AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Sociology of Education
2015, 88(4) 265–283
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DOI: 10.1177/0038040715601889
http://soe.sagepub.com
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"Fake It 'til You Make It": Why Community College Students' Aspirations "Hold Steady"

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Abstract

Sociologists of education have explored the relationship between students' postsecondary aspirations and their propensity to get 'cooled out' in community colleges. However, researchers have directed little attention to students whose aspirations remain stable over long periods of time or to the different roles that college degree goals play in the lives of disadvantaged students. Using four waves of longitudinal interviews, I examine the reasons why low-income women hold steady to their aspirations for college degrees over a three-and-a-half-year period. I argue that holding steady not only reflects rational expectations about future employment opportunities, but it also generates moral status in the face of marginalization and facilitates the navigation of personal relationships. I use the concept of an 'ambition imperative' to demonstrate how aspirations for college attainment are a means of asserting moral status and pursuing virtuous social membership. This article contributes to theories of aspirations and offers an alternative explanation of the institutional effects of community colleges in the lives of students.

Keywords

community college, aspirations, higher education, narrative, inequality

Large numbers of community college students aspire to bachelor's degrees, but relatively few attain them (Anderson 1981; Brand, Pfeffer, and Goldrick-Rab 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2010; Kane and Rouse 1999; Rouse 1995). To explain this discrepancy between aspirations and outcomes, scholars have drawn together, in varying degrees, four factors affecting student experiences: (1) broad cultural frameworks of educational attainment, (2) political-economic structures, (3) institutional arrangements, and (4) interactions between marginalized students and institutional actors (Clark 1960; Dougherty 1994; Karabel 1972; Pascarella, Wolniak, and Pierson 2003). Clark (1960) initiated this approach when he proposed that community colleges help resolve a key contradiction between cultural support for widespread postsecondary aspirations and the structural limits on labor market opportunities for bachelor's degree holders. They do this by "cooling out," or softly denying, the aspirations of poorly prepared and marginalized students. Over time, these students voluntarily withdraw from the competition for bachelor's degrees. However, Clark based his analysis of cooling out on social scientific assumptions about student responses to institutional pressures rather than empirical data that showed changes in aspirations. As subsequent scholars followed this approach, they relied on similar

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assumptions. Only recently have scholars begun to track student aspirations empirically.

We now have a large body of research showing that college aspirations are far more widespread today than they were at midcentury (Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999) and that cooling out is a significant social phenomenon. But while some students do lower their aspirations after enrolling in community college, it is much more common for students' aspirations to "hold steady" over long periods of time. Even as they make little headway toward degree completion, students maintain a belief that they will finish their education (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). Why and how does this happen? What are the social bases of community college going that shape one's decision to hold steady?

To investigate the phenomenon of persistent aspirations in contexts of slow or impeded progress, I examine community college students' motivations to hold steady and the cultural frameworks they use to maintain their aspirations. I base this analysis on four waves of semistructured interviews with 23 low-income female community college students. I argue that the women in this study use two dominant narratives to explain their persistent college aspirations, which I call *pragmatic job seeking* and *moral self-improvement*. My data reveal that the vast majority of respondents hold steady as a result of structural barriers to middle-class jobs. Faced with the prospect of low-wage work and insecure employment, these women draw on a narrative that links degree attainment with good jobs, which serves as a solution to problems, such as forming families in conditions of hardship or managing the dissolution of their relationships. Yet their aspirations are not simply a reflection of instrumental job seeking and problem solving. Rather, they also use a narrative of moral self-improvement that combines a belief in higher education as the main source of social mobility with a belief in high aspirations as indicators of moral worth and ethical social membership. Because educational aspirations are moral laden, respondents use their college aspirations to (1) draw boundaries between themselves and other disadvantaged people, (2) challenge stereotypes about poor and minority groups, and (3) manage difficult relationships with significant others.

Together, these narrative frameworks function as an *ambition imperative* that makes it difficult to change course in the face of disconfirming evidence that a college degree is attainable or worth the time, cost, and effort. Adherence to this social injunction to be ambitious signals high moral status while equating cooled-out aspirations with laziness, irresponsibility, and other socially undesirable qualities. I argue that the social identity conferred by community colleges, their open-access structure, and the vocational character of higher education more generally enables these students to adhere to this ambition imperative by providing narrative material that can be incorporated into individual life stories. As a result, community college contributes to both the stubbornness of aspirations and a form of moral equity, even for students who never finish a degree.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND STUDENT ASPIRATIONS

Early studies of community colleges were consistent with broader social scientific concerns about the tendency of democratic societies to produce more ambition than opportunity (Merton 1957; Stinchcombe 1964; Turner 1960). Clark (1960:570) argued that the ideology of equal opportunity, popularly interpreted as unlimited access to higher education and institutionalized in the open-access policies of community colleges, encourages "the aspirations of the multitude." Students, many of whom are unqualified for college, are also driven by necessity as educational requirements for high-status jobs increase. Clark claimed that the popular demand for postsecondary credentials creates a problem of blocked opportunity for a majority of students, because the number of high-status jobs is limited by the hierarchical structure of the economy.

Theories of ambition management suggest that in the face of limited opportunities, institutional processes must structure and legitimate failure (Brint and Karabel 1989). In the absence of such processes, society risks widespread psychological distress and social deviance due to dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and structural limits to their realization (Merton 1957). Clark (1960) argued that mechanisms such as counseling, remediation, and self-assessment gradually guide low-ability students away from the transfer track and toward vocational programs or dropping out altogether. In the process, students abandon their aspirations

for a bachelor's degree. Because community colleges appear to structure both aspirations and failure, Dougherty (1994) refers to them as contradictory colleges.

The generally assumed connection in community college research between structural conditions, institutional practices, and student aspirations has a theoretical basis. For instance, Clark's (1960) analysis of gradual institutionalized discouragement is consistent with Turner's (1960) account of the U.S. education system as one based on a norm of contest mobility. According to the cultural logic of the contest, schools give less able students repeated opportunities to compete for educational attainment until they voluntarily withdraw from the status competition. Clark's social-psychological conclusions about lowered aspirations correspond with practice-theoretical approaches that predict aspirations will tend to align with class-based probabilities for success over time (Bourdieu 1977). This suggests that poorly prepared, nontraditional students will gradually abandon aspirations for transfer and bachelor's degrees as they struggle to earn credits and do not have their particular experiences recognized or validated. Parsons' (1953) contention that a lower-class preference for security over success (Morgan 2005) and Willis's (1977) observation that working-class youth actively validate manual labor—both of which lead lower-class students to develop aspirations for work instead of school—further suggest that struggling community college students will lower their aspirations toward more vocational aims. Taken together, this work forms a robust theoretical argument for cooling out.[1]

