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TO GO OR NOT TO GO TO COLLEGE: THE MEANING OF EDUCATION
FOR STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A DISSERTATION

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By

Minodora M. Moldoveanu

Dissertation Committee Approval:

Professor Dawn Person, Chair
Associate Professor Jose Hoffman, College of Education
Expert Member, Renee DeLong, Cerritos College

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the meaning of education for stopped-out students. There has been no exploration of the meaning of education for students who have stopped out of college. Stopping out of college is defined as leaving college for a period of time and then returning. The problem this study addressed is the lack of knowledge of the meaning of education for stopped-out students. The purpose of this study was to understand the differences in the meaning of education for students who stopped out of college starting from the moment they first enrolled in college, to when they stopped out, to when they returned to school, and at the time of the interview. The study relied on personal interviews with 20 participants. The study used Viktor Frankl's (2006) logotherapy as the main lens to study stopped-out students' meaning of education. The results indicated that when first enrolling in higher education, students viewed education as a societal expectation and an obstacle to other priorities but also as an opportunity to gain more freedom. When leaving higher education, students described education as an obstacle to other priorities, an additional source of stress, and as worthless. By the time students were returning to college, they viewed education as a means to gain freedom, as meaningful in helping others, and as a badge of honor. At the time of the interview, students described education as a source of freedom, as meaningful in helping others, and as a source of self-improvement. Based on the themes that emerged, students are

more likely to persist in higher education when they give education positive meanings.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The higher education system in the United States is experiencing low student success rates at a time when the job market is seeking employees with higher levels of education (Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 2012). This is the result of fewer students enrolling in higher education and achieving less academic success than previous generations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). However, organizations seek employees with increased education and technical training (SHRM, 2012). The low academic achievement of this current generation of college students may be in part a result of this generation's lack of hope (Snyder, 2002). Hope is a component of meaning (Frankl, 2006). Therefore, several studies have found that hope and meaning of life are highly correlated concepts (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Kim, Lee, Yu, Kim, & Puig, 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006).

Background of the Problem

Humankind has been concerned with the meaning of life for generations; therefore, people from diverse walks of life have written on the topic. Viktor Frankl (2006), a psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, wrote extensively on the topic of meaning and designed a new form of therapy known as logotherapy, around the issue of life purpose. Logotherapy was meant to aid people who experienced trauma and deep depression, to help them overcome their

conditions and to help them find meaning in life once again. Frankl claimed that the issue of meaning in life is one of the most important to address. Frankl was inspired by some of the writings of the famous philosopher Nietzsche, who stated that, “He who has why to live for, can bear almost any how” (as cited in Frankl, 2006, p. ix). Nietzsche meant that as long as people have meaning for their actions, they can overcome their circumstances.

Around the same time that Frankl was developing his ideas on meaning in Germany, in another part of Europe, in France, Anais Nin and Albert Camus were writing about similar issues. Anais Nin (1966), a famous poet, wrote that there is not one overarching meaning for all people. Instead, we each have to give meaning to our individual lives. Albert Camus (1964), a Nobel Prize winner, believed that many people die because they do not find life to be worth living. He concluded, therefore, that the meaning of life is a very urgent matter. I believe that lack of meaning in life is still a problem today and can be seen in higher education in decreased student enrollment and low achievement rates.

College success is defined in this study as students reaching their proposed academic goals, whether they are achieving a degree, certificate, or transferring to a university. For the last three decades, the United States has not graduated enough students to satisfy the needs of the country’s economy (Adams, 2011). In the last two decades, more than 30 million students enrolled in college but never graduated (Shapiro, 2014). In a study of community colleges in 1996, 36% of students attained a certificate, an associate’s degree, or a baccalaureate degree within six years (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, &

Linebach, 2008). In 2003, the number of completions had already started to decline as only 34% of students attained a degree after six years (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). However, in a six-year longitudinal study across multiple states that followed the cohort that enrolled in public higher education institutions in 2005, only half of all students had earned a certificate, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree (Bransberger, 2014). Yet by 2013, though 75% of all students entering higher education and 40% of all 18-29-year-olds attended community colleges, only a quarter of them graduated (Strom & Strom, 2013). This low academic achievement rate has severe implications for these students who go on to live their lives without enjoying the benefits of a college education. Due to the decreasing rates of student success and the future forecast of labor conditions, students without a higher education degree will likely earn less money over their lifetimes compared to their more educated counterparts (Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Greenstone & Looney, 2013; U.S. Treasury, 2012).

Labor Force

The current job market is increasingly seeking employees who have higher education levels and more technical training than before (Schramm, 2012). This trend affects job availability. There are fewer entry level job openings, and according to human resources professionals, this trend is likely to continue in the future (Schramm, 2012). When the nation is under-producing qualified employees to meet the labor market demands, the United States is losing the edge it once had over its international competitors (Carnevale & Rose, 2011).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for the 35 countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) the average percent of 25-34-year-olds who completed a bachelor's degree in 2001 was 15%, while in the United States, the average for the same age group was 28% (Kena et al., 2014). However, by 2005 the gap between the United States and the 35 OECD countries started diminishing. The average percent for the OECD countries in 2005 was 19%, while for the United States it was 30% (Kena et al., 2014). By 2011, the gap was even smaller, with an average of 23% for the OECD countries, and 32% for the United States. By 2015, the average for the OECD countries was 30%, while for the United States, it was 34%. Also by 2015, 11 out of the 35 countries in the OECD had more 25-34-year-olds completing bachelor's degrees as compared to the United States (Kena et al., 2015). The United States is losing its lead among other developed countries. In order to remain a competitive country in the global economy, the United States must improve the rates of higher education degree attainment (Engle, Yeado, Brusi, & Cruz, 2012). By 2025 the United States will need an additional 20 million college graduates to satisfy the job needs and boost the economy, reduce economic hardship, and maintain the country's leadership internationally (Carnevale, & Rose, 2011). As Treasury Secretary, Timothy Geithner stated,

The moral case for doing a better job of giving Americans the opportunity to succeed is very compelling. The economic case is just as strong. If more Americans are educated, more will be employed, their collective

earnings will be greater, and the overall productivity of the American workforce will be higher (as cited in U. S. Treasury, 2012).

However, the country's education system may fail to meet the expectations and needs of the United States business sector.

Low Student Enrollment and High Attrition Rates

College enrollments have steadily decreased over the last three years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Two-year institutions experienced a student enrollment decrease of more than 3% from 2011 to 2012, and an additional 3% from 2012 to 2013 (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013). Of all higher education institutions, community colleges have experienced the greatest loss of enrollment, with a 10% decline in students of all ages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Increasing educational rates in other countries may drive corporations to pursue educated employees elsewhere rather than in the United States (Schramm, 2012). "While demand for skilled labor has continually increased, the supply of college-educated workers has not kept pace (U.S. Treasury, 2012). Therefore, the problem of faltering higher education attainment and higher education student success and education achievement is one that must be quickly addressed. As Education Secretary Arne Duncan stated, "The need to dramatically elevate college attainment is an urgent one—for our students, our families, our communities, and ultimately our nation's future . . . and we all have a role to play to keep college part of the American Dream" (as cited in U.S. Treasury, 2012). In addition to decreased enrollment, higher education institutions are also experiencing high attrition rates.

In 2004, higher education institutions experienced a 48% attrition or drop-out rate for community colleges, and 39% for universities (American College Testing, 2010). In 2010, the attrition rates for community colleges from the first year of college to the second was 44% (American College Testing, 2010). In 2015, community colleges had an attrition rate of 61% (Juszkiewicz, 2015). This problem affects businesses and organizations, but low educational achievement and high attrition rates also have serious implications for individuals.

The Meaning of Education

Addressing the issue of meaning (or the lack of meaning) of life and the meaning of education that our students may experience may help solve the current problem our higher education system is experiencing. Meaning is a concept that can be applied to a variety of aspects of life and has also been applied to the field of education. Learning is not just a cognitive development process, as it is the result of interactions between the learner, the outside world, activities, meaning, and cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lacking life meaning predicts feelings of boredom across time, and boredom predicts lower levels of life meaning across time creating a “bidirectional causal relationship” (Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009, p. 330) or a self-perpetuating cycle. Feeling a calling to a particular career is associated with feelings of happiness, as well as perceiving oneself to have a meaningful life (Duffy, Alan, & Bott, 2012; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2010). In addition, meaning can influence a person’s psychological health.

Lack of meaningful reasons to live can lead to depression (Westefeld, Cardin, & Deaton, 1992). This phenomenon can be observed as the current generation of students are experiencing increasingly problematic rates of depression (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Heppner et al., 1994). Hopelessness is another factor contributing to depression and is the most reported contributing factor for suicide ideation and attempted suicide (Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001). “Hopeless” is defined as “having no expectation of good or success” and “hopelessness” as “giving no ground for hope” (Merriam-Webster, 2015). Several studies have found perceived meaning of life and hope to be highly correlated concepts (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Kim et al., 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006).

Hope

Students who report greater life meaning or life purpose experience higher levels of hope (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). On the other hand, lower life meaning correlates with lower levels of hope. Low levels of hope are responsible for increased anxiety and a number of other negative consequences (Feldman & Dreher, 2012). According to two meta-analyses published in the same article, the current generation of youth is “unequivocally” experiencing heightened levels of anxiety compared to previous age groups (Twenge, 2000, p. 1011). On the other hand, high levels of hope are associated with several positive student behaviors. Students experiencing higher levels of hope are more focused on problem solving and cope better with stressors (Snyder et al., 1991). Frankl (2006) believed that as long as people have a reason or meaning for their action, or a

purpose, they can overcome many of the obstacles that may come their way. Students with high levels of hope perform better academically and are more likely to graduate (Snyder et al., 2002). Students with higher levels of hope tend to be high goal achievers, no matter what their goals are (Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009). It is possible that if students have higher levels of meaning for their lives and for their education and higher levels of hope, they would be more likely to persist in higher education, and they could take advantage of the many advantages of a higher education degree.

Benefits of Higher Education Degree Attainment

One of the main advantages of pursuing a higher education degree is economic opportunity. According to a report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and Workforce, the wages of college-educated workers have been steadily rising at faster rates than the wages of workers with high school diplomas, widening the income gap between more educated and less educated people (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). Even worse, a U.S. Treasury (2012) report found that while earnings for people with college degrees are increasing, earnings for individuals with high school degrees are actually decreasing. The wage ratio between people with a college degree and those with a high school diploma went from less than one and a half times in the 1980s to almost two times in 2010—meaning that college degree-holders make almost twice as much as their less educated counterparts (U.S. Treasury, 2012). Higher education is a vital component of social mobility for motivated individuals (U.S. Treasury, 2012). In addition, college educated workers also experienced much more job security

than their less educated counterparts, having lower rates of unemployment (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). People with a bachelor's degree can make \$500,000 (Greenstone & Looney, 2013) to one million dollars (Day & Newburger, 2002) more in their lifetime than people with just a high school diploma. Higher education provides a good economic return on the investment, and it raises earnings (U.S. Treasury, 2012). However, the economic advantage is only one of the benefits of a higher education degree.

Another benefit of getting a college education and climbing the socioeconomic ladder is improved health. One's socioeconomic status (SES) is the best predictor for mortality and most diseases across one's entire lifespan (Winkleby, Jatulis, Frank, & Fortmann, 1992). High school graduates tend to have jobs with fewer benefits such as health insurance and pensions compared to their college degree-holding counterparts (U.S. Treasury, 2012).

In addition to having better jobs, parents who are college graduates will also have the financial means to afford spending more time at home and to provide better nutrition for their families. With better jobs, college graduates may afford to have a stay-at-home parent if they choose to or to have paid vacation and paid sick leave (U.S. Treasury, 2012). In addition, the socioeconomic status of a family affects the quality of the family members' diet (McKay, Houser, Bloomberg, & Goldberg, 2006). According to an article on the National Agricultural Library USDA website, with better nutrition and increased parental involvement, the children of college graduates are already on their way to a better and more successful academic life (Food and Nutrition Information Center,

2011). This is a cycle that can affect people for generations: a better education tends to lead to better jobs and better income, which in turn affects the quality of life of the children of the better educated people; then the cycle repeats itself. Children of low income families are most likely to remain in low income categories, while children of well-off families are likely to remain well-off (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013). Therefore, higher education leaders need to identify the main factors affecting student academic achievement to increase rates of success, both academically and personally.

Problem Statement

Although there is an increasing body of literature examining the relationship between life meaning and education (Hagedorn, 2012) and educational achievement (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Henderson-King & Smith, 2006; Mason & Nel, 2011; Nash & Jang, 2014), there has been no exploration of the meaning of education for students who have stopped out of college. Stopping out of college is defined as leaving college for a period of time and then returning. The problem this study addressed is the lack of knowledge of the meaning of education for stopped-out students. As employers need more employees with higher education degrees (Carnevale, & Rose, 2011; OECD, 2011; Schramm, 2012), and as young people experience increased rates of mental issues manifested through unprecedented rates of depression (Greenstone & Looney, 2013), suicide ideation, and attempted suicide (Furr et al., 2001), educators need to understand the role of meaning of life and of the meaning of education that can signal a student's readiness to leave school

before attaining his or her educational goals. Then, the higher education system could provide support before the student reaches the point of dropping out or stopping out.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to understand-the differences in the meaning of education for students who stopped out of college from the moment they first enrolled, to when they stopped out to, to when they returned to school, and at the time of the interview.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide this qualitative study:

1. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they first started school?
2. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they dropped out?
3. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they returned to school?
4. How do students describe the meaning of education for them at the time of the interview?

Significance

Community colleges are the largest branch of the higher education system. Currently, the rates of success of students in higher education is low, while the need for students with higher education degrees is increasing. According to research, students who have high levels of hope (Snyder et al.

2002) and high meaning of education (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006) have higher education achievement. Furthermore, having high meaning of life provides a strong source of motivation (Frankl, 2006; Schulenberg, Baczwaski, & Buchanan, 2014). Though there has been some research linking concepts like hope and meaning to education, little is known about students who have already dropped out of school and have returned. The knowledge gained from this study could help higher education institutions reach out to students who have dropped out and help them find the meaning necessary to come back and attain their educational goals. Understanding how students' meaning of education and meaning of life have changed from the moment they left until the moment they returned to school, and what factors influenced that change, could help the higher education system prevent other students from dropping out or to reach out to those students who have dropped out and persuade them to come back and accomplish their educational goals.

This study is important because it will increase understanding of the concept of meaning as it relates to education. The knowledge of how hope and meaning affect success rates is applicable not only to the field of education, but to organizations such as businesses, hospitals, government, and the military. Understanding what gives people meaning in life and in their work can help organizations and career counselors aid employees to fulfill their needs for meaning. Furthermore, knowing what gives people meaning in life adds to a growing body of literature in vocational psychology that has targeted the role of the meaning in work or having a calling in a career path (Hall & Chandler, 2005;

Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Healthcare organizations can help their staff find more meaning in the work they do, as well as help patients deal not only with their disease but also with existential issues such as meaning of life (Ozanne, Graneheim, & Strang, 2013). Furthermore, healthcare organizations can help the patients and their relatives give their suffering meaning (Raingruber & Milstein, 2007). The military services can use the knowledge to help military personnel, as meaning in life was found to provide an insulating layer against suicide ideation for both active military personnel and veterans (Sungchoon, Bryan, & Bryan, 2016). This research is particularly relevant now, as people live in unpredictable times, marked by uncertainty, high stress, and anxiety, which are negatively impacting people's lives. Though the results of this study may assist many organizations, the results must not be overgeneralized; therefore, in the next section I will identify the study's assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study included interviewing 20 full-time and part-time students attending community college in Southern California in the Los Angeles region who have returned to school after having dropped out for at least one year.

Assumptions of the Study

Life meaning, meaning of education, and hope are concepts that have been studied at length in a variety of fields. This study assumed that life meaning, education meaning, and levels of hope pertain to higher education as

well and particularly to community colleges. Additionally, I assumed that students regularly face issues related to meaning and hope, whether consciously or unconsciously. Finally, this study assumed that participants would carefully consider all questions and answer them as best they could.

Study Delimitation

For convenience, this study was delimited to community college students in Southern California.

Study Limitations

This research project was conducted using a sample of students from community colleges in Southern California. The study relied on face-to-face interviews to collect the data. The participants had to recall the reasons they dropped out of school in the past, as well as recall the meaning education had at various points in their past. The very act of recalling or retrieving that information may change those memories. It is also possible the participants may not have had accurate recollections of the reasons for dropping out, and the meaning education had for them at a moment in their past.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following section provides definitions for the key terms used in the dissertation.

Academic achievement/academic outcome. Academic achievement refers to students' "final grades, dropout rates, scores in tests" (Gamboa, Rodriguez, & Garcia, 2013, p. 13).

Attrition rate. Attrition rate denotes the reduction of number of students due to low retention (Hagedorn, 2005).

Hope. Hope is having the ability or agency, determination, and plan involving a sequence of steps, to achieve a desired goal (Snyder et al., 1991)

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an appraisal of one's ability to perform certain actions or achieve desired goals (Bandura, 1982).

Meaning of education. The meaning of education is the value, or "the inner significance that university holds for individual students" (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2010, p. 120).

Meaning of life. "A meaningful life is one having a sense of purpose" (Heintzelman & King, 2014, p. 562), coherence, and is considered to be worthwhile.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 outlined the background of the problem of low student achievement in higher education in the United States, the problem statement, the purpose of the research, the research questions, significance of the study, scope of the study including the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations, and the definitions of key terms. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of literature and research related to meaning of life, hope, meaning of education, and academic achievement (student success) at the community college level. Moreover, Chapter 2 addresses the importance of discussing issues of meaning and hope with community college students to increase their academic achievement (rates of success). Chapter 3 outlines the research design, the

methods of data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and last, in Chapter 5, I address the conclusions, interpretation, and recommendations for policy and practice.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Having life meaning is associated with increased levels of hope (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Kim et al., 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006), which in turn positively affects students' educational goal attainment (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Feldman, Rand, & Kale-Wroblewski, 2009). Life meaning is also associated with increased self-efficacy, which also positively impacts students' persistence and success rates (Bandura, 1977); life meaning also provides people with the motivation to reach their goals (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010). Last, lack of life meaning is associated with indifference (Schulenberg et al., 2014), apathy (Fahlman et al., 2009), and depression (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 2014; Frankl, 2006; Mason, 2013; Schulenberg et al., 2014), which can negatively affect students' educational achievement. From the 1950s to 2000, each generation enrolled in higher education at higher rates compared to the previous generation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). For the first time in the last six decades, the last generation, after the year 2000, is enrolling in higher education at a decreased rate compared to the generation before it; this last generation is also graduating at reduced rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Although 75% of higher education students attend community colleges, only a quarter of them graduate (Strom & Strom, 2013). This creates problems for the students individually as well as for the economy of the U.S. The current U.S. job market is increasingly relying on

higher level thinking and higher level technical skills (Achieve, SHRM, 2012). If American youth are not qualified to meet this labor demand, companies looking for highly educated employees will have to look toward other countries to meet their labor demands (Scramm, 2012). Not meeting the labor demand could weaken the leadership position of the U.S. internationally; therefore, this deficit must be quickly addressed (U.S. Treasury, 2012).

In addition, having a higher education degree has many implications for individuals. College graduates tend to have higher income than those without a college degree (Carnevale & Rose, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). College graduates can make as much as two times more money than individuals without college degrees, thereby increasing their social mobility (U.S. Treasury, 2012). People with bachelor's degrees tend to make an average of 2.1 million dollars during their lifetime compared to the 1.2 million dollars earned by persons without college degrees (Day & Newburger, 2002). The ability to climb the socioeconomic ladder is linked to increased rates of health across multiple diseases and well-being across a person's lifespan (Winkleby et al., 1992). These are just a few of the benefits of earning a college degree.

This chapter reviews literature about potential solutions to the current low academic achievement rates for community college students and the role of meaning in student success. Although there is an increasing body of literature examining the relationship between life meaning (Bodner, Bergman, & Cohern-Fridel, 2014; Burrow, Summer, & Ong, 2014; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Darewych, 2014; Fahlman et al., 2009; Heintzelman & King, 2014), the meaning

of education (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Hagedorn, 2012; Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Henderson-King & Smith, 2006; Nash & Jang, 2014), and education achievement, no studies have been conducted on the meaning of education for students who have stopped out of school, defined as students who dropped out of higher education and returned after a year or longer. Using both philosophical and practical approaches, increasing student success rates benefits community college students in numerous ways. Therefore, if students assign increased meaning to their education, they are more likely to achieve their academic goals and take advantage of the benefits that come with a higher education degree. At the beginning of this chapter I provide an overview of the philosophical framework of the study. Next, I provide an extensive overview of the extant literature on the topic of this dissertation. Last, I conclude with a chapter summary.

Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Guiding this research study is Viktor Frankl's philosophy. Viktor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor who endured three years of concentration camps under the Nazi regime. Frankl was also a psychoanalyst who, while in the camps, observed the prisoners' psychology and tried to pinpoint what helped some prisoners survive in spite of the odds they faced.

