

Lived Experiences of a Successful Completion of a Bachelor's Degree: Views of Low-Income Graduates

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Abstract — There are extremely limited numbers of students from the lowest economic class graduating from our nation's institutions of higher education. The challenge to institutions of higher education is how to improve access, support, and successful completion of higher education for students experiencing the most extreme poverty barriers. Interviews and written reflections with a representative group of 10 people who grew up in poverty coming from Bato, Toril, Davao City were the main source of data. The interviews were open-ended and designed to reveal the participants' subjective experience of completing a college degree. The study results provided: a description of the poverty-related conditions, an overview of the early educational experiences of the participants, an overview of perceived challenges and barriers to higher education and a discussion of success factors. The findings from this study would suggest five areas for educational improvement: (a) development of a campus climate sensitive to social class and poverty issues; (b) implementation of faculty, staff, and student social-class sensitivity training programs combined with curricular reform; (c) facilitation of connections to informal mentors; (d) articulation of connections between obtaining a college degree and earning a higher income; and an (e) exploration of expanding college partnerships with social service agencies that are geared to helping people in poverty.

Keywords — *Lived experiences, low-income students, completion, college degree, challenges, concerns, lessons, insights*

I. Introduction

Many educators identified five barriers to completing higher education. The barriers were race, gender, geography, religion, and poverty. Although all these barriers continue to exist, research indicates that there has been some progress in diminishing the barriers of race, gender, geography, religion.

With improved transportation systems, increasing numbers of colleges and universities, and distance learning, geography as a barrier has declined and is close to being erased. Religion as a barrier to higher education has also declined to the point of no longer being studied as a barrier. Coed colleges have opened their doors to both sexes and racial discrimination is started to be frowned.

The one barrier that has not been partially overcome is the poverty barrier. In fact, the trend appears to be in the opposite direction. Students who have experienced poverty are eight times less likely to graduate from college than students from the rest of the population. The likelihood of graduating from college is reduced even more when students from the lowest income group are compared with students from the highest income group.

Few strategies for overcoming the barriers that poverty poses to higher education have been reported. If the goal is to increase the college graduation rates of those in poverty, a social-class perspective must be the framework for studying barriers to higher education. The social class perspective is the primary focus of this study. This focus examines how students growing up in poverty--regardless of race or sex--were able to achieve a bachelor's degree.

The researcher was persuaded to embark on this research because of the recurrent similar content of the reflection papers that were submitted by the students during the online class.

One of the requirements of the course is to submit meaningful reflections regarding a specific topic. In this regard, I gave my students the task of writing a reflection regarding their most unforgettable faith experience in life. The experience may be a situation wherein they felt pressured or challenged about any aspects of their life. It was not surprising that most of them pointed out COVID-19 pandemic as one of the common challenges that they have experienced with the big adjustment of totally shifting from face-to-face classes to online setup. However, what was more striking, was that many of these students highlighted on their reflection papers the persistence to complete their college degree despite financial problems.

This has opened the eyes of the researcher that junior and senior high school students have persistently encountered financial problems in their studies. Getting the stories or narratives of these students are easy, yet the researcher decided to get the data from those who have finished their studies despite their low-income status in life. Graduates who still lived in the locality, and those who went home for the weekend were interviewed for the study. Questions like, "what were their experiences?", "what challenges have they encountered?" and "what could these graduates share with other students in their persistence to complete their college degree or education?" were asked of these graduates.

The researcher also took note of the fact that there is little existing literature on the graduates from the field of low-income group. The study will hopefully provide additional literature on the journey of low-income students who determined to finish their college education despite financial challenges.

This study focuses on students enrolled in college who have experienced underclass poverty or problems when it comes to financial situations. It is not focused on members of the working class who occasionally experience poverty. The intent is to examine from the students' perspectives, the factors which enable or discourage them in the completion of their bachelor's

degrees. The collection of the data was through interviews, the researcher deciding that the study would be qualitative in approach.

The 1987 Philippine Constitution declares that education, particularly basic education, is a right of every Filipino. On this basis, government education policies and programs have been primarily geared toward providing access to education for all. The Philippines is committed to the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) and the second goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG)— to achieve universal primary education by 2015.

