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EMERGING ADULTS IN COLLEGE: ASSESSING EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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2012

This dissertation, submitted by Diane Joan Wolter in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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PERMISSION

Title Emerging Adults in College: Assessing Expectations and Perceptions

Department Educational Leadership

Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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Diane Wolter
July 9, 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES vi

LIST OF TABLES vii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS viii

ABSTRACT ix

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

Statement of the Problem 2

Context 3

Conceptual Framework 3

Research Questions 4

Importance of the Study 4

Outline of the Study 6

Limitations of the Study 8

Definition of Terms 8

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE 10

College Student Development 10

Development of the Emerging Adult Model 20

Contexts 28

Summary 45

III. METHODOLOGY 46

Researcher Perspective 46

Conceptual Framework 50

Methods 61

Metaphors 67

Data Analysis 70

Introduction of Subjects 75

Summary 85

IV. RESULTS 87

Research Question 1: Is the Emerging Adults Theoretical Construct Appropriate to Describe New Entering Freshmen at a Regional University 88

Research Question 2: How do These New Entering Freshmen Describe the Role of College in Their Lives? 118

Forming an Aspiration to Attend College 149

V. DISCUSSION 156

APPENDICES 176

Appendix A. Interview Protocol 177

Appendix B. Invitation to Participate 178

Appendix C. Chart of Results 180

REFERENCES 181

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. Elaboration on Erikson's Development Model.....15

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

1. Plans, Goals, and Expectations 53

2. In Deciding to go to College, How Important to You Was Each of the Following Reasons 54

3. Outline of Data Sources 66

4. Responses to How Often Students in the Current Study Used Similar Terms to Describe Adulthood 99

5. Responses to Other Concepts of Adulthood 100

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ABSTRACT

This study uses qualitative methods to investigate the expectations and perceptions of freshmen at a regional university. Research suggests that stratification in American higher education has resulted in differing student populations at different types of institutions, and that regional universities and their students are underrepresented in the literature. The study examines the utility of Arnett's emerging adults model to describe how freshmen at a regional university perceive the role of college in their lives. Application of metaphor theory reveals that students view college as either a commodity to be exchanged for a desired future outcome, or as one of a sequence of steps leading to their future. Students in this study were also not aware of having formed an aspiration to attend college, which is inconsistent with the college choice literature.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of an under-researched segment of higher education: students enrolled at a regional university (hereafter referred to as regional students). The concurrent trends of massification and stratification in American higher education over the past few decades suggest that regional students may view college differently than students who choose to attend highly selective private liberal arts colleges and large research universities and whose college experiences and development are more predominantly represented in the literature. This study examines regional students' perceptions of college and the role they expect a college education to play in their lives. Their perceptions of the purpose and role of higher education seem to be significantly shaped by societal messages, which may in turn affect their approach to obtaining that education. The study also considers whether a new developmental model, emerging adults, is useful in adding to the understanding of college students provided by other models currently in use.

Things sure weren't like this when I was in school!

I can't believe how much students have changed.

(comments often heard during fall faculty workshops)

Commenting on changes in students year to year is a popular pastime on many college campuses. Faculty and staff alike note changes in the preparedness, work ethic,

and attitude of their students, especially as compared with the halcyon recollections of their own college days. There is a widespread perception that the students who seek higher education have changed and are changing. The abundance of anecdotal evidence on this topic begs the question: do any empirical data support these claims?

The answer is yes, research does provide evidence of changes in American higher educational institutions and in their students. These data track changes in student demographics and characteristics, the societal view of students and higher education, and the relationship between higher education and the larger society.

Statement of the Problem

American higher education, always a dynamic institution, has undergone significant changes in the past fifty to sixty years. These changes include the numbers and types of students seeking education, the numbers and types of institutions offering higher education, the importance of higher education in American society, and the attitudes and views students bring to postsecondary education. Chapter two provides background information in each of these areas.

The literature also provides some evidence that students' attitudes toward higher education are changing. An analysis of forty-year trends in the data illustrates some shifts in the stated reasons for attending college, and in the importance of a college education (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). The cause of these shifts in attitudes is unclear. It is possible that the "new" students, brought to higher education because of massification (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Thelin, 2004) and the knowledge economy (Rhoades, 2004), have different motivations than those who pursued higher education forty years earlier. Other authors comment on changing societal views of education to

suggest that higher education has come to be viewed as a right rather than a privilege (Rhoades, 2004), or a 21st-century economic necessity (Trachtenberg, 2012).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) identify gaps in the types of institutions included in the college student literature. Regional universities and their students are underrepresented in the research. There is some support for the conclusion that these new students are more likely to attend regional universities than more prestigious institutions (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Jackson, 1982), thus contributing to the gap in information on these groups of students.

Context

This study was conducted at a regional university in the Midwest, Hillside University. The evolution of Hillside's institutional identity followed a typical path for many regional institutions: founded as a normal school, it then became a teacher's college, a state college, and eventually a regional university. Hillside enrolls around 7,800 undergraduate and 300 graduate students each year, in one of 76 major fields. The vast majority of students are drawn from Hillside's home state and one immediately adjacent. As befits a former teacher's college, the largest major is education.

Conceptual Framework

This study explores the utility of using the concept of emerging adults, a new developmental model unique to American society proposed by Jeffrey Jenson Arnett (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006) to describe college students. As I detail in chapter two, Arnett (2006) identifies five features that mark emerging adulthood: the age of identity exploration, an age of instability, the most self-focused age of life, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. Emerging adults are a product of changes in

American society, including increased emphasis on postsecondary education. Chapter II provides additional information on the background and development of this model.

Other than observations by Arnett (2000, 2004) that emerging adults are less likely to take a linear approach to higher education, and are more likely than others to change majors, the research on emerging adults in college is not extensive. To date, there has been limited research examining this population in specific contexts. Therefore, this study explores emerging adults in the context of college. Since the emerging adults population is extremely heterogeneous, this study focuses on one group of students: regional students. Specifically, it examines the expectations these students bring to higher education, and the role they believe such education will play in their lives.

Research Questions

1. Does the emerging adults theoretical construct appropriately describe new entering freshmen at a regional university?
2. How do these new entering freshmen describe the role of college in their lives?

Importance of the Study

A constantly changing student population requires constant study to ensure our understanding of students is current and accurate. Part of this understanding comes from studying all students, not just some groups. This study starts to fill a gap in the literature by examining an underrepresented student group, regional students, in order to understand their expectations of attending college. The study also explores a new construct for student development, emerging adults, by employing qualitative research methods. Although a growing body of literature exists on emerging adults, much of the research has been conducted on mixed populations rather than specifically in the context

of college. Arnett's (1998, 2000, 2004) model conjectures that students today expect to continue education into their twenties and thirties, and to take a less linear approach to education. Students are also likely to arrive on our campuses less ready and less well equipped than in earlier years to make identity commitments. These trends will have real implications for institutional staff. With a deeper understanding of emerging adults as college students, campus officials will be better equipped to understand both how this framework shapes students' college experience and how the campus environment may be adjusted to respond to this student population.

The emerging adult population is extremely heterogeneous, as young people may follow many different paths during this time in their lives (Arnett, 2004, 2006). This heterogeneity allows for a broad scope of investigation, as researchers seek to understand emerging adults in their various roles and life paths. Since such a large proportion of Americans seek postsecondary education, understanding emerging adults in the college context is an extremely important factor in understanding this population. As noted above, many of the new college students may be more likely to enroll at regional universities than in large research or prestigious institutions. Understanding the unique perceptions of regional students adds to the overall picture of emerging adults today.

The heterogeneity of the emerging adult population also calls for qualitative research approaches. The large national data sets such as the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) that note changing trends in student responses are insufficient to illustrate the nuances in these responses. If it is true that students' attitudes toward higher education have shifted, qualitative methods are best suited to moving beyond socially acceptable responses to discerning the gradations of attitudes expressed. Further,

questionnaires developed from the prevailing psychosocial development model for college students (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) may not allow researchers to identify the unique characteristics of regional students or the emerging adult population.

Outline of the Study

Because this study explores a relatively new field of scholarship, the focus is narrowly defined. First, the study includes students at only one institution, a regional university called Hillside University. As stated above, the regional universities are underrepresented in the research on college students, and regional students may have different expectations for their college education than students who seek to attend prestigious or competitive institutions.

This particular institution was selected for several reasons. First, in this community students may choose among a regional university, a research university and a regionally prestigious private institution. Thus Hillside is more likely to attract those students who desire to attend college, but do not aspire to attend more prestigious institutions. Second, a large proportion (one quarter to one third) of its entering freshman class each year does not declare a major, another possible indicator of emerging adults. Finally, results from a recent administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) at Hillside revealed that its students ranked below national and benchmark norms on every question except one: "would you re-enroll?" Clearly, the students at Hillside University bear investigation.

This study uses qualitative methods to investigate expectations and perceptions of new college students. The data are drawn from three sources: a survey of undeclared

students during fall Orientation in August, an essay assignment from several sections of a First Year Experience class in September, and a set of semi-structured interviews conducted December through February of their first college year. Data analysis methods include discourse analysis, metaphor theory, and thematic analysis. Chapter III provides detailed information on the methodology and data analysis used in the study.

Participants in this study were all new entering freshmen who had graduated from high school the previous spring. In order to provide the greatest range of attitudes toward higher education, the subjects were drawn from two groups: bioscience majors and undeclared students. The bioscience majors all indicated an intention to pursue graduate or professional programs upon completion of their baccalaureate degree, and may thus be likely to have a specific view of the role of undergraduate education in their lives. The undeclared participants have not yet chosen an academic or career direction.

Although many students who enter with a declared major will change, those that are truly uncertain of a path are more likely to fit the emerging adults profile of lacking identity and commitment to life goals. Results from a series of focus groups conducted with undeclared students and bioscience majors at Hillside University in the fall prior to this study showed that students in these two groups articulate their attitudes and expectations differently. The current study intended to explore those differences in greater depth, but the data actually illustrated fewer differences between the two groups than was the case in the focus group pilot project.

The results of the study fall into three broad areas. First is a thematic analysis of the utility of Arnett's emerging adults model in describing this population, with some of his features more appropriate to that task than others. Second, I use metaphor theory to

provide insight into how students understand college in terms of other concepts. Two primary metaphorical constructs appeared throughout the three data sets and across both student groups: a construct of college as a commodity, and another conceiving of college as part of a sequence of steps. These metaphorical constructs are illustrated and explored fully in Chapter IV.

The third area of results does not fall specifically under either of the research questions, but arose from discussions of college choice during the interviews. During these discussions it became apparent that none of the subjects were aware of having formed an intention to attend college. This finding, when viewed in light of the societal messages regarding participation in higher education, provides insight into what brings students to college and how their expectations of college are shaped. The implications of these results are discussed in Chapter V.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to two groups of students at one university. The results obtained may not be consistent with students at other institutions. Any common characteristics or attitudes arising through analysis of the interviews may, at best, serve as the basis for additional investigation, rather than for drawing any substantive conclusions. The scholarship on emerging adults is new and therefore limited in scope; this study seeks to add only a small piece to the overall puzzle.

Definition of Terms

New entering freshman: A student within the first year of matriculation to the university. For the purposes of this study, a student who matriculated to the university in the fall term immediately following a spring graduation from high school.

Outcome expectations. The attitude students have toward higher education, and the results students expect from their college degree. The expectations will be defined in part by descriptions of what brought the students to college initially, as well as what role they believe college will play in their lives.

College choice: The mental process students describe that led them to choose to attend college. The emphasis in this study focuses on students' decision to attend college, rather than their choice of any specific institution.

Regional students: Students enrolled at a regional comprehensive university.

Undeclared vs. exploring students: Undeclared is a label, specifically referring to students who have not yet declared a major. Exploring is a descriptive term, referring to students who are engaged in exploring major or career options.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to investigate what students at a regional comprehensive university expect from college. There are gaps in the literature regarding students from this type of institution, and what motivates them to pursue higher education. The recently proposed emerging adults theoretical model may provide some insight into this student population.

College Student Development

Before investigating the utility of the emerging adults model in understanding college students, it will be useful to consider some models of college student development. Many developmental models trace their roots to the work of Erik Erikson. Erikson (1968) identifies stages throughout the lifespan in terms of psychosocial crises. The stage of interest in college student development is adolescence, which Erikson defines as from 13 to 21 years of age. He identifies the psychosocial crisis of adolescence as identity vs. role confusion. Erikson's adolescents confront the question of who they are and where they are going.

The concept of identity development is central to several theoretical models, including two that are widely used when examining the college student population. Chickering and Marcia both propose models based in Erikson's concepts and centered on

identity development. Arnett's emerging adult model is also based in Erikson's work, thus a comparison of the three seems in order.

Chickering's Model of College Student Development

One characteristic all students bring with them to college is their level of psychosocial development. Although many models exist for various components of development, Chickering's (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) psychosocial development theory has been perhaps the most widely used among student affairs professionals for decades. Applying Erikson's (1964, 1968) developmental model to college students, the theory describes seven developmental tasks (which Chickering calls "vectors" to illustrate their non-sequential nature) faced by students as they leave home, attend college, and prepare to enter the "real world" as adults.

Developing Competence. This vector consists of three components: intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence. These components are tied together by an overall sense of competence that helps students feel confident they can cope with what comes and achieve goals successfully. Intellectual competence involves acquiring knowledge and skills related to subject matter; physical competence comes through athletic and recreational activities, wellness, artistic, and manual activities. Interpersonal competence includes communication, leadership, and working effectively with others.

Managing emotions. Managing emotions describes the ability to recognize and accept emotions, and to appropriately express and control them. This management of emotions applies both internally and externally in relationships with others.

Moving through autonomy toward interdependence. The task in this vector is characterized by increased emotional independence, in which students no longer feel pressing needs for external reassurance, affection, or approval. Also instrumental in achieving interdependence are self direction, problem-solving ability, and mobility, along with the ability to recognize and accept the importance of interdependence, an awareness of their interconnectedness with others. (In Chickering's (1969) first model this vector was labeled developing autonomy.)

Developing mature interpersonal relationships. Experiences with relationships of varying types contribute greatly to students' development of a sense of self. This vector includes developing intercultural and interpersonal tolerance as well as an appreciation of differences. (In Chickering's (1969) first model this vector was labeled freeing interpersonal relationships).

Establishing identity. This vector builds on each of the tasks accomplished in the other vectors. Chickering's revised theory acknowledges differences in identity development based on gender, ethnic background, and sexual orientation. Identity includes acceptance of body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, a sense of one's social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept and comfort with one's roles and lifestyle, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration.

Developing purpose. Developing purpose includes establishing clear vocational goals, making commitments to specific personal interests and activities as well as interpersonal commitments. Students intentionally make and stay with decisions, even when faced with opposition to those decisions. "Vocation" is used to refer to paid or

unpaid work within the context of a specific career or more generally as a person's life calling.

Developing integrity. The integrity vector includes three sequential but overlapping stages: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence. Students progress from a self-focused view to being able to balance self-interest with a sense of social responsibility.

Chickering also posits seven key factors of educational environmental influence: institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, friendships and student communities, and student development, mental programs and services. Three principles underscore these factors: integration of work and learning, recognition and respect for individual differences, and the acknowledgement of the cyclical nature of learning and development.

Marcia's Ego-identity Statuses

James Marcia is best known for his work on adolescent psychosocial and lifespan identity development. Using Erikson as a starting point, Marcia (1966) suggests that identity development may be best described by the exploration activities and levels of commitment displayed through a variety of life domains. He divides identity development into two parts: the process of choosing and making a commitment. Students at this point are examining the values and choices they bring from adolescence and exploring their options. Marcia's four statuses are Foreclosure, Identity Diffusion, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement.

Foreclosure. Foreclosure describes a status in which a student commits to an identity without exploring their options. This is often the result of accepting without

question some ideas and beliefs passed on by their parents. Some may choose this identity willingly while others may be pressured to accept an identity their parents wish them to have.

Identity diffusion. This is often considered the least mature status. Students in this status have not explored, have certainly not committed, and may have little interest in exploring or making decisions about their lives. Marcia suggests that students in this status are not invested in much and do not experience anxiety about not having or even exploring an identity.

Moratorium. Students in this status are actively exploring their alternatives, although they have not made a commitment. It is a time of experimenting and searching for new identities. Over time, students may be spending longer periods in moratorium before making a commitment to an identity.

Identity achievement. The identity achievement status characterizes students who have overcome their identity crises, and perhaps have explored alternatives in moratorium. These students have made commitments to identity and, Marcia (1973) suggests, may have an internal locus of self-definition.

Three psychosocial development models of interest in this study all have their roots in Erikson's (1964, 1968) work. Chickering's model applies very specifically to college students and its vectors center around identity development. Although Marcia's model was derived to describe adolescence, its application to identity development makes it useful in understanding college students. Arnett proposes a new model to describe 18 to 25 year olds, whether or not they attend college. All three models are based on Erikson's foundation, so Figure 1 provides a "family tree" of these four theoretical models.

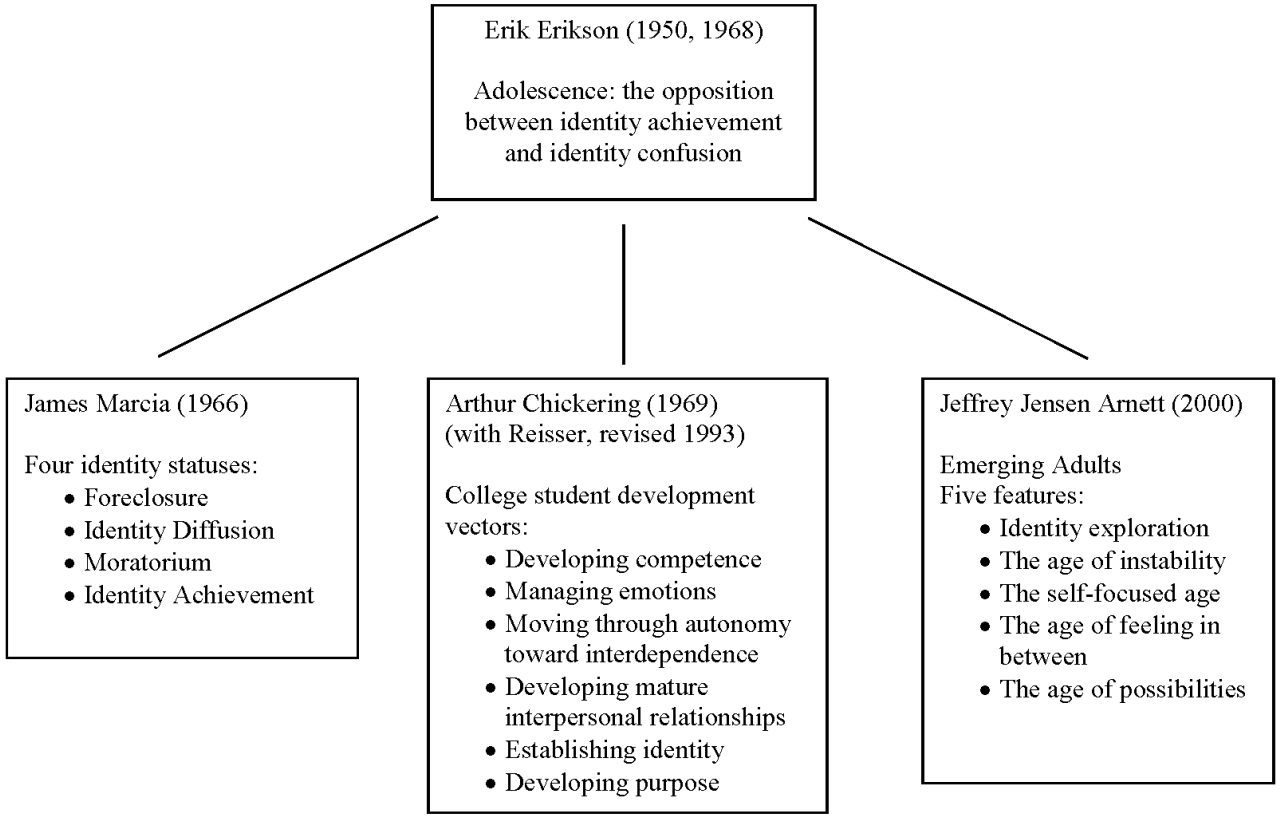

Figure 1. Elaboration on Erikson's Developmental Model.

Research on Brain Development

No description of these stages of development is complete without consideration of the current state of brain research. Understanding brain development helps us understand the implications for executive function in adolescent brains (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006) which is an important component of identity development. Recent research suggests that brain development continues until the mid-twenties, and the prefrontal cortex is the last area of the brain to develop. This is the section that controls executive function, which includes planning, setting priorities, suppressing thoughts, and weighing the consequences of decisions (Wallis, 2008). If executive function is developing throughout the traditional college years and beyond, we should expect to see behavior deemed as "adolescent" continue throughout Arnett's emerging adult stage. Since identity development often involves tasks such as planning for one's future, setting priorities, and weighing the outcomes of identity decisions, we may expect students to have difficulty making identity commitments during their college years.

Emerging Adults

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004, 2006) has proposed a new phase of psychosocial development: "emerging adults." Arnett builds on the work of Erikson (1950, 1968) in identity development and shows a shift from adolescence to young adulthood as the key time for identity formation. Emerging adults are a recent phenomenon, and reflect changes in American society. Fifty years ago, most 18 – 25 year-olds were likely to be married, possibly with children, and to have entered the work force. Current trends, including increased participation in higher education, geographic

mobility, and delays in marriage and childbearing ages, combine to create this new stage of psychosocial development unique to American society.

Arnett (1998) draws from anthropological research to differentiate the emerging adults stage. He draws from Schlegel and Barry's (1991) work studying 186 traditional cultures. In most of them, marriage is regarded as the entry to adulthood, thus the end of adolescence. The American majority culture is less inclined to use life tasks as markers of adulthood, in favor of legal markers. Additionally, the average age for marriage in American society has increased significantly over the past few decades.

According to Arnett (2000, 2006), five features mark the developmental period he calls emerging adulthood: the age of identity exploration, an age of instability, the most self-focused age of life, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. College has long been a time for students to explore their identity (Chickering 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), therefore the identity exploration will play an important role in this study, although all of the features may help shape students' expectations and perceptions of college.

Identity exploration. Previous research on identity development assigned this task primarily to the adolescent years (Erikson, 1950, 1968). In the emerging adults model, however, identity exploration is a prime feature as emerging adults form their worldviews as similar to or different from the ones held by their parents. This worldview development spans many issues of identity, including relationships, career or work identity, religious or philosophical views, racial or ethnic identity, and basic belief systems (Arnett, 2000, 2006). Emerging adults will move from looking at employment as

a means to acquire consumer goods to viewing employment as an expression of their identity (Arnett, 2004).

The age of instability. This feature refers primarily to physical, geographic instability, as well as shifting identities (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2006). College students move away from their parents, move into residence halls, move off campus, change roommates (in either romantic or platonic relationships), move to new parts of the country or world to pursue employment or additional education, and possibly move back in with their parents. Those not pursuing additional education may move out in order to be self-sufficient. Whether pursuing education or employment, emerging adults are likely to try on several identities sequentially, in search of one that "fits," resulting in an appearance of instability that is really an expression of exploration (Arnett, 2004).

The self-focused age. The term self-focused is not meant to imply self-centered (although recent research finds increasing levels of narcissism in this age group [Twenge, 2007]). Rather, the term refers to the fact that emerging adults are responsible for themselves for the first time, focusing on choices for their lives, including school and employment (Arnett, 2000, 2006). They have left their families and have not yet formed the complex network of social relationships that characterize older adults' lives. Emerging adults have few duties and commitments to others, which means they have a great deal of autonomy in deciding how to conduct their own lives. Their focus on self is a means to self-sufficiency (Arnett, 2004).

The age of feeling in-between. Arnett (2000, 2002) asked study participants "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" and found that few 18-25 year olds answer yes. The most common response was "in some ways yes, in some ways no." The feeling

of being an adult seems to take a long time to develop and may last throughout the emerging adulthood stage. Arnett attributes this in part to the criteria people use to define adulthood:

1. Accept responsibility for yourself.

2. Make independent decisions

3. Become financially independent (Arnett, 2004, p. 15).

None of these criteria have a clear demarcation; rather they are achieved gradually over time.

The age of possibilities. Emerging adulthood is a time of great optimism, and it may also represent a time for young people from difficult backgrounds to break away from their pasts (Arnett, 2004, 2006). This period seems to offer people a time to transform themselves beyond the influence of family background. This feature interacts strongly with the other four, and may be characterized by the trying on of new identities. Emerging adults have more choices during this stage of their life—having left their family of origin, but not yet taken on responsibilities of their own—than they will have at any other (Arnett, 2004).

Understanding emerging adults means understanding today's typical students. Tanner (2006) describes the primary task of emerging adults as "recentering," as students move from centering their identities on their families of origin to developing identities centered on their place in society. It seems reasonable to think that, as students face this task of recentering, their expectations and perceptions of college will change.

This model of emerging adults suggests that today's college students may arrive on campus with different characteristics than college students of a few decades ago. The

features described above illustrate the issues these students will face during their college years. This may be particularly true of regional students. The model suggests these students may have differing expectations of their college experience, in part because of changing societal expectations such as credential inflation. If they arrive on campus due to societal messages rather than personal desire, their attitudes and expectations may well differ from students pursuing higher education before massification, for whom that education was both a dream and a privilege.

Development of the Emerging Adult Model

Arnett's (1994) early work on emerging adults arose from the examination of how adolescents view the transition to adulthood. Building on the results of earlier studies, Arnett (1994) asked respondents (aged 18 – 23) about their definitions of adulthood. He used a questionnaire listing 40 criteria for adulthood and asked respondents to "indicate whether you think each of the following must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult." Each item was marked with a yes or no response. The top criteria endorsed were "accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions" (94%), "Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences" (78%), "financially independent from parents" (73%).

Arnett (1998) followed this study with one including structured interviews. The top five results from this study were "accept responsibility for one's self (43%), "Financial independence" (40%), "independent decision-making" (25%) "general independence/self-sufficiency" (25%), and "independent household" (22%). The first criteria indicate an awareness of the need to be responsible for one's actions, and the next four are all types of independence.