Before being sent to the concentration camps, Viktor Frankl was already an established psychologist. When analyzing his philosophy of life, it is important to also understand the psychological school of thought he associated with, existentialism.

Existentialism and Humanism

Viktor Frankl fits well into the philosophy of existentialism. As a philosophy, existentialism can be traced to the writings of Wilhelm Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard during the 1800s, and it continued to be developed into the 1900s by Martin Buber, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Karl Jasper (Ozmon, 2012).

Influenced heavily by the writings of Wilhelm Nietzsche, Viktor Frankl belongs to the atheistic existentialist school of thought, in contrast to Soren Kierkegaard, whose philosophy is theistic. However, Viktor Frankl was not just a philosopher, but also a psycho-analyst, and therefore he also influenced and was influenced by the existential psychological trend at the time.

Existential and Humanistic Psychology.

Existential psychology emerged and developed from the 1940s into the 1960s as a countermovement to the mainstream psychological practices of the time (Hoffman, Cleare-Hoffman, & Jackson, 2015, p. 42). Part of the third force of psychology, called humanistic psychology (Hoffman, Granger, & Mansilla, 2016), existentialism heavily influenced the tenets of humanistic psychology (McDonald & Wearing, 2013). Both humanistic and existential philosophies are phenomenological, meaning that the focus is not finding some objective truth, but accepting that knowledge is subjective (Hoffman, 2006). Humanism and existentialism are also both focused on the present (Hoffman, 2006), instead of the past, and like traditional psychology, both value self-awareness, and people's good nature (Hoffman, 2006). Other points of convergence between existential and humanistic psychology are their concern with people's well-being, people's

character or principled living, and their concern with meaning (Hoffman et al., 2016). Although humanism and existentialism have a few minor differences, because of the close alignment in their major beliefs and values, the two concepts are often used interchangeably. After understanding the origins of humanism and existentialism as well as their relationship to each other, it is important to further examine their contributions and shortcomings.

One of the positive contributions of humanistic psychology is its stance on the value of diversity (Hoffman et al., 2015). Compared to traditional psychology, “humanistic psychology is more open, inclusive, and progressive” (McDonald & Wearing, 2013, p. 39). Yet, humanistic psychology failed to act on the claimed value of diversity (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 41); in other words, it failed to fully commit to multiculturalism (Hoffman et al., 2016). Existential psychology was unsuccessful in enticing psychologists of color to join its ranks (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 41), and was not an integral player in the civil rights movement or the multicultural movement in the field of psychology (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 42). Though the wider psychology field increased in diversity, existential psychology continued to be lead primarily by white males (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 42). However, as the world is becoming increasingly culturally diverse, it is vital for existential psychology to incorporate a multitude of worldviews (Hoffman et al., 2016), to raise the interest of diverse groups, to challenge and motivate these groups to contribute to this field (Hoffman et al., 2015), and to let culturally diverse voices reshape the creeds of existential psychology (Hoffman et al., 2015; Hoffman et al., 2016).

A second major contribution of existential psychology is that it revolutionized the field of psychology, moving the analytic gaze from an isolationist perspective of an individual, to a broader perspective of an individual in context, taking a more holistic approach (Hoffman et al., 2015). However, even this broadened perspective was not broad enough, as it stopped short of analyzing a person's culture and people's influence on their broader context (Hoffman et al., 2015, p. 42). Instead of stopping at helping individual people to self-actualize, existential psychology should broaden its influence and strive to affect people's collective self-actualization (Hanks, 2008). Humanistic psychology must re-conceptualize the self from a disjointed, isolated self, to an inclusionary one that accounts for the socio-cultural context in which the self resides (McDonald & Wearing, 2013). Therefore, humanism and existentialism fall short, and multiculturalism can fill that void.

Multiculturalism

While having meaning in life is a general human need, how to achieve meaning in life must involve both personal and cultural factors alike (Hoffman, 2009). Multiculturalism de-isolates individuals and places them amongst other people and observes them from a collectivistic point of view (Hoffman et al., 2015). No singular meaning will be applicable to everyone across the world; therefore, multicultural psychology believes meaning is highly affected by one's culture (Hoffman et al., 2016). Multiculturalism accepts the idea that there is a multiplicity of worldviews, taking a "both/and" approach rather than an "either/or"

approach. In addition, people's actions must be observed in context. Similarly, to better understand multiculturalism, people must place it into context.

It is important to differentiate multiculturalism from other similar concepts such as cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology. Cultural psychology focuses only on one culture at a time and tries to understand all of its facets (Hoffman et al., 2016). Cross-cultural psychology is concerned with comparing and contrasting the different characteristics of cultures to understand their similarities and differences (Hoffman et al., 2016). However, only multiculturalism seeks to observe the result of the interaction of multiple cultures and to see the effect that interaction has on all of the cultures (Hoffman et al., 2016). For example, looking at the concept of "justice," cultural psychology would try to understand how justice is understood in the Ethiopian culture, for example. Cross-cultural psychology would look at how the concept of justice is understood differently or similarly in the Ethiopian culture, Polish culture, and Venezuelan culture. Multiculturalism would try to understand how the concept of justice is understood by Ethiopian, Polish, and Venezuelan people living in the United States while they interact with each other, and who are also exposed to the American version of the concept of justice, since the American version of justice is the law of the land in which they now live. After being acquainted with the psychological school of thought that influenced Frankl, it is also vital to address Frankl's unique contribution to the fields of psychology and philosophy.

Logotherapy

Based on his observations in the Nazi concentration camps, Viktor Frankl designed a therapy method known as logotherapy that is used widely to help people deal with trauma and deep depression, and to help them live full lives. In his analysis, Viktor Frankl (2006) noted that one of the main factors that differentiated prisoners who quit the fight for survival and those who kept on fighting until the end was their meaning of life, the meaning of their suffering, their level of hope, and a sense of freedom or choice over their life. Frankl articulated clearly that as long as human beings attribute a good meaning to their situation, no matter the situation and how difficult or painful it may be, they will overcome the difficulties and the obstacles they face. For example, Frankl himself chose to redefine the meaning of his experience in the concentration camps; he could not choose to leave and since he had to be there, he used the opportunity to save or prevent as many prisoners as possible from committing suicide. On the other hand, when people fail to give their situation a good meaning, and they lose hope, they are much more likely to quit.

Many people living in our postmodern society experience a void (Frankl, 2006). Frankl called it an “existential vacuum,” which is accompanied by “existential frustration” that is experienced when people cannot find meaning in life. People try to rid themselves of this vacuum and frustration by engaging in the “will-to-power,” or pursuit for power, often in the form of money, and the “will-to-pleasure,” often in the form of sex or shopping. These efforts satiate the vacuum and the frustration only momentarily, but the vacuum can only truly be

solved by the “will-to-meaning” or finding a great purpose in life (Frankl, 2006, p. 98). People can actually worsen their existential vacuum and their existential frustration when they try to appease them through the pursuit of materialistic gains, through aggression, or pleasure pursuits such as sex, alcohol, drugs, or even food (Frankl, 2006). The main motivation in human beings is finding a unique, individual meaning, the will-to-meaning, which is a life-long process (Washburn, 1998). When people find meaning, they experience a paradigm shift expressed in their own ideas of who they are, the way they see the world around them, and the way they relate to the people surrounding them (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). In turn, once individuals find meaning, they change how they react to the world and the events around them.

Logotherapy places high value on the unique responses of people to their human conditions and their lived experiences (Frankl, 1988). According to logotherapy, the key to psychological well-being is finding meaning, or giving value and meaning to the events we face throughout our lives (Noble, 1997). Life is primarily a quest for meaning (Frankl, 2006). People’s subconscious and conscious needs for meaning and purpose guide their behavior (Noble, 1997). Frankl (2006) believed strongly that those who have a reason to live will find the strength to withstand even the worst of circumstances. In explaining this issue, Frankl cited the philosopher Nietzsche who stated that “he who has a why to live for can bear almost any how (as cited in Frankl, 2006, p. IX). There are three main sources of meaning: work (doing something significant), love (caring for another person), and courage during difficult times (Frankl, 2006). Unlike other

types of psychological therapy, logotherapy is not retrospective; it is not concerned with the past, but is future oriented. Logotherapy focuses on the potential meaning that patients can fulfill through their circumstances in the future (Frankl, 2006). Logotherapy creates a vision and purpose for people's futures.

Though Frankl's logotherapy has mainly been applied to the field of psychology, the concepts framed by Frankl could very easily be applicable to the education field as well and particularly to the higher education system, which is currently facing low student success rates. Today there is an entire body of literature on higher education framed around Viktor Frankl's concepts. The following literature review surveys the present literature on the concepts of meaning of life, meaning of education, hope, student success or student achievement, and students who stop out, as well as re-entry students.

Review of the Scholarly Empirical Literature

It is important to understand the concept of meaning in life and the implications that the presence of life meaning or lack of life meaning can have on people's lives. In the next few paragraphs I will provide a literature review of the main concepts that pertain to this study. I will start by looking at the concept of meaning of life, hope as a component of life meaning, self-efficacy as a component of life meaning, meaning of education, stopped-out students, and last, re-entry students.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in five main concepts. The first concept addresses research on what people perceive as the meaning of life. Next, two main components of life meaning are dissected: hope

and self-efficacy. Last, I review research that has focused on the population selected for this study: stopped-out and re-entry students.

Meaning of Life

Having meaning in life is one of humans' most basic needs (Frankl, 2006; Noble, 1997; Steger et al., (2006). People who experience life as meaningful have a sense of purpose, a sense of life worth living (Heintzleman & King, 2014). Life meaning is one of the main motivating factors in people's lives (Frankl, 2006; Schulenberg et al. 2014). Life meaning provides people with the motivation to fulfill their goals (Ho et al. 2010). People with life meaning are less likely to be depressed, and tend to have higher life satisfaction, as well as a positive and content life (Steger et al. 2006). Those who have meaning in life experience higher life satisfaction and reduced depression, higher self-esteem, higher optimism, increased positive affect, and healthier lives (Steger et al. 2006). Meaning in life is inversely associated with isolation and alienation (Ho et al. 2010). Higher life purpose is also positively associated with increased levels of emotional intimacy with other individuals, and in turn better mental well-being (Bodner et al., 2014). A strong sense of meaning is associated with feeling grounded, and ensures well-being even in stressful conditions of insecurity (Burrow et al., 2014). Meaning is a mitigating factor, bridging the gap between people's trajectory of life from their past toward their future (Burrow et al., 2014). If having life meaning has so many positive effects, it is important to understand the effects of not having life purpose or life meaning.

According to Frankl (2006), the absence of meaning leads to an existential vacuum, or feelings of emptiness. The existential vacuum is a feeling of dullness, monotony, and indifference (Schulenberg et al., 2014). The level of apathy can range from a temporary discontent to chronic misery (Fahlman et al., 2009). When emptiness is not addressed, it is often associated with mental issues, such as depression (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 2014; Frankl, 2006; Mason, 2013; Schulenberg et al. 2014).

Due to the negative effects associated with a lack of meaning, and the positive effects associated with the presence of life meaning, it is imperative to further study this concept. Meaning is a subject that is worth researching and understanding (Steger et al., 2006). Life purpose, or life meaning, is a concept that must be reexamined (Schnell & Becker, 2006). One of the aspects that must be considered is who are the people who look for meaning.

Some may think that only those who lack life meaning are motivated to search for it. However, research does not support this idea. Steger et al. (2006) posited that people do not search for meaning only when they undergo difficult times or when they are experiencing emptiness. Instead, the search for meaning seems to be unaffected by the presence of meaning in one's life. People who already have life purpose could be looking for more meaning, to diversify their sources of meaning, to shift from one source of meaning to another, or to achieve a higher level of understanding of the sources of meaning in life.

Furthermore, Schnell and Becker (2006) concluded that personality seems to influence meaningfulness. There are several personality traits, and some of

them affect life purpose. Extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are predictors of life meaning. Extroverts tend to experience increased optimism and to report higher levels of well-being and happiness (Schnell & Becker, 2006). People with meaningful lives tend to have higher levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Self-transcendence, or people who are concerned with issues beyond themselves and their particular needs, such as having a spiritual life, being altruistic, and having an increased concern with nature and their environment also tend to have higher meaning (Schell & Becker, 2006). Living a meaningful life leads to commitment to a greater cause, a cause beyond the self (Frankl, 2006; Mason, 2013). Personality does not influence just the level of meaning in one's life but also the sources of meaning a person may seek.

Depending on personality, people report different sources of meaning. Extraverts, for example, get their meaning from engaging in pleasurable activities, pushing themselves, independence and spontaneity, self-expression and imagination, self-awareness, being attentive to others' needs, being active, discipline, and having a sense of duty (Schnell & Becker, 2006). These individuals tend to care about the activities they take on, get along with others easily, use reason, they have morals and are principled, are pragmatic, value tradition, are concerned with physical well-being, learning, and contributing to causes greater than themselves (Schnell & Becker, 2006). Since they get along with others easily, they are likely to find meaning in connecting with others and being part of social groups (Schnell & Becker, 2006). Relationships with others, education, profession, and spirituality are primary sources of life meaning

(Darewych, 2014). Higher levels of meaning are also associated with identifying multiple pathways for the future (Darewych, 2014). Furthermore, life meaning is a rather complex notion that encompasses other concepts as well. Two of the main components of meaning are hope and a sense of control, or efficacy (Frankl, 2006). Therefore, in order to fully understand life meaning, we must dissect it and analyze its primary components.

Hope as a Component of Life Meaning

Hope is defined as having the ability or agency, determination, and plan involving a sequence of steps, to achieve a desired goal (Snyder et al., 1991). Several quantitative studies, including one study that used a longitudinal national dataset, found perceived meaning of life and hope to be highly correlated concepts (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Kim et al., 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). Hopelessness is a significant factor that contributes to depression and is a primary factor in suicide ideation and attempted suicide (Furr et al., 2001). Low levels of hope also correlated with increased anxiety levels (Feldman & Snyder, 2005). Two meta-analyses published in the same article, found that the current generation of youth is unmistakably experiencing increased levels of anxiety compared to previous age groups (Twenge, 2000). On the other hand, people with increased life purpose report higher levels of hope (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Feldman & Snyder, 2005). When students have higher levels of hope, they also tend to have higher goal attainment (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wroblewski, 2009). Increased hope is correlated with positive student outcomes. Higher hope is associated with problem solving

behavior and better coping mechanisms in the face of stressors (Snyder et al., 1991). High levels of hope among students lead to better academic and athletic performance, higher grades, and higher graduation rates (Snyder et al., 2002). Higher levels of hope also lead to increased goal achievement, regardless of the types of goals (Feldman et al., 2009). Yet hope alone is insufficient without the belief that one can accomplish one's hopeful dreams.

Self-Efficacy as a Component of Life Meaning

A second component of meaning is self-efficacy (Frankl, 2006). Pruetz (2011) found meaning in life and academic self-efficacy were correlated as students who reported high levels of life meaning also reported high levels of academic self-efficacy. Another study by Lane and Schutts (2014) reported that self-efficacy is a good predictor of life meaning and hope. The concept of self-efficacy is important to discuss as it currently affects students, and it will continue to do so in the future. "Perceived self-efficacy" is a self-evaluation of how well one could perform certain actions or attain desired results (Bandura, 1982, p. 122). Appraisals of one's self-efficacy have a big impact on how people handle challenging situations, as they determine people's behavior, thoughts, and emotions in those difficult times (Bandura, 1982). Therefore, it is important to understand self-efficacy and how it affects students, their learning, academic achievement, as well as their career choices.

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory posited that psychological processes serve to create and reinforce perceptions of personal self-efficacy. "An outcome expectancy" is a person's assessment that a specific action will yield a particular

outcome (Bandura, 1977, p. 193). Belief in one's ability to master a skill affects a person's decision to start, persevere, and engage in coping behavior to attain the proposed goal. When people experience low self-efficacy, they are likely to procrastinate or avoid the situation altogether. People are likely to enter situations they believe they can successfully address but tend to avoid situations they deem as exceeding their skill level. This phenomenon explains procrastination. When students have low levels of self-discipline for learning and academic self-efficacy, they experience increased levels of anxiety, stress, and even sickness (Hen & Goroshit, 2014). Hen and Goroshit (2014) found self-efficacy, on the other hand, mediated academic performance, emotional intelligence, and academic procrastination. Students who believed they could use their cognitive skills and their time to study tended to experience more academic success (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2007). Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, or believing one possesses the ability to learn on his or her own, affects academic achievement and goal setting for students (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Studies revealed that self-efficacy, or believing you can achieve a certain goal affects the amount of effort a person is willing invest.

The higher the level of self-efficacy, the more effort a person will be willing to make and the longer they will be willing to sustain their effort in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1977). Those who persist, are more likely to succeed, which in turn validates their self-efficacy; on the other hand, those who give up hastily, will be left with negative expectations for long periods of time (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy affects the goals a person sets, their commitment to those goal,

their persistence during difficult times and willingness to overcome obstacles, their critical thinking, as well as attributions of locus of control for their failures and successes (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

The effects of self-efficacy can be seen early on in the life of a child and persists at different ages. Early on, self-efficacy affects children's ability to regulate their learning and grasp difficult concepts (Bandura, 1993). In addition, self-efficacy affects children's motivation, interest in academic subjects, and academic achievement (Bandura, 1993). Later in life, self-efficacy affects people's career ambitions and targets (Betz & Hackett, 1986). The higher the self-efficacy, the more options people will consider when choosing a career path, and the more likely they will be to persevere and succeed (Betz & Hackett, 1986). Self-efficacy and learning motivation are important factors that influence academic achievement (Hassankhani, Aghdam, Rahmani, & Mohammadpoorfard, 2015). The impact of self-efficacy on academic success has been proven to affect a diverse body of students.

Alongitudinal one-year quantitative study by Majer (2009) that took into account students' responses on a questionnaire as well as their participation and attrition status, revealed that self-efficacy influenced educational goal achievement and predicted increased grade point average in first-generation college students of diverse backgrounds. First-generation college students are those students whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree. A second quantitative study by Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz (2010) conducted on five California State University campuses showed that self-efficacy also influenced

the GPA and persistence of sophomore students. Using regression analysis in a study of 401 first-year students, Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, and Murdock (2012) found that self-efficacy also influenced persistence rates and academic achievement for first-generation immigrant students of diverse backgrounds.

Since meaning and hope are positively correlated (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Kim et al. 2005; Lane & Schutts, 2014; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006), and life meaning is also correlated with a sense of control, or efficacy (Lane & Schutts, 2014; Pruett, 2011), helping students identify and increase their life meaning, will likely increase their levels of hope and self-efficacy and could have positive effects on their academic achievement. However, a student's level of development could be another factor influencing students' ability to construct meaning. It is important to note that the students' level of development affects students' meaning making process, their ability to make sense of, and take ownership of their life stories. Therefore, in the next section, I will focus on Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship.

Theory of Self-Authorship

According to Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, there are four phases that individuals experience on the path to self-authorship. These phases move individuals on a continuum from relying on external factors for self-definition to internal self-definition. Individuals in the first phase unquestionably conform to societal norms and expectations in both their personal lives and career choices. Experiencing a high need for peer acceptance, individuals may adopt their peers' definitions of them as true and accept their peers' decisions

and beliefs as their own. When individuals become unsatisfied with previous choices, individuals reconsider their identities and paths in life.

During the second phase, known as “crossroads,” individuals often discover that following societal rules and expectations does not work well for them. Many individuals dislike the identities others have placed on them and reconsider their career choices. Through introspection and self-discovery, by the end of this phase, individuals have an increased sense of self-trust and a clearer path for the future. During the third phase, individuals take ownership of their lives, and authorship of their life story. They seek to identify a value system and start living according to that system. Individuals also cement their senses of self.

With a strong sense of self-awareness, individuals at stage four are cemented in the system of beliefs they have solidified. Secure and at peace with their identity, individuals at this stage are willing to explore and even change; however, instead of relying on external conditions to make decisions, individuals in the fourth stage follow their internal compass to make major decisions in both their personal and professional lives (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Though the phases of self-authorship describe people as a whole regardless of gender, women often have different experiences and perspectives than men, and, therefore, they develop differently than males. Therefore, it is important to understand women’s unique development process. In order to understand women’s experiences, Belenky’s theory of women’s development will be used.

Women's Ways of Knowing

Since women and men inherit very different societal experiences, they tend to develop their identities differently. Historically, because women were excluded from educational and career fields, male scholars defined ideas of self-development, cognitive development, and notions of truth by studying male subjects only (Belenky, McVicker Clinchy, Rule Goldberg, & Mattuck Tarule, 1986). Once identified, the developmental concepts were generalized to both men and women without distinction. Finally, in the 1970s, feminist scholars started studying women's ways of thinking, learning, and developing. The theory spearheaded by Field Belenky on women's development emerged as a result of thorough interviews with many rural and urban women at a variety of stages in their lives (Belenky et al., 1986). The interviews captured their experiences in their primary relationships and the educational field to understand how both of these primary spheres affected women's development of their senses of self.

