is dedicated to the study of characteristics of the world of work, the individuals who operate within it, and their interrelationships. A small subset of vocational psychology literature concerns questions of college students' career choices and successes. While this literature for many years focused on linear, stepwise understandings of students' career development, newer approaches have made room for dynamic, open systems models of career choice (Esbroeck, Tibos, & Zaman, 2005). These new approaches also appreciate the importance of other life roles

besides that of employee. Super's life-span, life-space theory is one good example of this (1990).

There is evidence in the literature that humanities students ponder their future career choices and pathways. In a study published in 2006, Lairio and Penttinen examined students' career concerns. Even in a sample over-representative of information technology students, humanities students were the ones who thought most about their careers. Their informal guidance systems were peers, for the most part, and they relied mostly on teachers for formal guidance. All students showed a tendency to rely on the campus career center to a greater extent as their proximity to graduation increased.

Despite this reliance on guidance from peers, professors, and professionals at the career center, Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, and Earl (2005) discovered that unplanned or serendipitous events were perceived by college students to influence their career decisions. Students in this study also relied significantly on family as well as media and web information. The authors cited their results as favoring the dynamic, open systems theories of career decision-making.

Still considering the factors involved in career decision-making, Lent et al. (2002) identified both supports and barriers to college students' career choice coping strategies. Supports included *person factors*, such as interests, and work-relevant experiences. *Contextual factors*—financial constraints and lack of social supports, to name a couple—served as barriers to implementation of desired career choices.

While questions of how college students define their career interests and make career decisions are of peripheral interest to this study, the effects of college experiences on work world preparation are the true focus. Several vocational psychology articles address this phenomenon. Munson and Savickas (1998) studied the leisure habits of first-year arts and sciences college

students in 1995. According to the results of this study, students who perceived themselves as in control of their leisure time possessed clearer conceptions of their occupational goals and talents. The authors defined leisure to include sports, television viewing, hobbies, entertainment, reading, relaxing, being with friends and family, music, thinking, and contemplating. Munson and Savickas found that “well-rounded, leisurite college students appear better prepared, yet less inclined, to make career choices” (p. 250). They stressed the importance of distinguishing between filling time vs. participating in meaningful activities. These same conversations continue today at career centers and in student affairs professionals’ offices across the country. Professionals exhort students, “Do this because you enjoy it and will gain from it, not simply to pad your resume!”

Turning their attention to pursuits related directly to working, Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield, and Joseph (1995) examined the relationship of internships to career development. Their research revealed that internships help solidify participants’ self-concepts, but do not improve results in the areas of occupational information, self-efficacy, decidedness, vocational commitment, or tendency to foreclose. Such results, if replicated and reliable, could prove quite disturbing to career advisors at many universities across the country and the globe. Instead of presenting internships as a panacea for career development ills, this study suggests their utility may be limited to the realm of self-understanding.

Feldman and Whitcomb (2005) provided insights that may prove useful in interpreting the results of Brooks et al. (2005). In a study of the effects of framing vocational choices, they discovered one reason that young adults experience considerable difficulty narrowing their career choices as they approach graduation. Simply put, college students have so very many criteria they hope to satisfy with their post-graduation job that they find no one option

satisfactory. At the same time, they have a tendency to obsessively gather more and more information, rather than ceasing their information collection activities and feeling comfortable with making a choice. The young adults in the study had difficulty closing off additional interest pathways. The authors (Feldman & Whitcomb, 2005) suggested that a focus on student abilities rather than a focus on student interests would be more effective in getting graduates-to-be to winnow their options down to a useful few.

### The Effects of College on Students

In their second and even more authoritative volume on the subject, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) considered the effects of college attendance and diploma receipt. Pascarella and Terenzini argued that:

The reasons for attending college appear to be strongly linked to a perception that a college degree gives decided economic and career advantages. According to the 1997 survey of American college freshmen by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, nearly three-fourths said that getting a better job (74.6 percent) and making more money (73.0 percent) were the most important reasons for attending college (p. 445).

Accordingly, they titled an entire chapter “Career and Economic Impacts of College.”

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that college graduates earn more money and have better jobs than non-graduates. They offered four separate possible causes for the effect of earning a college degree on work world participation. They were 1) the human capital theory—that graduates gain marketable skills and abilities desirable to employers; 2) socialization—graduates learn how to network, make small talk, and listen actively; 3) the screening/signaling hypothesis—that college attendees already have a desired set of skills before they even attend

colleges that augment and extend such skills, so employers know graduates will have what they want in workers; and 4) credentialing—the idea that college attendance serves as a sort of gateway, admitting only a select few to the ranks of desirable careers.

Despite the broad net they cast looking for research on the topic, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) “uncovered little research on the influence of post-secondary education on job performance” (p. 452). What they did find was one study on technical majors, not of interest for this particular project. Technical majors receive more applied education and have a more clearly indicated set of possible careers, whereas liberal arts majors study more esoteric subjects in preparation for a wide variety of possible careers. Pascarella and Terenzini did note that the effects of extracurricular participation are attributable to students’ perceptions thereof. Specifically, students believe that elected office, volunteering, and fraternity/sorority participation result in leadership gains. Diversity experiences and employment or internships lead to career skills. Finally, academic effort and informal conversations with faculty also help, according to students’ own interpretations.

#### Workforce Development and What Employers Seek in Recent Graduates

The idea that colleges and universities serve as a lynchpin in workforce development is not a new one. But it was not structurally built into the higher education enterprise from the start (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2005). To the contrary, attendance at colleges was historically reserved for men seeking to enter one of the professions: “priest, diplomat, physician, teacher, artist, or government official” (Reardon, Lenz, Sampson, & Peterson, 1999, p. 2).

This disparity of purpose and expectation has left all involved struggling to coherently understand the purpose and effects of the college enterprise on workforce development. A

review of the literature indicates researchers outside the United States spend the most time examining this relationship. This may be attributable to socialized societies, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and their more controlled relationship between degree seekers and the labor market.

Drawing from an economic perspective, Tchibozo (2007) conducted a study of effects of extra-curricular participation on the length of the unemployment period between college graduation and first job, and what kind of activities best prepare an individual for job success. This is the only study found that explicitly links college experience—in this case narrowly defined as social and leisure activities—with the workplace. Tchibozo found that “extra-curricular experience gives access to better occupational status but lengthens the period of unemployment preceding the first job” (p. 37). He also identified three types of co-curricular participation profiles: “Leaders and Citizens,” “Sportspersons,” and “Activists and Clients.” Of these three, the first “had the best transition outcomes (access to large firms and to managerial occupations, low risk of and short spells of unemployment)” (p. 54-55). Sportspersons were average, and Activists and Clients did the worst. Interestingly, Tchibozo also found that for those not involved in extracurricular activities, the initial time of unemployment was shorter but their occupational achievement levels were also lower.

Human resources managers at Fortune 500 companies are looking for candidates who can think, relate to others, be intrapreneurs, possess professionalism, and use business etiquette (Porterfield, 1999). There is a question, however, about whether college prepares graduates for this work world. “Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces” (Commission on Higher Education, 2006, p. 7). Several authors

investigated what employers want in recent graduates. The list of desirable traits includes work ethic and critical thinking (Alexander, 2004), as well as social competence, asset respect, managed temperament, self-efficacy, a sense of self-worth, and achievement motivation (Phelps, 2002).

Some in the higher education community have been squeamish when it comes to acknowledging the connections between college attendance and preparation for subsequent employment. One 1995 survey of employers indicated that only 4% of business leaders believed high school graduates were prepared for work (Olson, 1997). Could that be interpreted to mean 96% of employers trust that the experience during which a college graduate obtains a degree results in actual preparation for the world of work? Surely that is an overly broad application of the results of that particular study, but it does point to the expectations employers have for how educational institutions prepare people for employment. This same kind of gap exists between what colleges require of applicants in comparison to what high schools create in terms of diploma holders (Commission on Higher Education, 2006).

Educators explicitly emphasize skills different from those desired by employers. Badal (2000) found that leadership educators at colleges and universities “emphasized competencies and skills such as teambuilding, knowledge of self, and understanding leadership styles” (p. 111). In contrast, the employers Badal surveyed “indicated they seek more tangible skills such as taking initiative, listening and problem solving skills, and being flexible and open to change” (p. 111). Badal went on to make the same emphases as the American Council on Education’s 1996 report: new employees recently graduated from higher education institutions cannot do what employers ask of them.

Citing the earlier work of Candy and Crebert (1991) about transitioning from higher education to the work world:, Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, and Cragolini (2004) confirmed four problems new Australian graduates continued to encounter more than a decade after Candy & Crebert's original study (1991):

1. Employers see graduates as having heads full of theories, principles and information (and, by implication, as requiring intensive training before they can be 'useful' [sic] to the organization) [sic];
2. New graduates are often ill-equipped to deal with aspects of the workplace such as problem-solving, decision making, working in a team and learning for themselves (and, by implication, universities should be paying these issues greater attention in the curriculum);
3. New graduates have uninformed expectations that the work environment will display qualities of supervision, order and control similar to those experienced at university (and, by implication, will founder unless universities prepare them more realistically for real world conditions); and
4. In the course of adjusting and adapting to the workplace environment, new graduates move from the familiar, structured learning approaches adopted at university to self-reflective learning aimed at change and self-development (and, by implication, could do this more easily were they provided with an appropriate learning framework at university) (p. 5-6).

While many authors have explored the relationship between higher education, the workplace, and the disparity between universities' focus, graduates' abilities, and employers' expectations, this was the most concise summary found by this researcher. The authors

concluded that in the eleven years since Candy and Crebert's original report was released in Australia (1991), few changes occurred in those disparities, with the exception of graduates' expectations about the work world (Crebert et al., 2005).

Graduates who have never experienced the full-tilt drama of the work world lack basic skills. They do not understand unwritten expectations, what makes good quality work, how to choose among available options and dubiously reliable sources, how to pair problem-solving with their problem-identification orientation, how to navigate the social environment and relationships, the nature of office politics, or that grades and distinct subjects no longer apply (Gardner; Holton, 1998). To summarize, young adults need to shift rapidly from academic to employment success formulas, even though they have spent the better part of two decades establishing competency in the educational sphere.

#### Work Preparation for High School and Business School Graduates

Broadening the search to include preparation of high school and business graduates for work revealed that secondary educators and business school leaders alike were not afraid of linking their work directly to career preparation, whereas such connections are not as acceptable in the liberal arts education arena.

High school educators have had some success in tackling this relationship directly. In fact, as a result of reports in the 1980s documenting the gap between high school students' preparation for work and employers' requirements for new hires, the school-to-work movement began among the nation's high schools (Olson, 1997). The goals of school-to-work have been two-fold: "integrate academic and career-oriented studies" and "emphasize learning in the context of work—not just work experience" (p. ix). Examples of such programs included co-

ops, technical preparation, career academies, school-based enterprises, service-learning projects, job shadowing, and internships.

Other authors (Packer, Pines, Stluka, & Surowiec, 1996; Roulis, 2003) also made the clear connection that a function of secondary schooling, albeit not the only one, is to make students ready for the requirements of the work world. As noted above, while this may make some in higher education nervous or even indignant, a commonplace cultural expectation of many college attendees is that collegiate-level education is a prerequisite for work.

What skills, then, need to be mastered by those aspiring to desirable employment? Since the school-to-work movement is much more outcomes-focused, it offered a catalogue of required competencies. According to Packer, Pines, Stluka, & Surowiec (1996), workplace know-how has required a set of competencies—resources, interpersonal skills, information, technology, and systems—as well as foundations—basics, thinking skills, and personal qualities. Roulis (2003) was more detailed in explaining what is required, cataloguing items under three subheadings: work site habits, communication skills, and professional development. These formed the basis for a seven-page school/work site evaluation that relates the skills obtained by working with the competencies imparted by learning (Roulis). This kind of delineation is helpful because it stipulates the specific skills that employees need to be successful in the workplace; instead of relying on theories or generalizations, it is almost painfully explicit.

#### Work Preparation of Liberal Arts Graduates

Because of the different purposes of high school and college educations, vocational competencies are best paired with an explicit understanding of what something such as a liberal arts education should provide in terms of employment preparation. Watkins (1979) juxtaposed “Liberal Career Arts” with “Broad Life Skills,” highlighting the following abilities:

communicate orally and in writing, think critically, analyze and synthesize, examine one's values and attitudes, cope with unexpected situations, complete projects that are undertaken, tolerate and understand other people and their views, recognize assumptions and make logical inferences, relate to others, understand concepts of probability and proportion, and understand the nature of science, experimentation, and theory (Watkins, 1979, p. 54).

Examining Roulis's (2003) school-to-work expectations in comparison to Watkins' (1979) liberal career arts reveals that Roulis focused more pointedly on what makes a good employee, while Watkins paid more attention to what makes a prepared and effective student. This reveals yet again the mismatch that exists between the skills required of good students in comparison to the skills found in an effective and reliable employee.

The desires of employers are incongruent with what curricular and co-curricular educators at college and universities emphasize. Miller (2005) remonstrated faculty members for allowing "chaotic faculty expression [to trump] student learning," noting that faculty spend little time on how learning "transcends the individual disciplines" (p. 37). Shivpuri & Kim (2004) noted that faculty pride themselves on students' gains in social responsibility and multicultural tolerance, which are valuable pursuits but not ones most important to employers. With the exception of the education offered by a handful of colleges, programs, and professors, learning at college is frequently not reflective. Reflective learning requires construction of knowledge, rather than passive transmission and reception of it (Dempsey, 2001). A quick search of library shelves will reveal multitudes of authors exhorting educators to stop filling blank slates in their classrooms and start requiring critical pedagogy, collaborative learning, and reflection. Interestingly, many of these articles concern more applied fields or graduate levels of study, such

as social work and nursing (Dempsey, Halton, & Murphy, 2001; Glaze, 2001; Moon, 2004; Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yan, 1995; Harrison, Short, & Roberts, 2003; Stefani, Clarke, & Littlejohn, 2000).

Whether they master material by rote memorization or through reflective learning, college graduates generally possess much more domain knowledge than behavioral competency. This tendency is expected and appropriate for individuals at their stage of life and experience. Domain knowledge is defined as mastery of specific, narrow subjects. While it is domain knowledge that garners soon-to-be-graduates job interviews and offers, employers have sought specific work behaviors (Gardner, 1998).

Although it is limited, there is also literature about what skills students—future employees—do or should gain while in college. Speaking from the perspective of leadership education, Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt (2001) identified several areas in which leadership participants show growth: civic responsibility, leadership skills, multicultural awareness, understanding of leadership theories, and personal and societal values. Woest (2006) found that interpersonal, analytical, and communication competencies are associated with early career success. One positive aspect about skill identification is that, presumably, skills may be taught or enhanced in formal educational environments.

Instead of focusing on skills, several authors emphasized experience as contributing to improvements in employability. Exposure to both diverse environments as well as different worldviews “fosters development of critical thinking in college students” (Pascarella, Palmer, Moye, & Pierson, 2001, p. 269). According to Gellin (2003), involvement in certain kinds of co-curricular activities, including clubs and organizations, living on campus, employment, and peer interaction also created critical thinking gains. Woest (2006) admitted that of greater importance

than the skills he listed were socioeconomic background, work experience, career counseling, and extracurricular activities when it came to predicting early career success. Fortunately, colleges and universities can increase the amount of opportunities students have for such experiences, with the exception of ones that occur before students even arrive on campus.

#### Implications of the Review of Literature

Based on the review of literature, the following is clear. One obvious purpose of college is preparation for performance in the work world. Many groups, including employers, the Commission on Higher Education, and popular culture observers, say students are unprepared or underprepared. Research also indicates that college educators emphasize things that employers do not value as highly. As a result, employers are not satisfied with the quality of college graduates—or high school graduates, for the record.

Research also indicates, however, that the experiences students have while in college contribute to their career decision-making and pathways. The next logical research step was to ask how these experiences prepare students to fulfill those career plans, to hold jobs as responsible citizens of the working world. There is sparse literature about this topic, perhaps because it causes such discomfort for liberal arts and student affairs educators. What does exist points in many different directions.

When the strands are gathered together, however, they weave a coherent pattern of college experiences and their relationship to work preparation. The student development theories cited provide a way to understand how college students assign meaning to their college experiences and how they lead to work world preparation. Cognitive, psychosocial, and cultural theories of student development all provide college educators working with students with a way to understand the changes that occur between the start and finish of college. Knowing what the

theories say about these changes will also inform the research question concerning theories of the effects of college degree completion by providing a way to understand the data gathered.

Vocational and career literature provided insight into what experiences—leisure, extra-curricular activities, academics, work and internships, and socialization—liberal arts major are likely to cite. This body of literature, as noted above, also informed the research question about how non-dominant cultural status—race, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion or spirituality—may affect the relationship between college experiences and work preparation. Workforce development and the literature on how liberal arts educational programs relate to employment skills also provided a basis for interpreting the results of the interviews.

### Chapter Summary

To describe the literature in broad strokes, college attendance is strongly associated with vocational outcomes. There is general consensus that a gap exists between what skills college graduates actually possess and those employers and the public hope they possess. Several types of student development theories, including cognitive, psychosocial, and culture theories, inform questions of how college students' experiences do or do not prepare them for the work world. Insights from vocational psychology also factor into this study, providing a way to ground the findings. There is little research on how college experiences matter in the context of preparation for the work world. There is abundant research, however, on how employers' expectations do not match well with graduates'. Finally, liberal arts majors' work preparation, in relief against that of vocational high schools or business school students, demonstrates that there is room for improvement via tangible gains.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

Identifying the proper kind of methodology for any study involves careful examination of the research questions and study purpose. The purpose of this study was to illuminate the relationship between liberal arts college graduates' college experiences and preparation for the working world. There were four research questions: what theories about the effects of degree completion are supported by the results, how participants make sense of the interactions between college experiences and their career choices, what effects non-dominant cultural status has on the relationship between college experiences and preparation for work, and what college experiences liberal arts graduates cite as being related to their work world preparation.

Based on the purpose and questions, this study warranted a qualitative approach. "What" and "how" questions, as opposed to difference, treatment, or change questions, are best answered with qualitative methodologies. Specifically, qualitative interviews were utilized. A researcher journal, a tool from the qualitative tradition, supplemented the interviews, as did document analysis of resumes provided by participants.

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. All data collection was conducted in the natural world via face-to-face interactions. Because little formal research has been performed on the topic of liberal arts graduates' perceptions of the relationship between their college experiences and preparation for work, this study was a basic exploratory one in the hopes that further research may be based on a solid descriptive foundation.

### Sampling, Site Selection, and Ethical Considerations

The researcher solicited a list of eligible liberal arts graduates from the institution whose graduates were under study. Due to limitations on directory information imposed by Mountain State University, email addresses were not available. The researcher solicited participation, therefore, by using two social networking sites, making telephone calls, and accepting recommendations from current participants for future ones. This technique is called snowball sampling; it is a trusted qualitative method to garner participation (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). From those who responded, participants were evaluated based on the study criteria. If an individual met the designated criteria, the researcher offered him or her a chance to participate in the study. In addition to the 12 participants sought, alternates were identified in the event that some participants canceled or dropped out of the study.

Criterion sampling is commonly used in qualitative research because it allows a researcher to choose participants for their promise as information-rich cases (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). The criteria for inclusion in this study were as follows.

- 1) Participants were graduates from the institution under study.
- 2) Their programs of study were offered by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences; criminal justice and any education majors were excluded.
- 3) Participants were within three years of awarding of their Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree.
- 4) They lived within the greater metropolitan city area.
- 5) They were employed for more than 30 hours each week.
- 6) Participants were asked to provide a current resume, if available, for the study.
- 7) They agreed to the initial interview as well as any required follow up interviews.