However, recent research challenges the assumption that low attainment among community college students is associated with lowered aspirations. Drawing on a national sample of beginning community college students, Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) found that over a five-year period, the majority of respondents maintained their aspirations. Nearly 70 percent of the sample, including more than 40 percent of those considered dropouts, maintained the same goal over a five-year period. Looking more closely at students who hold steady, Alexander and colleagues (2008) found that students who are college oriented in high school tend to be college oriented 10 years later, regardless of enrollment patterns. Among students with expectations for a bachelor's degree in the 12th grade, more than 60 percent expected a bachelor's degree at age 22, and nearly a quarter continued to hold steady at age 28. When those holding steady at age 28 are combined with those who had already completed a bachelor's degree, fully half of students with expectations for a bachelor's degree in the 12th grade had either maintained their aspirations for a full decade, rebounded from a period of lowered aspirations, or graduated with the desired degree. Even respondents who never attended college but expected, in the 12th grade, to eventually earn a bachelor's degree held steady at similar rates at ages 22 and 28.

These findings call for empirical study and new theoretical approaches. Clark (1960) recognized that by the second half of the twentieth century, high-status work opportunities for high school graduates had begun to erode, and social pressure for a college-educated populace was on the rise. These forces pushing students into college were part of a broad transformation of college going into a moral as well as pragmatic pursuit. At the same time, the institutional processes that led to lowered aspirations changed. As a result, past theories of class-based aspiration formation and change are insufficient to explain these processes among current community college students. While cooling out may have been widespread in previous decades, large numbers of people holding steady today indicate an important shift in the character and function of college aspirations.

The Contemporary Context of College Aspirations

Since Clark (1960) first proposed the idea of cooling out, there have been important changes in the cultural, structural, institutional, and interactional contexts surrounding community college. Culturally, there has been a shift to the "college-for-all" era, characterized by the widespread belief that all students can and should attend college (Rosenbaum 1997). Similarly, beliefs in the necessity of a college education to attain high-status work have solidified into an "education gospel," which stipulates that at least some college education is required for the knowledge-based, flexible jobs of the future (Grubb and Lazerson 2005; Reich 1991). Corresponding to this narrative of structural change is a sharp rise in the college wage premium, or the relative incomes paid to degree holders, that began in the 1980s and continues to the present (Goldin and Katz 2008). Over

the same period, wages have fallen and job quality has declined for workers without at least some college (Dudley 1994; Hatton 2011; Kalleberg 2011; Sennett 1998; Weiss 1990). These structural changes altered the typical trajectories of both college- and non-college-educated adults, thereby changing the character of the decision to go to college altogether.

Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) found that community colleges have largely institutionalized these cultural and structural shifts, which has altered how students interact with teachers, counselors, and others associated with the school. For instance, they found that students encounter a wide range of institutional actors, particularly, faculty, who encourage bachelor's degree aspirations and try to minimize the stigma attached to remediation for poorly prepared students (see also Bahr 2008). There is also a general lack of access to information about students' trajectories and alternative, non–bachelor's degree pathways, in contrast to the careful documentation of failure presented to students that Clark (1960) witnessed. Vocational tracks no longer serve as barriers to transfer in the way they might have in the past; occupational education routinely requires academic work and includes four-year programs (Brint 2003; Grubb 1996). Tighter links between vocational and academic tracks reflect a trend toward vocationalization and what Brint (2002) calls the "practical arts" in higher education more generally (see also Brint et al. 2005; Mullen 2011). Altogether this amounts to "a 'hidden curriculum' of transfer" for all students, regardless of prior academic preparation, current academic progress, or future academic and professional interests (Rosenbaum et al. 2006:62).

Yet, many young adults aspiring to a bachelor's degree have little or no interaction with the community college, so one might question the impact of purported institutional effects. Even in cases where students do spend long periods of time in community college, it is unclear whether this hidden curriculum of transfer is responsible for students holding steady. Another approach is to consider the role that community colleges play in defining persons, roles, and statuses. Meyer (1977) proposes that the legitimating effects of education shape people's behavior beyond the effects of any particular educational experience. Schools as an institutional system have "charters" to define people, and students tend to adopt social identities associated with the positions that schools give access to. In other words, students become the people that schools are expected to produce, and their education is "more durable than work or income, more stable than family life and relations, and less subject to market fluctuations than 'real' property" (Meyer 1977:62).

The link between higher education and societal well-being also means that the kinds of people who go to college are morally distinct from those who do not. In today's "schooled society," education, particularly, higher education, shapes and gives access to the values, ideas, and norms that constitute mainstream culture (Baker 2014). Bosses, parents, and strangers recognize the role of the educated person in the schooled society. As a result, community colleges' chartering function makes them a valuable resource for people to develop narratives of moral self-improvement. It makes community college, and higher education more generally, a tool for drawing moral boundaries, challenging stereotypes, and negotiating relationships with others.

In this article, I ask two questions. First, why do community college students hold steady rather than form new aspirations when obstacles slow or impede academic progress? Second, how do they hold steady? Aspirations must be plausible to both the person who aspires and the person with whom he or she shares his or her aspirations; narratives are ineffectual when the sequence of events does not fit with the overall plot or the character of the story does not fit the expectations of the listener (Polletta et al. 2013). As a result, holding steady is simultaneously a social imperative and a social accomplishment that education scholars have so far missed.

With this study, I identify varied purposes and rich meanings behind holding steady to offer a fuller account of the role of postsecondary aspirations in young adults' lives. I depart from the almost exclusive focus on the college experience to examine the uses students put their aspirations to outside of school. I show that these nonschool purposes are important for maintaining ambition, and I extend research on postsecondary aspirations by focusing on their moral quality. In the college-for-all era, ethical social belonging may be just as important as socioeconomic attainment in the decision to hold steady.

DATA, METHODS, AND ANALYSIS

Data for this case study consist of four waves of in-depth, semistructured interviews with 23 poor

and working-class young adult women in a large metropolitan area of Southern California, for a total of 92 interviews.[2] A research team consisting of four researchers, including myself, conducted the interviews in person over a three-and-a-half-year period from September 2010 to March 2014.

We initially recruited participants from three community colleges that were part of the Southeastern Metro Community College (SMCC) district.[3] These three colleges are part of the largest community college system in the nation; it consists of 112 colleges. The student population of the district is approximately 40 percent Latino, 30 percent white, 11 percent African American, and 5 percent Asian American. The completion rate for the 2005-to-2008 cohort—the percentage of students who attained a certificate or degree or became "transfer prepared" during the three-year period—was 21.93 percent. The transfer rate for the 2002-to-2003 cohort showed that 28 percent of first-time students who showed intent to complete subsequently transferred to a four-year university within six years (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office 2014). Transfer figures are generally low, and among the SMCC student body, Latino and African American students are underrepresented in the population of transfers to four-year institutions.