According to *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986), received knowers are women who believe knowledge exists only outside of themselves, and no knowledge comes from within. These women tend to play by the rules established by authority figures without so much as questioning the reason for the rules. One of the main issues that received knowers experience is a desire to take care of others, often at their own expense. In addition, received knowers often have an "either/or" approach, often feeling that they have to choose between making self-serving or other-serving choices. If they choose self-serving options, women feel selfish. Furthermore, received knowers feel the pressure to

conform to stereotypical feminine attributes of not taking power for themselves, but instead, they approach adulthood as an opportunity to empower others by helping them or by teaching them. Received knowers tend to believe that they themselves cannot be a source of knowledge and that knowledge can only come from outside of themselves; this holds true for their self-concepts; many women therefore rely on others' descriptions of them to form their self-concepts.

Therefore, received knowers attempt to meet others' expectations of them.

On the other hand, another category of women, subjective knowers, acknowledge that some knowledge comes from within or is subjective, if they stop to listen to their inner voice (Belenky et al., 1986). With the discovery of their inner truth, subjective knowers, regardless of their biological age, feel emboldened, they are free from fulfilling everyone else's expectations for them and living up to others' definitions of them. In addition to a student's level of development and gender, other factors affect students' meaning of life and their education. Although there have been a few studies focusing on the meaning of education for students, even fewer studies have specifically focused on community college students, and there have not been any studies looking at the meaning of education for stopped-out and re-entry students. However, it is important to summarize the extant knowledge on education meaning.

Education Meaning

The American College Health Association (2012) found, in a sample of 76,000 students, over 85% were overwhelmed, more than 80% were emotionally drained, over 60% experienced sadness and loneliness, over 50% felt high levels

of stress and anxiety, close to 50% felt hopelessness and purposelessness, and the rest experienced depression that affected their ability to function properly. The currently low student achievement rates could be a side effect of this generation's low levels of life meaning. After all, the students are reporting the negative effects of a lack of meaning. Educators experience daily the need for students from all walks of life to have meaningful goals worth pursuing and a feeling of purpose in life (Nash & Jang, 2014). Currently, the economy is unstable and unpredictable, people experience political and religious turmoil, the environment is degenerating, and resources are becoming scarce. Students need a strong hold to carry them through (Nash & Jang, 2014). Only half of the students asked reported high levels of meaning or a search for meaning, further highlighting the need for educational institutions to focus on helping students identify a life purpose and identify pathways to that purpose (Darewych, 2014). While some students experience their quarterlife (ages 18-30) in a state of tension, panic, anxiety, and stress, other students use this time to write a different life story—one filled with meaning (Nash & Jang, 2014). Yet researchers have placed very little focus on aiding students to discover their life meaning and developing their life goals, in spite of the challenges they face (Mason & Nel, 2011). There is hardly any research linking the concepts of life meaning and education (Hagedorn, 2012). The next few paragraphs will summarize the existing literature on the meaning of education, which will include an article outlining the need for a meaning making education (Nash & Jang, 2014), a qualitative study of 13 participants performed in South Africa (Mason, 2013), a

few quantitative studies, a mixed-method study (Yeager & Budnick, 2009), and a quasi-experimental design (Feldman & Dreher, 2012). Two quantitative studies were conducted at a mid-western university, one of 653 students, predominantly white, and a second of 254 students with similar demographics (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). A third quantitative study included 232 students and were once again predominantly white (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Another quantitative study involved a large population of over 1800 students and was conducted in Hong Kong (Ho et al. 2010). The mixed-method study relied on 700 high school students in Northern California (Yeager & Budnick, 2009). Last, the quasi-experimental design study involved 96 students at a Northern California university who were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (Feldman & Dreher, 2012).

According to Nash and Jang (2014), instead of focusing on life meaning, students are channeled through the educational system with a focus on career success only. Education should also provide students with the means to identify and discover meaning in an ever-stressful world (Frankl, 1988). Meaning making is a process, while purpose-finding is an end result, but both are important, particularly during difficult times like our current times (Nash & Jang, 2014). The education system needs to help students to smooth out the discrepancies and inconsistencies of life, as well as help them further understand life in general, as well as understand the course content (Nash & Jang, 2014). Education is one of the main sources of meaning (Mason, 2013). The literature shows that finding meaning in education can lead to positive results.

Education meaning is the significance, value, or worth of education for students (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). College and university should be more than a preparation for a profession, or mastering the art of test-taking (Nash & Jang, 2014). College students must equally focus on identifying strong meanings of life and master the art of identifying meaningful goals. Identifying and focusing on worthwhile or meaningful academic goals and engaging in activities that contribute to one's identity increase students' satisfaction with their education and with themselves (Ho et al. 2010). Therefore, researchers must study the concept of education meaning more and increase people understanding of it.

Very few studies have focused on the particular meanings students give their education (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). A quantitative study by Henderson-King and Mitchell (2011) of 232 students at a university in the United States, who were predominantly white, showed that students' materialism, intrinsic goals, and their need for life meaning predicted the meaning students give their education. In addition, Yeager and Bundick's (2009) a mixed-methods study of 6th, 9th, and 12th grade students found similar results. For example, students who scored high on materialism viewed education as a means to achieve increased independence, establish connections with others and as a source of anxiety (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011), or as ways to achieve financial security and admiration (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Individuals with high intrinsic goals, who scored high on the search for life meaning, saw education as a means to increased autonomy, identifying future paths, achieving self-

development, and developing the skills needed to affect the world around them (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Students who search for life meaning are more likely to see their education as a period of self-discovery and self-development and as a time to identify what is important in life and ways to view life (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Students who had already identified their life meaning tended to see their education as a means to develop the skills they needed to affect the world around them (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Yeager & Bundick, 2009). These students were more likely to see the link between the activities they engaged in during their school years, whether academic or extra-curricular, and their life after graduation (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Those goals that are other-centered and have the ability to impact the world outside of the self are the kinds of goals that are most likely to indicate meaning of life and meaning of education (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Though some may suggest that the school years are the time for students to identify and develop their meaning of life, research shows that students who already have life meaning may benefit even more from their education, as they see the connection between what they are learning and the application of that knowledge in real life (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011).

Some students enjoy learning and being in school. These students who find school to be enjoyable saw education as an opportunity for a liberal arts education, and those who also focus on achieving good grades are likely to see education as a preparation for a profession (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). Other students see education as a chance to gain independence in the future

and reduce their current reliance on others; yet others see their education as a chance to build their social networks (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). Some students see education as nothing but a source of anxiety and a waste of time (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). In other words, some students gave their education an “intrinsic self-oriented” meaning, with education being a means to improving their own situation, rather than an other-oriented meaning, considering education as a means to improve the lives of others (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Therefore, we must help students give their education better meanings.

Meaning of education is positively associated with increased appreciation of academic work, intellectual development, and academic achievement (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006). Having education meaning helps student step back and stop going through the motions and chasing financial and career success, and instead gives them a chance to take it all in and talk about the existential issues of life with dear ones (Nash & Jang, 2014). When handled properly, academic life should not be just a source of stress, but together with loved ones, it should be a source of contentment, joy, and a source of purpose or meaning (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Feldman et al. 2009). Having life purpose is vital (Frankl, 2006). And there are ways for members of the higher education community to help students find a higher meaning of education.

One way to help students give their education and their lives more meaning is by spending quality time in conversation with them. Two of the key factors of meaning-making are moral conversations and storytelling (Nash &

Jang, 2014.). Students are able to identify their meaning in the process of telling their unique life stories (Nash & Jang, 2014).

Stopped-Out Students

To begin, it is important to define the concept of stopped-out students. “Stop-outs include students who do not complete their plan of study within the normal time schedule, having skipped a term or more, and then having returned to college” (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Stop-outs are typically non-traditional students, who have responsibilities such as supporting themselves, often are married and have children, are working, and are experiencing financial difficulty (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). These students have a variety of reasons for stopping out, which range from dealing with personal and health issues, caring for loved ones, job related issues, financial problems, poor academic skills, or dissatisfaction with courses or the educational institution they attend (Woosley, 2004). In order to prevent them from quitting school, higher education institutions must develop plans to help this group financially via scholarships and financial aid (Hoyt, 1999), provide child-care services, family housing, evening classes (Polson, 1994), and policies that are sensitive to family constraints such as divorce, illness or death in the family, which are issues that this population may have to deal with (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Research indicates that upon their departure from higher education, many of these students plan to return, but only a few actually do.

Hoyt and Winn (2004) conducted a study focused on stopped-out students and self-efficacy at a four-year state college. When surveyed, more than 50% of stopped-out students expressed a desire to return to higher education, and a

third of them actually did. Pre-existing student characteristics were not found to be related to re-enrollment. The students' return to school could potentially point once again to the role of self-efficacy mentioned previously.

However, Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong, and Gibson (2005) found students' sense of identity was positively correlated with GPA or student performance across both gender and racial lines and was negatively correlated with the intention to leave higher education. Even when taking into account students' personality dimensions such as extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability, sense of identity accounted for the largest portion of the correlation with GPA, and it was also positively correlated with life satisfaction. In addition, goal setting predicted re-enrollment (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Woosley, 2004). Students who listed a bachelor's (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Woosley, 2004; or a master's degree as their educational goal were more likely to re-enroll, leading to the assumption that a long term educational goal might act as a motivator (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). The earlier the withdrawal from college, the less likely students were to re-enroll (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). It seems that institutional commitment or lack thereof may influence students' persistence (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Woosley, 2004). There are several factors that influenced students' departure.

The primary reasons students stopped-out were finances, work, and family (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Students who listed work as the main reason for their stopping out were less likely to re-enroll compared to students who listed family or financial issues as the primary reasons for departure (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Work is the primary reason why community college students lag behind four-year

students by 21% in bachelor's degree attainment (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Two other reasons why community college students have lower bachelor's degree attainment rates are that many community college students fail to transfer after completing 60 credits and the loss of some of their credits if they do transfer (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Another reason for leaving school was low grades and not having clear goals (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). After identifying the main contributing factors to student departure, we must also note the factors affecting students' re-enrollment.

Class standing was a good predictor of re-enrollment; the more years students had completed, the more likely they were to return (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). In addition, students who had had a positive campus experience, were significantly more likely to return, and so were students who answered that they were dealing with personal or health issues (Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Woosley, 2004). On the other hand, students who stated they were planning to transfer or move to another institution were less likely to re-enroll (Woosley, 2004). Also, not receiving financial assistance was yet another contributor to decreased persistence in African American, Hispanic, and White groups alike (Hu & St. Jose, 2001). However, the same factors may not apply to all students. For example, Latino students may have unique reasons why they stop-out of higher education institutions.

There were five main factors that made the difference between Latino students who persisted in college goal attainment and those who stopped-out. One of these primary reasons was experiencing academic difficulty (Zurita,

2005). The second factor was having a hard time transitioning from a traditional Latino home environment to the higher education institutional culture (Zurita, 2005). The third reason was coming from a predominantly segregated high school which consisting of predominantly Latino and African-American students, as they tend to provide lower quality education than other schools (Zurita, 2005). The fourth factor was being a first-generation college student and having parents who did not attend college and would not be able to help them acclimate to the college environment (Zurita, 2005). The last factor was lacking well-determined educational and career goals (Zurita, 2005).

Re-entry Students

Re-entry students, also referred to as “returning students,” “adult students,” “adult learners,” or “nontraditional students” refers to students who “return to school either full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life” (Benshof & Lewis, 1992, p. 1). Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, or the number of years students had been away from school were not predictors of students’ academic success (Adebayo, 1993).

Bouer and Mott (1990) found that re-entry students were motivated by several factors to return to higher education. For most of them, the main motivating factors were their present life situations, marked by competing social and familial demands, rather than their future career. Many of these students struggled to maintain intimacy with their dear ones without losing their sense of self, and looked to higher education as a way to help them solve their problem. In

addition, Bouer and Mott noted that students are currently rewarded by the higher education system only when they take courses that apply to their major and careers and not for taking courses for their personal intrinsic gratification. In order to motivate older students, they recommended that higher education institutions create reward systems for these students to take courses for their personal interests. Rewarding even younger students for taking courses of their intrinsic interest will increase their motivation to stay in school and not drop out. However, appealing to the younger and older students' intrinsic motivation is not enough. Higher education leaders must consider the needs of other subgroups of re-entry students such as mothers.

In a study by Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013), one of the biggest motivators for students who are mothers was ensuring a safe future for their children. A desire to offer their children a better-quality life that includes a safe home environment and quality care drove mothers to bear the difficulties of returning to school. For some mothers, going back to school was a statement of taking charge of their life, as well as a necessary step for achieving a desired career. However, in spite of having multiple motivations for returning to school, re-entry students also face many hindrances.

Many returning students have experienced bullying and prejudice in the form of teasing or ignoring and were sanctioned by other students and sometimes instructors alike (Brown, 2010). These experiences only added additional stress to their transition to higher education and made the learning environment more hostile, adding conflict to the experience (Brown, 2010). The

hostility encountered led them to feel as outsiders and impeded their ability to integrate into the campus life (Parks, Evans, & Getch, 2013). Not only did they deal with a hostile outside environment, but re-entry students were also managing their internal conflict as well.

Re-entry students also have to manage the reminders of the reasons why they dropped out in the first place. For example, if a woman had dropped out of school due to having gotten pregnant, the school could serve as a reminder of her situation at the time and this could torment her psychologically (Brown, 2010). In other words, students felt re-victimized and felt that they did not belong, as they were different than the typical or traditional college students (Brown, 2010).

In addition, some re-entry students questioned their ability to meet the academic demands of higher education and see themselves as ill-equipped to handle the load compared to their traditional counterparts (Brown, 2010; Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013). Some women also feared not having the appropriate resources to handle all of their responsibilities (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013). Sometimes, all of the external mistreatment and internal turmoil were strong enough to drive re-entry students to consider dropping out all over again (Brown, 2010). Furthermore, re-entry students who are women and mothers often face additional concerns.

Re-entry women may have to manage societal expectations of womanhood. Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) recommended that to ease the negative feelings they are likely to experience, re-entry women needed to

abandon the feminine ideal that women should be able to do it all. In order to succeed, they may have to re-negotiate boundaries and learn to say “no” to certain demands or even certain classes. Many mothers in Filipponi-Berardinelli’s study felt they had to choose between providing the needed care to their children and finishing school assignments on time, as well as meeting work requirements; often times, the former took precedence. Moreover, whenever they had support, mothers experienced guilt for prioritizing school over spending time with their children. Mothers also experienced guilt from not being able to compensate their helpers or support people enough, and whenever they took any personal time to address their personal needs, or when they neglected any house chores. To deal with these barriers and negative feelings, students need coping mechanisms.

There are several coping strategies to help re-entry students meet their demands. First, to achieve balance, re-entry students need good communication skills to help them re-negotiate their boundaries with family members and other support people as well as make changes to their support system as needed (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013). Next, re-entry students must master time management skills, and employ organizational tools such as organizers, calendars, and other similar tools. Re-entry students must take charge of their situation and identify the appropriate resources to help them meet their needs, and also take charge of their educational success (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013). Though re-entry students face many impediments, they also have additional strengths compared to traditional students.

One of the areas of strength of re-entry students is computer skills. Re-entry students are more interested, more confident, and more capable in computer abilities (Klein & Knupfer, 1993). Another characteristic that sets apart re-entry students from traditional students is how they handle low grades. Earning lower grades does not affect re-entry students and their decision to persist as negatively as it affects traditional students (Spanard, 1990). Knowing the motivators, the obstacles, and the strengths of re-entry students, it is important for higher education leaders to address the needs that re-entry students face upon their return to higher education to ensure their success.

Conceptual Framework

A person who has life meaning experiences life as purposeful, and as worth living (Heintzleman & King, 2014). Having life meaning leads to increased life satisfaction and contentment, higher self-esteem, optimism and diminished rates of depression (Steger et al., 2006). On the other hand, lack of meaning in life is associated with feelings of apathy, indifference (Schulenberg et al., 2014), emptiness (Frankl, 2006) and depression (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 2014; Frankl, 2006; Schulenberg et al., 2014). Meaning in life is a complex concept that includes two other factors: hope and self-efficacy (Frankl, 2006).

Several studies found meaning in life and hope to be highly positively correlated (Feldman & Sneyder, 2005; Kim et al., 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006). Meaning in life is also positively correlated with academic self-efficacy (Pruett, 2011). Self-efficacy is a good predictor of life meaning and hope (Lane & Schutts, 2014). Students who have meaningful academic goals experience an

increased appreciation of learning and academic achievement (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006; Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010); furthermore, they are more able to see the application of their knowledge to practical life goals (Mitchell, 2011) and to contribute to their identities (Ho et al., 2010).

Chapter Summary

As the current literature review highlights, life meaning is a vital factor that affects people's quality of life. Lack of meaning is associated with several negative effects, while the presence of meaning is associated with positive effects. Higher levels of life meaning are also associated with increased levels of hope, and together, higher levels of life purpose and higher levels of hope can positively impact generations of students' education achievement rates. Though the body of research linking life meaning with education is growing, no studies have looked at the connection between life meaning, hope, meaning of education, and students who stop out or even drop out of higher education. We need to learn from these students and help them find meaning or give meaning to their lives and their education if we are to prevent them from dropping out of school or help them return to achieve their educational goals. As stories are a useful tool to explore concepts of meaning, this study used a narrative approach to address the concept of meaning in students who have stopped-out of higher education. Chapter 3 will explicate the methods used to address the current gaps in literature.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The U.S. has not been graduating enough college students in the last 30 years to meet the demands of the economy (Adams, 2011). Many students attend higher education institutions but do not attain certificates and degrees. In the last 20 years, 30 million students left higher education institutions without completing degrees (Shapiro, 2014). In a 2010 study by Radford et al. (2010), only 34% of a cohort of students who started college in 2003 had earned a degree after six years, and a 2013 study found that only a quarter of entering students graduated (Strom & Strom, 2013). National postsecondary achievement rates are low at a time when the U.S. economy is creating jobs that require higher education (Schramm, 2012). Researchers have been trying to identify some of the issues that might negatively affect student success rates. A study of 76,000 students identified some of these potential factors: more than 80% of students felt overwhelmed and emotionally drained, over 60% experienced sadness and loneliness, over 50% experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, hopelessness, and purposelessness, and the rest experienced depression that affected their ability to function properly (American College Health Association, 2012). All of these are symptoms of low levels of life meaning.

Students who experience high levels of life meaning tend to also experience high levels of hope (Feldman & Snyder, 2005; Kim et al., date;

Mascaro & Rosen, 2006), and high academic self-efficacy (Pruett, 2011). These students tend to view education as a way to gain the necessary skills to be able to influence the world around them (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Yeager & Bundick, 2009). Yet researchers have not helped society and students explore and understand the concept of life meaning and identify life goals (Mason & Nel, 2011), and very few studies have explored the relationship between the concepts of life meaning and education (Hagedorn, 2012). It remains to be seen whether students leave school without accomplishing their educational goals because they lack education meaning and thus cannot overcome the obstacles they face. Returning to school and actively working and successfully completing courses with passing grades may indicate that students see their education as having meaning or value in their lives.

The purpose of this study was to understand the meaning of education for students who stopped out of school for a period of time, and how that meaning may have changed from the moment they stopped attending college to the moment they returned. The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they first started school?
2. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they dropped out?
3. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they returned to school?

4. How do students describe the meaning of education for them at the time of the interview?

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this research study. I provide the justification for taking a qualitative approach, and particularly narrative analysis, to meet the goals of the study. Next, I provide an overview of the sample and setting, instrumentation, procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness. I end the chapter by including my personal perspective and life experiences and how they influenced the study at hand.

Qualitative Research

In the broad sense of the concept, qualitative research methods refer to gathering descriptive data, or the recording of people's actual words or descriptions of people's behavior (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Qualitative research is holistic, observing people in their context, and does not reduce people to variables (Taylor et al., 2016). To uncover answers to their questions, qualitative researchers examine humans in diverse settings by paying attention to how individuals place themselves in and understand their environments (Berg, 2004) and the meaning participants assign to the people, places, things, and events they encounter (Taylor et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers seek to understand the meaning making process of their participants in detail and to capture the nuances of how participants give meaning to their "social realities" (Berg, 2001, p. 7). In qualitative research, some data can be collected through fieldwork; the researchers at times submerge themselves in the environment under study, spending time and collecting observations and at times conducting

interviews with people or groups of people or examining artifacts or documents (Patton, 1990). The researcher becomes a “participant observer” (Patton, 1990, p. 10). Important pieces of information for the topic of study are recorded and preserved, and further examined at a later time (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, qualitative researchers seek to understand a phenomenon from their participants’ point of view (Taylor et al., 2016). By focusing on words rather than numbers, qualitative research attempts to understand and interpret the participants’ actions rather than controlling and predicting their behavior (Kim, 2016).