- 8) Finally, participants were not currently enrolled in any kind of graduate or professional degree program.

All interested participants were screened according to the criteria listed above; please see Appendix A. Participants were interviewed until data saturation was reached. Data saturation is apparent when information gleaned from additional participants simply confirms what has already been found instead of offering significant new insights (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). The researcher's ability to recognize familiar responses, based on the constant comparison she did as data collection progressed, demonstrated that data saturation had definitely been established by the twelfth and final interview.

The research site was Mountain State University, a metropolitan university with rapidly expanding undergraduate and graduate programs, located in a growing Southeastern suburban community. The student body hails mostly from the state. With an enrollment of almost 20,000 students and an average student age of 26, Mountain State University has a mix of traditional and nontraditional students in 60 academic programs. About 20% of the student population consists of ethnic minorities. The campus features a very modest residential housing program; most students live at home or in off-campus rental housing.

Ethical considerations included the securing of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study, as well as the use of pseudonyms for all participants, individuals named by participants in the course of the study, and the university.

#### Data Collection

The researcher used two methods of data collection, consistent with the purpose of the study: 1) individual interviews performed between the participants and the researcher, as well as 2) document examination involving resumes and a researcher journal. Interviews were designed

to answer all four of the research questions. Resume review offered information regarding how graduates understand the relationship of their college experiences to working; this provided answers to the fourth research question. The researcher journal applied to all four questions.

Research steps included the following:

- 1) Solicitation of participation via social networking sites, telephone calls, and snowball sampling;
- 2) Selection of participants;
- 3) Screening of initial participants based on study criteria;
- 4) Establishment of mutually convenient interview times;
- 5) Request for informed consent;
- 6) Interviews;
- 7) Transcription;
- 8) Collection of resumes;
- 9) Data analysis via the constant comparative method;
- 10) Member checks of interview transcripts;
- 11) Further data analysis and ascertaining of data saturation; and
- 12) Documentation of results.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are a staple of qualitative research because they are an ideal method to obtain direct quotations from participants describing their feelings about and understandings of the phenomenon of study (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). Interviews allow participants to give completely open-ended and detailed responses. They permit the researcher to follow up or gain clarity about responses. While they are relatively time-intensive due to the duration of the actual

interview and the time spent transcribing the tapes, the investment is worthwhile for the return in descriptive data.

For the purposes of this general descriptive study, one semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the twelve participants, with the clearly-noted possibility of a follow-up interview after the transcript and resume had been reviewed. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted over the course of one month in the late spring.

Areas of questioning included college experiences, current job experiences, career plans, college major(s), multicultural status, and beliefs about the purpose and effect of college on work world preparation. Please see Appendix C for the interview protocol. Because of the descriptive nature of the study and qualitative research's respect for emergent and flexible design, one additional question theme presented itself as the study progressed: inquiry about what offices or services participants interacted with while enrolled in college.

### *Resumes*

Submitted by participants, resumes were chosen to give the researcher another window into how the participants understand their college experiences. These documents were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Only nine participants had resumes. Of these, two did not provide them despite repeated reminders by the researcher. Three participants did not have resumes because they did not need them. All three of these participants are in the same jobs they had before beginning, or in Janine's case resuming, college. Therefore, seven resumes were analyzed for this study.

### *Researcher Journal*

According to Spradley (1980), a researcher journal offers a compilation of “experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems” (p. 71). Personal reflections were included to provide an understanding of how subjectivity may have affected the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon under study (Hebert & Beardsley, 2001).

This researcher used the journal to record observations about the subjects after interviews. Tentative ideas about themes emerging from the data were explored. Putting down on paper—either in the form of a researcher journal or field notes—feelings or impressions about the subjects allowed the researcher to set aside these matters so they would not cloud the data analysis (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003; Merriam, 2002). It also “provide[d] solid links to the many simultaneous levels of experience that are involved in the process of qualitative research” (Meloy, 1994, p. 60).

### Data Analysis

The constant comparative method, as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used to analyze the data collected. This method was appropriate because there were multiple sources of data, including not only the interviews, resumes, and researcher journal, but also the individual perspectives of each participant. The constant comparative method allows one to look for themes and patterns to emerge as the study progresses. Themes then inform the directions taken as additional participants are interviewed and the collected documents examined. Glaser and Strauss’ method allows researchers to write about categories developed as well as search for additional, different information to inform those categories.

Codes were identified to deepen the researcher’s understanding of the data as well as ensure she did not miss any important information. Initial perusals of each transcript yielded a

total of 39 codes. Data were then reanalyzed, summarizing the many codes into over-arching themes (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). Participants' demographic information was entered into a computer spreadsheet program. Several graphical analyses were performed, facilitating the search for patterns and themes according to common demographic characteristics. Mind-mapping techniques also provided a visual way to organize and consider the data. The researcher drew maps with central questions or themes, and then used offshoots or spokes filled with quotes and ideas, to flesh out the themes more fully. The main benefit of the constant comparative method was its recursive format, always circling back from the data collected to the data yet to be collected with an eye for themes and understandings.

#### Validity and Reliability

Several steps were taken to enhance the validity and reliability of this study. Validity ensures that results accurately reflect the actual phenomenon under study; reliability in qualitative research asks "*whether the results are consistent with the data collected*" (Merriam, 2002, p. 27). Not only did this study incorporate interview data; it also relied on resumes to provide an alternate expression of how liberal arts graduates highlight their college experiences in relation to employment. The researcher journal also provided a place to record personal experiences, biases, and assumptions for formal examination in comparison to the data collected. Because qualitative research is interested in participants' meanings, member checks of interview transcripts were conducted, allowing the participants to review, confirm, and/or amend the meanings that emerged from their interviews. The researcher journal also served as a form of audit trail, for use in tracking how themes were determined and how the constant comparative method led to the conclusions drawn (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research results may not be statistically generalized (Merriam, 2002). Because qualitative research relies on context for a nuanced understanding of the findings, however, generalization is left to individual readers (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003; Merriam). “Concrete universals” and “images” provides contexts from which “what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer to similar situations subsequently encountered” (Merriam, p. 28). Ideally, results of this qualitative study may be used to inspire new ideas, assessments, or research questions for readers of the studies. For this reason, the results chapters are filled with “rich, thick description,” the researcher strived for “maximum variation” among her participants, and contextual information about the setting and study are provided (Merriam, p. 29).

#### Researcher Position, Bias, and Assumptions

The researcher herself was a liberal arts graduate. While she did not enter the work world upon graduation with her Bachelor’s degree, she did experience the difficulty of trying to fit a varied array of college experiences into a neat package designed to help her meet future goals. She also works at an institution that enrolls primarily liberal arts majors, and therefore spends time in conversation with liberal arts majors who are thinking about their post-college plans and options. She utilized the researcher journal, as well as research conversations with those who earned bachelor’s degrees outside the liberal arts, to temper the effects of her own experience on the data collection and analysis process.

She is also a student affairs administrator who believes students should learn beyond the classroom as well as within it. She values college experiences such as living on campus, participation in organizations and activities, and meaningful relationships with members of the academic community. She works at a highly selective institution where most students can afford, literally and figuratively, to immerse themselves completely in the college enterprise,

with little thought spared for such concerns as earning living expenses or supporting their families. Before beginning the study, she assumed undergraduate college enrollment would play a relatively prominent role in the lives of the participants interviewed.

### Chapter Summary

This qualitative dissertation study employed criterion sampling to interview 12 participants about their college experiences and work world preparation. Resumes were also collected and a researcher journal maintained to provide triangulation opportunities and serve the purpose of an audit trail. Participation was solicited via invitations on social networking sites, telephone calls, and snowball sampling. All participants were liberal arts graduates of Mountain State University, currently working yet not currently enrolled in graduate or professional school. Data were analyzed as collection progressed using the constant comparative method.

CHAPTER FOUR  
RESULTS REGARDING THEORIES ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF  
COLLEGE DEGREE COMPLETION

The next three chapters provide the results of the study. Chapter Four begins with a description of the twelve participants to provide context for understanding how each contributed to the study. Then, the first research question is considered in Chapter Four; the second in Chapter Five; and the third and fourth in Chapter Six. For ease of reading, the research questions have been reproduced here and appear at the beginning of each relevant chapter.

This qualitative study used interviews and document analysis to explore aspects of the relationship between college experiences and work-related preparation with the participants.

There were four research questions:

- (1) Which of the theories about the effects of college degree completion—screening/signaling, credentialing, socialization, or human capital (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)—are supported by the study results?
- (2) How do the participants make sense of the interactions between college experiences and their career paths and choices?
- (3) What effects, if any, does difference or non-dominant cultural status have on the relationship between liberal arts college graduates' experiences and preparation for the working world?
- (4) What college experiences do liberal arts graduates cite to understand their work world preparation?

Qualitative methodology centers on the meanings made by participants, as interpreted by the researcher as instrument of analysis. The researcher refrained, however, from making evaluations of participants' actual skill levels on the basis of her interactions with interviewees. Claims made about the effects of college degree completion on individuals are from the perspective of the participants themselves, not an outside observer.

### Descriptions of Participants

Twelve people participated in this dissertation research study. There are some interesting similarities between their characteristics and experiences, in addition to their obvious commonalities of meeting the criteria for participation. They are also unique individuals. A summary table of major demographic characteristics as well as a more complete description of each person may be found below.

Table 1

*Summary of Participants' Demographic Characteristics*

Participant	Major	Gender	Age	Race	Grad Date	Job(s)
Antonio	History	Male	26	Latino	Dec. 15, 2005	Office manager/ Legal assistant
Janine	Psychology	Female	47	White	Dec. 20, 2004	Teacher
Jason	Psychology	Male	22	White	July 31, 2006	Account developer/ Office manager
John	Political Sci.	Male	26	White	July 31, 2006	Asst. director
Karen	English	Female	23	White	May 12, 2005	Ticket seller
Kimberly	Spanish	Female	25	White	May 12, 2006	Optician/ Translator
Lori	History	Female	42	White	Dec. 20, 2004	Teacher
Mark	Psychology	Male	28	White	May 13, 2004	Supply seller & Entrepreneur
Owen	History	Male	24	White	July 31, 2006	Temporary scorer
Samantha	Psychology	Female	31	White	Dec. 15, 2005	Office manager
Sonny	English	Male	25	White	July 31, 2006	Store manager
Steffe	Political Sci	Female	26	White	Dec. 15, 2006	Asst. manager

*Antonio: A Liberal Cuban-American With a Passion for Immigration Issues*

Antonio Iglesias arrived for the evening interview with a fresh cup of coffee in his hand, although the evening was fairly warm. He explained that he had been very busy and needed the caffeine to keep going. He works in a law office specializing in services for undocumented immigrants, serving as a both the office manager and legal assistant. Antonio's parents are Cuban-American immigrants themselves; he was born in Miami and lived there for several years before moving to their current home. According to Antonio, his parents bribed him into attending college by threatening to charge him rent at home if he did not enroll.

Antonio spoke enthusiastically about the experience of becoming academically and personally aware of the history and reasons behind Latino immigration to the United States; this interest influenced his college experience and his future career plan to attend law school.

Although Antonio enjoyed his liberal arts education, he felt it lacked emphasis on skills he needs for his current and intended career, such as researching, citation, and writing.

*Janine: Confirming a Purpose for the Second Half of Life*

Janine Sanders, although she did not look it and would probably not appreciate it being noted, is the oldest participant in this study. Despite this, Janine's love for dealing with and helping adolescents shone through during her interview. Currently, Janine works at a local Christian high school academy, teaching literature, Bible, and psychology classes. She applies her psychology degree, however, in frequent conversations with her students and their parents, even during her lunch breaks.

Janine began college in 1977, right around the time she married her high school sweetheart. She completed five years of part-time schooling while also working. Inspired by a television program about parenting, she began her family in 1982. She reared and home-educated her children, easily weaving herself into the fabric of their lives. Her own daughter inspired her to return to Mountain State in 2004, where she only needed 6 classes to finish. Since then, Janine has separated from her husband and reflected on her own development and needs, shelved out of necessity during her years of wife- and motherhood. She believes providing guidance for young people is the purpose for the second half of her life, and is considering a master's degree in psychology to be able to better serve that population.

*Jason: Longing for the “College Experience”*

At 22 years old, Jason Daniels is the youngest participant in the study. He has a variety of career aspirations from minister to motivational speaker, but is very happy with his current role as account developer and office manager in a travel consolidation company. Before he attended college, Jason expected to become a teacher. His interests shifted to industrial/organizational psychology, but he abandoned that dream due to further introspection about the field. He declared a psychology major because he trusted the safety of such a large and popular major.

Jason was highly active in the leadership organization at Mountain State, completing a multiyear program involving self-assessment, community organizing, and international service. He lived on campus for a brief period before buying his own home at the age of 21. An openly gay man, Jason believes he brings diversity as an asset to his company. He longed for the drunken parties, informality, and spontaneity that, for him, characterize the true college experience, but feels his structured, Type A personality prevented him from enjoying that.

*John: A Country Boy Reviving the Democratic Party*

John Fairweather’s interview was conducted in the downtown branch office of his political campaigning and policy consulting firm. In front of a large map showing the whole of the greater metropolitan area, John explained “my major is my job.” These brief, illuminating statements are characteristic of John, who spent his college years forging relationships and building skills in county, state, and federal election races.

Hailing from rural, agricultural beginnings in the northwest part of the state, John attended three different institutions of higher education. He enjoyed a forensics scholarship at a two-year college, then enrolled at the urban research university in the state system planning to

become a middle grades teacher until his major was cancelled, and finally graduated from Mountain State University in political science. John credits his years in college with making him balder, a little more liberal, and a lot more internationally minded.

*Karen: Content with an Enjoyable Job*

Karen Bristow is the second youngest participant. Her participation in campus life was, by her own admission, minimal. She was publicity chair for the national honors society to which she belonged. Beyond that, she attended classes for her major and enjoyed a few electives. Shortly before graduation, Karen landed her first job (besides baby-sitting) as a game-day employee with a local sports team. Her interest in the sport led her to find an internship program on their website.

Karen had no career aspirations before she entered college; she describes herself as not very skilled at planning in this or other arenas. Using phrases such as “stumbled upon it” and “got picked up,” she seems to imbue a sense of serendipity into her employment choices. Karen does not believe she is very different from when she entered college. She plans to stay in the job and field she enjoys and perhaps travel later in life.

*Kimberly: Juggling Love of Spanish with Motherhood and a Future Career in Teaching*

Kimberly Munoz was one of the few participants actually applying her degree. In the optical department at a large retail store, she both serves customers’ vision correction needs and translates between the doctor and her Spanish-speaking clientele. Conversational chats with her Mexican husband led to her interest in learning Spanish formally, and her hopes for her Mexican-American child inspired her future career goal, becoming an English as a second language teacher. She is currently enrolled in undergraduate classes to obtain her teaching certificate.

Kimberly initially attended college in the southern part of the state, planning to major in dance. When the program proved less rigorous than she hoped, Kimberly returned north to enroll at Mountain State University. She took a break from school to give birth to her son. A few years later, she returned to school, juggling work at the optical department with motherhood and classes. She prides herself on being open-minded and interested in others' cultures.

*Lori: A No-Nonsense Approach to Life After Child-Rearing*

Military police officer in the Army, wife and mother of 3 boys, and passionate history teacher: Lori Wilson has had a series of interesting and exciting careers. She home-schooled her children for many years. When one of them wanted to enroll in a hybrid school, combining campus and home instruction, Lori jumped at the chance to cover his tuition with her service as a teacher's assistant at the private Christian school. Soon, she decided to officially pursue teaching as a career, and enrolled at Mountain State to earn her degree. She began college at 37 years of age, attending school with her husband and oldest son.

Despite personal hardship, including her mother's death in 2004, and juggling school, motherhood, and work, Lori completed her degree in 3 years and served as a role model once again for her sons. The experience left her with a love for learning. She decided not to pursue an education degree as an undergraduate due to the loss of income resultant from the required student teaching, but plans to pursue a master's degree in teaching in the near future to secure her official teaching certificate and be able to keep taking the classes she enjoys so much.

*Mark: Finding True Passion and Purpose After College*

Mark Herrera began his college career 10 years before this study, moving on campus at the state's top engineering school. He believed others when they suggested his skills in physics and chemistry made him a natural engineer. After he and the school were mutually disillusioned

by that dream, Mark regrouped. He transferred to Mountain State where he declared a psychology major in the hopes it would support his dream of working for a Christian youth outreach group. During his time in school, he met his wife and moved to the mountains in the northwest of the state, taking transient classes at her institution to complete his degree.

Shortly before graduation, Mark met the man he now calls his mentor. He had done what Mark realized he wanted to do: develop a business profitable enough to support Mark and his family, as well as fund his support of causes and ministries to which he could not personally devote time. Currently, Mark works a sales job to fund his growing business, and has a clear growth plan and purpose. Mark considers his college attendance a life lesson about listening to others instead of knowing one's self.

*Owen: Aspirations to Instill Love of History Through Teaching*

Owen Henry is a natural joker. Living at home with his parents and older brother, Owen casts his life in terms of objectivism, the philosophy of Ayn Rand embraced by both himself and his father, and personal fulfillment. He hopes to achieve fulfillment through a job teaching history, establishment of a loving family, and a career as a writer, his true passion. Thus far, his stints in retail work and temporary standardized test scoring jobs have proved undesirable and in conflict with his personality and values.

Owen began his college career at the same urban research institution that John attended, initially planning to study psychology. Like many in the study, Owen had no career plan before he attended college. Life in the downtown residence halls and with community members who seemed indifferent and uncaring inspired Owen to transfer to Mountain State, which was close to his home. There, he found friendly faces and passionate history professors who served as role models for his own aspirations to teach middle or high school history.

*Samantha: Working for Comfort and Quality of Life, not Career*

Samantha Castillo began college at a residential private school in the early 1990s, fully intending to become a large animal veterinarian with a specialty in horses. When chemistry classes and the onset of clinical depression derailed her dream, she turned to Mountain State University to be closer to home. She worked a series of basic retail jobs, met her Cuban husband, dabbled with a Spanish major, and signed on as office manager at her parents' design industry company. She also went twice to Mexico on summer study abroad trips she describes as amazing.

Poor grades and a lack of focus led Samantha to take about four years off from Mountain State. She returned with a renewed purpose to prove to herself that she could accomplish her goal, and graduated after a year of high performances in her psychology major. Her thoughts about the importance of career have morphed from specific plans to interest in remaining financially secure, achieving her goals for herself and her family, and being intellectually challenged. Samantha's next plan is to earn her license as an emergency medical technician alongside her husband at the local technical college.

*Sonny: College as Stepping Stone to a Teaching Career*

Sonny Edwards, by his own admission, took little from the college experience. He did enjoy the classes for his English major and developed a new reading habit. Throughout college, he worked at the video production store managed by a friend's stepfather, advancing in responsibility and skill. He also played percussion and traveled with his band, which he classifies as a formative experience. He maintained friendships with people from outside the Mountain State community and also met his fiancée.

Although he began at Mountain State, Sonny briefly transferred to the urban research university that John and Owen attended because he wanted to pursue film studies. The commute from the suburbs and its toll on his work schedule proved too strenuous, and he returned to Mountain State where he settled on English. Since graduating, Sonny has developed an interest in teaching. Like Owen, he appreciated the good instruction he received from his college professors. Shortly after his interview for the study, he was scheduled to enroll in a master of arts in teaching program to earn his certification.

*Steffe: A German Transplant who Loves American Education and Serving Children*

Departing from the path taken by many of her friends and classmates in Germany, Steffe Schmidt arrived in the United States on an au pair exchange program. Although she was one of twelve to secure a seat at a nursing education program at home in Germany, Steffe's desire to return to America was greater than her initial interest in neo-natal nursing. Working as a nanny for a family who supported her interest in education, Steffe enrolled at Mountain State.