It is interesting to note that Arnett's 1994 study included only one item with the term "independent," the item that ranked third and noted financial independence. Interview subjects in the 1998 study had first filled out a questionnaire with 38 of the same items included in the 1994 version, thus may have been "primed" to consider certain items from the list in their interviews about adulthood as they answered the question "Do you feel as though you have reached adulthood?" The questionnaire asked a slightly different version of the question "Do you think you have reached adulthood?" Arnett followed this question with "What would you say makes a person a woman, as opposed to a girl? What would you say makes a person a man, as opposed to a boy?" Female respondents were asked the question in this order, for males the order was reversed.

In his definition of emerging adults, Arnett (2004) distinguishes them from late adolescence, young adulthood, and the transition to adulthood. He makes the case for emerging adulthood as a separate and distinct developmental stage. Arnett goes on to examine several characteristics of the emerging adult population, including their relationships with parents, romantic relationships, college attendance, approach to work, and religious beliefs and values (Arnett, 2004).

Arnett's age of instability (2000) is characterized by changing residences often. Emerging adults move out of the homes they grew up in to attend school or simply to assert independence. Emerging adults often have a better relationship with their parents after moving out (Arnett, 2004). They begin to view their parents as individuals rather than simply parents and to appreciate them as such. Parents also begin to view their children as individuals who are beginning to take some responsibility for their own lives.

The in-between feeling may be enhanced for those emerging adults who move out then back in or those who stay home much past high school (Arnett, 2004).

Emerging adults approach their romantic relationships as part of their exploration of identity: they explore options and take their time (Arnett, 2004). During this stage they are more likely to focus on whose company they enjoy now rather than with whom they want to form a lifelong relationship. When emerging adults describe what is important in a partner they are likely to list similarities in interests, beliefs, and values. Emerging adults are more likely to cohabitate than earlier generations, and many express a fear of divorce. Arnett also refers to something he calls the "age 30 deadline" alluded to by many emerging adults regarding the search for romance (Arnett, 2004). After their time of exploration, emerging adults do expect to find a suitable life partner.

In writing about emerging adults in college Arnett focuses on two areas: the differences between the American and European systems of higher education, and the differences in the ways emerging adults approach education as compared with earlier students. In the European system of education students are separated into different schools in their mid-teenage years. Those bound for both college and trade school select their area of study before they enroll, and it is very difficult to change that path. In American higher education, however, most four year schools require a liberal studies curriculum that allows students up to two years of exploration before declaring a major. Even so, it is common for students to change majors, and many students change multiple times. This open structure fosters the exploring mindset of emerging adults who feel little pressure to define an identity before their mid-twenties (Arnett, 2004).

Emerging adult college attendance patterns are different from those of students in prior decades. Most emerging adults plan to seek postsecondary education at some point, leading Arnett to opine that college has become a universal aspiration (2004). But their path is not always a straight line to a degree; rather it is full of twists and detours. As many as one-fourth of students drop out during their first year, and many take five or six years (or more) to complete a four year degree (Arnett, 2004). The increasing costs of college lead students to attend part-time while working or to attend sequentially as they take time off to earn money for tuition, thus increasing time to degree.

Many emerging adults expect that their education will continue through their twenties and thirties (Arnett, 2004), and many will eventually pursue advanced degrees. Thus, emerging adults are less likely to view education as a precursor, or prerequisite, to becoming an adult (Arnett, 2004), rather they view education as something that will continue through their early adult years. The combined circumstance of most high school graduates aspiring to a college education along with the flexibility for exploration built into the American system, have come together to help create the emerging adult population (Arnett, 2004). Indeed, Arnett calls the American college "the emerging adult environment *par excellence*" (2004, p. 140).

Emerging adults approach work the same way they approach college: with an emphasis on exploration. Arnett finds that emerging adults typically hold a number of what Douglas Coupland (1991) calls "McJobs," those requiring little in the way of skill or training. These jobs serve to pay the bills, nothing more. After these McJobs emerging adults may also hold a number of somewhat professional positions for a short time each until they find one that "clicks" with their identity (Arnett, 2004). They use these job

experiences to explore their working identities, and most emerging adults feel confident that they will eventually find a satisfying career, one that is an expression of themselves (Arnett, 2004).

Arnett builds his model from interviews with emerging adults across the age span and in many different life circumstances. His description of emerging adults in college was formed out of information from college students at different stages as well as those who have finished or otherwise left college. This study aims to focus on a specific segment of the population, new entering freshmen who enrolled in a four year institution immediately after finishing high school, to determine to what extent these students may fit the description and characteristics of emerging adults.

Models of Adolescence

Arnett differentiates emerging adults from adolescents. Authors have been attempting to define adolescence for decades. Havighurst (1952), for example, discusses developmental issues faced in adolescence, including work and relationships. In Super's (1963) work on vocational choice, he depicts adolescence and young adulthood as the time to explore and crystallize vocational choices. As noted earlier, for Erikson (1968) the psychosocial crisis of adolescence is identity vs. role confusion. His adolescents confront the question of who they are and where they are going. Among these authors there is a connecting theme of identity exploration.

Arnett (2004) offers several points on which he contends emerging adults differ from adolescents. Adolescents live at home, are experiencing puberty, attend secondary school, and are legally minors. Emerging adults have often left home, are past puberty, may attend college, and are legally adults. Additionally, Arnett differentiates emerging

adulthood from extended adolescence. For Arnett, not only does this mean a longer span of years than all other early developmental stages, from an age as early as 10 – 13 through the late twenties, but the developmental tasks faced by emerging adults are substantively different from those of adolescents.

Recent Applications of the Emerging Adult Model

A number of authors have used the emerging adults model as a basis for reexamining prevalent developmental models. Several researchers from the field of psychology have reviewed the existing literature in their area, and examined existing models in light of the emerging adults construct. The next section of this literature review summarizes their findings in two areas: individual characteristics, including emerging thought structures, identity formation, ethnic identity formation, mental heath, and resilience; and contexts, including family relationships, friendships, sexuality, school, and work.

Recentering. In the first example of applications of the emerging adult model, psychologist Jennifer Lynn Tanner (2006) examines emerging adulthood in the context of lifespan research, and breaks down emerging adulthood into three stages. In stage one emerging adults are embedded in their family of origin. During stage two they are involved in systems of education, occupation and relationships that tend to be both exploratory and temporary. Stage three is marked by commitments to system communities, such as careers and intimate relationships. Tanner describes the process of the emerging adults stage as recentering, as people move from their family of origin through exploration to making commitments of their own to careers and personal

relationships. As emerging adults recenter, the boundaries with their families of origin become better defined.

The two main tasks of emerging adults are separation/individuation and ego development. Although there are many paths through emerging adulthood, the stage is characterized by increasing independence. Tanner (2006) defines the specific ego task for this stage as gaining self-governance. The population features for emerging adults hold true for both college students and non-students, as both groups take on roles to gain self-sufficiency. This study will focus only on the experiences and perceptions of college students.

Although both Arnett (2004) and Tanner (2006) suggest that the model holds both for the student and the non-student populations, college tends to delay system commitments, and has a direct effect on development. The structures of college may facilitate the exploration so fundamental to emerging adults, but Tanner (2006) concludes that college modifies individual development, rather than serving as a defining feature of emerging adults.

Structures of adult thought. Many theorists have examined the changes in cognitive process from adolescence through adulthood; Gisela Labouvie-Vief (2006) reviews these theories in light of the emerging adult model. New thought structures may be launched during the emerging adult years, but the process of forming new structures may not be completed until later in development. Emerging adults begin to be capable of relativistic thought, but there are great variations in the growth and development of their cognitive structures. Not everyone masters the complex thought structures that surface during emerging adulthood.

Institutionalized moratorium. Erik Erikson (1968) defines institutionalized moratorium as the structural contexts for working through identity confusion. Identity development is a central characteristic of emerging adulthood, and Côté (2006) examines the concept of emerging adults in light of institutionalized moratorium. Many emerging adults face identity moratorium when pursuing postsecondary education, which may serve to delay identity formation and commitment. But not all face it voluntarily; many are forced by economic circumstances into unskilled, low paying jobs, which may serve to extend periods of identity confusion.

Mental health. Schulenberg and Zarrett (2006) find that, in general, during the emerging adult stage mental health improves, problem behaviors lessen, and incidents of psychopathology increase. These effects may be the consequence of adolescents leaving their families of origin and the attendant support systems. As some adolescents with troubled backgrounds leave their dysfunctional support structures, they may find the emerging adult stage allows them to move away from their problematic structures to healthier ways of coping, thus improving mental health and lessening problem behaviors. For others, the move away from healthy support structures may lead to psychopathology. The authors conclude that emerging adulthood offers an opportunity to examine continuity and discontinuity in adaptive coping mechanisms (2006).

Resilience. In a related area of mental health, Masten, Obradović, and Burt (2006) examine resilience in emerging adults and discover that this stage, with its changes in functional capacity, vulnerabilities and opportunities, is an excellent framework for the study of resilience. They find that those adolescents who demonstrate resilience hold that trait through emerging adulthood, while for others resilience may emerge during this

stage. In other words, successful development in adolescence lays the groundwork for the transition to adulthood. The authors suggest that the emerging adult stage offers an excellent opportunity for intervention strategies that promote positive change (2006).

Contexts

Family relationships and support systems. Building on a strong background of research on parent/child relationships, Aquilino (2006) examines the characteristics of family relationships during emerging adulthood. This developmental stage displays a unique combination of autonomy and dependency needs, as emerging adults seek, in Tanner's (2006) term, to recenter themselves from dependent children to autonomous adults. Aquilino finds that the ongoing relationship with their parents is important to the development of emerging adults. He also suggests that the relationships with siblings and grandparents may play an important role, although these relationships are understudied.

Friendships and romance. As has been demonstrated in earlier research, Collins and van Dulmen (2006) find that friendships are an important source of support during emerging adulthood. They do find some evidence that the close relationships pursued by emerging adults differ from those of other developmental periods. Everyday social interactions change throughout the emerging adult stage, building the potential for forming close relationships. As was outlined in the earlier section on cognitive development, Collins and van Dulmen (2006) find that emerging adults are capable of increasing differentiation and complexity of thought about their close relationships. Many in this stage feel a need to experience a variety of relationships, as they search for their individual identity within relationships. Some of this identity exploration may lead to confusion and uncertainty in close relationships (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006).

Sexuality. With the experience in increasingly close relationships comes the task of establishing intimacy, including sexual intimacy. Lefkowitz and Gillen (2006) find that at the beginning of emerging adulthood, around half are sexually active, and nearly all are by the end of the stage. Although the authors find that the potential consequences (pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases) of sexual behavior are important considerations to emerging adults, no one theory exists that is adequate to explicate the sexual behavior of emerging adults.

School and work. Hamilton and Hamilton (2006) find some real shifts in the school and work patterns of emerging adults as compared to the same population even a few decades ago. College attendance is more wide-spread than college graduation, and enrollment is often combined with employment, especially in two-year schools. Workers in their early 20s are concentrated in low-skill, low-wage jobs, both those who are simultaneously seeking postsecondary education and those who are not. These workers also change jobs frequently, often with periods of unemployment in between jobs.

The pattern of frequent job changes is open to two conflicting interpretations (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). The first interpretation holds that these workers change jobs in a search for a job that will match their skills, interests, and abilities. The second interpretation holds that these workers are merely "floundering" (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006, p. 265), and have an unproductive, undirected approach to employment. Employers may contribute to this pattern of job changes, as they may be reluctant to offer the higher quality, higher responsibility jobs to those of emerging adult age. Hamilton and Hamilton (2006) also find that academic achievement is more important than ever in pursuing careers, as it is closely related to career directedness. Those who lack career direction are

more likely to flounder in job choices, while those with high career directedness are more likely to persist to completion of a degree. The authors suggest that future research focus on the origin of career directedness.

Emerging Adults Summary

Each of the authors summarized above has reviewed the relevant literature in their area, and applied Arnett's new emerging adults construct to existing models. It seems their primary goal is to justify emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental stage. At first blush, these authors seem to have made their case, but upon thoughtful consideration the distinctiveness of the stage seems less clear. After all, the developmental tasks outlined by these authors are hardly new—people have always faced the same developmental issues. Take, for instance, Tanner's (2006) concept of recentering as a primary task for emerging adulthood. Since the days of clan life, when children did not leave home upon taking on adult responsibilities, adults have always been faced with the task of separating from their family of origin and establishing their own identity and roles in the larger society. Similarly, the establishment of ethnic identity in a multicultural society has always involved an element of identification with an ethnic or cultural group in addition to one's individual identity.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the emerging adult stage is that many Americans of this age now have the time (and, sometimes, the resources) to explore potential identities before committing to any adult roles. If emerging adulthood is defined by the exploration of all facets of identity, then Arnett's depiction of ages of instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities follow logically. If Arnett is accurate in his depiction of the American college as "the emerging adult environment *par*

excellence" (2004, p. 140), one would expect to find that college students display many of Arnett's emerging adult features. This model also implies that many students arrive on campus with no clear direction or focus, as they may view college as an appropriate environment in which to explore their identity options.

Changes in Students and Institutions

American higher education is an extremely dynamic institution, undergoing constant change. This section outlines several areas of change, including the trends of massification and stratification, along with changes in student attitudes.

Massification

The college student population has changed significantly over time. The passage of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill, in 1944 created possibilities for many who would not previously have considered pursuing higher education. Although enrollment in American higher education had been increasing steadily for the previous century, explosive growth in enrollment ensued after passage of the bill (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Thelin, 2004). This marked the beginning of what has been called the massification of American higher education, in which the masses—or at least a majority—of Americans now aspire to postsecondary education.

Institutional Types

The huge increase in numbers of students pursuing higher education had a considerable impact on American institutions. The number and type of institutions expanded greatly during the years after the GI Bill, in order to accommodate the influx of students. Two-year community and technical colleges saw explosive growth (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Lucas, 1994; Thelin, 1999). These schools

focus on technical and vocational training, in addition to preparing many students for transfer to four-year schools. Regional universities also increased in number and scope during this time, as many teacher's colleges and normal schools began to offer four-year and some master's degrees (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). This variety of institutional types makes available different educational and professional opportunities, providing more choice for students.

Stratification

This increase in number and types of institutions has contributed to some stratification of American higher education (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; McDonough, 1997). The prestigious private and public institutions serve the academic elite and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Brubacher and Rudy (1999) describe a tracking effect in American higher education arising in the 1960s, with the most elite students bound for the universities, the capable students to the public colleges, and everyone else to two-year institutions.

A large number of the "new" students are likely to enroll in two-year schools or regional universities (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Jackson, 1982). Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, and Li (2008) looked at college opportunity for underrepresented groups, finding that students in these groups tend to enroll in "less selective and less well-resourced" institutions (p. 131). Similarly, Ostrove and Long found that "educational institutions have class- (as well as gender-, race-, and ability-) based markers that define, implicitly or explicitly, who 'belongs' and who does not" (2007, p. 365). Labaree (1990) and Rhoades (1987) both found that our system of

higher education is stratified. Clearly, there are some differences in the populations of students who enroll in the different types of institutions.

Attitudes Toward Education

The Societal View

Today's students face greater societal emphasis on pursuing higher education. The baccalaureate degree has become "an economic necessity" (Trachtenberg, 2012) as well as "a minimum and essential credential" for those seeking upward mobility (Pryor, et al. 2007, p. 1). Authors now write about the impact of the "knowledge economy" and its effects on higher education, namely that society as a whole sends the message of needing higher education to "compete" or even get basic jobs in this new knowledge economy (Rhoades, 1987; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Sociologists term this emphasis on additional education "credential inflation" (Collins, 1971). Thus, many students who a few decades ago would have sought employment after high school, may now feel compelled to pursue additional education. In examining the impact of the knowledge economy on education, Gary Rhoades (2004) concludes that higher education has come to be viewed as a right, rather than a privilege. This societal shift in perception may well affect the way students themselves view higher education, the outcomes they expect from such an education, and their motivation to engage in the educational process.

Student Attitudes

There is also evidence that student attitudes have changed over time. A recent Pew Research Center report on what they term "GenNext" finds that nearly 80% of their respondents list getting rich as either the most important or second most important goal in their lives (2007). To investigate the shift in attitudes over time, I turn to the most widely

used sources of information on college freshmen, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which has been administered at hundreds of institutions yearly since 1966.

The CIRP instrument contains 40 questions covering areas such as demographic information, high school academic preparation, anticipated financing of higher education, and how students spent their time during the last year. The survey also investigates students' religious preferences and political views. The two questions relevant to this study are: "In deciding to go to college, how important to you was each of the following reasons?" and one asking students to rate the importance of a number of plans, goals, and expectations (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007).

The administrators of the CIRP recently marked forty years of research by tracking changing trends in American freshmen as illustrated through responses on the CIRP (Pryor et al., 2007). Several trends emerge from their findings. Two of these trends are of particular interest in the current study: the increased importance of financial outcomes from higher education, also reported by respondents in the Pew Research Center report above, and the increase in the perceived importance of a college education. In the early years of CIRP administration, during the late 1960s, "being very well off financially" was ranked very important or essential by less than 45% of respondents, with "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" garnering nearly 90% of respondents. By the late 1980s, this financial value had assumed first place in students' priorities, with 73.4% identifying it as their top priority in seeking higher education in 2006 (Pryor et al., 2007).

All responses for the importance of a college education have increased over the past forty years. Two items are of particular note in the current study: "to be able to make more money" and the importance of preparation for graduate school. The responses for "to be able to make more money" went from 49.9% in 1976 to 69.0% in 2006. Preparing for graduate school was marked "very important" by 34.9% in 1971 and by 57.7% in 2006. The increases in these two items support the Pew data as well as the trends identified by the authors who describe shifts in the value and perception of American higher education. The CIRP authors infer that these shifts in responses may indicate that student expectations for higher education are higher than at any time in the past (Pryor et al., 2007). Although the full results are not yet available, indications from the most recent CIRP surveys confirm these trends. Students entering college today are very focused on the financial outcomes of their education, and more of them than ever are planning to attend graduate or professional school (Sander, 2012).

Students' Expectations of College

There is a fair amount of literature available on college student expectations. Many early studies examine expectations of various aspects of the college environment (Baker, 1984, Berdie, 1966, Berdie, 1968, Herr, 1971, King & Walsh, 1972, Pate, 1970, Pervin, 1966, Schoemer, 1973). Studies have found that demographic, personality, and intellectual variables all play a part in determining student expectations, and that students tend to be fairly inaccurate in their estimates of their future academic performance (Pate, 1970, Pervin, 1966). One study finds significant disconnect between expectations and reality, and its author attributes to "the immaturity and impressionable nature of the new freshman . . . a good deal of her unrealistic attitudes about the campus environment"

(Schoemer, 1973, p. 195). If emerging adults are less mature than students thirty years ago, their expectations may be even less realistic.

Many influences combine to shape adolescents, and in turn their expectations. Bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986) examines the influence of environment on development. Bronfenbrenner identifies the system of relationships surrounding each child, and delineates their influences on development. The layers of influence include both immediate family and community and the societal landscape. All of these relationships affect children's development, and changes in one layer will affect the other layers. Astin (1985, 1993) outlines a model of the relationship between environment and development in college.

Our expectations color our experiences; the expectations students bring regarding college will influence their college experience. Thus student expectations may well be viewed as Input in Astin's I-E-O (Input-Environment-Output) model (1985, 1993). Astin's model of the impact of college states that everything students bring with them to college: academic preparation, demographics, and perceptions serves as input to the college experience. The Environment component encompasses the range of experiences students have while in college, and may sum up the impact of college on the student. The Output component consists of the characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, values, and so forth that define students after college. Students come to college with many expectations regarding their upcoming experience, and understanding these student expectations is integral to understanding how these inputs influence the college experience. Much of the research on student expectations has focused on areas such as the campus environment and academic rigor.

Over the past several decades, a number of campus environment questionnaires have been designed to study how students' expectations influence their college experience. Pervin (1966) used this stance as the basis for his investigations into the experiences of students at Princeton. Pervin used the College Characteristics Index (CCI), a measure of campus environment, to discover that students have vague and unrealistic conceptions of what to expect from college. Schoemer (1973) used the CCI to show that students' actual experience significantly altered their attitudes about the campus environment, while Herr (1971) used the CCI to conclude that if students' expectations are not met in the reality of the campus environment, students will leave.

Several studies have used Pace's College and University Environment Scales (CUES) instrument to examine student expectations (1966). Pace posits the existence of a "national halo" of misinformation regarding student expectations. In a follow-up study, Pate (1970) used the CUES to examine the expectations of freshman versus transfer students. He found little difference between the expectations of freshmen and transfers, thus casting doubt on the "national halo" effect.

Other researchers have used the CUES to examine the differences between expectations and perceptions drawn from actual experience. Berdie (1966, 1968), using cross-sectional and longitudinal methods, found that student perceptions about college change with experience, and do not match with their expectations. King and Walsh (1972) examined differences between freshmen and juniors, as well as males and females, using the CUES instrument. They found that experiences during the freshman year have a significant effect on expectations.

These studies focused on overall campus environment; others have a more specific focus. There is a body of research on academic expectations, often centered on the differing expectations of students versus faculty. Brinthaupt (2004) outlines the importance of providing a realistic preview for courses, in order to form accurate expectations in the students enrolled. Miley and Gonsalves (2004) investigated whether students made a transition from performance goals to mastery goals (i.e. placing value on the learning of new material itself). They also found that students and faculty differ in their expectations for the learning experience. Another study compares student and faculty expectations regarding the amount of time needed to achieve certain course grades, and found a high degree of similarity between student and faculty responses (Lammers, Kiesler, Curren, Cours, & Connett, 2005). Still another approach to examining academic expectations comes from the communication field, with an examination of the communication expectations between faculty and traditional versus non-traditional students (Houser, 2002).

Some researchers draw on the environment expectation literature to examine the role of expectations on college students' experience. Baker and Siryk (1984) constructed an instrument with four expectations scales: academic, social, personal-emotional, and general. Their purpose was to develop a diagnostic instrument to identify students with adjustment issues. Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) expanded on this study to explore the differences between expectations and perceptions of students' self-assessed adjustment to college. These studies represent an effort to apply information on student expectations to practice in working with college students.

Another study seeking practical application outcomes began to examine expectations in terms of commitment versus withdrawal plans. Braxton, Vester, and Hossler (1995) examined entry characteristics, initial commitments, expectations, integration, and subsequent commitments or withdrawal plans. The expectations examined in this study included students' expectations for academic and intellectual development, collegiate atmosphere, and career development. This study marks an early occurrence of asking what students expect after college.

A more recent study focuses specifically on the income expectations of students. Rouse (2004) used focus groups and questionnaires to study low-income high school seniors' expectations of income levels at age 30. The results were compared with the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 and a similar study using non-low-income students. This study begins to explore one component of outcome expectations by looking specifically at salary expectations.

When viewed in the context of Astin's (1985) I-E-O (Input-Environment-Output) model of the college experience, gaps in the literature on student expectations become apparent. The expectations students bring with them to campus fit well into the input portion of the model, as we know that expectations shape our experiences. The research outlined above examines what students expect of the college environment or its various components, in other words, the "E" of Astin's model. The CIRP data indicate differences in how students view the potential outcome of their college experience, and current research does not provide a key to understanding that difference.

Some studies do begin to address the issue of outcome expectations, and merit additional attention at this time. Braxton and colleagues (1995) included a career

development component in their study. This component reflected a composite of three survey items: "what you learned is related to world of work," "graduates get good jobs," and "faculty are known to be good teachers," students responded on a scale from "this trait has not met my expectations" to "this trait has met my expectations to a very large extent." The first two items do relate to outcome expectations but, since students are merely assessing the extent to which this trait met their expectations, this study does not provide illumination of what those expectations might be.

The study on income expectations addresses outcome expectations very directly (Rouse, 2005). Here we begin to see in what ways students are looking forward to postsecondary education, and its effects on their lives—at least in terms of earning potential. In the study, students were asked to think about a specific possible outcome of education, and predict a level they might attain. Examining income expectations in this way does little to illustrate the full outcome expectations students may have formed.

The literature does not include information on what students expect a college education to do for them, or what they expect as the result of obtaining a degree. If, as proposed earlier, students are affected by consumerist language and view education merely in terms of economic benefit, they may begin to view education as a product, rather than a process. People in general may be likely to engage differently with a product than with a process, thus this perception on the part of students may well affect their engagement with their educational process. The literature on engagement suggests it is an important contributor to student success.

College Choice

If ever-increasing numbers of high school students seek additional education, how do these students go about choosing the type of education most appropriate to their goals? Historically, several social psychological college choice models posit versions of a stage process (Chapman, 1981; Kotler, 1976; Jackson, 1982; Litton, 1982). Hossler and Gallagher (1987), build on these models to form their three-stage process of predisposition, search, and choice. Students form the desire to attend higher education (predisposition), generate a list of possible institutions (search), then select from among those institutions on the list (choice).

The research available on the search stage of the college choice models posits that students form their institution lists primarily by program, with some high-achieving students developing their lists and subsequent choices on the basis of reputation (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The role of academic programs in this process may be overstated for many students. Finances and financial aid are playing an increasingly important role in college choice (Jackson, 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

The emerging adults theory suggests that students may be less certain than ever about career or major choices, thus less likely to select their colleges on the basis of programmatic offerings. It seems reasonable to believe that these students are considering issues other than academic programs when choosing among their many institutional options. Indeed, to increase their attractiveness to traditional-age students, many campuses are marketing themselves through the quality of services they offer (Francis & Hampton, 1999). New fitness facilities, music downloading, wireless internet access, and

niche providers of formerly standard dining services are examples of entries into what some term the "amenities arms race" (Gose, 2006).

A great deal of information, including a plethora of guidebooks and a variety of national rankings, is now available to assist students with the college choice process. One of the advantages touted for national rankings of institutions is that they make available to all potential students quality comparisons of institutions (Hossler & Foley, 1995). Students should thus be able to select institutions on the basis of the quality measures included in these rankings. Put another way, if specific information on colleges and their relative merits is widely (and fairly inexpensively) available, the overall effect on higher education in this country should be an increase in democratization (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). One unstated assumption is that all students will be able to select an appropriate institution from the same information.

