

The Impact of Economic Disparity on Motivation and College Success

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the motivation and college success of a sample of economically disadvantage students attending an urban community college in the North Eastern region of United States. Low enrollment, an increase in drop out rates, and low retention rates became the trend for community colleges. The purpose of this study was to suggest an approach for addressing this issue on the community college campus. Six, first year students were individually interviewed using a familial career genogram and a 15-question interview guide surrounding their experiences with pre-college career guidance, college preparation, and motivation. A lack of college preparedness proves to have a negative impact on the student's motivation, which in turn, will hinder the participants' college success. This result will pose a challenge for these participants pursuing higher education, as they are now more susceptible to failure in college.

### The Impact of Economic Disparity on Motivation and College Success

Community Colleges welcome students from all walks of life. They are commended for their open door admissions policy and providing opportunities for everyone to obtain a degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Prior academic success does not serve as a deciding factor for admission into community colleges; therefore, they are referred to as second chance institutions (2010). These two-year public institutions of higher education serve a high portion of students with limited opportunities for education beyond high school (2010). It is not uncommon to enroll students who lack academic preparedness, financial support, family support, and possess many other non-academic deficiencies (Bailey, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Current findings showed that college retention and graduation rates for economically disadvantaged students are significantly low (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Prospero & Gupta, 2007; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). The open door policy of community colleges has become more of a revolving door, with dropout rates between 40% and 50% (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). The students who are economically disadvantaged and academically challenged have a lower graduation rate and high dropout rate (Bailey, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Completion of program requirements takes a longer time for this population of students (Lowe & Cook, 2003). The repercussion of prolonging degree attainment is that students will exhaust their financial aid funding, which will cause them to eventually drop out of college due to an inability to pay tuition (2003).

The focal point of this literature review will be placed on the need for community colleges to address the needs of students who are underprepared and more than likely to start their college career inadequately prepared (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008; Starling & Miller, 2011). If college success is solely determined by their motivation, as research suggests, then it is critical to determine the underlying reasons for their unpreparedness and lack of motivation (Young et al., 2011).

This literature review will address three areas of research related to economically disadvantaged students. The first section will focus on how being economically disadvantaged impacts college success. In the second section, there will be an emphasis on how a student's economically disadvantaged status may affect their motivation and how motivation has an impact on college success. Finally, the last section will address a research-based program, The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), which is effective in serving economically disadvantaged students and helping them to work towards achieving college success. Learning Communities has also proven to be another option for students, which has shown to be successful for college students.

### **Maslow's Human Motivation Theory (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs)**

Maslow's human motivation theory, the hierarchy of needs will be used as the framework for this manuscript. This theory expresses that as humans we are wired to become dominated by certain needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow (1943) expressed that human progress through five stages of growth, from physiological needs, to safety needs, to love and belongingness, to self-esteem, to self-actualization. Maslow (1943) explains that deficiency needs (first three levels), must get fulfilled in order to proceed to the next

level. Maslow (1943) also explained, if the level goes unfulfilled, then anxiety and tension will become present as a reaction of the need continuing to be unmet.

If physiological needs are not met, humans are incapable of functioning (1943). Maslow's (1943) second level consists of safety needs, and the third level is interpersonal needs of love and belongingness. The fourth level is esteem; and when this need goes unmet, helplessness and lack of locus of control sets in (1943). The last level is self-actualization (1943). When this level is achieved, an individual reaches their full potential (1943). A person needs to master the prior levels, in order to reach the level of self-actualization (1943). There is a possibility of students reaching a higher level need and then regressing down to a deficiency need (1943). The goal of Maslow's human motivation is to reach self-actualization (1943).

### **Personal/Academic Motivation**

It is important to consider how being economically disadvantaged may impact motivation. If a student is hungry, lacking love, or experiencing health or self-esteem issues, his or her priority will be to maintain those basic needs (Gobin, Teeroovengadam, Becceea, & Teeroovengadam, 2012). According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, those needs have to get met before catering to educational responsibilities (2012). Past research has shown that students' personal motivational type and determination will affect their levels of dedication and their approach to studying once they become a college student (Kember, Ho, & Kong, 2010; Prospero & Gupta, 2007; Young et al., 2011).

Motivation has been described as "the psychological feature that arouses an organism to action toward a desired goal...the reason for the action...that which gives

purpose and direction to behavior...[and]...one of the most important psychological concepts in education" (Horyna & Bonds, 2012, p. 708). According to Deci and Ryan (2008) and their Self-Determination Theory of Motivation, motivation is a behavior where a person is driven to be independent and possesses a sense of understanding of oneself, through autonomy, self-regulation, intrinsic drive, and extrinsic drive. On the other hand, it is important to understand the student who is underprepared academically and lacks: resources, family support, healthy coping skills, and the ability to manage his or her emotions; is a result of their economic status (Starling & Miller, 2011).

When this occurs, the probability of the student dropping out of college will increase (Starling & Miller, 2011). One reason for this may be amotivation.

