

Making It (or Not) on a Dime in College: Implications for Practice

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This longitudinal, mixed-method study explores how the financial burdens of college attendance impact student involvement and experiences throughout the first year of college. The student participants at 4 Midwestern, public universities were engaged to describe their experiences throughout their first year as they navigated a complex and expensive system. The policy recommendations of this study implicate many functional areas and levels at the university including academic and student affairs.

Between 2001 and 2006, the average tuition and fees for attending a 4-year public higher education institution increased 35%. During the past few years, although tuition and fee increases have slowed, the prices are up for the previous 5 years after adjusting for inflation (The College Board, 2006). The disparity between the steady rise in college tuition and the meager rise in family income leaves a significant difference between family contributions and the actual costs of attending college. The experiences of students who lack adequate financial support through their families or financial aid differ greatly from other students. Many of these students must work during the school year. In fact, during the 1999–2000 academic year 76% of all dependent students worked an average of 22 hours per week (Choy, 2004). As a result, the choices these students must make between working long hours and being involved in campus life have a great

impact on their college experience.

A significant number of descriptive and inferential statistical research studies by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and higher education researchers address the impact of recent trends in financial aid and college tuition on access to and persistence in college; however, the existing literature lacks the students' voices. This study provided students the opportunity to share their experiences as full-time, dependent, first-year students working to pay for college and living expenses. Thus, we chose a mixed-method longitudinal study utilizing NCES survey questions, focus groups, and online journaling data. The data presented in this article begin to tell the story of how these students manage college and make decisions given their financial needs and the challenges of being more responsible for meeting those needs than more advantaged students. Findings from the student surveys, blogs (i.e., Web logs or online journals), and focus groups over the course of the 2006–07 academic year are presented to inform administrators and student affairs professionals in the areas of financial management, working, and engagement. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students with unmet financial need, resulting in a high net price for attending a 4-year public university, persist in college academically, socially, and financially?

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2. How do these students make choices about involvement and engagement within college?
3. Do these choices affect the students' college experiences?

INSPIRATION FOR THE STUDY

The idea for this study was sparked by the book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich (2002). Her 2-year study of America's working poor attempted to expose how difficult it can be to survive on low wages in the United States. The experiences of the individuals portrayed in the book initiated a conversation about the college-bound children in these working class families. Our study does not include the children of the men and women in *Nickel and Dimed*, nor does it attempt to replicate Ehrenreich's study. Rather we used her book as a catalyst and model for our study, analyzing the experiences of college students with significant unmet financial need who must earn an income while attending college full time.

Supporting Literature

To further understand the consequences of full-time dependent students working and worrying about money, one must grasp the impact of meeting financial need on students and their families and how this responsibility affects student persistence. This literature review provides a brief overview of these areas, including the theory of social capital, and contextualizes this study within the existing literature.

Financing College

In the face of economic downturn and rising prices, American families are apprehensive about their ability to pay for college. Eighty-four percent of the nation believes that the cost of attending college is too high for many

students and families (Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc., 2003). At the same time, they are being persuaded that a college education provides the only hope of a secure economic future (McPherson & Schapiro, 1998). But hoping in future security does not pay the tuition bill. In the past, paying for college had been considered primarily a family responsibility; however, this has not been the case in recent decades. In the 1990s, college tuition and fees increased, outpacing both inflation and growth in the median family income (Joyner, 1996). The disparity between the steady rise in college tuition and the meager rise in family income left a significant difference between the actual costs of attending college and what families could afford to pay. As a result, the federal government's average expected family contribution declined for both low- and middle-income students, and the average amount of financial need increased. In 1990, 54% of full-time dependent students received some form of financial aid. By the 2004-05 school year, 76% of first-time, full-time undergraduates received financial aid at 4-year public institutions (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2007).

Impact on Graduation Rate

The federal government estimates that the total number of traditional age college students will see a steady growth rate from 2002 through 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005). The growth in numbers for this generation of college students has major implications as the increase in tuition and decline in family contributions continues. These discrepancies will bear substantially on persistence and graduation rates (ACSFA, 2001). As unmet need increases, students will attempt to bridge the gap by borrowing more money and working more hours. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that the more hours an undergraduate student works during college,

the less likely that individual is to complete a degree. In addition, working students are more likely to have problems with courses (i.e., course load, course scheduling, and course options), access to the library, and academic performance. The literature does not identify the problem as working while in college *per se*; rather, the number of hours spent working and the location of work (on campus vs. off campus) have been identified as the critical indicators (Choy & Carroll, 2003).