Challenges, Issues or Concerns Encountered by Low-Income College Students

While time spent at college is a fond memory and a happy experience for most, student life is not without its rough patches. Everyone's situation is unique, but there are a few problems that almost all low-income college students deal with at least once during their time at school.

Time Management. College is academically challenging. For many, college courses require much more effort than high school classes did. Unlike most high schools, colleges often pack two years of content into one year. Many students take a full 15-credit semester, while others try to cram in up to 18 or even 21 credits. At times, it seems impossible to stay on top of it all.

Know your limits. If you can't handle 18 credits in one semester, it is worth it in the long run to slow down and take only 15. While the purpose of a college education is to learn as much as you can, that doesn't mean studying all the time. It is important to schedule time for fun and to take breaks to keep your mind fresh and clear. Schedule your study time and make time for breaks. Also, know your limits. If you are taking too many credits, take fewer next term.

Debt. Tuition costs are rising at alarmingly high rates. Add to that the cost of housing, meals, supplies, transportation, and textbooks, and you have a recipe for unmanageable debt. Most financial advisors recommend borrowing no more than one expects to earn their first year out of college. However, soaring tuition costs make this rule difficult to follow. High School graduates found that nearly 50 percent of students didn't plan on attending a four-year school, with cost being a big reason. Additionally, students are increasingly dropping out of college because they cannot afford the expense. Others are forced to juggle full academic schedules with full-time jobs to make ends meet. Graduating debt-free is almost unheard of.

Student loans are relatively easy to get. Many students, however, don't know how repayment works and how many years they may spend paying off their loans. This lack of understanding only adds to the stress. An important part of your education is educating yourself about the structure of the loans you take on to pay for that education. Sit down with a financial advisor to get a firm grasp on the debt you're taking on.

Consider an on-campus job. Working on-campus will cut out potential transportation expenses and help you stay more focused academically. If you had a job in high school and are

going to college locally, see if you can continue working while in school. If you are going away to school, inquire about transferring to a job location near your school. In addition, create a budget for shopping trips and eating out and stick to it.

Spreading Yourself Too Thin. To afford the high price of college tuition, many students must get jobs. Juggling a job, 15 to 18 credits, relationships, and extracurricular activities is extremely difficult. Many students try to cram all of these activities into one day and do not get enough sleep. Without proper rest, students are vulnerable to physical and mental health problems.

Decide what is important. Prioritize and schedule events, games, meetings, social events, and studies accordingly. Also, be aware of your options when getting a job. Universities often offer jobs that fit into a student's schedule. Homesickness is a common and normal challenge for college students, especially those who are far from home and in their first year of school.

Homesickness. Whether they admit it or not, most students will at one point get homesick, especially those who attend a school that is more than three hours away from home. Freshmen suffer more, as it is presumably their first year away from home.

If you live within three or four hours from home (a comfortable day's drive), plan to visit home once every month or two. Ask friends and family to email, call, and send care packages. These steps should greatly assist in reducing feelings of homesickness. Many campuses have support groups for students. Talking to others who are having similar experiences can help. You may even form friendships with some of the people you meet there. Remember that the other students you come into contact with every day may be feeling the same things you are, and you can help each other.

Depression. Every problem on this list can raise a student's stress level and contribute to emotional lows. Some find temporary relief in partying which, in excess and in the long run, may contribute to depression.

If stress and depression are an issue, seek professional support. Many campuses have free counseling programs for students. Counselors are trained to listen and help students get back on track. Stress and depression are common problems faced by college students.

Sickness/Health Conditions. Heightened stress, poor self-care, and lack of sleep can cause health problems. Living in close quarters also poses health risks and can increase a student's chances of contracting illnesses.

Eat healthy, balanced meals. Get a good night's rest as well. Wash your hands often. If an illness does develop, visit your campus clinic.

Social Problems. If you're lucky, you'll make many new friends. Establishing connections and spending time with classmates and roommates is important for building community. However,

spending too much time together can be challenging, and conflicts can arise. Social relations can become a distraction.

Take some time out for yourself. If possible, get away from campus for a break and visit a coffee shop or a mall, take a walk in a neighborhood, or visit a local park. Prioritize time for studying and taking care of yourself. If conflicts do arise and you need help, get your RA or another friend involved.

