Instrumental and Expressive Education: College Planning in the Face of Poverty

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Abstract

Nearly all young people in the United States aspire to a college degree, but many fail to complete college in a timely manner. Does this lack of attainment reflect abandoned college plans? I analyze mixed-methods data from a five-year study of 700 low-income mothers at two Louisiana community colleges. Hurricane Katrina displaced respondents and interrupted their college educations; respondents had to decide whether, how, and why to return to school. Few women earned degrees during the study, but survey data indicate that the rate of reenrollment and intentions to complete were high. Interview data reveal the cultural logics supporting continued plans for a return to college. Instrumentally, respondents believed education would result in better employment. Expressively, the moral status afforded students supported respondents' narratives of upward mobility despite the difficulties they faced. The logic of human capital investment dominates policy and academic discussions of education's value, but I find the symbolic meaning of a college degree also shapes plans for college return and college decision making long into adulthood. Plans to return persist long beyond the objective probability of earning a degree, and despite respondents' difficult experiences, due to the expressive value college plans add to these young women's lives.

Keywords

community college, aspirations, persistence, expectations, mixed methodology

Nearly all young people in the United States expect to complete college (Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999), yet college attainment rates reveal that many do not do so in a timely manner. In 2014, only 44 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds had earned at least an associate's degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). Students starting at two-year colleges face particularly long odds for timely completion: fewer than one in three beginning community college students completes a credential within three years (National Center for Education Statistics 2014). Should one interpret this lack of timely attainment as indicative of abandoned college goals?

Sociologists have noted the difference between young people's outsized ambition and eventual college attainment in the United States (Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Vaisey 2010),

but little work examines college plans of students who fail to complete their goals in a timely manner. Clark's (1960a, 1960b, 1980) influential cooling-out hypothesis suggested that college planning follows a rational-actor model: firsthand experiences in college lead underprepared students to revise their goals downward, toward more probable outcomes. At the community college, high aspirations dissolve into lowered expectations. However, empirical evidence suggests that college goals are more resilient than predicted by the

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cooling-out hypothesis (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). Contemporary students increasingly return to school after breaks in continued pursuit of a degree, often across multiple institutions and long past traditional college-going age (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Giudici and Pallas 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2006). Why do so many students plan to start again, despite mounting evidence of the difficulties they face?

In this paper, I report on unique mixed-methods data from a five-year longitudinal study of 700 low-income mothers enrolled in two Louisiana community colleges. After Hurricane Katrina disrupted an experimental trial of pay-for-performance scholarships for low-income parents in 2005, study participants had to decide whether, how, and why to return to college. I use this forced break in college attendance to answer two research questions. First, do students maintain their educational goals in the face of major setbacks? Second, why do nearly all students continue to plan a college return? While previous sociological literature casts aspirations and expectations as distinct imaginings of the future, I argue that the two are intertwined and explain the persistence of college plans, even in the face of monumental setbacks.

Many previous studies of low-income students' college plans focus on teenagers in the final years of high school; these students are projecting goals before they have any actual college experience (e.g., Baird, Burge, and Reynolds 2008; Holland 2015; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). However, recent research suggests that educational attainment—particularly for disadvantaged students—is a process that unfolds over time and interacts with other aspects of the transition to adulthood (Giudici and Pallas 2014; Roksa and Velez 2012). It is no longer safe to assume that college goals are abandoned if degrees are not attained within a normative time frame. By examining the meaning and value that older students attach to earning a college degree, this study furthers our understanding of college going in an era when education is no longer a singular, sequential step in the transition to adulthood.

BACKGROUND

Understanding College Plans: Aspirations and Expectations

Researchers and policy makers alike note that nearly all young people in the United States expect to complete a college degree (Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). In the most recent cohort of students, degree expectations are less likely to be based on family background or educational requirements of one's expected occupation than in the past (Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006). The rise of academic and occupational goals has outpaced what many students are likely to attain, based on measures of their high school achievement or the composition of the labor market, leading some observers to conclude that today's adolescents have become too ambitious, "undercutting the long-observed benefits of early educational and occupational plans" (Reynolds et al. 2006:201).

In discussing young people's goals, sociologists generally make a conceptual distinction between aspirations and expectations "to capture the difference between idealized hopes for the future (i.e. aspirations) versus more probabilistic assessments of what will come to fruition (i.e. expectations)" (Baird et al. 2008:946). This is important because although young people across racial and class groups may share educational ideals, low-income or racial-minority youths' perceptions of blocked opportunity might better predict their behavior and outcomes (see Baird et al. 2008; Vaisey 2010). Indeed, when the empirical distinction is clearly made, aspirations tend to be higher than expectations, particularly for low-income (Vaisey 2010), African American (Hauser and Anderson 1991), and Mexican or Puerto Rican (Bohon, Johnson, and Gorman 2006) youth. This suggests that young people do perceive how limitations due to educational inequality and discrimination shape their opportunities.

While there is some agreement on this conceptual distinction, it is much more difficult to reach agreement on the operationalization of aspirations and expectations. Young (2004:162) points out that this literature is rife with empirical imprecision: "the concept of aspiration . . . is usually applied to a wide array of phenomena, ranging from anything that is slightly more ambitious than an expectation to that which typifies the grandest and boldest of dreams." Survey questions about aspirations and expectations are often used interchangeably (for examples, see Kao and Thompson 2003). Some empirical studies relating students' plans to outcomes clearly distinguish between aspirations and expectations (e.g., Hanson 1994; Hauser and Anderson 1991), but others do not (e.g., Schneider and Stevenson 1999).

Defining an a priori distinction between the concepts makes sense when studying educational planning among youth who have yet to experience college, but it is more complicated when examining the plans of potential returners. By virtue of their previous attendance, returning students meet a loose threshold for plans as expectations: they have some sense of the steps necessary to pursue a college degree. Although some disadvantaged students struggle to meet the logistical demands of enrolling even in open-door institutions (e.g., placement testing and filing the paperwork to enroll, transfer credits, or secure funding), potential returners have overcome these barriers at least once in the past. By examining how experienced students discuss college plans, I investigate how aspirations and expectations—previously considered distinct imagined futures—overlap in everyday practice for a group of low-income black mothers parenting on the edge of poverty.