Qualitative research methods take an inductive approach to data analysis (Taylor et al., 2016). Once the observations of people’s behavior or people’s words are recorded, the researchers look for patterns (Taylor et al., 2016); they do not look for the data to support already established hypotheses of what the researchers believe they will find. Qualitative researchers will, however, rely on theoretical or philosophical frameworks to help guide their studies and determine if the theory fits the data (Taylor et al., 2016). In addition, qualitative research values every voice, not solely the majority voice (Taylor et al., 2016). To have valid and reliable qualitative data, the researcher must demonstrate skill in this particular methodology, as well as thoughtfulness, honesty, and high ethical standards (Patton, 1990). A respectable qualitative research study is rigorous and systematic (Berg, 2004).

Qualitative inquiry helps researchers explore research problems for which the variables have not already been identified, and the researchers seek to uncover potential variables (Creswell, 2012). As the concept of meaning of

education has not been previously studied in relationship to students who have stopped out of higher education, a qualitative design allows for the exploration of this topic inductively, allowing participants to share their thoughts and feelings, and researchers to observe the emergent themes from the participants' answers (Patton, 1990). Using a qualitative approach allows for multiple truths to reside in the same space—one truth does not nullify the next. In addition, these perspectives are not isolated, but rather observed in the context of the participants' lived experience, with attention paid to the contextual elements that may have influenced each participant's story. Through the use of qualitative inquiry, this study endeavored to provide a detailed and nuanced depiction of the relationship between meaning of education and stopped-out students.

There are many advantages to conducting qualitative research. One advantage is that qualitative research points to issues that cannot be quantified (Berg, 2004). Qualitative studies provide a thick description of people's unique experiences, capturing variations between individuals. Qualitative approaches pay attention to details not captured by quantitative research. Qualitative research allows people to understand the world from the perspective of the researched (Patton, 1990). Also, the researcher does not have to rely on any specific instrument; instead, "the researcher is the instrument" (Patton, 1990, p. 14). Qualitative research provides a certain level of flexibility that comes from the open-ended questions employed (Patton, 1990). This flexibility is particularly well suited when exploring new territory in the research field.

Though using qualitative data has some benefits, it also has some disadvantages. While quantitative measures are brief, standardized, and easily summarized, qualitative findings are lengthier, more complex, and include more variety, making the analysis process more challenging (Patton, 1990, p. 24). Qualitative researchers must demonstrate rigor, familiarity with the process, ingenuity, and commitment (Patton, 1990, p. 11). As qualitative research is flexible, it requires comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty from the researchers (Patton, 1990). Another disadvantage is that since qualitative research uses small samples, it is not generalizable to the rest of the population. Yet, despite these disadvantages, qualitative inquiry is an appropriate method (a) for advancing into unexplored research territory, (b) to help researchers understand the landscape or the environment of the participants, and (c) to formulate a holistic and comprehensive picture of the lived experiences of stopped-out students and their meaning of education.

Narrative Design

In a narrative design, researchers study people's stories as the phenomenon or artifact to be examined (Kim, 2016). Narrative research seeks the unique stories of individuals in particular contexts. The qualitative researcher and the researched co-contribute to the creation of meaning of the issue or phenomenon being studied. In other words, qualitative research operates from a "symbolic interactionist perspective" (Berg, 2004, p. 8). Knowledge is constructed through the exchange of symbols between people; qualitative research is subjective and constructivist, meaning that the product of the research is a result

of the interplay and symbolic exchange between researcher and researched. Narrative inquiry uses a variety of interpretive lenses, theoretical and philosophical approaches, and methodologies (Kim, 2016). For this study, I used Viktor Frankl's philosophical lens. Frankl's (2006) philosophy, developed while in a Nazi concentration camp, claims that meaning is one of the most important concepts in people's lives, and that as long as people give meaning to their difficult situations, or any situations, they will be able to conquer the hindrances or stumbling blocks in their way. This concept of meaning, though typically used in psychology, has been applied to other contexts and in a variety of organizations including educational institutions. After selecting the theoretical or philosophical lenses through which to observe a phenomenon, narrative design studies participants in context.

Narratives tend to focus on particular events and are placed in the context in which the actions took place (Kim, 2016). Researchers rely on "stories to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences, the changes and challenges of life events, and the differences and complexity of people's actions" (Kim, 2016, p. 11). Narrative research has been used in psychology, law, medicine, and education. In education, narrative inquiry has been used to explore and explain the lived experiences of faculty and students, as stories help people give their lives coherence and organize their experiences (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry is valuable as it helps to uncover information left uncovered by quantitative research.

One of the advantages of narrative inquiry is that narratives provide a broader view as they capture more detail and more nuances of an event compared to quantitative research designs. Narrative research posits phenomena in the spatial and temporal context in which the events took place (Kim, 2016). By accounting for the context in which phenomena or artifacts reside, narrative inquiry adds ambiguity and complexity to the study (Kim, 2016). This can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage.

One of the potential disadvantages of narrative inquiry is that its interpretations can sometimes lead to contradictory results that cannot easily be summarized. People experiencing the same phenomenon or event may tell very different stories and give the events very different meanings (Kim, 2016). Contradictory opinions may not fit well into a single coherent story. However, instead of a disadvantage, the contradictory opinions represent the diverse stories and varied lived experiences of diverse participants. Personal differences in researchers (e.g., different cultures, values, biases, personalities, characteristics, etc.) might lead to different findings as well (Kim, 2016). Moreover, researchers have to be careful whenever they conduct research in their typical sphere of action, as they are more likely to be biased when analyzing these places (Kim, 2016). Therefore, researchers engaging in narrative inquiry must be honest and ethical when engaging in reflexivity in order to identify their biases and to be aware of their own perspective and influence on the study they conduct. They must constantly analyze themselves as they engage in the process of examining the subject or phenomenon under study (Kim, 2016).

Research Methods

As mentioned previously, this study relied on a narrative design. In qualitative studies, researchers seek the unique experience of participants from the participants' point of view (Patton, 1990). In a narrative design, researchers particularly focus on the participants' stories (Kim, 2016) in the context of their lived experience. This research study focused on the meaning of education for stopped out students at different points during their educational experiences. In this section, I will discuss the setting, sample, data collection, data analysis, procedures to ensure trustworthiness.

Setting

The study was conducted on a community college campus in the Los Angeles area of Southern California. The school awarded about 1,800 associate degrees and certificates in 2015 to a highly diverse student body. The student body of the school is comprised of 67% Hispanic students, 7.9% White, 7.4% Asian and Pacific Islander, 4% African American, 3.3% Native American, 2.2% Filipino, 1.3% multi-ethnic, and 6.3% unknown. The college enrolls more than 23,000 credit students, and employs more than 250 full-time faculty and more than 550 part-time faculty to help students reach their academic and career goals. This community college includes in its mission statement its dedication to a diverse student body and a commitment to increase student retention and student success.

The leadership of this particular community college specifically states in the Campus Guide that the college seeks to attract not only students who have

just graduated high school but also returning students and first-generation college students. In the Division of Student Services, this community college has a Re-Entry Resource Program committed to aiding adults who are returning to school after interrupting their education for a period of time. The college recognizes that this population of students may have different needs than the needs of traditional students and seeks to address those needs by providing personalized assistance, referrals to a variety of resources on and off campus, Re-Entry scholarships, success workshops, a support peer group, and socials. But aiding specific student groups is just one of the concerns of the college. To facilitate student success, the college offers a wide array of services and clubs to all students. The college offers about 60 clubs that have the potential to accommodate around 25,000 students with their varied interests. In addition, the college also offers a success center, a center for teaching excellence, and a media center to support faculty in their teaching goals and students in their learning goals.

Sample

To collect the data for this study I relied on convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012). Convenience sampling refers to participants who are accessible and agreeable to participate (Creswell, 2012). The study focused on students who had been away from school for at least one year and who are planning to continue their education. The students were enrolled either part-time or full-time. The participants were over the age of 18 years old. I decided to extend the age of participants because older adults are returning to school in

increasing numbers (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008), and their voices can add valuable insight to our understanding of the different reasons why people may return to school and the meaning education has for them.

Data Collection and Management

This section provides an overview of the instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the strategies used for data management in this narrative study.

Instrumentation. To collect the rich data, I conducted one-on-one interviews with 20 participants. The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to an hour, providing students with enough time to share their unique stories. As not all phenomena are visible or overt, interviews are appropriate tools to study unobservable phenomena, such as what goes on in a person's mind, personal beliefs, thoughts, and meanings people may give to their current or past experiences (Patton, 2002). As this study focused on exploring the meaning of education for people both in the present and their past, interviews were an adequate tool to use for this aim.

To facilitate the interviewing process, I relied on an interview guide. The interview guide contained seven main questions. Originally, I started with close to 10 questions; however, upon practicing interviewing, I limited the number of questions to be able to fit each interview into 30 minutes to an hour. Once I settled on which interview questions would help me focus on the information I was looking for, I organized the questions to take the interviewee through their life in chronological order, from when they first enrolled in higher education to the present time. The interview protocol included questions such as:

1. Please share with me what has been your experience with higher education.
2. What did education mean to you when you were first considering enrolling in higher education?
3. What was the meaning of education for you when you were considering leaving higher education?
4. What was the meaning of education for you when you considered returning to continue your higher education?
5. What does education mean to you now, at the time of the interview?

Using an interview protocol maximizes the time spent with the participants while staying focused on the topic of study (Patton, 2002). The interview guide provides enough structure to approach each participant in a systematic and inclusive way, and minimize potential gaps in the data by planning questions to fill in those gaps (Patton, 2002). As one of the weaknesses of the interview guide approach is that it may miss important topics and to maintain flexibility and the ability to explore these particular issues that may be salient for some of the participants, I used a semi-structured interview. Although using the interview guide in a semi-structured interview approach potentially increases the depth of the interview and allows for more unique responses from participants, it also potentially minimizes the researcher's ability to compare the responses (Patton, 2002).

I conducted 20 one-on-one interviews that were 25 to 60 minutes long to record the stories of the participants regarding their thoughts and feelings about stopping out of school and returning after a time. Conducting interviews allows the researcher to step into another person's frame of mind and walk a mile, not in their shoes, but in their head (Patton, 1990). While conducting in depth interviews, it is important for the interviewer to be genuinely interested in the participants' experience and be highly respectful of their voices (Patton, 1990). I designed the interview questions and the interview guide to specifically fit students who have been away from school for at least one year (Hoyt & Winn, 2004) and who are still continuing their education. The reason I chose students who had interrupted their higher education for at least one year is because a complete year-long break provides a more definitive halt to education than just one school term would. The interview guide was semi-structured and consisted of open ended questions as they are less likely to suggest thoughts to a participant and, instead, to access an individual's unique perspective shared in their own words (Patton, 1990). The interview guide was tested two times prior to the study interview process. Pilot testing was conducted with two students who had stopped out of school. The pilot testing helped me refine the questions and the interview guide, adding more probing questions to tap into the rich data I desired for the study.

Procedures. I met with each participant in a group study room at the college library. The room was quiet, and it allowed the interview to take place without interruptions. Each participant received an explanation of all study

procedures before signing the study consent form (Appendix A) prior to the interview. All of the interviews were audio-recorded. As in qualitative research the researcher's own impressions and interpretations constitute part of the data (Patton, 1990), during each interview I recorded my observations of the participant's nonverbal cues. This information was included later in the interpretation of the responses. Noting not only what participants said but also how they said it can add an extra layer of richness to capturing the stories of the participants.

Data management. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from both California State University, Fullerton and from the community college, I contacted the coordinator of the community college's Re-Entry Resource Program to identify potential study participants. Due to FERPA regulations, the coordinator was not able to provide a list of the re-entry students currently enrolled. Therefore, I designed recruitment fliers that I dropped off at the Re-Entry Student Center and the Counseling Department to recruit students to participate in the study (Appendix B). Instead of waiting for students to contact me, I decided to personally approach students at the College Library and ask them in person if they fit my criteria for the study (being stopped-out students who had taken at least one year off). I had great success with this approach, so I kept using this approach to identify interview candidates. Only three of the interviewees were students who contacted me as a result of the fliers that I had left with the Re-Entry Center and the Counseling Department. On Tuesday and Thursdays afternoons when I had personal time available, I would go to the

College Library and approach students who were studying in the common area. Using this approach gave me the opportunity to approach a variety of students who represented the diversity present at that community college. Therefore, I ensured my study would include racial and age diversity. To secure the most forthright responses, I took the necessary steps to ensure participant confidentiality and protect the data.

To maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used during the study. Neither the name of the institution nor the names of the participants were used. The interview data was transcribed using professional transcription services, and the data was sent for transcription without the actual names of the students interviewed. Audio files and transcript files were labeled with the pseudonyms rather than the actual participant names. Transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer where only I had access to the data. Paper consent forms were stored in a locked file cabinet at my house, where only I have access to the information. The rich data was uploaded to the data management software Dedoose, to enable me to code the diverse emergent themes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Once the interviews are recorded and transcribed, qualitative researchers face some challenges. First, a researcher should strive for accuracy. Consistent with the Collaborative Social Research Approaches, once the transcription process was completed, the participants' answers were validated through member checking (Creswell, 2012). The participants in the study were contacted

so they could approve or disapprove and validate if the transcripts accurately captured their words and their lived experience. The participants had the opportunity to make any corrections or clarify if their experience was not captured or understood accurately. Once the participants provided feedback, I was going to incorporate the responses and make any necessary changes to the findings. However, none of the participants requested any changes. A second challenge for qualitative researchers is the monumental amount of data they have to sift through to draw conclusions (Patton, 1990). The task is complex, requiring (a) identification of themes and salient patterns and (b) communication of findings in the context of both the lived experiences of the participants and the framework that shapes the study. A third challenge is that in qualitative research “there are no formulas for determining significance,” no rigid tests of reliability and validity, and no concrete rules for interpretation; a researcher can only try to be as honest and clear as possible in interpreting the data and communicating the findings (Patton, 1990, p. 372). Each researcher’s thought process is individual and unique and cannot be perfectly reproduced (Patton, 1990). However, there are a series of guidelines, procedures, and protocols that qualitative researchers can employ to maximize their efforts and strengthen the validity and reliability of their findings. The next section will outline the steps for analyzing the data.

Data analysis. To analyze the data, I relied on inductive analysis. In conducting inductive analysis, the researcher does not have a priori established themes or categories. Instead, the themes and categories or labels arise out of the data (Patton, 1990). The first step of the analysis was describing the findings.

The excellence of qualitative analysis depends on its thoroughness and precision, which can be accomplished by presenting concrete participant descriptions, known as “thick description” (Patton, 1990, p. 375). Each result or identified theme is supported by direct quotations from the participants. Supporting each finding with thick descriptions will provide enough information for the reader to draw their own conclusions and interpretations (Patton, 1990), giving the reader the ability to verify, agree, or disagree with the proposed interpretations. A common issue in qualitative research is that once researchers have the data, they fail to refresh in their minds the main issue under consideration in the study (Patton, 1990). Therefore, before each coding session, I reviewed the main questions of the study and kept them in mind while interpreting the data. Only after the main research question was brought into focus, did I strategically approach the data.

The data analysis of this study was consistent with the Collaborative Social Research Approaches. In this type of research, the participants in the study are considered “stakeholders” in the critical issue that requires change (Berg, 2004, p. 267). The researcher and the participants collaborate in the process of identifying the emergent themes. To systematically tackle the data, the researcher relies on cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis involves grouping together all of the participants’ answers to the same question (Patton, 1990). This strategy allows the researcher to capture commonalities between the answers, as well as the breadth of the answers to one question. Cross-case analysis is effective for analyzing the questions that all or most individuals

answered. However, since the study relied on semi-structured interviews, cross-case analysis may pose some additional challenges compared to structured interviews (Patton, 1990).

The additional answers or comments—responses not obtained from all participants—were labeled as such and addressed separately. These additional comments are just as important as the answers to the main questions, since the goal of qualitative research is to pay close attention to the content of the participants' answers to better understand the perspectives of the individuals (Berg, 2004, p. 269). To analyze the observations, I also used key issue analysis. The data were scrutinized to help identify key issues (Patton, 1990) that potentially affected participants' decisions to leave school or to re-enroll.

The second phase of inductive analysis involves identifying common themes and patterns (Patton, 1990). To develop these themes, I employed open coding. When engaging in open coding, researchers focus on four main criteria: (a) keeping in mind a specific set of questions that the data must answer; (b) carefully scrutinizing the data; (c) stopping coding to record theoretical insights; (d) holding any judgment on the relevance of any participant demographic information until the data demonstrate that connection to be plausible (Berg, 2004). To accomplish this phase, the researcher seeks “commonalities” or similar wording in the participants' answers (Berg, 2001, p. 240). While commonalities are important, I also made note of the differences or uniqueness of each participant's answers and what set each participant apart from the others.

To help with the analysis of data and the coding process, I used Dedoose, a data management tool. Once the data was uploaded to Dedoose, I read through the entire set at first to just familiarize myself with each participant's story. Only then did I read through the transcripts again and began identifying themes or topics. Generating themes is similar to the process of creating the table of contents of a book; look at the content of each chapter, and give it a title (Patton, 1990). Passages from the interview transcripts were highlighted and labeled. Some passages were highlighted multiple times, serving multiple purposes in identifying themes or patterns (Patton, 1990). The labeling process was the next step in the data analysis.

I recorded a full description for each label that captured the complex meaning of that label. This served as a reminder for me and for other readers of the thought process behind the label to ensure consistency across multiple coding sessions. As I read through the data, I developed themes or labels as well as sub-categories within those themes (Berg, 2001). Researchers may add new labels or re-label themes during this process, requiring a back and forth process between the data and the themes to code and re-code until the researcher feels comfortable that all important issues have been coded and captured in the labeling process. I considered the analysis portion complete once redundancy was achieved and the themes and labels reached saturation (Patton, 1990). Last, I verified the labels for consistency and discreteness.

It is important for each label to display consistency and discreteness (Patton, 1990). Internal consistency refers to ensuring that all of the participants'

comments with the same label belong together and support the same theme. External heterogeneity refers to each label being distinct enough from the others to be able to distinguish them from one another. Last, I captured the thick description of each theme, including the actual words of participants to support each theme (Creswell, 2013).

Next, I elaborated the information captured in each label or category. To aid in this process, the findings of the study were contextualized in the larger body of research; I used prior knowledge from other studies to understand the current findings and connect the emerging themes to the larger body of literature on the topic as well as to explain how new or conflicting findings might fit (Patton, 1990) to construct a coherent narrative.

Procedures to ensure trustworthiness. The process of identifying and coding themes relies on the researcher's judgment and creativity, and can potentially lead a researcher to disregard a potentially important issue or give importance to a trivial one (Patton, 1990). To limit these types of errors and increase the trustworthiness of the study, I employed the help of a peer researcher to verify the themes I identified. In addition, I relied on thick description to validate the emergent themes (Creswell, 2013).

Role of the researcher. As the researcher is the main instrument in qualitative study, it is important to identify and discuss the potential biases a researcher brings to a study. Therefore, in this section, I identify some aspects of my identity that are likely to influence this study. First, I am White. Due to my race, I did not experience racial discrimination directed at me. Second, I am a

woman, and I did have some experiences where I felt discriminated against, or marginalized, for being a woman. Third, I am a first-generation Romanian-American. English is not my native language. I had only been in the United States for one year when I enrolled at a local community college; therefore, I struggled with language acquisition and pursuing my education. Studying for my classes was more difficult than it was for native English speakers. I often relied on a dictionary to read the textbooks as well as to write my homework. And at times, even that was not enough. I simply lacked the ability to express my thoughts coherently in English. I relied on help from my significant other to proofread my work. After reading a section of my work, my partner would ask me what I had meant to say. Once I would clarify the main idea, my partner would help me re-write my work. However, even though studying was very time consuming, I felt it was a necessary evil to help me grow. In addition to having very poor grammar and limited vocabulary, my thick accent garnered some comments, letting me know some people could not understand what I said at times. In addition, I was not just a first-generation Romanian-American but also a first-generation college student.

My father completed only eight grades and my mother and brother have high school degrees. Therefore, there was no one in my family to guide me and to help me navigate college. Any help I received was from the couple of new friends I had made after moving to the United States. However, though none of my immediate family members had gone to college, they were highly supportive of my decision to pursue a higher education degree. My parents ensured that

while I was in school I did not have to pay rent at home, and they also provided me with food. I was a low-income student who qualified for financial aid, which paid for my tuition, so I could afford to work only part-time to cover my personal expenses and go to school full-time and focus my attention on being a straight-A student. Had I been required to contribute more to help my family financially, I probably would have had more difficulty maintaining the high GPA I graduated with. Not only did I have the time to study, but school was my number one priority.