All the women involved in this study were enrolled at the time of the first interview. In addition to college enrollment, participation in the study was based on eligibility for income-based support to attend community college in California. Support for low-income students includes CalWORKS, a program to support welfare recipients attending school, and a state-sponsored fee waiver from the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, commonly referred to as the BOG waiver. Recruitment for interviews involved placing flyers around the college campuses and asking key institutional actors to notify qualified students of the opportunity to participate in the study. These actors included counselors and administrators in the CalWORKs, Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) offices as well as teachers of remedial math and English, whose classes disproportionately serve poor and minority students. Incentives to participate were $50 for each of the first three interviews and $25 for the fourth interview.

By focusing on poor and minority female students, many of whom experience periods of remediation, this study is well suited to address the question of holding steady, because the community college literature predicts that low-income female students are most susceptible to cooling out. Scholars often focus on people with similar backgrounds to illuminate subtle but important differences. Sociologists have bounded their analyses to marginalized black men (Young 2004), white female university students (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), and college Republicans (Binder and Wood 2013) to highlight variation within these groups. Similarly, I am interested in the range of experiences that are possible from a specific social location and most visible when certain characteristics, such as gender, remain constant.

Men and women differ greatly in terms of educational processes, family responsibilities, and labor force dynamics. An important distinction between low-income men's and women's positions is the differential returns to education. While both tend to benefit greatly from postsecondary education, low-income women's employment in full-time jobs and earnings rise more once they have completed a bachelor's degree. By contrast, low-income men who have access to full-time work can earn substantially more with less education than can low-income women. Full-time employment and wages are also more stable for low-income men as their education increases, which means there is a lower wage premium for a bachelor's degree (Ashtiani, Burciaga, and Feliciano 2013). As a result, low-income men may have alternative sources of social mobility and moral worth. Focusing on women allows me to analyze the diverse ways of holding steady among the students who potentially have the most to lose from giving up their college aspirations.

Of the 23 women in the study, 13, or just over half, had one or more children, and 3 women reported being married in September 2010. Fewer than 15 percent of undergraduates nationwide are unmarried parents, but nearly 60 percent of low-income independent female students—that is, students not financially dependent on their parents—are parents, and nearly 40 percent are unmarried parents (Center for Women Policy Studies 2004; Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010). In addition to diverse family types, the women represent a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds: nine Latinas, seven black women, three white women, two Asian American women, and two women who identify as multiracial. Their average age was 23 years at the time of the first interview

and 25 years at the fourth interview. The women range from 19 to 29 years old at the start of the study and 22 to 31 years old at the last interview. See the online appendix for a description of participants.

I interviewed 11 of the women during the first three rounds of interviewing and all 23 women during the fourth wave. Twelve of the women were interviewed by one of three other researchers in Waves 1, 2, and 3. I personally conducted 56 of the 92 interviews. Interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours in a location chosen by the respondent. Researchers asked questions about interviewees' life history, social networks, school experiences, perceptions of their own and others' opportunities, sense of barriers, and hopes for the future. We were particularly interested in understanding how students had come to enroll at the community college and how they envisioned their educational and occupational trajectories. By asking for specific examples, the interviews sought to access narrative reasoning (i.e., the meanings behind the frameworks described and the actions they frame) and get beyond belief statements aimed primarily at the honorable presentation of self (Pugh 2013), to which a study of holding steady conducted by highly educated researchers may be particularly susceptible.

Being a white man with an advanced degree means there is considerable social distance between the respondents and myself. However, several similarities helped bridge this gap. For one, I am the first in my family to graduate from college, just as most of the women in the study are first-generation college students. For another, my academic career is broadly nontraditional. I attended community college off and on over a 10-year period before transferring to a public university, which I communicated with interviewees. Moreover, I had small children while in school, which was an important point of reference between myself and over half the women I interviewed. Nevertheless, I cannot presume that these similarities garnered complete trust. Multiple waves of interviews helped build trust over several meetings, and the research team and I built rapport as time went on. The use of multiple interviews also meant that as the women became more comfortable, they were able to revise past statements or elaborate on details they were initially uncomfortable sharing. While this process increased my confidence in the information we gathered, it also made me more cautious when it came to interpreting the data. For this reason, I tried to analyze particular statements within a broader portrait of the person generated from all four waves of interviews and field notes that captured physical cues and emotional tenors.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. For each respondent, I briefly summarized the general narrative of her college aspirations across all four waves. This allowed me to compare respondents' aspirations over time, identify changes to the general reasoning they offered, and discover emergent explanations for persistent aspirations. I approached community college students' aspirations as narratives that function as plausible stories that help coordinate interactions in the present and provide actors with "a sense of what will or should happen in the future" (Steinmetz 1992:499; see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Ewick and Silbey 1995; Somers 1994). Personal and collective narratives are linked through symbols, linguistic structures, and vocabularies of motive that constitute and reinforce existing ideologies and relations of power and inequality. For example, when participants described themselves as "lazy" because they did not go to school while they worked full-time and cared for their children, they reinforced the belief that success and virtue are attainable and deserved through higher education.

Using Atlas.ti, I coded all the interviews myself.[4] I initially read the transcripts for evidence of holding steady and then relied on open coding to analyze the data more closely. Drawing on situational analysis, I sought to identify the range of human, institutional, and discursive elements that constituted these women's experiences (Clarke 2003). I first generated codes to distinguish between the job-seeking and moral explanations for holding steady. Job-seeking explanations linked education to either finding a job or finding a better job, such as when one participant who cleaned houses for a living explained, "I want to get a house and a car and a good job, and the only way I'm gonna do that is if I finish school." Moral explanations broadly linked education to some personal quality; a student may say she wants a degree to show herself or others that she is hardworking, intelligent, or responsible, for example. I then sought to identify variation within morality claims, in particular, whom the claims were aimed toward. Students might direct morality claims at themselves; at personal relations; at particular social figures, such as a boss; or at society,

more generally. From this directional schema, I distinguished between claims for virtue, boundary making, challenges to stereotypes, and attempts to manage relationships.[5] Finally, I compared each student's explanations across all four interviews and recoded the transcripts using the final set of codes while checking for omissions and revisions in the broader narrative.

