

# “They Never Told Me What to Expect, So I Didn’t Know What to Do”: Defining and Clarifying the Role of a Community College Student

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**Background:** *Low community college completion rates are an area of concern for policymakers and practitioners. Although many students require developmental education upon entry, research suggests that even students who are deemed “college-ready” by virtue of their placement test scores or completion of developmental coursework may not earn a credential, suggesting that college readiness encompasses more than academic skill.*

**Purpose:** *The purpose of this study is to provide an empirically grounded description of the role of the community college student. Drawing on sociological role theory, we articulate the largely unspoken expectations, behaviors, and attitudes to which students must adhere if they are to be successful. In doing so, we begin to clarify a piece of the college success puzzle that has heretofore been underexamined. We also extend current literature on college persistence by integrating theories of psychosocial identity, social roles, and college persistence.*

**Research Design:** *The study uses qualitative data from semistructured interviews conducted with community college students (n = 97) and faculty and staff (n = 72) from a study of student success courses in three community colleges in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). We examined a subset of interview questions investigating the expectations that staff and faculty hold of community college students. We used analytic induction to categorize disparate expectations into discrete components of the community college student role.*

**Findings:** *Relying on sociological conceptions of the role, we find that the demands and expectations placed on community college students are different from other social positions with which individuals are familiar, particularly with regard to the level of fluidity and demands for self-awareness. We also identify four distinct components of the role of community college student: academic habits, cultural know-how, balancing multiple demands, and help seeking.*

**Conclusions:** *Our data clarify the nonacademic components of college success that contribute to academic readiness. We also find agreement between our data and other college persistence literature focused on other student populations. Our findings extend current understandings of the psychosocial transition to college by paying attention to the cultural elements of the community college student role. This paper concludes with suggestions for future research.*

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Increasing the number of young people who attain postsecondary credentials has become one of the primary educational foci of the 2010s (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.; Lumina Foundation for Education, 2011; The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). In order to achieve the nation's ambitious achievement agenda, students need to not only find their way into college, but also be successful once there. Only about 60% of first-time, full-time, degree-seeking college students at four-year colleges actually earn a degree within six years, and only about 30% of first-time, full-time students at two-year colleges earn a certificate or associate degree within three years or within 150% of the normal time required to complete such credentials (Aud et al., 2012). Rates of degree completion are particularly low for community college, minority, and economically disadvantaged students (Aud et al., 2012; Choy, 2002; Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Low community college success rates are typically linked to students' lack of academic preparation for college and their need for developmental or remedial instruction (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Jenkins, Jaggars, Roksa, Zeidenberg, & Cho, 2009). Community college students are also disproportionately part-time and older students who have other demands on their time, such as substantial work or family obligations (Aud et al., 2011; Goldrick-Rab, 2010); these factors create additional challenges to completion beyond academic preparation. In response to the challenges faced by these student populations, community colleges have implemented an array of services and interventions, including developmental education, student success courses, enhanced advising, and learning communities.

Given stubbornly low community college completion rates, these interventions do not appear to be sufficient. Moreover, research suggests that even students who are deemed "college-ready" by virtue of their placement test scores or completion of developmental coursework may not earn a credential (Jenkins et al., 2009). The fact that even academically proficient students have trouble continuing in college suggests that college readiness encompasses more than academic skill.

In this article, we build on previous work arguing that community college success<sup>1</sup> is not only about academic preparation, but is also dependent upon a host of equally important skills, attitudes, habits, and behaviors (Attinasi, 1989; Karp, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person 2006). Though often unspoken and unwritten, community college students are held to certain behavioral standards by their professors, families, and peers. Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) refer to these expectations, which include things such as the ability to navigate college bureaucracies, seek out assistance, and navigate myriad curricular choices, as "social know-how" (p. 113).

Colleges and college personnel do not clearly express these expectations to students, nor do they help students understand how to meet these expectations (Rosenbaum et al., 2006; Venezia, Bracco, & Nodine, 2010). Often, students feel confused about these expectations, or uncomfortable enacting them (Cox, 2009; Rendon, 1994). Successfully doing so is fundamental to student success, however. The mismatch between faculty expectations and student knowledge about those expectations disadvantages students and may contribute to low student success rates.

We contend that this lack of clarity is unfair to students and detrimental to the nation's goal of increasing postsecondary attainment. How can students live up to behavioral expectations they do not know exist? Moreover, such lack of transparency is particularly detrimental to students from families who do not have college-going backgrounds since these students are less likely to have knowledgeable adults to help guide them toward normatively appropriate college behavior. They are also less likely to possess the cultural repertoires that could help them understand the unwritten rules of the community college.

The goal of this article is to provide an empirically grounded description of the role of the community college student. Drawing on sociological role theory and using data from interviews at three community colleges, we aim to articulate the largely unspoken expectations, behaviors, and attitudes to which students must adhere if they are to be successful. In doing so, we begin to clarify a piece of the college success puzzle that has heretofore been underexamined. We also extend current literature on college persistence by integrating theories of psychosocial identity, social roles, and college persistence.

## BACKGROUND

### THE TRANSITION TO AND PERSISTENCE IN COLLEGE

Higher education scholars writing about student transitions typically examine one of two broad areas: information about college prior to entry (usually called *college knowledge*) and persistence in college once there. College knowledge literature examines what students need to know in order to successfully enter a postsecondary institution, such as how to identify colleges, apply and gain admission, and obtain financial aid (see, for example, Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Bloom, 2007; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, Thomas, & Li, 2008). Often, this body of research examines class- and race-based inequities in college knowledge in order to understand and potentially remedy the disparities in postsecondary access that currently exist in the United States (Bloom, 2007; Hill, 2008;

Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Though important, college knowledge research is not entirely relevant to this study, as it focuses on what happens to students *prior* to college entry, while we are concerned with success upon postsecondary matriculation.

Another strand of literature attempts to understand why some students persist in college while others do not. This line of questioning is robust, with myriad theories and empirical studies. In its attempt to understand what happens to students once they arrive on the college campus, it is closer to the questions under investigation here.