When I scheduled time to spend with friends or my significant other at the time, I first had to have my homework and studying done before I could enjoy having fun. I was very responsible and driven to do my best work in every class I took. I have always been intrinsically motivated. When I was in seventh grade, I remember my mother scolding me that I was studied too much, and she would urge me to call my friend to spend time with her and take a break from studying. In addition, having struggled with low self-esteem for many years, I received much of my self-worth from the quality of work I produced and the grades I earned, so keeping my grades high was a strong external motivator. I approached every class with uncertainty, not knowing if I could earn an A, but also with the determination to find out if I could. I was also blessed with a long attention span, so I could sit for hours in a recliner and read or do homework. When my attention span would diminish after two or three hours of mental work on one subject, I would simply switch subjects and my mind felt refreshed and

ready to engage in a couple more hours of brain work. So as much as I had several obstacles stacked against me, I also benefitted from privileges as well.

Given my high intrinsic motivation and high sense of responsibility, I often have a hard time understanding why some students do not take their schooling as seriously as I did. Once I became a college instructor, I would stress over my students' grades more than some of the students stressed over their own grades. Especially since I now know what a difference a college degree can have on a person's quality of life, I want all of my students to persist and attain a college degree so they can take advantage of the benefits that come with having higher education. Given that I also faced obstacles on my road toward my degrees, I believe that my students should be able to overcome a lot of the obstacles they face. I had to be vigilant and identify how my own predispositions influenced the questions I asked the participants and the reactions I had to their responses, as well as how I interpreted their answers during the analysis portion of the research study.

Chapter Summary

The U.S. has been failing to produce enough college graduates to satisfy the need in the economic sector. The problem is layered. Many students attend college but drop out before attaining a degree (Shapiro, 2014). In addition, close to 70% of students take longer than six years to attain a degree (Radford et al., 2010). Last, many, if not most, students experience psychological issues such as feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained, sad, lonely, highly stressed, anxious, hopeless, purposeless, and depressed (American College Health Association,

2012). The three layers stated may all be symptoms of the students' low levels of life meaning. However, researchers have not sufficiently explored the concept of life meaning (Mason & Nel, 2011), and even fewer studies analyzed the connection between the concepts of life meaning and education (Hagedorn, 2012). By studying stopped-out students, this study investigated whether students fail to achieve their educational goals due to having low levels of education meaning and thus feel powerless in the face of obstacles they may meet. This research study also indicated that by the time they returned to school to pursue their educational goals the students' meaning of education had increased. Therefore, this study sought to understand the meaning of education for stopped-out students, and how that meaning changed from the time they stopped attending college to the moment they returned.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the meaning of education for stopped-out community college students from the time of enrollment in higher education, to the time of their departure, to the time of return, and to their present meaning of education. This study sought not only to give voice to stopped-out students due to their limited presence in scholarly literature, but also to understand their voice holistically, in the context of their lived experience, paying attention to the cultural spaces in which these students operate.

The data analysis process included six steps: transcribing the data, organizing the data, reviewing the transcripts, line by line coding, identifying the major emergent themes from the text, and interpreting the data. Emergent themes will be supported with the participants' quotes.

This chapter details the findings of the study, and it includes two main sections. First, the chapter provides a brief overview of the participants. Second, the chapter will present the major emergent themes that answer the four guiding research questions of the study.

Participants

A summary of the 20 participants' traits reveals that four of the participants, or 20%, were 18-25 years old; 12 of the participants, or 60%, were

ages 25-40; and four participants, or 20%, were 41-60 years-old. Furthermore, ten of the participants, or 50%, were Latino/a, three of the participants, or 15%, were African American, three participants or 15%, were White, two participants, or 10%, were Filipinas, and another two participants, or 10%, were of two or more races. Last, 10 of the participants, or 50%, were male, and ten, or 50%, were female.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Name	Age	Gender	Race	Distinguishing Characteristic
Ana	23	Female	Latina	Restaurant owner
Angel	40	Male	Latino	Former military
Daniel	57	Male	European and Native American	Many Associate's degrees
Darna	30	Female	Filipina	Career change
Edgar	35	Male	Latino	Identity theft
Esperanza	26	Female	Latina	Engaged in drugs & alcohol
Jamil	45	Male	African American	Worked odd jobs for years
Jose	23	Male	Latino	Helped family not lose home
Kirk	48	Male	White	Worked as an architect
Luz	21	Female	Latina	Exhausted from high school
Mahalia	35	Female	Filipina	Future psychiatric nurse
Marbella	31	Female	Latina	Married
Miguel	30	Male	Latino	Left school for a job
Melissa	28	Female	White	Mother passed away
Ranisha	39	Female	African American	Divorced
Rayvon	27	Male	African American	Lived in subsidized housing
Rodrigo	38	Male	Latino	Phlebotomy/Airport worker
Rosalinda	34	Female	Latina	Partner passed away from cancer
Victoria	45	Female	Spanish and German	Brother killed
Wolfgang	23	Male	White	Lost housing

Next, I provide a brief summary of their life experiences of each of the participants around the time they were interacting with the higher education system.

Ana. Ana is a female, 23-year-old Latina. A year after graduating high school, Ana enrolled in a community college. Ana and her family were restaurant owners with many responsibilities. When Ana's sister had complications with her pregnancy, Ana had to pick up her share of responsibilities. The additional work and stress affected her grades, and Ana preferred to quit rather than ruin her GPA. Ana tried coming back later; however, her family decided to open a second restaurant, and the additional stress affected her school performance again. Ana left school once more. Recently, Ana and her family sold the restaurants, and Ana returned to school to earn her degree in business administration.

Angel. Angel is a male, 40-year-old Latino. While still in high school, Angel was living with an aunt who required Angel to contribute financially for living expenses. Angel got a job and started working. He then got his welding certificate from a community college. He later joined the military and, as a result, he received the benefits that come with the G.I. Bill. After leaving the military, Angel earned an associate degree in paralegal studies. Since in the military he was an engineer and enjoyed working with his hands, he is now pursuing another associate degree in engineering at a community college.

Daniel. Daniel is a 57-year-old White male. Daniel's parents first sent him to a private school, but because of poor instruction and being behind in math, he left the private school and enrolled in a community college instead. Daniel

transferred to a California State University institution and graduated. Over the years, he kept returning to community colleges to take courses, and over time he acquired a few more associate degrees. To Daniel, school is just something he does; similar to combing one's hair or brushing one's teeth. He enjoys constantly learning.

Darna. Darna is a female, 30-year-old Filipina. Darna graduated high school in the Philippines and was expected to go to college. Darna chose nursing, which is a very popular field in the Philippines. Soon, Darna regretted her choice but did not want to start over, she continued pursuing a nursing degree. However, she did not feel that nursing was her calling. In 2012, when Darna moved to the U.S., her relatives encouraged her to enroll in a nursing program here so she could practice nursing again. Darna felt like this was her chance to pursue her dreams and her calling, and, instead, she is now studying business.

Edgar. Edgar is a male, 35-year-old Latino. After graduating high school, Edgar felt exhausted; therefore, he decided to take some time off. A couple of years later, Edgar returned to school, but he was later the victim of a serious case of identity-theft; dealing with that stress, he fell ill, and he left school. For the next eight years, Edgar worked odd jobs, and because he earned a good salary, he did not feel the pressure to continue his education. He also struggled with his sexual identity. Realizing that much of the shyness and social discomfort he had experienced in his twenties were due to him not accepting who he truly was, he

chose to accept himself and come out. Much more comfortable in his own skin, Edgar returned to school and plans to be a therapist to help others.

Esperanza. Esperanza is a female, 26-year-old Latina. Esperanza enrolled at a community college immediately after high school. She had expensive shopping tastes and liked shoes, so she figured she would need a college degree to support her shopping habits. Esperanza was also in a toxic romantic relationship and liked to party often and used drugs and alcohol. When it became difficult to handle work, school, and partying, Esperanza quit school. After a year and a half of addiction, Esperanza decided to change her lifestyle, and she returned to school. She was frustrated at how much her learning ability had suffered due her unhealthy life style. Esperanza slowly regained her learning capability and started earning very good grades. Esperanza credits school with having saved her life. In the fall of 2017, Esperanza will be transferring to a four-year university.

Jamil. Jamil is a 45-year-old Black man. Jamil took the high school proficiency exam and then enrolled at a community college in 2008 with the goal of later being an office administrator. By the end of 2008 when the economy crashed, Jamil lost his job. He saw education as a fairy tale—a lie that the system created to fool the masses. For the next few years, Jamil struggled with working odd jobs, barely making ends meet. Exhausted, he returned to school and persisted, because by then, he saw education as the only life-line to surviving difficult times.

Jose. Jose is a male, 23-year-old Latino. Right out of high school, Jose was accepted to several universities. However, his family was struggling financially and were in danger of losing their house, so Jose took a year off to work more so he could help his family. Jose tried going to college part-time but the long work hours and the financial stress from his family made it very difficult for him to do well in school. Jose stopped attending college. His family lost the house anyway and moved to Colorado, but Jose decided to stay in California to earn his college degree. Now, Jose regrets having dropped out four years ago. He now realizes that he could have helped his family more had he already earned his degree and were working for better pay.

Kirk. Kirk is a 48-year-old White male. After graduating high school Kirk went to architecture school. Several months into the program, due to his talent, he was offered an architecture job that paid well. Since the goal of getting the degree was to be able to get a well-paying job, once he had the job he felt school was no longer necessary. He worked for many years for the same firm before he realized that no other company would give him the same position or similar pay without an actual architecture degree. He felt trapped. When the company he worked for went out of business, Kirk was out of a job and unable to get a new one. Kirk returned to school after close to 25 years to pursue a nursing degree.

Luz. Luz is a female, 21-year-old Latina. She enrolled at a community college right after graduating high school. However, just weeks after the beginning of the semester, she stopped attending. She felt exhausted from her senior year of high school. She felt her parents and friends expected her to go to

college, but she did not have the drive. As a first-generation college student, Luz also found it difficult to navigate the system. She took the following year off to rest and explore what she wanted to do. When she returned to school, she felt she was making the choice to go to college, instead of just fulfilling everyone else's expectations. Three years after returning, Luz is now close to transferring to a four-year university.

Mahalia. Mahalia is a female, 35-year-old Filipina. Mahlia graduated high school, and followed the cultural expectations of enrolling in college. After earning her associate degree in computer science, Mahalia became pregnant, so she stopped her education. A year later, she left her child in the Philippines, and she came to the U. S. She worked in retail to support her child back home. A decade later, when she lost her job, she decided to change careers. She enrolled in a community college, and while working on her general education, Mahalia discovered her passion; she decided to become a psychiatric nurse, a career that will allow her to combine her love of both nursing and psychology.

Marbella. Marbella is a female, 31-year-old Latina. Her family expected Marbella to go to college so she could be a role model to her younger siblings. Marbella worked full-time and went to school part-time. When she was promoted to a managerial position, she lost interest in education since she felt she could make it on her own without a college degree. She later got married and had two children. She and her husband kept getting better jobs, so they postponed their education. Later, in an effort to set a good example to her children and to have

more and better career opportunities, Marbella re-enrolled at a community college.

Melissa. Melissa is a 28-year-old White woman. Melissa enrolled in college as soon as she graduated high school. During her second semester in college, Malissa's mother was diagnosed with cancer. Melissa dropped out of college to help care for and financially support her family. After dealing with her mother's passing, Melissa completed a culinary program at an art institute. Three years later she longed to do something more meaningful with her life and returned to community college to become a therapist so she can provide people with support during difficult times.

Miguel. Miguel is a male, 30-year-old Latino. Miguel started going to college right after high school to see how he felt about higher education. However, after he got a job, the immediate rewards of the job were more appealing, so he interrupted his education. After a couple of years, realizing that he would need a college degree to qualify for some of the positions he would like to pursue, he returned to school. However, he also had to work full-time, and he soon felt burnt out and decided to take one semester off. The one semester off turned into an almost four-year break. He returned to school last semester and wants to finish his degree so he can reap off the benefits and freedom that a college degree affords.

Ranisha. Ranisha is a 39-year-old Black woman. Ranisha went to college right after high school and was pressured by her father into a major she did not enjoy. Ranisha then started dating a man and took some time off to get married

and get settled. Two years later Ranisha was ready to return to school but her husband decided to go instead. Her husband felt they should not be going both to school at the same time. Ranisha postponed her education again; however, her husband dropped all of his classes. Ranisha and her husband had a daughter, but a couple of years ago they divorced. Ranisha is now a single mom, with “no real education, and no real job skills.” She recently returned to school and earned her medical assistant certificate and is now pursuing a nursing degree.

Rayvon. Rayvon is a 27-year-old Black man. Rayvon grew up in the inner city and after graduating high school, desiring a better future for himself, went to a California State University institution. Rayvon and his mother lived in subsidized housing, but when his mother had to relocate, in order for Rayvon to retain subsidized housing for himself, he could not be a full-time student. Rayvon was later harassed in court by his landlord and that stress negatively affected his school performance. In addition, the trauma of finding a relative deceased in her house prompted him to take the semester off completely. He did not return for four years. Now, Rayvon is more mature, and he is finally continuing his higher education at a community college.

Rodrigo. Rodrigo is a male, 38-year-old Latino. Rodrigo never graduated high school. Instead, he took the GED. He later completed a phlebotomy program and worked in a lab. One day, he had a seizure, and the next day he was fired. He could not find another job. He started attending a community college, found a job, and a girlfriend. His mom started nagging him that he

needed to get a better job and quit school, because men are supposed to be providers. After much nagging, he followed her advice. He worked at the airport for many years. However, when his boss became aware of his epilepsy, his boss made his life at work so difficult that he could no longer take it, and he quit. He has now returned to school to earn a college degree. He values education, enjoys learning, and is committed to doing his best.

Rosalinda. Rosalinda is a female, 34-year-old Latina. After high school, Rosalinda wanted to travel and spent time with friends. A year later, Rosalinda enrolled in a community college and transferred to a four-year university in Texas. Rosalinda also met her partner there. A year into her studies in Texas, Rosalinda's partner was diagnosed with cancer, and Rosalinda had to stop her education to care for her partner and cover all of the bills. After her partner's passing, Rosalinda returned to California, but since she had a good job, she did not feel pressed to finish her degree. She later realized, however, that no other job would hire her for a similar position without a college degree. When she lost her job, she returned to college to complete her education. She is now committed to earning at least a bachelor's degree.

Victoria. Victoria is a 45-year-old Spanish and German woman. After graduating high school, Victoria's mother forced her to attend a California State University institution and selected a major for her. A couple of years later Victoria was put on probation for having a low GPA, and she quit going to school. Later she returned to school but chose a community college. She started earning good grades since at this time, she wanted to be in school. However, after Victoria's

brother was murdered, she fell into a deep depression and dropped out of school again. She later enrolled at another community college but only to take dance classes to keep her grounded during her depression. After another long break from college, she returned once again to community college determined to earn her degree. She is getting close to transferring to a Cal State University and after earning her bachelor's degree she plans to earn a master's degree as well.

Wolfgang. Wolfgang is a 23-year-old White and Latino man. Wolfgang was one of his only siblings to graduate high school, so he felt he had the responsibility to go to college to set a good example and to make his mother proud. He also wanted to have more career opportunities with a college degree. Wolfgang went to a community college, but when he and his mother were in danger of losing their housing, the stress affected Wolfgang's ability to focus so his grades suffered. Wolfgang and his mother were forced to relocate, and for the following few years, they lived with several dysfunctional families. Wolfgang fell into a depression and even attempted suicide. Recently, Wolfgang returned to school to escape the drama and abuse he and his mother were witnessing where they lived. Wolfgang returned to Southern California, resumed school, and is close to graduating with a double associate degree.

Themes

The following section presents the findings of the study. The emergent themes are identified and described. Eight discrete themes emerged from the participants' answers, and they were: education as a societal expectation, education as freedom, education as an obstacle to other priorities, education as

an additional source of stress, education as worthless, education as meaningful, education as a badge of honor, and education as self-improvement. It is important to understand what each theme captured; therefore, a detailed description of each theme will be provided next.

Education as a societal expectation includes any references to participants feeling like they were expected to go to school past high school. This expectation may have come from close family members, peers, teachers, or society at large. This theme also includes participants feeling like they were not the ones making the choice to go to college. The choice was being made for them, signaling a lack of agency. Participants were enrolling in college to please others and not out of their own free will.

Education as freedom includes participant passages that refer to education as a stepping stone to better or more opportunities. At times, these better or more opportunities were not connected to any specific goals. Instead, participants simply connected education to having more choices or having agency to select whatever they desired in the future instead of being limited by not having a degree. However, at times, participants also referred to education as a stepping stone or an intermediary step to specific end goals, such as moving out of a bad neighborhood, earning a higher salary, and having access to a specific job or a particular career.

Education as an obstacle to other priorities includes participants feeling like they had other more pressing priorities and that going to school was preventing them from fully committing to those goals. Other priorities included

having fun, making money, romantic relationships, caring for family members, or dealing with a crisis in their lives. Participants simply did not consider school a primary priority.

Education as an additional source of stress emerged when participants were talking about particularly stressful periods in their life. Whether participants were dealing with the loss of housing or the loss of family members, when they were juggling major life stressors, school was viewed as an additional source of stress. Not only was school an additional source of stress, but it was a voluntary choice. While participants may have not had control over the other sources of stress in their life, they felt school was a choice, and it was one stressor they could eliminate.

Education as worthless emerged usually when students felt they had hit rock bottom. Oftentimes, students hit rock bottom when they had lost dear ones or fell into depression because of other circumstances. During those times, they felt like nothing mattered, including school.

Education as meaningful refers to participants feeling like education gave them purpose in life. Often times, participants had discovered their life purpose or life calling, and education was helping them attain that goal. For many of the participants, these life goals included helping others by becoming therapists, nurses, donating money to the needy, for example. In other words, participants did not pursue selfish interests; they desired to positively contribute to society or to contribute to a cause beyond themselves.

Education as a badge of honor refers to participants earning others' respect. Education was a way to prove themselves, their families, or their neighbors and friends that they were amounting to something. For some of the participants, earning a college degree meant they were overcoming a negative stereotype associated with a group to which they belonged.

Last, education as self-improvement refers to participants being committed to become better version of themselves. Participants described a desire to grow, develop, know more, and to learn a variety of skills and knowledge that would help them in life. Some of the participants felt they needed to be their best selves in order to better contribute to society. Therefore, the outcome of investing in their self-improvement was other-centered.

In the following section, I will present the themes that emerged as the participants answered each one of the research questions. I provide an overview of the findings in Tables 2-5.

Table 2

Themes for Research Question 1

Research Question	Themes	Explanation	Sub-Themes
How did students describe the meaning education had for them when they first enrolled in school?	Education as a societal expectation	Participants felt like family members, teachers, and society expected them to enroll in higher education	
	Education as freedom	Education was perceived as a means to increased opportunities and more choices	Education as a means to an end (better jobs, increased financial security) Education as agency (providing more choices and control over one's life)
	Education as an obstacle to other priorities	Students had more important priorities such as enjoying life, caring for others, ensuring primary needs for food and housing	

Table 3

Themes for Research Question 2

Research Question	Themes	Explanation
How did students describe the meaning of education when they were considering dropping out?	Education as additional source of stress	When students were faced with other stress factors in their life, education became just another stressor
	Education as an obstacle to other priorities	Students had more important priorities such as enjoying life, caring for others, ensuring primary needs for food and housing
	Education as worthless	Education had no value

Table 4

Themes for Research Question 3

Research Question	Themes	Explanation	Sub-Themes
How did students describe the meaning of education when they returned to school?	Education as freedom and agency	Education was perceived as a means to increased opportunities and more choices	Education as a means to an end (better jobs, increased financial security) Education as agency (providing more choices and control over one's life)
	Education as meaningful	Education was a means to positively contribute to others lives and to society	
	Education as a badge of honor	Education was perceived as an honorable pursuit, one that would earn participants respect	

Table 5

Themes for Research Question 4

Research Question	Themes	Explanation	Sub-Themes
How did students describe the meaning of education at the time of the interview?	Education as freedom and agency	Education was perceived as a means to increased opportunities and more choices	Education as a means to an end (better jobs, increased financial security) Education as agency (providing more choices and control over one's life)
	Education as meaningful	Education was a means to positively contribute to others lives and to society	
	Education as self-improvement	Education was a means to increase one's knowledge and skill (in many cases with the purpose of better serving others)	

The Meaning of Education at First Enrollment

Research question one asked participants what education meant for them when they first enrolled in college.

Education as societal expectation, not as a personal choice. A majority of the participants shared that the main reason they decided to attend college was because they were expected to attend. College was not a free choice for them. Some of the participants felt that as they were getting ready to

graduate from high school, counselors, teachers, or parents were expecting them to enroll in a higher education institution. Furthermore, for some of the participants, seeing most of their peers' plan for college further contributed to them feeling pressure to follow suit and enroll in college as well, even though they did not personally desire to enroll. These participants felt that college was the mandatory next step after high school. One of the participants, Ranisha, a 39 years old African American woman, asserted the meaning education had for her right after high school in the following way:

It has to do with the values that were instilled in us as a whole and the community I lived in. You know, you either went to college or you got married. So, it was like one of those two things, so it was kind of like; all my friends are going you know? So, I need to go. I chose a community college to start off with. I was kind of pressured by my dad on my major, so I wasn't really happy with my major.