At each wave, the majority of students aspired to transfer to a four-year university, expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree, and held steady over the course of the study but had not transferred by the fourth interview, three-and-a-half years later. At the outset of the study, over three quarters of the women (18 of 23) said they planned to transfer to a four-year university; 7 of the 18 transfer aspirants had made the transition by the fourth interview. Among the women who had not transferred, nine planned on transferring, including one whose plans had warmed up. Only 3 of the 18 women who originally planned to transfer were cooled out by the final interview: one abandoned her plan to transfer to a four-year university and left school with no intention of returning, another lowered her sights from a bachelor's degree to a for-profit vocational certificate, and a third decided to pursue an associate's degree in nursing rather than a bachelor's degree in nursing.[6]

Students often responded differently in background surveys versus interviews, indicating that pursuits, plans, expectations, and ideals did not always neatly align. For example, a student might see herself as pursuing an associate's degree with no plan to transfer in the immediate future while nevertheless expecting to earn a bachelor's degree at some point and ideally wanting a master's degree later in life.[7] Similarly, she may list her most immediate goals in a survey but express commitment to alternative aspirations during the interview, depending on the topic of discussion. Because degree aspirations are complex and situational, I define holding steady as maintaining a degree plan, expectation, or ideal across two or more points in time, including the final interview. According to this definition, women could experience warming-up and cooling-out periods over the four waves, indicating that aspirations are not perfectly linear; these narratives serve a variety of functions in low-income women's lives.[8] Because I am concerned with the effects of community college and the consequences of slow or impeded progress, I focus on students who have not transferred to a four-year university, completed their education, or have not abandoned their educational goals in all their forms. This means I direct my attention to 14 of the 23 women included in the study.[9]

PRAGMATIC AND MORAL ASPIRATION NARRATIVES

Holding Steady for Pragmatic Reasons

Based on the belief that a college degree is necessary to get a good job, the women in this study made clear connections between the two. In part, they echoed the belief that middle-class jobs can be accessed only through college attainment. Their descriptions of jobs available to people without a college degree depict poor working conditions and a lack of opportunities for mobility. In her third interview, Amy put it succinctly when she said, "You have to go to college to get where you gotta go and that's it." A 22-year-old white woman with two kids, Amy has struggled to find work as a cosmetologist. She had recently been laid off from a records-keeping job and had "stopped out" of college to search for work. Still out of school a year later and working irregular hours as a housecleaner, she reiterated her belief that college is a necessity if she wants a career, concluding in her fourth interview, "I'm not going to get anywhere or do anything if I don't finish."

The job search was even more challenging for Patricia, a 28-year-old black woman with a prior criminal conviction, who recalled during her second interview, "I was adamant on trying to stay in school 'cause if I leave here, what do I have? I've been looking for a job for almost two years." Other women described a "bleak future" of low-wage "grunt work." They reported feeling "sick and tired of being sick and tired," restricted from utilizing their skills by the lack of a bachelor's degree. A college degree promises access to more than just jobs and higher pay; it holds out the possibility for a wide range of desirable qualities, including autonomy, independence, creativity, choice, variety, challenge, flexibility, and stability. While personal narratives are subjective representations of the opportunity structure, they nevertheless correspond in meaningful ways to the actual environment of work, including high rates of unemployment, degree requirements for jobs, and the added challenges facing applicants with criminal records.

As Silva (2013) documents, access to the markers of working-class adulthood, such as family stability and material goods, has become increasingly tenuous. For the 21 women in this study who desired at least a bachelor's degree, college solves a range of problems associated with instability in working-class adult lives. For the most part, the women in this study viewed degree attainment as the main mechanism that would propel them from the world of low-status work to middle-class work and, beyond that, to middle-class lifestyles. Routinely imagining the worst for themselves and their loved ones, they explained their aspirations as the pursuit of both security and success. The limited opportunities available to them without finishing their postsecondary education made them feel a college degree was a goal they could not give up. This dominant narrative of pragmatic job seeking conforms to the expectations of rational decision making. For the most part, scholars and community college advocates focus on smoothing out this narrative by facilitating the passage from school to work. Yet, high-status work and the advantages it promises are not the only reasons why women in this study hold steady. Many women expressed concerns with virtuous social membership, a facet of holding steady that sociologists of education have so far neglected.

Holding Steady for Virtue

Scholars have observed that the educational aspirations of contemporary youth often exceed their occupational goals (Reynolds et al. 2006). Consistent with this finding, the women in this study tended to aspire to more education than their career goals demanded. The majority of participants were pursuing bachelor's degrees because, as the interviews showed, the bachelor's degree is typically understood as a requirement for a particular job or field of work. When they wrote down the degree they expect to earn and the degree they would ideally like to earn, however, the majority raised their responses to a master's or professional degree, and several women indicated that they expect or ideally would like to earn a doctorate. For the most part, they desired these postgraduate degrees for reasons other than career attainment. This gap between what students believe is necessary and what they ultimately hope to achieve indicates that education aspirations are not simply rational responses to exigencies of the economy. Aspirations are claims on morality in the future as well as in the present.

Some women in this study recognized that a bachelor's degree is unnecessary and might even be detrimental to their careers, because it requires them to forgo work experience and network building while they are in school. Nevertheless, these women held steady. Adele, for example, a Latina in her early 20s, continued to pursue a bachelor's degree over the course of the study. She maintained a course load largely consisting of classes related to the production of film and television, with transfer requirements taking up the smallest portion of her schedule. Her film and television classes included many hands-on group projects, such as producing a local news program. She was also given the opportunity to work as a production assistant on a television show filmed in the area. Between her classes and work experience, she developed social networks and industry knowledge that she could draw on to get a job.

Over time, Adele recognized that a bachelor's degree "wouldn't make much of a difference" to her career prospects, because potential employers value networks and experience, not schooling. She also struggled to do well in her general education classes, which seemed to push her toward work and away from degree completion. However, by the fourth interview, she was retaking several failed classes and preparing to apply to transfer to a four-year university after four years of full-time community college enrollment. She explained that she has "just always seen it as important," and she holds steady because it "would kill me to know that I could not be an educated person." Community college gave her a crucial foothold in the film and television industry, but her aspirations for education were not bound by career considerations: being an "educated person" indicates status that is available only through educational attainment.

Importantly, this identity is there for students who struggle to make headway. Hannah, for example, reconciled her sense of stalled progress with the importance she attached to college by holding steady, saying, "I want to treat myself as like I've already gotten there and now just work my way up there to finally do it, like 'fake it 'til you make it' type thing." Holding steady was a way of holding on to virtuous social membership. The larger cultural positive social identity

associated with college going can threaten this sense of worth, however. When life circumstances impede college attendance and cast doubt on students' aspirations, young people are vulnerable to feelings of failure and flawed character. Interviewees complained of feeling lazy, unfocused, and idle. Amy believed that others could sense her aspirations. Reflecting on this idea, she said,

> I feel like when you lose that motivation, everybody else can tell, too. And that's kind of where you get where you're at. You do the job you're doing and the money that you have is kind of because you're giving off that vibe and that's all you're going to get back.