Amotivation is defined as a student "who perceives their behaviors as being caused by forces out of their control; therefore, they do not perceive the link between their desired outcomes and their desired behaviors" (Prospero & Gupta, 2007, p. 966). Amotivated students are not able to reach their goals due to the inability to conceptualize their goals. Prospero and Gupta (2007) reported that when barriers arise, these students believe they are powerless. They may display a pattern of dropping courses, not completing homework assignments, withdrawing from a class, as opposed to reaching out for help from professors and tutors (2007). They lack a locus of control which would encourage them to begin the problem solving process as a way to avoid failing a class, losing financial aid, or dropping out of college altogether (2007). A barrier may seem like an easy problem to resolve for the average student, however, an amotivated student will perceive the barrier as a stressful situation. Maslow (1943) stated that, "while behavior is almost always motivated, it is always biologically, culturally, and situationally

determined” (p. 371). Moreover, Maslow suggested that individuals experience life living in poverty become complacent (1943). Their survival plan is solely based on meeting those needs in order to maintain their level of poverty (1943).

### **Economically Disadvantaged Students**

This population of students may share one or more similar traits: they are urban youth, have fewer academic resources, family problems, employed, may have dependent children, lower career ambitions, and lack of support needed to succeed in college (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). They tend to have non-academic deficiencies, lower self-esteem, reduced self-efficacy, anxiety about the college environment, and a lack of motivation (2011). An urban youth is defined as “a racial or ethnic minority adolescent whose families are financially impoverished or working class” (Medvide & Blustein, 2010). A first-generational student is defined as a student whose parents have never entered into higher education (2010). First generational students and urban youth with an economic hardship fall under the umbrella of an economically disadvantaged student (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011).

The New York State Department of Education (2013) deems a student as low income (economically disadvantaged), when the “family’s taxable income for the proceeding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount”. Research shows that students who fall into the above categories mentioned have non-academic barriers (personal), lack social supports and academic motivation to achieve college success (Young et al., 2011). Studies have concluded that social, economic, and the

academic attributes students bring to college are some of the contributing factors for college success (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

It is clear that both low economic status and low academic status are high risk factors for determining college success (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Nevertheless, Leese (2010) explored the "...lack of cultural capital, possibly leading to a disjunction between the home environment and that of the university resulting in feelings of isolation" (p. 241). Leese (2010) explained that cultural capital is connected to being economically disadvantaged, receiving access to minimal resources, lacking family support, and lacking motivation. Research studies on community colleges lack the knowledge on underlying reasons as to why a correlation exists between economic and environmental factors (Madyun, 2011). This limitation warranted an examination of home environment and personal barriers, which may impact a student's ability to succeed in college. Furthermore, it is important that there is a focus on poverty and how it may impact a student's motivation to achieve their academic goals.

A student whose developmental lifespan from birth to young adulthood consisted of growing up in poverty is the college student at the base level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If this were the case, then this student would need to proceed through three levels in order to reach the self-actualization level at the top of the pyramid (Gobin et al, 2012; Maslow, 1943). A student with an amotivated mindset, lacking career exploration, college readiness, family or social support, is academically and economically disadvantaged; will have difficulty moving up the pyramid to reach self-actualization (1943). They will remain stuck in the deficiency levels until those needs are met (Maslow, 1943). There seems to have been an underestimation of "how poor

relationships and low trust on the power of academic interventions and the motivation of individuals in the community” can affect a college student (Madyun, 2011).

If a student is born into poverty, his or her view of the world will be negatively altered (Hall, Smith & China, 2008). Exposure to community violence will have a negative effect on the student’s view of self in society. Feelings of being unsafe in the home or neighborhood manifest, while a sense of purpose and future may be diminished. In addition, feelings of powerlessness and helplessness begin to surface (Anakwezi & Zuberi, 2013). According to Erickson’s Developmental Theory, when a positive sense of self occurs developmentally from childhood to young adulthood, this type of distress may cause identity confusion (Santrock, 2008). It suggests a student’s lack of control over his or her stressful environment, where they are reared, may lead to the use of avoidant coping skills; as a result of the pressure from the families’ economic hardships (Sanchez, Lambert & Cooley-Strickland, 2013). These characteristics were associated with an unmotivated student mentioned earlier (Prospero & Gupta, 2007).

### **Unclear Purpose/Lack of career decision**

Research suggests there is a correlation between exposure to chronic stressors during growth development and lower career goals (Medvide & Blustein, 2010; Sanders-Phillips, 2003). Moreover, the stressors may dampen a student’s outlook on college, causing anxiety and frustration, due to a lack of understanding the college process (Hall, Smith, & Chia, 2008). It is common for students to experience anxiety during their transition to college as a result of venturing into unknown territory (Starling & Miller, 2011).

The trend was for students to enroll in college without a career decision or with an unrealistic career decision (Starling & Miller, 2011). Starling & Miller (2011) discussed high school seniors and the expectation for students to participate in some type of career planning and transition enrichments before moving on to higher education. The question remains as to whether or not the expectation were being met. Theorists Super and Marcia explained that high school seniors lacked career maturity, as a result of not experiencing crisis/exploration and commitment; this insufficiency still proves to be a concern of today (Marcia, 1966; Super, 1955; Starling & Miller, 2011). Suggestions were made that students should explore career choices and receive honest feedback from counselors, as to whether or not their career choice(s) are realistic or unrealistic (ASCA, 1985; Starling & Miller, 2011). Crystallization will then occur once a student has experienced service learning, internships, and cooperative extensions (Starling & Miller, 2011).