The Cooling Out of Aspiration: More Information, Lowered Expectations?

Are experienced students' future college plans best understood as reasonable expectations of likely outcomes given firsthand experience? Clark's (1960a, 1960b, 1980) work on the community college sector continues to offer the central model for how struggling students' aspirations change over time. Following Clark, several prominent works detail how the experience of navigating the community college environment could result in frustrated ambition (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994; Pascarella et al. 1998). The cooling-out hypothesis spawned a cottage industry of empirical work that claims to test it (Alba and Lavin 1981; Alfonso 2006; Dougherty 1987, 1992; Doyle 2009; Leigh and Gill 2003; Rouse 1995). The bulk of this work finds that starting at a community college leads to lower rates of bachelor's degree attainment among individuals seeking a four-year degree. Although taken as evidence of cooling out or "diversion," these studies generally measure educational aspiration only during high school. Attainment within normative time tends to be the measure of lowered expectations. The mismatch between aspirations and degree attainment examined in these longitudinal studies may be important, but it is not the conceptual equivalent of abandoned college goals.

Clark's (1960a:569) influential hypothesis was, at its core, about the institutionally mediated process through which young people are forced to cope with "a major problem of democratic society . . . inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity." However, attention to individual social-psychological process has been largely set aside as researchers focused on the institutional forces shaping students' access to accurate information. These studies find little evidence that students adjust their goals downward as a result of attending community college, in response to either information about planned occupational requirements or feedback about their academic abilities (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum et al. 2006). In some cases, institutional efforts to reduce stigma and retain disadvantaged students appear to effectively prevent students from receiving accurate feedback (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002). And interactions with counselors appear to benefit, rather than restrict, students' attainment (Bahr 2008). In their longitudinal study of Baltimore youth, Alexander and colleagues (2008) find a modal pattern of stable degree expectations at both 4 and 10 years following high school graduation. Among students with shifting goals, they find movement in both directions: students are as likely to "warm up" to higher goals as they are to "cool out" after attending some college.

Popular accounts of going to college evoke a residential college experience, but the average community college student balances attending school with the demands of a complicated life outside the classroom. This often includes needing to work for pay (Roksa and Velez 2010), family obligations (Bozick 2007), and outside financial responsibilities (Conley 2001). Such students face academic challenges and pursue their goals while being "overburdened [by] adult responsibilities [they] must manage while in school" (Rosenbaum et al. 2006:2). Consequently, nationally representative studies estimate that between 25 and 30 percent of undergraduates "stop out" at some point, taking time off from college and returning at a later date (Berkner 2003; Carroll 1989; Park 2013). If these "failures" were to result in a widespread abandonment of college goals, it would be difficult to explain the long and winding pathways that many disadvantaged students travel to a college degree (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Giudici and Pallas 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2006; Kalogrides and Grodsky 2011; McCormick 2003).

In short, aggregate data on student experiences are difficult to square with a theory that predicts

disadvantaged or ill-prepared students' college goals are easily frustrated. These studies also suggest that educational attainment should be understood as a process that unfolds over time and interacts with other aspects of the transition to adulthood (Alexander et al. 2008; Giudici and Pallas 2014; Roksa and Velez 2012). By not assuming abandoned degree expectations from point-in-time educational outcomes, I am able to assess how students integrate life experiences into their future goals. And by taking seriously the subjective meaning that disadvantaged students attach to college plans, I question a largely unsubstantiated prediction in the literature on leveled expectations: personal experience that a degree will not come easy leads to the abandonment of educational goals.

The Subjective Meaning of Educational Plans

Clearly, a more robust theory of college plans is required in the face of mounting evidence of persistent expectation. Recent work by Frye (2012) finds that the formation of educational aspirations is deeply entwined with students' visions of self, which one should not assume are easily bounded by likely outcomes. Frye's research suggests that the symbolic meaning of educational plans can explain the formation of unlikely aspirations, but her cross-sectional interviews with teenagers cannot speak to whether these visions of self are resistant to evidence collected over time. Linking aspirational identity to educational enrollment, Luttrell (1997) reports that mothers who dropped out of high school resumed their education partially in search of a respectable identity. The theme of education as an expression of the self is also underlined in work by Finnish researchers (Antikainen et al. 1999) and in efforts to join the sociology of education to the study of the life course (e.g., Pallas, Boulay, and Karp 2003). Finally, a need for research on the subjective meaning of college education is suggested by the fact that today's young adults are increasingly redefining the transition to adulthood away from empirical markers of role transition (e.g., finishing school, starting a job, and starting a family) and toward subjective constructions of independence and responsibility for self and others (Eliason, Mortimer, and Vuolo 2015; Silva 2012, 2013; Silva and Pugh 2010).

Key features of the U.S. cultural context suggest a possible moral dimension to educational goals, perhaps particularly for the economically vulnerable women of color in this study. The college-for-all movement emphasizes a college degree as the best route to occupational success, a position that has powerfully shaped students' steadily climbing aspirations (Kerckhoff 2002, 2003; Rosenbaum 1998, 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). As a consequence of this economic and educational policy, contemporary teenagers across race and class have come to understand college going as a normative step in the transition to adulthood (Goyette 2008). What this means subjectively for students who fail to complete has yet to be examined.

At the same time that college-for-all gained traction in the minds of U.S. high schoolers, sweeping changes in the social safety net added further urgency to low-income students' pursuit of a college degree. In the mid-1990s, welfare reform prompted heated public debates over the best way to move Americans in poverty—primarily, mothers of dependent children—off of public assistance and on to self-sufficiency. The primacy of personal responsibility in implementation of welfare reform (Shaw et al. 2009) built on a long history of morally charged political rhetoric demarcating the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Katz 2013), and the myth of "the welfare queen" cast black women, in particular, as most likely to be lazy and dependent (Hancock 2004). At the beginning of this study, not all participants received public assistance. But in the wake of Katrina, nearly everyone reported accepting federal aid or private charity. For black mothers struggling to meet the challenge of economic self-sufficiency in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, college plans may represent a practical and a symbolic tool for asserting agency and virtue in the face of overwhelming uncertainty.