To earn an in-state tuition rate, Steffe participated in 20 hours of community service each semester. Through this and a brief period of living on campus, Steffe forged relationships with people all over Mountain State, from the adult education program to the College of the Arts. Fitting her classes around her work schedule, Steffe chose political science as her major. After her recent graduation, she landed a job as an assistant manager at a clothing retail store with a college graduate trainee program. Steffe is looking for opportunities to apply her major in the global service of children, either with a new job or by earning her MBA.

## Theories About Effects of Undergraduate Degree Completion

The first research question is which ideas about the effects of college degree completion—screening/ signaling, credentialing, socialization, or human capital (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)—are supported by the study results. In brief, the results uncovered themes that supported all four ideas to some degree. Human capital was the most widely applicable and logged the highest numerical tally of mentions, perhaps due to the researcher’s repeated prompting of participants to cite specific skills. Participants emphasized this idea strongly. Credentialing was a close second; characterization of degree completion as an accomplishment figured prominently here. Socialization was a theme expressed in some participants’ remarks, with references to networking and perhaps conflation with natural gains in maturity. Finally, there was reference to the screening/signaling hypothesis, mostly due to participants’ self-evaluations of pre-college skill sets and personal qualities. An emergent theme was perspective shift, cited by two-thirds of participants and almost all of those over age 25.

### *Human Capital*

The theory of human capital development refers to the attainment of marketable skills and qualities by college graduates. In other words, college graduates should have documented skills they may reference on their resumes and use in work settings. In the context of this research study, the theory of human capital received the most support of all initially examined theories, with related themes demonstrating both quantity and variety of citations as well as ubiquity of experience. The results stemmed from references by the participants themselves, as well as prompts by the researcher. There were six themes of human capital development: 1) communication, 2) time management, 3) critical thinking, 4) job-specific skills, 5) academically-related skills, and 6) the idea that “I do not believe college provided me skills at all.” These six

themes contribute to the idea that college degree completion results in marketable skills and abilities.

### *Communication*

The most prominent of the human capital themes was communication. Ten of twelve participants stated that communication was a skill they developed in college. Even Mark, for whom the college experience seemed to offer so little utility, remarked, “Clear written and oral communication was something that I learned to an extent through college.” This was not surprising, considering the emphasis placed on written and oral communication with professors, administrators, and peers in the college setting. Communication is a broad skill, however, so several individual examples will illuminate how the participants understood this idea.

Antonio said, “I’ve always felt I can communicate. I guess this is attributable to not only like my history and what I’ve done but with the liberal arts education.” Given his need to interact with both the lawyers who employ him as well as the undocumented immigrants he serves, this agility is important. Although Kimberly was not one of the 10 participants who cited communication as important, she has listened to clients each day and explained to them their options for glasses and contacts, and she has translated doctor-patient interactions in Spanish and English. She did say she learned Spanish grammar, accents, and colloquialisms from her classes at Mountain State.

Emphasizing the written side of communication, Lori said, “I came in as a very poor writer and left as a very confident writer. Maybe not a good writer but a confident writer.” In addition to giving her confidence, her college experience provided Lori the ability to evaluate her own writing skills. Similarly, Samantha reported, “[Written communication] was very bad. But now it’s a lot better. I even actually had two clients tell me after I came back from—after I

graduated—that I was looking even more professional to them.” Although Jason “hated [“all those horrible English classes” and “those wretched papers”] while I was doing them,” he judged them as “totally worth it.”

Yet another aspect of communication is effective transmission of ideas. John felt that college “reinforced a lot of ideas I already had, but helped me to articulate them in a way I could hold them closer as beliefs.” As a scholarship recipient and member of the forensics team at his two-year college, John believed that “being able to be on some teams ... kind of helped bolster [oral communication].” Sonny shared this perspective. “Obviously, as an English major, part of it is being able to write in a way that you’re communicating your ideas as effectively as possible. So that definitely is something that college helped me with.”

Steffe believed that communicating with others, including professors, prepared her for her current job as assistant manager at a retail store. As the only non-native English speaker, the English as a second language courses she had to take before enrolling at Mountain State helped her develop written language skills in addition to oral ones. When asked to relate her major to her current job in sales for a professional sports team, Karen replied, “I’d say the biggest thing would have to be good communication skills and being able to put forth your ideas.”

Some participants believed college let them down in this arena, however. Antonio wished his writing skills had been better tested. According to his recollection, he produced only one major research paper. As an aspiring law student, he believed more emphasis on well-cited and well-researched writing would have behooved him. Similarly, John recalled, “I was able to kind of skate through three schools without ever getting good at [grammar and written context].”

### *Time management*

Development of time management was another concept that garnered a lot of agreement and comment from the participants, and ranks as the second of the six themes. Even Mark, whom it has been noted before was relatively disparaging of the usefulness of college, said time management, “through the juggling of job and school at the same time,” was one of two college experiences that helped him prepare for work. Like clear written and oral communication, ability to use time and resources well is a skill that employers look for in recent college graduates.

Karen, the only one of the 12 interviewees who had not worked prior to her senior year of college, noted that her experience of time management in college was a lesson she has since applied at work.

Definitely the whole—when I started at the end of my senior year trying to balance school and work. The whole time management thing. All throughout school it was, “Hey, I’ve got a party to go to but I have a book I have to read by Monday that I slacked off on.” So it was definitely time management skills.

Echoing Karen’s sentiments, Samantha linked time management to performance. “If you’ve got good grades, you’ve definitely learned [time management].” Karen and Samantha learned time management directly through their class work, which was understandable given their low levels of participation in other aspects of college life.

Some considered time management to be the essence of college. Sonny’s perspective was:

I guess what college really prepares you for is your ability to handle deadlines and things like that. That’s really what college seems like—It’s can you be

responsible enough to handle your own workload like that. And you have assignments you have to get done at a certain time. And you sort of have to learn how to manage your time to get everything done as well as it can be... You have to learn how to manage that time to work in what fits.

In his usual terse fashion, John simply stated, “Ability to use time and resources well. That’s what college is.” Since these participants successfully progressed through college, they seemingly must have been able to manage their time well.

Jason attributed his development of time management to a figurative realization made during college: “someone’s not going to pick up after you.” Kimberly explained the process of developing time management: “Decide what needs to be done first and what’s more important. And what you need to spend the most time on. And I think that comes as well in college.” Time management stemmed from a variety of participants’ experiences, both directly and indirectly related to college.

### *Critical thinking*

The ability to critically analyze situations or information was vital for both academic and employment settings. Accordingly, more than half the participants referenced gains in critical thinking skills due to their college experience. Although he felt he had some competence in critical thinking coming out of high school, Antonio believed he “built on that in college.” Kimberly felt the same way. She had the critical thinking piece somewhat before college, but “it definitely has evolved and gotten better during college.”

Lori linked her development of critical thinking directly to academic work. “We did a lot of primary source analysis. Trying to figure out what was going on with the primary sources, what was going on in that time period that would make them write this. So critical thinking,

yes.” John simply said, “Critical thinking—you know you had to write essays to get through school,” implying that the critical thought necessary to produce college-level written work was the way he augmented this particular skill. Steffe also attributed her improvement in critical thinking to classes.

Jason was the one participant who cited extracurricular activities to explain his advances in critical thinking. Referencing his leadership organization’s final project in Ghana, he said:

So what the programs were really about—I mean—we had a concept and we had certain goals. But from there we were creating it all. So it took a lot of creativity, to put that all together and bounce off ideas back and forth and arguments back and forth.

Later, he explained what critical thinking means to him: “thinking a lot deeper, having a web of thoughts attached in several different ways and twisting and turning and you have to figure it out.” Considering his definition and his experiences with other student leaders at Mountain State, it seemed obvious that his leadership project was one of the inspirations for his development and understanding of critical thinking.

#### *Job-specific skills*

Because the researcher was interested in experiences of liberal arts majors, not those who entered specific careers, participants had a wide variety of jobs. One of the interview questions prompted them to describe their work responsibilities. Many of them also did this through the course of the interview to explain when asked such questions as “What came naturally to you when you began working?” or “What college experiences prepared you for working?” From this catalog of answers, a list of job-specific skills emerged. This was the fourth of six themes in human capital development.

*Understanding people.* Mark, a salesman, indicated, “I learned through my degree a very tiny bit of how to read people, how to understand people, how to relate to people.” This has proved important not only in his sales jobs but also in his own business. Mark’s entrepreneurial endeavors have required him to solicit capital investments and screen employee applicants. In his work as a video editor, Sonny occasionally used his English skills to edit copy for grammatical errors or conciseness. Although she has taught mostly literature, Janine’s psychology degree became “more and more a part [of her current job].” She also had the soft skill of being able to recognize that “a lot of the things I’m dealing with are beyond my capacity to deal with.” In a challenging work environment faced with outbursts from her own temperamental father, Samantha applied her psychology degree to bolster her own mental health and to deal with the unique personalities of her relatives/co-workers and clients. She used social psychology to contextualize their actions, and general psychology to separate their concerns from her own performance.

*Flexibility.* Flexibility was a job skill frequently cited by participants. Although he seemed to conflate flexibility with open-mindedness, Jason reported, “College, it opened so much flexibility, opportunities. It expanded your mind.” Since Jason self-styled himself as having a Type A personality, the experience of being open to other options was itself a form of flexibility for him. Although she declined to explain why, Steffe simply stated, “I know I’m more flexible after I’m done with college.” Similarly, Samantha said, “I’m not a flexible person. College made me more flexible.” Lori echoed, “I think college prepares you for that. Especially you know you have to be flexible in order to succeed in college.” John did give some insight, however.

I think the one thing I learned about flexibility in college was how we needed to go about—When you're scheduling classes, it's a nightmare. Figuring out how to fit those into a schedule and get those taken care of. That was a valuable skill I think I learned.

Survival of tight scheduling challenges improves flexibility.

*Self-initiation and guidance.* John also had a lengthy explanation of how he developed the trait of self-initiation and guidance.

At [the two-year college] we had an advisor. Kind of laid out classes with. I was on the forensics team. So being on scholarship and having to take these classes that was laid out—I didn't have to do much. At [the urban research university], I didn't have an advisor. So I had to just take care of it all myself. And at Mountain State, I had a great advisor... And she helped guide me. That time at [the urban research university], you have to—If you're at a big college and you don't have a specific, "This is your advisor," you kind of have to—someone who takes care of this and kind of holds your hand through the whole process—you gotta dig through the catalog. You gotta find out what your requirements are. You got to make sure they all fit. You've got to apply for this class to sub in for this class.

From his long description of receiving advisement, going without it, and then receiving it again, John clearly learned to appreciate the value of being able to meet his own academic needs.

Sonny apparently had some of the same insights. "Just they really put you on your own. No one's going to hold your hand and make sure you take the next step towards graduating. You just have to get it done yourself."

Samantha, conversely, believed that working in groups with non-participatory fellow students resulted in her gains in self-initiation. Karen recounted the dangers of not being self-motivated enough.

My best friend has been to England 3 times and I'm like so jealous. I'm kind of a procrastinator. I was too late for the study abroad program. I was like, "I'll do it next year. Oh, I'm graduating. And I'm behind!"

Some of the participants experienced advances in awareness of their self-initiation and guidance as a result of being enrolled in college and doing college course work.

*Understanding of policies and organizations.* Employers expect that those who work for them will know and abide by company policies. They also expect some basic organizational savvy. Steffe believed that college helped her better understand these concepts in general, preparing her to encounter them in the work world. Karen felt strict class attendance policies conveyed this message. Jason had the most to say on this topic:

College [was where I learned about policies] 'cause I would run into crossing boundaries a lot. Even with psychology and writing papers and them not being to standards. You know what I'm saying? And getting in trouble with that and I'd be like, "Damn." All these regulations and standards you never worried about before college.

He evokes a time before college when such worries were foreign to him, and also notes that policies come into play both in the academic and administrative arenas. The youngest participants in the study believed that college helped them develop this skill.

*Active listening.* Active listening was not an idea well understood by the participants. Most simply referenced their ability to take notes in class from professors' lectures as evidence

of this skill. Jason and Steffe, however, had formal exposure to the concept. Steffe took a course entitled “Alternative Dispute Resolution.” In it, she learned:

We don’t really listen. Period. We’re always interrupting somebody. We cannot listen. We always have to give our part to it... I think after that, I started to listen a lot more and better. Just letting the other person talk without interrupting.

Jason said that the way he learned active listening was “through my leadership program. That really helped.” Their current jobs managing people make active listening a vital element of human capital.

*General job skills.* While in college, Jason’s development of his identity as a gay man led him to a new certainty:

Being able to walk in and represent myself and say, “Alright well, I come from this minority group but I represent myself to anyone. I don’t care who you are.” I think they respect that more. ‘Cause they also know I can represent yet another community within their company. That’s what I’ve found from it anyway.

His coursework regarding workplace motivation and the importance of workplace diversity solidified this feeling. Lori’s history and education classes have proved directly applicable to her work as history teacher. Topic specific classes prepared her to teach about individual time periods. Spanish classes as well as Spanish club movie nights taught Kimberly about Hispanic culture, practices, and customs.

Conversely, Karen believed her ability to be outgoing to sign up fans for a rewards program came from her work experience, not college. In this way, her lack of that specific skill development during college meant she had to develop it while on the job. Antonio also felt he

should have learned more about research and citation while in school, skills he has needed as a legal assistant and developed by necessity on the job.

### *Academic skills*

Several of the graduates described academic skills, the fifth of the human capital themes, as applicable to their jobs. Samantha's favorite class, social psychology, taught her about concepts such as social loafing and self-fulfilling prophecies. She identified these and other tenets of human interaction in her current and former work settings. Owen was hired as a temporary test scorer because the company believes liberal arts majors know how to write. As assistant manager of the video store, Sonny ensured that each job was completed on time, a skill he related to his time management lessons from class assignments.

*Acceptance of criticism and feedback.* Although some participants, such as Antonio, did not get as much feedback as they would have preferred, others did receive substantial feedback and believed they became better at handling such input thanks to college. Jason recognized that he had a greater need for feedback while in college than while in high school, and felt, "I've gotta listen more." Karen enrolled in several writing classes and said that, "Doing a writing course will kind of break you down." Even Owen, who characterized the high school and college experiences as quite analogous, believed the greater specialization and knowledge of college professors resulted in more useful feedback than in high school. John was the most garrulous on the topic, however.

Not only from your professors writing how horrible this essay you handed in was, and how horrible this test that you thought you'd studied for was. But your peers when you'd have this discussion, when you bring your point of view to the table and you've got 17 people just rip-roaring ready to tell you how you're wrong.

And being ready to deal with that criticism and be able to turn it back around.

And defending your point of view. If you can accept criticism and then pick that criticism apart. Not the bad kind of pick an argument apart kind of way. But see what about that criticism may be valid or what might not. And then criticize the criticism. I think that goes a long way in accepting criticism. 'Cause if you don't know how to do that, you may think that every bit of criticism you ever received is true. Which probably it's not.

His insight about peer feedback and its usefulness in evaluating criticism itself was unique. He shared with other participants, however, the conviction that exposure to more effective and frequent feedback at college helped them develop the ability to accept it gracefully.

*Group work.* Working in groups on class assignments, loved by some and hated by other students, was nonetheless a skill with direct transference to the work world. Samantha and Steffe spoke about the importance of group work for development of work-related skills. Samantha went so far as to claim, "Of all things, that's the best thing they could teach." Steffe was a little less dramatic, linking the importance of group work to her current job, supervising up to 10 high school- and college-aged employees by herself as well as collaborating with the team of other managers from her store and the entire region.

#### *Lack of Skills*

Three participants, despite being quoted above for having gleaned skills from their college experiences, told the researcher that they did not gain the skills they needed from college. Reference by only one quarter of participants does not demonstrate broad support for this concept. It stood in such striking opposition to their earlier assertions of concrete skills that they had indeed gained while at college that the researcher felt compelled to include it in this results

chapter. More research into this phenomenon is warranted to answer such questions as why only men expressed this sentiment and whether it may be explained from a rhetorical or linguistic perspective.

Antonio said somewhat off-handedly, “You lack certain practical skills that you don’t get in a liberal arts education.” Later, he said that college provided him with “the networks I needed to make up for the lack of skills.” Mark was much more negative.

And I think part of that had to do with the fact that, in school, so much of what they were teaching in the psychology department was from a standpoint of going on to end up with your PhD or your PsyD... I knew that it wasn’t going to necessarily going to be a big benefit to me as a bachelor’s degree. I didn’t know just how little it would really benefit me. Because they still sold it as, “this is a great thing to use even if you just get it as a bachelor’s degree.” And it really is pointless other than to say, “I have *a* degree.” And going back—if I would have had it all to do over again, I wouldn’t have gotten the degree. I’ve never used it. It’s of no real benefit to me other than to say, “Yeah, look. I took the time to finish school and I’ve got a piece of paper now.”

Jason’s feelings were in line with Mark’s. “I went through all those years of school and thought I was learning something and honestly, I’ve got no more skills than when I left high school.” Despite these assessments, all three of these participants did name specific skills they gained as a result of their college attendance and experience. Their explicit statements that they did not learn skills applicable to work, however, constituted the final theme for the theory that college degree completion contributes to development of human capital.

### *Credentialing*

Another of the ideas espoused in Pascarella and Terenzini's overview of how college affects students (2005) was credentialing, the idea that college serves as a gateway, admitting only a select few to a set of desirable careers. Although asking participants about their level of academic performance was not a part of the study, Mountain State is not among the most selective of institutions in the state college and university system. Some participants, such as Antonio and Mark, tried to gain admission to or attend more rigorous institutions, but were unsuccessful. Several participants openly discussed poor academic performances, such as Samantha and Owen. Without benchmarks, it was hard to know what they deem to be bad grades. But these indicators—institutional rank and self-reports of academic achievement—did not support the credentialing theory.

The other element of credentialing is access to desirable careers. None of the participants held jobs that reasonable people would deem highly desirable. Some were involved in service to others, such as the teachers, Lori and Janine. Others had the potential to earn significant money, such as the salesman Mark. But most of them were in basic jobs without significant prestige or earning potential. Perhaps since the time the credentialing theory was developed, the onslaught of college attendees and degree holders has altered the employment landscape.

Themes from this study did support the theory about the effects of college degree completion, albeit by turning the traditional meaning upside-down. The new credential held by college graduates is perseverance. To put it another way, college graduates were the ones with the determination to accomplish the goal of earning a college degree. A full 75% of participants, without specific probing by the researcher for this result, stated that their college degrees meant

they were among the select few with stamina and dedication to complete their programs of study, despite the tensions, problems, and frustrations they encountered along the way.

*The Credential of Accomplishment*

The idea that holding a college degree means “I can finish what I start” was expressed in different ways by many participants. When asked how having a college degree made her different from someone her own age that does not, Karen replied:

I feel like personally, I accomplished something. I went through—I finished high school and I could have stopped, not that I would have. And I did in 4 years.

And I was done. And I was proud of that. A lot of people keep going. And it was nice to say, “Yes! There’s my college diploma and I’m done with that. I don’t ever have to go back to school if I really don’t want to.” That’s the only thing. I guess I’m proud of myself that I did it.

Janine also wanted to see what she could achieve. “The second time, I think I was trying to prove something to myself... I wanted to excel. I wanted to prove to myself I could. What I chose to do I could do well... I was just determined.” To Samantha, “[having a college degree] shows determination and an ability to follow through.” Kimberly said almost the exact same thing. These women, despite the differences in their age ranging from 23 to 47, some of whom have children and others who do not, all felt they had done something special simply by finishing their degrees.