Ranisha stayed in school until she met her future husband, and since he was ready to start a family, she stopped school to get married and adjust to her new life without the stress of school. She decided she would return to college once her and her new husband were more settled. It took Ranisha 10 years to return to school. Luz, a 21-year-old Latina and Miguel a 30-year-old Latino had similar feelings as Ranisha. They also felt that they were fulfilling others' expectations of them to attend college.

Marbella, a 21-year-old participant, who is now married and has two children, shared having a similar experience of being expected to go to college

by her teachers. When asked what would have made college more appealing, Marbella noted:

Maybe not feeling that the expectation was there, and, you know, aside from being first generation I also have the you're (on my mother's side) you're the first granddaughter; you're the example as the older sibling. You're the first born; you're the example; your brothers and sisters are going to look up to you; you don't want to let them down. So it was just I felt like pressure.

Half of the participants shared similar meanings of education as being a societal or familial expectation when they first enrolled in college. Although college was not a freely chosen path, many of the participants also recognized some of the benefits that would come with attaining a college degree.

Education as freedom. Most participants saw education as freedom. Education as freedom can be divided into two sub-themes. First, a few participants saw education as providing them with increased opportunities and increased agency. Second, some saw education as a means to a specific goal, such as better jobs, increased financial freedom, and more job security.

Education as increased agency. A few of the participants saw education as a way to have more freedom, or as a gateway to more opportunities, and to having more choices in the future. For example, when asked what education meant to him when he first enrolled in college, Jamil, who is 45, explained:

At the time, it meant, like, being able to, like, to get where I want to go without having to be hindered by like race or religion or philosophical beliefs. Like, you have that degree; they give you an opportunity.

Rayvon, age 27, who grew up in the inner city and lived in subsidized housing, saw higher education as a way to escape his family's lower social class and make a better life for himself:

Coming from an inner-city community, you know, and went to inner city schools, I wanted more for myself and my future. So, I saw college as kind of a way out. And so, I took it upon myself to make it important for me, to make it a necessary thing for me to do. You know, to really be successful and to have the freedom—what I talked about earlier, the freedom and, and, and just having more opportunity to live.

It is important to note that all of the participants who viewed education as agency were non-white.

Education as a means to an end. For many of the participants, education was a means to an end, a tool to help them reach other goals, to find employment or get better jobs, to earn more money, to afford better things, to leave bad neighborhoods, or the means for social mobility. For example, Kirk, a 48-year-old White male, stated that for him, education was a stepping stone to other goals.

Education is a means to an end I would say. You know what I'm saying, like you go to school to get, you know—something else. Because the reason I actually quit school is somebody offered me, ah, money to start

working in the architecture field. You know, when somebody offers you—when you're making like ten bucks an hour and somebody offers you \$40 to draw and design houses I'm done, see you.

Luz, a 21-year-old Latina, learned from her parents in their family talks to view education in a similar way, as a stepping stone towards more social mobility:

My parents have always said that education is the way to get out of the community that we're in, like working class, and they said a higher education is the way to go that's the only way to become a professional. So I think that was what was motivating me to—to go to college.

Esperanza, a Latina in her mid-20s with an expensive taste in clothing, was another participant who enrolled in college to reach other goals. For her, education was the means to later earn more money to support her spending habits.

Admittedly I have expensive taste, so I kind of figured, hey if I have expensive taste, I'm going to need to make some money. If I need to make some money, I need to go to school, and you know get my degree so I can get my career. That was my initial thought as a high school student. I like shoes, so I need to get an education so I can buy more shoes.

Though the participants had different end goals in mind, for them education was a stepping stone or an intermediary step to reaching a self-serving goal. Last, for some participants, education was not a tool that could help them achieve their

goals. For these participants, education got in the way of them achieving the goals they had at that time.

Education as an obstacle to other priorities. Many participants saw education as an obstacle getting in the way of other more important goals. Education became secondary to one of the participants, Jose, who at age 23 was trying to help his parents pay the mortgage so the family would not lose the house.

So, I would go to school unmotivated because I was already unmotivated because my parents where—I mean my mother, and my dad, and my sister— were giving me all this tension. They were like, “Oh, you need to help. You need to help. Why aren’t you helping?” And it was like, I would go to school unmotivated because of like, what am I coming here for, you know? Like this isn’t helping my family.

For another participant, education became less important when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. She had to stop school to take care of her mother and increase the number of hours she worked so she could pay the bills and help to pay the rent and for food for her, her mother, and her two younger siblings. Another participant preferred working to make money than go to school. For example, 35-year old Edgar already had a decent job and going to school would have made his life even more busy than it already was.

It would have been more difficult. Friends at that time weren’t in school. They were done with school. Like I said, I was in my mid, early, mid-twenties. I was going out. I wasn’t a party animal, but I was having fun

enjoying my twenties. And other family members, nobody was going to school. So, if I would have went to school, I would have felt like, “Oh, everybody’s going out, and I’m here in school.”

Another participant in her mid-30s, Rosalinda, wanted to travel and have fun for, and she felt that school would have gotten in the way. Similarly, Esperanza who was in her mid-20s was not particularly enjoying college, so it was easy to reprioritize her activities and place partying and her boyfriend above school.

The Meaning of Education at Departure

The second research question asked participants to describe the meaning education had for them when they were deciding to leave college.

Education as an additional source of stress. For several participants, education was just an additional source of stress at the time they decided to leave. Participants referred to numerous events that caused them stress and affected their decision to leave school. The additional sources of stress included the commute to school, family demands for the participants’ time and support; fear of losing housing; a new marriage, dealing with identity theft, and coming to terms with familial and cultural expectations and ideas of masculinity. For example, Rayvon, who lived in in the city of Los Angeles, was attending California State University, Northridge. He described the commute as being the most difficult part of school.

The academics, it got harder. It definitely got more challenging. But I think the biggest challenge I faced throughout this whole journey of being in college was the commute. That alone was a stressor for me because if I

didn't have enough gas to get to school, I didn't go to school. You know what I mean? Like or if, or if, if it was raining and the weather was bad, I didn't go to school.

Another participant, 23-year-old Wolfgang, and his mother were unable to continue paying rent and they knew it was just a matter of time before they would be evicted. He described his experience in the following words:

Like, me and where my mom lived at a place, and we were kicked out because we couldn't make rent so that just like wrecked my grades because I couldn't—focus on anything. I was worried about when we were going to be kicked out. It was like, you're going to leave, but you know, it's going, it's like not yet, but you're going to leave.

For another participant, Edgar, being the victim of a major case of identity theft was too stressful and time consuming. He fell ill due to the excessive stress.

When participants had their basic needs threatened, such as losing housing or having their financial status affected negatively, they tended to see school as an additional stressor or as stressor they could choose not to have. Having a roof over one's head is mandatory. On the other hand, going to school, seemed to many participants as an optional burden. Not only was education an added source of pressure, but for some participants, education was interfering with other more important goals.

Education as an obstacle to other priorities. A few participants responded that when they were ready to depart from college, education seemed like an obstacle to other more important priorities in their lives, such as caring for,

or helping family, working, reflecting on what they wanted to do in life, or just partying. For example, Melissa, whose mother had been diagnosed with cancer, described what education meant to her at the time in the following way: “It was more of a distraction . . . but then I just, it was too much time commitment for me to be away for all of that, so, for school and that.” Luz, who after high school felt tired, unmotivated, and “out of steam” enrolled in college, but she only lasted two weeks before dropping out. The following semester she repeated the same pattern. She explained the meaning of education in the following words:

I think it was an obstacle to me because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I couldn't take time to think about it myself. Because it [school] takes up a lot of time. So it was really hard to adapt to that, figure out what I'm trying to do, and I'm first generation, too so there was no one to help me. I didn't know what was going on and that added to just the burnout, like quick burnout. It felt more of a burden than an opportunity.

After the second semester, she took an entire year off before returning to community college.

For Esperanza, who at the time was in a toxic relationship and heavily involved in drugs and alcohol, the choice to drop out of school was not a difficult one. For her, education:

was getting in the way of my party time. So, it was hard for me to juggle working, school, and my partying habits. So, I decided to drop school instead of dropping partying.

Furthermore, in addition to seeing education as an additional source of stress or an obstacle to other priorities, some participants did not see any value at all in earning a college degree.

Education as worthless. A few participants described higher education as having no value at the time they chose to drop out. They felt they were doing well on their own without having a degree; pursuing a college degree was needless. Marbella, who was working full time and going to school part time explained: “It was easier to work my full-time hours and get my money than try to go to school and get a degree that I didn't think I needed at the time.” Once she was promoted and started earning more, she completely lost interest in education.

Um, the fact that I was able to be out on my own and pay bills and, you know, acquire a car without the need of education, you know. Just with my job alone I was able to finance it myself so I was like, oh well, I really don't need it [education]. I was able to climb from just the regular crew member to a manager position so it just—it seemed easier at that point.

As seen above, all three of the emergent themes for the second research question have negative meanings. Education was either an additional stressor, an obstacle to other life goals, or was futile. Yet, after taking some time off, the meanings of education for the participants changed considerably.

The Meaning of Education at Return

The third research question asked participants to describe the meaning education had for them when they were returning to school.

Education as freedom. Most of the participants described education as having a meaning related to having increased freedom, whether it meant providing them with more opportunities or helping them reach specific goals. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged once again: education as agency, and education as a means to specific goals.

Education as increased agency. A few participants identified education as being a means toward more freedom in a general sense—freedom to do whatever participants may want in the future or as a means to have more control over their life. For example, Miguel, who is in his early 30s, spoke with a sense of urgency about the reason why education was valuable to him when he returned to college.

And I think that in itself it's like I have a really good job, and I make a decent living but it's not a career. It's not something that I can just pick up and go work in, you know, another job and make this amount of money or I'm not—and I just want that kind of freedom.

Esperanza, who originally went to school to make money so she could support her shopping habits, once she returned to school, talked about the limited opportunities one had without an education. Similarly, Luz, who first went to school because she felt she was expected to go, upon returning saw education as providing her with a sense of freedom and choice, a sense of control over her life. School was now her choice and no longer an expectation. Though for some people, education was an open door to more choices and more freedom, for

other people, education was an intermediary step to reaching more specific desirable goals.

Education as a means to specific goals. A majority of participants saw education was a pathway to reaching clearly defined goals such as financial security, increased job skills and qualifications, or having a career. For example, Rayvon who is now a behavioral therapist, enjoys his job very much and aspires to be a teacher working with children with disabilities. He described his thinking process and the meaning of education for him when he returned to school:

I think it was just seeing how good I was. I work in special education. But I saw how good I was with that. So, I'm like you know, I could go back to school, get my degree, go and get my credentials and make this a full-time thing.

Ana, who was a restaurant owner, also returned to school for a very specific reason: "I just kind of thought more like an opportunity to learn so that I can grow what I already have."

Education as meaningful. Many participants mentioned that education was meaningful to them because it was going to help them reach their calling, and for many of the participants, their calling involved positively influencing others' lives, whether it be by providing people with a memorable experience at Disneyland, becoming a therapist to help people in their time of need, providing support to students with disabilities, or helping participants reach their life calling. For Melissa, who had taken care of her younger siblings after their mother passed away, education helped her become a pastry chef. She soon landed her

dream job, of making deserts at Disneyland, therefore, contributing to making people's dream day a reality. Her only disappointment was that she could never see the faces of the customers when they were savoring the pastries she so excitedly baked. When asked, what education meant to her, Melissa asserted:

To get my dream job. That would, the education there was because I wanted to be a really amazing cake decorator and a pastry chef and I felt like I needed the classical training to get that done. So, I mean it was stressful, but I really enjoyed the experience and it, it helped me, and I landed my dream job with it—what I thought was my dream job.

Victoria, whose brother had been killed and who returned to school in her mid-40s, was also interested in making a positive change in the world, even though she had not identified exactly how.

I wanted to obtain knowledge and somehow just be an instrument of change was probably the only thing I could probably think of to where—but not knowing how, not knowing where but just I need to be as educated as possible. . . . It was about making me the best me. But in return the best me would help more people.

The last emergent theme a few participants described is education as a badge of honor to be earned.

Education as a badge of honor. A few participants, all Latinos/as, described education as an honorable pursuit. They saw education as a way to earn others' respect or to prove they were not failures. For example, Angel, who is a veteran, described what education meant to him upon return: "Oh, it was a

way of recapturing what I couldn't do when I was living with my aunt. I was doing it for acknowledgement." Other participants, both men and women, described education as a means to disprove negative and stereotypical images of Latinos.

The Meaning of Education at the Time of the Interview

The last research question asked participants to describe what education meant to them at the time of the interview. Upon analysis of the participants' answers, three main themes emerged: (a) For most participants, education was a means for increased freedom and agency or a stepping stone to more career and financial freedom; (b) most participants also saw education as a means to self-improvement or self-enrichment; and (d) for some, education was meaningful because it allowed them to positively contribute to society or to help others. Three other common themes that emerged were education as a badge of honor or a medal to be earned, education as a source of satisfaction and enjoyment, and education as a rare gift.

Education as freedom. A majority of participants saw education as a means to increased freedom and opportunities. This took the form of education as increased agency and a means to achieve specific goals.

Education as increased agency. Ranisha, a 39-year-old mother, described education almost as a versatile tool that can help people achieve whatever goals they may set for themselves.

Like that's the thing about college. If you don't like the career that you're in, you can always go back again and do something new. . . . You're not

stuck. Education at that point is, honestly, whatever you want it to be. It could be, you know, whatever's important to you at that moment

For Rosalinda, a woman in her mid-30s who has been working as a security manager at a shopping center, earning a bachelor's or a master's degree will mean she will have more control of her life. She believes that with a college degree:

I can go anywhere else. I can hop around. Then it becomes my choice, right, versus you know, being afraid to lose my job. Now it's kind of like, you know what? I don't think this job is doing it for me. They're not offering me; . . . they're not challenging me enough. They're not, I'm worth a lot more than this. It was nice knowing you. I've got to go. I'm going here, and . . . I'll be the shot caller.

Education as a means to specific goals. For several participants, education was a stepping stone to specific end goals. For 35-year old Mahalia, who is a mother, education had several meanings. Education was helping her achieve her calling, but when choosing her career, she was also pragmatic.

And even [though] psychology is my passion, I look on nursing classes, and I feel like this is also my passion. But I will be more practical if I go to medical field because I have a kid. And I don't have time to spend for another doctoral for psychology because I'm old, and I want to, as much as possible, finish my education early and then start because compared to psychology and the nursing, nursing, I can finish faster, but earning good money too.

For Rosalinda, education is the means to financial security; education is:

opportunity and a decent, a decent livelihood you know? I'm tired of living paycheck to paycheck, you know. It's exhausting. I have a family to take care of. You know, I have my partner and her ten-year old daughter, and you know, we have a mortgage to pay. And I need to make sure that they're okay.

Rodrigo, who at the time of the interview was in his late 30s, returned to school knowing he wanted to pursue a degree in psychology. Although he wants to help others, he is also interested in having a comfortable and secure future.

Rodrigo explained:

I enjoy helping people, but at the same time, by getting my masters and opening up my private clinic, I will also be working for myself. And I'll be making up my own rules. [Education] It's an opportunity to make money. I mean, I'd be lying if I said I was, you know, I wasn't looking forward to getting paid either. It's just that it's an opportunity for yourself to, you know, like I said, stability, money.

Not only did participants see education as a means to affect their life by providing them with more control over their careers, but many participants saw education as a tool to help them become better versions of themselves.

Education as a means for self-improvement. Most participants saw education as a means to improve themselves, to gain the skills necessary to succeed in life, or to become more polished versions of themselves. For

example, 23-year old Jose who had helped his family financially to avoid losing the family home, described education as a way to learn to overcome obstacles.

It's, if you really want something then you fight the struggle. But why would you want it easy? Like, if you really, really want something, it's not fun if it's easy. You know what I mean? Like the struggle is the fun part because then after you, after you pass the struggle and get to relax for a little bit, you're like, "Yeah, I did it." You know, you feel accomplished. And don't think it's going to stop there because I'm pretty sure there's going to be another barrier. But you're learning the way to get around it. You're learning ways to tackle it.

Jamil, who is 45, also saw education as a self-improvement tool: "So, I basically I say like education to me is something like makes you just grow like personally to deal with the world that you can't control." At the age of 23, Wolfgang had a similar view of education: "It also builds character. College is also a way to you know, diversify your opinions." And 23-year old Ana shared that education makes people more well-rounded and more knowledgeable. Esperanza, another participant in her mid-20s, who overcame drug and alcohol addictions, looked at education as the place that provided her with a healthy social network, with the opportunity to meet new people she can keep learning from, whether they were peers or mentors. And some participants, spoke of the importance of becoming their best selves so they could better help others.

Education as meaningful. For a few of the participants, education was worth their time and effort this time around because they had an end goal in mind

of helping others or of positively contributing to society in some way. For some of the participants, education was going to help them become counselors to provide people with support during difficult times. Melissa, who is in her late 20s and who had been a pastry chef at Disneyland found a new purpose in life, becoming a therapist, once she returned to school. She described the meaning of education at the time of the interview in the following way: “I don’t know how to really describe it. It’s, it will help me get the tools that I need to help people better their lives and become healthy.” Melissa later described the role education had played in her life once she returned to school:

I found really what I feel is my calling. What I really, really feel like I’m meant to do. And so, I don’t know if I would have found that if I wasn’t coming to school while I was helping my brother for my family. I’m the one who helps everyone emotionally. Really I’m the only one in my family who talks to everyone. [Starting to cry] I like being that person that can help them. So, I want to share that with other people [emotional]. I just want to do more. People really need help when they’re at their worse times. And it’s not always available. And so, that’s, that’s what’s really important to me—is to be someone there that’s going to be available when nobody else is.

For 27-year old Rayvon, who decided to become a special education teacher, described education as giving him a purpose. He wants to help others, and as long as education can help him do that, education is worth it.

Mahalia, who is 35-year-old mother, also saw her education as providing her with more opportunities to help others in the future. Mahalia is from the Philippines and is studying to be a psychiatric nurse. Her meaning of education is keeping her grounded and committed when school is difficult.

So, I have so much plans that I want to help them not to give all my salary. But to able to help them if they need help like calamities. You heard a lot of things happened in Philippines, you know, like the area of my friends. They lost their house. I cannot able to help them a lot because I need help here too. So, for me I see education as like to help people who need it too because I'm not rich. I'm not wealthy, but later I'm going to have a job. I'm going to earn money. And I'll be able to help them. I want to travel to Nepal and help them like with my salary. So, that's what motivating me when I feel like giving up with all my classes. I'm like, I just want to go back working again. But I'm like, no. I want to be able to help those people later.

As the data shows, the meanings of education participants had once they returned to college and at the time of the interview were more positive than the meanings described in the answers to the first two research questions. Participants went from describing education as a societal expectation, freedom, obstacle to other priorities, additional source of stress, and worthless in their responses to the first two research questions, to seeing education as freedom, meaningful in helping others, a badge of honor, and as a means to self-improvement in their responses to the last two research questions. After

analyzing the themes, a few noteworthy findings were highlighted from the participants' answers to each research question.

Notable Findings

Research Question One

The first research question asked participants what education meant to them when they first enrolled in college. For a majority of the participants, education was a societal expectation. Although all racial groups were proportionately represented in viewing education as a societal expectation, it is important to note that most of these participants were female. A second theme that emerged was that for many of the participants, education was an obstacle to other priorities. Though Latinos/as represented half of the participants in the study, most of the participants who saw education as an obstacle were Latinos/as. In addition, none of the African American participants described education as an obstacle to other priorities. A third theme that emerged was of education as freedom. Though all other racial groups were equally likely to describe education as freedom, none of the white participants described education in this way.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked participants to describe what education meant to them when they were deciding to leave college. For many participants, education was an obstacle to other priorities. Once again, most participants who saw education as an obstacle were Latinos. On the other hand, none of the African American participants described education as an obstacle to

other priorities. Furthermore, most participants who described education as an obstacle to other priorities were female. It is important to note that a majority of the women who viewed education as an obstacle left college to care for family members.

An additional emergent theme was of education as worthless. Once again, none of the African American participants saw education as worthless. The last emergent theme was of education as an additional source of stress, and although Latinos/as, African American, Whites, and mixed-races participants were proportionately represented, none of the White participants viewed education as an additional source of stress. It is important to note, however, that most of the participants who viewed education as a source of stress were male.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked participants to describe what education meant to them when they returned to school. One of the emergent themes was of education as meaningful or as a means to positively affect others. It is important to note however that a large majority of the participants who saw education as a means to positively contribute to others' lives were female. Age also seemed to matter. For example, most participants who saw education as meaningful were between the ages of 25-40. Also worth mentioning is that Latinos were less likely to see education as meaningful compared to other races.