An ideal situation for undergraduates who must work during college would allow students to take a full course load, to work approximately 12 hours a week, and to be fully engaged in college academics and activities without the burden of financial insecurity. However, the research indicates that this is not the case for many students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Choy & Carroll, 2003). The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (ACSFA, 2001) found that excessive levels of unmet need for low-income students translates to abandoned plans for full-time, on-campus attendance in favor of part-time attendance, long work hours, and heavy debt. Although motivated by financial considerations, "students make choices that significantly lower the probability of their persistence and degree completion" (ACSFA, p. v).

A Social Mechanism for Persistence

Researchers and administrators should bear in mind that many of these students are living independently from their parents for the first time and thus, must learn how to navigate multiple systems within the college environment while making appropriate decisions for their current and future well-being. Therefore, it is critical to understand how first-year students learn to navigate these systems and make decisions in order to persist through college. Students who have an

accumulated amount of social capital may show greater persistence (Berger, 2000), especially during the first years of college (McDonough, 1997). Social capital is intangible and is embodied within the relationships among people, leading to tangible and/or intangible benefits. Students will use the resources that exist within their relationships with other people and organizations to facilitate a particular end or means (Coleman, 1988). Thereby, students can accumulate social capital by establishing relationships purposefully and employing the relationships to help them maneuver through certain situations or issues (Lin, 1999).

Once a student makes the complex decision to attend college, what to study, and which college to attend, the student will inevitably be concerned about persistence to graduation and the financial issues to be faced. The choices students make are influenced by family background, environmental and educational experiences, social networks, and policy-related factors, including postsecondary information, student aid, tuition costs, and debt forgiveness (Paulsen & St. John, 1997). Our goal in this study was to begin to contribute to the literature the students' stories about how they manage college and make choices given their unmet financial need over the course of their first year in college.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to learn about the level of engagement, involvement, and the decisions traditional-age students make during their first year in college based on their financial circumstances. The ideal study would follow students from the point they begin college through graduation. This was a 1-year case study of first-time, full-time undergraduate students at 4 different institutions in 3 states.

Research Design

The research design for this study was a longitudinal mixed-methods case study. The study was conducted during the 2006-07 academic year. The data collection methods included online surveys, online journaling, and focus groups. The quantitative and foundational data collection tool was a survey administered twice during the academic year. Several questions were selected from the NCES Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey (BPS) and National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The BPS is a longitudinal survey focusing on persistence, including the relationship between working and academics, and the impact of students' educational efforts on their lives. The BPS begins with traditional-age students who are entering college for the first time. Specific survey questions were chosen to enable us to compare our data to larger national data sets. For this study, the student participants completed the survey instrument to determine if they met the criteria for participation: (a) first-time first-year college undergraduate, (b) living on campus, (c) receiving financial aid, and (d) working.

The qualitative data was collected through multiple sources bound by the common theme of finances. This qualitative tradition was selected because we were exploring the phenomenon of students' managing college and the financial burden on their campuses (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). Additionally we employed multiple data sources to triangulate the data and ensure the credibility of the study (Anfara & Mertz). Our study was unique in that it explored the phenomena of engagement and involvement in college for students who define themselves as financially burdened and work for an income.

The qualitative data collection procedures

involved two focus groups (conducted in the fall and spring), telephone interviews with some of the students who could not attend the focus groups, and narrative reflections from a blog they responded to every two weeks. Focus groups provided the participants opportunities to clarify their ideas and experiences through discussions with other students who had similar circumstances (Kelly, 2003). The goal was to capture the unique experiences shared by students through their initial surveys and interview data.

Document analysis can provide an important avenue of "voice, interpretation, and meaning" (Love, 2003, p. 83). Online blogs were used to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences biweekly and to interact in their own natural setting, in their own language, and in their own rich cultural contexts (Love). Students were asked to respond to questions from the initial survey instrument and were prompted to convey their stories about the decisions they made based on their financial concerns.

Research Sites

Research was conducted at 4 higher education institutions in 3 Midwestern states. The states, part of the U.S. Rust Belt, have experienced declining economies due to the loss of manufacturing jobs; two of the states were ranked 41st and 46th among states in job creation during the 1990s.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data included distinct methods for the quantitative and qualitative data obtained using multimedia collection schemes, including phone interviews, online surveys, in-person focus groups, and an online blog site.