DATA AND METHODS

I conduct a secondary analysis of longitudinal survey and in-depth interview data collected by researchers in the Resilience in Survivors of Katrina (RISK) Project to examine the meaning of college plans for a group of disadvantaged young mothers over a five-year period. I use five-year survey data to identify students' current attainment and future educational plans, and data

from life history interviews to explore how and why the majority of respondents maintained plans to return to college over long time horizons and despite significant setbacks.

The RISK Project began in 2004 as the randomized, controlled trial of Opening Doors Louisiana, part of a larger multisite demonstration project that aimed to improve educational outcomes for low-income community college students. In Louisiana, the Opening Doors program was hosted by two institutions: Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College (LTC)–West Jefferson. Delgado is the largest community college in Louisiana, offering a comprehensive range of academic and vocational programs leading to associate's degrees and vocational certification; it enrolled approximately 15,000 students on multiple campuses when the study began. LTC–West Jefferson was a much smaller and more specialized institution, serving approximately 700 students who sought occupational certification in mechanics, appliance repair, and nursing assistance. Many students at both sites came from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and they had difficulty completing certificate or degree programs in a timely manner. At Delgado, only 2.3 percent of students entering in fall 2000 graduated within 150 percent of normative time (comparable statistics for LTC are not available). The Opening Doors intervention examined whether performance-based scholarships increased low-income parents' credit accumulation and persistence across semesters.[1]

Scholarship funds for Opening Doors were provided by the Louisiana Department of Social Services through its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program. The state was particularly interested in working with its community colleges to target young adults who were either receiving public assistance or at risk of needing such assistance in the future. To be eligible for the study, students had to be 18 to 34 years old, be the parent of at least one dependent child under age 19, have a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, and not have already earned a degree or occupational certificate from an accredited institution. Because of these criteria and the New Orleans location, study participants were primarily black (85 percent) women (92 percent) living at or near the poverty line. At baseline, 73 percent of participants received at least one form of public assistance, the most common of which was food stamps (62 percent). Analysis by Barrow and

colleagues (2014) found that Opening Doors participants reported more demographic disadvantages than did the average first-time community college student in both Louisiana and the United States. Students in this study thus represent a particularly disadvantaged subset of the community college population and one that is statistically unlikely to complete college credentials in a timely manner. Yet, this population is of importance to scholars of educational inequality and policy makers interested in alleviating poverty through higher education.

College staff recruited baseline study participants from the pool of enrolling students through college orientation and testing sessions and other on-campus outreach over four semesters, from spring 2004 to spring 2005. Program staff primarily targeted first-term students, although some continuing students ready to progress from remedial course work to credit-bearing courses were included to reach a target of 1,000 participants. In all, the Opening Doors Louisiana study included 1,019 low-income young parents in the two participating community colleges.

The Opening Doors evaluation was originally planned to follow students for two years after randomization, but Hurricane Katrina interrupted the intervention in August 2005, severely damaging the study institutions, dispersing study participants across the country, and halting data collection. Following the hurricane, a multidisciplinary team of researchers (sociologists, clinical psychologists, and economists) repurposed predisaster data to study the consequences of natural disaster for vulnerable individuals and their families. Under the RISK Project, researchers developed and administered two posthurricane surveys, attempting to contact all baseline participants in each wave. For the second post-Katrina survey (five years after Opening Doors baseline), 752 individuals (74 percent of baseline) responded; nonresponse bias analysis reveals no significant demographic differences between responders and nonresponders (see Online Appendix A). Because the study population was overwhelmingly female, I restricted the survey sample to women only for clarity. After excluding the 50 male survey respondents and eight female respondents who were missing key education variables, the final analytic set contains 694 women who answered the five-year survey.

In addition to follow-up surveys, RISK post-Katrina data include 127 interviews with 105

female survey respondents, conducted in three rounds between January 2006 and June 2007, April and October 2009, and August 2011 and March 2012. In selecting interview respondents from the survey population, efforts were made to balance residential location between New Orleans and Houston/Dallas, the two main post-Katrina residential clusters observed in the sample. Interviews were conducted by a multiethnic team of qualitative researchers in respondents' homes or public establishments, like casual dining restaurants and coffee shops. Interviews followed a semistructured protocol, lasting from one to two hours. To meet the needs of the full research team, interviews covered broad life history topics, including family of origin; residential, romantic, health, and educational histories; and respondents' experiences during Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Although the interview protocol was not exclusively focused on educational experiences and planning, it included extensive modules on two topics central to an understanding of educational decision making: respondents' educational histories (high school and postsecondary experiences, feelings about college, and future goals and plans) and their ideas about what constitutes successful adulthood (beliefs about the normative transition to adulthood, personal definitions of success, assessment of their progress, and a statement of five-year life goals). These modules appeared at different points in the interview, so I do not expect, a priori, that the latter would be dominated by discussion of education. Online Appendix B lists the survey and interview questions I used for this analysis. Due to technical difficulties or interviewer errors, five interviews did not have sufficient information on educational history or plans to be included in the present analysis; analysis of the remaining 122 interviews with 100 respondents is included here.

The RISK data offer several unique opportunities for understanding the college plans of low-income adults. First, whereas most persistence studies measure enrollment and completion of full-time, first-time degree seekers over a three-year period (150 percent time to an associate's degree), the RISK Project's five-year timeline provides a fuller picture of older students' persistence and planning over time. This is important given the low rates of completion within normative time for community college students, particularly for the most disadvantaged among them. Second, unlike many site-based studies of college persistence, follow-up was not contingent on continued enrollment in a single institution: respondents were followed wherever they relocated, and at five years after the hurricane they were living in 31 different states. The RISK Project interviews offer timely data on how potential returners navigated the full range of U.S. sub-baccalaureate educational options during a time when for-profit college and distance-learning options rapidly expanded. Finally, as the largest natural disaster in recent U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina represented an unavoidable break in respondents' college attendance and a broad disruption to their daily lives. This break allows me to observe how college plans serve practical and narrative functions in a context of substantial adversity. If I observe persistent expectations for college graduation in the face of such a major setback, surely expectations will persist for other low-income students who face more typical interruptions to their college careers.