Even Mark, so taciturn on the benefits of college attendance, allowed, “I had invested a lot of time into it. And I felt it was worth finishing.” Steffe also did not give reasons, but demonstrated that finishing was important to her. “It was just for me to go through it and start and be there and finish it, I think was the biggest for me.”

Although he cast it in a humorous light, Owen had a fascinating analogy for what finishing college and obtaining a degree meant for him.

But I always wanted one. Even if it was something I never used. I always wanted one because I wanted to say, “I accomplished this.” To myself. I wanted to say, “Hey, I learned this.” It’s almost like a video game. Hey, I beat this! I conquered college! But I guess I probably shouldn’t say college was a game. But it was kind of game. What could I do to better myself? What could I do that would help me towards my life goals?

John shared this idea, claiming,

If you have a college degree, all it means is you were smart enough to outsmart the people for them to give you a piece of paper. That’s all that a college degree gives you. Whether it’s from Harvard or Yale or [a technical college]. Make your momma proud of you. That’s all it is... Because all I was able to do was hang on long enough until they decided they were going to give me one.

John was more cynical than Owen, but his sentiments were similar: college is a game to be won, either by strategy or scheming. For these participants, college was about making it through, no matter what it takes.

Some of the participants understood that their degrees send messages to other people. Sonny knew explicitly what his possession of a degree should tell an employer. “But a college degree, that tells employers that you can handle responsibility if given a task. You can get it done. That’s what I think having a college degree means, really.” Lori directed her message at another audience: her sons. “The highlight was watching my boys realize that Mom and Dad like to learn as much as-- And it motivated them to strive for excellence.”

A review of resumes provided by seven of the participants provides strong support for this theory. All seven resumes noted college graduation, year, type of bachelor's degree, and major. Everyone who earned a concentration or minor also noted it. Three of the participants listed their earned grade point averages. Clearly, participants wanted employers to know about their accomplishment, believing it demonstrates dedication and perseverance.

*Obstacles: Problems, tensions, and distractions.* The feelings of the participants that their degrees represented such great accomplishments were best understood in the context of the hardships they reported as part of their college experiences. All but Karen worked their way through college, several in full-time positions. Some held more than one job, including ones in manual labor or with under-the-table pay arrangements. Three participants were mothers; Kimberly had a toddler who was born in the middle of her college career.

Jason and Samantha both reported bouts with depression. Janine's marriage was endangered partly due to her pursuit of her degree; she recently separated from her husband. Lori's mother died while she was enrolled; she credits extraordinary help from professors for being able to complete her classes that semester. John's major was cancelled without warning at the urban research university, leaving him scrambling to formulate an alternative plan. Owen's on-campus roommate at the same urban research university was a heavy and hard-core drug user. Steffe compressed her final semesters to attend to family business at home in Germany. Mark had to take his final class a second time at Mountain State because a new department chair was unwilling to honor the verbal agreement he had made. He had to travel many miles against traffic twice a week from his home in the northwest mountains of the state to do so.

The only three participants who did not recount some sort of difficulty were Karen, Owen, Sonny, perhaps due to their young age or the protection of living with family. For the

other nine participants, finishing college was a battle against the odds and the unforeseeable circumstances that confronted them along the way.

*The Credential of Awareness of Options*

Almost half of the participants believed that college endowed them with greater awareness of the options before them. According to Antonio, “College exposes you to something completely different from blue collar work straight from high school... You have more options... It doesn’t prepare you any more to work and all that, but it opens your options to what you can do.” Janine put a slightly finer point on it. “I think [not having a degree] limits their thinking more. What I believe my possibilities are—are probably bigger. I notice... Or people I know who don’t [have a degree], it may not limit them, but they believe it does.” Janine speculated that earning a degree may have affected her recent marital separation; her husband is not a college degree holder. Similarly, Samantha said of her husband, “I would like him to be a little more curious.”

From her perspective as an international student, Steffe noticed that she has more opportunities than her friends at home in Germany. She also valued those options in a way that they do not. This was one of the reasons she enjoyed living in the United States.

I think for me, I have a lot more opportunities. Like most of my friends here, they do have college degrees. But a lot of the friends from home, they don’t. But they’re happy with it. They don’t really need it. It’s a different culture. Because I know I can go—I just can do, not whatever I want to do. But I have a lot more opportunities. I think, especially having a college degree here. A lot of people study something here and then they go in a totally different field. It’s not possible at home. You study something, this is what you work in. If you want to go

somewhere else, you have to go back to school. Not always, but that's pretty much how it is. I think for me it just opened a lot more doors than to what some of my friends do.

Although he did not specify in what way he would do so, Owen claimed, "[A degree] provided for me something I can always fall back on." The effects of all these open doors and opportunities, however, proved too much for Jason. "What I found out is that it opens you to so many doors that it's overwhelming." Both the existence of options and the awareness of them were part of the credentialing effect of college degree completion.

### *The Credential of Love of Learning*

The final criterion for which college demonstrates selectivity was love of learning. Several participants felt their completion of a college degree showed others that they value knowledge and its pursuit. Interestingly, two of the participants who were minimally involved in college beyond class attendance, Sonny and Karen, claimed a love of learning. Looking back, Karen missed the opportunities she had for learning and research during college, although she had tired of them by her senior year. Sonny simply said, "I love to learn." Enjoyment of the educational process was the reason Janine initially attended college in 1977. John prided himself on finding out as much as he can, calling his transcript "a long, long piece of paper." Lori was the most eloquent on this subject.

[A college degree] also provided me with motivation to continue learning for the rest of my life. Like I said, I'm still in school right now. The last two semesters had absolutely nothing to do with the teaching degree. The last two semesters I've taken classes that I thought would enhance my teaching ability. Right now I have fourteen classes that don't go towards either degree. Just 14 classes I've

taken for class, I've taken to make me a better teacher. To make me—I know for a fact I'm a lifelong learner. I will take a class a year for the rest of my life because I like to learn. I would rather take a class every semester for the rest of my life, but unfortunately, I have now burned up every class, every history class that Mountain State teaches. I'm going to have to transfer to another university to get classes that I don't have—in order to continue with history classes.

Taken as a whole, these participants' credential was a love for learning itself. While others may have mentioned the utility of a liberal arts degree for those who wish to pursue a graduate degree in the same field, these five individuals simply relished the chance to gain new knowledge for its own sake. Considering that three of the five participants who hold this belief were or planned to be teachers, a college degree was indeed a solid credential for love of learning.

### *Socialization*

Support for the socialization concept, the idea that college provides graduates with skills in networking, socializing, small talk, active listening, and the like, was modest. Three common ideas—access to like-minded individuals; networking; and social skill development—emerged, but they were mentioned by less than half of the participants. Given the age of most participants when they reported their gains, however, in their late teens and early 20s, natural maturity development may have been a confounding factor. This diminished the researcher's confidence that college experiences are the cause for the reported improvement in socialization. The oldest participant, however, did report an improvement in her confidence in new situations, thanks in part to her college experience and the insights gained there. One possible reason participants

shared few insights relating to this theory was because they did not perceive that socialization had a clear connection to work preparation.

*Access to Like-Minded People*

Antonio, while talking about the differences between college attendees and non-attendees, noted, “The type of people you surround yourself with are really different.” Earlier in the interview, he spoke about the difficulties of maintaining friendships with non-college peers who had different priorities. At one point, he felt seduced by the promise of having more spending money in his pocket and a more spontaneous lifestyle. Antonio also felt, however, that not all people at college valued the same things he did. Leading in with a comment about others’ apathy, he continued.

I didn’t give a crap about the lifestyle, the fraternities, and the kegs. So I was always the guy who went to social gatherings and trying to talk to someone about something—And they were getting frustrated and just became sarcastic... I always felt that struggle.

Antonio himself wanted that big school experience, saying he wished he had attended a flagship public institution in his own or a neighboring state. At the same time, he values conversations of substance and issues of personal relevance.

Jason was frank about the fact that he mainly associates with people who have either earned their degrees or proved themselves personally successful. He cited an example of a high school classmate to make his point about how the differences factor in his relationships.

She’s pregnant, got divorced, and now she’s having another baby with a different man. A lot of [my high school classmates] just are living the same lives they lived in high school... It’s like living a completely different life. Going to

college allows the universe to give you another opportunity to experience life on a different level, a different experience than you could in high school.

Mark successfully found kindred souls while living on campus at the public engineering university. “Two guys from there actually ended up being in my wedding. I became very close to them at the time.”

Jason, with his understanding of his own Type A personality, perceived some of his relationships with older, non-traditional students were deeper than his interactions with students his own age. Owen also referenced a lack of interest in drunkenness and wild parties. College attendees, therefore, must find the “right” people within the college environment with which to associate. When they do so, they make positive gains in socialization skills.

### *Networking*

Similar to the importance of meeting friends, college provided for some participants an opportunity to make connections. Antonio “learned how to network, how to meet people.” He secured his first job out of college thanks to the relationship with one of his history professors and the work he did as student assistant. John made specific, professional connections. He became personal assistant to a senator who taught a class at the two-year college he attended first and built a relationship with him. While at the urban research university, John “worked on [the governor’s] staff ... making sure that mainly the prisoner mail was taken care of in a proper way.” He also networked with two professors at Mountain State, one of whom is a “conservative political consultant that runs races” and the other, who is “a member of the Democratic Party executive committee.” Like Jason, who improved his networking skills through involvement with the leadership organization, both John and Antonio also recognized the power behind the idea that it is not what, but whom, you know.

*Social Skills*

Half of the participants reported gains in social skills thanks to the college experiences. Only one, Karen, said she developed her social skills at work rather than at college. John met “a lot of different people that weren’t from my corner of the world,” which allowed him to “look at the world in a not ‘us v. them’ mentality.” Hailing from a rural part of the state, he would not have had this experience had he not attended college. Two summers in Mexico on successive study abroad trips “brought me out of my shell—a lot,” according to Samantha. “It kind of broadened my horizons socially, which has always been a problem for me.” The small group environment allowed Samantha a chance to create the connections that were so difficult back on campus.

Owen did miss the clique he had in high school. Because he didn’t feel “that need to belong,” he “just kind of kept to himself.” Through his involvement with the history honors society, though, Owen “joked around with people and relaxed with people who were in my field.” Steffe valued the variety of friendship groups she formed both in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the College of Arts where she worked as an usher.

I think you enjoy the two things more. If you have a difference. You have something between it, so it’s not always the same people. There was a border between—I had friends and people there, and in the political science department and classes I had different friends.

Coming from someone reared in a former Communist country, this respect for the insights that result from division is fascinating. For most participants, exposure to different but interesting people played an important role in social skill development.

### *Screening/Signaling*

The screening/signaling idea posited that those who complete their college degrees already possess skills prior to their entry into college. In fact, college itself has been thought to value such skills and welcomes individuals who have them. Support for this concept, as demonstrated by common ideas uncovered in participants' interviews, was minimal. Some participants seemed mildly defensive, alleging that they did have skills prior to enrolling in college. Others displayed what seemed to be typical American humility, downplaying a frank assessment of their own abilities in favor of casting themselves as "works in progress."

The screening/signaling hypothesis was also problematic in this sample as it applied to the three mothers and the two women who home-schooled their own children. The modified credentialing idea classified simple completion of college as a significant accomplishment, demonstrating perseverance. In a parallel way, the three mothers who juggled work and child-rearing showed that they possessed a valuable set of skills useful to employers. The screening/signaling concept, however, did not account for this kind of skill acquisition. Nor does college as an institution value the skills Lori and Janine already had from years of teaching their children at home. As Lori saw it, "The one thing I think our society kind of forgets is sometimes the level of learning that you do in life has value, too. And we valued that little piece of paper that you get." Both of them were required to earn bachelor's degrees before they could be certified to teach at their private schools.

This example was illustrative, however. Even Lori, the no-nonsense former Army MP who brought up 3 boys, had adjustments to make when she entered the classroom. She cited in-class learning from her history and education professors as better preparing her for this

challenge. So perhaps even college degree holders who already have skills—those recognized by the academy or not—stood to gain something from their college experience.

### *Personal Qualities*

The skills that participants reported themselves as possessing prior to college were personal qualities or gifts important to them. Some were attributable to both receiving and providing good parenting; others were inherent personality characteristics. Kimberly, Samantha, and Mark considered themselves to be quick studies, easily picking up new job requirements. Both Kimberly and Lori referenced their ability to balance motherhood, marriage, work, and schooling; both specifically used the verb “juggle.” Antonio considered his ability to communicate with many different types of people a gift he has always had. Similarly, Kimberly and Steffe both felt they have always been open-minded. Owen just knew that “you kind of just have to roll with the punches.” He also considered himself reserved and comfortable with himself. Steffe was naturally happy, a quality she classifies as a benefit to her retail employer. Even before he began working, Sonny was loyal, decent, honest, and hardworking. Karen, too, has a good work ethic, instilled by her parents. Some of these skills would obviously be of value to employers. It is hard to make the claim, however, that Mountain State’s admissions process accounted for these qualities when welcoming the participants to enroll. In this way, the screening/signaling hypothesis was not well informed by the data.

### *A Shift of Perspective*

A fifth theme about the effects of college degree completion emerged during the study. Two-thirds of participants, excluding primarily the youngest individuals, believed that one major

effect of college degree completion was a fundamental shift in perspective. Eight participants made 20 different mentions of this idea.

Antonio simply said, “It opened my eyes. I loved it. I think the way it affected me was my ideology, understanding of the world.” Although he found it hard to express, Jason had some good insights:

So many people I’ve talked to believe that college is about the experience. It’s more than the knowledge. And the overall attitude that they come out of it with. And the drive. And—it like matures you. And that part, it doesn’t matter what you learn. It’s almost like you need that part because it gives you that foundation, that base where you can move forward.

Samantha concurred: “I don’t think [people who don’t attend college are] any less prepared. I just don’t think their eyes are as open to as much as is possible.” New vision was a metaphor frequently invoked to describe the change wrought by college completion.

Later, Jason said, “I don’t really know who I am or what I represent or what I want. And then I got into college and all that changed.” Mark had the same kind of epiphany after college, but still believes that college provided him with “a lesson in [pause] understanding what the purpose is for decisions that I make like that. Why we do certain things.” In her careers in psychology class, Janine learned about herself and clarified her values. In health class, she gained a new awareness for the unique contributions she can make as a more mature employee. John also believes college is “about asking questions.” The experience of earning a college degree showed these participants how to question assumptions and find deeper meanings.

When Steffe thought about going home to visit family and friends in Germany, she reported,

Every time I go home, I go back to the old person. To the one they want me to be. [Laughs] And when I leave home, I just slowly go back to my own...But when you go home, you go back to being a child and being what you're supposed to be. I did grow up a lot. But most of them like—they don't know how much I've been growing up and what I'm doing. 'Cause they never really see that. I don't think they think as far as I do. I think they studied something and they're happy right there where they are and they go day by day. I have a whole stuff [sic] in my head. What I want to do and where I want to go. My life is still open and I still have the idea that I still can do whatever I want to do.

For Steffe, the difference was one of perspective, of view of the world and one's self. She had to change herself to fit back into the space her family and friends had for her in their lives.

Echoing the theme of size, Antonio's opinion was:

It opens your doors. Your options get so much bigger... Once you get out of there, society forces you to work... Then when you work, the world gets smaller. The world gets smaller, you don't have those opportunities. It becomes the work. You know, and in college, your world is a lot. In my opinion your world is bigger. I think if you just go from high school straight into the world you cut off a lot of other things.

Like both of them, John was able to "expand the horizons of [his] life." Kimberly used the same phrase. Overall, Janine said, "It gave me a much bigger world view." Not only did perspective shift, therefore; it grew larger and could accommodate more.

Karen, Owen, and Sonny felt relatively unchanged by their college experience; they did not express this idea of perspective shift. Lori, who went to college with the specific objective of

getting her degree so she could be a full teacher, did not talk about new understandings or insights as a result of college attendance. All four of them participated in very few on-campus activities or organizations. Karen and Owen held positions in their academic honors societies. Owen lived for a short time on campus at the urban research university. Apart from that, this group of four went untouched by the beyond-the-classroom experiences—and the radical change in perspective—that the other eight participants enjoyed.

### Chapter Summary

Of the four theories the researcher hoped to explore, only the human capital hypothesis received unqualified support via the themes found. The number of skills graduates could readily cite and the experiences to which they tied them supports the concept that earning a college degree results in concrete gains in marketable skills and abilities. The fact that several participants highlighted these on their resumes is also germane. The most commonly cited skills were communication and time management. In-class, extracurricular, and college-related activities were all cited by participants to explain how they increased their own capital value.

While it came from an unexpected corner, the credentialing theory did have supporting themes. The traditional notion of the college credential conveying admission of a select few through the gateway of college to desirable careers was inverted by the participants' insistence that a diploma truly demonstrates perseverance. The qualitative nature of the study permitted participants' true understandings of the college credential to emerge. Given Mountain State's graduation rate, which hovers around 30%, the participants may have been right about their perseverance levels. Although many may be admitted through the school's gates, few emerge with a degree firmly in hand. Even the urban research university so many participants denigrated

during their interviews graduates only about 40% of its students within six years. The national college graduation rate is about 51%, placing these students in the top half of all college attendees (Horn, 2006). (This statistic does not apply all that well to this study's participants, because it is the six-year graduation rate of freshmen who attend college full-time, for the first time, beginning in the fall semester. The National Center for Education Statistics, however, does not routinely measure the roughly 30% of students who do not fall within those parameters.)

Instead of admitting a select few, participants' understandings indicated that college admits those who can persevere and those who love learning. Although they did not secure highly desirable jobs right after graduation, participants did proudly bear the credential of knowing the vast expanse of options available to them.

Support for the third theory, socialization, was very modest. A handful of ideas were uncovered from the half of the interview transcripts. Most of those whose comments supported this concept were younger, indicating a possible conflation with natural maturity gains. Interactions with the researcher by the participants are not a very reliable external measure, but some participants definitely had better social skills than others. It is likely that the type of institution limited the expectation participants had of participation in social-skill building activities. Mountain State is primarily a commuter school with a history of serving non-traditional, older learners. It also has a very recent and limited on-campus housing program. The fact that most of the participants were working and many living at home in the same communities with high school acquaintances should also be considered. Perhaps a study at a different type of institution would yield better support for this theory.

The final theory that the researcher explored was the idea of screening or signaling, which suggests that colleges purposefully select individuals who already have traits desirable to

employers and that college values the skills those individuals have. Although there were some ideas to support this concept, they were too minimally supported to provide any significant insight. Participants' expectations that college would somehow enlighten them and change them into employable people probably undermined this theory. They simply did not consider themselves highly desirable to employers before college, believing the degree and experience would be necessary and sufficient to secure employment.

One theme about the effect of degree completion emerged from the study, and featured prominently in the participants' responses. While reflecting on their college experiences, participants reported a shift in perspective. They described this using such ideas as expanded horizons, new vision, and ability to question. The depth of feeling conveyed by participants about this change showed just what a profound effect college had on them in terms of a new outlook on the world.

CHAPTER FIVE  
RESULTS REGARDING MAKING SENSE OF COLLEGE EXPERIENCES  
AND CAREER PATHS

The second research question was about how the participants make sense of the interactions between college experiences and their career paths and choices. Results for this question were grouped into seven different themes as well as three considerations prompted by the literature. Each of the themes and considerations will be described in detail below.

Seven Themes Involved in Participants' Understandings of College and Career

*The Relationship of Major to Career*

All of the participants expressed the sentiment that a major should correspond to a career in some concrete way, with the exception of Lori. Her history major obviously related to her career as a high school history teacher, however. This idea took several different forms.