The major theories of student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) argue, in various ways, that postsecondary persistence is influenced by a combination of preexisting characteristics, external forces, and institutional factors. Tinto's theory of integration (1993) has become a classic frame. Tinto posited that students are more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if they become connected to the social and academic life of that institution—he calls this connection “integration.” Tinto pointed out that student integration into an institution can occur along two dimensions. Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the college, while social integration occurs when students create relationships and connections outside of the classroom.

Tinto (1993) argued that nonresidential students have particular challenges developing and maintaining such connections, in part because their time on campus is limited. Nonresidential students also typically maintain strong ties to external communities such as jobs and family. These relationships may work against membership in college communities, either by providing competing demands on time and energy or by emphasizing norms that contrast with the norms of higher education (p. 128). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Braxton and colleagues (Braxton et al., 1997; Braxton et al., 2004) made similar arguments. Critics of this type of model, however, contend that students should not have to choose between their home cultures and the majority college culture and note that many underrepresented minorities benefit from maintaining ties to their home cultures (Guiffrida, 2006; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999).

Other persistence theories focus on the role that students' identities and sense of self play in persistence (cf. Bandura, 1993; Cox, 2009; Leese, 2010; Rendon, 1994). These psychosocial theories argue that students who do not see themselves as belonging in college are unlikely to remain enrolled. They note that the culture of higher education privileges certain skills and cultural knowledge, which can be intimidating or even alienating for some students. Helping students self-identify as members

of postsecondary education culture and—perhaps most importantly—potentially *successful* college students can help them persist (Bensimon, 2007; Cox, 2009; Rendon, 1994; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999).

## ROLE THEORY

We base our contention that students need to understand the nonacademic expectations of college in sociological theories of the role and role change. Role theory purports that people play *roles*, or parts, throughout their lives (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1961; Turner, 1990). Each role—parent, spouse, student, worker, and friend—has a comprehensive set of behaviors, attitudes, values, and ways of interacting that other people expect to see (Stryker, 1980; Turner, 1990).

Roles are fundamentally social, in that we as a society work together (albeit in unspoken ways) to define what is and is not acceptable from individuals in a given role. People act in ways that are in accordance with the socially understood behaviors of the roles they assume (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980); if they do not comply, they are likely to receive negative feedback from others. Behaviors and attitudes that are linked to the definitions and expectations of a specific role are called *role-related behaviors* or *behavioral standards*. Individuals inhabiting a specific role are referred to as *role incumbents* and those with whom they interact are called *role alters* or *role others*. Role others for a mother, for example, may include a father and children.

As individuals move through life, they take on new roles and must learn to enact new role-related behaviors and attitudes. For instance, demonstrating responsibility for one's financial health by paying bills on time and behaving independently by getting one's own apartment can signal that a young person has taken on a new role as an adult. Importantly, *not* behaving in ways in accordance with newly entered roles leads to negative feedback—potentially leading an individual to forgo a newly entered role in favor of another, more comfortable and easily enacted one.

How do people learn the expectations of new roles? Sociologists discuss a process of socialization, where those already in a given role or those familiar with it teach potential entrants the normative attitudes and behaviors related to that role (Ebaugh, 1988; Merton, 1957; Olesen & Whittaker, 1968; Simpson, 1979). Socialization can occur within formal organizations, such as a professional school or apprenticeship, or more informally, such as when parents teach young people how to behave appropriately. Throughout this process, individuals learn about three key aspects of a given role: its technical demands, such as the actual skill entailed in doing a job; its normative expectations, including habits and values of successful role incumbents; and its desirability, which provides motivation to enter the role.

## POOR DEFINITION OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT ROLE

The above description of roles and role-related learning is accurate for many social positions, but it assumes that all roles are clearly defined.<sup>2</sup> But what happens when the confines of acceptable role-related behaviors are not clear-cut? Some roles are less well-defined than others, and it is much harder for new entrants to these positions to learn to “play the part” (Ibarra, 1999).

In many respects, the normative expectations of the role of college student—particularly community college student—are ill-defined (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Efforts to improve the alignment of high school and college academics have gone a long way toward generating a clear set of technical or academic demands of the college student role, and increased awareness of the need for post-high-school education for success in today’s workforce has helped to motivate individuals to enter the role. Yet, although a generalized set of expected student behaviors exists, how these change as a young person moves from high school to college is not well-articulated.

Interviews with high school students indicate that potential community college students have little understanding of what will be expected in terms of behaviors and attitudes once they enter college (Karp, 2006; Karp et al., 2012; Venezia et al., 2010; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2010). In addition, interviews with college students reveal that students enter post-secondary education with a vague sense that college is different from high school, but not the specific ways in which it differs (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Cox, 2009). The mismatch between expectations and students’ understandings are particularly pronounced among first-generation college students (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Conceivably, potential community college students might learn the expectations of the role from high school teachers and counselors. Research, however, shows that this is not the case. Venezia et al. (2010) found that while community colleges almost universally claim to participate in outreach to neighborhood high schools, students feel they are given little information prior to enrollment. Rosenbaum, Stephan, and Rosenbaum (2010) found that counselors omit important details about community colleges, such as the fact that, even within open-access institutions, students must meet certain academic standards to enter credit-bearing courses, in an effort to raise students’ aspirations. Moreover, many community college students do not come directly from high school, making information provided via this route available to only a subset of the community college student population.

Popular and journalistic images of college might be another source of

information, but they too provide little guidance to potential community college students. Many television portrayals of college, such as *Greek* or *Gossip Girl*, take place at residential four-year institutions and focus on the social aspects of college rather than academic coursework. In its “Education Life” section, *The New York Times* defines *college* as a four-year, residential experience and rarely refers to other forms of postsecondary education. The prevalence of these images both reinforces the notion that college is a homogenous institution and provides little information for the many students attending two-year and commuter institutions; it may also inhibit successful transition into the college student role because potential students learn inaccurate information about the expectations to which they will ultimately be held (Thornton & Nardi, 1975).