Qualitative Analysis

Although I was involved as a researcher on the RISK Project for many years, I was not a member of the interview team. There is little guidance in the methodological literature on how to approach a secondary analysis of qualitative interview data when the researcher cannot elaborate or clarify his or her theoretical hunches by modifying the interview protocol. My priority, then, was to implement a systematic analytic process that allowed for the testing and disconfirmation of the prevalence of emergent themes.

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using NVivo 10 software for qualitative data analysis. To facilitate data retrieval, a team of graduate student coders began by applying "topic codes" to the transcripts and indexing the data by interview question. After this basic step of data preparation, I read each transcript front to back. At this time, I verified the topical coding of the education and adulthood modules using a code-by-document matrix to revisit interviews that appeared to have missing data. I also summarized each respondent's postsecondary education history to gain a better understanding of her educational pathway, triangulating data across multiple interviews when applicable. Finally, in the first round of analysis, I wrote extensive analytic memos on emerging cross-case themes, including the instrumental

Table 1. Degree Attainment at Five Years by Baseline Reason for Enrolling (*N* = 694).

Educational Attainment at Five Years	Primary Reason for Enrolling (Baseline)			
	BA Transfer	AA Degree	Certificate/Job Skills/Other	Total
Earned AA or BA (%)	14.43	13.28	10.8	12.68
n	14	51	23	88
Attending short of credential (%)	44.33	32.81	30.05	33.57
n	43	126	64	233
Not attending (%)	41.24	53.91	59.15	53.75
n	40	207	126	373
Column proportion of sample	0.14	0.55	0.31	1.00
Total *n*	97	384	213	694

and expressive educational logics reported in this paper.

In the second round of analysis, I extracted the portions of the interviews related to respondents' educational history, transition to adulthood, and definitions of success (see Online Appendix B). The excerpted portions range from 5 to 33 percent of the full interview transcripts. Based on the emergent constructs from the thematic memos, I coded all interview excerpts for textual evidence of instrumental and expressive logic for plans to return to college.

Coding Instrumental and Expressive Education

To understand the persistence of students' college plans over time, I use Weber's ([1922] 1978) distinction between goal- and value-oriented—or instrumental and expressive—action, posited to be key for an interpretive understanding of human behavior. As summarized by Hamilton (1991:320), instrumental action is the means to a desired end, whereas expressive action is the "behavioral expression of a value." To put it simply, instrumental action is oriented toward practical ends, whereas expressive action is concerned with the symbolic meaning of the activity itself, largely independent of its chance of success. As ideal types, Weber argued that it was unusual to find only one of these orientations in human behavior; combinations are more likely to be the norm. Popular accounts of vocational course work assume an instrumental orientation, but I maintain the possibility that both motivations are present within a single respondent's account.[2]

FINDINGS

Survey Measures: Completion, Return, and Future Educational Plans

Table 1 displays data on college attainment at 60 months by students' goals at the beginning of the study. Reflective of the role of community colleges in the United States—but not directly equivalent to the bachelor's degree seeking central to cooling out—the young women in this study enrolled in Opening Doors with a range of educational goals. The majority of students sought an associate's degree (55 percent), and one third enrolled to earn a technical certificate or otherwise improve their job skills. Only a small percentage (14 percent) sought transfer for a bachelor's degree.

Few of the women (13 percent) completed a degree in the five years of the study. Table 1 collapses bachelor's and associate's degree attainment because only five respondents reported earning a bachelor's degree. Slightly more bachelor's degree seekers earned a degree, but variation by respondents' initial expectations was not substantial. Consistent with other research suggesting that some students' goals warm up with college attendance (Alexander et al. 2008), some degree earners outperformed their initial expectations: 10 percent of certificate- and skills-seeking students completed a degree within the study period.

The rate of degree completion was low, but a substantial proportion of students actively persisted five years later. Approximately one third of the women were attending college two years after Katrina. Students with the highest initial goals (bachelor's degree seekers) were more likely

Table 2. Future Education Plans of Respondents Not Enrolled at 60 Months (*N* = 373).

| Survey Response | Primary Reason for Enrolling (Baseline) | | | |
	BA Transfer	AA Degree	Certificate/ Job Skills/ Other	Total
n	40	207	126	373
Are you planning to continue your studies within the next year? (%)				
Yes	90.0	78.7	66.7	75.9
No	7.5	16.4	27.8	19.3
Don't know	2.5	4.8	5.6	4.8
If "no" or "don't know," which of these reasons are true for why you don't plan to continue your studies in the next year?				
n	4	44	42	90
"I have as much education as I want" (%)	0.0	15.9	14.3	14.4
"I plan to continue later, but now is not a good time" (%)	100.0	95.5	92.3	94.4
"I would like to continue school but cannot afford it" (%)	100.0	75.0	61.9	70.0
"I would like to continue school but do not have enough time" (%)	75.0	68.2	85.7	76.7
"I would like to continue school but there is nowhere convenient to go" (%)	0.0	9.3	7.1	7.9

to be enrolled than their peers with lower baseline expectations (44 vs. 33 percent of those pursuing an associate's degree and 30 percent of those seeking job skills).

Reflective of low rates of timely completion in community colleges, more than half of study participants had not earned a degree and were not attending school at the five-year survey. But can one interpret this as evidence of abandoned college expectations? Survey responses make it plain that not currently attending is not an effective proxy for abandoned college plans (see Table 2). Nearly all students who were not enrolled at the time of the survey reported plans to continue their degree in the coming year or beyond; few respondents believed they had completed enough education.

Table 2 is restricted to the 373 women who were not enrolled at the final survey. Nearly all respondents who initially sought a bachelor's degree (90 percent), and the vast majority of associate's degree seekers (79 percent), reported that they plan to continue their studies within the year. Even the majority of students who did not enroll for a degree (67 percent) indicated that they had plans to return to school. Further underscoring the continued importance of college going

for these respondents, few (14 percent) believed they had completed enough education. Instead, 94 percent of respondents without immediate plans agreed with the statement, "I plan to continue later, but now is not a good time." Reflective of the broad accessibility of community colleges, for-profit training institutions, and distance-learning modalities, convenient options were not a major problem in their minds (cited by only 8 percent). Instead, the women reported concrete barriers to their reenrollment: not enough time (77 percent) and an inability to afford it (70 percent). Given the financial and logistical difficulties of balancing work for pay, child care, and recovery from the hurricane itself, these seem plausible assessments of the difficulties they would face upon return.