Research, however, shows that some groups of students are more likely than others to use the available information in their college choice. McDonough et al. (1998) used CIRP data to illustrate that 59.9% find such publications as "not very important". The researchers identified a group of students who found these rankings to be more important in their college search; these students were already headed for the top schools, in other words already part of the educational elite. The authors suggest these guides are used primarily by those students who aspire to attend elite institutions, with the implication that the primary value of the guides is to choose among elite institutions, rather than to decide what type of institution is most appropriate. Thus these authors suggest that the proliferation of guidebooks and rankings may be contributing to the stratification of higher education described above (McDonough et al., 1998). Indeed,

McDonough (1997) has found that socioeconomic (SES) status plays an influential role in college choice. Students from lower SES status are less influenced by college rankings and guidebooks than they are by local opportunities and financial issues. Put another way, some students may not be choosing colleges on the basis of quality of programs and opportunities, but rather by price and proximity.

It seems reasonable to posit some relationship between emerging adults and institutional stratification. If students lack clear identity and commitment to life goals, they are unlikely to select their institutions on the basis of program, as in the college choice models above. They may also be less likely to aspire to attend highly prestigious institutions for the same reasons. Indeed, research on the use of the vast amounts of literature available to help students facing the college choice process (guidebooks, rankings, and so forth), suggests that the students most likely to avail themselves of this information are those who aspire to the most selective institutions, thus contributing to further stratification of higher education (McDonough, 1997; McDonough et al., 1998).

Gaps in Research on Students and Institutional Types

With more students attending more institutions than ever before, a short overview of the research on these students is in order. A special issue of *The Review of Higher Education* in 1998 focused on the changes in students as a constituency in higher education. The articles highlight the numerous changes in the academic context as well as changes in students themselves (Altbach, 1998).

The Student Population

Those who study students identify a range of changes in the student population over the past decades. The foremost compilers of research on college students, Ernest

Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, in reflecting on their work for *How College Affects Students*, conclude that the knowledge base contained therein is about "a population of students that no longer dominates American postsecondary education" (1998, p. 152). A reviewer of Pascarella and Terenzini's work notes that "just as analysis of the experiences of college students reached an apex . . . the population of interest began shifting" (Stage, 1993, pp. 22-23).

Early research on college students focused on a homogeneous population: white, male, traditional age, full-time students at four-year institutions (mostly residential), who had few responsibilities outside pursuing an education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Most of the research was conducted at a limited variety of institutions as well, reflecting both the researchers' bias that such institutions served as an educational ideal, and the availability of both students and researchers (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). These institutions tended to be large research universities or prestigious private institutions, both of which are likely to have students whose goals and motivations differ from students at other types of institutions, such as regional universities and community colleges.

Stratification and Institutional Types

As outlined above in the description of stratification, student populations differ by type of institution. If, as suggested by Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) most of the research on college students has been conducted at one or two types of institutions, some student populations are underrepresented in the research. Both Perna and colleagues (2008) and Ostrove and Long (2007) identified differences in student populations between prestigious, elite institutions and less selective ones such as regional comprehensive universities.

There is clear evidence of changes in American higher education. These changes are reflected in both the students who attend our institutions and the institutions themselves, as well as in the role and perception of higher education in American society. Society at large and the institutions of higher education are inextricably intertwined, thus their individual influences on each other may be hard to discern. Psychologists suggest that changes in the nature of school and society are responsible for creating a new developmental stage.

Summary

Clearly there are some gaps in the literature on college students, two of which this study aims to address. The emerging adults model outlines several characteristics of people at this stage in life, and this study seeks to discern if these characteristics are appropriate to describe new entering freshmen. Although the topic of student expectations of college has been addressed by many authors over several decades, there are few qualitative studies attempting to determine what outcomes students today expect from their education.

As seen in chapter one, higher education in the United States is becoming increasingly stratified, while at the same time the bulk of the research on college students is concentrated in one or two types of institutions: large research universities or elite private colleges. There is also a considerable body of research on two-year schools and their students. Stratification implies that different types of students attend the different types of institutions. By examining students at a moderately selective regional comprehensive university, this study seeks to provide greater understand of these students' expectations of college.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate what students at a regional comprehensive university expect from college. There are gaps in the literature regarding students from this type of institution and about what motivates them to pursue higher education. The recently proposed emerging adults theoretical model may provide some insight into this student population.

Researcher Perspective

I have worked with college students for over 25 years, at both public and private institutions. I have spent most of my time working with students who are exploring their options for majors and careers through programming, academic advising, and formal career counseling. I have taught classes in study skills and First Year Experience. My decision to pursue a doctorate was based on my desire to learn more about institutions of higher learning and the students who attend them, in order to become more effective in serving both.

My coursework brought into focus a trend I had only sensed: an ever-increasing disconnect between what I was reading in the literature and what I was experiencing with students on a daily basis. The literature depicted students who viewed their high school years as primarily a preparation for college: in selecting sports and activities, testing,

gathering information, and even just thinking about college. What I was reading just did not describe my students.

A project I completed for a course on higher education policy led me to research schools using the Early Decision option. The data I found described students whose entire high school career was focused around an effort to get into the prestigious institutions of their choice, and the incredible pressure this competition caused for both the students and their families. Early Decision was described as eliminating months of nearly intolerable stress for these students, while creating the additional stress of having to commit to a single institution very early in the process, without the opportunity to weigh competing financial aid offers or other factors. For these students, getting into the "right" college was of paramount importance in guiding their entire high school career. These were not my students.

When I developed a presentation and paper on how students choose college, the literature, especially the Indiana longitudinal study (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999), offered several versions of choice models. Each model outlined a stage process, during which students formed an aspiration to attend college, then created plans to explore their options, and finally selected an option. All of the models at least implied a great degree of intentionality, and an aspiration that was "owned" by the students (even though it was not articulated this way by the theorists). This does not describe my students.

During my work toward a graduate certification in Institutional Research, I investigated the power and effects of the various college ranking organizations, such as *U.S. News and World Report*. In this area, the literature focused on the users of the vast amount of information available to help students and their families compare colleges, in

order to make thoughtful and informed choices. McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez (1998) in particular noted that the students most likely to avail themselves of this information were the students who were already advantaged by socioeconomic status or superior high schools. These families gathered a great deal of data before carefully narrowing down lists of possible colleges, which they then scrutinized more closely. These are not my students' families.

Other literature describes ways in which students spend high school preparing themselves to compete for places at the most desirable institutions. Students select their extracurricular activities and summer jobs with admissions staff in mind, they hire coaches to walk them through the process, including (sometimes) writing essays for the student (Hoover, 2011). Students pay fees to SAT or ACT preparation companies in order to boost their scores, and often take the test multiple times in an effort to boost their scores and become more competitive. Students start exploring college options early in high school, and apply to more than a dozen different schools, sometimes twice that number (Hoover, 2010). These activities do not describe my students.

When I first encountered the emerging adult literature, I felt a sense of recognition. I had thought it possible that my students were merely lagging behind in some of the adult task areas, but the emerging adults theory depicts as perfectly normal the lack of urgency to commit to life roles, as students take time to explore their options fully. This seemed to me a better way to describe my students.

"My" students seemed to share several characteristics, at least through anecdotal evidence. They articulated no particular reason or even specific desire to attend college, most talk about college as just "what you do after high school." Many struggled to

articulate any vision of the future; not just after graduation, but often the next semester. Even many juniors and seniors that I met with to talk about job search strategies had little clear idea of what was in their future. Moreover, many of these students did not seem to feel any need to become actively involved in directing their futures, or take ownership for their time here.

Granted, much of my time has been spent with students who have not selected a major or career path for college or beyond. Our campus now prefers to use the term "exploring" rather than "undeclared" for students who have not chosen a major, but even that term feels a bit misleading to me. To describe students as "exploring" implies that they are actively involved in investigating their options, and attempting to study their choices. Many of the students of my experience are content to merely drift along until someone requires them to make a choice, at which point they often select a major just to have one, but without any real exploration of how well that area of study suits them.

After years of wondering about what I was observing in students, it seemed natural to pursue the opportunity to study in a formal manner that which I had been perceiving, and to test my perceptions. I wanted to know what brings these students to college? What do they expect from their time there? Does the emerging adults model provide a useful description of the behaviors I had been seeing?

In order to provide a degree of focus on possibly differing expectations, I chose to include two sets of students: bioscience majors who had stated an intention to pursue graduate or professional school, and undeclared students. It seemed reasonable to expect that having a defined direction for their education may lead the bioscience students to articulate perceptions of college differently than the undeclared students. Somewhat

surprisingly, the bioscience majors expressed many of the same themes as the undeclared students, as I describe in Chapter IV.

Since the role of higher education has certain assigned values in American society, one can expect that students' responses regarding the role of higher education will, to some extent, reflect or respond to the societal view. Through a process of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, followed by analysis of the resulting text, I sought to gain a more complete understanding of students' own meaning-making, by going beyond the socially acceptable views of education to discern the true role of higher education in their lives (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005).

The examination of both speech and metaphorical constructs produced several themes illustrative of students' views and expectations of college. In describing their expectations, students use commodity metaphors, and have difficulty articulating both their perception of this commodity of a college education and how their expectations have been formed.

Conceptual Framework

The emerging adult construct is relatively new, having been first identified in 1998. Arnett (1998, 2000, 2004, 2006) notes some characteristics of the way emerging adults approach college, i.e. in a non-linear fashion, and asserts that the emerging adults model describes both student and non-student populations, but does not focus on college. The emerging adult research is based on an age group, and does not examine that group in any specific context. Tanner (2006) refers to "recentering" as a primary task of emerging adults after high school, and suggests that this recentering process may take place in college or in other settings as emerging adults leave their family of origin. The

purpose of this study was to examine first year students on one campus to ascertain to what degree these students display the characteristics proposed by the emerging adults construct.

Arnett (2006) urges researchers to employ qualitative approaches when investigating the emerging adult population. Quantitative approaches can provide a description of a situation or phenomenon. As illustrated by the CIRP data, the amount of importance students attach to particular reasons for attending college has shifted over the past forty years. But in order to understand the meaning behind these responses, the topic must be addressed through qualitative means. Qualitative approaches allow researchers to understand the meaning of responses, and the knowledge that is found within the meanings people make of it (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The critical theory ideological approach investigates the influence of social values on how people form their actions and choices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Students (and others) express their thoughts and ideas in many ways, but most particularly through the spoken and written word. Arnett (1998, 2000) gathered his data primarily through extensive interviews, whereas the CIRP questionnaire asks students to select pre-determined responses to particular questions. In order to understand the meaning within those responses, researchers must dig more deeply into the responses themselves. Meaning is constructed through both the formation and perception of discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005). Thus this study used discourse analysis to investigate the meanings contained within student responses. For example, the students use metaphorical constructs that allow us to understand how they conceive of the concept of a college education.

As seen in Chapter I, the CIRP data provide information on what brings students to college. Surveys such as the CIRP, however, are inherently limited. Students may only choose responses from the options listed. It certainly seems possible that students' goals, plans, and expectations may not coincide with any of the options provided. Students may also select from the options provided in a "sure, that sounds good" approach, if they perceive one or more of the options to be socially acceptable.

This study delves more deeply into how students make meaning of college. Using qualitative approach allows students to articulate their plans and motivations in their own words, rather than selecting from a list of options. To illustrate this limitation, Tables 1 and 2 compare CIRP responses with information from interviews in this study. The interview transcripts contain very few references to the plans, goals, and expectations listed as options in the CIRP survey, listed in Table 1.

Table 2, which lists CIRP responses relating to students' decision to go to college, illustrates more congruence between interview responses and CIRP options, but not complete correlation. These results suggest that the CIRP survey may not be sufficient to understand students' plans, goals and expectations.

Discourse Analysis

Language is used to construct meaning, within both the speaker and the listener; meaning-making is an interactive process (Fairclough, 2003). The very exchange of words in an interview may illustrate how meaning is constructed as participants respond to each other. Discourse, or the interchange of words and ideas, may be understood on many levels. Discourse analysis seeks to understand meaning beyond the level of the

Table 1. Plans, Goals, and Expectations (importance of—not specifically college).

CIRP items	Essential or Very Important	Interview responses N = 22
Becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts	15.7 %	0
Becoming a community leader	35.2 %	0
Becoming an authority in my field	58.2 %	1
Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	22.2 %	0
Becoming successful in a business of my own	41.9 %	1
Being very well off financially	73.4 %	6
Creating artistic work	16.2 %	0
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	46.3 %	0
Having administrative responsibility for the work of others	41.0 %	0
Helping others who are in difficulty	66.7 %	0
Influencing social values	42.5 %	0
Influencing the political structure	22.7 %	0
Keeping up to date with political affairs	37.2 %	0
Making a theoretical contribution to science	19.7 %	0
Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field	53.8 %	0
Participating in a community action program	27.0 %	0
Participating in an organization like the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps/VISTA	11.3 %	0
Helping to promote racial understanding	34.0 %	0
Raising a family	75.7 %	6
Writing original works	16.2 %	0

Table 2. In Deciding to go to College, How Important to Uou Was Each of the Following Reasons?

CIRP item	"very important" CIRP responses	Interview responses N = 22
A mentor/role model encouraged me to go	17.2%	0
I could not find a job	5.6%	0
My parents wanted me to go	46.4%	20
There was nothing better to do	4.1%	0
To be able to get a better job	70.4%	8
To be able to make more money	69.0%	9
To get training for a specific career	69.2%	2
To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas	64.3%	2
To improve my reading and study skills	--	0
To learn more about things that interest me	76.8%	2
To make me a more cultured person	41.7%	0
To prepare for graduate or professional school	57.7%	3
Wanted to get away from home	21.1%	0

sentence, including the influences of social dynamics and societal messages. Meaning depends on both what is explicitly stated and on the implicit statements, or the underlying assumptions of both speakers (Fairclough, 2003). Underlying assumptions may be

illustrated through descriptions of expectations. They may also be illustrated by examining the use of metaphorical constructs.

Fairclough (2003) refers to the social effects of discourse, because language serves as part of the social structure. People express their understanding and perceptions of social norms through their discourse and underlying assumptions. Today's students have perceptions and assumptions about higher education and its meaning, both for society at large and for their own lives. Much can be learned about these perceptions and assumptions through examining students' language and responses.

Background of Discourse Analysis

There are many branches of linguistics and language studies; this section provides an outline of some of the approaches to analyzing language which serve as the background to the development of current discourse analysis practice.

Norman Fairclough (1992) identifies two groups of approaches that view their analysis of textual materials within a social orientation: critical and non-critical approaches. In Fairclough's distinction, critical approaches, in addition to description of practice, include attention to the roles of power and ideologies in discourse. Critical approaches also attend to influences of society, including the concept of "social identities" that are central to this study.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) used classroom interactions for their approach, which describes units of rank: lesson, transaction, exchange, move and act. These are in descending order, each rank is composed of units from the rank below. Critiques of their approach point out that it forces decisions about utterances, rather than leaving open some possible interpretations.

Another approach to examining discourse comes from ethnomethodology, a sociological approach (Benson & Hughes, 1983). Ethnomethodologists have developed conversation analysis (CA) through analyzing informal conversations, rather than classroom interactions. The CA approach attends more closely to interpretation than the Sinclair and Coulthard approach, and pays particular attention to sequencing of conversations. This means that each portion of a conversation or interaction shapes the next portion in the sequence. One underlying assumption in CA is that participants in some conversation have equal status, in those instances the approach may look at interactions independent of power issues. The primary contribution of the CA approach is increased understanding of structure in dialogue.

Fairclough identifies another discourse analysis approach that he considers non-critical. Potter and Wetherell (1987) approach social psychology using discourse analysis methodologies, and focus on content rather than form. Potter and Wetherell identify discourse as "constructive," meaning that people's discourse production depends on context. Fairclough criticizes Potter and Wetherell's approach as lacking attention to the social orientation of discourse.

Critical linguists seek to differentiate themselves from traditional linguistics as well as from sociolinguistics. Halliday (1973) asserts that language is formed as part of "the social structure, and the organization of behavioural meanings should give some insight into its social foundations" (p. 65). Critical linguistics also departs from mainstream linguistics in emphasizing the use of complete texts as the unit of analysis, and seeks to identify the ideologies or social meanings underlying texts.

Gee (2005) takes an integrated approach to discourse analysis. Gee refers to what he calls the "magical" property of language, that speakers "design what we have to say to fit the situation in which we are communicating" (2005, p. 10). Gee builds upon the "social language" concepts of Bakhtin (1986). We all use many different social languages as the language we use changes to fit the context and situation we are in. Language is also an "active building process" (Gee, 2005, p. 10), and part of what we use language for is "to build an identity" (p. 11).

My intent had been to use Discourse Analysis to analyze all of the data. Upon examination of the data, however, especially the written sources, I identified several metaphorical constructs used by the students. At that point I decided metaphor theory would provide a richer understanding of the meaning in the students' responses.

Metaphor Theory

In their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) describe the importance of metaphor in understanding how we experience the world. Metaphors allow us to understand and express our experiences in terms of other domains of understanding. We create our conceptions of the world through our own experiences. "Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities" even though we are generally not aware of these systems (p. 3). Metaphors allow us to both increase and describe our conceptual systems, as "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5).

To illustrate what they mean by conceptual metaphor, the authors begin with an example where the concept is "argument" and the conceptual metaphor is "argument is war." They find many examples of this metaphorical construct in everyday speech.

ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked* every weak point in my argument.

His criticisms were right on *target.*

I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!

If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments. (p. 4)

In this example, the metaphor of war does not merely compare one object to another. The full meaning of an argument, with actions such as attacking and defending, strategies, targets, winners and losers, is all understood in the conceptual metaphor. These examples from speech do not merely state that an argument is like a war, they illustrate the interactional meaning of the full comparison between argument and war.

The metaphor of argument as war is not limited to how we describe argument. It provides a deeper understanding of what we do when arguing, including some of the actions: attack, demolish, and shoot down. Arguments can be won or lost. In this culture, the metaphor of argument as war illustrates how we structure the actions we perform in arguing. This metaphor "is not merely in the words we use—it is our very concept of an argument" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4).

Metaphors help us understand the precise nature of similarities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 151). The objectivist view constructs definitions from lists of inherent properties, for instance of an object. In contrast, a metaphor "by virtue of giving coherent

structure to our range of experiences, creates similarities of a new kind" (p. 151). Since metaphors are shaped by our own conceptual systems, metaphorical definitions are created from our own experiences, as well as properties of the object or experience in question. Unlike objectivist definitions, metaphors help us understand interactional properties. "Understanding always involves human categorization, which is a function of interactional (rather than inherent) properties and of dimensions that emerge from our experience" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 165).

The interactional properties expressed by metaphors help speakers communicate meaning to each other. The use of metaphors is crucial in "communicating the nature of unshared experiences" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 231). Thus, students who as yet have limited first hand experience of college may display their understanding and conceptualization of a college education in terms of the metaphors they use.

Metaphors "play a central role in the construction of social and political reality" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 159). In other words, metaphors may provide clues as to how we are making meaning of our experience, and how we are constructing our realities. Looking for metaphorical constructs used by students to describe their expectations of the college experience may provide insight into their understanding of higher education as a concept, in other words how students are constructing their own social reality of college.

In their review of the development of metaphor theory over two decades, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that metaphor theory has been adopted as a tool in both cognitive and clinical psychology. It serves as a useful tool to psychologists, because it "provides a systematic guide to the cognitive and affective dimensions of our sense of

self" (p. 270). Examining metaphors used by students in this study provides insight into whether and how attending college is shaping their sense of self. Both similarities and differences in the use of metaphor should aid in illustrating how respondents are constructing their social reality as college students.

The examination of metaphors, therefore, is a tool that allows us a deeper understanding of the speaker's understanding of terms and concepts. Metaphors illustrate how we understand one concept in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 10), or how we make sense of constructs around us. The current study contains several instances of students using metaphorical constructs to illustrate their understanding of one concept: a college education. Chapter IV outlines, and then examines, several metaphorical constructs employed by the study subjects.

Since the role of higher education has certain assigned values in American society, one can expect that students' responses regarding the role of higher education will, to some extent, reflect or respond to the societal view. Through a process of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, followed by analysis of the resulting text, I sought to gain a more complete understanding of students' own meaning-making, by going beyond the socially acceptable views of education to discern the true role of higher education in their lives (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005).

The examination of both speech and metaphorical constructs produced several themes illustrative of students' views and expectations of college. In describing their expectations, students use commodity metaphors, and have difficulty articulating both their perception of this commodity of a college education and how their expectations have been formed.

Summary. Discourse analysis includes approaches that examine texts as products that are analyzed and examined through attention to grammar and vocabulary. Other approaches also examine overall structure of the texts. In addition to products, later analysis approaches examine the processes of producing texts. In these approaches, analysis is viewed as interpretation, with the recognition that there are many possible interpretations for different texts.

Metaphor theory allows us to examine conceptual relationships. The metaphorical constructs students use when describing their expectations of college illustrate how the concept of college relates to other concepts in their lives, thus demonstrating their understanding of college as a commodity. Understanding this view students have of college as a commodity further helps us comprehend how students may approach college, as well as their involvement in their own education.

Methods

Data Collection

Pilot study. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) advise starting any qualitative project with some initial fieldwork. This study draws upon information from a pilot project conducted during the previous academic year, which used focus groups to explore students' outcome expectations. The focus groups consisted of two sets of new entering freshmen: bioscience majors and students who had not declared a major. At Hillside University, a majority of bioscience majors plan to attend graduate or professional school, while the vast majority of undeclared students have yet to select a career path.

The focus groups yielded some minor differences between the two groups of students. The undeclared students described their outcome expectations for college in

terms of having more money and greater career options, while bioscience majors described wanting to learn everything they can, or follow their dreams. When depicting college graduates, undeclared students said they were "qualified for more positions" while bioscience majors highlighted personal qualities, such as "someone who survived" or "winners, not just people who gave up."

Both groups of students used the term "successful" to describe both their own goals and the typical college graduate, but the two groups defined success differently. For the undeclared students, "success" included financial markers such as having money, being better off, and not in debt. For bioscience students, "success" was defined in more intrinsic terms, such as loving your job in life, influencing people, and being happy with life. The undeclared students seemed more externally motivated, i.e. "career options," while bioscience majors were motivated from within, i.e. "my dream." I felt these differing views of education professed in the focus groups merited closer scrutiny. Upon examination of the data collected in this study, however, I was surprised to find few differences in the responses between the two groups.

Data Sources

This dissertation draws from three data sources: two written artifacts and a set of interviews, all from first year students. In order to build upon the information and themes that emerged during the pilot study, two groups of students were solicited for in-depth interviews: bioscience majors and undeclared students. One set of written responses was gathered during freshman orientation, the other from a class assignment.

Orientation survey. Each year new students at Hillside University are invited to participate in a multi-day orientation to the campus in August prior to the beginning of

classes. One of the orientation sessions is a departmental meeting. During the "departmental" meeting for undeclared students, participants were given a survey, including the following question: "Think about what has brought you to college—not necessarily Hillside University, but to college in general. Why did you decide to pursue a college degree? What is it you expect college to do for you?" The responses to this survey included several metaphorical constructs that students use to make meaning of their college education.

Class assignment. The second written source used to provide additional understanding of students' expectations is an essay assignment from the First Year Experience (FYE) course. In this assignment students were asked to reflect on their reasons for pursuing postsecondary education and how this education fits into their goals. Although the FYE sections are taught from a common syllabus, individual instructors have some latitude in what they assign. The essay topics included in this study were identically phrased: "why did you decide to go to college?" Three instructors shared their students' papers with me, for a total of 42 students. I eliminated two responses in which students referred to having taken time off between high school and college, as the current study includes only students who had graduated from high school the previous spring. Taking time off after high school may change students' motivation to attend college as well as their expectations thereof.

Interviews. The primary source of data for this study is a series of in-depth interviews of new entering freshmen conducted from December to February of their first year of college. These interviews were structured to allow students to fully articulate their understanding of a college education, and what such an education means to them.

Students were asked to explore the formation of their educational aspirations, articulate their paths to college, and look to their future to describe their outcome expectations as clearly as possible, using the words and phrases they deem most appropriate. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to pursue any relevant topics that arose during the course of each interview (Appendix A).

Selection and Recruitment of Participants. The participants in the interview portion of this study, who are introduced later in this chapter, were freshmen during their first year of college, who were either undeclared or who had declared a bioscience major with intention of pursuing graduate or professional school. These two groups of students were solicited for participation because they may have differing expectations of college. The bioscience majors were selected because they had stated an intention to pursue graduate or professional school. Although some of these students were still choosing between two or more career options, all intended to stay with their declared major and pursue additional education. These intentions contrast with the undeclared students, who had chosen neither a major nor a career path. It seems reasonable to suppose that students for whom college is a necessary part of a specific plan, such as graduate or professional school, may have different expectations for college than students who have yet to find a path to their future. During the pilot study, there were some differences in the way these two groups described college. In this study, however, there were few differences between the groups.

Bioscience major participants were recruited with the assistance of the instructor of the required first course for all majors. She allowed me class time to present a short description of the project, ask for volunteers to participate, and distribute a sign-up sheet

for those students interested in receiving additional information about participating in the study. Those students who evinced an interest were contacted via e-mail with the formal invitation to participate (Appendix B). Undeclared students were recruited in two ways: by an electronic invitation to participate sent to all undeclared students, and through the Advising Center as they came in to meet with their advisors. Advising Center staff offered students handouts with a description of the project, and the same invitation to participate. Interviews were conducted during the final week of fall semester, and the first three weeks of spring semester. Students were provided with a certificate for a beverage and a pastry at the time of the interview, and all participants were entered in a drawing for a $100.00 gift certificate.

My plan was to conduct the interviews at the beginning of fall semester, so that student responses would be close in time to the two written data sources. The timing did not work out as planned. Although I received IRB permission from UND at the beginning of October, I did not receive Hillside's IRB permission until the end of November. After that another week passed before the instructor of the introductory course for bioscience majors was able to give me class time to recruit subjects. Also, by this time of semester the traffic in the advising center was slow, limiting the number of undeclared students receiving the invitation to participate. Thus I was only able to schedule two interviews during finals week of fall semester; the remainder occurred in the first four weeks of the spring term.

Table 3. Outline of Data Sources.