Starling and Miller (2011) studied 60 community college students with undeclared majors thinking patterns and found that there was a correlation between dysfunctional career thoughts and declaring a major using the Career Thoughts Inventory. Furthermore, the students who did not declare a major scored higher in the negative thinking category than those students who have declared a major (2011). In addition, the study suggested that counselors help students with coping skills as a buffer for the anxiety that may arise during their transition into college (2011). This study did not take into account that the home environment and family may have affected the student's decision-making process (2011).

Raisman's model (2008), hierarchy of student decision-making, suggested that the decision-making process used to select a college/major by students was parallel to

Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The levels that stimulate the decisions were described as basic issues, practical issues, and personal issues; these issues are driven by the student's primary concern and immediacy of their need (2008). In other words, if the student was worrying about whether or not they can afford college, which is a basic need, they would focus on that particular need and not move on to the next need until it was met (2008). The hierarchy of decision-making suggests that college personnel should focus on the student's hierarchy of needs, in order to best serve them, in other words, meet them where they are in life (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Raisman, 2008).

### **Differences in Social Economic Status**

It is important to pay attention to how economic status has an impact on education and academic motivation (Madyun, 2011; Young et al, 2011). Low social economic status has an impact on a student's ability to achieve college success (Young et al, 2011). It is not uncommon for students who are economically disadvantaged to receive fewer advanced courses, fewer resources, and minimal college preparation, compared to the students who are advantaged (Prospero & Gupta, 2011). Being underprepared academically will force students to enroll in remedial courses. Students entering college needing remedial courses are less likely to obtain a degree at a community college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

The educational level of parents was also a known predictor for determining a student's perseverance in college, therefore, if the student had parents who attended college; there is likelihood they would succeed as well (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Students who are advantaged are privileged with knowledge about colleges/universities and how to finance college. Students identified as economically

disadvantaged, may not have as many resources, as students who are advantaged (2010). They have to depend solely on their school counselor's information (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). In the Rochester City School District, an urban school district, counselors were reportedly carrying larger caseloads of students in comparison to one of the suburban school districts (New York State Department of Education, 2013). This may prove to be problematic for the Rochester City School District students if there are not enough counselors readily available to assist students with college preparation (2013). In 2013, 64% of the RCSD's senior class was comprised of students who were economically disadvantaged versus the 14% in the Brighton Central School District (2013). This supports the notion that there was still an achievement gap in regard to social inequality (2013). Racial stratification between urban and suburban schools has remained an issue for the last four decades, since Brown versus Board of Education case in 1954 (Noguero & Wing, 2006; Sadovik & Semel, 2010). These statistics showed the economic disparity and how it differed between the two districts.

Noguera and Wing (2006) told the story of Berkeley's high school, which voluntarily chose to integrate, busing economically disadvantaged, and urban youth to affluent suburban schools in 1968 (2006). The Berkeley high school research demonstrated that education is highly political, adding to the achievement gap between urban and suburban schools (2006). Furthermore, student experiences confirmed that economic, social, and cultural capital plays a role in student educational outcomes supporting the evidence that achievement gaps do exist (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Sadovnik & Semel, 2010). There are programs that exist today, called Federal TRIO

programs, which targets students who are economically disadvantaged, with hopes to bridge the achievement gap in higher education.

### **Advocacy Program**

**Educational Opportunity Program (EOP).** The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) provides access to economically disadvantaged students, allowing them an opportunity to attend college even though they are academically and economically disadvantaged (State University of New York, 2014). This program operates on 45 campuses across New York State (2014). This program provides students with pre-freshman services, tutoring and individual counseling (2014). Each participant is assigned a counselor who serves as a personal counselor, financial aid advisor, a life coach, mentor, teacher, parent figure, career coach etc. (2014). EOP counselors provide supports and services to the students depending on their need. Focusing on increasing participant's self-sufficiency and independence is the program's goal (2014).

This program was designed to meet students where they are developmentally, while providing them with the necessary supports and resources to assist the student (New York State Department of Education, 2013). If the students enter into college at a disadvantage, receiving advisement that follows EOP's model would be beneficial for that student and the college in its entirety (Guilliano & Sullivan, 2007).

**Learning Communities.** Students entering college with a lack of knowledge may be experiencing anxiety and frustration (Starling & Miller, 2011). If no concrete college readiness experience is present, then students may have difficulty navigating the

enrollment process (2011). Learning Communities could counteract this confusion. A learning community (LC) is a group of students who move through a sequence of courses together, sharing common experiences around their academics (Medvide & Blustein, 2010). Medvide and Blustein (2010) reported the key is to help LC students attain a deeper understanding of the coursework while simultaneously building relationships and learning to work together inside and outside of the classroom.