Partying. Partying is not a problem. Parties can be a great way for students to blow off steam. However, sometimes partying can cause problems. Drugs and alcohol can lead to poor choices, risky behavior, health risks, and even potentially deadly situations. Having sex without sober consent and without taking the necessary precautions can be traumatic, dangerous, and even criminal.

While parties are important, enjoy them in a responsible and legal way so you don't create problems for yourself or others. Know your limits. Ask for a ride home if you've been drinking. Keep track of your friends and make sure they're being safe, too. Make sure to eat and drink enough water when consuming alcohol. Carry a condom. Understand what it means to have "affirmative consent." While parties can be a great way to blow off steam, partying can also become a major problem in college.

Relationships. Relationships are good, but they can be overwhelming. Sometimes they take a lot of time and can begin to encroach on your education. There are times in every relationship when a couple will have a disagreement which can distract them from schoolwork and add to stress levels. Break-ups can drive some students even further into depression.

Relationship advice is hard to give since the solution varies on a case-by-case basis. Establish a clear communication of your needs and expectations from the outset. If you do break up, consult with a school counselor to work through the experience.

Choosing a Major. There is a lot of pressure to choose a major. It is easy to think that your major will determine your future career and how much money you will make, which means that making the right decision now feels hugely important (and stressful).

College majors are important, but they do not chisel your future career or wages into stone. Choose something that you like. If you are unsure about what major to choose, choose something broad and versatile, such as communications. Many students who get their undergraduate degrees in one field progress to get a master's degree in a different area. Worrying too much about your major is simply not worth it. Focus instead on gaining knowledge and life skills.

These are just 10 of the major challenges that students face. In the end, is it worth facing these problems and struggles? If you ask students, eight out of ten will say it is. While college can stress you to the limit, the good times and outcomes will outweigh the bad.

This study uses the proposition of Mortenson that “students experiencing poverty bring challenges to institutions of higher education.” The challenge includes a recognition that social-class experiences influence students' abilities to be successful (Mortenson, 1995). Class theory demands a contextual examination which takes the view that economic and social factors influence behavior and conflict. Social classes are not separated by strict dividing lines. Rather, a "class" can be labeled such according to the groups, economic or status designation. "Class" is an ambiguous term which has been used loosely. Class is a phenomenon which is distinct from caste. In societies where caste systems prevail, a person is born into a particular caste and, most often, will remain for their lifetime. An individual's place in life is well defined and clear from birth (Kerbo, 1991). However, in other parts of the world, it is assumed that a person can move in and out of different classes based on their own efforts. But the reality of social class is that the class position of an individual seldom changes. Some of the reasons for this immutability are due to past experiences, opportunities, and current expressions of inequality in social power and advantage (Goldthorpe, 1987).

The ambiguity of the term and its defining lines serve to obscure the "hidden injuries of class" as described by Sennett and Cobb (1973). Such injuries include limited opportunity and choice, lack of respect, and few opportunities for self-development. The most common understanding of class is that "class pertains to hierarchical position in the social order and differential distribution of prestige based on that position" (Coser & Rosenberg, 1969). Kerbo (1991) asserted that class divisions can be understood best based on the following three criteria: (a) a person's position in the occupational structure, (b) a person's position in authority structures, and (c) a person's ownership of property. These three criteria intersect to create class divisions which are distinct.

Karl Marx (Coser & Rosenberg, 1969) used the following definition to explain class: In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interest and their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile relationships to the latter, they form a class. Marx argued that class could be defined in terms of what a person does, and what they are likely to do. In Marx's view, class related directly to ownership and the means of production.

Perhaps the most profound and lasting understanding of the complexities of class status came from the writings of Max Weber. To some extent, Weber (1946) agreed with Marx that class could be defined in exclusively economic or market terms. Weber argued that property and lack of property are the two basic categories of all class situations. But within these two categories, further distinctions exist. There are different kinds of property owners such as owners of domestic buildings, mines, and capital goods. Weber suggested that the way property is distributed will shape life chances. People with little or no property receive little or no opportunity.

In addition to the distinction among types of property owners, Weber (cited in Coser & Rosenberg, 1969) included in his explanations descriptions of class "status" and power relations.