According to this understanding of social mobility, aspirations play a causal role by affecting the presentation of self and the interactions between workers and bosses. From this viewpoint, holding steady is critical for navigating the workplace due to the public recognition of college-based social identities.

This compensatory use of aspirations was particularly important to the eight women who stopped out of college at one or more points during the study but who did not give up their degree aspirations. But it was also important to women like Gloria and Margaret, who did not leave school yet still faced feelings of worthlessness. As Gloria explained in her first interview, "My whole entire life my family just insults me to a point where I didn't think I was worth anything, but I moved past that and now I'm here and doing fine." After years of low expectations from others, Gloria still cried when she described how others viewed her and said, "I feel like I have something to prove to them, that I can do it." She held steady to the goal of earning a master's degree to show everyone "that I did it, that I'm not stupid." Similarly, Margaret suggested, "If I continue to go to school that's something that they can say, 'Oh, she's good at this.'"

The recognition of oneself as an educated person apart from any specific skills or career outcomes is consistent with Meyer's (1977) description of the chartering function of education. For Adele, holding steady represented a claim on a particular social identity, one that has high moral value, whereas Hannah used aspirations to manage negative feelings about herself by assuming the moral status associated with college going and attainment. Because education produces individuals—as well as definitions of success, conceptions of work, and models of social mobility—identification with education is simultaneously an identification with socially valued, widely recognized forms of life. One consequence of the social identity conferred by colleges is that it produces insiders and outsiders and reconstitutes social relationships. Aspirations often function as a narrative of moral self-improvement that explicitly draws boundaries, challenges stereotypes, and redefines relationships.

Drawing Boundaries

The strategy of distinguishing between those who maintain their goal of finishing college and those who give up fits with broader processes of identity formation. Just as the poor adopt conservative frameworks to criticize other poor adults, particularly, welfare recipients (Hays 2003; Katz 2013; Lamont 2000), poor college students use college aspirations to create moral boundaries.

Comparing herself to young adults who are not in college, Adele insisted that "not everyone has that force in them to succeed." Non-enrollment signals weak or nonexistent college aspirations. Similarly, Patricia explained in her first interview, "You want to be bigger and better than where your mother was at. A lot of people are comfortable in the [housing] projects. That's all they know." During her second interview, she drew on her college experience to assert her virtuous character: "I'm still in school, I'm still clean and sober, and not in trouble with the law, and still taking care of my beautiful baby boy." Likewise, Rosa believed that persisting in school despite being a single mother reflected strength and determination, adding that most people "would have just stuck with the domestic work." At another point she said, "I mean, nothing against people who work at McDonald's, but it's like people can do so much better than that." Despite the fact that Rosa, a mother in her early 20s, had never worked for pay, she still constructed a boundary between those who work in bad jobs and those who "do so much better." And Hannah's commitment to college distinguished her from others when she said, "There's a lot of people who just would have given up."

For Margaret, being in college did not necessarily distinguish her from other poor women, but it did allow her to generate distance between herself and a certain type of poor person. She is a white single mother in her mid-20s who has never held a job. Throughout the course of the

study, she lived with her grandmother, mother, uncle, and daughter. None of the family worked, and they pieced together different sources of state support to make ends meet. Reflecting on her living situation, she said, "I feel kind of like on the lower grade of people. I don't have any money or anything and I feel kinda crappy because of it." She said she had looked for work in the past but, for reasons she could not explain, she was never offered a job. Yet, college offered a pathway to a more virtuous lifestyle of self-reliance:

> I don't like being in this situation but if I'm in this situation I'm gonna make the most of it and go to school so that one day I won't have to be like this, like my mother. You know, she's in this situation but she's just sitting there waiting for life to hand her things and I don't want to be like that.

By the fourth interview, Margaret had received an associate's degree but had not transferred. She said she lacks the self-esteem to make the transition to a four-year university even though she has the qualifications to do so. However, she was still taking a class at the community college, because being out of school made her feel "useless." Moreover, college allowed her to achieve some dignity and be a role model for her daughter:

> I'm not a crack addict or a prostitute or whatever. I go to school, I have a very high [grade point average], I'm a very good mother, I don't engage in any bad things. I wasn't raised with any morals, but I have a very strict way of thinking I should live. And I try to be a role model for my daughter.

For Margaret, holding steady meant holding on to an identity opposed to categories of social deviance. Contrary to theories of ambition management that stipulate students need to have their aspirations discouraged to avoid widespread deviant behavior, Margaret's case suggests that students can use high aspirations to distance themselves from socially illegitimate ways of life.

Combating Stereotypes

In addition to creating boundaries between themselves and other disadvantaged people, the women in this study made it clear that education was a key safeguard against systemic abuse and stigmatization coming from others. As Jeanie concluded from her years of work in the criminal justice system, "I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't. Education is costly and ignorance is costly, too, so I'd rather have the costly education instead of the costly ignorance." Watching poor and minority young adults without higher education cycle in and out of prison reinforced her belief in education to generate moral status. Jeanie had no history of legal trouble and had held what she considered a good job for over a decade, yet she saw her pursuit of education in relation to the criminalization of poor and minority youth without college degrees. Women like Jeanie used their aspirations to resist and reject oppressive structures and ideologies. Another interviewee, Patricia, explained, "As a woman, as a black woman, I feel sometimes that I always have to work harder. I want to show that I'm a strong black woman to represent my race and that we're not just dysfunctional, loud, black ghetto women, you know." College, she said, gave her the sense that she was "worth it."

Several respondents envisioned a college degree as serving to buffer against racism in the labor market. Kimberly, for example, a black woman in her mid-20s who stopped out of community college after the first interview but held steady to her aspiration for a bachelor's degree in social work, believed things had changed since her grandparents' generation: "Well, you know what, it is 2012, it is not 1956, or 1929. My grandpa was running from a white man. It's 2012, and I think it's kinda what you do with your life now." Similar to the black youth in MacLeod's (1995) *Ain't No Makin' It*, Kimberly's sense of progress shaped her perception of opportunity. Although she spoke at length about residential segregation, racialized gang violence, and discriminatory policing, Kimberly maintained a belief in the power of education to transcend discrimination. Pointing out that racist hiring practices are prevalent, she concluded that education, hard work, and self-presentation can transcend them:

> Of course, you might still have some racists—white man don't want to hire you, black people that won't hire black people, racist Mexicans that don't hire black people, racist black people who don't hire Mexicans—you gonna have racists regardless. You just have to do extra. It doesn't

> matter your color, your race, ethnicity, your last name, your first name . . . it's how you make it. If it's something you want to do, then you know the obstacles that are gonna be in your way, you gonna have to work double time, and it doesn't matter what your background is. It should be your education and how you present yourself, not how your race represents you.