Though potential and new community college students may not be explicitly told about normative behavioral standards for college students, the faculty who await them on campus certainly hold such expectations (Attinasi, 1989; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Dickie & Farrell, 1991; Shields, 2002). Recent research has attempted to clarify the nonacademic knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for college success (see, for example, Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Conley, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009), but the existing body of work has two drawbacks.

First, the literature provides little specific guidance for community college students seeking to understand, or community college faculty seeking to communicate, the expectations to which students are held. For example, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) noted that successful community college students have strong time-management skills and goal-orientation; can advocate for themselves in order to get help; and understand college systems and procedures. They do not, however, give clear strategies for enacting these expectations. Conley’s work (2010) presented a similar problem.

Second, much of the work is not necessarily applicable to the particularities of today’s community college student (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Conley, 2005; Roderick et al., 2009; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Conley (2005), for example, assumed that most students will attend residential institutions, ignoring the many students who live at home while attending college, as well as adult students (pp. 117–118). The college preparation literature also tends to focus on preparation for liberal arts programs (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Conley, 2007a) and assumes that college readiness comes after completion of developmental education (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Conley, 2007b)—neglecting the many students whose first encounter with postsecondary education occurs within the context of developmental coursework, as well as those pursuing career and technical or terminal associate degrees.

The nonspecific conceptualization of what the part of a community college student looks like creates challenges for individuals seeking to enter the role. Lack of clarity about what is expected of community college students and how to achieve those expectations may lead to negative feedback, such as poor grades or discomfort on campus, and—potentially—to college dropout (See Collier & Morgan, 2008; Cox, 2009; Venezia et al., 2003, 2010).

The remainder of this article attempts to provide a data-based conception of the community college student role. We articulate the various behaviors and attitudes that, at the three colleges in our sample, college faculty and staff expect community college students to exhibit, as well as specific strategies used by college students to meet those expectations. The goal is to use role theory to frame a conversation about college readiness that goes beyond academic skills in order to generate a more holistic understanding of what it means to *be* a successful community college student. In doing so, we also extend the literature on the college transition by integrating role and psychosocial identity theories, and applying them to community college students rather than students in the four-year sector.

## METHODS

This study uses qualitative data from semistructured interviews conducted with community college students ( $n = 97$ ) and faculty and staff ( $n = 72$ ) for a study of student success courses at three colleges in the Virginia Community College System (VCCS).<sup>3</sup> Student success courses aim to prepare students for college success by providing them with information about their colleges' practices, policies, and procedures; tips on study skills, course planning, and career exploration; and, sometimes, broader life skills, such as health and wellness information.

In Virginia, all student success courses address six areas of content required by the VCCS: career development/exploration; library resources/information literacy; college policies; college services; study skills; and life management, including time management and financial literacy. Some colleges opt to include additional content areas as well, such as critical thinking or critical reading. Research has found a positive association among participation in a Virginia student success course, early credit accrual, and persistence of a second year of college enrollment (Cho & Karp, 2013).

All degree-seeking students in the VCCS must take a student success course as part of their graduation requirements, and are encouraged to do so during their first semester of enrollment. The course is required regardless of whether students seek a terminal (i.e., occupational) degree



or transfer, and whether or not they were enrolled in developmental coursework. Our sample, therefore, includes students with a broad range of goals and academic backgrounds.

The research team worked with VCCS personnel to identify colleges that were committed to running effective student success courses and were geographically and demographically diverse. Table 1 describes the sites, which are referred to by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

**Table 1. Site Characteristics**

| Site      | Location           | Approximate Enrollment | Number of Campuses | Minority Students in Fall 2007 (%) | Approximate Three-Year Graduation and Transfer Rate (%) | First Semester Success Course Enrollment Rate, 2007 Cohort (%) |
|-----------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Metro     | Urban              | > 15,000               | Multicampus        | 49                                 | 26  | 34   |
| Riverview | Rural              | 5,000–15,000           | Single campus      | 37                                 | 35  | 67   |
| Hillside  | Suburban and rural | < 5,000                | Multicampus        | 14                                 | 40  | 64   |

*Note.* All data are from fall 2010 except when noted.

A three-person research team visited each college twice during fall 2010.<sup>4</sup> While on site, interviewers conducted semistructured interviews with student success course administrators and instructors, students currently or recently enrolled in success courses, and other campus employees who encountered new college students and/or student success courses, such as college advisors. Student participants were recruited via invitation emails or flyers distributed in their student success course or by their student success course instructors, and were compensated for participation. Faculty and staff were recruited via email request and were not compensated for participation. Table 2 presents the data collected at each of the three sites.

The students interviewed were predominately attending college full time (75%), although many were also working. Overall, 55% of the students were women, 67% were White, and 55% were between 18 and 20 years old. At the time of the interview, all student interviewees were currently enrolled in or had recently completed a student success course.

All interviews were approximately one hour in length and were audio recorded with participants' consent.<sup>5</sup> Data reliability and validity were ensured in multiple ways. First, the interview protocols were based on those used in other studies of college readiness and student experiences in college, in order to ensure that questions would capture data pertinent to the

research questions. Second, the research team met prior to conducting fieldwork to review the protocols, clarify the intent of each question, and identify possible follow-up probes. Third, after each site visit, the team debriefed to ensure that all interviewers were following the interview protocols and to clarify any issues that arose while on site.

**Table 2. Data Collected**

| College   | Faculty/Staff/<br>Administrator <sup>1</sup> Interviews | Student Interviews |
|-----------|---|--------------------|
| Metro     | 24  | 33                 |
| Riverview | 23  | 33                 |
| Hillside  | 25  | 31                 |
| Total     | 72  | 97                 |

<sup>1</sup>Some individuals served multiple roles, such as staff who also taught College 101 courses.