Power and/or status were generally closely related to class. Status included everything associated with what Weber called societal honor. Societal honor required people to live a specific style of life. If they were not living in the style expected, they were looked upon as deficient. Weber suggested that class could be determined by how much a person had, and how much she or he was likely to get life chances. Weber felt that a person's life chances were not absolute givens, but a result of: (a) "the given distribution of property" and (b) "the structure of the concrete economic order." Weber believed that in a capitalistic society, if a person were born into a lower class, their class status would serve as an iron cage, preventing them from gaining access to most of the opportunities for upward mobility.

Weber (as cited in Coser & Rosenberg, 1969) explained that status groups (classes) are phenomena resulting from the distribution of power within a community. Weber identified numerous forms of power in social structures, including not only legitimate power or authority but also power derived from tradition, habit or custom, and fear of repression. Weber believed a person's power or lack thereof would affect their social status. Weber suggested that a status group could be recognized when "a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances." Each status group can expect a specific style of life. Individual expectations reflect the expectations of those with whom the individual identifies and interacts with. Because people who are poor generally interact with others who are poor, expectations remain consistent. People are set apart by where they live and their lifestyles (e.g., their house, food, clothes, car, jewelry, music, etc.).

London (1992), in his discussions of first-generation college students, reflected on the "culture" shock experienced as lower-class students meet middle- (and sometimes upper-) class students. They listen to different music, eat different foods, read different materials, relate to others differently, think differently, have different expectations, different relationships to power, different experiences, and so on. The respective statuses or class norms are worlds apart.

Weber (1946) emphasized the importance of focusing on social class to explore life chances, opportunities for income, and intergenerational social mobility. He believed that it was necessary to examine the social structure in which people live to fully understand a person's life chances. Weber also believed that people in certain classes were privileged through education and that those who did not receive an education had trouble in competing in the labor market. The philosophical and theoretical perspectives of Weber's social-class theory provide a foundation for an account of students' experiences which emphasizes inequalities, power, and advantage. This framework supports the subject of this study. The focus is on examining barriers faced by those born into poverty and how they were able to overcome those barriers to achieve a bachelor's degree despite their class position.

Although Weber's theory addressed some of the complexities of poverty, no one theoretical framework can completely describe the life experiences of those living in poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1994). People experiencing underclass poverty have different backgrounds, experiences,

and life chances than those from other social-class backgrounds and often from each other (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992). At the same time, shared class background also creates some similar experiences (Levine Sc Nidiffer, 1996). Focusing on the similarities of a particular class can illuminate the daily realities faced by members of that class. The nature of this research inquiry that strives to illuminate the ways in which barriers of generational poverty are overcome to achieve a bachelor's degree can best be approached by using a synthesis of Weber's social-class theory (1946) and ideas from social capital theories, social psychological, and cultural theoretical frameworks. Weberian social-class theory was used as the guiding framework to examine student barriers to bachelor's degrees and the strategies they used to overcome them. Students' issues related to social-psychological and culture frameworks are also examined. This broader theoretical vision, recommended by Wilson (1996) and Foley (1990) provided the focus for my interpretation and integration of this research.

II. Methodology

This study is a qualitative type of research with an in-depth analysis of interviews to obtain the desired result. It utilizes one of the popular data analysis tools in qualitative psychology which is the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA was popularized by Jonathan Smith and it aims to provide detailed examinations of personal lived experience and produces an account of this experience in its own terms rather than any prescribed by the pre-existing theoretical pre-conceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2015). IPA gives researchers the best opportunity to understand the innermost deliberation of the experiences of research participants. In short, it is participant oriented since it allows the participants to express themselves and their “lived experience” stories the way they see them without any distortion and/or prosecution (Alase, 2017).

For this study, the researcher has chosen ten (10) out of the many reflection papers as the sample size. Again, it is important to take note that these reflection papers were chosen from the total sample since they have similar themes, which is, pointing to the experiences and causes of college students' problems in completing their college degrees. In an IPA approach, eight (8) to ten (10) as the sample size is sufficient to represent the total population of this study.

The interview method was used because it presents a life-like environment in which the respondents were allowed to have group discussions about their perspectives on the implementation of mother tongue. Interviews across selected stakeholders were conducted. This study complied with the requirement in conducting interviews to properly compare and contrast data across groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Semi-structured, open-ended questions were constructed based on the research questions. The questions were ordered in a logical sequence, from general questions to more specific or focused questions. In many cases, additional questions were asked to the focus group participants based on their responses.