Quantitative Survey and Blog Data. The researchers entered the quantitative survey and blog data into SPSS version 16.0 for analysis.

Initial analysis included descriptive statistics, illustrating participant characteristics (e.g., background, parents' education, ethnicity, gender, year in college). At the end of the year, the quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics of the final survey and blog data. For this article, only the questions focusing on finances, including work and financial aid, were analyzed.

We acknowledge the internal threats to validity, including events happening between interview times; maturation of subjects; loss of subjects during the study due to time, dropping out, and other circumstances; and subjects' perceptions changing in response to the research situation. We also acknowledge the issues of validity and credibility of students' self-reporting on their blogs and surveys. Our goal was to have more than 24 students from each of the 4 institutions persist in the study over the course of the academic year; but by the end of the spring semester approximately 33% of the participants had withdrawn from our study. We had 80 students who completed the initial survey and of those, 31 completed the final survey; however, during the year 65 students consistently completed the biweekly blogs and attended focus groups in the spring. The anticipated sample of 96 students would have allowed us to address generalizability issues.

Qualitative Data. The qualitative data was analyzed using a constant comparative coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because multiple data sources were used, they were initially coded as a single source: focus group data, telephone interviews, and the online blog data. Next we began comparing and contrasting the data from the different sources. This was continuous throughout the study. Because the data was collected at multiple points throughout the year and analysis was being conducted continually, we were able to see the emerging themes and develop subsequent probes for the ongoing blogs and

the focus groups. The emerging themes were compared throughout the yearlong study to the biweekly, open-ended blog questions to identify any differences over time. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the data we triangulated the multiple sources of data to one another. This allowed us to build the emergent themes through multiple data sources (Creswell, 2003). Additionally with three researchers on the project we were able to debrief with one another following data collection and analysis (Creswell). This helped ensure the descriptions and interpretations we were making were accurate and reflective of the students' voices.

Two focus groups were held during this study, fall and spring, with a total of 65 students across 4 institutions participating. Each focus group had from 6 to 10 students. When the students initially signed up to participate in the study, the requirements for participation were explicitly stated. We offered a variety of meeting times for the focus groups to accommodate the needs of this population of students, including meetings on Sunday nights with dinner provided. This increased participation, as some campuses did not offer Sunday meals. The focus groups lasted 1½ to 2 hours. There were 6 students who could not attend any of the focus group times in the spring; so individual telephone interviews were conducted with each of these students, lasting approximately 1 hour.

Several of the fall focus group questions were used at the final focus group in the spring with additional questions that focused on the students' time spent at school, any lessons learned, and what they would want to tell policy makers. We focused on the meaning-making by the participants, how the participants were influenced by their behaviors and activities based on their financial concerns and work constraints, and how those factors impacted involvement on campus.

Participants

The students in our study were first-time, full-time undergraduate students living in the residence halls, receiving financial aid, and working for an income during their first academic year. Ninety-one percent of the students graduated from a public high school. The majority of the students were female (71%), and over half were first-generation college students (63%). Racially the students represented a homogenous population with 90% self-identifying as White.

Most of the students' parents were married (62%). Parents financially supported one (44%) or two (25%) dependent children. Thirty percent of families were supporting 2 or more college attendees during 2006-07. Income for the parents of 41% of the students was reported between \$30,001 and \$60,000.

In regards to the parents' highest level of education attained, 29% of the students' fathers had high school diplomas, followed by 20% with bachelor's degrees; 34% of the students' mothers had high school diplomas, followed by 22% with bachelor's degrees, and 20% with associate's degrees. Parent education levels in the NCES BPS (1996/2001) were higher than in our study. Overall, in the BPS study, 50% of the parents held bachelor's degrees or higher, and 30% held high school diplomas.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity for students to share their experiences of college attendance, working while attending college, and decision making. When asked about their first-year college experience overall, 54% stated that they were *satisfied* and 24% were *very satisfied*. This is a significant statistic that merits further explanation. The students in our study consistently held the belief that the only way

to a secure financial future is by earning a college degree. They felt that the sacrifices at this point in their lives were essential to secure their futures. The accounts of these students first revealed how they had chosen to finance college. In identifying the two primary chosen methods of financing college (i.e., securing jobs and incurring debt), the most significant findings relate to the consequences and impact of these choices. This study captured the students' experiences as a function of their financing choices and revealed three emergent themes: (a) the practical challenges to initially secure the chosen method(s) of financing (i.e., obtaining financial aid, securing one or more jobs), (b) the impact of such choices on academics (limited options, performance, etc.), and (c) the impact of such choices on college engagement and involvement.