Data Source	Timing	Student Population	Format
Orientation survey	Thursday morning in August before classes began on Monday	63 undeclared students, who self selected into this group	Survey, with very little time to respond
First Year Experience course essay assignment	Assigned during the first week of classes, due during the second week	New entering freshmen from a variety of majors	Assigned essay, students had a week to write their responses
Semi-structured interviews	Finals week of fall semester and the first four weeks of spring semester	22 bioscience majors 10 undeclared students	Semi-structured interviews, allowing follow-up questions to clarify understanding of student responses

There may be some overlap of subjects from the different data sources. It is probable that some or all of the undeclared students interviewed had also completed the orientation questionnaire, since it was administered during a meeting of all entering undeclared students. In order to avoid any potential conflicts posed by a dual relationship, no students from the section of FYE specifically designated for undeclared students were solicited for participation in this study, as that section was taught by the researcher. It is also possible that some of the undeclared students or bioscience majors were also represented in the FYE assignment, as those sections represented here were open to all students.

Each of these three data sources provided a different perspective for understanding the student experience. The semi-structured form of the interviews allowed

me to follow up on students' responses to help them more fully express their experiences. For instance, I was able to ask them to explain what they meant by particular words or phrases during the course of the interview. This was particularly useful in determining how they defined the term "adult." In contrast, students completed the orientation survey quickly, and did not appear to be thinking carefully about their responses. It was administered at the end of a "departmental" meeting, after which students were to go to lunch, and most students completed the survey as quickly as possible. The FYE assignment may have provided a more in-depth, personal view than the survey, as students had at least a week to complete (and hopefully think about) the assignment. The responses in the FYE assignment were more fully structured than the lists of phrases found in some of the survey responses, but the substance of the content was quite similar to the survey.

The structure and content of language used in the three sources were examined to illustrate how students are making meaning of their experiences (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005). The interview transcripts and the two written artifacts were examined for repetitive phrases or ideas, as well as underlying structures, which served as the basis for forming areas of agreement (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). These areas of agreement were combined into several themes.

Metaphors

The interviews were designed to allow me to move beyond facile, socially constructed responses, including follow-up questions to ascertain students' true attitudes and perceptions. As detailed later in this chapter, my analysis of the interview transcripts focuses on two areas: metaphorical constructs used by the students, and content themes

they expressed. Chapter IV includes an examination of these metaphorical constructs and themes to see what we can learn about how college students make meaning of their education, or how they understand the concept of college in terms of other concepts with which they are more familiar.

Triangulating the interview data with the written sources provided support for the metaphorical constructs. In each of the written sources, students used similar metaphorical constructs when describing their concept of a college education. The Orientation survey had two different types of constructs, commodity and sequence metaphors. In the commodity metaphors, students described their expectation that a college degree education would be exchanged for something, such as a job or future happiness. Students also used a passive construction, in which the degree will act as a kind of agent outside of themselves to "open" doors or opportunities for them. In the sequence constructions, students described an education as a "next step" or a "path" to their future.

Very similar metaphorical constructs appear in the FYE assignment as well. Here, too, students expect to exchange their education to "get" or "find a job, and that it will "open" doors. College is also the "first" or "next" step; one that will help them "move forward" in life. The two types of metaphorical constructs identified in the interview transcripts are echoed in both the Orientation survey and the FYE assignment.

Member checking. After all interviews were completed, students were invited to review the transcripts of their interviews for accuracy. Students were also invited to learn more about the categories and themes emerging from analysis of the interview transcripts. I did not have any students choose to review their transcripts, or ask to learn

more about my results. All students were invited to participate in a focus group held at the end of the semester after the interviews were conducted. Three of the bioscience majors, Pam, Kelsey, and Kayla (all subjects have been assigned pseudonyms), and one of the undeclared students, Kerry, chose to participate. The digital recorder malfunctioned, so the only data available from this focus group consisted of some notes jotted by the researcher during the discussion.

This limited information from the focus group does provide support for several of the themes emerging from the primary data sources. Students still described a sense of feeling "in between," rather than having reach adulthood. They also agreed that they had never made a conscious choice to attend college, that they had always expected, and been expected, to attend. Unfortunately, the lack of verbatim transcription made examination of metaphorical constructs impossible.

Researcher responsibilities. The researcher was solely responsible for collecting all data, and obtained project approval from the Institutional Research Boards of both the University of North Dakota and of Hillside University. The researcher also obtained permission from the coordinator of fall Orientation to use information gathered in the student survey, as well as permission from several FYE instructors to share their students' class assignments. No individual student identifying information was available for either of these data sources. The researcher conducted all interviews and transcribed the results.

Data Analysis

Two of the interviews were conducted during finals week of fall semester, the other twenty during the first four weeks of spring semester. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. During and after each interview I made notes of impressions.

After all interviews were complete I transcribed them, using Naturally Speaking voice recognition software. This software yields the best results when it is "trained" to recognize a single person's voice and speech patterns, so I employed a skill developed during my days as a classical music radio announcer, using headphones to listen to the interview recordings while speaking aloud the content I was hearing. This process allowed the software to more accurately transcribe the content than playing the recordings directly into the computer, where the software would need to recognize both my voice and those of the subjects. I then checked the transcripts against the digital audio recording for accuracy. After transcribing the interviews, I read through each transcript, then wrote an analytic memorandum with impressions of the subject as well as issues arising during that interview. These memoranda served as the basis for the "introduction of subjects" section to follow.

I began my analysis of the interviews by attempting to code the transcriptions. I spent a great deal of time not getting anywhere, as using a coding method did not seem to be yielding the depth of understanding I sought. For instance, I struggled to make sense of coding the descriptions of the role of college. I had three related codes: college as a "next step" or "stepping stone" and journey constructions such as "getting there." I felt that the richness of description provided by students was getting lost in assigning codes. I

was so frustrated by the limitations of my coding that I actually halted my attempts at data analysis.

After considerable time away, I returned to the interviews with a new eye. I soon realized that these three codes are all different versions of the same underlying metaphorical construct: college as part of a sequence. Using metaphor theory rather than coding led me to a greater comprehension of how students were describing their understanding of a college education and its role in their lives. My use of metaphor theory in analyzing data is presented in greater detail later in this chapter.

At this time, I also began to identify themes. In answering the first research question, several of the themes I identified corresponded with Arnett's characteristics of emerging adulthood. I identified strong support for three of his characteristics and minimal support for the other two.

Not surprisingly, I identified a strong theme of identity development, one of Arnett's characteristics. Since identity development is key to many college student development theories, it would have been surprising not to find evidence that these students were in the process of developing their identities. Students articulated three general aspects of identity in development: exploring careers, changing relationships, and shifts in perception of themselves and society.

Throughout the transcripts I found indications that the subjects felt themselves to be what Arnett calls "in between," or not yet adults. Several students stated outright that they were in between, for instances answering "yes and no" to the question of whether or not they were adults. After noting these overt statements of feeling in between, I examined the responses of the students who had said they either were or were not adults

for evidence of in between language. All of the interviews contained some expression of this feeling.

The next theme I identified supports Arnett's characteristic of a focus on self. To Arnett, this does not mean being self-absorbed, but rather that emerging adults are newly responsible for themselves, and for making their own decisions, rather than following the orders of parents and other authority figures. Some students articulated a sense of themselves as apart from their families, and many described decisions they are now able to make for themselves. For instance, one student describes how much she enjoys being able to wear sweatpants to class, while another was pleased that she got positive feedback about a pair of boots she would have hesitated to wear in high school. Other students describe how college has challenged their beliefs, including the bioscience major who did not believe in evolution, but is now having to revisit that belief.

Arnett's theory includes two other characteristics: the age of possibilities and the age of instability. The interviews did not include support for these two characteristics. Several students did express a sense of optimism and looking forward to possibilities available to them in college, which fits with Arnett's age of possibilities. Since Arnett defines instability as geographic instability, meaning moving around a great deal, it does not yet apply to these subjects, who have in the past few months made their first move, from home to living on campus.

As I began to work on the second research question, I returned to the other two written artifacts. At this time, I noticed two metaphorical constructions present in all three sources with a remarkable degree of similarity among the responses. It became clear to me that students were using a variety of constructions that indicated they viewed

college as a commodity. To them, a college education is a product to obtain, rather than a process to engage in. This product is something they may then exchange for something else, such as "a good life for myself" or "a career that I enjoy." Once I identified these constructions, I wanted to see if the findings could be triangulated through identifying similar constructions in all three data sources: the interview, the orientation survey, and the FYE assignment.

The students' use of metaphor to convey the concept of a college education as a commodity makes apparent the limitations of quantitative approaches to understanding student motivations. The CIRP instrument, for example, does not allow students to select any options that describe college as a product. This disparity between the CIRP items and students' actual responses became even more apparent when I examined students' descriptions of what they expected to gain from their time in college.

While reading these outcome descriptions I was struck by the lack of detail students used to describe their expectations of college, even the bioscience majors. I began my investigation of students' outcome expectations through the use of a proxy. I asked students to identify someone who had graduated from college, then to discuss what they thought the role of college may have been in this person's life. Many of the students had considerable difficulty in identifying a college graduate, which may indicate some difficulty in identifying their own outcome expectations. After using the proxy approach I asked students about their own outcome expectations.

Students had difficulty articulating why they had come to college as well as what they expected from college. I examined each transcript for descriptions of outcome expectations, and although some students were able to articulate an expectation, such as

"Educating me toward my career" many more responded in vague terms such as "I want to gain some kind of, well, knowledge, and educational and social betterness about that growth of sorts." Phrases such as "some kind of" and "of sorts" indicate vaguely formed ideas, and such phrases were common in the transcripts. Other students were clear about their lack of clarity; responding "I guess I don't know" what the role of college will be. In chapter 4 I report the themes arising from students' outcome responses.

The lack of focus present in students' descriptions of their outcome expectations may be related to another theme I identified in the transcripts: the absence of intentionality in choosing to attend college. My second research question asks how students view the role of college in their lives. When I reviewed the notes I had made after each interview I noticed a general sense that students were vague about what they expected from college, even the bioscience students with post-graduate plans. I also noted, time and again, a complete absence of intentionality to pursue a college education. These students were not conscious of ever making a decision to attend college; rather they described going to college as the expected next step in their lives.

Contrary to the theoretical models of college choice, none of these students were aware of forming an aspiration to attend college. Rather, they seemed swept up in a tide of expectations. Many students describe messages from their parents such as "they kind of expected, it was an expected thing that I would do" or "it was always kind of like expected." Others cite a broader societal message: "it's expected in today's world" or even that not attending college is "going against the social norm." These responses suggest that students may be letting outside forces influence their decisions to attend college.

Although these responses resulted from my second research question, I believe they are distinct enough to merit being addressed separately. If students have not made a conscious choice to attend college, yet have matriculated and enrolled, this circumstance must color their approach to college in a fundamental way. In chapter four I delineate the students' expectation language in detail.

Introduction of Subjects

Twenty-two subjects were interviewed in this study, twelve were bioscience majors who had stated their intent to continue on to graduate or professional school, and ten students had not yet declared a major. Some of the bioscience majors were still deciding on a specific graduate program, but all did intend to pursue additional education. Some of the undeclared students were considering possible majors, but none of them were close to choosing an academic or life path. All subjects have been assigned pseudonyms.

Bioscience Majors

Missy the bubbly pre-pharmacy major. Melissa (Missy) finds college to be much easier than high school, at least so far. She is an only child, neither of her parents went to college. She works in the chemistry department office, so feels like she is in the loop more than some other students. Although she has declared a pre-pharmacy major, she understands that pharmacy requires lots of steps, so if she finds something else along the way that is more interesting, that will be fine, too. Missy is not that fond of science, but is willing to put up with it if it takes her in the right direction. She says college will help "become more of who I am", and that it will "facilitate a career that I'd love to do."

Ruth, full of self doubt. Ruth's experience with her chiropractor inspired her to select that career path. She appreciates that chiropractors get to help people, but "don't have to be around people that are, like, sick." She wasn't really ready for the "life decisions" she feels she has had to face in college. She describes herself as coming from a Republican, Christian background, and had never taken evolution very seriously. Now, as a biosciences major, she needs to face the decision about "what morals you choose to take from home." Ruth feels that new opinions and decisions were "bombarded upon" her in college, and that she is being forced to think in new ways. She really wasn't ready for some of these life decisions. Ruth likes being around smart people, but wonders if she is smart enough for biosciences, as she has struggled to do well on tests.

Catherine the self-possessed. Catherine's parents are both college graduates, and her father always "encouraged [her] to ask questions about the world around me." She doesn't see adults today as being very analytical or intellectually curious—rather many of them are "trudging" through life. Since she did well in several AP classes in high school, Catherine doesn't feel she should have to take the core requirements again. She would rather spend her time taking classes that interest her. Currently, she plans to pursue a career either as a dentist or a physician's assistant, because they both take about the same amount of schooling. During the interview, she seemed very conscious that it was an interview, rather than a conversation, and at one point expressed her hope that she was giving me "the information that [I] like for [my] study."

Pam the planner. Pam chose physical therapy to explore for a career class in eighth grade, and decided that was the perfect career choice for her. As a dancer, she has had considerable experience with physical therapy, and knows the difference therapists

can make. Pam had her next six years mapped out before she graduated from high school. She first selected a graduate program in physical therapy, then asked those faculty if [Hillside] would prepare her well for their program. Pam is far more excited about her graduate classes than anything she is taking now, and needs to find a way to motivate herself to get through her undergraduate classes.

Maria, holding onto childhood: "I'm like, oh, man!" Maria's mother has a college degree, but her father, an immigrant, didn't even finish high school. They divorced when Maria was seven. She has two older brothers, the oldest joined the marines, and her other brother is also a student at [Hillside]. Right now she has declared a biosciences major, with the intention of going to veterinary school, because she loves animals. She knows that veterinary programs are very competitive, and her stepmother has told Maria that veterinary school will be too hard for her. Maria wants to prove her wrong. Although she knows she needs to be taking on more responsibility, Maria doesn't really want to. "Oh, man!" she says, "I still want to be like a kid."

Jennifer the animal lover. Jennifer's parents both have degrees, and Jennifer admires the way her mother was able to balance her career and family. Although she doesn't have a specific career direction yet, Jennifer plans to major in either marine biology or pre-veterinary science (although she might also like to study bats). Jennifer says "I was just ready to be here [college], I think, and I'm just really, really enjoying it." "Every year I learn more about who I am" and college is an important part of that learning process. Even though she feels ready for college and self discovery, that doesn't necessarily mean she is ready to embrace adulthood. She is "still kind of trying to hold on to that little kid in me."

Kayla the dentist fan. Most people hate going to the dentist, but Kayla has "always been weird, I've always loved going to the dentist." She has had many conversations with her own dentist about the profession, and she thinks it will be a great career choice for her. She may go into orthodonture, because she likes kids, but knows she will have to do dentistry first, regardless.

Kayla hadn't expected to miss her family so much when she came to college. Her parents have always wanted their three girls to go to college, even though they have good jobs without degrees. Kayla's mother is actually taking classes right now, so that gives them something in common. Kayla also hadn't expected the work to be so hard. She got good grades in high school without having to work very hard, and always did well taking tests, but now she is being asked to think conceptually, which is a big change for her. Kayla is also realizing how peer groups are different in college. "I have these boots, and I was scared to wear them, so I wore them to work and everyone was like, oh, those are really cute boots!" She is becoming more comfortable with letting her personality show.

Megan, getting away from home. Both of Megan's parents work on a university campus, so her first priority in choosing a campus was getting away from home. She appreciates that her parents were able to help her with a lot of the specific tasks relating to the transition to college, but is still glad to have gotten away from home. She believes that moving away to college "helps you grow more as a person." Many of Megan's high school friends went to school in their home town, and she feels as though they are not growing or changing as much as she is. Megan was undeclared during summer registration days, but chose bioscience classes. She decided to declare for pre-physical

therapy when she came for fall orientation. For Megan, college will help you "grow into what you're going to be."

Kelsey the paleontologist. "I have to wait for someone to die to get a job." That's how Kelsey opened a presentation on paleontology for a career class in her freshman year of high school. She says she never grew out of the dinosaur phase so many children go through. Neither of her parents went to college, but they wanted their girls to go on for something. Kelsey's twin sister joined the Air Force, so Kelsey knew that she would need to go to college; both because they had a "twin thing" agreement that they would never do the same thing, but also in order not to disappoint their parents. She uses colorful descriptions and metaphors during our conversation, such as describing herself as "one foot in [adulthood], one foot kind of stuck in pudding." She thinks that the role of college is to give her "a lot more info," and has known since her freshman year of high school that she will need to pursue a Ph.D. in order to get where she wants to go.

Susan and duty to society. Susan describes herself as a "pretty straitlaced kid" who had always gone to Catholic schools until college. She came to [Hillside] to have the opportunity to play soccer, and plans to transfer to a Big 10 school near her home at some point. She has always planned to go to college, even graduate or professional school. She had considered neurobiology or orthopedics, but discovered that she doesn't "handle sick people well", so decided to pursue pharmacy. She is pragmatic about this career path, which she sees as expanding as the boomers get older.

For Susan, college is the "natural next step in life" after high school. She says "it's my duty to society to have a job, make money, invest in the economy, make the country a better place kind of thing." She enjoys the relative freedom of college,

especially the ability to wear sweatpants to class, but doesn't "like being adult and making decisions." What she would really like is for someone to tell her whether to transfer for the academics, or to stay here to play soccer.

Abbi the incurious. Abbi hasn't really thought much about college or her future. She decided fairly young to be a doctor, because she would like to make a lot of money, and would probably be a pediatrician because she really likes babies. She doesn't really know what brought her to college, and hasn't thought about the question. Both of her parents have some college classes, but no degree, and about half of her high school graduating class went on to college. Several of them dropped out during their first semester. At some point she would like to "give back" to society, but isn't sure exactly what that will mean. She had a flat "no" answer to whether or not she had reached adulthood, and had not thought about this, either. This was by far my shortest interview.

Kelly the lifelong fish lover. Kelly discovered her passion early. For her birthday in fifth grade, her parents wanted to buy her a bedroom set, but she asked for a fish tank instead. By sixth grade she had decided she wanted to be a marine biologist. Her mother is particularly supportive of having Kelly pursue her passion, telling her that doing what you want is more important than the money. When Kelly's mom was in college, she let her father talk her into pursuing an education degree. She never really used that degree, and is now returning to school at the age of 42, to pursue an interest that she wishes she had in the first place. Kelly admits that she looks down on people who take a year off after high school.

With her marine biology major, Kelly doesn't have a particular career path in mind. She does have a double major in Spanish, and looks forward to studying abroad.

She is trying to figure out ways to combine her two interests, and help define a career path.

Undeclared Students

Alyssa, keeping her options open. Alyssa is keeping her options open. She runs cross country and track, so she is more focused on that than on major or career directions at the moment. She says that going to college "gives [me] time to figure out what to do" and that it's a "nice intermediate between leaving the house and being on your own." She really likes her orthodontist, and had considered that career path, but really hates dentistry. She is frustrated because she is "used to my whole life having people tell me [what to take], you have no choice," but now she needs to make her own decisions. She is "scared about" choosing a career path for the money. One thing Alyssa appreciates about college is that in high school she was "shunned on because I wanted to do my homework. And now it's nice, I like it" that others are also studious.

Mike the teenager. For Mike, leaving his teenage years will be a defining moment. He believes turning twenty will be "a big change mentally when I'm not a teenager anymore." And there are different expectations once you leave your teenage years: "if you're nineteen and watching cartoons, you're just a stupid college kid, but if you're twenty and watching cartoons, you're a future sex offender or something like that."

Mike's mother did not attend college, and his father has a two-year degree. His brother went to a technical school to prepare to take over the family farm, so Mike felt free to pursue his passion. He came in as an art major, but after his first day of art classes he became undeclared. He really has no idea what he'd like to pursue, but is thinking of

something having to do with sports. He does feel about college that he will "be ready for the world once I graduate."

Kerry's undefined path. Both of Kerry's parents have bachelor's degrees, but her older brother did not go to college. She chose Hillside in order to be close to home. She lives on campus, but home is only a few miles away. She believes that college is a "stepping stone to bigger and better things, and that it "is what's going to get me to my future." Although she views college as a path to her future, Kerry really has no idea what direction to pursue, and is a little stressed about not knowing.

Rachel the individual. Rachel admires her oldest sister, who went to college and is very successful. She is the youngest of five, and three of her older siblings went to college, even though neither of her parents did. She chose Hillside because she visited the campus and just liked it. She doesn't know what she wants to major in, but thinks that college is about "growing as your own individual." She also views adulthood as kind of a moving target: "I think people think they're adults before they are."

Jordan the independent. Jordan likes to do things his own way, and describes himself as "really independent." Both of his parents have some college, but neither graduated. His older sister is a college senior, bound for medical school next year. He thinks the role of college is "to provide options", and plans to do a lot of "do it yourself" learning, as he takes advantage of the resources available. He is undeclared, but is thinking about maybe majoring in art. He definitely considers himself to be an adult "oh, yeah," but gets a bit defensive when asked for definitions "it's an opinion, it's just as fair as anyone's"

Ashley the mature. As an only child who spent more of her time with adults than some of her peers, Ashley feels as though she is reaching adulthood faster than some. Her father went to technical school, and her mother started college but dropped out. She thinks that college "gives you a lot of different perspectives on things," and really likes the opportunity to meet different kinds of people.

Ashley likes and is good at science, so is considering majors in that area. She is an athlete, and has had physical therapy. She has also worked in a hospital and interacted with physical therapists there, so at this time is strongly considering pursuing physical therapy. She has also thought about being a graphic designer or a psychologist.

Mitch, forced into college. For the first four weeks of his college career, Mitch didn't smile at all; he was belligerent and angry. He absolutely did not want to go to college. Although both his parents have degrees, Mitch didn't think he needed one to take over the family business. His mother signed him up for [Hillside], and he makes it clear that he was only going to "get a degree to please my parents" and his grandmother, who "had been harping on it forever." He is clear that "if it had been up to me, I would never have gone to college in the first place."

After a few weeks, Mitch began to meet some people, and settle down in his classes. Now, he says, "it's nice to get away from everything, need to come and go be who you want" in college. He was kind of thinking of majoring in business, but that took too much math, so he doesn't know what he'll major in. Outward appearances are very important to Mitch, he wants to be seen by others as being successful someday. This attitude shows through when he says he will "probably never" reach adulthood, but he does know that at some point "you need to act like an adult."

Becca the soccer player. Becca comes from a big Catholic family. She is the fourth of nine children, and all her older siblings have gone to college. Her father has a four year degree, her mother went to community college. Becca says they all went to four year schools because her mother said of community college "our kids were better than that." She plays soccer, and doesn't have a major yet, although she has considered art or possibly graphic communication.

To Becca, college students used to seem "old", like her upperclass soccer teammates, or her sister when she graduated from high school. Now that she is in college, she doesn't "feel old at all." Becca does know that she likes consistency, and wants a big family. She might like to be a stay-at-home mother.

Leigh the self aware. Since she was young, Leigh's father has said "if you <u>can</u> do it, then you need to do it." That's why she chose to pursue a bachelor's degree, after her two older brothers went to technical school, because she knew she was capable of the work. She doesn't have a major or career path at this point. In high school, she was planning on orthodontia, but then she "got sick of science." Next she considered real estate, because she likes people and thinks she would be good at sales. Eventually she might like to own her own business.

Leigh is very self aware, and admits that she has thought a lot about growing up and becoming an adult. She says she "like[s] to be driven," and feels herself growing in independence. When she thinks about reaching adulthood, she describes herself has being perhaps three fourths of the way around a circle. Although she knows that she will eventually want to inspire others, she isn't ready to be a role model for anyone "at this point."

Chelsea, making her family proud. Chelsea's family is very important to her views of college. She has two older cousins, one of whom graduated from college and one who dropped out. Chelsea admires her the first cousin a great deal, and sees her as a role model. Her mother finished a four year degree, and her father dropped out. Chelsea's grandparents have given her financial support to attend college, which she views as a message that "they have faith in me." She doesn't have a direction yet, although she has considered television broadcasting or interior design. Whatever major she chooses, Chelsea is determined to graduate to show her grandparents they were right to have faith in her.

Summary

In this study I investigated what students at a regional university expect from college. My primary data source was 22 semi-structured interviews of first year students, twelve of whom had declared a biosciences major with an intention to pursue graduate or professional school, and ten of whom had not yet declared a major. The data gathered from these interviews were supported by two written documents. The first written resource consists of 63 responses to a survey administered to undeclared students during fall Orientation. The second resource consists of 40 essays written for three sections of a First Year Experience class.

In the next chapter I will present the results for my two research questions, using thematic analysis for the first research question. For the second question, I had intended to analyze the results using Discourse Analysis, but found that Metaphor Theory provided a richer explication of the data. The metaphor analysis is followed by a thematic analysis of what brought students to college. I will also include evidence indicating the

presence of an additional theme arising from the data: students' approach to college choice.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to investigate what students at a regional comprehensive university expect from college. There are gaps in the literature regarding students from this type of institution and about what motivates them to pursue higher education. The recently proposed emerging adults theoretical model may provide some insight into this student population.

This study poses two research questions: Is the emerging adults theoretical construct appropriate to describe new entering freshmen at a regional university? and how do these new entering freshmen describe the role of college in their lives? For the first question I provide a thematic analysis of the interview contents, highlighting the response areas congruent with the emerging adults model. For the second question the results are divided into two sections, and include data from all three sources. The first uses metaphor theory to provide insight into how students understand the concept of a college education. The second section is a thematic analysis of the students' description of their expectations from a college education. Following the results for the two research questions is an outline of an additional theme identified in the interview contents: the lack of an aspiration to attend college. Appendix C contains a chart of the results contained in this chapter.

Research Question 1: Is the Emerging Adults Theoretical Construct Appropriate to Describe New Entering Freshmen at a Regional University?

Several themes emerged from the interview responses: identity development, a sense of being self-focused, and a feeling that they are not yet adults. The third theme, related to what Arnett describes as feeling in between, was by far the most prevalent throughout the interview transcripts. I will present these three themes in order, beginning with identity exploration. The transcripts reveal three general themes within identity exploration: exploring careers, changing relationships, and shifting conceptions of self in relation to society.

Identity Exploration

Identity exploration is a theme common to many college student development models, and these students are no exception to dealing with issues of identity. Some respondents use very general language to describe exploring their identity, and the role of attending college in that exploration. Missy hopes that college "helps me to become more of who I am" and she is "hoping that in the end it will just work out, like eventually I'll just be like, okay, this is just my place where I figured it out." Additionally, she says about college "this place makes me weird. It seems weird, but I am more of a unique person." Megan also hopes that college will help her "grow as a person." Kerry views college as "what's going to get me to my future. It's what determines the rest of my life." Rachel "so to me it's just about growing as your own individual." For Jordan, "I think a lot of us just like having the options provided where you can find your own roles" in college. These students expect that college will aid in their identity exploration.