Interviews focused on student success course implementation (including course format and content), campus context, instructional expectations in student success and academic courses, and student experiences during the transition to college. Our analysis draws on a subset of questions included in the interview protocols about expectations of students, expectations of the institution, and student needs (Appendix A lists these questions). Though these questions were asked within the context of success course participation, they asked respondents to reflect upon expectations and needs broadly in relation to all courses and postsecondary experiences as well as in relation to success courses specifically.

Data were analyzed using NVivo qualitative analysis software.<sup>6</sup> The research team developed a detailed set of codes to analyze each transcript for a range of “big-bucket” topics related to the research questions for the larger study.<sup>7</sup> Coding validity was ensured through a series of validity checks, in which every 10th transcript was coded by two researchers and coding results compared and verified by a third. The research team also met weekly to discuss discrepancies in the coding, challenging passages, and areas of the coding scheme in need of refinement.

Upon completing the big-bucket coding, the research team identified the node “expectations of students” as potentially useful in further investigating the role of a community college student. We examined these data thematically, in the tradition of analytic induction (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993; Ragin, 1994). Through our close reading and rereading of the data, we sought to categorize disparate expectations into manageable and actionable chunks. Appendix B provides an illustration of the way that a

big-bucket node was distilled into discrete components of the community college student role.

During the analytic process, we created matrices outlining the various categories that emerged from the data. We also used a memo process (Bernard, 2002) to describe and clarify our proposed model of the role of a community college student. We discussed the matrices and memos with the research team, refining the materials until they best represented the data in the dataset.

## FINDINGS

Our data indicate that the community college student role is fundamentally different from the non-college roles that community college students often play; most participants explicitly or implicitly expressed the need for changed behaviors and attitudes when students enter postsecondary education. The community college role, as expressed in our data, differs from other roles in two important and cross-cutting ways: fluidity and self-awareness. The data also reveal four specific areas of knowledge and behavior that make up the community college student role: academic habits, cultural know-how, balancing multiple roles, and help seeking. We call these the four components of the role, and together, they represent the core elements of the role of the community college student, at least as enacted at the colleges in our study.

### FLUIDITY AND SELF-AWARENESS IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT ROLE

The community college role presented in our data is characterized by new forms of thinking and strategies, particularly when compared with other roles with which students are often familiar. First, respondents noted that the community college student role was more fluid than their other roles—meaning that it was less structured, more flexible, and included fewer forms of clear feedback than other roles. Second, and largely due to the fluidity of the role, the role requires students to exhibit high degrees of reflection, such that they can cognitively evaluate their actions in order to modify them if necessary.

The fluidity of the community college student role is most evident when comparing the role to others with which students are often familiar. These comparisons are illustrated in Table 3. Analyses of interviews revealed “fluidity” to be made up of three dimensions: structure, feedback, and variability. The first, *structure*, relates to how clearly defined and prescribed the role is. For example, high school students must adhere to a strict schedule that dictates when they engage in academics and when they take breaks,

while community college students have no such constraints on their time. A student explained,

When you're coming straight out of high school, you have somebody telling you what to do and how to do it and when to do it. And then you get to college. When I went the first time, they never told me anything to expect, so I didn't know what to do.

The second dimension of role fluidity, *feedback*, relates to how often role incumbents are told by others whether or not they are meeting expectations. A common refrain among the community college students we spoke with was the infrequency of assignments and subsequent opportunities for feedback on their academic progress from professors. One instructor alluded to the lack of explicit feedback received by community college students when describing the way that students need to—on their own—examine their work and “look at what you missed and why you missed it . . . [students should think,] if I didn't do too well, what do I need to do different?”

Finally, as compared with other roles, the community college student role is highly *variable*, in that there are many ways to enact the same role-related expectation. For example, community college students are expected to pass exams with little guidance or instruction on how to study—they can achieve a passing grade using any number of strategies. Instructors frequently emphasized that a fundamental element leading to success in the community college is students' ability to figure out “how they study best,” implying that there is no one right way to study. High school students, in contrast, are often given discrete study-related tasks, such as creating flash cards for a vocabulary quiz or a timeline for a history test.

**Table 3. Fluidity of Various Roles**

|                    | High School Student                | Employee  | Community College Student                                   |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Structure</b>   | High<br><i>daily homework</i>      | High<br><i>discrete job tasks</i>               | Low<br><i>student-designed schedule and time management</i> |
| <b>Feedback</b>    | Frequent<br><i>unit tests</i>      | Frequent<br><i>supervisor feedback</i>          | Sporadic<br><i>few graded assessments</i>                   |
| <b>Variability</b> | Low<br><i>discrete assignments</i> | Low<br><i>specific approaches to doing work</i> | High<br><i>independent study</i>                            |

Taken together, these three dimensions indicate how rigid or fluid role-related expectations are for a given social location. As compared with other roles, the community college student role leaves more room for individual interpretation and action, even as students must adhere to socially defined and understood standards of behavior. Students still must meet expectations, but how they get there is left to them to a greater extent than in other roles.

Such fluidity then raises the question: How does one figure out how to enact a role that has less structure and clarity than one is used to? Determining what strategies to use and when to use them appropriately requires a degree of reflection that is not necessary for the other roles with which community college students tend to be familiar. Without this second overarching characteristic—which we call *self-awareness*—community college students were unable to enact the four main components of the role.