To present how the IPA as an analysis tool is applied, the four basic stages nominated by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), which can be adapted by researchers, are described as:

Stage 1: Multiple reading and making notes. Close reading of the transcript several times to immerse in the data; Making notes about one's observations and reflections about the interview experience or any other thoughts and comments of potential significance; Highlighting distinctive phrases and emotional responses.

Stage 2: Transforming notes into Emergent Themes. Reflecting on the source material to transform notes into emerging themes; Formulating a concise phrase (themes) at a slightly higher level of abstraction which may refer to a more psychological conceptualization.

Stage 3: Seeking relationships and clustering themes. Looking for connections between emerging themes, grouping them according to conceptual similarities, and providing each cluster with a descriptive label; Dropping of 'unfit' themes; Listing of major themes and subthemes, and relevant short extracts from the transcript

Stage 4: Writing a narrative account of the study. Taking the themes identified in the final table and writing them up one by one; Describing each theme and exemplifying it with extracts from interview, followed by analytic comments from the author/s.

This research utilized all the IPA stages. It followed the first three stages of the tool while the fourth stage was integrated into the Results and Discussion of Chapter 3 where the themes were described and discussed thoroughly.

IPA is a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research explores and understands the meanings people assign to their experiences (Hennink, Hutter, Bailey, 2011; Madill, Jordan, Shirley, 2000). Qualitative inquiries seek to shed light on meanings that are less perceptible. They also seek to investigate complexities of our social world. They are inductive and share similarities in exploring 'what' 'why' and 'how' questions, as opposed to 'how much' and 'how many' preferred by quantitative studies. What's more, qualitative research is designed to study people's life experiences and deliberately shuns quantitative preoccupation with measuring, counting and prediction in favor of describing, exploring, understanding, and interpreting how a phenomenon (Smith, 1996).

III. Results and Discussion

Lived experiences of low-income students in completing their college degree

The social class origins and poverty-related experiences were identified by this group as directly connected to internal shame and embarrassment. Participants described poverty-related experiences linked to themes such as: *appearance, jobs, housing, food, health care, money, and*

control over their lives. The poverty-related stories of *early education experiences and the role of teachers in the participants' lives* are also included in this section.

Theme 1. Appearance. All participants described a world where they felt their value as human beings was judged by their appearance. Stories about appearance related to: cleanliness of themselves and family members; hair-cuts or styles, clothing, and shoes. Comments about disliking or hating school were often connected to an experience in which a participant was humiliated or embarrassed by her or his poverty. It was not only their own personal appearance they felt embarrassed by, but also their parents or family members' appearances. Participants described experiences where they perceived they were judged and made fun for their parents' appearance.

Theme 2. Expectations for Jobs. Respondents and participants reported that their expectations for jobs were shaped by their parents and others around them. Respondents were asked, "As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?" Most respondents did not have job or career goals. Most reported that they never thought about "being something."

Theme 3. Housing. Inadequate housing was a theme that emerged in all interviews. The family housing situation added to most participants' feelings of being "ashamed" and increased their perception that their family was "different."

Theme 4. Food. Like housing, food was not only a necessity to this group, but also served as an important status symbol which participants associated with their own worth and belonging. The participants shared stories of how food was a barrier for them. They discussed not having the type of foods that other people were eating, which made them feel inferior. Others shared stories of not having food or having to purchase food and the embarrassment that came with that.

Theme 5. Health. Almost all participants from this group reported that they and their family members had little or no medical care. The participants could not remember ever going to a doctor or knowing of anyone in their family who went to a doctor. The result was a lot of sickness and early deaths.

Theme 6. The Meaning of Money. All participants reported that not having money to get the necessities contributed to their feelings of "hopelessness." The participants felt that without money, their lives were out of their control, and they had no power to change their life situations. When asked what money meant to them and their families, the participants associated money with safety, security, and choice.

Theme 7. Control of their Life. Participants in this study did not feel they were in control of their lives. They described feelings of inner shame and humiliation because of their poverty. Most participants discussed reacting to the events in their lives rather than shaping or choosing their futures. Many of the participants shared that they felt something was personally wrong with them and that was the cause of their poverty situations.

Theme 8. Early Education Conditions. This section explores participants' experiences with early education. The conditions of poverty continued to affect the participants' sense of self and their expectations in their educational experiences. The meaning of education--including communication about education and educational goals--are concepts most frequently discussed by participants.