If the conceptual distinction between aspiration and expectation lies in having a plan, survey responses indicate that these students maintained nearly universal college expectations. Most of the low-income mothers had yet to earn a degree, but their lack of attainment—or even point-in-time enrollment—cannot be interpreted as abandoned goals. I now turn to qualitative interview data to better understand the logic of this near-universal persistence of plans for college return.

Interview Data: Instrumental Expectations and Expressive Aspirations

As respondents discussed their prior educational experiences and future college plans, two broad logics underlying plans for return emerged: instrumental and expressive. As described earlier in the Qualitative Analysis section, instrumental logic was connoted by a discussion of college going as a means to a desired end—typically, a specific career goal or desire for economic stability more broadly. An educational logic was coded as expressive if (1) college return was described as an end in itself or (2) respondents emphasized the symbolic meaning of a degree or status as a college student. Of the 100 interviewees, 83 used instrumental logic while discussing college decision making, and 80 reported expressive reasons for planning to return. The majority of interviewees (63 of 100) utilized both logics in the course of one or more interviews.

Instrumental logic, shifting expectations.

Underpinning *instrumental logic*, the living-wage careers most commonly sought by respondents—nursing, administrative assistance, or early-childhood education—require college-level skills or technical certification. By the time interviewers spoke with 34-year-old Shawna in 2008, she had reenrolled in her pre-Katrina accounting program.[3] Shawna discussed her motivation for the degree in purely instrumental terms:

> My interest isn't in accounting actually, but like CSI [crime scene investigation], detective work. But I know that I can find a job in accounting. I am looking at job opportunities around here, and that's the field. In order for me to get a job, I need to study a field that's in demand.

Distinguishing between her "interests" and her course of study, Shawna prioritized the program she felt would lead to the best likelihood of gainful employment.

Other respondents demonstrated instrumental logic—albeit less laser focused than Shawna's—when describing college as a prerequisite for economic independence in more general terms. When Cheryl, a 32-year-old mother of two, was interviewed in 2008, she described what prompted her initial enrollment in Opening Doors: "After

my mom passed, I lost my job as a vault teller. And me having a second baby right after my momma died, I just had to do something else so I can give my kids a better life than what I had." Opening Doors represented Cheryl's second attempt to convert a college credential into living-wage work: she completed a medical coding certificate at an unaccredited for-profit college right after high school, but she was pregnant at graduation and never found work in the field. At the time of the post-Katrina interview, Cheryl had returned to New Orleans and reenrolled in her pharmacy technology program at Delgado. She was looking forward to next semester's internship at a national drugstore chain. Echoing Cheryl, 28-year-old Shelly, in her 2008 interview, described her reasons for returning to school that fall:

> When I think about the fact that I have two kids now and I need to be able to support these kids myself, the money I'd make nursing is the best way for me to go. I wish I had finished college earlier, but I definitely think this is where I need to be.

When respondents discussed their college plans as requisite for a particular career or for economic stability more broadly, I designated the logic of education as instrumental.[4]

The economic imperative for a return to college is objectively strong for most women in the study, yet the cost-benefit analysis implicit in instrumental education did lead some respondents to report abandoned college plans. Tina, the single mother of a 12-year-old girl, reported plans to continue school at the five-year survey. But by the time she was interviewed in 2011, the 29-year-old no longer planned a college return. She recalled that when she settled in Texas after Katrina,

> I was doin' nails. I had in mind that I wanted my own business, so I thought, "Okay, I wanna take business administration courses." I took a class or two, but then I just saw me already making a lot of money, and I thought "Well, I'm makin' good money, and maybe I really don't need to go to school for this."

Tina had attended multiple institutions (Delgado, an unaccredited massage school, and online courses at a Texas community college) at the point that she "just kind of gave up, I guess." While she

did not report ever receiving institutionally mediated information about her low probability of completing a degree, the relatively good money she made as a nail technician allowed her to reconsider the necessity of school.

Contrary to the social-psychological process implied in cooling out, instrumental logic did not guarantee the leveling of expectations when college plans did not pan out. In contrast to Tina, other respondents used a series of educational experiences to narrow down potential career options but maintained the expectation to graduate despite many starts and stops. In the three semesters that she attended Delgado between high school and the hurricane, 25-year-old Cherise switched fields several times: "I studied different fields. I first started out learning telecommunications. But what is that about, really? And that after that, what did I switch to?" Cherise also studied respiratory therapy but decided, "I don't really like germs, so that wasn't a field for me." She then switched to business, which she continued to study at the time of the interview. In what appears to be the absence of any career planning or advising, she used her early college experiences to try on different potential career paths, switching several times until she found one that felt like a fit. All this switching stalled Cherise's progress toward a credential, but she ultimately found a field that fit her interests and her goals for a stable career.

When interviewers spoke with Cherise in Dallas a year after Katrina, she was taking online business classes at the University of Phoenix in an attempt to balance full-time work at an insurance agency with caring for her two children. She planned to finish her degree, but the stability of her current job led to a lowering of degree goals as she accumulated more experience: "At first I was thinking about getting a master's degree. Then I looked at my job; I don't think that is necessary. Where I'm working now, I can have a career, so I may not even need a master's degree."

Similar to Cherise, students who prioritized instrumental logic were willing to switch fields of study until they found what felt like a fit. Like Cherise and Tina, other respondents who discussed college only in instrumental terms revised their goals downward without much apparent distress. The expectation of continued enrollment remained, but these respondents used instrumental logic to justify abandoning associate's degree plans for shorter technical certification programs, prioritizing speedier graduation. In 2007, Tonya,

a 30-year-old mother of two who was unable to pass remedial course work at the community college, reported she had moved to a private technical institute "because it's faster than Delgado." Her "admissions counselor" at the private school outlined a back-up plan if all did not go well: "Let's say I fail my LPN entrance test. They said I could take all the little [prerequisites] and apply them to something smaller. Credits aren't transferrable to another college but transferrable within Cameron College." Tonya was optimistic, but a significant proportion of women whose surveys indicated they had yet to earn a formal degree and planned to return to school reported in interviews that shortcut technical training had not generated the economic returns they expected. When respondents were not as lucky as Tina or Cherise—landing a job that paid a living wage— they continued to trust that an investment in college would bear economic fruits.