We define *self-awareness* as an individual's ability to critically examine and reflect upon personal strengths and weaknesses in order to develop a plan for addressing self-diagnosed deficits as a means to successfully enact the role. The academic literature sometimes refers to this process as *metacognition*—the ability to understand “one's own cognitive skills, including memory, attention, and problem-solving” (Davidson, Deuser, & Sternberg, 1994; Duckworth, Akerman, MacGregor, Salter, & Vorhaus, 2009, p. ii; See Flavell, 1979 for more information). Some researchers have noted that the ability to understand one's own needs encourages academic success by developing an internal feedback loop in which students are able to monitor their own learning and anticipate, assess, and solve problems as they occur (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Dignath & Büettner, 2008; Zimmerman, 1990, 2001; Zimmerman, Moylan, Hudesman, White, & Flugman, 2011).<sup>8</sup>

Our data suggest the need for students to develop the ability to reflect upon and become aware of not only their academic learning, but their behavior as well. Enacting a fluid role requires students to examine their own adherence to role-related norms and to diagnose potential problems. One student, for example, described her reflection on her new, looser schedule and its implications for her study habits, saying, “And I've figured out that even though I have all that freedom, I'm still able to focus my time and efforts toward school work; not just, oh, I got a week to do that.” Another described his thought process in similar terms: “And now it's like, I got one class and then I'm done for the whole day. So it's like, what am I supposed to do?” Both of these students found that they had to think and reflect upon their behaviors in order to make sure that they were able to meet academic and other role-related demands.

## FOUR SPECIFIC COMPONENTS OF THE ROLE

This section describes the four components of the community college role identified during data analysis. These components are made up of the behaviors, skills, and attitudes required of successful community college students—things that others expect community college students to be able to know and do. When students engage in these behaviors, they signal to others that they are serious about being a successful community college student.

### *Academic Habits*

Our data indicate that the community college student role requires a revision of students’ academic habits and behaviors. New community college students have experience with academic habits, of course, as they were all high school students at some point. But, the community college role requires a change in these habits and a new toolkit of strategies. Recall that we are not discussing technical aspects of the role—specific forms of academic knowledge such as writing essays or factoring a polynomial. Instead, academic habits refer to normative behaviors and activities that cut across disciplines and entail new ways of going about or approaching school-related learning. These habits include strategies for completing college work, approaches to learning, and other academically oriented behaviors (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Academic Habits**

| <b>Behaviors and Attitudes</b>                    | <b>Strategies</b>   |
|---|---|
| Manage workflow independently                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a syllabus</li> <li>• Complete work without clear due dates or that must be done over a long period of time in increments</li> </ul>   |
| Organize and manage time and time-related demands | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find the best time and place to study for individual circumstances</li> <li>• Plan ahead in order to carve out enough time to complete assignments</li> <li>• Study in new ways, and identify which methods work best</li> </ul> |
| Independent and reflective note-taking            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take notes from multiple sources</li> <li>• Discern what is likely to be important</li> </ul>  |
| Use the tools of the trade                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use tools and resources such as Blackboard and the library appropriately</li> <li>• Regularly access tools, even in absence of explicit instructions to do so</li> </ul>   |

*Manage workflow and time-related demands independently.* Unlike in high school, where students are given specific assignments to complete every day or are given specific studying tasks, community college students are expected to complete work on their own and in the manner that suits them best. The most prominent example of this expectation is the college syllabus, where students are given their expected work for the semester at the outset, and then are left alone to complete it independently. Instructors do not regularly remind students to complete assignments and instructors assume that students know to refer to the syllabus throughout the semester.

Independently completing work means that students must become less reliant on external supports or structures and more reliant on their own discipline, sense of responsibility, and time management skills. One student described this new workflow by saying, “There’s really no actual work. It’s up to us to do the studying and the note taking and stuff.” What are frequently referred to as *new time management techniques* are really strategies to balance the role-related demands of independent academic habits. Students must effectively manage their time by learning to approach academic work in new ways—for example, by studying over long periods and thinking more critically about what it means to successfully learn and master course requirements. As one instructor said, “You have to decide if you’re going to study or not.” Students need to find the time to do this studying, but the role-related expectation is the completing of independent work, not time-management per se.

Students summed up the need to develop new ways of managing time to promote independent and longer-term learning throughout their interviews.

It’s tough because you have to do so much and you have to remember so much. One class gave you ten assignments, another class gives you ten assignments, and it’s kind of hard to do everything in one week.

The freedom of time to just, you know, the freedom of assignments. Where [my courses] go, you know, we need this three page paper by next Thursday. Boom! Done! Last time you heard about it was, you know, the Tuesday before, and I can sit down with my planner and go, OK, Monday is this. Tuesday is this. Wednesday, I’ll do the outline for it. And it’s just, it’s so nice to be able to run my own ship, I guess.

In these quotes, interviewees are expressing the need to be independent learners and schedulers of their own learning. They are also describing

the need to engage in reflection in order to successfully enact the community college student role, as they note that they must think about what is being required of them and strategize the best way to accomplish those requirements.

*Independent and reflective note taking.* Though high school students are also expected to take notes in class, college note taking is fundamentally different. A student contrasted the two by saying, “Most of my history classes in high school would be, they gave us notes, like fill-in-the blank or something. But the lectures in college, they don’t give you anything. You have to take all the notes yourself.” As this student implied, community college students are expected to do more than copy what their instructor writes on the board. They must discern on their own which elements of a lecture or discussion are worth writing down. Successful community college students also discover that notes can come from multiple sources, including lectures, discussions, and textbooks. One instructor described those students who do *not* successfully enact role expectations this way:

When I see students taking notes in a math class, invariably, they write only what is on the board. Invariably, they ignore what the teacher is actually saying, which is why this step is next. They just copy down, OK, cross multiply. OK. “Why do you cross multiply?” “I don’t know, she just did.”

Self-awareness is a key component of college note-taking habits. In order to be active note takers, students must be able to think about what they might need to refer to in the future. They need to be able to reflect on what they know and what they are likely to need to know. Role others—particularly professors—expect students to develop an understanding of what is important without being told this explicitly.

*Use tools of the trade.* Finally, community college students are expected to use the tools of the trade independently and appropriately. These include institutional tools (e.g., advising courseware or course registration/SIS systems); college support services (e.g., tutoring, Blackboard or other course management systems, and basic technological applications); research tools (e.g., library and online resources); and interpersonal resources, (e.g., faculty or support staff). For example, students are expected to access courseware, such as Blackboard® or Moodle™, regularly and on their own: “I’m assuming they know how to navigate Blackboard and send an email,” said one instructor. Moreover, the expectation is that students will use these resources correctly—for example, relying on online sources for research without resorting to plagiarism.