Students enrolled in a LC at a community college were 10-15% more persistent than students in traditional classrooms (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008). LC's are known for providing a safe learning environment, support, resources, an assigned advisor/counselor, and a level of comfort all while receiving academic instruction (2008). Enstrom and Tinto (2008) reported that students who participated in learning communities felt like they were a part of a community. They felt more comfortable expressing themselves due to familiarity with classmates, learned to trust each other, took risks, and looked at their LC as a safe place to learn (2008). In this way, LC's can meet the needs of students who are struggling with the deficiency needs from Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human development theory (2008).

There are many factors that shape the success of economically disadvantaged students. Past research focused on poverty, social inequality, lack of career decision, and motivation as determining factors of college success. It is vital to understand the whole student versus isolating them by their demographics. We must consider poverty and social inequality as a vicious cycle, that serves as a barrier for this population of students. A lack of academic preparation and college preparation will continue to remain a problem for the higher educational system, leading to low retention and

graduation rates.

A student considered amotivated, may be stuck in the deficiency needs area of the hierarchy of needs. In order to assist this student, there should be a focus on assisting the student through the levels; in other words, help the student climb the pyramid. Seeing an individual as a whole student is key. It is beneficial to help the student explore their sense of self and work on identifying a realistic career plan. In addition, providing the necessary support and resources will help meet the deficiency needs of students. Once the student's basic needs are met, the focus can shift to helping the student gain life, social, basic organization, and study skills. This plan of action may help improve a student's ability to achieve self-actualization and self-determination. According to Maslow, once a student reaches the level of self-actualization, "then and only then", can the student push forward, stimulating their motivation (Prospero & Gupta, 2007). This research investigated motivation and how it impacted college success for students who are economically disadvantaged. Students entering into their first year of college with an unclear purpose or goal are at a higher risk for dropping out of college.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to research how college success is affected by a student's motivation or lack thereof. Students who enter into college, without a clear purpose or career goal, may end up being unsuccessful (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008; Hall, Smith & Chia, 2008; Medvide & Blustein, 2010). This study delved deeper into the lives of students who are economically disadvantaged and explored the relationship between economic status, motivation, and college success. It is essential for college personnel to understand the past studies suggesting that being economically disadvantaged impacts a

student's thought pattern and human developmental needs; therefore, it is plausible to assume that living with disparity would have an impact on motivation as well, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Community colleges are two-year public institutions of higher education, serving a high portion of students who have limited opportunities for education beyond high school (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). The limited opportunities include: lack of academic preparedness, lack of financial support, lack of family support, and other "deficiencies" that students bring with them (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Starling & Miller, 2011; Enstrom & Tinto, 2008; Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Community colleges are faced with an issue of students enrolling into college unprepared to engage in college course work (Bailey, 2009). Moreover, studies have shown community college retention and graduation rates as being significantly low, especially for the economically disadvantaged students (Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). This research paper will focus on economically disadvantaged students as the target population in its entirety.

Guiliano & Sullivan reported that students are entering college with defeat already lingering in the back of their minds (2007). A lack of decisiveness and direction has been found as a contributing factor to stress and anxiety that first time college students (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Therefore, it is important for faculty and staff to meet these students where they are, in order to assist them with the completion of college level coursework (Goldrick-Rab, p 438, 2010).

In addition to being economically disadvantaged and underprepared, many low-income students have other traits in common: they are urban youth, first-generation college students, have fewer academic resources, family problems, employed, have

dependent children, lower career ambitions, and lack of support needed to succeed in college (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Enstrom (sic) & Tinto, 2008). They tend to have non-academic deficiencies, lower self-esteem, reduced self-efficacy, lack of motivation, and anxiety about the college environment (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Enstrom (sic) & Tinto, 2008). An urban youth is defined as “a racial or ethnic minority adolescent whose families are financially impoverished or working class” (Medvide & Blustein, 2010). While a first-generational student (will be referred to as fgs) is defined as a student whose parents have never entered into higher education (2010). First generation students and urban youth with an economic disparity, fall under the category of a low-income student (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011).

### **Method**

This study was designed to fulfill the requirements of the author’s thesis. The intent of this study was to assess the impact of motivation on college success. Furthermore, it will explore the relationship between motivation, economic status, and college success for students with an economic disadvantage.

The author interned at a publicly funded, two-year North Eastern Community College. This community college is located in the third largest city in its state, serving a diverse population of students where the average age is 21 (Monroe Community College, 2014). In 2013, the college accepted 40% of the areas local high school students. In 2010, the graduation rate was 21.9 percent (Monroe Community College, 2013). The author interned in a program that is housed under the Student Services Division. This program supports students with a historical academic and economic disadvantage. The author was interested in assessing whether or not students received help with their pre-college

process and if having a career goal affected the student's motivation, which in turn, may affect their college success.

### **Participants**

The convenient sample included six participants. The interviewees included four women and two men ages 18 and 19 years, mean age = 18.33 years. Ethnicities of the participants included Sudanese, Black (2), Haitian, Puerto Rican, and Vietnamese. The participants were selected from a caseload of first year college students.