For Antonio, certain majors were common to law school applicants. He felt his history major lines up well with his aspiration to become a lawyer. While enrolled, Samantha believed she would use her psychology degree to go on to be a counselor. Owen's passion was writing and, in his words, "history was writing." So he built a foundation for a future aspiration with his major, too. Before his focus changed, Mark believed a psychology degree would best prepare him to work full-time for a Christian youth outreach group. Karen was a little chagrined that her major—English—did not relate better to her current field—professional sports. Jason picked his psychology major believing it would prepare him for a wide variety of careers.

For John, it was clear. “[My major is] professional politics concentration in political science. And we are, as the tagline goes, a professional political consulting firm. So it is—my major is my job.” Kimberly’s experience was similar. She applied her Spanish major by serving as a translator in the optical department. When she does earn her teaching certification, she plans to teach Spanish. Similarly, Owen and Sonny wanted to teach in their respective major fields. Janine used her psychology degree each day at work with the adolescents she teaches and their parents. Steffe knew her retail management job does not relate to her political science bachelor’s degree, but longs for a job with the government or a non-profit organization. Although this result was not particularly surprising, support for it was firm: participants believed majors should relate to careers.

#### *Career Planning and Research*

As a rule, the participants did little formal career planning and even less career research. There were some participants who had initial careers in mind. Mark thought he would become a chemical engineer. Samantha planned to be a veterinarian. Both of their dreams foundered on poor academic performance in key subject areas. John and Jason planned to enter the teaching field. The cancellation of John’s major helped him switch to political science. Jason wanted more challenges than he perceived teaching could provide for him, and redirected his interests. Kimberly hoped to become a dance instructor. Earning lead roles as a freshman while at school in the southern part of the state did not match her expectation of gradual advance up the dance ranks there, so she abandoned that goal. Janine planned to make lots of money with her own psychology practice, but her interest in starting a family derailed that dream.

The only participant who achieved her initial goal was Lori. Because of her choice to forgo the student teaching requirement of the social science education major, however, Lori is

still taking classes in pursuit of her formal teaching certificate. When asked about her career plan before entering college, though, Lori shared,

My job was to raise my children... But when they became adults, then it was my turn to, to pursue a career... The fact that I loved teaching them... gave me some indication that, that was a gift I'd been given to use. I've got 15 years of experience... So why not keep doing it?

Janine was already teaching and simply needed her degree to help with her employing school's accreditation efforts. She has taught two subjects, literature and the Bible, in which she has no formal academic foundation, in addition to teaching one psychology class.

Comments from Mark shed useful light on the lack of time spent by participants on career research.

I guess I had been told, "Hey look. You're good in physics, you're good in chemistry, you're good in math. Chemical engineering is a good way to go." And I said, "Sounds great!" I had no idea what it was. So I thought I'd go in and be a chemical engineer. Make 50, 55, 60 thousand dollars. And it'd be great. I literally had no thoughts beyond that. No real experience or understanding of what it would entail. Nothing. Just that I would get the degree and I would go out, have a good job. Make good money.

Mark had even participated in career guidance while in high school. Although science and engineering were third on the list of proclivities he demonstrated, he feels now that he should have paid more attention to the top two: counselor and teacher. When Mark entered college, the

extent of his career planning was declaration of a major that matched his academic talents and would lead to a lucrative career.

Students who had the most information about career choices were psychology majors. Samantha and Janine both enrolled in a ‘Careers in Psychology’ course in which they had to actively consider some various options to which a psychology degree might lead. Janine’s instructor went so far as to have them draw up a budget based on what they valued in life and then compare their needed income to the projected income ranges of certain careers. The same class helped Samantha realize “the impact it would have on my family life. And the money.” As a result, she changed her mind about wanting to attend graduate school in psychology. Jason also took the class, but felt the instruction quality was poor. Mark remembered taking a self-assessment course in which he learned about himself and his personality.

Mark, Sonny, Karen, Owen, Lori, Kimberly, Antonio, Jason, and John did not participate in any career planning. Owen said, “I didn’t think I needed it.” John made a similar statement, “I kind of knew what I was going to be doing and how I needed to go about doing it.” Steffe was in between Owen’s and John’s positions.

I don’t think I really needed help because I knew what I wanted to do. It was just more for questions and advice... Where to look for jobs. Yeah, I kind of knew what I wanted. Just how to get there was more difficult.

Through his leadership program, Jason did have a mentor, an important dean. But he felt, “I figured I couldn’t discuss my ideas as far as career because they were like this big in comparison to these enormous dreams that these people were living.” He also judged that he had a problem with procrastination.

Janine, Lori, Sonny, Mark, Samantha, and Kimberly were already full-time employees during some or all of their enrollment and at the time of graduation, perhaps reducing their interest in career planning. Two participants did mention interactions with the Career Service Center at Mountain State. Steffe went there twice, first to take an aptitude test and then closer to graduation. Samantha also went during her final year. “I did go and see the guy across the street to see about what to do with my degree because I didn’t have a clue.” Overall, participants either did not believe career planning was necessary, procrastinated too long for it to be useful, or did not understand what resources were at their disposal to more effectively prepare for their careers.

### *Enlightenment via Education*

Close reading of the participants’ interviews revealed a perception, held by all four of the youngest participants, that attending college would somehow stimulate a dramatic revelation of true purpose in life. When asked what he believed college would provide for him, Jason was frank. “I figured that when I got in here I would end up knowing exactly what I wanted to do.” This assertion should be juxtaposed with a statement he made moments earlier. “[I attended college] to buy time until life started.” Jason declined to say what at college would enlighten him, especially when such an experience would be somehow suspended from the real world. Owen was sure that certainty would be a result of his college experience.

Well, it gives me some idea of what I want in life. Because usually, people get a degree in something they like. And if you find what you like, that’s the first step into discovering what you want to do for the next 40 or 50 years or whatever.

Ahh, I’d say people my age who don’t have college degrees are probably a lot less sure of what they want.

Certainty was important to Owen, so it was understandable that he valued becoming more certain as a result of earning a college degree. Owen did not actually leave college with a clear career plan, nor did the career plan he developed since graduation account clearly for how he will have an opportunity to pursue his true passion, writing.

Jason and Owen were not the only participants who expressed this feeling. Although Karen did not have a career plan, she believed college would “have something to do with whatever career I’d pick.” Sonny was similarly unclear on just what college would provide, but he knew it would be positive. His answers to the questions of why he attended college and what he believed it would provide for him were halting.

I like to learn. I thought it was important—umm... It was important to me. And the sort of—I like to learn so I had to go... Ahh, I don’t know. I didn’t really think about it too much other than just—I like learning stuff.

Although college was enjoyable to Sonny, a man who valued the pursuit of knowledge, and although he had no specific career plan, Sonny was sure he needed to attend college and that it would have a positive result. All four of these participants advanced rapidly through college, on their way to an unknown future, hopeful it would be revealed. Sonny, whose interest in teaching developed only recently, even wished he had finished school faster.

### *Enjoyment and Relevance*

When describing how they chose majors and the careers they hoped to pursue, participants’ comments centered on either enjoyment or relevance. Most participants ruled majors/careers in or out due to their enjoyment rating, according to a personal scale. Jason explained this connection in a very simple way. “My academics were really focused on what I had fun in. Because I figured if I had fun in class I would have fun in my job.” Kimberly

“would like to teach kids Spanish” and believes “it’d be really awesome.” For Lori, “History has always been a passion.” Janine had a fascination for psychology and really valued her role as a substitute mother while chaperoning her children’s mission trips. Owen “fell in love with the notion of becoming a history teacher.” While trying to decide between art and English, Sonny “started taking a few extra English classes and ... really enjoyed it.” According to Karen, “I kind of knew I wanted to go with English because that was what I liked in school.” In fact, her enjoyment of art history courses inspired her to briefly consider graduate school in the art history field. This quick catalog of quotations shows how ubiquitous the theme of enjoyment was in the context of career decision-making.

Relevance fell into several categories. Antonio wanted his career to be politically relevant: “I figured if I became an attorney I could be most effective in immigration.” For Owen, history was personally relevant. “It suited my personality, my preferences, and my need to be right.” Steffe’s interest in helping outsiders, especially children, was ethically relevant. Whatever the kind of relevance or the reason for enjoyment, both were important considerations to the participants when it came to selecting a career path.

*Interest and Purpose v. Career.*

Several participants confounded the researcher’s expectation that recent graduates would focus on career plans. Instead, they spoke of interests and how a particular career supported those, or of life purpose. Steffe and Antonio were good examples. Steffe enjoyed helping those in need, and therefore would like a job in government or non-profit work supporting children. Antonio was passionate about the issue of immigration, and believed a law degree would aid him in his quest to make a difference on that front.

Karen and Samantha, on the other hand, looked for satisfying criteria within a job rather than a particular job description. Karen, who could not articulate a specific career interest or plan, did explain the two reasons she likes her current job. “Feeling like I know what I have to do and it’s something I like to do being around people that I like.” Samantha initially disliked her husband’s philosophy of holding a job to earn money in service of one’s dreams. Now, however, “I want to be able to do certain things. And I don’t really care how I get the money... As long as I’m happy in a job.” For Samantha, the purpose of working was to fund her aspirations of being financially secure, traveling, and one day owning a horse.

Three of the participants spoke openly about their Christian faith or worked at religious institutions where their religious values were reflected. An interesting phenomenon surfaced after comparison of transcripts from Mark, Lori, and Janine. Instead of answering questions about career interest and plan with specific interests or job titles, they referenced purpose. Lori described parenting as her “job.” She left the Army to focus fully on that responsibility. She also described teaching as “a gift I’d been given to use.” Janine explained her second stint in college in this way. “The way I look at it, when I came back, I believe God had something for me. He had a purpose for the second half. And I needed to be as equipped as I could be.” Later, when explaining the differences between her children’s educational experiences, she said of her them, “Basically, how God made you. He made [my son] to work with his hands. It was perfect for him. It wouldn’t have been perfect for her.”

Mark echoed this sentiment of some paths being designated for a certain set of individuals, and others reserved for a different group. For Mark, college provided “A learning lesson... Why we do certain things. Why other people choose to take certain paths in their life.” Taken independently, this comment might not appear to support the idea of Christian participants

valuing purpose. Repeatedly, however, Mark described himself as having a “calling” and a “sense of purpose.” He contrasted this with his feeling that, after college, he and his wife “didn’t really have a clear direction for life, so we could focus on very short term. Make enough cash to survive the week.” Mark also demonstrated that one’s calling can change over time. “I had interviewed at one point with [the Christian youth outreach group] while I was still in high school, and then, later on decided that that wasn’t what I felt called to and where I wanted to go with my life. Full-time for a career.”

This approach to career decisions—as Mark says, “an inner decision of changing directions of where I wanted to go”—contrasted sharply with the emphasis some other participants placed on choosing majors or careers for their innate enjoyment. There was also a possibility that this sense of calling provides a stronger base for career planning. When asked to describe himself, Mark answered, “Very driven right now to pursue both short-term and long-term goals and very willing to change what I need to change to be able to do that.” While other participants knew they needed advanced schooling to achieve their goals, none had Mark’s clarity about what kind of personal development would be necessary, too. Interestingly, these three participants were also among the oldest of the sample. Perhaps age or maturity also provided perspective on what is truly important in life and on what basis decisions should be made.

#### *Convenience and Expediency*

Reflecting their perception that college is an experience to be endured or an achievement to be catalogued, many of the participants understood the importance of both convenience and expedience when it came to linking their college experiences and career goals. Both Mark and Jason had a shared sense of inexorability. According to Jason, “Next thing you know, I’m

halfway through my degree and it's too late to turn back." Even though Mark had dropped his dream of being on staff for the Christian youth outreach group, he stayed with psychology because "I was fairly close to finishing my degree and I had invested a lot of time into it." Antonio described it as "going through the motions."

Initially, Jason planned to be a teacher because "it was easy... I mean, you have a book right in front of you." Karen's convenience took the form of consignment or acceptance. She said things such as, "I'm perfectly fine staying with [the professional sports team]" and "I'd be perfectly fine staying in [this sport] for the rest of my life." She took a job she "got picked up for" and "just kept going. Just stuck to it." This is similar to the idea of acquiescing to a major simply so one can graduate.

Mark admitted to taking two different jobs because "that was the easy way out" and "I needed to make quick money." Steffe agreed with the researcher's suggestion that her current job of clothing store management is just "paying the bills," saying, "Yeah. That's all it is. I mean, it's fun for right now." Owen, who scorned his job as a temporary test scorer, classified it as a "filler job," a way to "mak[e] money that's going towards my intended career." Samantha took her current job to help her parents and to make more money, and has held it for the past 6 years. Coming from a slightly different perspective, Kimberly switched out of her dance program because "dancers don't make a lot of money."

Certainly, these comments reflected a sense of economic reality. Adherence to strict and lofty career ideals without an incoming paycheck is not a wise strategy. Samantha encapsulated this tension well.

Now I'm just happy going to my 9-5 job that's not even a career. I guess you just—everything's less real when you're that age. And just everything's so big.

You're going to do everything so big. And now I'm just, I'm so glad I can pay my bills and put some money to the side. I'm glad I have enough money to invest. And I'm not worried that I'm going to lose my house. I guess—priorities change, I guess.

What seemed to be missing for the participants during their college experiences, however, was a way to create realistic career aspirations and a sound income plan at the same time.

### *A Stepping Stone*

Another common way participants understood the relationship between the college experience and career choices was the stepping stone metaphor. They used words such as “foundation” and “step” when speaking about this phenomenon. For Sonny, college “got me into graduate school.” Characteristically disparaging of his own time dedicated to college, Mark said, “All it provided was an opportunity to potentially get a different kind of job.” Karen called college a “gateway to my job.” The stepping stone metaphor implies both a sense of motion, from one place or state to another, as well as a time spent in construction of something that will need a sturdy base. As Jason said, “It gives you that foundation, that base where you can move forward.”

Participants already actively involved in their careers or current jobs did not make these references. This includes Kimberly, Lori, John, and Samantha. Janine, also holding her job while she was enrolled in college, did explain her first college experience, back in 1977, with the stepping stone terminology, saying college should provide “the first step into a career.”

### Three Considerations from the Literature

#### *Barriers Involved in Connecting College Experience to Career Path*

Perhaps repeating the pattern of college graduation being a triumph over adversity, participants described more barriers than supports for their major and career choices (Lent et al., 2002). Sonny was disheartened by the fact that, unlike his fiancée's nursing degree, "there's not a strictly defined, 'Once you graduate with an English degree you're going to do this' like a lot of other majors have." Mark simply did not know what his options truly were. "Lack of knowledge definitely hindered me. Umm, lack of an understanding of what was really out there." Although Steffe knew she was interested in biology, she was unable to enroll in the necessary lab classes due to scheduling conflicts with her job as a nanny. John, whose commitment to teaching was so firm that he had already spent time student-teaching, was confronted with an abrupt cancellation of his middle education major while at the urban research university. According to John, this completely curtailed his plan to become a teacher.

Owen and Jason had enough knowledge about their personalities to rule out certain jobs. Thanks to the insights gained from his leadership program, Jason eliminated counseling. "I pick up a lot of times on other people's moods and the moods of the environment. And I learned that from [the leadership organization] too. So I decided not to go into counseling." Owen knew he found psychology disquieting, and changed his major to history.

Even knowledge of personal goals was not enough in the face of poor academic performance. As noted above, both Mark and Samantha changed career trajectories when confronted with poor grades in crucial classes. On a related note, Steffe ignored her own interest in international science because it carried a Bachelor of Arts rather than a Bachelor of Science

designation, which was to her of lesser worth. Instead, she declared political science and earned her BS.

Lori, with her clarity regarding her gift to teach, dropped her initial education major because of the student teaching requirement. “I didn’t want to have to go to work and student teach at another school while I still had [my children] at home.” Later, she put a finer point on the significance of this barrier. “You know, to have to quit work, and forgo a decent salary in order to teach for free for a semester is a pain.”

Although Samantha was “only like three or four classes away from a Spanish major,” she did not pursue it because “I would need to retake Spanish history. Which is God-awful. Honestly, that’s the only reason, is if I feel like I could get through Spanish History 1 and 2, I could do it.” Sonny chose English instead of art because “I’m way behind in art... So I figured I would go with the one that I could get done faster.” Karen, who valued reading, “briefly thought about being a history major but then I found out that they had to have one more semester of foreign language so I—English major it was!” Repeating the idea of convenience as a value, multiple participants eschewed a certain path or preparation step due to the extra effort required.

#### *Supports Found in College Experiences Leading to Career Choices*

The results demonstrated several types of support for certain career decisions (Lent et al., 2002). Learning more about oneself was important to Jason and Antonio. Referencing his involvement in Mountain State’s leadership organization, Jason said, “Like doing group activities to learn about personality styles and stuff like that is when I realized I really like working with people. And analyzing group dynamics. Which is still what I like to do.” Antonio, for whom two study abroad trips were fundamentally formative, had a series of

epiphanies related to college experiences. The following long quotation summarized his insights.

I think the thing that moved me toward what I wanted to do was-- when I started working in the restaurant industry and landscaping during college. Together with the classes I was taking in college... I started seeing people change. Who was doing these jobs? Why are these people coming here? Why are they speaking the same language I spoke as a kid? What's their history? I started making friends with them. That's when it started... Couple that with the spur of the moment idea when I was already planning to go to the study abroad in Italy and [a professor] convinced me 'Why don't you just pay half of it and go to Central America? We really just backpack and we talk about it every night...' So I went on this trip and that was it. I started putting things together. So yeah the classes had a lot to do with it, but I think more what was going on. With what I was seeing at work and how I saw [the state's composition] changing, coupled with that ... completely random trip to Central America... Putting those two things together. And from then I started taking classes. I focused more on immigration issues, the history of Latin America and all that stuff. But that's what it was. It was the work, seeing the workers. Seeing the new immigrants coming in. Having contact with them. Seeing them in a different way than most people around me were seeing them. And then traveling to where they come from. And seeing that is what changed me. Is what made me start working toward this. And meeting him, [this professor], the Latin American specialist.

A certain history professor at Mountain State provided a mentoring relationship for Antonio. Similar experiences with mentors played a role in career decision-making for John, Owen, Lori, and Mark. John specifically went to the two-year college in the northern part of the state with the aim of getting to know the senator on the faculty there. He went on to be his personal assistant and maintains a relationship with him today. Owen and Lori were inspired to love history—and to want to teach it—by superb history teachers. Lori’s mentor, however, taught at her high school. Mark did not meet his mentor until his final semester of college, but his life changed dramatically after forming that relationship. Jason had a mentor, an important dean, but was too intimidated to consult him. Obviously, close personal relationships of the mentoring variety had significant effects on the career plans of these college graduates.

The final support for choosing certain careers or majors was enjoyment. A quote from Owen nicely illustrated this.

I started to focus more on what career path would make me happier. My parents often told me and my personality test, everything pointed towards teaching. But I didn’t really love it until I had good teachers. You know, even in high school, I had some good history teachers. But the fields, the classes that they taught. You know you don’t have Greco-Roman history, or medieval Europe. Classes that are really interesting. Things I like. Or the philosophies. You don’t really get any philosophy in high school. So it was like, kind of opening up a new world to me. So once I experienced it, I kind of fell in love with the notion of becoming a history teacher.

For Lori, “it was easy to transition into teaching when it is a subject that you are passionate about.” Participants chose their majors or careers based on what they knew about themselves or believed they would relish, and sometimes had help from mentors.