Theme 9. The Role of Teachers (K-12). This section explores the impact of K-12 teachers on this group of students from poverty. Participant perceptions of teachers overall were that most teachers in elementary and high school "didn't care." They had not experienced teachers who protected them or reached out to them.

Challenges, issues or concerns encountered by low-income students in completing their college education or degree

Most participants reported that their biggest challenges in college to completion of their degrees were: (a) lack of money and unstable living conditions, (b) loyalty to family of origin issues, (c) lack of basic skills, (d) lack of knowledge about the college system, (e) not fitting into the college environment, and (f) lack of understanding of social class in the college environment.

Challenge 1. Lack of Money and Unstable Living Conditions. Participants in this study reported that not having money to live on was a barrier to college attendance and completion. Most participants struggled with money and living conditions while in college. Most of the participants in this study worked while in college. Even though they worked, they struggled with basic needs.

Challenge 2. Loyalty to Family Issues. Family loyalty was a concern expressed by all participants across racial lines. Those experiencing poverty do not experience it in a vacuum. The people they love and for whom they care are also in pain and struggling for basic needs. Participants reported great anguish for their family members' conditions. It was important for participants to know that family members were not going hungry or experiencing homelessness. Most participants expressed that their concern for family members' living conditions and their relationships with family members presented challenges to college completion. In addition to trying to keep up with family, work, and college, participants reported that they were trying to help family members with their basic survival needs.

Challenge 3. Lack of Basic Skills. All participants reported that even after making it through high school they reached college missing basic skills in almost every subject, including grammar, math, writing, reading, vocabulary, English, and the sciences, and they also lacked study skills. Most participants reported that throughout their college education their major struggles were trying to gain missing background knowledge.

Challenge 4. Lack of Knowledge About the College System. The college system intimidated most of the participants in this study. Participants reported not knowing how to register for college

classes. They reported that they believed other students had the "secrets" about the registration process.

Challenge 5. Not Fitting into the College Culture. Participants reported not fitting in with their early education experiences, and this continued through their college experiences. Most participants reported that they knew they were different from students and professors who came from privileged backgrounds. They talked about different subjects, they ate different foods, they had different relationships with their family members, they had different background experiences, and their priorities concerning what was important in life were different. Participants reported making great efforts to "stay away" from the college as much as possible.

Challenge 6. Lack of Understanding of Social-Class in the College Culture. On the part of college staffs, faculties, and other students, the lack of understanding of social-class made almost all of the participants feel like they did not belong in college. All participants reported that there was little or no understanding of their experiences of growing up in poverty. For all poor participants, social class carried an additional stigma. They reported feeling that it was almost expected that people from minority groups had grown up in poverty, but for them, it was expected that their social status meant that they had led privileged lives. All participants felt that their poverty was seen by others because of bad choices that they had made. In addition to the poverty being "their fault," all White participants reported that poverty-related barriers such as lack of basic skills and unstable living conditions were seen by others as personal deficiencies. The invisible nature of social class created barriers for all participants in the college environment.

Insights or lessons shared by students to complete their college degree or education

Strategies and experiences that contributed to participants' success are described in this section in two parts: (a) *overcoming the barriers: how they got to college, and (b) overcoming the barriers: why they stayed.*

Theme 1. Overcoming the Barriers: How Students Got to College. Very few of the participants in this study received support or encouragement to attend college in their early years either from their home, communities, or schools. Even participants who had received good grades in school reported not being encouraged to go to college. Participants in this group overcame barriers to higher education and found their way to college in a variety of ways. Some of the triggers for getting to college included fear of a lifetime of poverty, life transitions, being introduced to the idea of college, securing resources, personal, emotional, and practical support.

Theme 2. Overcoming the Barriers: Why Students Stayed. Once participants made it to college, all reported that they continued to need support for completion. Participants described a variety of supports that enabled them to complete their degrees. These motivators included: *creating increased networks and connections, personal relationships, desire for a better life, understanding the link between a college degree and a better future, learning social and academic behavior of other students, satisfaction with college experience, gaining an understanding social*

class, creating increased networks and connections, and gaining coping skills for dealing with changing family relationships. Participants also reported that as their social networks increased, they were better able to secure needed resources and support to overcome the poverty-related barriers.