Expressive education, symbolic progress.

In contrast to the implicit cost-benefit analysis that supported instrumental reasons for college return, *expressive logic* emphasized the symbolic meaning of being a college student or of graduation in and of itself. Our 2009 interview with Felicia offers a particularly poignant example of the expressive potential of educational achievement. "Earning my degree would be the success point in my life," she told her interviewer. "As soon as I can achieve that goal, everybody on the outside looking in'll look at me as being successful." Felicia emphasized her belief that a college degree confers status in the eyes of the community:

> According to everyone, I was supposed to be nothing because I had a baby early. I was going to drop out of school, going to have another kid. I was supposed to be on drugs maybe. But once I can achieve that goal of graduating from college and having my degree, I think that I've reached success.

At the time of this interview, Felicia had not attained many other markers of successful adulthood. She was caring for her disabled husband and their three children full-time, and the family lived on disability insurance payments. Prior to the hurricane, Felicia's family responsibilities interfered with her Opening Doors schoolwork, leading to two Fs for the semester and rendering her ineligible for continued financial aid.

Although she had yet to reenroll, Felicia was by any reasonable definition persistent: at multiple points in the interview, she spoke at length about her struggle to find money to repay her outstanding debts and return to school, holding fast to plans to return when she secured the necessary resources. While she is "certain" that she will return to college someday, her current lack of a degree symbolized her perceived lack of success as of age 28. "Right now, I consider myself a loser," she reported at the end of her interview.

Other respondents, like 30-year-old Erica, recalled that they reenrolled in courses as a concrete action that showed others (and themselves) that they had not given up. Articulating the overwhelming uncertainty she faced when displaced to Texas by Katrina, Erica said, "When I went online [after the hurricane], I just took general studies, just to do something, so I could say that I was trying." These courses did not bring Erica any closer to her dream job in early-childhood education—in fact, she did not successfully complete them—but the planning and return to school offered her a sense of agency during a particularly unsettled time. When we spoke in 2009, Erica was happily employed in a loan-processing job that paid significantly more than what she had earned in New Orleans. Yet, unlike respondents whose educational plans were motivated by instrumental logic, Erica remained adamant that she would complete a degree someday, despite her relative economic success. "It's something that I know I will do for me. I am not the type of person who gives up on her dreams," she concluded. In this and similar examples of expressive education, a return to school offered respondents concrete direction and the positive identity of a striver in times of uncertainty, even when there was no economic payoff. Erica did not have immediate plans to return to school, but the eventual goal of college completion still served as a narrative tool she employed to offer the interviewer a sense of "the type of person" she was.

Intertwined logics, aspirations maintained. While respondents in the previous sections clearly utilized one logic or the other to describe their educational plans, instrumental and expressive logics comingled within the majority of interviews. The instrumental and expressive value of education most commonly co-occurred at an interview's conclusion, when the discussion turned away from respondents' specific experiences to a self-assessment of their progress toward successful adulthood. At this point, the women had spent over an hour in a wide-ranging interview that covered all the major facets of their transition to adulthood: experiences with Katrina and its aftermath, educational experiences, childbearing, romantic relationships, residential mobility, employment history, and descriptions of their families of origin. Respondents were then asked to identify their own definition of success for "someone their age" and assess their progress toward it. Respondents had discussed the particulars of their educational plans much earlier in the interview; when they were are asked to speak about their broad life trajectories, the instrumental promise and expressive power of education became intertwined, underscoring that a return to college offers both practical and symbolic tools to envision a better future. Here, respondents integrated their first-hand life experiences with idealized outcomes, with the effect of maintaining educational aspirations.

As the women discussed their educational journeys, what it means to be an adult, and what they consider markers of success, "finishing school" or "earning a degree" were mentioned alongside other milestones of middle-class status to which they aspired: owning a house, holding a professional job, and making enough money to take an occasional vacation. Given the original Opening Doors study population—mainly young, black mothers on the cusp of poverty—the fact that these women dream of more stable economic lives is unsurprising. But, most respondents had struggled in the aftermath of the hurricane and through the lived experience of poverty in the United States. Here, responses underscore that planning a return to college is both a concrete step and a symbolic tool required if they are to "become somebody."

In the conclusion of the interview with 27-year-old Renata, she emphasized that her goal of "being somebody" implied both economic stability and the moral dignity afforded respectable adults. At the time, Renata had just been promoted from part-time to full-time work with benefits. She enjoyed interacting with kids as a cashier in a middle school cafeteria. Nonetheless, she saw this as a job rather than a career, and she planned to work in the cafeteria only until it was time for her clinical experience as a surgical technician: "Once I have to do my clinical with my major, that's my two-week notice." When asked about the likelihood of achieving her educational (and

by proxy, career) goals, Renata identified specific educational plans to underscore expectations for a degree. But when directly asked, "How realistic is it that you'll get that AA?" Renata did not resort to probabilities: "Oh, it's real. I have my mind set on it. And nothing is not going to change me."[5] Although Renata had three prior unsuccessful attempts at school, she continued evocatively,

> I don't care if I become cripple, I'm going to wheel in there in a wheelchair. I want my children to have things that I didn't have when I was younger. For me to do that I have to become somebody. I don't want to be no cafeteria worker all my life, working in a cafeteria for all my life. I want to, you know, be somebody.

Renata's particular language for her likelihood of completion—"nothing is not going to change me"—reveals the degree to which her future plans are linked to her very understanding of herself. To the point of scraping together her own money when financial aid was blocked, Renata went to great lengths to act in accordance with her vision of herself as someone who will make it. Not merely a childhood dream, this vision persisted to her late 20s as she continued to strive toward a job, like surgical technician, that a "somebody" might hold.