For Kimberly, the recognition of racism in employment outcomes led to the conclusion that education is the only signal that can be heard through the noise of discrimination. Holding steady reflected her understanding of the labor market and how it is structured by race.

Nevertheless, her beliefs about college and work are consistent with a long literature that finds disadvantaged students adhere to an achievement ideology that posits hard work will be rewarded. In the context of being stopped out of college, Kimberly's beliefs caution against easy conclusions about the relationship between perceptions of opportunity and actions related to education. One might interpret Kimberley's perceptions of racist hiring practices and the fact that she is stopped out of college as an indication that she has disidentified with college, but this is not the case. Like other marginalized youth, her narratives and actions reflect a complicated relationship between discourse and behavior (Gowan 2010; O'Connor 1999; Young 2004). What this illustrates is the *moral* force of education.

Holding steady is also a way of managing stereotypes associated with poverty, single parenthood, and other stigmatized social statuses, like high school dropout and welfare recipient. Together, these stereotypes constitute a highly gendered image of low achievement and unfulfilled ambition. Carolyn discovered that doing well at community college

> showed me that I could do something else because I never finished high school. I ended up having a kid and people aren't very nice when you do that. Especially when you don't finish high school, people are mean to you, especially when they have high expectations. So it kind of raised my own expectations for myself.

Success in college is something interviewees could look to as a source of worth. It is a way to "prove" they are "smart" and "worthy." As Margaret claimed, going to college shows that "I'm worthy of whatever it is that I'm gonna get. I am important. I don't know how important, but I fit somewhere in this world." For Margaret and others like her, college functions as a set of coordinates that guide others' estimation of one's moral standing and help repair damage to one's self-esteem.

Managing Relationships

In addition to fending off stereotypes coming from distant others, some women held steady as a way of managing personal relationships with those closest to them. As women get older, competing social roles, such as worker, wife, and mother, impede their ability to attend school full-time and complete degrees (Jacobs and King 2002). Holding steady often means negotiating these roles with significant others, which has consequences for employment, family structure, living arrangements, child care, money, and a variety of other resources. College serves as an institution around which relationships form and are built because it carries moral weight, particularly for students who have few sources of power in their relationships. Family members are most often the main source of conflict and the biggest reason to pursue college.

Adele used her aspirations as a source of stability when difficulties at home overwhelmed her. During her fourth interview, as she neared transfer to a four-year university, she said that her parents were considering separating, and she noted that trouble at home had caused her to focus less on some of her goals, such as traveling and moving out on her own. She felt these goals were more out of reach than ever, because she might have to help support her mother if her parents were to separate. Although she described her dreams as "muted," she held steady to her goal of earning a bachelor's degree. When I asked her what the difference was between her aspiration for a college degree and her other goals, she responded, "It's something stable I can hold on to, I think because it's a goal I can reach." College kept her positive and "looking forward to something, not dwelling on problems that I have to deal with. It's something for me to, just, kind of relieve some stress and work toward that." Adele was able to organize her life around the institutionalized goals of

transfer and degree attainment not only because they were clear but also because they carried moral weight. Adele was not simply mooring her aspirations in a stable port during a storm. She explained that if she were to move out of the house with her mother, they would have to move to wherever she decides to transfer. This demonstrates the life-structuring capacity of higher-education institutions and the stability and durability of academic identities.

For some students, holding steady involved a *restructuring* of stable relationships as they pursued moral self-improvement. Carolyn explained her decision to return to school:

> I didn't feel like I was doing anything other than raising my daughter. I didn't want to be one of those people—you see them on TV—"Well all I am is just their mom and I never got to do this or that or the other." I'd rather be able to go, "Yeah, I was successful in being a mom and I went to school and I was a good student."

Holding steady allowed Carolyn to negotiate her relationship with her daughter, spending less time parenting in exchange for an expanded source of meaning. The moral value of education makes a more limited mother role a plausible trade-off. Carolyn similarly resisted marriage, telling her boyfriend, "We can get married but we need to get more of our school done" first. Family structure and formal education are tightly coupled.

Margaret also held steady to shape her role as a mother, not to generate distance from it but to mitigate the conflicts that distance causes. She confided that she "would love to be a stay-at-home mom," but staying home would not ensure closeness. "As my daughter gets older, she's gonna hate me as all teenagers do," she explained. "I have to have my own interests, even though I don't believe in that." Imagining the worst, she said, "If I do go to school and I learn about things that are interesting to me, when she does go off and say, 'I hate you, get away from me,' I can be focused on other things." Through holding steady, Carolyn and Margaret reconstituted the possibilities for motherhood. They drew on the virtues of independence and intellectual growth through their aspirations.

The ability to see clearly from moral ground allowed the women in this study to negotiate present relationships and imagine their relationships in the future. In some cases, it opened the way to imagine the absence of certain relationships, whether due to death, divorce, or the decision to remain single. For women like Adele, surrounded by single parents, having a "traditional family" of one's own was difficult to imagine; it was easier to imagine a pathway leading through school to a career and then stability and self-reliance for them and their children. College allowed them to avoid dependence and undesired partnerships, and it provided the moral ground to be a single parent in a society that denigrates such choices (Edin and Kefalas 2011).

In summary, outside the domain of work, the women in this study made sense of their educational aspirations through a narrative of moral self-improvement. Understood as a source of virtue, they used their aspirations to claim moral status and navigate personal relationships. They did this by using their college experience and aspirations to manage self-understanding, respond to the beliefs of others, and coordinate their lives with various people. Through these processes, continuing to pursue educational credentials indicates one's desire for success, emotional and socioeconomic security, and a virtuous commitment to the American Dream.

DISCUSSION

This paper addressed the experience of holding steady among community college students. I argued that the women in this study used two dominant narrative frameworks to explain holding steady. The first, which I call pragmatic job seeking, is that a college education is necessary for secure employment outside the low-wage service economy. Understood more positively, a college degree is a requirement for jobs that offer work and life qualities that are highly valued, such as independence, self-determination, and creativity. Access to high-status work also bears on how people experience other institutions, such as the family. The second narrative framework, which I call moral self-improvement, asserts that the pursuit of a college education signals high moral status. Community college students hold steady to their college aspirations to form positive self-conceptions, often in contrast to dominant stereotypes. Holding steady indicates motivation, which bears on an individual's opportunity in the workplace. In other words, self-presentation as someone who strives generates its own rewards.