Exploring careers. Exploring possible major and career paths is a specific thread of identity identified by several students. Missy is a pre-pharmacy major, but is not completely committed to pharmacy, rather she thinks it "gave me a direction" to start out in college. Ruth thought she had defined a career direction but now says "college has really challenged me, like whether I want to be a chiropractor or not, and actually not what I want to or not, but whether I'm smart enough or not." She may need to explore new options. "I don't have a plan B. I thought maybe being a middle school science teacher, just because that's what really inspired me. But I kind of, and I'm not dissing teachers, but I feel that for myself, being a teacher would be . . . I would do that because I didn't know what else I wanted to do and because I couldn't find something I was really passionate about." Ruth is questioning her planned direction in light of her college experience.

Finding a direction that is really appropriate for you is very important to Kelly, because she does not want to follow the same path as her mother. She recommends

> definitely doing what you want in the first place. It doesn't matter how much you make, it will be better, because, I mean, my mom didn't know what she wanted to do when she went to college, and my grandpa was like, well, why don't you go into teaching? And she's like, well, I don't know what I want to do, okay, I'll try it. And she didn't go anywhere with it. I mean, she subbed for a while, but she never actually had like a full teaching job. And then she had different, well, she knows a lot about computers and so she got into like that kind of thing for like, different businesses, but she never went into nursing which she really wanted in the first place, until she's 42 years old and she goes back to school, and it's like, I

bet you wish you would have done that right out of high school. And so I don't want to be, I wish I would have done that.

These three bioscience majors raised the issue of exploring the career aspect of identity, in part because they are beginning to question their own career plans. The undeclared students also articulate a desire to explore that aspect of their own identities. For instance, "Learning what I want to do with the rest of my life" is Chelsea's plan. Alyssa says "I still don't really know what I want to do with my life." She is glad that college "gives me time to figure out what I want to do" because she doesn't yet "know what I'm going to love doing." Mike definitely wants to explore the career aspect of his identity, and hopes "to maybe get a career that I like out of" college. Jordan discussed the concept in a more abstract sense. "Like some people have that one thing that they've always wanted to do and they go for it, and some people aren't too sure, then some people have no idea." He does not belong to the group that has always had a specific thing he has wanted to do, and appreciates having options to explore. Both the bioscience students and the undeclared students illustrate exploring careers.

Changing relationships. Several students discuss identity in terms of their changing relationships. Pam finds that "some of my friends are kind of growing in an opposite direction," "but my good friends, my close friends, we seem to be growing in the same direction." When she goes home, Megan finds "because you're not like what you've always had with other here and you can tell, especially when you go back home. It's just different." She finds that "You're kind of a different person, but yet the same, and like, friendships and stuff when you go back home. They're different, but they're still the same. I mean, they're the same people that you've grown, I think in different ways,

which is good, too" Leigh says that "now I feel like when me and my parents talk, they respect what I say a lot more, and like they want to know what I think." She is aware of the changing relationship with her parents. All of these students convey a sense that they have grown and changed since going to college, and they recognize this change in their interactions with others.

Ruth has found challenges to her sense of self in college. She "wasn't ready to make all these life decisions for my own opinions and form my own opinions." She discovered that "when you get to college it's kind of like all up to you for it's your own decisions and choices that you have to make" and this has "made me question where my values stand." Ruth is also uncomfortable about the fact that college "it's forcing me to think in new ways." In fact, "Since being in college I've really had a lot of morals challenged with what I'm going to choose to do with my life. A lot of it is drinking a lot of the other ones are sex, and, because you always get those questions. It is, I never really got those questions at home." She is exploring aspects of her identity that she has never questioned before. Leigh already has "a basis for what I believe in and like what I think, and all that" so college is not having a great effect on those beliefs. These students found that college led them to think about themselves and their values in new ways.

Self and society. Another aspect of identity exploration that emerged from the interviews is the relationship between self and society. "Coming to college and meeting people from other places and tons of different beliefs and everything just like makes you sometimes feel uncomfortable like here but it makes you feel a lot more cultured" is an important aspect for Megan.

Similarly, some students are finding that college is offering them new ways of expressing themselves. Leigh just looks forward to a general chance for "just really broadening my horizons." Kayla is excited about the opportunity to express herself through her wardrobe.

> And I come here and now like, even yesterday I was scared to wear, I have these boots, and I was scared to wear them so I wore them to work and everyone was like, oh, those are really cute boots, and I was so scared to wear them and see what people said, and then other people are like, you're in college—nobody cares, and so I was like, you're right.

And although Ruth is struggling with some aspects of identity exploration, she has found that

> I really like to express myself in college. At home I had, I was so close knit with my family and we really had, like, telepathy going on because we can totally read each other, and so it was really a shock for me to come here and be, like, all I can't just rely on people knowing what I'm thinking anymore, so learning to express myself has been really, I've really learned how to do that.

She is proud of her ability to express herself in a different way.

Within the feature of identity exploration, these students are exploring several aspects of identity. There is some difference here between the bioscience majors and the undeclared students, in that only one of the undeclared students discussed any component of identity exploration other than careers. Three bioscience students mentioned each of the other two components mentioned; changing relationships and changing self in

society. The bioscience students have all at least tentatively chosen a career path, while the undeclared students have not.

There are some differences in the way the two groups of students articulate exploring this aspect of their search for identity. Both Ruth and Missy talk about the effects of college on their career choices, while Kelly, with her mother's example before her, is determined to do what she wants in the first place. The undeclared students use much broader language to discuss their exploration. Both Alyssa and Kelsey say they don't know "what [they] want to do" with their lives, while Mike hopes "to maybe get a career that I like" from college. They are not yet to the point where they are considering any specific paths. For them, college is about having options to explore who they are and who they might become.

Identity exploration is a key feature of developmental models for adolescents and college students (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1950, 1968). The responses above illustrate that these students are at least thinking about different aspects of their identity. Some of the bioscience majors express the hope that college will help them explore their identity, while others express identity development through changes in themselves or their relationships.

The Age of Being Self-Focused

Closely related to the identity development theme is a sense conveyed by several students that they are in some ways responsible for themselves for the first time. Although students talk about themselves throughout the interview, there are some instances when they address more specifically this changing sense of themselves, and the relationships between themselves and others. Several discuss having to make different

kinds of decisions for themselves—about relationships, schoolwork, how to spend their time, even wardrobe choices—that have previously been made by others.

Separating from family. Several students talk about themselves as separating from their families. One thing Missy comments on about being at college is "And so it, like I don't have to spend time with these people [her family], it's just myself." She feels she has more time for herself in college, time formerly spent with family. Chelsea also describes separating from her family. When choosing a college, "I kind of, well, you know, I love my family, but I kind of just wanted to get away." At Hillside she will "be far enough away so that I don't need to see my family all the time. It's also close enough to where if I want to just go home, I can totally do that." Both Missy and Chelsea describe this separation from their families in terms of their own choices. They both say they no longer "have to" or "need to" be with their families. They seem to appreciate the opportunity to choose to spend time with their families.

Making decisions for themselves. Students talk about different kinds of decisions they are now able to make for themselves. Missy says

> Like my last, senior year, I said, okay, I'm going to step back, because I was a lot of the person who would organize an event and get as many people as I want to go. And then I was kind of like the center of various things with my friends, that is. Then last year I said okay, I'm going to step back and let you guys take over, and it kind of worked.

She is deliberately changing her role and her relationships.

Three students also talk about being able to make their own choices in what to wear. Pam enjoys being able to choose to wear sweatpants to class. On the other hand,

Missy's first thought when envisioning herself in her career is that she will not be able to choose. "It's like I'll have a uniform and I've never had a uniform or like even in stuff before that. It'll be different situations where I'll have to dress up, and I don't know what that's going to be like." Kayla talks about feeling free to make different wardrobe choices than she would have dared to in high school. As we saw above in the identity exploration section, she feels more free to express herself through her wardrobe by wearing her cute new boots. When thinking about herself, Kayla realizes that the importance she places on others' opinions of her has changed significantly, as she develops a stronger sense of self.

Alyssa also recognizes changes in her peers "Like in high school I was always like shunned on because I wanted to do my homework. And now it's like nice, I like it." She now feels free to make decisions about doing homework on her own terms, rather than letting others' opinions influence her. Catherine asserts her sense self by expressing her wish to have more autonomy in selecting appropriate coursework. "I don't think we should have to take requirements again, if we did good enough in high school." She feels "like I'm very well-rounded, because I didn't take just one AP class, and took all of my core in every subject, so I feel like this is almost redundant." Catherine wants to take responsibility in this area.

Jordan displays a very practical self focus. "I taught myself a lot of stuff on my own, because like my high school didn't prepare me." In college, he says,

> it's more just like you learn yourself, you have your own lessons when you come up with your own style. It's not like someone teaches you your own style, or their style onto you and you're trying to emulate it in its own, like, bastardized form.

It's more like you coming up with your own concepts that are new and creative, you hope.

Jordan has a very personalized approach to college and learning.

Leigh recognizes growing personal responsibility in her relationships.

Like from last semester to this semester I used to be so dependent on Jessica. Well this semester, she started going off with like her boyfriend all the time, well eventually. Well, me and her have been like this [twisted fingers] since we were three. I mean every single day. So, for real. It's like every single day we would be together so like all of a sudden I'm kind of like, okay, I guess I need to buck up and deal with things on my own. And now all of a sudden I feel like I have my own life, my own priorities, and I don't have to be like: Jessica, do you want to go work out? I mean, I don't think about it, I just get up in the morning and I do what I have to do. I don't think you're going to make it if you're not like self-reliant, and now I feel like she is lagging behind.

Leigh recognizes that she is separating from this long-lasting relationship in order to become more of her own person.

Susan enjoys making her own decisions.

It's just, it's nice knowing that there aren't people saying no, I can say no to myself and I trust myself to say no to myself, but there's nobody else out there.

It's more my decision is up to me and what I want to do, and what I want to make of my life.

Megan thinks college will help her "to grow more as a person, because you're not like what you've always had with other people in your life picking, I think that helps." She recognizes that she is making more of her own decisions.

Becca had more autonomy in high school. "We had to figure out all of our own schedules, and what we needed to do, so it helped a lot, that transition here was really easy, because of my independence in high school." Kelly is planning to leave the country:

> I want to go to Spain for a year, and I'll be in a different country, where my parents aren't helping me get there and they aren't helping me financially. And they're not there, and I can speak the language, only halfway, and finding my way around, and pretty much just doing it on my own without having to call them for help.

She looks forward to being autonomous when she is on her own in a foreign land.

Maria's focus on herself expresses itself in holding on to childhood.

> I like acting immature sometimes, like going outside and throwing snowballs, and people are like, why are you outside, because we went out in the big first snow, and they have these hills. We took our storage bin tops and slid down the hills, and people are like, what are you doing, and we're like, we're sliding, why can't we have fun, and people are like, okay, and were like oh, well that's cool.

She continues "I guess everyone will have their inner kid in them always. Mine is just showing a lot more." Maria knows she should be moving toward adulthood, but isn't ready to give up her childhood yet.

These students describe making their own choices, and taking responsibility for them, in ways they could not in high school. College is giving them the opportunity to

move away from the situation in high school where others were making most decisions for them. Arnett's (2004, p. 14) description of age of self-focus depicts just this state of taking responsibility and making decisions. Arnett believes that this stage of newly empowered decision making helps emerging adults develop skills for daily living.

The subjects in this study are not typical of emerging adults as a whole, as they are all first year college students of the "traditional" sort. None have spouses or children, thus they also have none of the family duties or commitments that come with these relationships. Nevertheless, the responses above illustrate a differing focus on self for these subjects. They are separating from their families and making new decisions for themselves about what to do and wear, and how to behave. They are less influenced by the opinions of their peers, as we see with Kayla and her boots, and Alyssa feeling free to study. They are demonstrating a developmental focus on self like that described in Arnett's model.

Feeling in Between

These students definitely do not yet see themselves as adults. Arnett's feature of feeling in between is articulated in all of the interviews. Each of the respondents described, more or less overtly, a sense of feeling in between. Several of them expressed a feeling that they were adults in some ways, or were nearing adulthood, and even those that said they had reached adulthood tended to modify that response when asked to expand on their answer. Most of the subjects conveyed some sense of being partly adults, or of feeling in between adulthood and some other stage. Some expressed this sense in terms of being between yes and no, some felt they were moving toward adulthood.

Before examining their responses in detail, it may be helpful to know how these students define adulthood. As described in chapter two, Arnett's (2000, 2002) early work identified several markers of adulthood used by his subjects. As I also noted in chapter two, Arnett's interview subjects may have been "primed" to consider certain items from the list in their interviews about adulthood. Subjects in the current study received no prior information about or discussion of adulthood, the adulthood questions came near the end of the interview that centered mainly around their thoughts about college. The initial question "Do you feel as though you have reached adulthood?" is identical to Arnett's (1998) structured interviews. The questionnaire asked a slightly different version of the question "Do you think you have reached adulthood?" Table 4 illustrates how often students in the current study used similar terms to describe adulthood.

Table 4. Responses to How Often Students in the Current Study Used Similar Terms to Describe Adulthood.

Item	Arnett	Current N=22
Accept responsibility for one's self	43%	8
Financial independence	40%	6
Independent decision-making	25%	3
General independence/self-sufficiency	25%	15
Independent household	22%	10

In addition to the responsibility and independence items noted above, the interviews reveal several other ways students conceive of adulthood. Descriptors of

adulthood include knowledge, tasks, legal definitions, and life markers. Table 2 outlines these other concepts of adulthood.

Table 5. Responses to Other Concepts of Adulthood.

Descriptor	Examples	Responses of 22
Adulthood as knowledge	Understand how things work	6
Adulthood as tasks	Pay own taxes/bills, fix car	3
Adulthood as legal status	Legally, I'm an adult	2
Adulthood as life markers	Married	3
	First "real" job	4

During the interview, each subject was asked "Do you feel as though you have reached adulthood?" Eight respondents were clear that they do not yet consider themselves to be adults. Missy and Rachel are emphatic, saying "No. Crap, no!" and "Heck, no!" respectively. Maria, Megan, Abbi, Alyssa, Kerry all responded with a simple "no." "I'd say no" says Mike, who is a little less certain.

Only four responded to the question with an affirmative. Ruth qualifies her answer, saying "yes, for the most part." Pam said "My first response was 'yes'", but then she went on to qualify her answer, later saying "I'm getting there." Jordan was also positive, saying "oh, yeah", but later he tempered his response by saying "I hope so." Ashley was the only respondent to give a flat "yes" response.

Most of the subjects articulated a response indicating an awareness of feeling "in between". Having a clear career direction does not seem to influence the feeling of being

in between. Six each of the bioscience majors and undeclared students gave a definite "yes" or "no" response. Six of the bioscience majors and four of the undeclared students expressed some sense of being "in between" in their initial response.

Catherine says

> My first reaction was that initially, I know people don't think I'm an adult. That was my initial reaction. So from an outside perspective people don't, but I guess I can consider myself an adult because I make my own decisions.

She juxtaposes her view of herself with how she believes others view her. She goes on to outline her definition of adulthood as "people that have a family or that are financially supporting themselves in every way and are totally segregated from their parents" and recognizes that these descriptors do not yet apply to her. When asked if she has a clear answer, she says "I'm still not really clear myself. On whether or not I am." Catherine's description of feeling in between seems to stem from her lack of clarity on her definition of adulthood. She knows others do not view her as an adult, but she considers herself to be one. As she moves through her definition, it becomes more clear that she has not yet achieved the markers she uses to define adulthood.

Between yes and no. Kayla also starts out with an overt statement of feeling in between "Can I say yes and no?" She then goes on to list ways in which she does and does not feel like an adult.

> I think I am because now I don't have to like ask my parents when I call them every day. I don't know, I just don't depend on them, but I know they'll always be there, but I don't depend on them to like get me out of all my things, like, even

> according to my first job, they helped me with like the application and everything, now I can just go.

Here she is delineating specific examples of her progress toward adulthood, identifying a task (getting a job) that formerly fell to her parents, where now she feels able to accomplish this task on her own.

She goes on to describe a different task

> my mom works at a bank, and she taught me how to do money, she's going to teach me how to do taxes, well, not taxes, but she's showed me a lot of things, and I just know how to do them, and when people say 'what's this?' I can answer it for them.

Clearly she feels these competencies illustrate her progress toward adulthood. She also recognizes that there are other markers of adulthood that she has not yet reached. "And no, because well, I know they do pay for everything pretty much. But I don't ask for a lot, I guess, but they help me." Here one of the specific markers of adulthood, financial independence, is one she has not yet reached.

Kelsey also feels in between, but uses a unique analogy to describe how she feels: "kind of, sort of, in a way, like one foot in, one foot kind of stuck in pudding." Here adulthood seems to be a line to be crossed, one that she is currently straddling. When asked to explain the "pudding" she says "well, when I was a kid, I really liked eating pudding, and every time we spilled it on accident I'd step on it. So I would be like, squish, squish, and that's when I was, like, four." Like others who are consciously trying to hang onto some aspect of childhood, she recognizes that part of her is grasping the past.

Susan also has a foot on both sides of adulthood as she responds "yes and no." She also identifies areas in which she is and is not yet an adult.

> I feel like I've reached adulthood from the standpoint that I have a lot more decisions to make on my own, such as whether or not to switch schools. I have to, I don't have to be completely worried about money, because like I said, my parents help me with that, but I need to think about where my money is going and what I'm spending it on. So I think in those aspects I feel like an adult. But at the same time, it's still kind of, you know, when I grow up I want to be a pharmacist. I haven't reached the point where, oh, god, I actually am grown up and I need to *be* a pharmacist kind of thing.

Susan recognizes that she will need to be an adult at some point, but she doesn't "need to be" one yet.

Susan can see herself in the future, can picture her adult self, but is not yet ready to claim that identity. She knows that she "want[s] to be a pharmacist" but is not yet at the point where she actually has to become one. When she says "I'm very confused. I know where I want to end up, but I haven't figured out how to get there yet" Susan is articulating the gap between her present and future state.

Kelly says "No. Yes and no but my first answer is no so I guess I'll go with that." She also goes on to describe the ways in which she is not an adult.

> I'm only 19, I've never lived on my own, like, this is as much as I've gone to living on my own. But I know how to, like, pay my car insurance, I know how to pay my own gas money and all that kind of stuff, but from the fact, like in the view of buying your own home kind of thing. I couldn't tell you anything about

> politics, I know nothing about politics, I don't care. And you know, and I just feel like adults know that kind of thing. Like they know about the economy, where, I don't even know what being a bull or a moose or that kind of stuff means like adults do. And I feel like I'm probably a lot more mature than a lot of other people, but, like, I know where I'm going, where other people don't, and kind of just want to come to college to party and have fun. And I kind of have a goal in life, but as far as being an adult, I think I have a lot to learn.

Kelly has specific markers for her definition of adulthood, and recognizes that she has not yet reached them.

In listing several tasks she has mastered, such as paying insurance and gas money, Kelly makes it clear that she does not consider these few examples of competence bring her anywhere near adulthood. Her view of adulthood includes being part of the greater society, including knowing about politics and the economy. She also considers herself to be more mature than other students, who "just want to come to college to party and have fun." She equates maturity with being goal-oriented, but acknowledges that she still has much to learn.

Mitch also says

> yes and no, what I want to say yes, because like I've got a pretty good overview of things, like how things work, and how you can do to stuff to get this and what not. But if, I don't know. I think I missed out somewhat on like a normal childhood

because he preferred to work rather than play. So although he feels he never had a normal childhood, he does not feel like an adult. In fact, "I'll never reach adulthood, because I

can't ask what an adult . . . I can act like an adult, but I prefer not to have just too hyper demands, do my own thing, and make people, like, that seem never to reach adulthood." Mitch recognizes the difference between "acting like" an adult, and actually being one. He believes himself capable of the act, but perhaps not the state of adulthood.

Many of the adults Mitch observes, especially some of his father's friends, act in very non-adult ways. "They're still pulling pranks, and they're in their 40s or 45-year-olds." He definitely seems to feel in between, because he feels as though he never had a "normal" childhood, yet he also thinks he "probably never will" become an adult. He does realize, however, that "at a certain point, you need to act like an adult. I would like to have kids and everything." So it seems clear to Mitch that he will never feel like an adult. At some point, however, he will be able to put on a good facade, and pretend to be one when circumstances call for it, for instance when he has children of his own.

Moving toward adulthood. Several students use terms that express a sense of process, or of moving toward adulthood. Becca says she is not yet an adult.

> Not quite, because I d have to pay like monthly bills. I pretty much have, yet I don't really have to deal about money issues yet. And I don't even have a credit card yet. I have to get on that sometime soon, but it's just really like living. It's due to whatever needs to get done at the time, but I don't, like, own a car or anything, but I actually have to like, still pay apartment bills or something like that, like if I lived off campus. Then I think I would feel more independent, like towards adulthood.

She articulates a sense that she has not yet arrived at adulthood.

Becca is aware that her definition of adulthood is a moving target, one that changes as she learns more.

> Like when I was in high school, or in junior high, the high schoolers seemed so old, and then I got there and it was like, well, I'm in school, or I don't feel old at all in college, to college people are older in their maturity, and like you take little steps, in stages, and after college, then it's like, yeah, now for sure you're an adult, for sure, but like in college, it's like levels of adult you could say.

She views others as more adult than she is, and seems to expect to feel more like an adult when she gets to the stage she used to consider adult.

Leigh is also in between, but definitely moving forward toward adulthood "last semester no, this semester, more so. But no, I'm not. I don't think that I have reached it yet." She then uses an illustration "if you're like I'm in a circle, and I'm like, maybe three quarters of the way done." She offers some outside support for her own observations

> now I feel like when me and my parents talk, they respect what I say a lot more, and like, they want to know what I think. And I feel like I'm just becoming more, it's all like, I don't know, it's coming together daily. I'm starting to get on the same level as they are.

She is the only one to reflect this way on her progress toward adulthood, and in fact seems much more self-aware than the other students.

Leigh also understands there are roles that come with adulthood that she is consciously rejecting "I don't think that I personally want to be a role model for anybody at this point." She goes on to say "I know how I want to be. But I'm not getting closer to wanting, like, I want to be this way, but I don't right now, but I'm getting closer to

wanting to get there." Although Leigh has some things in common with those who articulate a desire to hold onto their childhood, she phrases it differently. She acknowledges that she is "getting closer to wanting" to be an adult.

Chelsea also phrases her response in terms of reaching an objective. "I don't know if I've completely grasped it, but I think I'm definitely getting there." As have so many others, she goes on to list items that put her in between

> I'm learning how to do things more on my own now, because, especially when it comes to like doing bills, and signing up for stuff like that, I'm sometimes still confused, so I ask like my parents or my grandparents. I ask my mom a lot for help because she used to work in a bank. But now that I'm starting to do more on my own and I'm hopefully going to be living off campus next year, and now I'm starting to grasp it more. And now that I'm also here in college, my parents aren't paying for almost everything. So I'm doing that more now, and I'm learning how it is actually.

Again, there is some measure of financial independence, a measure of adulthood for most of the respondents, but she is still "learning how it is" to be an adult.

Jennifer describes more of a process:

> I feel like I'm still, actually, I thought I was as I was leaving high school, I thought I'm coming, becoming an adult. And I'm starting to realize I'm still kind of transitioning into it. Like I feel like I'm growing more independent and at the same time, I'm still kind of trying to hold onto that little kid in me.

She describes a growing awareness that her definition of adult is changing, as she experiences some independence and realizes how much more she needs to know. She

also expresses a desire to remain a child, "to hold onto that little kid in me." This is an overt expression of feeling in between, as she recognizes that she is in transition, but is not entirely ready to be an adult yet.

Now that she's thinking about it, Jennifer goes on to identify some other markers of adulthood, and her progress toward them.

> I think as far as maturity level goes, I think I'm pretty much there, yet I still got a couple more things to learn, and my brain still has some growing yet to do and, say, you know I still have some time left for that, but as far as my maturity level goes I think I'm almost there, with the financial independence I think I'm still working on it.

She is conscious of being in between, and sees herself as both "working on" becoming an adult, or achieving the markers of adulthood, while still trying to "hold onto that little kid" that she feels inside herself.

All of these students stated explicitly that they did not yet feel they had reached adulthood. Many of them also use words and phrases to describe a journey or a process, acknowledging that they feel themselves to be in transition, "moving toward" adulthood. Jennifer and Maria admit to a desire to hold onto their inner child. This shows an awareness that they both feel they *should* have moved beyond childhood, and perhaps highlights a contrast between how they view themselves and how they would like to present themselves to others. They seem a bit wistful about leaving childhood behind.

Initial response congruent with description? Twelve respondents were overtly positive or negative about whether or not they have reached adulthood. But their initial response does not necessarily match the language they use when providing a fuller

description. For most students, following up on the question provides support for the notion that they also feel "in between."

Ruth is straightforward in her initial response "Yes, for the most part. Do I need to elaborate?" She is very conscious throughout the interview that she is being interviewed, it never really falls into a conversational mode. When she is talking about being in college, she uses different language to describe her own adulthood.

> I think real adulthood for me, it will be to find, like, you know, when I'm on my own, then in an apartment. I'm really watching out for myself, I really have to watch my budget and financial, so, like, financial stability will really, like, solidify adulthood.

Although she states that she has reached adulthood, she also apparently feels that she needs to "solidify" that adulthood. "Real adulthood" is in the future, as she uses future tense to describe that state. Qualifiers such as "for the most part" and "solidify" indicate a sense of feeling in between.

Pam also responds positively, then goes on to qualify her answer.

> My first response was yes and then I thought, wait a minute. Well technically, I'm like 18. So like legally, yes, but I still depend on my parents for a lot. I guess adult to me is like independence. So I'm getting there and really know what I am right now.

She juxtaposes her legal status with her dependence on her parents, identifying some ways in which she is and some ways in which she is not an adult.