CHALLENGES TO SECURING COLLEGE FINANCING

Finding Jobs

When we recruited students for this study within the first 2 weeks of school, we assumed that all participants would have a job; however, we learned that two thirds of the students were in the midst of their job hunts. For those without a job, it took them up to half of the school year to find a job because (a) they did not know how to navigate the hiring system on campus, (b) they were not awarded Federal Work-Study (FWS) money (some did not know how to request it), (c) they were picky and did not want to take a job they deemed undesirable (e.g., food service employee), (d) they were feeling overwhelmed, or (e) they were getting involved in other activities (e.g., student clubs). Because they had worked during high school and summers for their families, relatives, or family friends, a majority of these students were not confident with nor equipped for how to pursue a job.

The other students found jobs easily on campus through FWS, networking, or searching for jobs that were available. Since most of these students were working part-time jobs on campus, their average wages were low and they were limited to a maximum of 29 hours scheduled per week. About 20% of the students who worked, held more than one job with hours totaling closer to 40 hours per week on and off campus. One of the young men told us, "I have to work at least two jobs and would love another one, but cannot find one that would work in my schedule." Another student told us:

Work is not that hard to find on campus. There are a lot of opportunities out there. At times it is very hard to balance your time with school work and working at your job. Many times I have felt overwhelmed. But I am saving my money to pay off my loans.

Financial Aid

Pell Grants were awarded to 37% of these students, while federal loans were made to 67% (more than \$3,000 to 43%, and more than \$6,000 to 17%), and private loans made to 30%. These percentages are higher than the 2004-05 IPEDS student financial aid data that reported 28% received federal grants and 44% borrowed through an educational loan program (Knapp et al., 2007). From our sample, 41% had received one-time state merit scholarship awards. One student remarked, "I am a fine arts major and will be close to \$60,000 in debt, but feel that I have no other choice but higher education."

By the beginning of the spring semester the students provided us with mixed messages about their knowledge and expertise of the financial aid system. A few were knowledgeable about the financial aid process, including how to complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and how to work with

the institution's financial aid office; however, more than half did not know how to navigate the financial aid system. As a result, many were unsure how they would pay for their second year. Several were averse to taking loans, however, they realized that loans might be the only available option to continue with their schooling.

During the fourth quarter of their first year, a few of the students shared that their 2007-08 financial aid had already been dispersed and they were using that loan money to pay for the current year's bills. One stated:

I am currently in the process of canceling half of my student loans for the second semester and using [the money] to pay off the other half of the first semester that I could not afford. For the second semester, I am going to take out a student loan from a different lender because of cheaper interest rates and other factors.

Despite having filled out the FAFSA as high school seniors and current dependent students, several, who had little assistance from family, had difficulty understanding the paperwork and how the financial aid system worked. A few did not know when the deadline was for completing the FAFSA. One student stated that her family included only her and her father, and that she had to take responsibility to complete the form. Several students indicated that they sent money home to assist with their family situations. One student from a single-parent family said that her mother had been laid off from work due to an employment-related injury. Her sister, a senior at the same institution, worked two jobs to pay for her mother's health insurance, while our participant sent money home to her mother to help with her daily living expenses. She stated, "I feel like I owe my mother at least a little bit, because she has done so much for my sister and [me]."

When asked at the end of the year how

TABLE 1.
Working and Classes During the
First Year of College

	Yes	No
Working Restricts Your Choice of Classes	16.7%	86.7%
Working Limits the Number of Classes You Can Take	29.0%	71.0%
Working Limits Your Involvement on Campus	61.3%	38.7%*
Parents/Guardians Expect You to Have a Job for Pay	74.2%	25.8%

* $p < .05$.

satisfied they were with the financial aid office and their services, 32% of the students were *neutral* on a 5-point scale of *very satisfied* to *very unsatisfied*. Many of our students spent hours working on removing financial holds from their accounts or standing in line at the financial aid office inquiring into specific issues. One student actually owes more money than she had anticipated, because her institution sent a loan refund check to her in error. She called the financial aid office at least three times to make sure it was not an error, and each time the school told her that it was an overpayment and that she could keep the money. She used the money for other living expenses and when the error was discovered, she did not have the money to pay it back. This discrepancy was a result of university procedures for charging and crediting accounts not coinciding with the schedule for loan check reimbursement. As a consequence of the many hours spent trying to take care of this issue and the frustration of the experience, she did not return to this institution the next year.