### **Instrument**

The researcher designed an interview guide consisting of a genogram and 15 questions as a tool for data collection. The participants recorded their families' educational level: parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family members. Next, they were asked to record each family member's occupation. Then participants engaged in a question and answer section surrounding motivation, college preparation, and career guidance.

### **Procedure**

The author created a flyer that was distributed to the first year students in the program by email correspondence. The flyer explained the purpose of the study, requirements, and expectations. The participants were asked to reply to the email and/or contact the author and set up an interview appointment if interested in volunteering to participate in the study.

An interview guide was developed and utilized for each interview. The author interviewed each participant individually for the duration of 45-60 minutes. All

interviews were conducted in the program's counselor's office by the primary researcher. The researcher discussed the purpose of the study, explained informed consent, and sought permissions from each participant to tape interviews in the beginning of each interview. As a result of the genogram and the question and answer section, the discussion during the interview provided the researcher with an opportunity to collect qualitative data from the participant's perspectives. Moreover, the interview allowed the participants to share their insight on why they enrolled in college, their pre-college experience, and their experience with career exploration or lack thereof. At the end of each interview, the participant was reminded about informed consent. Finally, the data was analyzed, transcribed, coded, and reported for the purposes of this study. The purpose of this study was to gather information relating to the participant's knowledge and beliefs surrounding motivation and what propelled them to enroll in college.

### **Interview Question guide**

1. Tell me about your decision to attend college?
2. Tell me about your experience with the college application process?
3. What was your college preparation like?
4. In what ways did you experience career guidance?
5. Tell me about your family work/educational history? (views of not working/education)?
6. Tell me about your career interest(s)?
7. If you could select any job in the world, what would it be? Why?
8. Now that you are enrolled in college, what helps you to stay and continue your education?

9. What factors in your life may contribute to you possibly stopping out of college? Why?
10. Tell me about your motivation?

Debriefing Questions:

1. What was it like for you talking to me about this?
2. What did you think this program could help you with?
  - a. What was your experience in receiving help?
3. In what ways can the program help you in the future?
4. How helpful is this program with your career planning?
5. Unknown follow-up question if necessary

### Results

The researcher investigated how motivation, college preparation, career guidance, and having an economic disadvantage may impact college success. Tapes were transcribed and coded for a frequency of themes and minimized to seven themes. The seven themes the data analysis identified were placed in two categories: five general themes and two typical themes (see Table 1.1 for summary). Insights from the interviews were shared in support of the themes.

**Table 1.1.** Summary of Case Numbers Per Case

Themes	Total cases
General themes	
Broken lineage	6
Receiving help from someone other than a high school counselor (college application process, college preparation, career guidance)	6
Identification of a career goal/interest	6
Family beliefs and value of education	6
Taking one semester or more off from college due to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Safety	6

## Typical Themes

Biological Parents are blue-collar workers	5
Extrinsic motivation	5

**General themes**

**Broken lineage.** Participants were asked to share their biological families' level of education and occupation. Five out of six participants had difficulty explaining their paternal grandparent's educational level and career history. P5 was able to list her father and paternal grandparent's education and occupation; however, they were not a part of her life. P5: "I just met my paternal grandfather in 2008 at my sister's graduation and he told us about his job and how he was a chef..." Two participants were separated from their family when migrating to the United States; as a result, they lacked knowledge of their familial education and career history. P2: "No not much. Umm, when I was 10 months and five days, I came over to the US and I didn't really touch base and so I revisited [Vietnam]. We only talked for brief moment, you know, shared our thoughts and opinions about things. They are way safe staying school and don't drop out." Another participant stated, P3: "I don't know what my dad is doing. Maybe he graduated. No, I don't know my grandparents." One participant has never met their father or paternal grandparents. P1: "I don't know anything about my dad family" One participant's father has not been a part of her life, however, she knows about him. She referred to her father and his family as bums during her interview. P6: "I don't know he [dad] do construction, he is a roofer he works for local 22. He got his degree in jail, jailbird. I don't know my grandparents real names, is it okay if I write their nicknames. I know my grandmother but I don't know my grandfather he was born in Florida. I know

he is a construction worker though. I don't know where." It was the opposite for this participant, she knew her father but her mother resides in Haiti. The participant knows her maternal grandparents but does not know her paternal grandparents. P4: "Um for my dad's side, I don't know everything about them but I can try. My dad left my mom pregnant, so basically his family and my mom they not cool like that. My dad don't know his dad, so I don't know his name."

**Lack of pre-college process assistance from high school counselors.** Every participant mentioned receiving help with the pre-college process from someone other than his or her high school counselor. Having the support of a high school counselor, which is expected throughout the pre-college transition, was absent. Two of the participants were able to go their mother for help with the pre-college process. One participant shared, P1: "My mom and the counselor from admissions and my friend help. The counselor came to my school from the college." The other participant had her mother's help specifically with completing her college applications, P6: "My mom, she had conversations with me [about college]. I did not do anything my mom did. Well, I tried the Brockport one [college application] but I did not finish, it was pretty difficult, yeah." One participant had to complete the pre-college process on her own. She explained that the college application process was difficult. P5: "It [college applications] was not simple and I did not like the fact I had to do it on my own. My mother helped my sister but she has this thing where she expects more from me, so I did it myself..." Another example of an individual figuring out his or her own path is shown here. P3: "There was a room at the school to help you with resumes. I didn't talk about it [career interest] with anyone; I just looked at the military and emergency services like fire