Analysis

Participants in this study longed to have the "right" clothing and shoes, and to be clean. The awareness of not feeling normal because of their appearance and their parents' appearance was strongly expressed by almost all participants.

What the parents did to earn money also affected the self-esteem and employment goals of respondents. Seventy-one percent of the participants also reported that their personal worth was judged by the kind of work their parents did or did not do. They described feelings of wanting their parents to have "normal" jobs. Participants' perceptions of others' behavior may or may not be true. However, they were problems for these participants whether they are actualities or perceptions.

Expectations of jobs or careers for participants were directly linked to their social class context. Coming from poverty, most did not have a future vision of what they wanted to be when they grew up. They were not exposed to professional career opportunities other than what existed within their communities, and most of those jobs did not require a college education. Limited employment opportunities and poverty level incomes affected the participants' housing experiences.

Participants described their efforts to make their homes nicer. They shared stories of cleaning, building, and repairing the places where they lived, but no matter how hard they tried, most participants reported that they were "shamed" by their homes.

Participants were asked to reflect on what education meant to them and their families. Most participants across race reported that education had little or no meaning in their context. For most, early education was just something they "did" and never knew why. Participants felt that education was not important. Some of the most common reasons for going to school included, "it was the law," they "had to be there" and they "just went and never gave it a thought."

Participants reported that friends played a role in shaping what education meant. They recalled that their friends were also from poverty and shared many of their beliefs about education. They also shared that the peer-pressure from friends to not gain an education was especially difficult. They needed and wanted to belong and fit in with their friends. Gaining an education meant becoming an outsider. Friendships were an unseen, internal barrier to education.

Wanting to belong and "be like" everyone else was a common phrase attached to the ends of stories of embarrassment related to poverty by all races. The participants in this study were not able to live up to the middle-class standards of food, jobs, housing, cars, clothing, and often

expected behavior (such as gift giving or completing outside of school projects). This made participants feel like outsiders and deeply affected their educational experiences and expectations.

The expectations for education for this group were also affected by their parents' education levels. None of the parents were educated beyond high school, and for most any of the participants, the goal was to just do a little better than their parents. Considering that most of the parents had less than a 10th grade education, high school completion became the goal for many.

Summarily, the meaning of education is rooted in the context of poverty for participants in the present study. Attitudes, values, and beliefs concerning education were formed based on the communication and experiences of people around them, including their families and friends. Most participants could not articulate why they went to school as children and teenagers, except that it was "something you did." Communication about education was rare in participants' homes, giving them more messages that education was not important and not for "people like" them. What was important to participants was what was going on in their lives related to basic needs. This group emphasized that they did not belong or fit in at school.

People at school dressed and behaved differently, they ate different foods, drove different cars, and lived in different homes. Participants did not identify with anyone for whom education made a difference; therefore, they believed it would not make a difference in their lives. Their expectations for education were "just to do better" than their parents. For females, that meant little or no education. For males, the expectation was not more than a high school education.

Discussion

This study reveals the structural inequities such as low incomes, inadequate housing, experiences of hunger, and limited access to resources that prevent students from poverty backgrounds and their families from social-class mobility and perpetuate the cycles of poverty. The political ideological reasons behind poverty must be challenged to promote an environment of equity. The inhumanity of the current paradigm that emphasizes the complaints of people from poverty rather than the faults of the current economy that cause poverty is revealed through the stories of respondents and participants in the present study.

Students from poverty backgrounds have a lot to tell us about the influences and experiences that support college completion. Colleges and universities would do well to go to the source to make informed decisions about policies and practices designed to increase college graduation rates for students from poverty.

The findings of the present study support many of the findings in the literature on college students. The data reveal previously undetected motives for participants' decisions to complete college degrees such as securing additional income and resources fueled a strong determination to complete college to rise out of poverty and bring family of origin members along with them. In addition to the continuing efforts to change the structural conditions which cause poverty, there