On the other hand, Latinos were more likely to see education as a means to gain career and financial freedom compared to other races. Furthermore, men were more likely than women to see education as a means to gain career and

financial independence. None of the White participants described education as means for increased freedom and opportunities.

One last emergent themes was of education as a badge of honor. Latinos/as were the only race to list education as a badge of honor. Both men and women were equally likely to describe education as a means to gain respect or honor.

Research Question Four

The last research question asked participants what their meaning of education was at the time of the interview. Many participants asserted education was now meaningful to them because it allowed them to positively influence others' lives. Most of the participants who described education as meaningful and aiding them in enriching other people's lives were 25-40 years old. Latinos were less likely than other races to see education as meaningful or as a tool to helping others.

Instead, Latinos/as were much more likely than other races to see education as a means to gain agency and control over their own lives, and they slightly more likely than other races to see education as a way to have more career and financial opportunities. Participants who were 25-40 years old were also most likely to see education as a means to take charge of their careers and gain financial security and as a means to increased freedom and more life opportunities. Furthermore, a majority of the participants described education as a means to self-improvement. All races were equally likely to describe education

as a means to self-improvement. However, participants who were 25-40 were more likely than other age groups to see education as a tool to self-betterment.

Chapter Summary

The research questions pursued information about the diverse meanings education had for participants at different points along their educational journey, from their first enrollment in college, to their departure from college, to their return to college, and at the time of the interview. The participants shared many meanings of education. In addition, because of the diverse sample of participants, some commonalities in some of the participants' answers could be explained by their race, gender, or age.

When participants first enrolled, their meanings of education were more negative, such as education as a societal expectation instead of a freely chosen act and education as an obstacle to other priorities. Only one of the emergent themes from the first research question had the positive meaning of education as a pathway to freedom or agency. These meanings had become completely negative by the time participants departed college. At departure education was viewed as an additional source of stress, an obstacle to other priorities, and as worthless.

On the other hand, when participants returned to college to continue their education, education had once again given the meanings of a pathway to freedom, increased opportunities, career advancement and choice, and financial security. In addition, education was also meaningful because it allowed participants to positively contribute to society by helping others in a variety of

ways. Finally, some participants also saw education as a badge of honor or an important achievement worthy of recognition.

Finally, at the time of the interview, the meanings of education as a gateway to freedom and agency and as a means of positively impacting others' lives had persisted. One additional emergent theme was of education as a means to self-improvement. For some of the participants, self-betterment was deemed as necessary to be better agents of positive change in the world.

Women were more likely than men to feel the societal pressure to go to college and were also more likely to see education as an obstacle to other priorities, especially when those other priorities involved caring for family members. When returning to school, women were also more likely to describe education as meaningful or as an instrument to helping others. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to see education as an additional source of stress. Participants 25-40 years-old were most likely to see education as a source of freedom and as meaningful in helping others. Latinos/as were more likely than other racial groups to see education as gaining freedom and agency over their lives and their future, and they were the only racial group to see education as a badge of honor.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify how stopped-out students described the meaning education had for them at different points throughout their educational journey. To accomplish this goal, I relied on four research questions:

1. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they first started school?
2. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they dropped out?
3. How do students describe the meaning education had for them when they returned to school?
4. How do students describe the meaning of education for them now?

The framework for this study is Viktor Frankl's philosophy because it helps explain why some people are more likely to succeed at any task regardless of the obstacles they may face and why others are more likely to give up when facing impediments. Viktor Frankl, a psychoanalyst who survived the Holocaust, developed his philosophy while in the concentration camps. Based on Frankl's (2006) observations, when people have a good reason for withstanding or a good meaning for an event in their life, they are likely to endure and overcome the difficulties in their way. However, when people have insufficient reason or meaning for their difficulties, they are much more likely to give up (Frankl, 2006).

According to Frankl's philosophy, people evaluate their experiences as meaningful when they believe they are contributing to a cause greater than themselves (Frankl, 2006; Mason, 2013), when they are altruistic or believe they are positively impacting other people's lives (Schell & Becker, 2006), when they have high levels of hope (Frankl, 2006), self-efficacy (Frankl, 2006), and when they feel a sense of choice, freedom, or autonomy over their own life (Frankl, 2006). When these factors that make one's experience meaningful are missing, people are much more likely to quit a task, especially when encountering obstacles in their way. Furthermore, according to Frankl (2006), each person is the author of his or her life, and each person can choose to give the events in their life different meanings. The remainder of this chapter includes the problem statement, the summary and interpretations of the findings, as well as the implications and recommendations for higher education.

The nation's labor market is demanding increasing numbers of college educated and higher trained workers (Carnevale & Rose, 2011). At the same time, however, our nation's educational system is under-producing college graduates and higher skilled workers (Schramm, 2012). One of the reasons for the insufficient number of college graduates has been the steady decrease in higher education enrollments since 2010 (Ginder & Kelly-Reid, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Community colleges have been in particular negatively affected by this downward trend in enrollment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Moreover, a secondary factor affecting the small number of college graduates is the high attrition rates. In 2004, universities experienced a 39% attrition rate

(American College Testing, 2010). In 2010, community colleges experienced a 44% attrition rate from the first year of college to the second (American College Testing, 2010). By the year 2015, the attrition rate at community colleges increased to 61% (Juszkiewicz, 2015). These statistics may be the effects of other issues affecting the country's youth.

The current generation of young people is experiencing higher rates of depression than previous generations (Twenge, 2000). In a study involving a large sample of over 75,000 students, most participants felt overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted; a majority recounted feelings of sadness and loneliness, as well as high levels of stress and anxiety; almost half experienced hopelessness, purposelessness, and depression debilitating enough to impair their proper functioning (American College Health Association, 2012). All of these problems are symptoms of a lack of meaning in life and a lack of meaning in education.

Although the body of literature examining the link between the concepts of life meaning and education (Hagedorn, 2012) and education attainment (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Henderson-King & Smith, 2006; Mason & Nel, 2011; Nash & Jang, 2014) has been growing, no research has focused on the meaning of education for students who have stopped-out of college. Stopped-out students are students who departed college for a while and later returned. This study addressed the problem of the absence of knowledge and understanding of the meaning of education for stopped-out students.

Interpretations and Conclusions

From the participants' narrated descriptions of their meaning of education at different turning points in their educational journeys, eight themes emerged: (a) education as a societal expectation, (b) education as freedom, (c) education as an obstacle to other priorities, (d) education as an additional source of stress, (e) education as worthless, (f) education as meaningful, (g) education as a badge of honor, and (h) education as self-improvement. In the next few paragraphs, each theme will be discussed and framed by Viktor Frankl's philosophical perspective as well as integrated into the empirical discourse on the subject of meaning and its two other components, hope and self-efficacy.

Education as a Societal Expectation

Education as societal expectation emerged in response to the first research question, which asked participants what education meant to them when they first enrolled in higher education. A majority of the participants described education as an expectation. Some reported their families expected them to attend college so they can improve their opportunities, or to be role models for younger siblings. Others mentioned either their teachers expected them to attend or seeing their friends make plans to go to college made them feel like college was the next step they were supposed to take. Regardless of where the feeling of expectation stemmed from, participants who saw education as an expectation felt as though they had not personally chosen to go to college. Others had already made the decision for them. Frankl's (2006) philosophy explained that people have a need to be in control of their lives, to be the ones who choose a

certain course of action, or to dedicate themselves to freely chosen tasks.

Whenever people have a choice, they tend to be more committed to the choices they make. However, when people are pushed into actions they have not personally chosen, they are less committed and more likely to give up. This might be one of the factors that explains why the participants in this study did not persist in higher education.

Furthermore, some of the participants mentioned they did not know how to navigate the higher education system. They felt confused and unable to decipher the steps necessary to succeed. In other words, some of the participants did not feel efficacious. Instead of having people in their lives simply expecting students to go to college, students need agents who can help them become more self-efficacious. These agents can be teachers, family members or friends who can clarify to students the necessary steps to make a successful transition to higher education. First generation college students especially need more guidance to navigate this transition.

Another interpretation for so many participants describing education as an expectation comes from Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of student development of self-authorship. A majority of these students may have been in the first phase of the development of self-authorship in which their senses of self were heavily influenced by external factors such as societal expectations and their peers. These individuals had not taken the time to think and to choose for themselves an education. They were simply adopting others' views and others' choices.

Although some of the participants education did not freely choose education, for many of them education was a stepping stone to increased freedom. Furthermore, it may not be a coincidence that most of the participants who described education as an expectation were women. Women tend to be more susceptible to societal expectations than men (Belenky et al., 1986). Women who rely on knowledge received from others believe that no knowledge resides within them; all knowledge comes from outside of themselves. These women follow the rules established by authority figures (Belenky et al., 1986). This theory may help explain why it was mostly women who enrolled in higher education because they felt they were expected to go to college.

Education as Freedom

A second emergent theme that emerged from responses from the first research question was education as freedom. Most students described education as freedom when they first enrolled in higher education. This was the only positive theme that emerged from the answers to the first research question, with the other two themes being education as an expectation and education as an obstacle to other priorities. The theme of education as freedom emerged again when participants described the meanings education had when they returned to college after dropping out and at the time of the interview. The overarching theme of theme as freedom included two sub-themes. One sub-theme was education as a means to a goal or as a stepping stone to specific goals, such as better jobs, increased financial security, and more career choices. A second sub-

theme was education as agency or as a means to gain free-choice and increased control over one's life and future.

Education as a means to an end. Almost half of participants described education as a means to an end, and most of them had an end result in mind that only benefitted them individually; it was a self-serving end goal that did not involve the wellbeing of others. According to Frankl (2006), fulfilling their own selfish desires is the primary way used by people to fill their “existential vacuum” (p. 107) or the emptiness they feel inside. People often attempt to satisfy this void through actions such as shopping, eating, or sexual promiscuity, and these actions constitute the “will to pleasure” (Frankl, 2006, p. 107). This was evident in some of the participants' narratives. One of the participants liked to shop for expensive shoes. Another participant, Esperanza, sought satisfaction by partying, drinking, and doing drugs. The rewards, or brief moments of pleasure people experience from activities such as shopping, partying, alcohol, and drugs, are fleeting and leave the person in pursuit of more fulfillment. In the case of excessive shopping, people can accrue debt if they do not keep their shopping habits in check. In the case of drugs and alcohol, the desire for more pleasure can lead to addiction and, in some cases, even over-intoxication and, at times, death. Thankfully, Esperanza was able to recognize the downward spiral she was in, and made better decisions than continue on that path.

A second strategy people often employ to satisfy their emptiness is by chase after more influential positions or money or by appealing to their “will to power” (Frankl, 2006, p. 107). However, neither of these two paths, the will to

pleasure or the will to power have a lasting satisfaction (Frankl, 2006). Previous studies found that students who scored high on materialism tended to view education as a path to increased independence (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011), and as a means to financial security (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). However, pursuing materialistic gains can deepen the void people feel (Frankl, 2006). Based on the participants' responses, many of the participants were likely attempting to fill the void they were experiencing from not have a strong meaning of life and of education. Without a meaningful path in life, these students were also likely to experience diminished levels of hope (Feldman & Snyder, 2005) and academic self-efficacy (Pruett, 2011), which are the two other components of meaning.

Education as agency. Seeing education as a source of freedom and a means to gain control over one's life is validated by Frankl's (2006) philosophy. Life is more fulfilling and people are more motivated to complete tasks they have freely chosen. Furthermore, pursuing a higher education degree to increase one's social mobility is linked to many health benefits and improved well-being (Winkleby et al., 1992). In other words, feeling a sense of freedom benefits a person psychologically and physiologically. Therefore, when education is a freely chosen task rather than an expectation, people are more likely to persist.

According to Frankl (2006), one of the most fulfilling and meaningful tasks in a person's life is dedicating oneself to a cause greater than the self. Frankl, posited that people cannot be truly happy while chasing their own happiness or while seeking selfish gains. People will only be truly happy when they are

concerned with other people's happiness. People are most fulfilled when dedicating their lives to helping others or to improving other people's lives. Having life meaning is positively associated with self-transcendence (or being concerned with issues beyond the self), increased levels of altruism, and by being concerned with the surrounding environment and nature (Frankl, 2006; Mason, 2013). Last, education itself has been found to be a source of life meaning (Darewych, 2014).

A second motivating factor is finding a unique purpose to one's life (Washburn, 1998). Some of the participants in the study asserted that while going to school they were able to find their calling. Once they had identified their life passion, participants stated their motivation to achieve their educational goals increased drastically; school became a primary priority. Just as Frankl (2006, p. ix) cited the philosopher Nietzsche, who noted that those who have a good reason for engaging in an act can withstand almost any obstacles in their way, once students have a meaningful goal, they are more willing to undergo the pressures education place on a person and come out the other end. Aside from helping people attain their goals having meaning has many other benefits as well.

Having meaning is associated with increased hope (Feldman & Sneyder, 2005; Kim et al., 2005; Mascaro & Rosen, 2006) and improved educational attainment (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Feldman et al., 2009). In addition to increased levels of hope, life meaning is also associated with improved self-efficacy, which further positively affects students' performance and persistence

(Bandura, 1977). Life meaning is associated with lower levels of depression and increased life satisfaction, self-image, optimism, and even health (Steger et al., 2006). Furthermore, life meaning is positively associated with improved psychological health and the ability to establish emotional connections with others (Bodner et al., 2014). Having a strong life meaning acts as an insulating layer against life's stressors and provides people with a sense of security (Burrow et al., 2014).

Furthermore, students who scored high on the search for meaning in life also saw education as a path to more autonomy (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Most students described education as providing them with a sense of freedom or increased control over their life. However, as they faced obstacles in their personal lives, they lost sight of this desired freedom. By the time most of the participants were ready to leave higher education, freedom was no longer a meaning they gave to education. Education become predominately an additional source of stress, an obstacle to other more pressing goals and, for some, education was worthless.

Education as an Obstacle to Other Priorities

Although attaining a degree or a certificate would give students more control over their fate in the future, some students had more pressing immediate priorities. Some of the students were attempting to meet their basic needs of having food and shelter. According to Maslow's theory, people have a difficult time becoming self-actualized if their primary needs are not met (Francis & Kritsonis, 2006). Other participants, however, had other priorities such as caring

for loved ones. The act of loving or caring for someone is meaningful in and of itself (Frankl, 2006). Most of the individuals who left school to care for others were women. According to Field Belenky's *Women's Ways of Knowing*, women who are at the received knowledge stage of development tend to have an either/or approach to handling problems (Belenky et al., 1986). When they feel are forced to choose between caring for their own needs or for the needs of others, very often women put others above themselves, choosing to prioritize others' needs at the expense of their own. Women are not socialized to find integrative solutions that allow them to meet their own needs along with the needs of others.

Participants left higher education for other reasons, such as to pursue entertainment, to get married, or to rest. When people did not place much value on education or had more basic needs to meet, they were also more likely to see education as a stressor rather than a helpful tool. Viktor Frankl (2006) is not the only one who suggested individuals must make the choice to go to school for themselves. Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship presented similar ideas.

Using Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship, students who left college to pursue other priorities may have been in the second phase of development of self-authorship. In this phase, individuals realize that following societal expectations is not working out for them. Unfulfilled by their choice to pursue higher education, individuals reconsidered their options. Some left higher education to take some time to explore what they truly wanted for themselves.

Others knew they did not want a higher education degree at that time. After taking time to think for themselves, some of the individuals identified their own reasons to return to college. When they returned, they were the ones choosing to attend school. They were following their internal compass instead of letting external factors dictate their life choices.

Education as an Additional Source of Stress

Several students, predominately males, described viewing education as a source of stress when they left higher education. These findings confirm previous studies that obtained similar results. Students who placed high value on materialism described education as a source of anxiety (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). When properly managed, academics should not be just a source of stress but also a source of gratification, satisfaction, and a source of meaning (Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Feldman et al., 2009). Academia is meant to produce tension in students or else growth cannot take place. Humans do not need a completely stress-free life (Frankl, 2006). Not all stress is bad stress. There are two types of stress: distress and eustress. Stress becomes negative, or distress, when it triggers a negative psychological response in a person (Simmons, 2000). When stress produces a positive psychological state of mind, it is considered positive, and it is called eustress (McGowan, Gardner, & Fletcher, 2006). Therefore, having a certain amount of tension oriented toward meaningful goals will produce growth and increase one's psychological well-being (Frankl, 2006).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is another theory that could explain some of the participants' hierarchy of priorities. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs

theory (Francis & Kritsonis, 2006), people are not concerned with their self-actualizing, a higher-level need, until their physiological needs are met. Aside from education as an additional source of stress and as an obstacle to other priorities, when students were departing college, some students also considered education of no value.

Education as Worthless

Right before stopping out of college, several students saw education as worthless. Some of the participants, one of them being Victoria, a 39-year-old woman whose brother had been killed, stated that at that time nothing mattered. This indifference is an effect of not having meaning in life (Schulenberg et al., 2014). Lack of meaning in life also leads to depression (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 2014; Frankl, 2006; Mason, 2013; Schulenberg et al., 2014), just as some of the participants in the study such as Victoria and Wolfgang, who was homeless for a couple of years, reported experiencing. The participants' responses confirmed the findings of previous studies on stopped-out students and the reasons why they leave higher education. Among the many factors that cause students to drop out are caring for loved ones, financial problems, and job-related issues (Woosley, 2004; Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Had these participants been able to give their life meaning, they may not have stopped-out of college since finding meaning or being able to give the events people face throughout their lives good meaning leads to psychological well-being (Frankl, 2006; Noble, 1997) and improved motivation to achieve goals (Ho, Cheung, & Cheung, 2010).

Education as a Badge of Honor

After returning to college, a few students reported viewing education as a badge of honor. In their eyes, earning a degree was an honorable pursuit that would earn them increased respect. A previous study reported that students who scored high on materialism were more likely to view education as a source of admiration (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). It is important to highlight that all of the participants who described education as a badge of honor were Latinos and Latinas. For some, finishing college was proof to themselves that they were not failures, that they could accomplish such a task. For others, earning a degree meant proving others that they were honorable people, and not “those kinds” of Latinos who were on welfare. According to Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship, this may mean that these students were still in the second phase of development where others’ opinions about them matter (2001). Or it may be that these participants experienced a fear of confirming a negative stereotype about their group; this fear is called stereotype threat (Steele, 2011). Stereotype threat is an additional stress factor that many people experience and that has been linked to not only reducing people’s performance on a variety of tasks, but also to impeding people’s ability to learn in the first place (Apple & Kronberger, 2012). Meaning in life, on the other hand, contributes to people having higher self-esteem (Steger et al., 2006). Self-esteem has a positive influence on academic achievement (Arshad, Zaidi, & Mahmood, 2015; Bartozs, 2014). When asked about the meaning of education at the time of the interviews, education as a badge of honor was rarely mentioned, and, therefore, no longer an emergent

theme. Instead, a new theme emerged as participants were responding to the last research question, which inquired what education meant for students at the time of the interview.

Education as Self-Improvement

When answering the question inquiring what education meant for participants at the time of the interview, a majority of the students asserted education was a tool to self-development. Many of these students wanted to be more knowledgeable and have more skills to positively contribute to society. Previous studies established that students who scored high on the search for meaning in life described education as means to self-development (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). Furthermore, students who had already developed their life meaning were more likely to see education as a way to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to influence the world (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011; Yeager & Bundick, 2009).

The findings from the four research questions demonstrated that when students attach positive meanings to education that, according to Frankl (2006), add purpose and coherence to the participants' lives, students will be more likely to persist. The factors that add purpose to one's life are dedicating one's life to a cause greater than oneself, such as helping others, exercising free agency or the ability to engage in freely chosen tasks, as well as having one's basic needs met, and seeking self-actualization such as self-improvement (Frankl, 2006). The emergent themes were a good reflection of Frankl's philosophy in higher education. Aside from the emergent themes, this study provided some additional

findings such as the effect of age on meaning, some of the reasons why participants departed higher education, and the meanings of education for students upon returning to college.

Age as a Factor Affecting Meaning

The findings of this study point to age as a factor affecting students' meaning of education. Older students, 25-40 years of age, were more likely to have higher meaning of education and be more concerned with helping others and with gaining agency. These results are similar to the findings of previous studies that noted that students who are 18-30 years old are particularly marked by high levels of stress and anxiety (Nash & Jang, 2014), which signal the absence of life meaning. Yet not all of the students 18-30 experience the added tension; some of them use this period in their life to inquire and explore their life purpose (Nash & Jang, 2014). It is important that higher education institutions whose student population is predominantly in the 18-30-year-old range design avenues of support that can guide students during this tumultuous time of their life. One way to help students is to provide a meaning making education and not just prepare students for a specific profession (Nash & Jang, 2014). When students identify a good purpose and meaningful academic goals that contribute to their identity formation, their level of satisfaction with their education and their life increases (Ho et al., 2010). However, when students have not developed a strong life purpose and meaningful goals, they are more negatively influenced by the obstacles they may face.