#### *Attribution to Serendipity*

As predicted by the literature (Bright et al., 2005), the idea of serendipity or happy accident was a theme articulated by three-quarters of the participants. Kimberly applied to be a cashier but was placed in the optical department, and started applying her Spanish major out of necessity to assist the doctor and clients. When she learned she could defray her son’s tuition costs by being on staff at his school, Lori entered the teaching profession in a formal way. Sonny had “sort of a nagging feeling in the back of my head that maybe I can teach.” Being in the right place (his job waiting tables) at the right time (his final semester of college) allowed Mark to meet the entrepreneur who would become his mentor. Karen made a habit of trusting fate. “I still don’t have any [plans]... I’m just kind of ‘I’ll go and see what happens here.’ ”

At his current job, Jason’s employer did not look at his resume or even know Jason was arriving. Jason himself put his application in via a popular job website, but did not think much of it. He characterized the job as “heaven-sent. An answer to my prayers. It was a miracle. It landed in my lap completely. I can’t credit it to anything other than that.” Janine returned to school after her daughter’s off-hand suggestion, “Why don’t you just go to school with me?” Steffe did not plan on declaring a major in political science, but “really liked it” after she “took a lot of my general education classes in the beginning.” The fact that so many participants put stock in serendipitous events may thwart efforts to pinpoint just what parts of the college experience can help clarify career pathways.

## Chapter Summary

In summary, the themes relating to participants' understandings of interactions between college experiences and career choices were as follows:

1. One's major should relate to one's career,
2. Little to no formal career planning or research occurs before or during college,
3. College is expected to provide enlightenment,
4. Enjoyment and personal relevance are the most salient factors in major/career choice,
5. Interest or purpose is more important than actual career for some participants
6. Convenience and expedience figured prominently in participants' discussions,
7. College is a stepping stone.

The three considerations from the literature included barriers, supports, and serendipity.

CHAPTER SIX  
RESULTS REGARDING THE EFFECTS OF DIFFERENCE, AND UNDERSTANDINGS  
OF COLLEGE EXPERIENCES AND WORK PREPARATION

Effects of Difference or Non-Dominant Cultural Status  
on College Experiences and Work Preparation

The third research question was about what effects difference or non-dominant cultural status has on the relationship between liberal arts college graduates' experiences and preparation for the working world. In response to interview questions designed to elicit answers about this topic, participants catalogued an impressive array of difference types. In line with the trend of more barriers than supports for career choices, they reported more barriers due to difference than benefits. Barriers fell into two primary thematic categories: involvement and experience, and difficulties or frustrations. Participants did nonetheless cite many benefits, including concepts of performance enhancement and advantage. Despite all of these reports, half of the participants also classified difference as a non-issue when it came to work preparation and the college experience.

*Types of Differences Reported by Participants*

In all interviews, the researcher asked participants, "How would you describe yourself in terms of multiculturalism or difference from others?" This question seemed to surprise the first four participants, so a lead-in, "How would you describe yourself?" was added. Interestingly, all of the first four participants described themselves in terms of qualities others might observe

about them easily: Southern, white, female, mother of a Mexican-American child, and the like. None of the final eight participants readily disclosed such “observable” differences. Steffe did disclose that she was brought up in a communist country, and Jason that he was gay. Most of the final eight interviewees, however, even when responding to the multiculturalism prompt, spoke about their personality differences or styles.

The range of “observable” differences reported was as follows. Antonio disclosed that he is Cuban-American. Kimberly, John, Lori, and Samantha all said they are Southerners. Samantha and John described themselves by their respective genders. Kimberly and Samantha, whose maiden names were not of Hispanic origin, noted that they married, respectively, Mexican and Cuban men.

Although Antonio referenced his Latino heritage, John, Samantha, and Sonny were the only participants to name their own race when asked to describe themselves in terms of multiculturalism. Other participants did show an awareness of the effects of racial or cultural politics. Lori reported, “My children were totally culture shocked when they came back to this country [from living overseas during Army postings] because how come neighborhoods were segregated... You know, it just didn’t make sense to them.” Samantha recounted a troubling interaction she had with an African-American classmate on one of her study abroad trips to Mexico. She felt her comment about the differences they experienced in tanning was interpreted too sensitively. Sonny’s time at the urban research university made him realize how homogenous the Mountain State University environment is. Steffe was sensitive to ill-informed declarations about Germany, characterizing her country as a frequent example in all sorts of classes. This in turn exposed Steffe to “other people just straight out of high school and never

left the country coming up with arguments... They haven't experienced anything or done any more research."

Overwhelmingly, however, the types of difference reported by participants were those of personal style or background. For example, Janine jokingly classified herself "maladjusted," preferring the company of adolescents to fellow adults. Unwillingness to define himself by the standards of others sets Owen apart. Sonny equated his whiteness to being "pretty American," saying "I don't really have an interest to travel the world. I don't know any other languages. I don't listen to music from other countries or anything like that." For Mark, the difference between himself and others was his embrace of capitalism and his rejection of self-limiting beliefs that inhibit his potential. John attributed his values to being a country boy "raised on the front pew of the Southern Baptist Church." Both John and Antonio thought of themselves as liberal. The wide range of reported differences meant that participants had plenty of answers to questions about how this difference affected their college experience and work preparation.

#### *Barriers to Career Preparation Created by Difference Experienced in College*

With the types of difference understood by the participants now enumerated, a discussion of their opinions on the barriers created by these differences is relevant. Personality distinctions were cited by several participants as the reasons behind their lack of involvement or experience. Samantha did not have "the big party time" because she was quiet. She also "didn't feel like there was much of a connection" when she returned to Mountain State to finish her degree because those whom she knew—former high school classmates—were gone. Karen felt she "could have been a little more outgoing and participated in different things besides my brief stint as publicity coordinator." Sonny expressed the same idea. Always longing for that stereotypical

college experience of partying and spontaneity but never finding it, Jason indicted his own rigid and structured personality as the inhibiting factor.

The other kind of barrier involved difficulties or frustrations. Whereas Mark sought approval, Owen had this to say:

Although I had fun with other people, I never felt like I had to go out there and make myself known to the world. The world would come to me. I'm not going to go charge it and yell, "Here I am! Notice me!" You know. Kind of kept to myself.

Offering a third variation on care for others' opinions, Antonio found himself resentful of the apathy of his classmates for the issues he found so compelling, and the emptiness of their hard-partying lifestyle.

For Steffe, the burden was not others' perceptions; it was financial. Because she did not pursue a basically free education at home in Germany, she shouldered much of the fiscal responsibility for her tuition and fees at Mountain State. As a result, she participated less frequently in campus events. Even though she was at Mountain State, known for its non-traditional learners, Janine spent her time with her daughter and others that same age.

In fact, the principal several months ago said, "I'm not commanding you. But I'm asking you to consider coming down and having lunch with the staff a few times a week. Because some of them have asked me what they did to offend you because you don't hang around them." I just want to be with the kids. So I have to learn to relate more to the adults.

According to Janine, her preference for dealing with adolescents made the transition to full-time teaching even more difficult.

*Benefits to Career Preparation Created by Difference Experienced in College*

Although they had much to say about the difficulties and barriers to involvement manifested because of their differences, participants also evaluated standing out as beneficial. Two participants felt their difference led to improved performance. Janine was determined to succeed when she returned to college 27 years after she first enrolled. “Overall I made A’s in everything. I was just determined.” Kimberly notes that:

The non-traditional students like myself—parents, married—tend to do a little bit better in college, because they’re more focused... They know what they need to do. They’re a little bit more responsible than sometimes the kids that are here ... [who] don’t have to look out for anyone except themselves.

Several participants also believed their difference conferred an advantage in occupational or educational settings. Lori evaluated herself as having a higher maturity level and better coping skills due to her life experience. Antonio perceived “when they saw the interests ... they maybe gave me more opportunities. It opened up a ton of doors.” Jason used his status as an out gay man as his “trademark” on campus. “It helped me separate myself from everyone,” he said. Content at his two-year college, unlike classmates who attended there because they did not receive admissions offers from the flagship public school, John made the most of his first years of college. Later, faced with a cancelled major, he “made the best of the situation,” saying emphasis from his mother on achieving happiness would not let him “just kind of fit in.” The only participant who spoke about the advantage of a traditional type of diversity was Jason, who came out while in college at Mountain State. Jason claimed that he brought a minority voice to his company as a gay individual.

*Difference as a Non-Issue*

Despite the willingness of many participants to speculate about the benefits and barriers to career choice created by the experience of difference, six of the twelve participants dismissed the idea that difference should matter at all. Samantha's husband has said of her that she does not "see color." Samantha herself declared, "I treat people based on how they treat me." Sonny noticed that the urban research university was attended by more "city kids and all sorts of races that weren't really represented at [Mountain State]," but felt any difference he experienced was due only to his personal shyness.

Although he was born of Cuban parents, Antonio felt his race did not matter because "And I'm as American as apple pie and my parents left when they were very young from their countries of origin... So if there was a support center for Latinos and stuff like that I don't know how that would have helped me." Relying on a country truism, John said, "I like to think I give everybody a fair shot and a square deal." In thoughts just prior to that, however, he spoke about how people's differences affect the way they are treated. Karen simply "never really felt difference from anyone." With the exception of Karen, all of the participants who classified difference as not important also named barriers and benefits related to their own difference. This apparent contradiction deserves further investigation.

#### Summary of Effects of Difference on the Relationship

#### Between College Experience and Work Preparation

In a generic way, participants' differences did affect their college experiences and work preparation. The range of personal distinctions they reported created unique barriers and benefits. Without more representation from additional "traditional" types of multicultural

statuses, however, it was difficult to report on how difference matters. The assertion by six of the twelve participants that difference did not matter—juxtaposed with the explanations of how difference did matter—also introduced an element of difficulty in answering this research question with confidence.

#### College Experiences Graduates Use to Understand Work Preparation

The fourth and final research question explored in this dissertation was what college experiences liberal arts graduates cite to understand their work world preparation. In comparison to the information gleaned from interviews in support of the first two research questions, relatively little information was uncovered to answer this question. The data were also highly individualized, likely due to differences in majors, aspirations, and current jobs held. Results were grouped into two themes: related to classes, and related to other college experiences.

#### *Academic Experiences Used to Understand Work Preparation*

Multiple participants spoke about class content when explaining what college experiences prepared them for the work world. The most obvious connection was the Careers in Psychology course that Janine, Samantha, and Jason took. For Janine and Samantha, the class provided a way to make decisions about ways they could apply their psychology degrees, and what avenues they should avoid. Kimberly, who used her academic study of Spanish each day at work in the optical department, attributed her skills to the culture, linguistics, and grammar courses she took from Mountain State's Spanish department. Although John did not end up pursuing his goal of becoming a teacher, teaching a high school history class for class credit "kept [John's] taste buds

watering.” With typical emphasis on application, Lori credited learning from classes with in-service teachers and skills in primary source analysis with improvement of her teaching ability.

Jason has applied lessons from his academics concerning workplace motivation and structure as well as the importance of diversity in his job in travel consolidation. Guest speakers who were also attorneys helped Antonio to clarify his interest and refine his aspirations. Steffe learned about active listening, a skill employers desire in recent graduates, thanks to the alternative dispute resolution class in which she enrolled. Finally, Lori said that “there were classes that really prepared me to teach those time periods,” referring to history courses on Colonial, Gilded Age, Renaissance, and Reformation eras.

Inspiration or take-away lessons provided by classes also provided the participants ways to understand their preparation for work. For Karen, the intense feedback experienced in her writing classes taught her how to better handle criticism. Janine had a revelation in her health class, a new class that was not originally required to graduate when she began school in 1977. She recounted:

And while at some points I might not be able to keep up with them physically, I think I came to understand and value some of the things that came with age...

Like kind of a bigger picture... The things that are life and death to them are not really life and death. So that whatever job arena I entered, maybe I would have advantages that maybe not a younger graduate would have.

As noted before, class discussions and the opportunity to evaluate criticisms offered by peers allowed John to understand that not all feedback is accurate. This study uncovered the theme that participants cite class experiences to understand their own preparation for the working world.

*Other College Experiences Used to Understand Work Preparation*

Participants made just as many references to out-of-class or college-related experiences when explaining their work preparation to the researcher. Under the category of general experiences, there were almost two experiences cited for every one participant. One sub-category deserves its own treatment: activities. Participants' hindsight evaluations of what they wish they had done while in college to gain experiences, as well as their future plans, emerged as other ways they understand their work preparation.

*General experiences.* Interest in a particular career, teaching, can be traced back to simply having good instruction for both Owen and Sonny. For John, work on campaigns and providing assistance to in-office politicians were the experiences he needed to build a solid portfolio of political experience.

The rest of the general experiences discussed by participants provided for them specific applicable skills. John and Antonio began professional networks as a result of their close relationships with select professors at Mountain State. Steffe and Samantha have applied the lessons learned from group work to their current jobs. Time management, developed as a result of juggling school and work, was a college experience that Mark, Sonny, and Karen shared. Similarly, Owen and Sonny thanked the deadlines of assignments and papers required for their ability to prioritize tasks now. Studying abroad was a way for Samantha to develop her personal interaction skills, becoming a more outgoing individual. Finally, both Janine and Samantha had new confidence in their own abilities, due to their successful return to school to complete their degrees.

*Activities.* On the whole, participants were involved in very few activities. This may be attributable to participants' perception of Mountain State as a commuter school, although it has had residence halls for the past four years and has quite an active student life. Almost everyone who was involved in an activity gained from it, however. Four of five participants who joined groups or honors societies included them on their resumes. Kimberly and Antonio simply listed, respectively, the Spanish Club and Spanish Honors Society, and progressive groups such as the Mexican American Student Alliance and Maya Community Heritage Project.

Jason and Owen, however, positioned their involvement in the leadership group and history honors society right along with paid employment on their resumes. Owen attributed to his involvement with the history honors society an increase in his "accuracy, communication, and presentation skills." Jason's entry was so impressive that it deserved reproduction:

CENTER FOR STUDENT LEADERSHIP

August 2004-August 2006

*Selective leadership organization serving the community through Mountain State University*

- Participation in seminars to understand and relate to different personalities, leadership styles, and skills.
- Use acquired skills to successfully create, organize, and implement strategy to raise student involvement during new student orientations. ***Increasing participation by 70% within 6 months.***
- Tactical planning, budgeting, and organizing of an international intercollegiate excursion to the University of Cape Coast to better understand diversity within leadership abroad.

With this text, Jason has demonstrated aptly to both employers and the researcher just what he learned from his college involvement and how he could transfer it to an employment context.

*Hindsight and Future Plans*

The researcher asked participants what they wished they had done differently while in college to prepare for the work world. Only Lori could not think of anything she would change. The remaining 11 certainly had answers at the ready. Several focused on timing. Steffe would

have preferred to go to school sooner after her high school graduation. While Sonny wished he had completed his degree more expediently, John speculated about what he might have gained had he taken time off in 2006 to run a political race somewhere. Kimberly reflected a desire to have waited to start her family until after she had completed her degree. Owen felt his time at the urban research university spent majoring in psychology was wasted, and wished he had declared his history major earlier.

Others focused on different opportunities they wish they had pursued. Currently in a job that requires proficiency in several computer programs, both Samantha and Antonio yearned for the expertise they could have gained had they taken computer courses. Because she has received many surprised looks from co-workers at the professional sports team when they hear about her English major, Karen has wondered what a different major would have provided her. Antonio still wished he had been able to attend a flagship state institution where students were more focused on learning, and where he would have been more challenged to improve his writing and researching skills.

Finally, three participants wished they had known to take advantage of other opportunities. Janine would have relished the opportunity to have an internship. Jason felt his experience would have been different had he known what he wanted to do in terms of a career. Mark would have started a career as early as possible, perhaps in his teens, and maybe never even attended college. Despite the ease with which they offered these insights, none of the participants seemed to feel regret about their college experiences. After they had become full members of the working world, they better understood what experiences would have been beneficial while in college.

Most participants expressed a defined future plan. Karen did not. But of the others, many planned to return to school for higher or different credentialing. Antonio planned to attend law school. At the time of their interviews, Lori and Kimberly were taking classes to earn teachers' certificates. Lori, Sonny, and Owen planned to earn their Masters in Teaching degrees, each in the same field as their major. Janine had considered a Masters degree in the field of psychology; Steffe and Jason had thought about Masters of Business Administration degrees. Samantha planned to become an emergency medical technician by enrolling in courses at the local technical school. Mark and John had defined future plans, but they did not involve more education. Mark wanted to expand his business so he could support his family as well as important ministries and causes. John wanted to spend more time in politics, perhaps even running for office himself one day. Results from the study confirmed the ideas that college is a stepping stone, sometimes to more education, and that graduate or professional education also enhances career attainment and options.

#### Summary of College Experiences Graduates Use to Understand Work World Preparation

Participants' citations of college experiences they use to understand their work preparation were highly individualized. They were grouped into two themes, including in-class and out-of-class experiences. Of the out-of-class experiences, school-related activities featured prominently. Two participants even included them on their resumes in parity with notations of paid employment. Although they did not participate in much planning while in college, participants do have both future plans—many of which involved further schooling—as well as opinions on what they ought to have done during college to better prepare for work.

### Summary of Chapters Four, Five, and Six

Twelve participants shared their reflections and insights regarding college experiences and work preparation. They were Antonio, Janine, Jason, John, Karen, Kimberly, Lori, Mark, Owen, Samantha, Sonny, and Steffe. Results gleaned from their interviews and document analysis of resumes they provided were used to answer the four research questions of this study.

Ample support was uncovered for the theories of human capital and credentialing as two effects of college degree completion. Kinds of marketable skills that participants reported included communication, time management, critical thinking, job-specific skills, academic skills, flexibility, self-initiation and guidance, acceptance of criticism and feedback, understanding of organizational policies, group work, and active listening. In contrast to the predicted credential of being a member of the elite destined for a highly valued job, the credential that these 12 participants enjoy is a universal sense of accomplishment and perseverance. Some also believed a college degree signals a love of learning and a new awareness of the wide range of possibilities inherent in every person and situation.

Exploration of interview and resume data did not reflect the other two theories, screening/signaling and socialization, strongly. Some participants did believe they had important personal qualities before attending college, and others made improvements in their access to like-minded people, networking, and social interaction abilities. A fifth theme emerged from participants' comments: the sense of perspective that college graduates enjoy but non-attendees lack. Metaphors of new vision and increased breadth of worldview were applied as participants explained this theory.

In terms of participants' understandings of how college experiences related to career choices, seven themes surfaced. They were the idea that one's major should relate directly to one's career; a common experience of little to no career planning or research before or during college; the expectation that college will provide vocational enlightenment; the most salient factors in career choice being enjoyment and relevance; for some participants, interest or purpose as more important than an actual career; convenience and expedience being important to the participants when considering career pathways; and understanding of college itself as a stepping stone to future pursuits. Participants also acknowledged the importance of barriers, supports, and serendipity, confirming findings from the literature review.

Although the researcher anticipated she would uncover themes related to cultural kinds of difference, participants reported a wide range of differences, from sexual orientation and ethnicity to personality type and life philosophy. Some participants attributed their low levels of college participation to personality characteristics, while others encountered frustrations because of their differences from fellow students. Benefits due to differences were explored as well. Half of the 12 participants did stipulate that difference of any kind is a non-issue in terms of college experiences and work preparation.

As a group, participants did not cite many college experiences from which they could extrapolate work preparation and skills. Some did report gains as a result of academic experiences. A handful of participants were involved in activities such as honors societies or cultural clubs. Overall, their participation in college life beyond class and the trappings of college—tuition payments, registration, and the like—was quite low. Despite this, however, almost all 12 interviewees could readily explain what they wished they had done differently during college. Their hindsight covered such topics as finishing more quickly, gaining more

concrete skills, and taking better advantage of what was offered. Every participant except Karen did have a plan for the future; most of them intended to return to graduate school.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION

The seventh and final chapter of this dissertation considers the following issues: insights from the study; surprises from the data; what types of information or approaches would improve the study; how the study's findings inform the existing literature; what relationship to college student development theory the results have; limitations that affect the validity and transferability of the study; suggestions for future research; and ideas for practical application.