Jordan is very clear about his opinion: "Oh, yeah." After describing his definition of adulthood as "the concept of achieving independence, and, what's that word,

maintaining yourself, as in you are able to provide for yourself." When I ask again "you feel as though you've reached adulthood?" he modifies his response just a bit "I hope so. I feel like I have. It's an opinion, it's just as fair as anyone's." His final phrase "It's an opinion, it's just as fair as anyone's" seems a bit defensive, possibly indicating his sense that others may not consider him to be an adult. His sense of feeling in between juxtaposes his own perception with how others may perceive him.

Ashley is also quite clear, responding simply "yes." She goes on to substantiate her claim, saying "I'm an only child, I grew up around a lot of adults my whole life, so I feel like I'm at that level a little sooner than most people." But although she feels that she has "matured faster than some other people" she hedges a little on having actually reached adulthood. "I don't think there's an actual point, where I can say okay, I'm an adult." Her use of the present tense here, rather than using past tense "where I said okay, I'm adult" indicates that her current perception is that she has not yet reached the threshold of adulthood.

Not adult yet. Eight of the respondents were clear that they had not yet reached adulthood. Subsequent discussion with these students on the meaning of adulthood reveals that, although they don't see themselves as adults yet, most describe progressing toward adulthood. They describe "adult" tasks that they have accomplished, or other markers of the move toward becoming an adult. They don't express a feeling that they should be closer toward adulthood.

Missy is vehement in her response to the question "No. Crap, no!" During follow up discussion she articulates more of feeling in between she acknowledges that "there's a lot of things that I just don't know how to do yet, but are just associated with growing up,

you know." Missy recognizes that she has responsibility, which she considers to be part of adulthood, but does not claim the state of being an adult. "It's a silly question" in her opinion.

Maria is very uncertain "No. Well, I just had my birthday, so I don't know. I kind of feel like I still want to be like a kid." She is in active avoidance mode "I don't feel like I've reached my adulthood, I don't want to grow up too fast." Even though she is avoiding growing up, she does use some in between language. First she talks about her mother's attempts to have Maria take over more of her own finances

> I think she's kind of edging in on me now, so when I come back home for spring break then I have to pay for my own ticket, so I'm like, 'oh, man, are you serious? Why?' And she's like, 'you have to learn, is that okay?' Maybe it's coming on now, maybe a little right now, but I don't want it to.

Maria feels adulthood "coming on" a little, but is clear that she doesn't want to be an adult yet.

Megan is also straightforward in her "no." Later she describes feeling different since she came to college.

> I guess I feel like I've changed some since I came here, and you can tell, especially when you go back home. It's just different. You're kind of a different person, but yet the same and like friendships and stuff when you go back home.

She says "I don't know if you ever know when you're fully, like, grown up." Megan's description illustrates a "not quite here, not quite there" feeling.

Abbi also responds with a flat "no." When pressed, she concedes "maybe just a little touch, not much, I just moved out of the home. That's probably the only part." This

is the only in between language, and it was prompted. She has not thought about herself in this way, and did not seem interested in exploring the concept.

Alyssa says “no, not at all.” Later she says “I think college is a nice intermediate between leaving the house and being on your own.” She looks at herself in relation to other students “because the older students now like juniors and seniors, I probably consider them adults. But I just don’t feel like an adult myself. I just feel so much younger, and probably I’ve felt that my whole life, though.” Alyssa is not particularly eager to become an adult “I guess I’ve got to be an adult some time. I just don’t really feel like I’m in, like I said I don’t have to.” Like Maria, Kelsey, and Jennifer who are holding on to their childhood, Alyssa may like to keep adulthood at bay for a while longer.

Mike goes straight into his supporting statement

> I’d say no, not, I’d say all the adulthood would be being able to be on your own and do adult things like pay taxes, do, like insurance stuff. I don’t even know about that really, just being on your own, having a steady job, and that’s just stuff that I don’t have yet.

Looking back, he thinks his perception of adulthood may have changed “I’d probably say, like, just not being in high school would be an adult, but it’s not really that way.” He also thinks adulthood is tied to age.

> I think once I get that age [20] I will maybe feel like an adult. Or at least I would want to feel like an adult. Like I’d feel like I have to be an adult, but I don’t think I would be yet, like.

Like some others, he views adulthood as an obligation, that he would "have to be an adult," even that he "would want to feel like an adult," but is not convinced that he really will be one at that stage. This is clearly a feeling of being in between what he is and what he thinks he should be.

Kerry also has some specifics for not feeling adult. "No, when I move out for good and no longer go home, you know, a few times a week, I think I've reached adulthood. When I graduate college, and when I'm making, you know, a salary." She, too says her view of adulthood has changed since high school, when she used to think "like being in college you're an adult, but now that I'm here, I don't feel that way at all." Like Mike and Alyssa, Kerry differentiates between those she formerly viewed as adults and her perception of herself when she reaches that same age. This difference of self versus others' perception may be another way to describe the feeling of being in between.

This same differentiation between self and others occurs in Rachel's response. When asked if she feels she has reached adulthood, Rachel is quite certain "heck no!" When I ask her to explain, she says "see now before I came to college I thought this would be, like, well now you're an adult, but to me it's still, like I said, you need people and you can rely on people for things." Later "I just, I think people think they're adults before they are, I guess in my opinion. Like I said, I thought we're going to go to college and so now we're adults but now that I'm here, I know there's a lot of things I don't know." She views adulthood as a kind of moving target.

Clearly the students that responded with some form of "yes and no" feel themselves to be "in between." Upon examining the responses of the twelve students who responded either "yes" or "no", several of those students also articulated feelings of being

in between. Only one student who said "yes" and two who said "no" did not display any sense of being in between. Several students described a difference in how they formerly perceived college students in terms of adulthood, and how they perceive themselves now that they have reached that stage. This may be a different way of expressing a feeling of being in between, and it may be a way of experiencing the difference between societal definitions and students' own.

The sense of feeling in between is the most clearly represented of Arnett's themes in the interview transcripts. The main reason this feature is so prevalent may be that in the interviews I asked Arnett's specific question "Do you feel as though you have reached adulthood?" Support for the other features of emerging adulthood arose through indirect questions in other portions of the interviews.

The Age of Possibilities

The fourth emerging adult feature identified by Arnett is the Age of Possibilities, including a sense of high hopes and great expectations. This optimism stems, in part, from the fact that few of the emerging adults' hopes and dreams have yet met with disappointment. Several students do express a sense of having possibilities at this stage of their lives. They view expanded possibilities in academic options as well as in exploring identity.

When Missy talks about classes, she says "well, I have as many choices as I want because I can take whatever I want." Kelly wants

> to take advantage of every opportunity that I have that comes to me now. So I'll do it [study abroad] and then I know I can do it right now before I even get there I'm going to like it and I'm going to want to do it again.

She appreciates the possibilities of achieving independence when studying abroad.

Kayla is excited by the possibilities of achievement. She was at first scared of hard classes, nearly dropped out of general chemistry one, but now

> I'm excited because when I take these hard courses like I'm just excited, like I get them, like I was so close to dropping out of general chemistry and I'm like, how will I ever, how can I just even think about dropping out of my first hard class, and now that I finished it and did fine. I'm so happy I did that. And now I'm like, gen chem two is hard, too, but I know that I can do this. And I'm just excited when I finish it, like a good semester and I go home and people are like, how is your first semester in college, and I hadn't really thought about it, but it really is a whole semester.

Her success in this difficult class leads Kayla to be excited about other possible achievements.

Options and possibilities are part of identity exploration for several students, both undeclared and bioscience students. Maria wants college to "just like let me explore my options kind of thing." Susan also talks about the possibilities of finding direction. "I know where I want to end up, but I haven't figured out how to get there." For Megan, college is more than an education, it is "how can you grow into what you're going to be." These bioscience majors enjoy the chance to explore.

Undeclared students Alyssa and Jordan also talk about having possibilities. This is frustrating to Alyssa. She is "having a really hard time thinking about that [choosing a major] and everybody's like, nobody knows. They're all like: it's all about what you want, and I don't know." In fact, "that's what I'm most worried about, I guess. I just

don't want to pick something for the money or anything like that. I want to be happy doing my job." On the other hand, college "gives me time to figure out what I want to do. I mean, I can't imagine not being in college right now." "Just keeping my options open at this time" is important to Alyssa.

On the other hand, Jordan thinks "a lot of us just like having the options provided where you can find your own roles. Like you have a lot of interests in life, but is it what you really wanted?" For Jordan, the role of college is

> to provide options, and then, what else, provide options and then let people try them out and if they succeed add, provide more options for them to pursue. And if not then they can switch around and find out what they excel at until you finally graduate.

College provides options and possibilities for Jordan.

For most of these students, having options and possibilities is a positive thing. The bioscience majors are excited when looking to the future, and want to take advantage of their opportunities. Alyssa acknowledges possibilities, but seems overwhelmed by them, since she would rather be narrowing down her possibilities to make a decision about a major. It is probable that the other subjects also sense options and possibilities, but, since I did not ask a direct question, these opinions did not emerge in the interviews.

The Age of Instability

Arnett's Age of Instability refers very specifically to geographic instability over time, which he describes as a tendency among emerging adults to move often over the years covered in this stage. Many of Arnett's emerging adults move away from home, then back in with their parents, often several times. Thus Arnett's description of

instability looks at the span of emerging adulthood. This particular aspect is not applicable to my subjects, as they have just moved away from home to attend college. One move does not quite qualify for Arnett's description of instability involving multiple, frequent moves over time. For these first year students, this first move was a necessary part of becoming a college student. All of the subjects live on campus, and only one mentioned having changed rooms since arriving in the fall.

This research question asked: Is the emerging adults theoretical construct appropriate to describe new entering freshmen at a regional university? The answer to the question is: somewhat. The feature of identity exploration is common to many theoretical models, and Arnett adds nothing unique. The age of being self focused describes a time when emerging adults first have the opportunity to make many decisions for themselves, but before they have other obligations to consider. This may be an apt description of many college students, who have moved away from home, and have no one but themselves to consider.

Perhaps the most appropriate use of the emerging adults construct is its description of feeling in between. Other developmental theories do not include this same depiction of stage ambiguity. The interviews contained considerable support for this feature, but this prevalence may be due to the construction of the interview questions, which specifically prompted students to think about this topic. The sense of optimism inherent in Arnett's age of possibilities did not come through strongly in the transcripts, but the interviews were not structured to elicit specific responses in this area. Arnett's age of instability is defined in a way that makes it irrelevant to those newly entering the emerging adults stage, such as the students in this study.

Research Question 2: How do These New Entering Freshmen Describe the Role of College in Their Lives?

The respondents clearly express one of the foundational characteristics of Arnett's emerging adulthood theoretical model, feeling in between. Neither children nor adults, the students feel themselves to be in transition. Since all have chosen to attend college, I next examine what they perceive the role of college to be in their lives, or in their transition to adulthood.

Metaphors

Examination of the two written data sets produced numerous examples of metaphorical constructions. As outlined in chapter three, metaphors "play a central role in the construction of social and political reality" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 159). Metaphors may provide clues as to how we are making meaning of our experience, and how we are constructing our realities. Looking for metaphorical constructs used by students to describe their expectations of the college experience may provide insight into their understanding of higher education as a concept, in other words how students are constructing their own social reality of college. Their use of metaphorical constructs suggests these students understand the unknown concept of college in terms of other concepts more familiar to them.

The major metaphorical constructs of interest in this study fall into two basic themes: commodity metaphors and sequence metaphors. The commodity metaphors illustrate that students understand a college education in terms of a product, that is, something they can "get" or something that is "required" in life. The students may then use this product to obtain something else, such as "a good life for myself" or "a career

that I enjoy." The commodity metaphorical construct takes two different forms: transactional metaphors in which the students are the actors in exchanging the degree for their desired outcome, and a passive construction where the degree acts as an outside agent for the student. The sequence metaphors suggest that college is part of a series of tasks. Students say it is "what you do after high school" or the "next step" in life.

These two metaphorical constructs appearing in the Orientation survey also appeared in the FYE assignment, and again in the interviews. The consistency of the metaphors used in these three different data sets suggests that these constructs do provide clues as to how these students are making meaning of the experience of being a college student. In order to illustrate both the consistency of these constructs through time and across data sets, I outline each metaphorical construct through all three data sources in turn, tracing a chronological path from Orientation survey to FYE assignment and interview. I then examine each of the constructs to see what clues they provide to understanding students' views of college.

College Degree as Commodity

Data source: orientation survey. These data were gathered during fall Orientation, held the week before classes begin. The survey was administered at the end of a "departmental" meeting for undeclared students. Students self-selected into this group, and it was not a required orientation event. Sixty-three students chose to attend this session, which led them through an exploration exercise and outlined the various services available on campus to help them select a major.

The survey asked "Think about what has brought you to college—not necessarily Hillside University, but to college in general. Why did you decide to pursue a college

degree? What is it you expect college to do for you?" The students filled out the survey at the end of the session, immediately before lunch, and had little time to spend considering their answers. Many of the answers were disjointed, written in phrases rather than sentences, but two main metaphorical concepts emerged quite clearly: commodity and sequence.

In the 63 responses, there were 54 instances of commodity metaphors. In this construct, students use commodity terms to describe their college aspirations. In both of commodity constructs, students describe an exchange of the degree commodity for a desired outcome of some sort. Several of these undeclared students while using commodity metaphors also describe the role they expect a degree a degree to play for them.

career *requires* a college degree

get a degree

get an education

it's almost *required* to get a decent job

Students used transactional metaphors to express an expectation that they will trade the commodity of a degree for certain desired outcomes. In transactional metaphors students will themselves use a degree to "get" a decent job. The orientation surveys contain several examples of students describing transactions they hope to make:

with a degree I can find a *job that I like doing* and make more money doing it

better my chance of obtaining a *good and fun career*

to get a *well-paying job*

make a *good life for myself*

degree will help me find a *career that I enjoy*

better job opportunities if I have degree

you need a degree to get a *good job*

The other version of the metaphorical concept of commodity is that of degree as agent. Students use metaphors to describe a degree as an outside agent that will act for them. The agent of a degree will:

open doors

open career paths

open more job opportunities

open more doors of opportunity

degree *will make* my life easier when I'm older

do great things for me

will make me a more successful person

lead me to a life filled with happiness

get me through life happily and comfortably

degree will *support* me

need degree to even be considered for high up jobs

In using words to describe a degree as an item or commodity, it seems these students view a degree as something to be exchanged for desired outcomes, whether those outcomes are opportunities, happiness, or financial benefits. In other words, these students view a degree as something to obtain, rather than attain.

Often the transactional language is expressed in direct terms of cause and effect. Students say they need a degree "so I can get a good job and make a good living" or "to

get me through life happily and comfortably and have never ending possibilities." These students are describing the results of obtaining a degree, continuing with the transactional metaphors.

Metaphor theory allows us to find insight into how students view a college education, and what they expect from attending college. Students who view a college education or a degree as something to obtain rather than attain will have different expectations for their own involvement in their education.

Data source: FYE assignment. One of the first assignments in FYE classes is an essay describing what brought students to college. Three instructors agreed to share their students' responses with me, for a total of 42 essays, 40 of which are included for analysis. Two were rejected as they contain references to their authors having taken time off between high school and college. Each of these instructors used the same wording in the assignment. Although each essay assignment posed different questions, all students were asked to write about "why did you decide to go to college?" Students received the assignment the second week of classes, and had one week to respond.

Even though the FYE assignment produced more formal writing than the Orientation survey, the same metaphorical constructions appear. Fewer students used the commodity metaphor, but those that do state that the commodity of a degree is obligatory:

a *necessity* for success in life

every opportunity for advancement *required* a degree

the *only way to get* a job that I want

By far the most common metaphorical construction in the FYE assignments is that of transaction. As in the Orientation survey responses, students say that they expect a college degree to get them something. They are not describing transactions in the sense of exchanging a degree for a job or a comfortable life, as they will retain the degree, but are using a construction quite similar to the "degree as agent" metaphor, in that they will use their degree to obtain the desired outcome.

If you *get* your bachelor degree you will earn more

a degree that will *get me* a job

to *get* a good job

get a job I deserve and know a lot about

to get a good, fairly well paying job

get the perfect job for me

to pursue a career I enjoy and that would make me happy

to live a more comfortable life

to find a good job

to have a good job

one *to get* a healthy income and two *to make me* happy

college graduate can do so much more with their life

lead to a well paying job

to provide my family with the best care I could possibly give them

to make as much money as possible

so I can make more money and be financially stable

to have a good job, *make* good money, and *be* financially set

so I can *get* better jobs

Ten of the students specifically described their intention of using their degree to get a job or career, while seven students mentioned income or finances. Several students made references to comfort or happiness, but in these metaphorical constructions none of them identified a career path or used other specific outcome expectations.

As in the Orientation survey, FYE students also used metaphors to describe a degree as an outside agent.

to find a career that I like

the only way for me *to make* all my dreams come true

have better job opportunities *open* for me

expect *doors to open* because I have degree

make me financially stable with a highly respectful [sic] job

I *expect* a job

The Orientation students made more references to opportunities related to jobs and careers than the FYE students, perhaps to be expected from a group of undeclared students. Both groups express an outcome in positive terms, here "make all my dreams come true" and from the survey students look forward to a "life filled with happiness" or living "happily and comfortably" due to the agent of a degree. As with the orientation students, a degree is something to obtain rather than attain, to "get" rather than to earn, but it is interesting that both sets of students are so vague in the outcome they foresee.

Finally, several of the FYE essays included metaphorical constructs stated in the negative, as students described how they perceived life without going to college.

without a college degree I would *be unable* to reach my goals

if you don't go to college, you'll *never amount to anything*

my dad had to *work a little harder for a little less money* because of his level of education

Knowing *the hardships* of not having a college degree

Not going to college would mean *getting stuck working not so good jobs*

I see how *hard life is* for people with *only a high school education*

without a degree my future *job opportunities will be very limited*

Many of these are a reverse image of the metaphors used earlier. Rather than exchanging a college education for getting better jobs or making more money, here the lack of a degree means "not so good" jobs, "less" money, and limited opportunities. These constructions still carry the connotation of transaction, but in the sense that without college these students would not be able to engage in the transactions resulting in better jobs or more money.

Data source: Interview transcripts. The interview transcripts contain many of the same metaphorical constructs present in the two written data sources. Most of the students used a transactional metaphor to describe college, beginning with the bioscience students:

get a degree, *get* a job

have a very high increase in *getting* a good job

to *get* a good career

that will *require* some higher education

college *means* opportunities

The undeclared students use very similar transactional constructions:

if you *want a good* job you have to do college

go to college, *make* a good living

the *more years* [of education] you get, the *more money* you earn

to *get* a better paying job

find a job or career of your own

you need to *go to* college *to become* these things

[the more education you have] the *more* money you're going to make

All of these constructs equate education with employment opportunities. The bioscience majors exchange education for jobs and careers, as do the undeclared students. Several of the undeclared students are also specific about education leading to increased earning opportunities.

The interviews contain two of the most explicit examples of degree as agent metaphors in the study; the first two from bioscience majors, the third from an undeclared student. According to them, attending college will:

facilitate a career I'd like to do

a piece of paper that *allowed me to* start a career in life as an adult

[when describing proxy] *key* to get her where she is today

Finally, several of the interviews contained the same kinds of negative statements of the construct seen in the FYE assignments. The first example is from a bioscience major, the next three from undeclared students.

college *wasn't necessary* for them [parents] *to get* their jobs

it's *hard to find* jobs and careers and stuff *without* a college degree

[without] *lower range job* wouldn't *be as happy*

if you *don't go* to college you're *not going to go* very far

The metaphorical constructs in the interviews are very consistent with those from the other data sources. Although examined separately, there are few differences between the bioscience and undeclared students in their uses of metaphor. One difference is somewhat surprising. In the metaphors listed in this section, the bioscience students used non-specific terms: "a job," "a good job," "a good career," and even "a career I'd like to do" rather than correlating college to their own career choices. I might have expected more specific references to "my career" or terms more specific to their chosen paths. The undeclared students were more likely to use terms referring to money: "a good living," "the more money you earn," "a better paying job." These examples may imply that having a specific career path does not affect how these students understand college. For bioscience students, college is still a means to an end, without being a means to their specific end. The metaphorical constructs still illustrate that all these students view college as a commodity, or as something to use in a transactional exchange.

Three different prompt structures and three different situations resulted in remarkably similar metaphorical constructions. The consistency demonstrated in the metaphorical constructs appearing in the three data sources provides a powerful clue to understanding how students perceive a college education, and its importance in their lives. The underlying concept of education as a commodity appears throughout the data sets, thus seems foundational in nature.

College as Part of a Sequence

The other metaphorical concept that appears in the surveys is that of sequence. Here students are not viewing college or a degree as a commodity to be exchanged for future benefits. The sequence metaphorical construct indicates that students understand a college education in terms of being one in a series of steps, or tasks in life. Here are the metaphors used in the orientation survey:

College is the *next step*

give me a *path* to my future

stepping block to help me achieve bigger and better things

put me on *path* for the future

good *transition* for moving out

attend college as my *next step*

going *through* college is better than not

it will be the *next step* in my education

it is a major *step* into the real world

further my education

gateway to a more successful future

The FYE students also used sequence metaphors to describe college:

it's an *extra step* after high school

why would not I *follow in their footsteps* [siblings]

didn't want to follow *on there[sic] footsteps* [siblings w/children right out of hs]

to *further* my education

college degree is the *first step*

to *move forward* in life

where I would *go next*

to go *farther* in life

Sequence metaphors are also prevalent in the interviews. Many of these constructs are identical to those in the written data sources. Several students use "step" or "stepping stone" to describe their education. The bioscience majors use a variety of sequence constructions:

getting somewhere

you *go* to high school and *then* you *go* to college

a *stepping stone* on my way to my career

get *further* in life

stepping stone to get to my adult life

need to *go through* college to have a career

it's just kind of the *next step* in life

it's high school *and then* college that's just how it works

an important *step* for another step or two to come

come out with a good education

going to the next level

it's just kind of the *next step* in life

The metaphors used by undeclared students are very similar:

it's just something you *do after* high school

go on to bigger and better things, higher things

stepping stone to bigger and better things

the next *step* after high school

it's just another *step*

The sequence metaphors indicate that students understand a college education in terms of being one in a series of steps, or tasks to be accomplished. It is as though they see a checklist, i.e. "high school, check, college, check, job, check." If students view college as "just something you do after high school," they may not feel a need to engage with their education. The use of the term "just" in these constructs may serve to lessen significance, possibly indicating that students assign a low priority or importance to a college education. It may also imply a sort of inevitability, or lack of conscious choice on the part of the students; it is "just something you do" rather than something that they choose.

The commodity metaphors indicate that students view education as a product, rather than a process, and as something to *obtain* rather than *attain*. The sequence metaphors indicate that college is merely one in a series of steps students are to take, rather than something students have consciously chosen to do. These metaphorical constructs provide insight into how students view and approach a college education. How did students come to have this understanding of college as a commodity, or as part of a sequence of steps?

Ventriloquation

The metaphors gestalt says that metaphorical concepts help "fit an experience". What if the speaker has no first-hand experience, for instance of college? Their metaphorical gestalts cannot be drawn from their own experience, thus must reflect some other source. The fact that these particular metaphors are so prevalent in these data

samples may reflect a widely understood societal concept—or at least widely "experienced" by this sample of students. If students do not have first hand experience, they must draw on other sources of information. It seems reasonable to suspect that students will draw from other family members' experiences and descriptions of college, or may reflect some societal view of a college education.

The consistent metaphorical constructs across the three data sets may suggest that these students are merely ventriloquating the societal view of higher education. Students who view a degree as something to obtain rather than attain may be less likely to engage in their education. If they don't view education as a process, but rather as a product, they may remain aloof to the process. This may be another sign that they have not internalized their views of college, but rather are merely doing what society deems proper, or the expected "next step."

So what if these students are using societal metaphors and language to describe college education? Does this necessarily mean that they have not internalized the role or importance of college? Are they viewing a college degree as more like a high school diploma (expected, mandated, etc.) than as something to be achieved, earned, by themselves? Are they actors in their own education? The concept of ventriloquating, first proposed by Bakhtin (1981), suggests that students may be giving voice to something outside, another voice channeled through the "speaker." Ventriloquating a societal view suggests these students have not formed their own views, motivations, or aspirations, regarding higher education and its role in their lives.

The uniformity of metaphors seen here may be additional evidence that the metaphor comes from the societal concept of "college education." As these students go

through college and expand their own personal experience, their metaphorical constructs may change. It would be useful to compare these metaphors of first year students to those of graduating seniors, or perhaps recent alums.

Students whose descriptions of "college" are thus shaped primarily by outside definitions and experiences, rather than their own aspirations, may reflect an understanding of college as an outside experience. Students for whom a degree is an outside agent that will "open doors" for them may be articulating a lack of internalization of the importance or role of college in their own lives.

Another means to understand how students view a college education, and its role in their lives, is to use a proxy. Since the students in the study have only been in college for one semester, they have limited personal experience to draw from. They may be more likely to convey their understanding by describing another person, one who has already completed a college education.

Proxy for Role of College

In order to better understand how students view the role of college in their own lives, I asked each student to identify someone they knew with a college degree, then describe that person. Similar to examining metaphors to gain insight into how students view how the concept of college relates to other concepts in their lives, having students describe their impressions of a person with a degree should provide some insight into how they view the importance of college, and the role of college in their lives. Students may also identify attributes or characteristics they perceive college graduates to possess that they would like to emulate or develop.

Selecting a proxy. Surprisingly, several students had a great deal of difficulty identifying a college graduate of their acquaintance. Ruth "I have to think about this one 'cause, you know, I guess I have a really hard time thinking about that's because in one way I want to be a chiropractor. So I want is, my chiropractor, I want to be like him." Maria has trouble narrowing it down "well, that's rather a lot of people I know. Okay, I have someone." Kayla also struggles, then says "okay, I've got one." The same with Mike, who eventually says "Okay, I think I have someone." Leigh also "Okay, I've got someone." Susan can't settle on just one "Okay. I'll kind of put two people together, maybe."

Even after being prompted with the option to include public figures who had graduated from college, several students struggled with the question. Jordan really can't come up with anyone at all: "Well, no, not him. I guess I can't use him, really, to be honest, I guess all the people I really like actually didn't go to college." Abbi is really very vague about the whole concept "I don't know. I have a role model, but she didn't go to college." She was not able to identify a college graduate to describe. Ashley says "Wow, this is hard!" and "This is one of those questions that when you get asked, you kind of need time to think." She asks "Can we come back to this question?" Later in the interview she is able to identify a college graduate.