Reasons for Departure from Higher Education

Some of the students left college to care for loved ones or because of financial issues, including losing housing. These findings mirror some of the findings from a previous study by Woosley (2004) that identified that the reasons students stop out are due to personal health issues, caring for loved ones, work related problems, lack of student success skills, and discontent with their course work or the institution at large. However, after taking some time off, students' meaning of education changed.

Meaning of Education upon Returning to College

At the time that students returned to college, this study found that the participants' meaning of education were: (a) education as a means for increased job opportunities and financial security; (b) education as agency and as a tool to positively contribute to others or society; and (c) education as a badge of honor or a source of respect. Previous research by Bouer and Mott (1992) found that the main factors for returning to higher education were competing social and familial demands. However, this study found that career goals were an important factor affecting students' decision to continue their education.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study I address several implications. First, it is imperative that the California Community College System take steps to redress the low student enrollment and high attrition rates. In order to improve the situation, the findings of this study suggest that community college need to address students' meaning of education. As the findings of this study suggests,

many students who enter higher education have negative or self-serving meanings of education. Educators continually face students who lack meaningful goals and a sense of purpose in life (Nash & Jang, 2014). Once students face obstacles, whether in the school environment or in their personal lives, they are likely to leave the educational system. Thus, students need an anchor to keep them grounded during difficult times (Nash & Jang, 2014). Higher education institutions should invest in helping students find purpose and identify meaningful goals (Darewych, 2014).

The findings of this study showed that many students are enrolling into higher education to fulfill other's expectations of them and not as a personal choice. This demonstrates that students do not value education enough to want it for themselves. This may be a systemic issue in which high schools and colleges are not succeeding in making higher education an attractive option for students. Many of these students were not freely choosing higher education even though they knew a college degree would increase their opportunities.

Most students saw education as a gateway to increased freedom and opportunities, and all of the students who saw education as an access point to more freedom were historically underrepresented students. It is no surprise that historically underrepresented groups still face many more obstacles in life than White students and that increased access is one of the most attractive features of higher education for minority students. For example, according to an Economic Policy Institute report published in 2016, the wage gap between White and Black earners is the largest it has been in the last four decades (Wilson & Rodgers,

2016). Black men earn hourly rates that are over 22% lower than the hourly wages of White men, even when the level of education and experience of employees is accounted for. And Black women's pay is 34% lower than that of White men with comparable education and experience (Wilson & Rodgers, 2016). And this is just one piece of the puzzle contributing to more difficulties for members of minority groups. When historically underrepresented students leave higher education, they lose the opportunity to close the achievement gap. On the other hand, when minority students continue their education, they set precedence in their families and their communities. Other members of their circles of influence can see that it is possible to attain a college degree. The college students and graduates can later become role models and agents in their communities. They can explain the steps needed to attain a college degree to those around them, therefore, increasing their communities' cultural capital and access to higher education.

In addition, many of our students still face unmet basic needs for food, shelter, and other primary resources. We cannot expect students to be concerned with self-actualization while they do not have a place they can call home, and they do not know where the next meal will come from.

Additionally, female students still seem to bear the burden of caring for loved ones when loved ones are in need. Several research studies have determined that women tend to be the main care givers in their families (Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). Women often spend more hours as well as more energy caring for loved ones as compared to men (Navaie-Waliser, Sprigs, &

Feldman, 2002). It is important to build societal standards that break gender expectations and distribute the weight of caring for loved ones with other family members so that women will also have the opportunity to pursue their life dreams. When women are more educated, the many family member they are surrounded by can also benefit from not only their knowledge and skills but also their longer life, increased engagement in civic life, and higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction, higher income, and larger networks (OECD, 2013).

Furthermore, many students, and particularly men, were more likely to see education as an additional source of stress. This is a sign that men tend to be more concerned with materialism (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). This may be the result of our societal ideals of masculinity and what makes one successful. Hegemonic masculinity equates money, status, and power with success (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016). However, as Frankl (2006) pointed out, chasing materialistic possessions will only provide temporary fulfillment. Men need better definitions of success and information on what provides increased life satisfaction.

Latinos/as were the only group to see education as a badge of honor. This may highlight the discrimination and negative stereotype the Latina community still faces, and the need of the people of this community to be recognized as positive members of our society. At a time when political rhetoric is increasingly referring to Latinos as illegal immigrants and criminals, many Latinos/as may be viewing education as a way to prove they are productive agents of their

communities. It is important that higher education institutions fulfill their need for respect and provide more opportunities for recognition.

Last, when students returned to school, many of them were interested in self-improvement. This demonstrates a longing for meaning in their life (Henderson-King & Mitchell, 2011). It is important that higher education institutions capitalize on this search for purpose and help students find their life calling. Since older students were more likely to have meaning or be searching for meaning, this suggests that younger students are lacking meaning in their lives, making them more likely to leave before attaining their desired degrees or certificates.

Recommendations

This study has increased the understanding of the meaning of education for stopped-out students who enroll in community colleges in Southern California. Based on the findings of this study, I make several recommendations to improve the retention rates and increase the achievement of stopped-out students in California's community colleges.

Recommendations for Policy

To better fulfill the Student Success Act of 2012, also known as SB1456, Community colleges need to appropriate more resources to present higher education as an opportunity and not as an obstacle. Particularly the Latino/Latina community tended to see education as an obstacle. It is important that when engaging in recruiting or serving first time or returning Latino/Latina students,

community colleges appeal to the needs of the particular students and the communities they serve.

Community colleges must also better link with high schools and even middle schools to help persuade students of the benefits of higher education so that high students will freely choose to go to college instead of simply fulfilling others' expectations of them. When conversations about college begins, often times when students are still in middle school, it should include a meaning making component to help students explore much earlier their purpose in life and the role education can fulfill in achieving that goal. Therefore, outreach counselors as well as high school and middle school counselors must be trained to address meaning in their interactions with students. All educational faculty and staff must help students connect education to a larger meaning beyond having a career and making money. Education must have a greater meaning than a self-serving one, even if this view is contrary to current higher educational trends.

The current trend in higher education is to streamline the curriculum and push students through the pipeline. Though in theory this will speed up the process, and it should increase student completion, this type of educational model removes students' free choice, which is a vital component of meaning. Furthermore, this educational model does not take into consideration students' satisfaction with life and the effect that can have on their psychological well-being. Education must include much more than career training. Education should help students self-actualize and become emotionally and psychologically healthy

human beings and citizens. In addition to policy changes, I recommend several practices that could capitalize on the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Practice

Knowing that young adulthood is a particularly tumultuous time for many people, marked with high levels of stress, anxiety and depression, higher education institutions must be better equipped to help students with their psychological health. Since having meaning in life and a strong meaning of education can alleviate many of the negative psychological issues young people experience, community colleges must provide the time and space for students to analyze and explore their purpose in life and the role of education in helping them achieve that purpose. One way to help students through the process of meaning making of their education and of their lives is to engage them in meaningful moral conversation about this topic. A second way is to provide opportunities for storytelling on the subject of education and life meaning (Nash & Jang, 2014). Both of these goals can be accomplished in a variety of ways.

For example, the counseling department can offer meaning seminars to help guide students towards more meaningful paths. Meaning seminars should include an information section about the main components of meaning, the effects of a lack of meaning, as well as the role and the benefits of meaning in a person's life. Furthermore, the seminar should include a small groups discussion session that would provide students the opportunity to talk about their current meaning in life or lack of meaning, giving students authorship rights to their life stories and helping them explore other meanings they could have for their

existence. Moreover, the seminar should help students explore and identify the role of education in helping them achieve those new goals or meanings they may have identified. Once students identify new goals and higher meanings for their lives, the workshop should focus on building students' hope and their agency. As hope is a main component of meaning, the workshop must address students' levels of hope. After presenting hope-based stories and sharing research-based information about the concept of hope, students should be encouraged to set hopeful goals for their future. Yet hope alone, without strategy is not sufficient. Therefore, the seminar must also address the last component of meaning, which is agency. Students could be prompted to brainstorm pathways toward their hopeful future goals, as well as obstacles they will likely face on the way to achieving those goals. Once the obstacles are identified, students should identify and write a variety of strategies to overcome those obstacles when they happen. These strategies can range from finding new paths to identifying resources and people to help them along the way. Once the meaning workshop is designed, many of the campus community members can refer students to it.

For example, career counselors should receive training and resources to engage students in moral conversations about the meaning of life and the meaning of education or to refer students to meaning workshops on campus. Furthermore, special population counselors such as Extended Opportunities Programs and Services, Disabled Student Programs and Services, the PUENTE program counselors, and even welcome centers staff and learning resources staff could provide information and refer students to meaning seminars. Students

should be required to take these seminars within the first semester of college. The seminars can be incorporated into the students' educational plans and could be fulfilled either through face-to-face meaning seminars or online training. In addition, when students express to any school personnel an intention to drop out, they should be referred to these meaning making resources.

Second, when conducting marketing, knowing what particular meanings tend to lead to increased student attainment can help facilitate student recruitment. Community colleges can better target particular groups by appealing to the meanings of education that are most engaging to that group. For example, knowing that women were particularly concerned with caring for family members, outreach staff can use material that link education with opportunities for women to help their loved ones. Knowing that the Latino/Latina community was likely to see education as an obstacle, outreach staff can better paint education as a place that increases opportunities instead of being an obstacle that needs to be overcome and can provide information about the resources available to help students deal with other obstacles the Latina community members may be facing. When addressing men, who were more likely to see education as an additional stressor in their life but also as a tool to gain agency, outreach counselors can help male students see education as an opportunity for increased control over their lives and for increased career and financial security instead of a stressor. Such information can also be included on the schools' websites, in their marketing and outreach fliers and pamphlets, as advertisement on busses and billboards, and in radio and television advertisements.

In addition, if higher education institutions want to meet potential and actual students where they are, they have to also reach them online. Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms can include advertisements that appear on viewers' screens prompting them to consider their meaning of life and of education and include links to other resources connecting people with additional information on this topic and with higher education institutions. Higher education institutions would benefit from presenting themselves as places where individuals can explore and identify their life purpose and also as places where individuals can begin fulfilling that life purpose. But getting students interested in enrolling in higher education is not sufficient. Once students join our campus communities, we need to transform our curriculum into a meaning making curriculum.

Faculty must connect their areas of knowledge to a greater and more meaningful cause if they want to increase student persistence and student attainment in their courses. Faculty must find ways to integrate meaning making into their assignments. For example, as a communication studies instructor, when I am teaching public speaking, I plan to have my students present a speech on their meaning of life, their life purpose, and the role education can play in achieving that purpose. When teaching interpersonal communication, I can assign students a journal on the same topic and have students connect meaning making to who they are as individuals and to the effect life meaning can have on their relationships. In intercultural communication, I can assign students

an essay where they explore their meaning of life and of education and on the role of culture in influencing those meanings.

Last, community colleges can include meaning making as one of the habits of mind that are more likely to increase student retention and student attainment. These habits of mind must be advertised on campus in a variety of ways, from fliers and pamphlets placed in strategic places with high visibility to counseling sessions, teacher syllabi, classrooms, student success workshops, the schools' websites, and other places. In addition to being advertised, meaning making should become a daily topic of conversation on a college campus and should be part of the decision-making process of staff take at every layer of the institutional hierarchy.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should seek to identify what the main factors were that helped students give their education stronger meaning by the time they returned to school. Additionally, future research should also identify ways to help students increase their meaning of education so they will be less likely to leave higher education before completing their educational goals. Furthermore, future research should also identify a variety of places where community college administrators can engage students in a discussion about their meanings of education and help students give education stronger, more lasting meanings.

Summary of the Dissertation

Students are enrolling in higher education in smaller numbers than previous generations and have high attrition rates. In addition, they also

experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. All of these negative symptoms could be reduced if students had higher meanings for their lives and for their education. The findings of this study strongly indicate that when students give their education meanings that are (a) connected with positively contributing to a cause greater than themselves; (b) targeted at gaining agency so they can engage in freely chosen, meaningful tasks; (c) connected with finding purpose for their existence; and (d) fulfilling their primary needs for food, shelter, and safety, students are more likely to persist and succeed in higher education. If implemented, the suggestions for policy and practice can positively impact many students in the California Community College System.

Implementing targeted outreach strategies that appeal to specific student groups will increase enrollment. Once enrolled, campus programs that help students find purpose and positive meanings of education will benefit individual students and each campus, as well as the community college system as a whole. If students have positive, long lasting meanings of education, attrition rates will decrease and student success rates will increase. Community college would improve their goal of serving students and the communities in which they reside.

Therefore, I urge the Chancellor's office to support efforts aimed at increasing students' meaning of education. I urge community college presidents and deans of counseling to appoint staff to provide meaning of education workshops to students in their student success centers, and include meaning making as one of the habits of the mind. I urge counselors to address students' meanings of education during counseling appointments; I urge faculty to carve

out time during the semester to deal with this topic, and I urge outreach staff and welcome center staff to design material aimed at increasing students' meaning of education.

EPILOGUE

When I took on this project I had a preconceived notion about stopped-out students. I thought that many of the stopped-out students may have not cared about school enough to stay in school while dealing with life difficulties. I thought that everyone experiences difficulties at times, yet some people manage to stay in school in spite of their problems. And I found philosopher Nietzsche's words to confirm my belief: "He who has a *why* to live for, can bear almost any *how*." I used this as evidence or support for my belief that if stopped-out students really wanted, they would have found a way to remain in school. One of my peers in my graduate cohort repeatedly challenged this assumption. She kept making the claim that maybe the students had faced such difficult situations that they had to stop going to school. I knew that *some* of the students who had dropped out had faced unusual circumstances that affected their ability to stay in school, but I was fairly convinced that *many* of the stopped-out students had quit too easily, because school did not mean much to them. As I got ready for the personal interviews, I tried ridding myself of my biases and let participants share their experiences. I was ready to listen to their stories.

By the end of the interviews, I had learned that I had been both right and wrong at the same time. On the one hand, this study revealed that for many students, school did not have a great significance when they first enrolled. Many stopped-out students did not have a strong reason for going to college. Other

students were in college for the wrong reason. Some students had left schools simply because they had better things to do, like travel, start families, have fun, and so forth. At the same time, however, many of the students faced such negative circumstances that they felt there was no way to continue school at that time.

Some of the stopped-out students experienced extremely negative life episodes that contributed to their stopping out. Several of the participants cried during the interviews recalling the issues they were handling when they stopped going to college, even though several years had passed since the incidents had unfolded. I was able to see that for many of the students, stopping out of school had not been a decision they made easily, but a decision that at the time they felt they had to make. And yes, as an outsider, not being in the midst of a life crisis, and an educated person completing a doctoral program, I can sit and analyze each of the interviewee's past situations and try to identify what courses of actions each could have taken to deal with their difficult life circumstances that would have allowed them to remain in school. But that would not be fair. Hindsight is always in 20/20 vision. However, after listening to the stories and the perspectives of the participants, I learned that while they were dealing with the stress, chaos, and hurt of their respective situations, many of them did not see a path that would have allowed them to remain in school. They truly did the best they could at that moment. They handled the difficult times the best way they knew. Therefore, I now feel guilty for having jumped to conclusions and judged stopped-out students as having left school too easily. I hope this study will help

stopped-out students' voices be heard and inform higher education about the harsh situation many of our students face. Higher education institutions need to be aware of the issues affecting students, so they can take the necessary steps to better support them. I also hope that this study will help higher education institutional leaders understand the role of a strong meaning for education in students' educational decisions and in their academic success.

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APPENDIX A**PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING REFERRALS**

Cerritos College
Student Health Services: (562) 860-2451 x 2321
11110 Alondra Blvd., Norwalk, CA

Starview Children & Family Services-(310) 868-5379
1303 Walnut Park Way, Compton, CA
Website: <http://www.starsinc.com>

LA County Department of Mental Health-(310) 668-4272
1720 East 120th Street, Compton, CA
Website: <http://dmh.lacounty.gov/wps/portal/dmh>

Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services-(310) 677-7808
323 N. Prairie Ave., Inglewood, CA

YWCA-(310) 763-9117
1600 E. Compton Blvd., Compton, CA

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Gender: Female Male Other: _____

Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Academic year status: _____

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date:

Place:

Participant:

Welcome

Hello, my name is Minodora Moldoveanu, and I am very grateful for your willingness to participate in this study.

Interview Questions

- A. Please share with me what has been your experience with higher education.
- B. What did education mean to you when you were first considering enrolling in higher education?
- C. What was the meaning of education for you when you were considering leaving higher education?
- D. What was the meaning of education for you when you considered returning to continue your higher education?
- E. What does education mean to you now, at the time of the interview?

*Note: Ask follow-up questions if needed for clarity.

F. Thank you statement

Thank you once again for your time and willingness to participate in this study. There is a list of community resources you can contact if you experience any distress related to remembering your experiences.

Note: If the interviewee becomes distressed at any time, stop the interview and remind the participant that they can a) stop the interview entirely (and provide referrals for outside counseling), b) take a break from the interview, or c) change the subject and return to the subject at a later time if they wish.

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

To: [Selected email recipients]

From: Minodora Moldoveanu, M. A., Doctoral Candidate

Subject: Invitation to Participate

Dear Re-Entry Student,

In partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree in educational leadership from California State University, Fullerton, I am studying the meaning of education for students who left college for a period of time and later returned. The purpose of this study is to identify what education meant for students when they left college, and what it means to them now that they have returned.

I am asking students who are at least 18 years of age and currently enrolled at Cerritos College either part-time or full-time, and who are planning to enroll again next semester or are accomplishing their educational goals, to share their experiences with me. Participants in this study will provide basic demographic information and complete one in-person interview that will last 60-90 minutes. All information you share will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. This means that your name and other identifying information will never be connected with your words. Only I will know your identity, and to maintain confidentiality I will use aliases for participants when writing about them. As a thank you gift, you will receive a \$20 gift certificate to Starbucks.

If you'd like to contribute your voice to this study, please respond to this email or call me at (562) 556-2341. Let me know when I can meet you on campus to interview you (choose a time that does not conflict with your class schedule or other obligations). The study consent form is attached to this message if you would like more information.

Thank you for your consideration and your participation! I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Minodora Moldoveanu, M. A.
Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.), Candidate
California State University, Fullerton

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT-ADULT

My name is Minodora Moldoveanu. I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Dawn Person at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) in the doctoral program in Community College Educational Leadership. I am conducting a study on the meaning of education for students who have left college for a period of time and later returned. The purpose of this study is to understand what education meant for students when they left college, and what it means to them now that they returned.

As a student who has returned to college after having previously left for some time, you are eligible to participate in this study. You will have the opportunity to answer questions and share information about your meaning of education. Please note that your participation in this research study will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the perspectives of re-entry students.

Your participation will involve a face-to-face interview that will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded with your permission. If you choose not to be recorded, I will take notes during the interview. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study.

During the interview, you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. If you choose not to answer, there will be no consequence and you will still remain a part of the study. The only identifiable risk to you as a participant in this study is that you may recall personal and academic obstacles you had to overcome in your college experience.

Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. I am the only person who will know your name. The responses you provide will not be connected with your name in any way, as participants will be referred to only by pseudonyms (aliases). Interview transcripts and other study information will be stored in a locked cabinet and on the researcher's password-protected computer, and the only people who will have access to the data will be the researcher, the researcher's advisor, and a qualified data transcriber. Data will be kept indefinitely for future publication or presentation.

Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from participation at any time without suffering penalty or loss of benefits or services to which you may otherwise be entitled.

As a thank you gift for participating in the study, you will receive a \$20 gift certificate at Starbucks.

If you have additional questions please contact me at minodora.moldoveanu@csu.fullerton.edu. My dissertation committee chair, Dr. Dawn Person, will also be available to discuss any issues that may arise from this study. Contact Dr. Person by calling 657-278-8510 or by emailing to

dperson@fullerton.edu. If you have questions about the rights of human research participants, contact the CSUF Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office at 657-278-7640 or irb@fullerton.edu.

I have no conflict of interest relating to this study, financial or otherwise.

I have carefully read and/or have had the terms used in this consent form and their significance explained to me. By signing below, I agree that I am at least 18 years of age and agree to participate in this project.

Name of Participant (print) _____

Signature of Participant _____ **Date** _____

Name of Investigator (print) Minodora Moldoveanu

Signature of Investigator _____ **Date** _____

Your signature below indicates that you are giving permission to audio record your responses.

Signature of Participant _____ **Date** _____

<p>All California State University employees are mandated reporters under California's Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act ("CANRA"). Whenever a CSU employee, in his/her professional capacity or within the scope of his/her employment, has knowledge of or observes a person under the age of 18 years whom the employee knows, or</p>
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