Other Borrowing

On the final survey, given at the end of the spring semester, 21% stated that they were

finding it *difficult* to pay for college expenses and 30% found it *very difficult* (on a 5-point scale from *not at all difficult* to *very difficult*). At the beginning of the academic year, 47% of the participants owned a credit card, but by the end of the year, this figure had increased to 62%. Of those who had credit cards, 84% did not get help from their parents to pay off their credit card balance. Likewise, 74% of the students indicated their parents/guardians did not deposit money into their checking/savings accounts throughout the year.

Participants were not using credit cards for frivolous or luxury spending. They had multiple reasons for using credit cards; the most frequently cited reason was to eat. One student said, "My schedule does not allow me to eat when the café is open, so I have to buy my own food, which really sucks because I pay a lot for the [university] meal plan." When we probed further about the use of credit cards to pay for incidentals, many of the students had not given much thought to the fact that they will need to repay credit card balances sooner than student loans. It became clear that attitudes and approaches to using credit cards and getting student loans were more similar than different.

WORKING AND THE IMPACT ON ACADEMICS

Time Management

Paying for tuition is one issue that impacts students from low- and middle-class families in profound ways. The most common means for these students is working both on and off campus. The participants predicted in the fall survey that keeping up with school work was going to be *somewhat difficult* (38%). Of the more than 80 students who took the survey, the students perceived that managing time was going to be *a little difficult* (28%) to *somewhat difficult* (26%) to *more difficult* (25%).

In the final survey participants indicated that working did limit their involvement on campus, which was significantly different from the initial survey responses, $\chi^2(1, N = 80), = .206, p < .05$. Restricting class choices and number of credits that could be earned were not found statistically significant for the students between the two surveys.

The study also found that almost 90% of the students were forced to miss optional evening study sessions because of work. One student reported, "I could have done much better in my [fall semester] chemistry class if I had attended some of the study sessions." We also heard from students who encountered adverse reactions from employers when they selected school over work. One student shared, "I had to take a shift off from work because I had to take a test for my major. I got penalized [at work], which I don't think should happen considering it was for school."

We also found that additional classroom needs (e.g., supplemental books, course packs, special calculators) not specified in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester were not purchased by most of these students. One student said, "I actually went the first 4 weeks of the spring semester with no books, and when I finally got them I could only afford the required books. I did without the supplemental book which could have helped with the class." It was clear that the students made difficult choices about the costs of extra academic support in both time and money. Working usually took precedence, because, as one student stated, "someone has to pay the tuition bill, and that is my responsibility. If I want to return [to school], I have to work."

The academic costs of financial hardship and working were evident as the students received their final grades for the fall semester. Since we tracked the students during the spring as well, we were able to ask questions specifically focusing on grades and working.

Most of our students were in good academic standing and reported satisfaction with the first semester of their college career. The biggest complaint noted at the end of the fall semester was not being able to get "the perfect schedule" because of their work hours. The students not bound by scheduling constraints were often limited in the number of credits they could earn because of cost. Many were also left with a less desirable schedule of classes because financial holds delayed their ability to register.

WORKING AND THE IMPACT ON COLLEGE ENGAGEMENT Involvement

The students selected for this study were all on-campus residents, so, typical of first-year students, their notion of a true campus experience meant joining lots of groups and meeting new friends. We found students were often forced to make decisions based on a desire to be engaged in their college experience while balancing their financial responsibilities, relationships, and well-being. At the beginning of the semester all the campuses provided opportunities for student groups, Greek organizations, and campus government groups to showcase themselves. The students had idealistic visions of being involved on campus and embraced the opportunities to be included. But our students quickly found out that most of the groups had costs and fees associated with involvement, and the costs were often excessive for the students. Meeting times frequently conflicted with work schedules. A majority of the students were interested in joining a fraternity or sorority, but because of the prohibitive costs only one student actually joined a sorority.