Beyond offering a concrete line of action and a narrative tool for symbolically claiming respectable middle-class status, respondents integrated their college plans and biographies, using expressive education to draw moral distinction between themselves and the families or neighborhoods in which they were raised. At the time of her 2009 interview, 24-year-old Michelle worked as a customer service representative at a Verizon store and attended a Houston community college for an associate's degree in business administration. Michelle, a single mother of a 9-year-old, had attended three other colleges since high school graduation, including two semesters at a four-year historically black college/university for nursing, three semesters at Delgado, and six months at a multisite for-profit technical institute that turned out to be "just, like, a rip-off. It was one of those business colleges where you be in there for 18 months or whatever amount of months and you're supposed to get your degree. Right." While she had yet to complete any credentials, Michelle reflected on how her definition of success had changed with her move to Texas, sparking an aspiration for a bachelor's degree: "For me, success probably would be me finishing college, finishing school—not just the community college that I go to, going to a university, getting my bachelor's." Michelle continued outlining indicators of success to her and her rightful claim to them: "owning my own house, making the money that I need to make. I'm doing what I didn't see a lot of people do before around me. Graduating from high school was considered an accomplishment, but for me I see that is just standard. Now I look at things different." Michelle had yet to earn any credentials or see the economic payoff of any of her several spells of college enrollment. Yet, when asked, "What's the number one thing that prevents people from being successful?" she quickly responded, "Not getting enough education."

In fact, an overwhelming portion (89 of 100) of respondents mentioned lack of education as an important factor explaining their own and others' lack of progress toward success. Desiree offers a poignant example of how expressive education demarcated smooth and rocky periods in life for some respondents. Desiree had been trying "to get back to school" since she became pregnant at 15 and left the 10th grade. As a teenager, she took a course for a hairdressing certification, but she failed the written portion of the licensure exam. One day, as she ate lunch at McDonalds, the YMCA was signing people up for a General Educational Development (GED) course. She was under the impression that attending the course would earn the GED, but she was unable to pass the written exam, again leaving her without a credential. In May 2004, Desiree was randomized into Opening Doors to take remedial courses, but she did not end up "getting it together" to enroll until fall 2005, the semester Katrina struck.

When interviewed in 2008, 24-year-old Desiree was separated from her drug-addicted boyfriend, struggling with depression, and abusing over-the-counter medicines. She braided hair out of her home to make money as she waited to hear back on her welfare application. Over the course of the interview, Desiree repeatedly contrasted how she felt during the semester she was enrolled in college to the "sad state" of her current life. "I was so proud of myself," she reported.

> I did everything right, too, as far as financial aid, Pell grant. I did everything by myself. I took my time, and I did it. And

then when I got in there, I was just so proud. And then the hurricane happened, I—you know, it messed up a lot of things for a lot of people.

Despite her current struggles, Desiree was adamant that a return to college—any college—was in her future. "As long as I'm going to school, I wouldn't care if the school sat on the side of a corner store. I wouldn't care if it's Delgado or . . . it doesn't matter. Education is education." Desiree told the interviewer that she hopes to one day earn a bachelor's degree.

If experienced students' educational plans are best understood as "expectations" alone, these accounts of future goals would include a straightforward incorporation of previous failure and a probabilistic assessment of the likelihood of success. A simple (re)calculation should make it clear to Desiree that she is very unlikely to earn a four-year degree. Instead, her plans to return to school offer a concrete set of steps to follow and deliver a claim about the type of person she is. By linking that vision of self to the idea that "education is education," and describing the powerful emotion she attached to the (fleeting) moment when she was enrolled in college and her dreams seemed within her grasp, Desiree projects a story of upward trajectory despite no material progress toward it. Desiree said she was so committed to her college goals that she passed up a ride out of New Orleans because she did not want to miss the first day of community college orientation, held the Friday before Hurricane Katrina hit. Since her post-Katrina return to New Orleans, Desiree has attempted to reenroll at the community college, but enough time has elapsed that she needs to retake the placement test and figure out financial aid anew. In the context of her other challenging life circumstances, she is unsure when she will be able to return to school, although she answered she would return within the year on the survey and clearly articulated her "plan." If cooling out is about reconciling pie-in-the-sky aspirations and firsthand experiences, Desiree's and many other respondents' lack of concrete progress toward their goals cannot be understood as cooling out.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

I find that disadvantaged students' plans to complete college are not easily shaken, even in the context of a setback as all-encompassing as Hurricane Katrina, the largest natural disaster in recent U.S. history. For the women in this study, educational planning is more complex than suggested by theoretical models that cast students' "unrealistic" ambitions as easily channeled into expectations for more likely outcomes. While the few previous studies to directly measure changing educational goals across young adulthood suggest their resilience, little research has studied how potential returners subjectively understand their plans for a degree. Using longitudinal mixed-methods data collected from a group of mostly black, low-income mothers, I find surveys indicate nearly universal persistence of college plans—reenrollment or plans to return—over a five-year period. I then use interview data to explain the persistence of college plans despite substantial setbacks.

I argue that the economic imperative and symbolic value of college going are intertwined in respondents' educational planning and expectations for themselves. Although the instrumental logic of vocational training is present in many young women's discussions of reasons for a return to school, attending college—or just planning to—also serves an expressive function, allowing them to construct and enact a narrative of upward mobility and claim the identity of a morally worthy striver, despite the mounting evidence that they have made little progress toward their middle-class aspirations.

This work contributes to a growing literature on the importance of understanding the cultural context in which young adults identify aspirations and make decisions about their futures. To this point, Frye (2012:1565) concludes that Malawian schoolgirls' educational "aspirations should be interpreted not as rational calculations but instead as assertions of virtuous identity," explaining students' otherwise "illogical" behavior. Unlike in Frye's account of rural Malawi, however, I find that economic rationality is firmly lodged in the minds of low-income U.S. mothers. To the extent that larger cultural discourses about education are implicated in accounts of unlikely college aspirations in the United States, the discussion usually centers on the college-for-all regime (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Indeed, the logic of college-for-all is largely instrumental: college attendance is framed as the most probable pathway to individual

economic stability. If instrumental logic were all that was at play, perhaps one would observe more cooling out of college plans over time as students struggle to complete their goals. Still, nearly all respondents at least "plan" a return to school, even in cases where their own prior college experiences have failed to result in the economic payoff they seek.