The struggle these students had in identifying a college graduate is illuminating. They were asked to select a person on the basis of only one identifying characteristic, that of having graduated from college. The difficulty the students had in identifying a college graduate took two forms: an inability to choose from among many possibilities, and difficulty in thinking of anyone they knew who had graduated from college. Difficulty in

selecting someone with this characteristic might indicate a similar difficulty for these students in articulating or even identifying their own expectations for college. For these nine subjects, five bioscience majors and four undeclared students, this may also imply a lack of a role model for the effects of college.

Those students who identified a proxy chose them from three categories, family members, university officials, and other professionals.

Family members as proxies. Of those students who were able to identify a college graduate, several students selected a family member. Ruth named two college graduates "it's really hard for me just to pick one person." She selects her chiropractor as a career role model, and her mother as a model for how she would like to balance family and career. Jennifer also selects her mother, and for similar reasons, as she'd "like to still be able to work and still have a family." Susan names both of her parents, because "the most important thing to me after college is settling down and getting married and starting a family" although she does "want to have a steady strong career" as well. Although Mitch's father graduated from college, Mitch says "it's hard to tell" how he was influenced by college."

Two students chose uncles as their exemplars of college graduates. Kelsey's uncle "was the oldest of four siblings, and he was definitely the smartest, because the other three, well what, my dad went into the service too, my aunt Sue, she got a job, and so did my aunt Linda. They got jobs right out of high school." Leigh's uncle "grew up pretty much where I did, like kind of in a small town, and he ended up moving to LA and then he ended up with a super good job."

Rachel and Chelsea both chose someone of their own generation. Rachel identified her sister, who "can take care of, like herself, all by herself without anybody else." Chelsea's cousin "is doing really, really well that way and everything." Finally, Maria selects an unidentified relative "they're related to me."

University officials as proxies. Two students selected people from the University. Kayla works in a Dean's office, and greatly admires the Dean. "she's just, well she makes me, like I've heard from students obviously that she's kind of a hard-core teacher. But she's so busy and she's just always so organized, and she seems so busy." College was a big factor in making her the way she is "definitely. And just, like I'm sure she, probably she'll be a president someday. She's just, well there's just something about her." Kayla is in awe of the Dean.

Kelly selects one of her professors.

> Just because she'll be going in lecture, and she'll be telling us everything she knows about biology, and then at the end she'll stop and say, are there any questions, and there will be. You know, a couple of questions, and it's like, how do you know the answer to that? You don't even know what we're asking you, or what's going to come out of her mouth. But you already know, you know the answer before we ask you because you are just that intelligent about what you know. And that's what I want to be like. I want to know everything there is to know about the field I want to go in that, like, if someone asks me, I don't have to be like, I don't know. Like if some really smart student questions her and she doesn't know, but it's never happened. She's never not known. She can always

spit the questions back out, and if she doesn't know it's because it hasn't been like scientifically proven yet. So it's like she knows her stuff! I mean, she knows stuff!

Kelly is impressed by the level of expertise shown by her instructor, and might like to attain that same level some day.

In selecting individuals from their university experience, Kayla and Kelly may be illustrating newly acquired perceptions of the effects of college. Clearly, these two proxies cannot have contributed to Kayla or Kelly's desire to attend college in the first place. It is reasonable to expect, however, that students' perceptions of how attending college will affect their lives will be influenced by the actual college experience. On the other hand, selecting people they met after coming to college does not provide any illumination as to what brought these students to college. Recognizing aspects of these proxies may mean that the proxy characteristics were not desired outcomes initially.

Other professionals as proxies. In addition to her mother, Ruth selects her chiropractor, the one who inspired her to pursue the chiropractic profession. She describes both personal and professional qualities "He's really successful, but it's nice, he's always booked for patients. He is a really hard worker. He's actually only taken one sick day in six years, which is incredible." She doesn't directly address the issue of how college affected him, other than she knows she will need both a college degree and graduate education to become a chiropractor.

After struggling to come up with an example of a college graduate, Ashley chooses a doctor at the hospital where she works.

It's not someone very close with, but there is a doctor at the hospital, and he was so friendly. And I knew his son, and he went to a different school. But that whole

> family was just a really nice family, and it would be nice to have something like that someday, because he's very successful. And I got to know him, obviously, since I worked in the hospital and like I saw him every day.

As to the role of college in his life

> I think college actually helps you with working with different people from various backgrounds, and I think it gives you a lot of different perspectives on things. And it's nice to kind of get different opinions, you know, instead of just being like, well, this is my opinion, you know, and I don't think anybody else's really matters, because obviously they do, and, I don't know, it helps you to work with people that you may not feel comfortable with, but it helps you deal with people in different ways.

Ashley makes the transition in this statement from describing a proxy to using second person to project characteristics of college graduates.

In addition to Kelsey, who chose her teacher uncle, Mike and Kerry also chose teachers. Mike was

> thinking about a teacher I had in high school. Just a hard-working teacher who helped us out a lot, was tough, but still fair. What else, just kind of pretty good role model I'd say, pushed us to do our hardest, what else, friendly outside of school activities and stuff, and involved in different things throughout the school and outside of school and stuff, and was actually my friend's dad also. So I seen him like outside of the whole school environment. So, just that. Overall a pretty nice person.

As to the role of college for this teacher,

> that's a hard question, well, they're a little older person, so I don't really know what college was like back a while ago, I don't think he could be a teacher without college. College must've been a lot different, because they wouldn't have had computers when he went, then he became like the computer teacher. So that must have been a little difficult.

Mike's selection of his teacher centers around personal characteristics, rather than anything particularly related to college.

Kerry's teacher is "very outgoing. She does the best that she can to teach her students. She's fun, but she's strict, too. She's disciplined. I want to be like that, I want to know what I want from life." College was

> the key to get her where she is today. She wasn't going to go, she started and then she didn't, and then like four years later, she decided to go back and so she would be stuck with her other job if she hadn't gone back to college.
>
> I asked Kerry what made her go back:
>
> Actually, I wrote a paper on her so I know a lot about this, but, like her grandfather tried, like bribery to go back, and she wouldn't take his money. And then she just decided that, you know, it was a good idea and he was right all along.

Since Kerry had written a paper on this person, I asked if she knew what her proxy saw as the role of college.

> I think she sees it as what got her where she is. Like, I don't know how to explain this. If she wouldn't have went back to college, she would be stuck with her job at a chemistry lab that she didn't like at all. And she would just be very unhappy.

Kerry is very clear about the role of college in this person's life.

Asking students to think of a college educated person as a proxy to illustrate what they hope to gain from college revealed that students believe college will lead to jobs and careers, possibly related to their majors. Some students describe college graduates as being successful, self-sufficient, competent in their field, plus a variety of personal characteristics. Often, the attempt to understand students' perceptions of college through use of a proxy underscores the concepts from the metaphor section. College for Kerry's proxy "got here where she is," in other words a commodity. It was also an outside agent, because it was "the key to get her where she is." In other cases, the lack of specificity in proxy descriptions may be indicative of a lack of specificity in students' own aspirations for college.

What Students Hope to Gain from College

After discussing the effects of college on through the use of proxies, I asked students directly what they hoped to gain from their own time in college. Student responses covered a variety of areas, some of which are related to the definitions of adulthood reported earlier. Employment and careers play a prominent role, but students also report hoping to make gains in personal development and in meeting friends.

Employment and income. When asked directly what they hoped to gain from their time in college, most of the students made some kind of reference to jobs or careers. This is one area where there are some differences between the descriptions of the bioscience

majors and those of the undeclared students. The undeclared students tend to use much more vague language to refer to the concept of future employment. Alyssa says "It gives me time to figure out what I want to do." She sees that life after college will involve "supporting [her]self," but has no idea how she will accomplish it.

Income also figures into Becca's view of life after college. She thinks college will provide "an education so that you can find a job or career of your own to have some sort of income." She also includes an opinion about the type of job college will provide "a good enough job where you enjoy going to work every day, because if you have to go that will be a big part of your life after you graduate." For Becca, the concept of employment is tied both to income and to enjoyment.

Mike also has a vague view of future employment with income. "I hope to maybe get a career that I like out of it" and be "able to make some money, not a ton of money, but enough to live by, and just enjoy my life." It is clear that Mike sees a causal link between a college education and types of employment.

> I think going to college better prepares you for maybe a different type of job than a high school education would. High school education I think will prepare you more for like a hands-on like, type of, like mechanic, carpenter, things like that, more of those kinds of jobs.

Kelsey also refers to differences in types of employment. She is in college to get "a lot more info. Basically, I don't want to be flipping burgers the rest of my life." She has this view because "I generally noticed it if you know more stuff, you get paid more for better jobs." Although Missy plans on becoming a pharmacist, she "never thought that far in

advance. I mean, I've always just kind of said, okay, well, get a degree, get a job." She uses similarly vague language to describe her expectations.

Chelsea doesn't use specific terms such as job or career, but knows she expects "learning what I want to do with the rest of my life." Jordan seems to be alluding to employment when he talks about options. "I think a lot of it's just like having the options provided where you can find your own roles." Although he has yet to find a role, he sees that "some people have that one thing that they've always wanted to do and they go for it and some people aren't too sure, then some people have no idea." He does want to find a path that he will enjoy, though.

> Like myself, I have a lot of different interests and a lot of different fields so that should be geared more towards like what I want to do that I wouldn't be sick of my whole life, because I'm definitely one of those people I don't want to get stuck in a rut.

Jordan has some conceptions about his future role, in that he is sure he doesn't want to get stuck. He does seem to think that his career decision is one that will last for his "whole life," which may add more importance to a decision than one that merely reflects a first position after college.

Careers. The concept of employment being enjoyable is also important to Maria. "I wanted also to like, well, to get a good career. Something that I don't have to go to work, but I get to go to work." Like Maria, many of the other bioscience majors use the term career rather than job. Susan is in college because "I want to have a steady strong career." Pam is very straightforward about the role of college, it's "educating me toward my career. That's the main thing for me." Ashley doesn't have a career choice, but she

knows what she wants “Well, obviously I’d like to gain knowledge related to my profession.” These students see college as leading them to their careers.

Jennifer and Megan refer to their graduate school plans. For Jennifer, “Undergrad school right now will help make it into a good grad school, and a good grad school will help me move on to a good career.” Megan is a little impatient with the question, she says “Well, just like well obviously to get into pre-physical therapy school,” as if I should have known without asking.

Both Ruth and Catherine describe college using the term “stepping stone” to a career. Ruth says “Umm, I think college is kind of like a stepping stone on my way to my career,” while Catherine knows “I need to go through college to have a career to support a family, and it’s one of those stepping stones.” They are both using the sequence metaphor described above.

Increased options. Having options was an important role of college for many students. Mentions of options range from Maria’s general reference of “Just like let me explore my options kind of thing“ to Ashley’s wish to “keeping [her] options open.” For Alyssa, college is a kind of placeholder, because “It gives me time to figure out what I want to do.” Expanding options for employment after college is important to Mike, who thinks that college “better prepares you for maybe a different type of job than a high school education would.” Kerry uses the sequence metaphor to describe her time in college “as a stepping stone, I guess, to bigger and better things.” Leigh uses the same phrase when she opines that college will provide a “drive to move on to bigger and better things.” These students express an appreciation for having options, as well as viewing how those options will influence their futures.

Jordan likes having options, because he thinks "a lot of us just like having the options provided where you can find your own roles." He views the role of college as "To provide options, and then, what else, provide options and then let people try them out and if they succeed add, provide more options for them to pursue. And if not then they can switch around and find out what they excel at until you finally graduate." Jordan views options as part of identity development.

Education and knowledge. Somewhat surprisingly, fewer than half of the students make specific references to education or learning when they describe what they hope to gain from their time in college. Several use the term "education" in a general sense. Chelsea expects "An education, for one thing, and learning what I want to do with the rest of my life." Jennifer hopes "to be able to come out with a good education, degree." Rachel says "Well obviously the education, but I don't think that's the biggest role of college for a lot of people." Rachel may be encapsulating the view of many students, even beyond those in this study.

Three students refer to learning. Kelsey is "learning a whole bunch of stuff, like there are 32 muscles in a cat's ear, I did not know that before." Kayla also considers that she has definitely "learned a lot already and I'm not just saying that obviously but there's something to go to college." Susan looks forward to "just learning all I can in the time that I have in school, getting the most out of my money, investing in my future and my education."

General education. Several students include learning about things outside their major in their descriptions. Missy looks forward to going outside her major, to take

"Outside classes, just like various things that are different from science and other stuff. I don't know." Jennifer's description of a good education includes

> being challenged in my learning is very very important to me, and coming out of college having a better understanding of, especially for me, science, and maybe even other subjects as well, just having a better understanding than I had coming in.

Leigh expects college to have the effect of

> just really broadening my horizons, like, kind of at first I was really not happy about the [core curriculum], like really not thrilled about the . . . core, but this semester I'm taking the Women in World Religions class and it's just, like you get new insights and then I'm taking economics and all those weird things that you have to take.

Although Leigh was initially displeased about having to take core courses, she now recognizes that she is gaining new insights from some core classes.

Jordan is a little mystified about the role of learning in college.

> Sometimes it's not even the idea of what you learned. It's just the fact that you have it [a degree] that some people are appealed by, like it makes it seem like effort. Even though I know quite a few people who went to college, and actually learned nothing and some people who didn't go to college who know quite a bit. So it's, it's very, very strange.

Jordan does not see a relationship among college and learning and knowing. He truly seems to view a degree as separate from an education.

Personal growth. In addition to education and employment, many students include personal growth in their descriptions of what they hope to gain from college. Jennifer looks forward to "kind of just growing personally in learning more about myself because every year, you know I learn more and more about who I am, and college is a very important part about that." Megan also thinks college will help her "like, to grow as a person." Rachel sees that college is "just about growing as your own individual."

As we saw in the section in identity exploration at the beginning of the chapter, discovering or forming their identity is important to several students' personal growth. Missy hopes that college "helps me to become more of who I am." Megan agrees, saying that in college "you can grow into what you're going to be" Kerry says "It's what's going to get me to my future. It's what determines the rest of my life." Ruth talks about college as a challenge: "it's just a way to challenge yourself and get further in life with a higher quality of life." Jordan says college is "just like having the options provided where you can find your own roles."

Other students express the role of college in their identity development in terms of skills. For example, Leigh says "I think, just coming here makes you more independent. You know, like you have to become more of a leader." Catherine talks about her goals, saying "it's a stepping stone to something needing to be done to achieve other goals." For Ashley, college "helps you to work with people that you may not feel comfortable with, but it helps you deal with people in different ways." Mike is less specific, he wants to "be ready for the world once I graduate from here."

Meeting new people. In addition to education, career options, and personal development, finding friends and relationships is an important part of college. Just meeting new people in general is interesting to Kelsey, because

> Well, you meet new people, like the four Nebraskans. They are crazy people. They are actually planning to go to Canada this next three day weekend and they want to do eggs. They want to do egg decorating, and then there's a special egg painting class that they want to go to in Winnipeg. And they want to do crazy stuff like that, and another girl on my floor, Ashley. She's a film major, and so she always has crazy things to say. And she likes quoting Monty Python, and that's great, and we have, well, actually, my roommate is an Indian off the reservation so that's kind of cool. And my neighbor is from England, and so it's just meeting all sorts of people.

Kelsey is clearly enjoying the variety of people she has met so far in college.

Simply meeting people is important to Mitch; "I admit, I want to meet a lot of people, know a lot of people instead and you get to do that." Mike also hopes college will help him "just not be scared of trying new things and meeting new people and stuff." Jordan provides a value for meeting new people. "Well, so far I've met a lot of really good people. So it's helped make me more outgoing and like make a lot of good connections *per se*. Being able to live with people and getting to know more people, so that aspect is good." Jordan finds value in meeting more people, and recognizes that this has already had an influence on his development, by making him more outgoing.

Ashley expands on the reason for wanting to meet new people, because it will help her develop skills.

> The role of college, I think college actually helps you with working with different people from various backgrounds and I think it gives you a lot of different perspectives on things. And it's nice to kind of get different opinions, you know, instead of just being like well this is my opinion, you know, and I don't think anybody else's really matters, because obviously they do and, I don't know, it helps you to work with people that you may not feel comfortable with, but it helps you deal with people in different ways.

Not only does Ashley value meeting new people, but she articulates some specific outcomes she expects from the experience.

Susan has a more specific reason for meeting and learning how to communicate with different types of people.

> I hope to, like I said, networking and connections, you know, hooking up with professors and getting connections to potential jobs, potential research opportunities, that kind of thing, and just learning all I can in the time that I have in school, getting the most out of my money, investing in my future and my education and meeting new people, new friends that are interested in the same field that I am. So we can, you know, stay connected kind of thing, because you know a lot of my friends are interested in the whole science math thing, that's why I was friends with them in high school. But you know, finding people who are more specifically interested in pharmacy and being able to connect with people on that level.

Susan sees college as a way to create her professional network.

Besides just expanding experience with different kinds of people, several students talk in terms of developing friendships and stronger relationships. Kelly looks forward to "meeting new people along the way, you know they always say you make your best friends in college." Becca expects "more friendships to come out of it. That's a big part, meeting new people." Pam is a little more singular, she thinks "I might meet a friend here. Meeting a spouse, I'm kind of assuming that that will happen some time in my college career." Abbi and Chelsea describe the quality of friendships they expect from college. Abbi hopes for "good strong friendships. I don't know what else," while Chelsea values "like with the friends I've gotten, like keeping in contact with them, because I love them all so much, they're like my sisters now, and my best friends."

Although there are some specific descriptions of outcome expectations here, most students use more general terms to describe what they expect to gain from their time in college. When looking ahead to employment they use terms like "some sort of income" and "maybe a career I like." Students also expect to gain "an education" and to "grow as a person" without being very specific about what that means. Many students also struggled with even identifying a college graduate. Few, if any, of the responses reflect the specificity of the items in the CIRP questionnaire, which suggests that instruments such as the CIRP may not provide sufficient insight into the complexity of students' conceptions. If students do not have clear notions of what they expect from college, it seems reasonable to investigate what brought them to college in the first place.

Asking students about their decisions to attend college produced what I found to be the most interesting results of the study. As we have seen, students use commodity metaphors to indicate they may perceive of a college education as a commodity, or as an

item to be exchanged for desired results. They also view college as the next in a sequence of actions outlined or defined by societal messages. The data suggest that students may have drifted into college, possibly without conscious choice. The portion of the interviews where I asked about forming the intention to attend college indicates these students have no awareness of forming such an intention. This may indicate that students have not internalized a motivation or a choice to attend college.

Forming an Aspiration to Attend College

When I asked students what they remembered about deciding to go to college, not specifically to Hillside, but just choosing to go to college, I was surprised by the consistency of their answers. No student was able to identify a point at which they decided to go to college. A sampling of their answers illustrates the consistency of the message: "I always just said I was going to go, like forever. There was no like turning point or decision." "I guess there's never really been a time when I decided I'm going to college. But there's never been a time when I was never going to go." "It was always an option, no, I mean, not an option, it never was an option. I was going to go, if an expectation I was going to go by myself." "Yeah, I never thought like there'd be anything else . . . but then I never thought like high school, that it's like, no more college or anything else." "College has been, like, just something that you do after high school in my family. It's just like that type of thing that you never even think of it, like I was not going to college." "It was always I just knew I was going. It never ever even crossed my mind to do like a year off. I just always knew that I was going straight from May in high school to that fall I would be in college." "Not really. I never really, I mean, thought about it." "I think it was always just expected that I would, was going to go. I never

thought of not going to college. I thought of maybe taking a year off and working, but I knew I wanted to go." "I guess, I just always thought I would go to college" "I don't know, I always wanted to go to college" "it's just always kind of been there" "I just always assumed I would." The consistency of message in these responses is fascinating to me.

If students are not very clear on what has brought them to college, or what they hope to gain from the experience, it seems logical to examine how they decided to pursue a college education in the first place. As seen in chapter two, most college choice models include a stage of forming the aspiration to attend college. At what point do these students form that aspiration? The examples above suggest that these students are not aware of having formed an aspiration. Rather, each student describes "always" planning to go to college.

College as the next step. As illustrated in the sequence metaphors above, several students describe college as the next logical step in life. Ruth says that was pretty, pretty much ingrained in me since I was a little kid. My parents have always pretty much been like, well, you go to high school and then you go to college, and so I guess there really wasn't much of an option.

Others also describe the sequence similarly. "It's high school and then college, that's just how it works," "I never really decided, it was just like, high school, college," "College has been, like, just something that you do after high school in my family" and "I just always knew that I was going straight from May in high school to that fall I would be in college." Several students also use the "next step" language. Susan thinks "it's just kind of the natural next step in life," while for Rachel, college "just seems like the next

step after high school. It's like what you do after grade school and high school." The students are conveying a sense of inevitability, rather than intentionality, regarding their college attendance.

Expectation language. Another common element in student depictions is the use of "expectation" language. Most students include a passive voice, impersonal "expectation" that they attend college. Mike invokes a societal expectation about college attendance. "It's just kind of always been expected of me. Mostly everyone in my high school, they always go on to something else. It's just, it's expected in today's world, I think." Chelsea says "I think it was always just expected that I would, was going to go." Missy includes a first person element in her general description. "It was always an option, no, I mean, not an option, it never was an option. I was going to go, if an expectation I was going to go by myself." Students use passive constructions here: "it was expected" or it was "an expectation" that they would attend college. They seem to be describing an impetus outside of themselves.

Parental messages. Many students cite parental expectations. Catherine says her parents "did talk about, you know, going to college is a normal thing. They didn't say you must go to college, but they kind of expected, it was an expected thing that I would do." Susan describes conversations with her parents. "I think it was expected too, like it was with me, at the same time it was we wanted to, because we just had been thinking about it for so long." Ruth's parents "didn't say you have to go to college, but they kind of expected of me and I expect it of myself." Leigh also has a very general statement that she has "always wanted to, but yeah, because, I mean, it's just kind of an expected thing."

Even when students are attributing the expectation messages to specific sources, such as parents, they use passive constructions.

The parental expectations are echoed by other family members for two students. Mitch got pressure from two generations. “I think it was always kind of like expected that I would attend college, like my grandmother had been harping on it forever and so had my parents.” For Becca it is a family tradition.

> Well, yes, it’s like everyone in my family has already decided and always expected it of us to go to a university. My mom was always pushing toward a four year university. She thought we could all handle it and it just seemed like we had a high expectation. And because it always seemed like we had a high expectation for our grades coming from like a middle-class family. And we always did well in school, so it was always expected of us, so it wasn’t a question of should we go to college.

Becca illustrates a first person plural construction “we had a high expectation,” but the impression of her comments is very similar to those students who use passive constructions to describe an “expectation” coming from outside themselves.

Influence of teachers. Others describe how their high school teachers expected them to attend. Ruth says

> I think for the most part, everyone really kind of pushed college, but they pretty much expected you to go to college, it was really a positive message for going to college and getting higher education and most people planned to do that from my high school.

Catherine says “Maybe they would ask where I was going, but they wouldn’t say are you going because it was kind of expected from teachers.” Here again, the messages come from outside, as teachers sent messages that students were expected to attend college.

Both parents and teachers conveyed a message of expectations for students to attend college. Mike is specific that “it’s always been expected by both parents and teachers and people at school and stuff. I always got good grades and stuff, so people just expect me to go on to bigger and better things, higher things.” Susan cites expectations from both sides, as well

> Well, it’s kind of been ingrained in me since I was a little kid. My parents both went to college. I’ve been in private school my entire life, I went to college prep Catholic private school. So it was kind of almost expected of me, but at the same time, I still, I wanted to because I wanted the type of profession that required a college education.

Susan is the first to start to own her own expectations for herself.

Societal messages. Students use general wording to describe attending college as a concept of today’s society. Missy thinks “it seems weird, people who are not going to go.” For Rachel, attending college is a given ”because that’s what people do nowadays. It’s just like, you know, what else would you do?” Pam thinks going to college “just seems like that’s our culture in general” and that not attending college is “going against the social norm.” Alyssa says “It’s just what you do.” Mike says going to college is “just, it’s expected in today’s world, I think.” Similarly, Kelly says college is “the thing to do nowadays to set yourself up for a good life.” Catherine views college as “a part of being an educated person.” “Going to college is a normal thing” for Catherine, and for Susan

"it's just kind of the natural next step in life." The reasoning for attending college should be self-evident for Pam, "it was just kind of a no-brainer, I don't know. It's high school and then college, that's just how it works." These students all express a strong societal message that attending college is the societal norm.

In these excerpts students do not recall or identify a point where they formed an aspiration to attend college. They articulate messages from parents, teachers, and society in general that college is simply what one does after high school. This seems contrary to the college choice models that posit a stage of specific aspiration formation. These students seem most strongly influenced by outside forces and societal messages, illustrated by their passive constructions. As demonstrated earlier, some students also have difficulty identifying a proxy for a college education, a possible indicator of difficulty in articulating their own expectations of college.

Students do list some outcome expectations for college. Many of these, however, are quite vague. For example, we saw students list expectations such as "a career that I like," "increased options," the "education," "broadening horizons," a "higher quality of life" and to "meet people." Students also describe college as something that will "get me to my future" or "help me to become more of who I am." None of these depictions seem to indicate a concrete conceptualization of college, and its role in their lives.

This combination of vagueness of expectation and lack of intentionality helps illuminate the metaphorical constructs that indicate students view a college education as a commodity, or product. All of these data combine to provide a clearer understanding of how these students are approaching their college education. The overall message seems

to convey that students' actions are guided by the expectations of others, and may be drifting into, then perhaps through, their college education.

These students clearly view themselves to be in transition, and are not yet adults. They are exploring their identities, and becoming responsible for themselves for the first time. Although they may not quite display the pervasive sense of optimism Arnett describes for his age of possibilities feature, they are clearly aware that options and possibilities lie ahead for them. They have moved away from home for the first time, and are just beginning to discover who they are, and who they might become.