As with note taking, using the tools of the trade also requires student reflection and self-awareness. Those individuals filling the community



college student role must understand when to use a given resource, as well as how to access the resource. One instructor described the reflective process by which successful community college students learn to use their syllabus appropriately:

It's there, the opportunity for [students] to see the syllabus in the very beginning [of each course] . . . Most of them don't believe it. Then the first test comes and there is panic mode and then they want somebody to help them.

In sum, the first aspect of the community college student role requires individuals to refine their academic habits to meet new expectations. These expectations can be met via a variety of strategies, given the fluidity of the role. However, figuring out which academic habits and strategies are appropriate to use and when to use them requires self-awareness. Students must be able to reflect on their learning and their needs to identify behaviors that will benefit them and use strategies that are effective for their personal circumstances and learning styles. Role alters expect that community college students will independently take the time to think critically and analytically about both their course content and their understanding of that content in order to identify strategies, tools, and behaviors that will allow them to meet deadlines and complete assignments thoughtfully and effectively.

### *Cultural Know-How*

All institutions, community colleges included, have their own cultures and norms. To successfully enact the role, community college students must understand and adhere to these norms in culturally acceptable ways. Community college students need to possess the contextual awareness to understand what is expected of them in given situations, and to determine how to adapt and conform to those expectations. We refer to this contextual awareness as cultural know-how in order to signify that students must understand the institutional culture and its importance, and know how to enact it.

The forms of discourse, types of language, and ways of interaction that are seen as “normal” or “accepted” in postsecondary education tend to be rooted in White, middle-class norms (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999), largely because college faculty have been educated in such cultures themselves. Though some have called for transforming these expectations via approaches such as culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), middle-class cultural expectations remain the norm in community colleges. First-generation and ethnic and

racial minority students are particularly disadvantaged because they have less familiarity with these norms and fewer individuals to help them learn the norms.

This is not to say that community college students need to give up their home cultures entirely, but rather that in order to enact the community college student role effectively, they need to be able to adhere to institutional cultures, at least within the confines of the college environment.<sup>9</sup> Community college students must, in effect, become what Lacy (2007) called *code-switchers*, demonstrating their knowledge of middle-class norms even as they hold onto their home cultures. One instructor described this aspect of the role explicitly, saying that it is important for the college to figure out how to help students “make that cultural shift . . . and sort of get them used to this academic culture and what we expect from them.” Table 5 highlights the cultural know-how expected by interviewees.

**Table 5. Exhibiting Cultural Know-How**

| Behaviors and Attitudes                            | Strategies  |
|--|---|
| Engage in collegiate discourse                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use academic and noncolloquial language in speaking and writing</li> <li>• Engage in discussion about opinions</li> <li>• Demonstrate openness to new ideas</li> </ul> |
| Demonstrate culturally defined forms of respect    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give-and-take with professors</li> <li>• Put forth good effort</li> </ul>  |
| Recognize that community college is less forgiving | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not expect exceptions</li> <li>• Adhere to rules and deadlines</li> <li>• Adapt to instructors’ personal styles</li> </ul>  |

*Engaging in collegiate discourse.* Faculty and administrator interviews revealed that community college students are expected to engage in collegiate forms of discourse, including the use of academic and noncolloquial language when both speaking and writing. An instructor explained: “Where do you draw the line at, is that the text messaging type of wording is not appropriate for college level. . . . You know, like that the lowercase *i* and these symbols are not college writing.” Another instructor noted that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to interact with faculty members. Successful community college students need to learn the difference, and to “[learn] how and feel comfortable to communicate with a faculty member . . .”

Culturally acceptable discourse also includes the ability to engage in conversations about ideas and opinions rather than mere facts, as well as showing a willingness to embrace new ideas and experiences. One student told us that a key element for college success is open-mindedness:

“Basically just don’t be closed-minded; be open-minded to a lot of things. To me being open-minded could be making new friends, or getting different opinions about different things.”

Community college students are expected to participate in class discussions that are often free-wheeling and potentially controversial or uncomfortable. This requires verbal fluidity, as well as respect for new opinions, and recognition that this kind of “talk” is an academically and intellectually worthwhile endeavor. One student expressed frustration with a class that contained little lecture or discussion of the textbook, instead focusing on discussion and, in his mind, “rants.” He noted that “there were very strong opinions in the class” and that this took some getting used to, especially since he tends to be “a quiet guy in class.”

*Culturally defined demonstrations of respect and commitment.* The college student role also requires demonstration of specific manifestations of respect, commitment, and motivation. Instructors wanted to see that students really “wanted to be in college”—but viewed only certain behaviors as indicative of such commitment and desire. Even the most committed student was not viewed as such if he or she did not adhere to these normative ideals of demonstrating respect for authority and motivation for collegiate-level learning.

Respect for authority and the collegiate enterprise was signaled by an array of student behaviors. Some of these were linguistic in nature, as in the text-messaging example above, whereas others involved personal appearance and presentation. One student told us that, upon entering the community college, she learned that how she dressed influenced how her instructors viewed her: “You need to dress professionally when you are going to school because teachers will respect you more.”

One accepted form of showing commitment to college was to put forth a good-faith effort, both in and out of class. Instructors viewed such efforts as indicative of students being goal-oriented and ready to put in the work necessary for college success. Both faculty and students spoke of a give-and-take, whereby students who exhibit the appropriate form of respect for their instructors are more likely to receive help or positive reinforcement in return. A student explained:

If you go in their class and be disruptive and, you know, just aren’t very nice, then they’re not going to be very nice to you, and they’re not going to be lenient, especially if you turn in an assignment late.

An instructor concurred when telling a story about two students who wanted leniency in grading, but did not turn in required assignments or even bother coming to class:

Neither one came to class today. At the end of the semester when they come to me and say, “But we really needed Cs,” I’m not inclined at all to massage the numbers or whatever the case may be because they’re not living up to their end of the bargain.