Both narrative frameworks rely on the cultural and structural resources that community colleges provide. The need for disadvantaged students to hold steady is rooted in the structural, cultural, institutional, and interactional changes that have occurred since Clark (1960) first proposed that community colleges cool students out. Together, these changes constitute the particular social context of possibility, the intersection of objective structures and subjective representations that shape students' life chances (Bourdieu 1989). It is the complex moral aspect of aspiring to a college degree, however, that previous research has overlooked.

Cultural changes have affected the position of higher education in the popular imagination. Culture is constituted by the publicly available shared stories and moral categories that allow us to make sense of who we are and communicate that understanding to others (Illouz 2008; Lamont 2000). The emergence of the college-for-all ideology and the education gospel at the end of the twentieth century tracks the structural changes in the economy. Previous scholarship shows that these cultural frameworks express a moral position that everyone can and should go to college (Rosenbaum 1997) and an argument that college is the only pathway to particular types of high-status work (Grubb and Lazerson 2005). I build on this literature by showing how the women in this study similarly linked moral claims with beliefs about occupational attainment.

There is a long-standing relationship between the cultivation of individual productive capacities and moral status. In the early nineteenth century, U.S. elites defined poverty as a moral condition (Bellah et al. 1996), and early-twentieth-century eugenicists claimed that economic growth, social progress, and resource preservation were bound to individual foresight, of which the poor were incapable (Mitchell 2011). Moreover, the American Dream stipulates that the pursuit of success is associated with virtue (Hochschild 1995). Postwar social science even formulated an American national character that was particularly achievement oriented (Katz 2013). From the perspective of a broad cultural imperative to be ambitious, the ideology of college for all is not just an expression of democratic ideals or economic rationality but an integral feature of a discourse of ethical social membership. Narratives that link college going with life outcomes provide an explanatory system through which these women indicate to themselves and others that they are ambitious.

Given these structural and cultural trends, there is an interactional basis for holding steady. This interactional basis refers to the microlevel interactions through which subjects are produced and socially located (Foley 1990; Khan 2010; Mehan 2012). The women in this study emphasized the importance of indicating to others that they are ethical members of society. Interactions with family members, employers, and others were central to their narratives of pursuing educational and occupational attainment. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that social relationships involve the coordination of future orientations, from immediate futures to longer-term narratives (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). On the other hand, seemingly unreasonable aspirations often serve as moral claims in the present, as opposed to meaningful expectations about future outcomes (Frye 2012). The moral-laden attitudinal and behavioral schemas associated with discourses of attainment, which are disseminated through mainstream institutions, give poor and working-class youth the cultural tools to navigate present relationships. For some of the women in this study, holding steady is oriented toward these present relationships as much as it is toward career attainment.

Past research focuses on interactions, but it privileges interactions between students and community college actors, such as counselors and teachers (Clark 1960; Rosenbaum et al. 2006). The women in this study did not make these institutional figures central to their narratives of holding steady, indicating that a narrow institutional focus is liable to miss the range of people shaping the trajectories of community college students. This study supports research on working-class students in higher education that argues these students are more oriented toward people outside of the college environment than are their wealthier peers (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Unlike previous research that has uncovered a relational function behind seemingly unreasonable aspirations, this study shows how rational expectations about work and moral claims in the present can operate simultaneously, and it demonstrates there are social and emotional costs to abandoning postsecondary goals.

Although the women in this study did not describe their interactions with others in the community college setting in their narratives of holding steady, the institutional context was key to understanding the phenomenon of holding steady. Institutions are the codified roles and rule systems

that people adhere to within specific social settings (Binder and Wood 2013; Bourdieu 1990; Brint and Karabel 1989; Lareau 2011). The community college plays a critical role in facilitating individuals' adherence to the ambition imperative. As their narratives show, respondents often struggled to imagine the development of many aspects of their lives. By contrast, they could more easily imagine getting a college degree and going on to a career.

One reason for this is that although community colleges often fail to provide students with clear steps they can take to accomplish their academic goals (Rosenbaum et al. 2006), they do provide stable markers of academic progress along with direct and indirect links to the workforce—for example, transfer to a university, occupational certification, and institutional actors with practical experience in their chosen field (Nielsen 2015). The vocational character of community colleges and higher education more generally allows students to imagine careers more clearly. If college did not align with occupations, it would have been harder for the women in this study to hold steady, because they would have been under greater pressure to abandon their degree aspirations. As it was, many of the women reported that family members urged them to give up their goals and find work. Academic and vocational milestones stand in contrast to the increasingly less attainable markers of adulthood, such as moving out on one's own or getting married (Silva 2013). Holding steady is possible because community colleges offer plausible outcomes.

Community colleges also make it possible for students to hold steady through their open-access structure and their willingness to give students multiple chances to compete for postsecondary credentials (Rose 2012). Even when students leave college and do not return for long periods, they can tell themselves and others that they can and will return. Furthermore, the chartering function of schools (Meyer 1977) is important: community colleges confer social identities that are publicly recognized and exceptionally durable. Whereas organizational structure makes college aspirations plausible, the institutional charter makes the aspirations socially valuable in their own right. For these reasons, community colleges contribute to a form of moral equity at the same time that so many students fall short of their goals.

These findings are important for research concerned with the rise of ambition among U.S. youth. While concerns about widespread deviance have abated since Clark (1960) began his investigations into community colleges, scholars continue to focus on the psychological consequences of falling short in the pursuit of one's goals (Reynolds and Baird 2010; Vaisey 2006). In place of theories of ambition management, a theory of ambition imperative suggests that in the face of limited attainment, institutional processes must structure and legitimate holding steady. High aspirations are necessary, and students may not believe they have fallen short so long as they can hold steady. Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) argue that community colleges' failure to cool out some students may actually delay their recognition of more appropriate pathways. Yet, holding on to aspirations for a bachelor's degree appears to be oriented toward more than simply finding the most appropriate pathway to a job.

Drawing virtue from adherence to the ambition imperative through higher education has several implications. Adele's desire to be an "educated person," rather than take a job that does not require more education, could negatively affect her career trajectory and eventual socioeconomic status. For people primarily concerned with the economic returns to education, Adele's decision is problematic, because she potentially hampers her own social mobility, goes into debt, and wastes public resources. Conversely, increased levels of education have a wide range of social returns (Hout 2012). From this view, Adele's persistence benefits her community and society as a whole and should be encouraged. Similarly, poor and minority students empowered to challenge stereotypes and manage relationships are an important outcome of higher education whether or not they are ultimately unsuccessful.