At the beginning of the study, 100% of the students in this study belonged to at least one social group on their respective campuses. However, during the spring focus groups,

nearly 75% reported that they had to end participation in the groups because of their work schedules. “I did join some groups at the beginning of the year, but I have found that I have to work . . . and do not have time to be part of groups,” one student said.

A majority of the students joined academic groups associated with their chosen majors that would presumably assist in networking for future employment, but they did little with the group outside weekly meetings that were free. We did find that the students were willing to pay \$10, \$15, and even \$20 to such groups, but they were not willing or able to pay for strictly social groups. When optional trips to professional sites were offered, most could not or did not attend because of the additional cost or their work schedules.

“The choice is quite simple—either work or go home,” one student said about the choices he made. When asked whether personal relationships with peers suffered any because of financial hardship, another student responded, “I had to go home every weekend to work for my parents, so I had no social life.” This defeats the purpose for many students choosing to live on campus rather than attend a school close to home—for the experience of participating in college life. A student reflected on her choices by saying:

There are days when I'm going to burst into tears or break something, and then there are days when it all fits and feels like I shouldn't be anywhere else. It's work. I'm in Honors College, I'm in three honors classes at a time, and I'm a pre-med starting to dip my toes into hard classes. It's not a party. College became my life. I miss always having lunch with friends, going home where my parents took care of all the bills, and [I miss] my dog—but I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm a college student; watch me smile through a yawn.

Health

The study also revealed the physical demands of balancing school, work, and relationships on the well-being of the students. In a blog entry late in the spring semester a student wrote, “I have slept 9 hours in 3 days between tests, work, and trying to have a social life.” Another student reported, “I either have mono or am just really sick, because I never sleep. I take 15 credits and then work 12 a.m. to 5 a.m. four days a week.” These students represent extreme cases among our sample, but nonetheless many other students talked about viruses and other physical ailments that had plagued them for more than half a semester. In the final survey, we found that a high percentage of students worried about their health (24% *occasionally*, and 20% *sometimes*), which was exacerbated by concerns for how they would pay for their health care.

A small number of students did not have health insurance; the campus infirmary provided 3 free visits, but lab tests were not covered. The students reported that after seeing a doctor, either getting to a pharmacy was not possible or the cost of medicine was too high. At one institution where medical tests were outsourced to a different medical center or testing company, some students' family health insurance would not cover the costs of the outside tests.

For some of the students, illness affected their academic success for brief times over the year. For others, not being physically healthy impacted their mental health more than anything. One student said, “It was just one more thing I had to worry about.” Another student concurred, “I know if I did not stress out so much about money and classes, I would not be sick so much. It made going to class and work tough.” And another student related, “I didn't get to sleep because I worked 11:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. . . . So I study at night until 3:00 a.m., and

now I am getting sick from sleep deprivation. My immune system is getting weak.”

Financial Decision Making

In the beginning of the school year and close to the winter holidays many of the students reported overextending themselves getting ready for the academic year and purchasing too many holiday gifts for loved ones. One student said, “I had to get a haircut, but I guess I could have saved \$50 by not having my hair highlighted.” Another student said, “I was doing really well before I got my debit card, and then I would go crazy at Wal-Mart buying stuff I wanted but did not need.” Others made more difficult choices. “I haven’t bought a bus pass in order to save money; [I] just walk everywhere.” We heard many other similar stories about the learning curve that existed regarding financial management. One student stated, “It has sucked. Money is evil and I don’t want to be an adult simply because of money.” Another told us:

Halfway through last semester I sold a chemistry book I still needed this semester to pay my phone bill after already owing my boyfriend \$150. It seems like whenever I think about the next 3 years, when I have to pay for everything except tuition, it scares me. I got lucky getting an internship that will cover [costs for] next year if I work really hard, but will I be this lucky again? And if I fail, what will I do? It seems like every time I think I’m going to be okay financially, something comes up and I have less than \$100 in my bank account again, or [I’m overdrawn by] \$36.

In conclusion, these student experiences illustrate that financial hardship in college can impact engagement, well-being, relationships, return rates, and ultimately, graduation rates as students struggle to meet the rising costs to attend college each year. As one

participant stated, “It is stressful to see the [costs] accumulate at such a fast rate when most of the classes within the first year are a review from high school or do not pertain to my concentration.”