fighters and medical technician. I kind of like building things and fixing things and when I took an automotive course at high school it gave me a perspective view on my career.” There were two examples of that included community outreach. The college visited the high school of one of the participants, P4: “It was easy because they [college] come to my school and they tell who ever want to come to my school, they just pass it [application] out and so it was somebody to help me do the application so I didn’t have to go online and do it.” Participating in a community outreach program helped this participant with their pre-college process. P2: “My sister introduced me to one of the great programs for RCSD students called Upward Bound that is linked with the U of R. There was a lot of counselors and mentors that talked about college and bring students that like to achieve greatness.”

**Identification of a career goal/interest.** Every participant shared a career goal. The careers mentioned consisted of medical assistant, automotive tech, business/engineer, prenatal nurse, registered nurse, and motivational speaker. Of the six participants, two were following their parent’s advice for their career choice. P1: “I know she [mom] went to school so and she went for it [medical assistant] and I know she went for this, so that’s how I want to do it.” P6 followed her mother’s advice until she realized it was not what she desired to be. P6: “...I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to be a prenatal nurse because I like babies. My mom and stepmother talked to me about it. But I don’t want to be a nurse. They made it sound real good but in reality I hate babies. No hate is a strong word, I dislike babies. I was helping a couple of people with their issues and problems. A lot of my friends come to me for stuff so I decided I’m going to help children/adolescents between 13-18 with depression and mental disabilities.” The

last four insights display career decisions resulting from personal experiences with community outreach programs which they participated in and received career guidance.

P2: “Umm I want to be an entrepreneur. Kinda want to be in a partnership with another company, basically find a product that I would like to create and have CO’s and other groupings to help me create it. So it will kinda be like a partnership.” Another

participant shares what she desires to do, P5: “Speaking, motivational speaker, public speaking along those lines. As you see I love to talk and I want to make a difference.”

Personal preference is shown when this participant shared the type of person they wanted

to be, P3: “Just the kind of person that I am making stuff with my hands building stuff and fixing stuff. So I took construction and high school and some auto classes and so I decided that I wanted to go to college to be automotive tech.” While this participant

selected her career due to wanting to help her country. P4: “Basically, I want to go to college because I want to get a degree in nursing so I can go [back] to Haiti to help. I’m trying to get my master’s but for now I will go for my bachelors.”

**Family beliefs and values** of education make up the last general theme. The value of education surfaced in every participant’s interview. Out of six participants, four have parents who are blue-collar workers; who instilled the value of education. These parents support the participants and remind them to stay in college. Sending the message that obtaining a degree is important for their future is shown in these two insights. P1: “They say to continue to study and get a career. You can pick whichever career you want so as long as you go to school. My mom always tell me they career is good and try hard then graduate with honor roll but I don’t know about that.” Also, these parents push the participants to select careers they enjoy. P5: “I’ve always been told don’t do nothing just

to get paid make sure whatever you're doing you're enjoying. Don't do something just for check or you will end up losing a job or quitting or won't work out. My mother told me whatever you do don't do what I did do not put your life on hold. She wants us to pursue our dreams because family always got in the way of her following her dream." Utilizing their life story, as a reason why P2 needs to aim higher by gaining an education is the message these parents were sending. P2: "They believe education actually helps you along the way and at least get a job. They are like don't drop out of school and then working like I [parents] do and stressing out just to pay simple bills, that others can pay out of their paycheck and have left over cash and save money." These two participants received the message of getting a "good" education indirectly from their parent(s) migrating to the United States to get a better education. P3: "I think my mom always wants the best for us so, so when we were in Africa she wanted to get away and go to a different country that we came here to the United States because they have better educational program and she wanted us to go to school and be successful." P4: "On my mom's side there is 40 something kids and it's only five of us going to college. The opportunity to go to school here [US] is a big thing for me. My family always calling to say they're proud of me they keep me going, it makes me feel so good." This participant's mother set a standard that obtaining a college education is essential. P6: "There are only three ambitious people in my family, that's how I feel anyways. Me, my mom, and my younger sibling we are all role models. My mom said I needed to go to college."

**Hierarchy of Human needs, safety.** Each participant shared they would take one semester or more off for a reason that aligns with the safety and security level of