When these students talk about college, they use metaphorical constructs to indicate that they perceive college as a commodity to be exchanged for desired outcomes, such as a job or career. They also use metaphors to indicate that they understand college as merely a step in a sequence, or just what you do after high school. Some struggle to identify someone they know who has graduated from college, either because they know too many, or because they know too few. They have some ideas about what they expect from college: jobs and careers, more education, and friendships, but they have fewer specific expectations, even the bioscience majors who have identified career paths require graduate or professional school. Overall, these students always knew they were going to college, they either expected it of themselves, or followed the expectations of others. All of them describe messages about attending college coming at them from every direction. In reading their descriptions, a different metaphor comes to mind: it seems as though they have been swept into college on a tide of societal expectations.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate what students at a regional comprehensive university expect from college. There are gaps in the literature regarding students from this type of institution, and what motivates them to pursue higher education. The recently proposed emerging adults theoretical model was used to provide some insight into this student population.

As outlined in Chapter II, several development theories are grounded in the work of Erik Erikson. Figure 1 illustrated the relationships among theories put forward by Chickering (1969), Marcia (1966) and Arnett (2000, 2004). My first research question asked whether Arnett's emerging adults theoretical construct is appropriate to describe new entering freshmen at a regional university. The results in chapter 4 suggest that part of the answer to this question is somewhat.

The results of this study show clear support for the accuracy of two of Arnett's features of emerging adulthood to describe college freshmen: Identity Exploration and Feeling in Between, and some support for the Self-Focused Age. The other two features Arnett identifies are less prevalent in the students' responses, in part because of the specificity of his definitions. Arnett's description of the Age of Possibilities includes a pervasive sense of optimism, along with a sense of great expectations. Several students do mention possibilities in the context of identity exploration, and four others also discuss

having options (which is a positive thing for some, but not for all), but none seem to exhibit the sense of optimism and expectations described by Arnett. Overall, this feature is not as present in the responses as the sense of feeling in between. The lack of support for the Age of Instability is due to the specificity of Arnett's description, which defines this feature over the passage of time.

Identity Development.

Identity development is a central focus of several development theories (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Marcia, 1966). Traditional age college students, especially those who do not commute from home, have the opportunity to explore and develop many aspects of their identity as they separate from their family of origin and as they are exposed to new people and ideas in college. The students in this study offer clear evidence of several aspects of identity development, including exploring majors and careers, changing relationships, and developing social identities. There is no particular evidence that the emerging adults aspect of Identity Exploration is any more appropriate than other theorists' descriptions. Developing an identity apart from family of origin is a necessary task for everyone, no matter how they approach the task, or at what point in their development.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the emerging adults model, and the one that distinguishes it from other developmental theories, is the sense of feeling in between. It is clear that the students in this study feel that they are not yet adults, and feel themselves to be between childhood or adolescence and adulthood. This particular aspect is unique to the emerging adults theory, and does seem to accurately reflect the experiences of students in this study.

Overall, the emerging adults model does provide a reasonable framework for understanding this group of college students. Since they are on the cusp of emerging adulthood, the model may provide more applicability as they progress through that stage. The features of emerging adulthood, especially identity development, are similar to other development models. The sense of feeling in between does seem unique to this model, and aptly describes the students in this study.

This comparison of developmental models led me to reexamine some assumptions about identity and college students. Identity development is a foundational component of all the models outlined above, tracing back to Erikson's (1950, 1966) model in which he identifies the psychosocial crisis of adolescence as identity vs. role confusion. Erikson's adolescent stage ends at age 21, which may imply he expects that crisis to be resolved by that age. While Chickering's (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) model does not specify age ranges, it is clear that he is depicting traditional age college students, probably between 18 and 22. Again, the implication is that by the time students graduate they have made progress in all of Chickering's developmental vectors.

The latest advancements in brain research, however, suggest that these models are not congruent with brain development. If the prefrontal cortex, the seat of executive function, continues to develop into the mid twenties, it may not be reasonable to expect students to have made appropriate identity commitments by the age of 21 or 22. Here Arnett's model seems more appropriate, as his emerging adults stage is congruent with ages of brain development. Arnett's emerging adults continue their identity exploration by trying out different career possibilities, and often pursue education off and on until their late twenties.

Examining the topic of identity development and brain research in the context of Marcia's ego-identity statuses provides new insight into the issue. Most of my undeclared students are in Marcia's state of identity diffusion, meaning that not only are they not exploring their identities, they are not necessarily interested in doing so at any time soon. Although several of them talk about college as a time to "figure out" what they want to do, or help them learn "what [they] want to do" with their lives, only Leigh talks about actively exploring options. Most of these students are neither actively exploring nor attempting to make any kind of identity commitment, and many seem glad of a respite before being required to make these decisions.

Most of the bioscience majors came to college with a specific career path in mind. This may indicate either foreclosure, in which they have committed to this identity without exploration, or identity achievement, in which they have committed to an appropriate path. Several of them describe making career identity decisions early in life. Pam, for instance, was so committed to physical therapy that she chose a graduate program before investigating undergraduate institutions. Kelsey the paleontologist also discovered her passion more than a decade before she started exploring schools. While students who enter college with such clearly defined career paths may indeed be in identity achievement, it seems likely that many are actually in foreclosure, and have not actively explored their options. Marcia suggests that those in foreclosure may have accepted identities bestowed on them by their parents without exploring more appropriate options, but that does not seem to be the case with any students in this study.

Several of the bioscience students exhibit signs of being in moratorium, as they are actively exploring their alternatives and searching for new identities. While Ruth

came to college intending to become a chiropractor, she is now questioning the appropriateness of that choice. She has not started exploring options, but will need to soon, as she realizes she doesn't have a "plan B." Missy is also open to exploring options other than pharmacy. Although these students made an initial identity commitment, they seem to be moving away from foreclosure into moratorium. Although developed through his work with adolescents, Marcia's ego identity statuses are not necessarily tied to any age ranges, and it is possible for people to cycle through statuses at different points in their lives.

Looking at these developmental theories together raises some questions about the messages we send to students, and the approaches we take when they come to college. For instance, there are assumptions about students who are declared versus undeclared upon matriculation. We often consider those students who have declared a major to be advantaged by doing so. The involvement literature describes the benefits of connecting to an academic department, and forming relationships with departmental faculty. Connecting with an appropriate major during freshman year also helps ensure students graduate in a timely manner. On the other hand, we may view undeclared students as needing greater support and attention because they have not yet found their academic home.

At Hillside, undeclared students are considered to be at risk for degree completion. If declared students are actually in foreclosure, however, this may cause issues for them later in their college careers, if at some point they need to investigate other options. Marcia's model suggests that identities chosen through foreclosure may ultimately be unsatisfying, since they were not the product of the intentional exploration

characteristic of the moratorium process. Students who realize their senior year that their chosen identities are inappropriate have limited options to change their majors and still graduate in a timely fashion. Changing majors to follow a new path nearly always involves extra time, consequently expense, in college. Students who realize after they have entered a chosen profession that it is not appropriate may need to invest even more time and money to establish a new direction. These graduates may also have more limited access to the kinds of resources and services that were available when they were students, making the exploration activities of moratorium more difficult.

These possibly conflicting ways of understanding college student development may have a significant impact on our understanding of how students approach college, and on how colleges serve their students. There is an inherent conflict between a recognition that students are often not developmentally capable of making identity commitments until their mid twenties and the current national focus on getting students through college in a timely fashion. The longer students take to declare a major, the less likely it is that they will be able to graduate in four years. On the other hand, with college costs and concomitant levels of student debt rising to more unmanageable heights each year, it is in students' best financial interest to declare early and stay on a focused path to graduate in four years. Many students literally cannot afford the luxury of exploration.

Is it possible we may be forcing students into foreclosure for the sake of graduating with something, anything? I return to the metaphorical constructs used by students, and what they tell us about how students perceive a college education. The metaphors indicate that students view college as a commodity to be exchanged for a job, or career, or future happiness. They also view college as merely one of a series of items

in a sequence, or something to be checked off on a list. If college is just something to obtain in order to trade it for a job, which is the next item in the sequence of life, students may be looking for the most direct route to that next step. If students are bombarded by constant messages that college is an economic necessity (Trachtenberg, 2012), they may come to view it in entirely economic terms.

Stratification

As stated in Chapter I, it seems reasonable to posit some relationship between emerging adults' exploration of identity and sense of being in between and institutional stratification. If students lack clear identity and commitment to life goals, perhaps exemplified by choosing a major or career path, they are unlikely to select their institutions on the basis of program, as in the college choice models outlined above. Students may also be less likely to aspire to attend highly prestigious institutions for the same reasons, and to attend regional comprehensive universities such as Hillside University (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Jackson, 1982). The interview responses illustrated several interesting student perceptions about the role of a college education.

Perhaps the most interesting results came when examining why students choose to attend college. This study makes clear that students are unable to identify a point at which they formed an aspiration to attend college. Their reasons for choosing to attend do not fit with the existing literature, or with national survey data.

Comparisons With National Norms

One goal of this study was to begin to fill in gaps in the literature regarding college students and their expectations. Existing literature draws either from specific

types of institutions—large research universities or prestigious private institutions—or large national surveys encompassing students across a broad spectrum of institutional types (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998). First conducted in 1966, the longest-standing study of college freshmen is the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) Freshman Survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute. Over 1200 institutions participate in the CIRP annually, and many have done so for decades (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos & Korn, 2007; Sander, 2012).

Even though the CIRP has widespread participation and purports to provide insights into the American freshman, my results suggest otherwise. Tables 1 and 2, from Chapter III, outline the discrepancies between the CIRP responses and the issues discussed by my subjects. The qualitative methods employed in this study illustrate considerable differences when the interview responses are compared with the choices provided in the CIRP survey. The CIRP offers students 21 possible responses to describe their plans, goals, and expectations of their college experience. There is very little overlap between these choices and the items articulated by the students in this study about their expectations of college. Only four of the CIRP choices appear in any form in the interviews. The item "becoming an authority in my field" is implied in Kelly's description of her college graduate proxy. Kelly is specific about her expectations, "that's what I want to be like. I want to know everything there is to know about the field I want to go in that, like, if someone asks me, I don't have to be like, I don't know." Kelly's proxy is an authority in her field, and thus provides a model Kelly would like to emulate.

Several students use the term "success" or "successful" as they look toward the future, but only Leigh considers the possibility that she might own her own business one

day. The CIRP item "becoming successful in a business of my own" may be more specific than is appropriate for students in this study. The bioscience majors are not intending to pursue business ownership, with the possible exception of owning their own practice. The undeclared students are not yet at a point where owning their own business is a defined option.

Several students also describe looking forward to having families in the future. The corresponding CIRP item is "raising a family." Mitch mentions children "like kids and pets is the model for me." In selecting a proxy, Ruth selects her mother as a model for how she would like to balance family and career. Jennifer also selects her mother as a proxy, and for similar reasons, as she'd "like to still be able to work and still have a family." Susan says that "the most important thing to me after college is settling down and getting married and starting a family." Catherine mentions family when describing what she hopes to gain from college: "I need to go through college to have a career to support a family." Ruth and Jennifer want to balance family and career, while Susan and Catherine look at family as a next step after college.

The CIRP topic that appears most often in this study is "being very well off financially." Although no students specifically evince a desire to be "very well off" financially, many view college as contributing to increased financial success or independence. Mike hopes he will be "able to make some money, not a ton of money, but enough to live by, and just enjoy my life." Becca thinks college will provide "an education so that you can find a job or career of your own to have some sort of income." Kelsey has "generally noticed it if you know more stuff, you get paid more for better jobs." Ruth thinks college will affect "like measure of monetarily, what you'll be able to

make." Finally, Jennifer hopes to achieve "financial independence," while Susan wants "to be financially responsible." These two students are looking toward their future selves.

This lack of congruence between my subjects' responses and the CIRP survey indicates why the dearth of literature on regional students should be troubling. While it is true that institutions of all sizes and types participate in the CIRP, when these data are presented in the aggregate some important institutional distinctions may be lost. Besides distinctions being lost to aggregation, this incongruence also underscores the need for increased use of qualitative methodologies. Using quantitatively based instruments such as the CIRP allows researchers to gather data on thousands of students annually, but it is clear that these methods are not sufficient to explore nuances of meaning.

There are inherent limitations in the construction of the survey instrument. Providing the same list of response options each year enables the CIRP authors to examine changes in responses over time. On the other hand, these changes only reflect students' opinions of the options provided, thus important changes over time may be lost completely. The researchers using large national data sets are thus limited to tracking shifts in what they already know (or predict) students are thinking, but have no mechanism to discern new thoughts and opinions.

Metaphors

Examining the metaphors used by students in this study provides a great deal of insight into how they conceptualize college. The metaphors gestalt says that metaphorical concepts help "fit an experience". What if the speaker has no first-hand experience, for instance of college? Their metaphorical gestalts cannot be drawn from their own experience, thus must reflect some other source. The fact that these particular metaphors

are so prevalent in this sample may reflect a widely understood societal concept—or at least widely "experienced" by this sample of students. If students do not have first hand experience, they must draw on other sources of information. It seems reasonable to suspect that students will draw from other family members' experiences and descriptions of college, or may reflect some societal view of a college education.

The commodity and transactional metaphorical constructs used by students suggest that a college education is a commodity, and is something to be obtained rather than attained. These constructs imply that students understand college education in terms of something outside themselves, or as a product, as opposed to something that they engage in, in other words a process. The actions of someone seeking to obtain a product are different from one seeking to engage in a process. The commodity metaphors may indicate that students expect to put in their time (attending classes) and money (tuition) in order to obtain the product of a degree, which they may then use to obtain, or purchase, more opportunities.

Students' Expectations of College

Upon examination of students' descriptions of their expectations for the college experience, it soon became clear that few students have clear expectations. Several had difficulty even identifying a proxy for college education. Once chosen, their proxies' characteristics often had little to do with their college degrees. After one semester of actual college experience, many students' descriptions of the role of college in their lives are no more specific than the responses from the orientation survey.

Some studies suggest that, among the characteristics students consider when selecting a college, academic programs feature prominently (McDonough et al., 1998). It

is probably the case, however, that the undeclared students in this study made their college choice on the basis of something other than programs, since they have not yet chosen a program to pursue. In this study, many of the bioscience majors use vague and general language to describe their expectations, rather than strong commitments to clear identities and life goals. Many, in fact, have chosen career paths on the basis of a single inspirational figure, rather than a well-considered plan. Only three even mention their chosen career path when talking about the role of college. Megan talks about getting into physical therapy school, Susan refers to her pharmacy plans. Abbi, who uses very vague language to describe most of her future plans, talks about wanting to be "a very good pediatrician" when she describes the role of college in her life.

Understanding what students expect from college helps us understand their behaviors in college. Students described their expectations in passive terms such as "prepares you for maybe a different type of job than a high school education" or "having options provided where you can find your own roles." Their use of passive constructions may reflect a similarly passive mindset when it comes to how they approach their own education. A number of students use metaphorical constructions that depict education as something that happens to them, rather than a process in which they engage. A challenge for staff and faculty, then, is to find ways to get students actively involved in their own educations.

By far the most interesting theme to emerge from the study, in my mind, came from the examination of students' intent to attend college. There is virtually no evidence to suggest that these students have, at any time, formed a specific aspiration to attend college. Although it was expected that students at Hillside University would not have

aspired to attend prestigious or elite institutions, prevailing college choice models do predict that students specifically form an aspiration to attend college before identifying the appropriate type of institution. The pervasiveness of the "it's just what you do after high school" attitude exemplified in the sequence metaphors surely reflects how these students approach college. It may indicate that students view college in much the same way they view high school: as an obligatory pursuit.

During a student panel conference presentation, one first year student stated "It wasn't until after I actually came to college that I realized it was optional" (National Academic Advising Association, 2012). The sequence metaphors indicate that students view college as one in a series of steps that also includes high school. If some students assign this high school characteristic to college, that of being obligatory, what other high school characteristics might they mistakenly assign to college?

Historically, we expect students to have very different views of high school and of college. High school attendance is required by law, the curriculum is, for the most part, set by state legislatures, and there are certain classes everyone needs to take. It is largely how people in this age group (for the most part teenagers) are defined: Their identities are still rooted substantially in their family of origin in aspects such as race, socioeconomic status and ethnicity. They may have begun to develop individual interests, and may view themselves as musicians or athletes, but their identity is primarily that of student. Even those who believe they have a clearly defined career path do not yet have any particular means of following that path—until they complete the compulsory secondary education the state is in more control of their professional selves than they are. There are exceptions

to this, of course, in some communities that offer specially focused high schools where students may concentrate on the arts, or on the STEM areas.

College, on the other hand, is, as far as the state is concerned, entirely optional. There are no laws mandating attendance. In college, students are expected to take a greater degree of ownership for their own education. They are allowed to select their own major area, and generally have a great deal of input into creating their own schedules each term. Students in college are treated legally as adults, and their educational records are protected by FERPA in a fashion very different from high school records. Students, especially on residential campuses, may also choose whether or not to attend class, how much homework to do, and what and when to eat, sleep, and study. Students (or their families, or someone) have to pay for college, whereas public high schools are free. College students pay tuition and fees, must buy books and supplies, and often room and board.

College faculty and staff expect students to play an active role in forming their own educational experience. Engagement with the campus and their education is considered necessary; in fact one widely used instrument for understanding college student behavior is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). A significant body of literature exists that also emphasizes the importance of involvement that is, the degree to which students are involved in their own educations and their campuses.

These very different situations of high school and college should engender very different mindsets in the students attending each. This study reveals that students may not be approaching college with the intentionality or engagement that college faculty and staff historically consider necessary for success. They use metaphorical constructs to

describe college as a commodity, or as just the latest in a series of steps they need to take. They have difficulty both in selecting a proxy for college education and in defining the effects of college for that proxy. They use vague, general terms to describe their own outcome expectations for college. They cannot articulate an aspiration of their own to attend college. Indeed, rather than making a conscious, internal decision to pursue higher education, they seem to have merely drifted into college.

Implications for Practice

Today's students encounter greater societal emphasis than ever before on pursuing higher education. The baccalaureate degree has become "a minimum and essential credential" for those seeking upward mobility (Pryor, et al. 2007, p. 1). President Barack Obama's policy statement on higher education includes a goal that all students attend at least one year of post secondary education or training (Carey, 2009; White House, 2012; Wood, 2012). This increased emphasis on higher education is accompanied by more pronounced stratification in our system of higher education, with increasing differences in the student populations of the various types of institutions.

The stratification literature presented in chapter two suggests that students who have not formed an aspiration of their own to seek higher education, and who may be unclear about their professional and career goals, may be more likely to enroll in regional comprehensive universities than in more selective types of four-year institutions (Brubacher & Rudy, 1999; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005; Jackson, 1982). The admissions requirements at these universities tend to be less stringent than those of research universities or elite private schools, and they are, in general, less expensive than those institutions as well (Labaree, 1990; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Rhoades, 1987). Students

with no clearly formed plans are not likely to select institutions on the basis of program offerings, as suggested by the college choice literature, but rather on items such as price and proximity. The literature on students at regional universities is limited; this study adds a piece to that knowledge, and suggests that some students are merely drifting into college.

The literature on student success identifies several characteristics of students and institutions that have high rates of retention and completion. Motivation is a strong predictor of persistence (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009, p. 21), and students who have difficulty articulating why they came to, or are enrolled in, college may have difficulty finding motivation. Students who view college as a product rather than a process, as something to obtain rather than attain, may be less likely to engage with the educational process. Students who view college as just the latest in a series of steps, the one that they drift into after high school, may be less likely to be actively involved in that step than students who sought a college education from their own motivation.

The challenges for university faculty and staff, therefore, involve finding ways to motivate these students, to engage them in their own education, and to help them articulate specific goals and paths for their own futures. If we return to Astin's I-E-O model (Astin, 1985, 1998), we see that we are facing considerable change in the input expectations of our students. The core activity in Astin's model is involvement, where the effectiveness of students' education correlates directly with their level of involvement (Astin, 1985). We will need to change the environment that we provide to these students in order to achieve our desired outcomes of persistence and completion.

This change in student input may be particularly pronounced at regional universities, which the literature suggests may have a higher concentration of these students (Labaree, 1990; Rhoades, 1987). Orientation and first year programs of all sorts, both curricular and co-curricular, need to take into consideration the characteristics of these students, and be intentional about fostering engagement and involvement in ways that are effective at reaching these drifting students. Academic advisors and those who work with exploring students need to be aware of the detachment these students bring to their future planning, and adapt their approaches accordingly.

The literature on the importance of engaging students in their own education suggests many methods and tactics institutions may use to enhance engagement (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates 2005*)*. The widely used NSSE identifies markers of engagement its authors deem to contribute to student success. The markers measured by the NSSE could also be re-examined in light of today's students and their changing expectations. We need to propose, test, and assess the degree to which our engagement strategies are effective on students at our own institutions.

Directions for Future Research

This study involved only 22 students at one institution. In order to determine the extent to which these students are typical, additional research is needed. This study should be replicated with entering first year students each year. Future studies should continue to focus on identifying the unique aspects (if any) of students attending regional comprehensive universities. It would be instructive to examine these students' knowledge

and attitudes in light of Marcia Baxter Magolda's (1992, 1995, 2004, 2010) work with students and self-authorship.

Baxter Magolda's Model of Epistemological Reflection is a cognitive development theory based on Perry's (1968) work on men and Belenky's (1986) work on women. Her model (1992) describes four stages: absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing and contextual knowing. Students go from viewing knowledge as certain to eventually determining that knowledge is contextual. Inherent in these stages is a similar progression from socially constructed knowledge to knowledge that integrates students' own voices into contextually seated understanding. Examining regional students' responses and ways of knowing would help illuminate how these students are making meaning from their experiences.

The students in this study form an extremely homogeneous group. They come from five states in the upper Midwest: North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Many are from relatively small towns and high schools. Most attended public high schools, while a few went to parochial schools. All but one are Caucasian. Maria is the outlier: a Hispanic woman from Chicago who attended a military high school. Observations of these students need to be replicated on other student groups, particularly racial and cultural minorities. Models of identity development that include forming a racial identity suggest these students may have very different perceptions.

Summary

This study has provided some insight into the thoughts and expectations of regional students during their first year of college. I have found some support for Arnett's emerging adults construct, particularly in they way it depicts students' awareness of

being in transition, or of feeling in between. Many of the students are becoming aware of their identities as individuals, and some are engaging in intentional exploration. They use metaphorical constructions to convey their sense of college as a commodity, or as part of a sequence; and they do not recall ever having formed a conscious decision to pursue a college education.

Using qualitative methods to explore these students' perceptions illuminated a significant shortcoming of the large national data sets such as the CIRP survey. These well established quantitative instruments are inherently less useful in investigating changing student thoughts and opinions, as they draw their value from comparisons over time. The comparisons, however, can only be made to other administrations of the instrument, and have no qualitative mechanism by which to capture new thoughts and ideas. These limitations may be particularly evident in the case of regional students. Regional institutions and their students are underrepresented in the literature. It may be even more difficult to ascertain differences in student populations among different institutional types if the preponderance of information is based on one or two institutional types. Clearly, more information on regional students, their attitudes, expectations, and perceptions is needed.

This study also calls into question some very basic assumptions about students coming to college. Many in higher education consider undeclared students to be at risk of completion, while viewing students who have declared a major path as having achieved a positive identity status. Examining several models of development in the context of recent development in brain research, however, suggests that many traditional age

students may not truly be capable of the mental processes required to make identity commitments that will take them into successful futures.

It is possible that the students in this study are unique, and have little to tell us about college students in general. On the other hand, their lack of formed aspirations, their view of college as a commodity, and their general disengagement in identity exploration may well be indicative of many other students to follow. If the increased societal emphasis on higher education leads more students to drift into college, we should be ready to meet them with a compass and a pair of oars.

APPENDICES

Appendix A
Interview Protocol

1. How is your semester going so far?

2. What about college is the most different from what you expected? What has been the most similar to your expectations?

3. Do you remember making a decision to attend college—not specifically Hillside, but college in general? Tell me what you remember about that, then how you chose Hillside.

4. Tell me what you remember about selecting classes for this semester—walk me through the process. How about next semester?

5. Think about someone you know of that graduated from college, that you might want to be like some day. Tell me about that person.

6. What do you hope to gain from your time in college?

7. When you think about what kind of job you might have eventually, what kinds of things do you think of?

8. Do you feel that you have reached adulthood? What does "adulthood" mean to you? How will you know you have reached it?

Appendix B
Invitation to Participate

November, 2007

Dear [biology major] or [undeclared student]:

I write to request your participation in a project investigating the thoughts and expectations of entering freshmen at Hillside University I am a doctoral student at the University of North Dakota, pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. I am also employed at Hillside, where I serve as the coordinator of the Supplemental Instruction program.

Having worked on college campuses for over twenty years, I have seen many changes among entering students. Today's students face different challenges than students even a few years ago. I would like to hear what brings you to college, specifically to Hillside, and what you hope to gain from your time here. By talking with students during your first semester on campus, I hope to gain a better understanding of what is important to you. Because your input is important, I will be conducting individual interviews during the weeks of November 12 through December 3, and would like to invite you to participate. The interviews will last 60 – 90 minutes, and you will receive a Subs N Sweets certificate to thank you for your time. All participants will be entered in a drawing for a $100.00 gift certificate. You may also be asked to participate in a follow-up focus group next semester.

In order to encourage you to comment freely during the interview, I would like to reassure you that all of your responses will be confidential, and will not be traceable to you. Your instructor will not know which students have chosen to participate [for biology majors]. If you are willing to participate, please fill out the attached form and drop it in campus mail. I will send you an e-mail with a schedule for you to sign up for an interview time.

I look forward to hearing from you by [insert date] regarding your willingness to participate. If you have any questions regarding this project, please contact me at wolterdi@mnstate.edu or (218) 477-5949. This research project is conducted in keeping with the guidelines for the use of human subjects established by the University of North Dakota.

Thank you for your consideration of this request,

Diane J. Wolter, M.S.
Counseling and Career Services
Hillside University

Yes, I would be happy to participate in an interview to share my thoughts and expectations for my college experience!

Name:
_____

E-mail address (for the reminder):
_____

Please fold this sheet and drop in campus mail, either at the residence hall desks or at the campus post office.

Appendix C
Chart of Results

RQ 1: Does the emerging adults theoretical construct appropriately describe new entering freshmen at a regional university?

Emerging adult features

- The age of identity exploration
- The age of being self-focused
- The age of feeling in between
- The age of possibilities
- The age of instability

RQ 2: How do these new entering freshmen describe the role of college in their lives?

Metaphorical constructions: commodification, sequence

Ventriloquation

Proxy for role of college

What students hope to gain from college

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