#### Overview of Significant Findings

Results from this study offer three major insights for the existing knowledge base regarding the relationship between liberal arts graduates' college experiences and their preparation for the work world. They include insights about career planning, differences among participants due to demographic characteristics, and how the nature of an educational institution as well as the place of school in students' lives affects their experience. A discussion of the research questions for which few themes emerged is also included.

#### *Findings Regarding Career Planning: Too Little, Too Late*

None of the participants stated that they went to college with a specific career plan, and a rough sketch of how to achieve it, in mind. The universal expression of little or no planning was a surprising result of the study. Lori's data was contradictory, as she said at one point that she went simply to get her history degree so she could teach, and at another point that she had no plan when entering college. The other 11 participants had vague notions at best. For example,

Mark planned to become a chemical engineer, but had no information whatsoever about what the career entailed. Off-handedly, Jason mentioned interest in teaching, but this was not strong enough to last past the beginning of his enrollment. These three examples represent the total acknowledgement of pre-college career planning that all 12 participants expressed.

More important than the fact of not having a well-defined career plan itself is the effect it had on participants' time in college. Because they did not know clearly enough what they wanted to do, Lori and Kimberly are currently re-enrolled in bachelor's level classes to earn teaching certificates. Sonny and Owen lack the credentials to teach, and now need master's degrees to be able to achieve their occupational goals. Mark felt he wasted years during which he could have been building up his business. Samantha met her personal goal of completing her degree, but is stuck working for her parents in a job she feels she has outgrown. Steffe feels her choice to declare a political science major has hindered her search for meaningful jobs, due to incompatibility between her as a foreign national and the requirements for government jobs. Had these individuals better defined their goals before entering and then completing college, they could have saved themselves time, money, and energy.

Although Mountain State University does have a career service center, almost none of the students utilized it. Even when representatives came to their classes to make presentations about what the center could offer, participants such as Owen felt they had no need of what was offered there. Consistent with the literature (Lairio & Penttinen, 2006), Samantha and Steffe visited the career center as they neared graduation. By then, however, the only help that could be offered was tailoring of the resume and introduction to job searching resources. By doing little or no career planning, participants left unexplored the issue of whether they would actually be satisfied

with careers related to their majors or what experiences they could undertake to strengthen their candidacy for desired jobs.

Lack of planning also lead to misperceptions. Sonny's and Owen's inspiration to become teachers is limited to enjoying the instruction they received. Not once did either of them mention the schedule and compensation, compatibility with their personal skills or values, or the work environment—all important considerations when taking a job. Even a few days spent shadowing a classroom teacher could help them better understand the career to which they plan to commit additional years of study and employment. Karen felt that her English degree was good for only teaching. She was unaware of the other options liberal arts majors have on the job market.

Owen's comments about why he does not wish to earn a graduate degree in history also show lack of information. He conflated the master's with the doctorate degree, and suggested he would be age 40 before he ever began teaching. He also characterized it as an expensive proposition. Had Owen spent purposeful time learning more about that option, he may have known the difference between master's and terminal degrees, the average length of time to complete each, and the teaching responsibilities that often accompany the graduate assistantship that can defray tuition costs. This is a poignant example of how basic career research, as simple as conversations with professors or graduate students, could be of benefit to liberal arts majors.

It may not be reasonable to expect this kind of insight from current undergraduate students, especially ones of traditional age (Ignelzi, 2000). For this reason, however, universities provide career counseling services and departments provide advisement. This is a way in which institutions can provide ways for people at introductory adult development stages to cope with higher order developmental tasks (Ignelzi; Kegan, 1994). Few participants took advantage of the knowledge and resources offered to them.

The emphasis participants placed on serendipity, as predicted by the literature (Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005), makes their lack of planning all the more understandable. The richness of the college environment and the breadth of possible experiences should have boded well for participants' experience of spontaneous enlightenment. In combination with many participants' single-minded focus on both enjoyment and expedience when it came to career decisions, however, the college experience begins to resemble one of the worst places to prepare for work. The American system's openness to students' personal choice of major did participants no favor, while the myriad bureaucratic obstacles wore them down. Few participants expressed sentiments like Antonio's, the wish to have been more challenged to develop solid academic skills so he could then transfer them to his job. From a career preparation perspective, a liberal arts college experience can seem to be at worst a liability, or at best a dalliance.

These findings about the importance of career planning, however, should be tempered by an awareness of economic realities. A number of the participants were working full-time while enrolled in college. Three were parenting children still living at home. They may not have had the time to spend on such luxuries as planning for a future career. Many also already held jobs, making their need to "find" a career perhaps less salient. Paradoxically, even though their undergraduate experiences did not prove all that useful, three-quarters of the participants plan to pursue advanced degrees. Perhaps this time, they will know more concretely what they hope to gain from the experience.

Student affairs professionals may take note of the themes regarding career planning that emerged. Readers may be able to generalize from the results of this study (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003) when considering their own college-bound students who lack defined career plans, do not

perceive the need for them, and may not use services even when offered directly to them. On the contrary, college graduates in this study expected that attendance at college and degree completion would enlighten them, almost as if by magic. Participants in this study relied most on convenience, relevance, enjoyment, expediency, and a sense of purpose when declaring majors or deciding on careers. Awareness of the prominence of these factors is significant contribution of this study to the knowledge base of the student affairs field.

Because liberal arts faculty members are often averse to vocational applications of their subjects, student affairs educators have an opportunity to lead the way. Colleges and universities could offer undeclared students a priceless advantage by mandating career exploration and preparation. Instructors of the first-year experience course often educate students about resources; they could encourage them to actually utilize them via class assignments. The chief student affairs officer could partner with academic colleagues to improve the delivery of career planning information in classes, the participants' only common experience. Students like those at Mountain State would only be further overwhelmed with more choices (Feldman & Whitcomb, 2005). Instead, such students need meaningful information about their top few careers. Barring students' ability to commit to specific career pathways, they could benefit from understanding the steps involved in making career decisions and the range of resources available.

#### *Findings Regarding Participants' Demographic Differences*

Although one of the research questions did concern cultural difference, the focus on this section is on how demographic differences disparately affected participants' college experiences and work preparation. Maturity level was definitely a factor in understanding of the college experience. Arnett (2004) defined the markers of maturity as twofold: milestones, such as home ownership, marriage/partnership, and the like; and orientations to the world, including

responsibility and independence. Baxter Magolda explained that young adults move from external formulas through a crossroads to internal foundations as they grow up. Many younger participants lacked the milestones, the qualitative orientations to the world, and the internal foundations. They live with parents. They spoke often of outside influences when describing reasons for their choices. In contrast, the oldest participants, as well as Kimberly who became a mother at 22, had some of the best developed understandings of what college can provide, did provide, and what their career paths will be. The fact that three of the oldest participants are also devout Christians, each with a highly developed sense of purpose, may also affect their understanding.

The three oldest (according to their ages at the time of graduation), Samantha (age 30), Lori (age 40), and Janine (age 44), certainly had their eyes wide open when it came to the utility of the degree. Younger graduates, such as Jason (age 21), Karen (age 21), and Sonny (age 23), focused much more heavily on going to college because it was expected by parents and on love of learning, neither of which are highly desirable skills to most employers.

Type of major also affected the results. The four psychology majors all took classes in self-assessment or career planning for psychology majors. They spent significant time, therefore, on introspection about aptitude and options. In contrast, both of the English majors were hindered by what their degree meant, even to them. Sonny was unsure to what career English led directly, and Karen feared her only choice was teaching. Kimberly had the same experience, when Spanish teachers suggested she consider teaching the language as a career. Use of her degree is secondary to her employment as an optician. History offered little function for Lori, Antonio, or Owen. All three of them need additional schooling to meet their

aspirations. The psychology department at Mountain State set a positive example for other major departments when it comes to preparing graduates to enter the work world.

The findings of this study as they relate to questions of maturity and the timing of college attendance are problematic. From a structural point of view, enrollment in college directly from high school delays entry into the working world. The expectation of college attendance is very common among today's high school seniors and their families, as demonstrated by comments from the youngest study participants. People also expect that college completion will result in a better career. Students who lack a career plan, however, are not well served by lock-step high school-to-college enrollment progression. The experience of college, especially when it resembles the experiences of working, hardship, and aimlessness described by this study's participants, does not provide enough time and reflection opportunities for undecided students to develop useful, thorough career plans.

In this matter, parents, high school counselors, and higher education community members may be unintentionally putting high school seniors at a disadvantage. By itself, attending college does not automatically result in a desirable and well-paying job. Waiting until an individual does know what she wants to gain from attending college is valuable. So is a more nuanced understanding of what different college degrees do for an individual's career prospects. Similar to the way that changes in some housing markets have affected traditional wisdom that buying a home is always better than renting one (Crook, 2007; Leonhardt, 2007), individuals' goals and circumstances should be factored into their college planning.

Parents, admissions counselors, and staff sometimes stress the importance of college attendance for its own sake over its actual efficacy. More people could be counseled to defer college until they have clear career plans in mind so they may intentionally accumulate college

experiences designed to move them closer to their vocational and life goals. By itself, finishing the academic requirements at Mountain State was not enough to help some participants learn what they wanted to do with their lives.

Seen in this light, the results of this study suggest that the idea of a liberal arts degree as an automatic career booster may be outdated. An educational base informed by general education requirements is certainly worthwhile, and would meet the goal of many colleges and universities to produce well-rounded graduates. Major courses of study, however, should provide college attendees with a marked improvement in the skills and abilities they may apply after graduation. Simply put, liberal arts majors, as experienced by these participants, did not provide enough of the human capital gains that college students and the public expect. There is a distinct possibility that gains in the areas of love of learning, participation in a community of learners, and awareness of the special enterprise that is college in America may be lost along with liberal arts majors. Concrete skills that prepare graduates for jobs are what employers, the citizenry, and the government want, however, and liberal arts simply did not deliver them for this study's participants. This is why it is so vital to reinvigorate the liberal arts experience in light of demographic and vocational changes in the United States. Suggestions for doing so appear below.

*Findings Regarding the Nature of Mountain State University  
and the Place of College in Participants' Lives*

One of the surprises encountered during the data collection and analysis phases was how few out-of-class experiences the participants had while in college. Jason was in a leadership organization. Karen and Owen held minor offices in their academic honors societies. Kimberly attended films hosted by the Spanish club and was a member of the honors society. While living

on campus, Samantha, Mark, and Steffe were involved in a handful of activities, but they lived off campus the majority of their time and their involvement levels were correspondingly lower. Steffe did 20 hours of community service each semester as a condition of her tuition discount. Aside from Antonio's peripheral involvement in some progressive organizations and John's minor involvement in campus political groups, this is the sum total of activities pursued by the participants while in college.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the nature of Mountain State University. It is primarily a commuter school that, while quickly changing, is best known for its non-traditional enrollees. When many of the participants began at Mountain State, it did not even offer on-campus housing. Now that it does, new trends in residence hall construction mean every unit is apartment-style, which is less conducive to community formation. Although the school also has traditional hallmarks of campus life such as Greek organizations, student government, and on-campus dining, many of the participants gave the impression that they did not consider Mountain State to be an "authentic" college, in the model of a generic "State U." or "Animal House" stereotype.

Another possible explanation for low involvement levels was the place held by school in participants' lives. Seven of the twelve were working, many in full-time positions, to support their educational costs or their families. Three were parents, and five were married. Janine and Lori, whose children were oldest, seamlessly interwove their lives with their children's. Both went to class with their children. Janine also spent many hours, by choice, with her daughter and her daughter's same-aged friends. This is a view of the millennial generation not often considered in higher education—the view from non-traditional learners who practice millennial parenting while enrolled in school themselves.

Because of the significant draw of Mountain State from nearby counties and high schools, many of the traditionally aged students lived with family or in close proximity to high school friends. As a result, Mountain State itself, the friendships made, and the activities experienced were often not a primary focus for the participants. In the few cases that they were, participants did note positive connections. Mark's time living on-campus at the state engineering school netted him such good friends they served in his wedding party. Samantha listed her roommate from her first private school a significant friend, and Steffe admitted she was more involved in campus activities for the brief span that she lived at Mountain State. In contrast, however, most participants treated school as something that, while important, was not the sole focus of their lives.

When participants did have immersion experiences, they definitely classified them as meaningful and having impact on their work preparation. Antonio and Samantha both went abroad twice, and both reported solid gains from those trips. Although it was not related to school in any way, Sonny belonged to a touring band. He considered that experience to be more formative than any he had connected to Mountain State. Jason's extensive involvement in the leadership organization provided him with a slew of understandings and skills. Because the other participants could not or did not immerse themselves in college in this way, they could not claim similarly profound effects, transferable to the work world, from their college experiences.

Fortunately for the other participants, Mountain State did provide several academically related experiences that prepared them for work. Multiple participants raved about their advisors and relationships with special professors. Surprisingly, they also believed they could transfer a number of lessons learned in class directly to their work environments. These characteristics of Mountain State were an asset to its graduates.

Results from this study provide student affairs professionals with valuable insights about students with low campus involvement levels and how their preparation for the work world can be improved. The challenge will be moving students beyond the formulaic approach to school:

classes + time = a piece of paper (the degree).

An improved formula would be:

in- and out-of-class experiences + intentional career planning = desirable skills and traits  
+ the degree.

Educators could advertise the “college experience” concept even to commuting and non-traditional students. When participants lived on campus or were immersed in activities, they showed big gains in marketable skills. It was clear from several participants’ comments that they hungered for those connections. They saw their busy schedules or non-school centered lives as barriers to involvement. Therefore, key ideas here are convenience and relevance, balanced with integrity to the academic mission of higher education.

Another way for educators to acknowledge the place that school holds in busy students’ lives would be granting credit for work and life experiences. Doctoral programs substitute years of professional experience for required administrative internships. Why could undergraduate colleges not give academic credit, for example, for parenting in exchange for a child development psychology class or running a political campaign race on behalf of a local candidate in exchange for a political theory class? Doing so would challenge the finely manicured distinction between liberal/theoretical and vocational/practical education, and would also call into question the monopoly of educational institutions as work preparation sites. This researcher believes such ideological discomfort would be well worth the resultant improvements in students’ ability to make connections between college experiences and work preparation.

Finally, student affairs professionals as well as students' support persons have an opportunity to capitalize on the theme of persistence when discussing career development opportunities. All 12 participants in this study were proud they "made it" by graduating from college. This same sense of accomplishment could be extended to choosing a career path and preparing for it. This may require parallels to some of the challenges of college such as time management and meeting requirements. In other words, college students could be pressured to declare career interests in the same way they are pressured to declare majors. They would also benefit from high expectations for preparation and planning rather than allowed to rely on vague notions that they will serendipitously stumble upon wonderful, perfectly tailored careers. The best people to convey these expectations are educators, family members, and friends.

#### *Inadequately Supported Research Questions*

Although there was some useful data, the third and fourth research questions were not well answered by the study. The third question concerned the effects of difference or non-dominant cultural status on college experiences and work preparation. The sample was not as diverse as the researcher would have preferred. Because she used a social networking site to invite participation by some recent graduates, she was able to discern the race of some potential participants from posted photographs. Despite efforts to draw in people of color, particularly African-Americans, none were represented in the final sample. The other method of inviting participation, cold-calling graduates, did not provide a way for the researcher to identify individuals' races. Additional representation of one or two non-white graduates, beyond Antonio's Latino representation, may have provided better insight into this question.

Although it is difficult to be certain, Mountain State's reputation as a primarily white institution may affect the experience of students of color enrolled there. Although its online fact

book reports a 4:1 white to non-white demographic ratio, most participants referred to it as quite homogenous. Even when specifically prompted about offerings of, or participation in, activities designed for Latino students, Antonio downplayed his need for them. The same may be true of Jason's experience as an openly gay man. He said that he made little of his status when relating to other students. An alternative explanation is the millennial generation's newfound freedom from fixation on issues of race and sexuality (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This study raises the question of whether, in today's young college population, race and sexual identity remain the hot-button identity development issues they once were.

Results yielded little data to answer the fourth research question, concerning which college experiences participants cited to understand their work preparation. This may be due to characteristics of the institution and its students mentioned above. Mountain State is not known as a hotbed of student activity, and its students have other priorities in their lives. Mountain State University was specifically chosen, however, for how well it represents so many United States college students today. They are older, take longer to complete their degrees, work by necessity, and lack the luxury of immersing themselves in the traditional college experience (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). As a result, they are not well prepared by college itself for the work world.

#### Consideration of Results and Findings in Comparison to the Literature

Findings from this study dovetailed well with several studies cited in the review of literature. For example, participants themselves embodied the skills gap (United States Commission on Education, 2006). Three said they were not prepared at all for work by college, and nine plan to go back to graduate school because they need further credentialing.

Participants' haphazard approach to career planning also endorsed the open systems models of career choice (Esbroeck, Tibos, & Zaman, 2005), as did the choices of Janine, Lori, Mark, and Samantha support Super's life-span model (1990) with emphasis on the long view and its triumph over strict career designations.

Predictions from the literature that serendipity (Bright et al., 2005) as well as barriers and supports such as interest and relevance (Lent et al., 2002) would be vital to vocational decisions were also well supported. Only one participant, however, attributed her serendipitous inspiration to the media, courtesy of a Phil Donohue program Janine watched in the early 1980s.

There was scanty information provided by participants about leisure activities, despite prompts from the researcher. This is because they lacked leisure time altogether, because it was unremarkable, or because the researcher did not craft questions effectively enough to draw out these results. Participants did not report participating in internships, formal diversity activities, or employment out of interest. Their high level of work experience countermanded some of the "transition to work" literature cited in the review (Commission on Higher Education, 2006). Some of them did not make a transition—they simply kept going to work after they graduated. Surprisingly, few participants referenced money as a consideration in work preparation and college attendance. Those who did downplayed its importance, with the exception of Lori's complaint about having to forgo her salary to spend a semester student teaching and Mark's need to support his family by waiting tables.

Although two participants held elected office and one did volunteer service, none of them reported leadership gains as a result. This contradicted one article cited in the literature review (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). As noted above, making an effort in academic settings was useful to work preparation. Finally, many of Roulis's skills attributed to

the liberal arts education (1979) were verified. The fact that colleges are consistently providing the same product they did in the 1970s shows continuity, but is also troubling given the seismic national, international, political, economic, and labor shifts that have occurred since then.

Two of the most promising ideas from the literature review were not illuminated due to lack of specific comparative information. These include Tchibozo's (2007) analysis of the effects of extracurricular activities on periods of unemployment and job status level, and Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, and Cragolini's (2004) analysis of what graduates lack when they enter the workforce. The study did not feature participants with enough activities, nor participants far enough removed from school to assess their job status level. It also did not gather data from employers about the graduates, due to the requirement that the study stay narrowly focused. Both of these represent opportunities for further research.

#### Implications for Student Development Theory

Theories utilized in this study include meaning-making with Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001), psychosocial development with Chickering and Reisser (1993), and cultural concepts from Robbins and Willner (2001), Howe and Strauss (2000), and Arnett (2004). There was data related to Kegan's meaning-making schema, particularly his idea of the "hidden curriculum." Several participants had caught on to the idea that they needed to see the relationship of the parts to the whole, such as Steffe when she spoke about representing her store and employees to the entire retail regional management. Mark was also a great example of someone who has realized the necessity of being guided by his own visions. Unfortunately for the purposes of this study, both of those realizations happened after college.

It is possible, however, that gains in self-authorship—for which they built a foundation during college—are what made those realizations possible for Steffe and Mark. More than half the participants made reference to following external formulas, the first of Baxter Magolda's stages of adult development (2001). Mark, for example, attended college because the “committee of they” said so. Antonio went under threat of having to pay rent to his parents, who apparently valued his education more than he did at that time. Jason believed the droves of other Mountain State students flocking to the psychology major could not be wrong, and signed up.