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. One participant shared that she would only take one semester or more off from college as a result of her personal health. P5 has critical health issue that affects her lifestyle daily. P5: "My health. Some days I'm so sore and just don't want to move and allowing my past to dictate how I'm feeling today." Taking one or more semesters off due to struggling with rigorous coursework is what this participant describes in her statement. P1: "The classes I try to take every day, it's hard. I try to do better so, the only thing that will make me stop is it gets too tough. Math is really difficult and division, eww." Taking one semester or more off from college due to lack of finances was a factor for two of the six participants when asked what would make them drop out of college. P3: "Umm, I don't know. I guess because the only reason I would drop out of college is because something happened in my life, making it hard for me to go to school and I guess I will stop for a couple years and then I continue doing go to school again because it's the whole reason my mother brought us to United States, so it will be like what was the point for her coming. There was something that will make it harder to go to school by not having a car or financially can't go to school or timing because of work. You can't attend school without paying for tuition, for books and pens or just to get your degree." P4: "I would say independent. Why? Because umm, I have to work for me to pay my rent and take care of myself and work more, which will help me for my bills and stuff. That's what." P2 and P5 shared that a traumatic experience involving parents was the only reason they would take one or more semesters off in college. P2: "Okay, umm. Maybe, if my parents were to like pass away and um it just me and my sister uh if we are financially struggling then I will have no choice. Uhh then again, I think about it because financially is covering for me but it's not just the financial

part, is not just financial part I am worried about. I know school is paid but why having a house and paying for, I would have to move out into an apartment and settle somewhere else. You know emotionally that is just a lot of stress and on top of that, just living day by day, just the emotional stress that happens cause of death it, it hurts.” P5: “I don’t think anything will make me just completely stop cause I already lost one person I was doing everything for. My grandfather. Um if something happened to my parents that’s the only thing I could see. Something drastic like a tragedy but anything else, no.”

### **Typical Themes**

**Both biological parents are blue-collar workers.** Blue-collar workers earn an hourly wage and perform manual labor or are highly skilled workers (Chron, 2014). The level of education has proven to be a determining factor in a participant’s college success. Furthermore, four out of six participants are first-generation students. Five out of six participants discussed their parents’ careers including: maintenance, medical assistant, anesthesia tech, sells food goods, packaging, party rental set up, developmental aid, construction worker (degree in jail), and nurse’s aid. Two out of six participants have one parent with an associate degree. P5: “My mother is a developmental aid so she works for Finger Lakes. My dad is an anesthesia tech.” P1: “She work in um [does the finger movement]. She graduated high school in PR. [Puerto Rico]. She a medical assistant. He umm, they are like the people that go around the apartments when something is wrong [maintenance].” Two of the participants are products of parents who dropped out of high school. P2: “My mom dropped out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and my dad did too. My mother works for flower city doing packaging. My father is unemployed right now but he used to do packaging, too, for Birdseye.” P4: “My mom she stopped in the ninth grade and my dad

stop in the seventh grade. My mom sells food like groceries and stuff like that [in Haiti]. My dad works at Nolan's Party Rental where they do tables."

One participant's parents are unemployed. P3: "I'm not sure, she doesn't work. Yeah she doesn't work now but it was in a department store she did stock shelves and things. He did military. He doesn't work now." P3's family migrated here from Sudan.

**Extrinsic motivation.** Five out of six participants displayed extrinsic motivation when sharing their insights on what drives them to stay in college. Of the six participants, two participants had difficulty defining motivation when asked for the definition. P1: "I don't know." However, when the author asked what is motivation? But, later in the interview the participant stated, "My mom is my motivation." P3 answers the question; with the response I do not know at first but explains extrinsic motivation when asked what motivates him. P3: "Well I don't know what motivation means. I say to get up in the morning and do something instead of lying in bed. But my motivation is my education, my mom. And basically, that's my whole motivation to get through what I am doing right now. It's something that is valuable that you go to great lengths to do. My mom wanted to get away and go to a different country then we came here to the US because they have better educational program and she wanted us to go to school and be successful." P2 and P5 share that their family members are their motivation. P2: "My family counts on me. Motivation is different; it just comes out, that little monster. It just takes it right out and uses it to implement the action you know." P5: "My little brother that's my motivation. I want to be sure people are good, that's kind of my energy. I am motivated by helping people. By making a difference. Knowing that something that I said or something I did made a difference in someone's life. Everyone deserves it, even

the worst person in the world.” P6 uses her paying for college as motivation to succeed.

P6: “Well, now I’m motivated. I am happy about my career field now that I chose. I think that keeps me pushing and I pay for college, half of my tuition now so that keeps me pushing.”

### **Discussion**

The six participants shared insights about their experiences with the pre-college process providing background information, which may help community colleges address the needs of students who are underprepared and more than likely inadequately prepared (Enstrom & Tinto, 2008; Starling & Miller, 2011). Receiving help from someone other than a high school counselor in the areas of the college application process, college preparation, and career guidance was the norm for these participants. Of the six participants, four participants received help from community outreach programs while the other two participants received no assistance at all. The expectation that high schools are providing students with career planning and enrichments preparing students for the transition to higher education are definitely not being met, according to the experiences of these six participants. Consequently, the participants will lack career maturity, which may have an impact on their college success (Super, 1955).

Research shows it is common for economically disadvantaged students to enter into college without declaring a major or a career goal (Startling & Miller, 2011). However, the findings proved otherwise. Each participant enrolled into college with a career goal, even though they lacked the career exploration experience while in high school. Moreover, despite the lack of college preparation in high school, the students enrolled into community college ready to learn and work towards obtaining a degree.