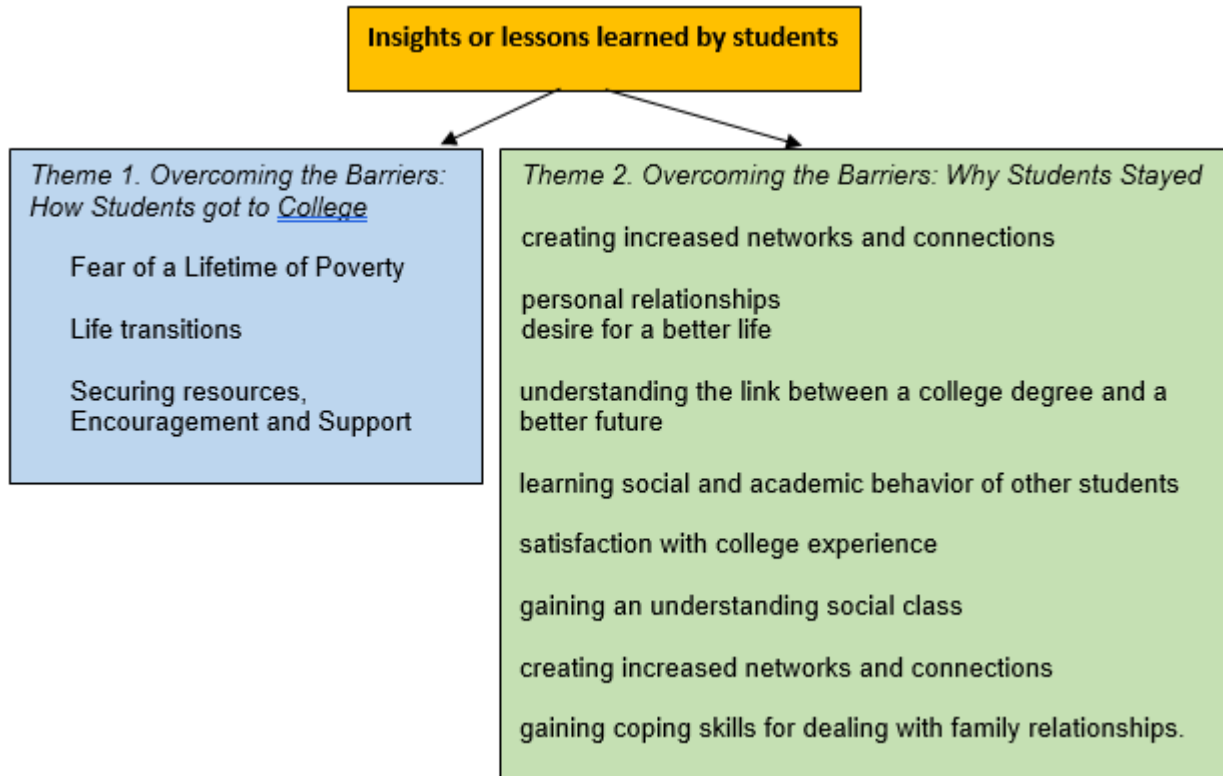
are several things that colleges and universities can do to ameliorate the situation of poor students from poor backgrounds and to increase the likelihood that they will be successful.

The findings from this study would suggest five areas for educational improvement for students coming from poverty backgrounds: (a) exploration of partnerships with social service agencies to increase income and resources for students from poverty backgrounds and their families; (b) development of a campus climate sensitive to social class and poverty issues; (c) implementation of faculty, staff, and student development programs combined with curricular reform; (d) facilitation of connections to formal mentors (e) articulation of connections between obtaining a college degree and earning a higher income.

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APPENDIX



AUTHOR'S PROFILE

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The author is 45 years old, single, born on July 25, 1978, at Davao City, Philippines. She is currently living in Purok 14, Bato, Toril, Davao City. She finished her bachelor's degree in Secondary Education major in Mathematics at St. Peter's College of Toril. She took the Licensure Examination for teaching and passed. She applied to the Department of Education and became a substitute teacher for 2 months in Malabog National High School, Barangay Malabog Paquibato District, Davao City. She served as a Volunteer and barangay paid Teacher at Sumimao National High School, Barangay Sumimao Paquibato, District Davao City for almost 2 years. She was a Local School Board Teacher at Emilio J. Estipona National High School for 9 years at Manuel Guinga, Tugbok, Davao City. She got hired by the Department of Education as regular permanent

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Currently, she is a Grade 1- Teacher at Gasco & Centina Integrated School, which is situated at Barangay Bato, Toril, Davao City, Philippines. She is a school math coordinator. GAD focal point person and Alumni school coordinator.