Note her implicit expression of a give-and-take between teacher and student, a cultural expectation that leniency is something to be earned, not given, and that students who do not live up to their “end of the bargain” are not deserving of positive feedback. Not exhibiting normatively accepted forms of commitment was often interpreted by college faculty and staff as students behaving disrespectfully or not being ready for college.

*Recognize that community college is less forgiving.* The community college culture is less forgiving than other institutional environments, particularly high school, where exceptions are frequently made for students and their personal circumstances. Our data indicate that while some acknowledgment of personal circumstances are made, in general, community college students are expected to function in a more impersonal and unforgiving environment than they are otherwise used to. This facet of the role was expressed by one instructor who said, “I just can’t stop [a lesson] because a couple of you guys don’t have a book or you are dealing with financial aid. We just can’t stop.” Therefore, a key element of demonstrating cultural know-how entails recognizing that there are few exceptions in college and behaving accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

Students were surprised to discover this aspect of the role, and their surprise was salient in our interviews with them. One described this expectation thusly: “[Professors are] not going to stop the lesson for you to leave. You’re there for what they’re talking about or you’re just out.” Another said, “You need to take it seriously. . . . Make sure you get everything done because teachers are not going to give you all the extensions and benefits they would give you in high school.”

Not only are community college students expected to adhere to rules and deadlines, they are also expected to adapt to various instructional styles. Professors and disciplines have varying approaches to coursework and studying, and community college students must learn that these expectations will not change to meet their needs. One student said, “So I have to learn to work with their teaching styles to fit it into . . . my learning style so that I can comprehend it better.” Note that the expected onus of change is on the student not—as it often is in high school—the instructor. Recognizing this difference and learning to function accordingly is an important element to exhibiting cultural know-how and enacting the college student role.

Individuals entering the community college student role, therefore, are faced with a significant challenge as they must contemplate how to

meet role-related demands that are simultaneously diffuse and inflexible. Though the *how* of the role remains fluid—there are multiple strategies to meet expectations—the *what* is not, as deadlines, learning outcomes, and expectations are more immutable. Consequently, the role requires community college students to reflect on their needs and act accordingly. Students must develop an understanding of college culture and the resulting behavioral expectations. Then, they must assess their own ability to adhere to those expectations.

*Balancing Multiple Roles and Time Constraints*

Community college students not only fill the community college role, but they typically also have other social positions as workers or family members caring for others. These additional roles compete for their time and energy, and may conflict with the demands of the community college student role. One student in our sample explained, “I work full time and have three children and a husband and a home, I can’t just run over to [campus] and hope that somebody’s going to be at the tutoring center.”

Unlike high school students, for whom it is generally assumed that their role as a student is primary, community college students may find that they have to privilege the demands of other roles to the same—or even greater—degree than their student responsibilities. Another student described the conflict and emphasized the need to put other roles first when she said, “Because at home I can’t get hardly anything done because my little girl wants all the attention. It’s just so hard . . .” As a result, a fundamental expectation held of community college students is that they find ways to balance the many demands on their time in order to juggle the constraints of multiple roles (see Table 6 for a description of behaviors included in this component of the role).

**Table 6. Balancing Multiple Roles**

| Behaviors and Attitudes                         | Strategies  |
|---|---|
| Make college a priority                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take responsibility for meeting deadlines</li> <li>• “Stick-to-it-ness”</li> </ul>   |
| Use the fluidity of the part to their advantage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find a schedule that works for personal circumstances</li> <li>• Filter out distractions</li> <li>• Have a plan</li> <li>• Modify obligations</li> </ul> |
| Communicate with instructors early and often    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Earn acknowledgement of the balancing act by honest and frequent communication</li> </ul>  |

It is important to recognize that this component of the role is connected to the previous one, developing cultural know-how, in that the behaviors and expectations surrounding the balancing of multiple roles are rooted in a middle-class assumption that privileges going to college over other responsibilities. Instructors and staff frequently expressed the notion that college should be *the* prominent, or at least a prominent, role in students' lives, as expressed in these quotes from college personnel:

[Students] have a really hard time understanding why they're not successful when they're not putting so much extra time outside of being here on campus into their course work. . . . They feel like if they're in class, that's what they need to do. But we know that there's so much more to it.

What I mean is they fail because their lifestyle prevents them. It's an obstacle. Their lifestyle, in that they have families; they have children; some of them take care of a parent; most have transportation but some might not. They have to work, they're single parents, they have to work.

Though this expectation may be culturally biased, unfair, or unrealistic, it is an assumption made by most of the staff and administration at college, and so we take it as a starting point for this component of the role.<sup>10</sup>

*Make college a priority.* Community college students are expected to behave as though college is a priority, even when other roles are important as well. Although the majority of instructors we spoke with recognized the multiple roles their students play, this acknowledgement was almost always followed by a statement emphasizing that school and school work still needed to be completed and prioritized. Instructors often framed this as overcoming the "obstacle" of other roles; regardless of how it was stated, the message was that part of successfully being a community college student is finding a balance that privileges the student role.

Respondents frequently used phrases such as "making college a priority" or "being dedicated." One instructor referred to a community college "as a job." Another instructor explained: "I want them to take this very seriously. I want them to take their college education very seriously and make it a priority." Though these phrases appear vague and are hard to operationalize, further analyses indicate that instructors had specific behaviors in mind that signaled such dedication and commitment. Behavioral indicators included things such as completing assignments on time, meeting deadlines on a regular basis, and taking responsibility for ensuring that deadlines were met even in the face of other demands. One instructor described these behaviors and attitudes as "stick-to-it-ness." As

such, they were inclined to look favorably upon students who exhibited such behaviors.

*Take advantage of the fluidity of the role.* Successful community college students learn to use the fluidity of the role to their advantage. For example, successful students might opt to study or visit a tutoring center between classes instead of socializing, thereby freeing up off-campus time for the demands of other roles. Because a specific mode of studying is not typically specified, successful students study in ways and at times that best meet their needs and obligations. One student described her personal strategy for completing work by saying, “I just have to put time aside. I stay here [on campus] more often than I go home; that way I don’t have the distractions to do the stuff so I can succeed.”