All of the students in the study stated that going to school was a choice they made, but for them working while in school was mandatory. At the end of the study, 90% of the students planned to return to their institution for their second year, despite reporting that they are extremely worried about paying for and succeeding in school for the next few years. A majority of the students realized that costs are expected to increase as they progress through school.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Making the transition to being a college student is difficult; add financial and new college experience pressures and it can become overwhelming. The escalated costs of attending college are impacting students in profound ways. Even when tuition and fees are paid through financial aid packages, the hidden costs to fully engage on a college campus are prohibitive for many students. No one would argue the value of an education. However, understanding the experiences and impacts of financial burdens on college students can impact how we make decisions in the academic and student affairs realms. As mentioned, the NSSE and NPSAS/BPS data provides sound and vigorous data to inform policy; however, these studies are missing the rich narrative data of these first-year students’ experiences on campus and how financial issues affect these experiences.

Policy implications emerging from this study can be classified into three areas: (a) navigating the system, (b) balancing work, academics, and the college experience, and (c) giving voice to the students when planning for

the future of the institution (e.g., making policy regarding residence halls, matriculation fees).

Navigating the System

In referring to the “system” we are primarily focusing on the financial aid system; however, we learned that the financial aid system was the not the only concern of the students. Other systems—acquiring health care, food, and academic supplies—were also problematic. We found that the participants, who were primarily first-generation students, learned about navigating their institution’s system in times of need, several learning the hard way. A few students used their social capital to determine the best route for proceeding; however, their networks did not always have the correct information, which meant researching as they went along, thus causing stress and diverting precious time from studying or working.

Financial Aid. As students who cannot fully fund their college education without loans and other forms of financial aid, the participants were beginning their adult lives in debt for their education. Having student loans is not the problem; rather, the failure of the institutions studied to provide the necessary educational component of assuming student loan obligations created unforeseen burdens on the students. The students signed financial aid forms with little or no understanding of where the money is coming from, how much they will finally owe, or what the debt means for their future.

How can institutions assist families and students in learning how to navigate the financial aid system? During their high school senior year, many of the students and their families attended financial aid seminars held at their school, so lack of general information was not the issue according to our participants. The issue was when the students arrived on campus. A few of the students stated that they felt like

their financial aid offices left them out in the cold. The first point of assistance is needed at the beginning of the academic year when students and their parents/guardians realize that the financial aid package will not cover all expenses. The second point of assistance is needed towards the end of the year when the students are figuring out how to pay for their second year, especially because many had received one-time scholarships. A third point of assistance would be requiring a financial management class for the students receiving financial aid, specifically loans. This course should be taken either during the second semester of the first year or the first semester of the second year. We recommend these semesters so the students have enough time on campus to gain a better understanding of the costs associated with attending college.

After hearing these students’ stories, we recommend that students are assigned a financial aid counselor. Many reading this may believe that this is already the case throughout academia. Offering individual counselors for each student may be a reality in small colleges, but not at larger doctoral-level institutions. Typically the students there do not have the same level of access as they have to academic advisors or student affairs professionals, such as resident hall advisors (i.e., a student is assigned an individual to guide them through their undergraduate academic career). However, when it comes to finances, the students are advised to e-mail, call, or stand in line at a central location to talk to a financial aid counselor. This can be frustrating, especially when students are not sure what questions to ask or how to ask them. In addition, the financial aid office should offer different ways for the students and families to learn about the regularly changing variety of financial aid options, especially for their subsequent years. Because student and family situations are so unique, Web sites, newsletters, or generally targeted workshops

are not sufficient. Counselors who are certified as financial advisors can better guide families and students who need to learn about and understand long-term financial planning related to college costs. Such advice is invaluable for many who may be paying off their student loans for several decades. The conversation needs to be personalized, discussing ways that truly define all options, including what a future looks like being thousands of dollars in debt for an undergraduate degree.

Institutional Systems. We did hear from students how the college experience helped them learn about financial management, including spending habits, banking, and buying textbooks. However, many did not find help on campus with finding and obtaining a job, navigating the health care system, or dealing with an emergency financial hardship. Again, many of the students learned about the system in the midst of a crisis and were often given incorrect information. We heard from the students that they were overwhelmed with information at the orientation program during the summer, and consequently they did not learn what they really needed to know. A couple of examples include:

- Health care: Several of the students in this study had to use their institution's health care system, but learned quickly that they had to pay out for extra services or prescriptions despite having insurance through their families.
- Food: The policies for meal plans varied across the institutions. One institution did not offer Sunday meals. Students had to use their own money to purchase additional meals or hoard food from the cafeteria. In addition, a couple of institutions offered inconvenient mealtimes that conflicted with classes, labs, or work. Lastly, the students had received recommendations for an appropriate meal plan, but many

discovered that the chosen plan included more meals than they could use, resulting in wasted expense.