Other possible implications from holding steady are less readily answered. For students with few alternative, popularly supported, and institutionalized sources of moral self-improvement, insurmountable obstacles to attending college can have serious effects on their well-being. Whereas the women in this study distanced themselves from socially illegitimate ways of life and rejected the negative views of others through their aspirations, working-class young adults cut off from traditional sources of self-worth are more likely to withdraw inward and develop hostile attitudes toward others (Silva 2013). The plausibility of degree aspirations may also degrade over time so that they are no longer a source of virtue,

despite the open-access character of community colleges. For these reasons, students should receive as much support as they need to achieve their degree goals and increase their access to good jobs and other sources of moral worth not readily available to them. Initiatives such as free community college across the country, proposed by President Obama, or the Student Success Act in California, which aims to foster timely degree completion, are promising steps in the move from a focus on access to a focus on completion. Policy makers should avoid erecting barriers to access for students who may not meet criteria for timely progress but who nevertheless hold steady to the idea that they can and will finish. In a schooled society, there are few ready substitutes for actual schooling.

Another concern is that drawing moral boundaries through holding steady may reduce solidarity and resilience in poor and minority communities while increasing support for punitive and exclusionary policies. The history of welfare illustrates how the intersection of morality and public services can generate divisions among the disadvantaged. Students who view people who stop out of school—or who never enroll in the first place—as lazy or unintelligent may be more likely to blame them, rather than structural barriers, for their own difficulties and other social problems. Challenging stereotypes through holding steady may produce solidarity, but it must involve a rejection of the divisions that moral prescriptions generate.

I have proposed an expanded view of the many uses of university aspirations in the lives of low-income women. Future research should continue to identify the causes and consequences of adherence to an imperative to be ambitious through college degree attainment. Sociologists should also explore the limits to holding steady. The virtue from holding steady may be limited for certain groups or take different forms. Researchers should study holding steady among men, in particular, because the relationship between education and labor market outcomes differs for men and women, and masculinity likely shapes how stereotypes, boundaries, and relationships are managed through aspirations. This is certainly the case among wealthier students, who may face different expectations and pressures to complete their degrees. In the college-for-all era, it is imperative that we understand what college aspirations mean for all of us.

RESEARCH ETHICS

All research on human subjects in this study has been approved by the University of California–San Diego Institutional Review Board and was performed according to the ethical standards laid out in the approval. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to participation in the research and I took adequate steps to protect their confidentiality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Amy Binder, Amanda Datnow, Vicki Park, Jenn Nations, Christine Cerven, and Hugh Mehan for their involvement at all stages of this research. I would also like to thank Daniel Solorzano and UC/ACCORD for their generous support. Katherine Kenny, David Pinzur, Rachel Soper, and Aaron Marquette read multiple drafts of this paper and offered invaluable feedback. Last, I am thankful for the many thoughtful suggestions from the editor, Rob Warren, and four anonymous reviewers.

NOTES

1. According to empirical studies, students with limited integration into the school environment, lower academic self-esteem, a greater sense of stigmatization, and fewer opportunities for mobility gradually disengage from some or all forms of academic work. In some cases, students eventually "disidentify" with college and degree attainment altogether (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Cech et al. 2011; Correll 2004; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Tinto 1987). There is a strong relationship between marginalizing experiences and the social-psychological states of students, but it is often unclear whether aspirations decline as a result of low attainment. Moreover, researchers have largely drawn their conclusions from the experiences of secondary students and students attending four-year universities, not community college students.
2. This research is an outgrowth of a larger project, "Pathways to Postsecondary Success," a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation–funded project under the direction of Daniel Solórzano, Amanda Datnow, and UC/ACCORD (see http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/).
3. Southeastern Metro Community College is a pseudonym; all other names have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.
4. At earlier stages of the project, all four researchers coded the interviews. We developed codes and ascertained intercoder reliability through repeated discussions and debates until we reached consensus. I did not use these codes, although I developed greater familiarity with the data and was able to identify themes I could pursue at a later time.

5. I define a *virtue claim* as a reference to some personal quality, which may be directed at oneself or someone else. For example, a student holds steady to prove to herself that she is smart or to prove to a boss that she is hardworking. *Drawing boundaries* refers to attempts to distinguish between one's own personal qualities and the personal qualities of another person or group, as when a student contrasts herself with people who leave school or never enroll in the first place. *Challenging stereotypes* refers to students' claims that holding steady runs counter to beliefs about a group to which they belong, such as a racial group, social class, or gender. Through holding steady, they tend to view themselves as an exemplary, as opposed to exceptional, group member. They may see their education as a form of group solidarity and improvement rather than a way to distance themselves from others. Drawing boundaries and challenging stereotypes can overlap, as when someone accepts basic features of a stereotype but challenges its reductive and self-effacing character. Finally, I define *managing relationships* as an attempt to respond to or shape particular interactions and relationships through holding steady, for example, when a student explains holding steady as a way to deal with family problems or as a reason for delaying marriage. Women who manage relationships through holding steady may simultaneously draw boundaries or challenge stereotypes.
6. In addition to the three students who were cooled out, several women indicated uncertainty about their plans and expectations or temporarily lowered one or both. Sara, for example, reported in background surveys that she planned to transfer and expected a master's degree during each wave except the third, when she did not know if she would transfer and expected only a bachelor's degree. Another student, Rachel, planned to transfer during each wave and had transferred by the fourth, but she admitted during the final interview that she had considered leaving school with an associate's degree. These examples illustrate the complexity of short-term adjustments to aspirations and the challenges of determining if a student is cooled out.
7. Although 9 of the 16 women who had not transferred by the end of the study planned on transferring, 11 expected and 14 ideally desired at least a bachelor's degree at some point, including two of the three cooled out students.
8. Even when temporarily cooled-out students are included, the proportion of students whose aspirations were cooled out are lower than Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) and others found. This could be an artifact of the study design. A longitudinal interview study may attract particular types of students, as opposed to a survey-based study that attracts a wider cross-section of the community college student body. Relying on voluntary respondents who are offered money to participate may also shape the sample in unexpected ways. Although respondents were under no obligation to stay in school or hold educational aspirations to remain in the study, they nevertheless may have believed it was necessary. Another possibility is that the longitudinal interview process itself may have encouraged participants to maintain their educational aspirations. As I show elsewhere (Nielsen 2015), it can be difficult for students to explain cooled-out aspirations. Abandoning an academic goal may compel cooled-out students to reconstruct a virtuous trajectory from other cultural and institutional materials that they may not have similar access to. A further possibility is that, by focusing on women, I exclude men for whom a college degree is less critical for social identity and work opportunities and who thus may be more likely to lower their educational aspirations. Alternatively, the cooling-out rate among this group of women could increase over time.
9. The analysis does not include the seven transfer students; one cooled-out student without academic plans, expectations, or ideals; and one student who aspired to an associate's degree and left school once she had completed it.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The online appendix is available at http://soe.sagepub.com/supplemental.

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