They were ready to learn and this yearning for education can continue with the proper supports. The participants shared their only reasons that would make them stop out of college. The reasons included a traumatic experience involving their parents, the inability to pay tuition, having to take care of themselves or their family, health issues and only one student stated if the coursework became too tough. These insights expressed determination, not lack of motivation as studies predict. The participants wanted to succeed in college and only a disruption of their safety needs will stop them.

One participant mentioned struggling with the course work as her reason. In her predicament, once faced with the rigorous coursework, lack of study skills, and the possibility of failing a course, her motivation may be impacted by her inability to handle the coursework. She may begin to display amotivation type characteristics. The best practice would be to catch students in their first semester while they are determined, in order to work on their motivation to prevent this from happening.

Research shows that a parent's educational level is a predictor for a student's ability to succeed in college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). What does this say about the six participants whose parents' are blue-collar workers? Of six participants, one had a parent who obtained an associates degree. Research predicts that the probability of these six participants' succeeding in college is low. If parents aren't helping and schools aren't then who is? Parental support can only go so far if they have not experienced college level coursework. Of the six participants, 5 of the students are children of parents who are blue-collar workers with no college education. One participant's parents are both unemployed and dropped out of high school. In this case, this student is left to figure out how to navigate the pre-college process on their own,

unless they are a part of a community program or a teacher and/or an administrator really invests time to prepare them. As a student at a vocational high school, he was able to experience two career fields through his high school courses and was able to participate in a neighborhood program for Emergency Medical Technicians. When this participant started his support program last semester, his performance in his courses was below average. Once he was approved to start taking courses in his program of choice, automotive technology, he started completing his coursework and attending his support program appointments. Although it is possible that other variables may have affected this outcome, it is clear there was a change in this student's motivation once he was accepted in to his academic program of choice. When another participant enrolled in college, she selected a program that her mother wanted her to go into. She scored below average her first year at her community college. Once she changed her program to what she desired to do, her response was "well, now, I'm motivated. I am happy about my career field now that I chose.

Of the six participants, only one student displayed intrinsic motivation. Although the participant lacks the understanding of what it means to have intrinsic motivation, the participant displays it in their response. "Nothing pushes me but I know it's good for me later in life because I do not have no one here to keep me going to school...I just decide to get up in the morning to come the school...I don't have a mom or a dad to tell me you have to get up and go to school. I do not have that. I keep myself pushing." Out of the six participants, she has reached self-actualization and has a higher success rate in her courses compared to the other participants.

### **Limitations**

This study was conducted at a northeastern community college in the United States. A convenience sample was used for this study, which does not represent the majority of the community college population. The participants volunteered to partake in the interview and were familiar with the researcher. The participants were also selected from the researcher's caseload of students as a result of having majority of the first year students. Language barrier proved to be an issue for two of the participants. One participant responded in Spanish to several of her answers, as a result of not being able to define the words in English. The other participant requested clarification for several of the questions.

### **Future Research**

Random sampling and utilizing a larger body of students for the study will increase generalizability. Each participant enrolled into his or her first semester of community college with a career goal. It would be beneficial to research the academic performance of the six participants to gauge whether or not having a career goal impacted their motivation to satisfactory academic progress. Future research should examine amotivation in order to gain a better understanding of the concept. Furthermore, delving deeper into the meaning of motivation by comparing the participants who display extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic motivation would be beneficial for tracking achievement of long-term goals. A longitudinal study would be necessary in order to track degree attainment as well. Investigating the student's feelings toward self and their academic performance will be beneficial along with obtaining an evaluation of their course work from their professors.

Research suggests that the underlying reasons for a student's unpreparedness and lack of motivation is a result of being economically disadvantaged (Young et al., 2011). If this is the case, we must begin to provide students with the tools necessary to survive in college. Exploring the relationship between economic status, motivation, and college success is necessary in order to understand the student population that community colleges serve. The author recommends a mandated college preparation course in the first semester that focuses on the skills necessary to succeed in college. Topics such as: learning the fundamentals of studying, reading comprehension, organization skills, managing self and time, differences between college versus high school, decision making skills, critical thinking, classroom etiquette and navigating the college catalog are topics that should receive adequate attention. The ideal is to bridge the gap for those students who are lacking the proper pre-college preparation in their high schools and support from home, during their transition into college. Allowing students to have an opportunity to explore their purpose, values, and different career options through interactive activities is another way to help with increasing motivation. Furthermore, holding students accountable and having high expectations in regard to academic coursework will help students become accustomed to college-level course work.

It is essential for college personnel to understand the whole student in order to make a substantial difference. Making sure each student has a college advisor or specific office for assistance is key. One on one meetings allowed the staff and personnel to connect with students on a more personal level. Basically, following the advocacy program model. Studies show that being economically disadvantaged impacts a student's thought pattern and human developmental needs. When thinking about the hierarchy of

needs, implementing more learning communities may help fulfill the student's need to belong, increase trust, improve self-esteem, and encourage self-actualization.

It is important to remember that if a student's basic needs are not met, it may be hard for them to achieve self-actualization, which will impact academic success. Their motivation will solely be focused on survival and not on education. When devising plans to attend to this population's needs as students, we need to keep this in mind and meet them where they are, in order to truly help and retain them.

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