In areas such as health care, food, and academic supplies, institutions are increasingly outsourcing or finding other ways to stay in the black. And there is a feeling that the business of the institution is overshadowing the mission of the institution: to nurture learning. Students quickly realized that there are many hidden costs to attending college, something they did not expect when choosing to attend a public higher education institution. During the focus groups, students were not afraid to express their dissatisfaction with their school: "Once here, they don't care for us." "They can show a bit more compassion. We are being ripped off."

Balancing Work, Academics, and the College Experience

Working during college is the norm for students from low- and middle-income families. For 74% of the students in our study, their families expected them to have a job while attending college. We learned that several students had a hard time finding a job on campus. While approximately 30% of the students received FWS aid, many other students did not know about this financial aid option. During the focus groups, several students asked us questions such as, "How is work-study determined?" "What truly is work-study?" and "How do I find a work-study job on campus?" These questions lead back to the issue of navigating the institution's financial aid system. And for those who do not receive FWS aid, how do they navigate the institution's student job system? Again, how can administrators assist students through this process?

The issue of balancing responsibilities was a major issue for our students. Participants told us that they were attending college to create a

better economic future for themselves. Many were balancing the demands of a full load of academic classes, work schedules that most often exceeded 20 hours per week, studying, and trying to maintain a social life. The hours spent in class and at work exceeded the standard 40-hour workweek by at least 10 hours in most cases. Working so many hours made it difficult to fully engage on campus and in many cases involvement in any out-of-class activities was sacrificed. The issue of balance can be addressed through academic and student affairs programming and a creative approach to engaging students on campus. Students want to be part of a campus community, but are limited by the way campus activities are scheduled. As campuses design their student life programming and yearlong activities, the consideration of the varying time demands on students could benefit the vast majority of working students.

Giving Voice to the Students for Institutional Planning

The students in our study asked during the focus groups where and how their tuition money was spent. In addition, they questioned how the state funding process worked, and what was meant by *capital outlays* and *endowment funds*. Specifically, they did not understand why money was allocated to nonacademic items versus academic items when academics were supposed to be the main purpose of their attendance.

Giving voice to students when planning for the future is difficult to implement because institutions have a variety of budget and planning processes, even within the same institution. When we heard the students' stories, we doubted that administrators had taken into consideration the various students' and families' voices in planning the financial aid, health care, textbook, recreation, residence hall, and meal systems.

If institutions held town hall meetings and

provided other opportunities for students to voice their concerns and join the discussions of capital improvement projects, budget allocations, state appropriations, tuition and fee increases, and other financial issues, the institutions would begin creating an environment that is more transparent and gives students confidence that their concerns are important. This process can also educate students about institutional budgeting and how funds are allocated. Currently, many students feel that administrators and faculty in higher education spend freely and raise tuition to the detriment of the students. In reality, those in budgeting know that while waste does occur in higher education, budgets are truly extremely tight and limited. With transparency in the institutional budgeting process, students could feel more educated and thus empowered. Therefore, communicating with, educating, and involving students and families is critical in these times of lean resources, increased costs, and decreased funding from the state.

Future Research Possibilities

Several future research possibilities emanate from this study. As this is a pilot study, we hope future studies follow our method for obtaining undergraduate students' stories. We highly recommend conducting longitudinal studies, following the students through their entire undergraduate tenure. The research literature illustrates that the majority of students who drop out of college do so after completing just the first year drop out after their first year of college (ACT, 2002). The majority of the students in this study indicated that they would be returning to the same institution next year, though they remained unsure or worried about how they would pay for their second year. Further study is needed that focuses on student health concerns—mental, physical, and emotional—with students similar to those who participated in this study. Case

studies, or benchmarking, on different types of institutions, different financial aid systems, and different student receivables systems could determine processes and systems that will assist students with their college experience. We found that a student's social capital could help or hinder navigating the system. A study is recommended to analyze the social capital of students, that is friends, family, and coworkers,

and how these relationships impact how they navigate the system and make decisions about their academic career.

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