Several participants had found themselves at a crossroads. Sonny used that very phrase when talking about his turn from video store management to impending enrollment in the Masters of Teaching program. John was also weighing what his company wanted—his relocation to a new branch office in another southeastern city—against his own preference of staying in the city with his girlfriend. Steffe was facing the proverbial music that her international status will continue to represent a barrier to her successful earning of a job in her desired field, and decide what it is she will do next to fulfill her life goals.

Some of the older participants had begun to develop internal foundations. Mark, with his talk of purpose and willingness to change his weaknesses to achieve his goals, was the best example of this. Janine, too, was creating an internal anchor. Although she was doing so at a later age than usual, her delay was understandable because she deferred her own personal growth for the past quarter century of wife- and motherhood. Lori was the only participant who seemed firmly ensconced in the self-authorship phase. She knew what was important to her and what she needed to do to protect it.

Good company is a phrase employed by both Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001) to encapsulate the idea that the journey to self-authorship or actualization requires guides. In

this study, professors, advisors, and family acted as good company. Several professors, mostly within participants' major departments, served as sounding boards and career idea catalysts. Advisors also gave guidance on what was needed to graduate and what might help participants as they crafted their career plans. Family members, particularly in the case of children for Lori and Janine, pitched in to help the participants earn their college credential.

Another major class of student development theories is psychosocial theory. Chickering and Reisser's identity development construct (1993) accounted for the various changes that happen to young adults as they formulate their identities. The results included several references to progress along the seven vectors. Antonio, Kimberly, and John spoke about gains in competence, the first vector. By virtue of her college experience, Steffe improved her ability to manage her moods and emotions. She also learned the value of interdependence but, like Samantha, that lesson happened at work, not school. John, Kimberly, and Sonny created lasting relationships. For both of the men, these were romantic affiliations. Kimberly formed friendships thanks to her participation in the Spanish club activities. Jason was the most articulate participant when it came to establishing identity, perhaps because he perceived that he came into his own as a person while in college. As noted before, Mark, Lori, and Janine all spoke about purpose during their interviews. Together, these results indicated that psychosocial theory is alive within the interface between college experiences and work preparation.

The final type of student development constructs referenced for this study was cultural. Robbins and Willner (2001) developed the quarterlife crisis concept to understand the wandering and exploration they witnessed in themselves and their friends after college. These ideas were definitely represented in the study. Jason went through multiple career ideas while in school, and is still formulating a final plan. Sonny, Karen, and Steffe are still searching for their desired

careers; Sonny believes he may have found his in teaching. Antonio and Samantha demonstrated the exploration phase during their college experiences, seeking new opportunities to learn more about themselves and their interests.

The greatest proof for Howe and Strauss' millennial generation theory (2000) was the prevalence of focus on interest rather than career. Millennials, who are special and sheltered and idealistic, have been cast as much more likely than previous generations to value what a job provides in terms of lifestyle and values congruence. Antonio, Karen, and Steffe demonstrated this, with their respective interests in immigration, sports, and children. Interestingly, however, Mark and Janine also expressed their career goals in terms of interests as well. The departure of the boomer and generation X participants from strict emphasis on career may be attributable to their religiously inspired reverence for purpose in life.

Finally, Arnett's emerging adulthood literature (2004) was certainly at work in the sample. Karen, Sonny, Jason, Antonio, and Steffe, unencumbered by family or other responsibilities, were free to focus on themselves. In contrast, Kimberly, Mark, Lori, Janine, and Samantha demonstrated the true hallmarks of adulthood: taking responsibility for their own actions, making independent decisions, and establishing financial independence. This likely contributed to their comfort level with creating and adhering to career plans.

### Limitations

Although the researcher very specifically chose Mountain State for its student body, representative of the national statistics on college attendees, she was unable to anticipate just how little involvement participants would have in the college experience. She also chose an institution with a relatively homogenous environment and was unable to convince more than one

participant of color to be interviewed. As a result, she was unable to fully answer two of the research questions.

This study's potential applications are also limited by the fact that liberal arts majors are now in the minority among students graduating from college (US Department of Education, 2007). As a result, many college-bound high school students or returning adults may not be concerned about what experiences liberal arts majors apply to work preparation, because they fully intend to declare a pre-professional, health, or business major.

A third limitation is one common to qualitative research. This study is limited by the context in which it was conducted. Beyond schools very similar to Mountain State with students like the participants, results of the study are only reader generalizable. Reader generalizability means using results from a qualitative study to raise questions or apply insights (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). Other results, such as the lack of career planning and research, might be highly germane in other settings as well, based on the literature reviewed for this study. Differences in age could carry across institutions and samples as well.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Like any study, this one naturally raised additional questions of research interest. While collecting data, the researcher began interviewing an individual who considered his graphic arts degree to classify as a liberal arts major. After this discovery was made, the interview was stopped. He had already provided a copy of his resume, however, and the researcher had already met him at his place of work. His resume, filled with multiple citations of work on student publications and juried student art shows, contrasted sharply with the other resumes collected for this study. His workplace, a major broadcasting conglomerate with its downtown corporate

headquarters, was far more impressive than any of the other work sites described by the liberal arts participants. This difference inspired an interest in questions of how other majors such as arts, health, education, and business contribute to preparation for the work world.

Inability to compare to Crebert et al's (2004) study on employer perspectives from Australia means another natural extension of this study would be interviews of participants' employers to determine their assessment of liberal arts graduates' preparation for the work world. A follow-up study on these particular participants would also provide a way to verify the results of Tchizabo's (2007) study of how activities make an impact on unemployment periods and job preeminence.

The unexpected finding about how college degree completion matters—perspective shift—is another exciting avenue of future research. What might it mean to employers that their workers have a different outlook on the world and its possibilities thanks to earning a liberal arts bachelor's degree? How does a liberal arts degree result in this shift? Two of the “effect of college” theories were well supported by the data; both human capital and perspective shift deserve additional investigation that asks how the college experience creates these effects in comparison to other experiences such as military service or full-time work itself.

A final research interest, inspired by the researcher's discussion on the findings, would be whether a liberal arts degree is actually sufficient in today's occupational landscape. This study gives the impression that liberal arts at the level experienced at an institution such as Mountain State does not create significant gains. The participants were working with what they have at their disposal, but it is worth exploring just what is needed to be a successful member of the working world and how that preparation can best be gained while in college.

### Implications for Practice and Application

On a basic level, results from this study indicate that schools would do well to emulate the successes that Mountain State has had with advising and mentoring. The researcher was pleasantly surprised to hear how well served participants felt by these systems at Mountain State, albeit with a few exceptions. If other students are like the participants, they may not interact with many offices or services besides their faculty. Liberal arts faculty members and professional advisors can leverage their impact by serving as effective advisors who ask insightful questions, listen actively, and prompt students to maximize their work preparation experiences while in the rich college environment. This is of course easier said than done, but bears repeating.

This study also provides endorsement for the idea that informal advising, such as conversations between students and organizational advisors, campus work supervisors, or student service providers, may represent a terrific opportunity to engage students in questions of career pathways and planning. In fact, the results indicate that discussions about career ought to have been a part of the fabric of daily life at Mountain State University. In addition to the usual questions about what classes students are taking and whether they are involved in any activities, faculty and staff members alike could have inquired about students' career plans.

Career services personnel may be pleased to read this study, which endorses the work they already do and the messages they already transmit. Despite several participants' assertions that they did not need any career planning, it is clear from the study results that they could have benefited highly from just a bit of it. Mountain State's career services staff obviously worked hard to provide outreach to students, partnering with faculty to make in-class presentations where they can reach most of the non-involved audience enrolled there. Other liberal arts degree

granting institutions could do the same, perhaps even going so far as to mandate some minimal career counseling. This could be delivered in the format of a major-specific class, such as the careers in psychology class referenced above, or a major-aggregated one which would serve to dispel the notion that a liberal arts major must relate strictly to a given set of careers. A university orientation class would be another natural home for a career planning requirement.

Such outreach efforts could play on the themes of serendipity, enjoyment, and convenience so prominently featured in this study. Gaining insight into how students think about certain topics is half of the proverbial battle in providing them the assistance and services they need. Mountain State is already doing this by bringing career services presentations to class rather than waiting for students to discover their existence.

In fact, practitioners could turn the serendipity concept upside-down. First, college applications could require that students have a specific career or careers in mind before beginning school. In practice, it would be difficult to be sure students were not simply answering to fill the blanks on the application. But such a signal on the application form would be a positive step toward emphasizing the importance of career planning and skill acquisition in tandem with degree completion. Student and academic affairs educators could then pepper the college landscape with seemingly serendipitous but truly intentional activities to stimulate learning about skills required for most of the careers declared by admitted students. Given their reverence for the ideals of liberal education, this idea may cause liberal arts advocates to cringe (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2006). With so many bachelor's degree holders in today's job market, however, a degree should provide something tangible beyond appreciation and lore.

Partnerships between academic and student affairs could also be formed to augment the existing human capital development opportunities, the most strongly supported of the initially examined college effects theories. As one example, resident advisors could be encouraged to apply the communication training they receive to providing useful feedback to their peers during group work or other class assignments. Professors could also help students to apply the critical thinking skills practiced in the classroom to real-life scenarios such as major financial decisions.

Academic classes were the only common experience among the group, and the only experience that non-traditional students such as Lori even had at Mountain State. Not surprisingly, their importance as a vehicle for not only theoretical or subject-based knowledge but also development of life skills and clarification of values is paramount. Academic immersion experiences, such as learning communities, cohorts, practicum classes, student teaching, and study abroad trips, could increase students' number of college experiences and therefore their level of work preparation. Given the financial realities for many of today's college students, scholarships and a cost-benefit analysis of future advantages to be gained from spending time and money on such an endeavor should ideally accompany these opportunities.

Realistically, even if this study had found that liberal arts majors made no gains whatsoever in work preparation due to their liberal arts college experiences, liberal arts programs across the country would continue to operate. That does not mean, however, that proponents of liberal arts might not welcome suggestions about how to improve the value of their degree programs from a work preparation standpoint. The Association of American Colleges and Universities is savvy enough to market the liberal arts experience; they are also interested in improving it (2006). To that end, some suggestions about doing just that, inspired by this study, follow.

According to the results of this study, colleges and certification bodies may wish to explore acceptable ways to accommodate the life experience of non-traditional students such as Lori and Janine. Certainly, women who taught their own children as well as others in their cooperative teaching groups and who managed households successfully for 20 to 30 years ought to receive some credit for their life experience. Such accommodation is made in technical fields and for students who “test out” of certain general education requirements. Not only might this strategy welcome more non-traditional students to a school’s doorstep, it might also help move the entire educational enterprise closer to valuing skills applicable to everyday life management as well as the working world.

Although college students at all schools may not be the same as these 12 participants, there are many schools whose undergraduates have closer bonds to high school and home than the campus. One way to provide such students with more enriching college experiences would be to provide them the support they need to participate, such as child care or a chance to live on campus for a short period of time to learn what opportunities exist. A second strategy would be to draw high school friends and families into the life of the institution. For example, Mountain State is fed by 10 main high schools. Student affairs professionals could plan a high school reunion for a specific high school, inviting even non-enrolled high school friends of current students. This would provide an admissions outreach opportunity and also a way for under-involved students to experience college in the company of trusted friends.

Another way to draw students’ families into the college enterprise could be to highlight the opportunity for parents to attend college with their children, in the same way Lori and Janine did. Bringing students’ support systems to campus increases the likelihood that the students will

have more college experiences from which they can draw when preparing for work (Sanford, 1966).

Finally, college representatives, guidance counselors, and parents should be frank with aspiring college students about both what a liberal arts degree provides and what benefits it entails. Several participants seemed disillusioned by what they expected to gain from college in comparison to what they actually accrued. Hopefully, the aforementioned constituencies are willing to be honest about what a liberal arts degree offers. Aspiring college students must also be willing to consider their advice. College attendees should also be honest with themselves. Instead of attributing to college magical powers to enlighten and prepare them, students would do better to realistically understand their responsibility in adequately preparing to enter the work world from college.

### Conclusions

This qualitative study featured interviews with 12 liberal arts graduates regarding their college experiences and work preparation. Resumes provided by the participants were also reviewed. Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Four pre-defined research questions were addressed by this study.

As a result of this study, it is apparent that completion of a liberal arts major did provide the participants with gains in the development of human capital. College graduates also perceived they have a shared credential: perseverance. Career decisions of these liberal arts students were informed by serendipity; enjoyment and relevance; choice of major; expectation of enlightenment; purpose; and convenience and expediency. Personal differences had a greater effect than cultural ones on college experiences and career preparation; being different resulted

in both barriers to work preparation as well as supports. Graduates understood that classes, general college-related experiences, and activities prepared them for work.

In addition to these results, the researcher found that these liberal arts students participate in too little career planning and research, at too late a stage in their college careers.

Demographic differences, specifically those of maturity, major, and religion, affected the relationship between college experiences and work preparation. The nature of an educational institution itself as well as the place of college in students' lives corresponded with the kinds of college experiences participants were able to amass, and therefore the beyond-class work preparation they were able to undertake.

The results reflected different elements of each of the student development theories considered, including cognitive-structural, psychosocial, and cultural. Limitations of the study include the low number of college experiences that participants had, under-representation by people of color, and the fact that liberal arts majors are in the minority nationally.

Future research directions based on this study may include comparison of liberal arts' majors' work preparation with that of business, education, or other applied majors. Inclusion of employers' evaluations of work preparation levels and a sample with more activities are also of interest. Three ideas about degree completion—human capital, credentialing, and perspective shift—deserve further investigation. Finally, a brave researcher may ask the complex question, “How can a liberal arts major remain sufficient for today's occupational landscape?”

One suggestion for practice is the replication of Mountain State's successful advising and mentoring successes. Maximization of the opportunities provided by informal advising or conversations would be another way to apply the results. Career planning should be required, and delivery of career services should bank upon the serendipity expectations of college students.

Academic immersions and other student and academic affairs partnerships could be informed by the results of this study. Outreach efforts, such as granting credit for life experiences or involving family and friends with students' college lives, can improve the way that liberal arts students' college experiences prepare them for work. Finally, all constituencies in the education arena—including students themselves—should be honest about what college is for and what it can provide so aspiring students can make informed decisions.

As college costs rise in tandem with the enrollment numbers of the millennial generation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; NCES, 2005), clear expectations about what a college degree can provide, specifically in the liberal arts, are needed. This study played on the common cultural assumption that attending college prepares a person for a career. While liberal arts study itself does have intrinsic value, improvement of its role in relation to career planning and preparation is vital.

This study imparts the following messages. To aspiring college students, do more career planning and research. For current college students, maximize experiences even in light of family or fiscal realities. To recent graduates, highlight marketable skills gained inside and beyond class thanks to college experiences. For parents, leave space for development of career ideas. To parents, faculty, and staff, hold high expectations and frequent conversations about career pathways. Finally, for student affairs professionals, meet students where they are, using some of the insights contained in this study and its supporting literature, in order to lead those students closer to their life goals.

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## APPENDIX A

## PROTOCOL OF INITIAL SCREENING

Screening Criteria

The researcher will ask the following questions to determine if respondents meet the requirement to participate in the study.

Are you a graduate of Mountain State University?

YES NO

Did you graduate within the last three years?

YES NO

Please name your major(s).

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Are you currently employed for at least 30 hours per week?

YES NO

Are you currently enrolled in a graduate or professional school program?

YES NO

Do you live in the greater metropolitan city area?

YES NO

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DID THE RESPONDENT MEET THE CRITERIA TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

YES NO

Participant Requirements

If the researcher ascertains that the respondent meets the criteria, then the researcher will inform the respondents of the following participation requirements of this study:

Would you be willing to discuss your preparation for work and college experiences in a personal, face-to-face interview that will last approximately 60 minutes?

YES NO

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview if necessary?

YES NO

Would you provide your current resume for analysis as part of this study?

YES NO

Participant Information

If respondents affirm they will complete these tasks, then establish their contact info and interview time.

NAME:

\_\_\_\_\_ TELEPHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

INTERVIEW TIME: \_\_\_\_\_



TQ4: What college experiences do liberal arts graduates cite to understand their work world preparation?

IQs 1-10

APPENDIX C  
RECENT GRADUATES' INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I. Introductions

A. Research and researcher's background

II. Purpose of the Study

A. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between liberal arts college graduates' college experiences and preparation for the working world.

III. Explanation of the Interview

- A. Explain how candor and honesty is needed in this project.
- B. Answer any questions.
- C. Secure informed consent.

IV. Interview Questions

[Gather demographic data about current age, age at graduation, race, gender, major(s), minor(s), and current job(s).]

First I would like to hear about your college experiences. I consider these to include all the things you did directly related to college—academics, socializing, work or internships, leisure, and extracurricular activities.

1. Tell me about the highlights of your time in college. [Prompt w/ categories if needed]
2. Please describe any low points you had during college. [Prompt if needed]
3. What relationships were most memorable from your college days? [Prompts: professors, staff, family, friends, classmates, colleagues]
4. Tell me about your current job(s). What are your responsibilities? How did land it/them?
5. What was easy for you when you first started working? What were you good at? Why?
6. What did you find difficult when you began working? What was hard for you? Why?
7. Please describe your overall feeling of preparation for working.
8. Could you identify any college experiences that contributed to this feeling?
9. What situations in college prepared you to be a part of the working world? How?
10. If you could go back and do something totally different during college to prepare yourself for work, what would it have been?

Now I would like to ask about your college experiences and your career path and decisions.

11. What were your career plans before you began college?
12. How did your plans change from the start to the end of college? Please give me your ideas about why your plans changed. [Prompts: barriers, supports]
13. Can you identify any college experiences that led to your interest in a certain career?
14. Did you participate in any career planning in college? If yes, what kind(s)?
15. Who were the most significant influences on your career choice? What other sources or events played a role?
16. Please tell me how you chose your major(s).

17. Could you explain how your major(s) relate(s) to your current job(s)?
18. How would you say your intended career relates to your major(s)?
19. In your opinion, how do(es) your current job(s) relate(s) to your overall career goals?

Next I hope you will share with me your thoughts about who you are as a person and how that interacted with your college experiences and work world preparation.

20. How would you describe yourself in terms of multiculturalism or difference from others?
21. How, if at all, did you feel different from your classmates or college peers?
22. Do you believe your status affected your college experience? How?
23. What about your preparation for work? Did it help or hurt? [Prompts: opportunities, attention, networking, support, etc]

Finally, I'd like to get your opinion on the purpose of college and its effects on people.

24. Why did you attend college?
25. What did you *believe* college would provide for you?
26. What were you good at before you went to college? [Prompt with list:
  - a. Flexibility
  - b. Self-initiation and guidance
  - c. Respectful and appropriate relationships with others
  - d. Self-control
  - e. Problem solving
  - f. Critical thinking
  - g. Active listening
  - h. Self-reflection
  - i. Clear written and oral communication
  - j. Acceptance of criticism and feedback
  - k. Dependability
  - l. Professional appearance
  - m. Positive attitude
  - n. Ability to use time and resources well
  - o. Understanding of and adherence to the organization's policies]
27. What do you believe a college degree *actually* provided you?
28. How does having a college degree make you different from someone your own age who does not have one?
29. Was a degree required for your current job(s)? Why or why not?
30. Do you think people who do not attend college are less prepared to work? Could you cite examples from your own experience to explain your answer?
31. If I asked your family and friends, what would they say about how college affected you?
32. What would a high school supervisor or authority figure say about you as a worker in comparison to your present supervisor(s)?
33. What are your future plans?