This suggests that for this sample of young women—seeking dignity and economic stability in an era of declining social support—more than money is at stake. Here, building on Frye (2012) and others who suggest that educational goals may be understood as an expression of self (Antikainen et al. 1999; Pallas et al. 2003), I find that the expressive value of being a student allows these young women to maintain the image of morally worthy strivers despite few objective markers of social mobility. This finding complements recent work by sociologists of the life course that finds, in the absence of traditional markers of adulthood, young people rely on subjective meaning to construct narratives of progress and dignity (Silva 2012, 2013). For many respondents, Hurricane Katrina required a literal rebuilding of their homes and lives, but the young women in this study have long needed to build and rebuild a sense of self in the face of the struggles that accompany teenage motherhood and poverty. Planning a return to college—regardless of how unlikely it may be—offers the narrative possibility of upward mobility and allows respondents to continue to define themselves as on the way to their goals. The conflation of point-in-time attainment with abandoned college plans may explain prior research that finds no negative psychological consequences to unmet educational expectations (Reynolds and Baird 2010). Perhaps many young adults have simply not met their expectations *yet*. Given the expressive value of college return, it is not hard to see why aspirations for a college credential are resilient, despite firsthand evidence of the difficulties they will face when students reenroll.

What are the consequences of low-income adults' persistent unmet expectations for a college degree? In contrast to Reynolds and Baird's (2010) conclusion that there is little "downside to shooting for the stars," I offer some evidence that the growth of for-profit education providers and distance-learning technologies changes the equation. In the not-so-distant past, when college going was typically a singular, sequential stop in the transition to adulthood, participants may have been unlikely to convert their unmet expectations into actual return. Even if they were to return at a nontraditional age, the low tuition of community college minimized personal risk. However, one of the practical goals of expanding the for-profit sector was to increase the set of educational options for busy working adults (Mettler 2014). In fact, these new educational forms are often targeted specifically toward older students who have struggled in previous postsecondary attempts (Campbell and Deil-Amen 2012; Government Accountability Office 2010). On the basis of survey responses, the women in this study believed there are convenient college options available to them, and in interviews, they reported encountering advertisements for such programs in television commercials, on billboards and city busses, and even when submitting job applications online. These "degrees of inequality" (Mettler 2014) can cost as much as 15 times the local community college (Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012), requiring large student loans that cannot be discharged even in bankruptcy. At the same time, these new programs offer students additional opportunities to envision possibility in the midst of struggle. The combination of economic necessity and the moral valence of college going may make low-income parents particularly vulnerable to exploitation by predatory institutions.

My work could serve as the basis for several fruitful avenues of future research. While the logic of human capital investment dominates policy—and increasingly academic—discussions of education's value, disadvantaged students themselves tell us that other reasoning factors into their decision making. Clearly, as long argued by Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006), many students—like Tina, Cherise, and Tonya—could benefit from a better understanding of the likely outcomes and consequences of their enrollment decisions. At the same time, a better understanding of what is at stake—both materially and symbolically—as students process this information may reveal important limitations to policies and practices that simply provide "better information." Future comparative research should also examine whether the symbolic meaning of college education varies across students of different backgrounds who have access to different resources. The symbolic meaning of educational decisions will likely reveal much about the U.S. opportunity structure more broadly.

By using longitudinal mixed-methods data to explore the logic of economically vulnerable mothers' persistent college plans, I offer timely

insight into the experiences of potential college returners, a growing population that is largely overlooked in studies of educational aspiration and attainment in the United States. Clark's (1960a) midcentury cooling-out hypothesis was, at root, about the subjective process of reconciling cultural imperatives for limitless ambition with the reality of limited opportunity. For better or worse, ample evidence shows this process is not efficiently accomplished in schools. Stratification in the United States has long been understood as a comparatively open regime of "contest mobility," full of perceived second chances for improved social and economic status (Turner 1960). Contrary to concerns that disadvantaged students' college plans are easily frustrated, my work suggests that the possibility of college return long into adulthood may be simply the latest instantiation of the contest regime.

RESEARCH ETHICS

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NOTES

1. Discussion of outcomes of the Opening Doors evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper, but the program has been thoroughly examined by Richburg-Hayes and colleagues (2009) and Barrow and colleagues (2014). The intervention and Opening Doors longitudinal survey were designed and conducted by the policy research firm MDRC, with assistance from the MacArthur Foundation–funded Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and the Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health.

2. Educational gerontologists have applied instrumental and expressive labels to differentiate among types of educational activities pursued by older adult learners (Havighurst 1964; Hiemstra 1972, 1976; Londoner 1990; Peterson 1983). In this literature, primarily concerned with educational planning and practice, instrumental education is defined as learning that is valuable for later use, whereas expressive education consists of activities pursued for their own sake (Havighurst 1964). In Havighurst's (1964) original formulation, educational activities—for instance, skills of adult care versus arts-and-crafts activities—are categorized as inherently instrumental or expressive. However, as Londoner (1990) points out, returning to Parsons ([1951] 1962), if the actions and behaviors of the learners themselves are the unit of analysis, any given activity may be simultaneously instrumental and expressive. In my coding, I emphasize the importance of the symbolic meaning of expressive action, underplayed in Parsons' translation of Weber's ideas, but key to Weber's original call for an interpretive understanding of human action.

3. All names are pseudonyms.

4. Particular careers may themselves have symbolic meanings, but my focus here is on the logic of college plans specifically. If interview text positioned college attendance as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, I coded the text as instrumental.

5. Note that a surgical technician certification is not actually an associate's degree. Frequently throughout the interviews, respondents misidentified the type of credential they sought, conflating vocational certificates with more academic degrees. One respondent, when asked what degree she would ultimately like to attain, responded, "What's the highest? A doctor? I mean, I guess, with refrigerator and AC repair, I could probably stop with being a master of that." Several respondents also appeared mistakenly to believe that completing a technical course would qualify them for a specific job. Many of these jobs, particularly in health fields, require clinical hours in the field or certification exams before respondents would be allowed to hold employment for pay.

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