Students can also use the flexibility of the role to modify their in-school and out-of-school obligations. This may include cutting back on how many credits they are taking or designing course schedules that balance easy and hard courses in a given semester. The fact that there is flexibility in many aspects of college, including course scheduling and work flow, can help in this regard. An instructor described the desirability of this strategy by saying,

Someone needs to tell [students] to be realistic between balancing their goals, what they want to do, what curriculum they want to pursue in working and raising a family. Because a lot of our students do that. They try to take full loads and raise a family and work full time and I think that just kind of sets them up for failure in many respects.

For many students, the key to taking advantage of the role’s flexibility was having a simple, actionable plan for balancing their multiple roles. Many students discussed the benefit of having a plan, whether for scheduling studying, seeking help, or tending to family. Such a plan gave structure to the many demands students faced, and it provided a systematic and thoughtful way to confront challenges when multiple roles conflicted. Explained one student,

I need to have a plan because I’m very spontaneous and I just, I go with the flow type thing. That’s a good mentality, but also you always need a plan. And I have realized throughout this year-and-a-half I needed a plan from the get-go because if you don’t have a plan, if you’re just like doing it or whatever, then you might go out of those two years with not much of what you really wanted.

Taking advantage of fluidity, particularly in order to develop a plan for balancing multiple roles, requires a highly developed ability to reflect on

one's needs and act accordingly. Students need to be able to think critically about their various roles and obligations, and develop strategies that will work for their unique circumstances. They also need to have enough awareness to recognize when strategies are not working, in order to make appropriate modifications.

*Communicate with instructors early and often.* Another strategy used by successful community college students is to communicate with instructors honestly, early on, and often. Students indicated that they desired some recognition of the balancing act they perform, particularly if they do everything in their power to make college a priority. Professors agreed, to an extent, but emphasized that the onus was on the students to ask for and earn any flexibility. One student described the way he could and should have approached his instructor when trying to balance a move and school requirements:

And I was just so busy in the move and everything that I was like, I completely forgot and I didn't really take the time out to do, you know, like I said, make school my priority either way. And that's where I messed up. And then when I went back with the stuff and when I went back to Miss Taylor, I was like, "Look, I'm really sorry."

An instructor described the same process, only from the faculty point of view: "I want to meet students, maybe not halfway, maybe 80%. I want to meet them there, but they've got to put in the work to do that and show me that they really want it and that they're trying."

Across all elements of this component, self-reflection and metacognition were crucial. Individual students have unique circumstances, and the strategies that allow one student to meet deadlines may not work for others. Students must be able to take a critical look at their personal circumstances in order to develop strategies for success. For example, a key strategy for many students was to develop a realistic sense of what is and is not feasible, given their other role-related demands. One instructor described this as a process in which students "figure out where their balance is, too, and they have to figure out what they're giving up." Note the use of the phrase "figuring out," which implies a cognitive and reflective process on the part of the student.

### *Help Seeking*

Community college students are expected to engage in help seeking behaviors that are proactive and self-directed. They must do this in a timely manner and in ways that are culturally delineated with a strong sense of what they need—this is often fundamentally different from previous forms of help seeking, a role that is likely to be familiar to aspirants. This



component is obviously related to the first, academic habits, in that it supports students' academic progress. But help seeking is a very specific form of academic habit, one that takes on particular importance in the community college (See Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Nelson-Le Gall, 1985). This component, therefore, appears separately in our data.

Respondents indicate that help seeking in college is different than in high school. Unlike in secondary school, role alters do not approach community college students offering assistance. Instead, students are expected to funnel themselves into a preexisting structure of supports made available by the institution. The college offers the services, and students need to find and use them on their own. Explained one student, "It's college. They do everything; they have the Learning Center, the Tutoring Center, they've got the library; they've got all these computer labs. I mean, they offer everything. . . . You have to figure it out on your own." An instructor made a similar point when saying, "I'm not going to be the Wizard of Oz and know everything . . . I'm just going to steer you [the student] and tell you what steps you may want to take."

The data indicate that help seeking in the community college is a process in which students first must recognize that they need help, then must understand the possible places to get help from, and finally follow through on asking for help. Successful role incumbents learn about this process and enact it throughout their college careers. Table 7 highlights the three main parts of the process, as well as strategies used by successful community college students to engage in help-seeking behaviors.

**Table 7. Help Seeking**

| Behaviors and Attitudes               | Strategies  |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Demonstrate awareness of need         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask for help early</li> <li>• Anticipate areas that might become problematic in the future</li> </ul>  |
| Gain knowledge of available resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know what resources are available</li> <li>• Know when to use resources, how to do so appropriately, and which ones to use</li> </ul>              |
| Develop a sense of agency             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take initiative to seek out help</li> <li>• Ask for assistance rather than waiting for it to be offered</li> <li>• Advocate for oneself</li> </ul> |

*Develop awareness of need.* Before they can ask for help, community college students must recognize that they need assistance. Since others are unlikely to approach them and offer help, students must diagnose their

needs on their own. For example, they need to realize that they will need help in a certain subject, or that they will need guidance in planning their schedule for the following semester. One instructor noted the need for student awareness by saying, “If you’re not good at math and you need help and you’re struggling, you need to avail yourself” of available services.

Ideally, students must recognize that they might need help before the need becomes acute. Said one instructor, “We have students who are coming in the last few weeks and they say they don’t understand anything. Well, there’s no way we can bring them up to speed.” Another expressed frustration that students often don’t seek out advisors until they are failing: “Students don’t have to see their advisor unless they have a block on there. They have a block because their average has dropped below C; then, in order to register, they need to see someone.”

*Knowledge of available resources.* Community college students are also expected to have a working knowledge of available resources, including college support services, supportive staff and faculty, and sources of information. This means that they must know what resources are at their disposal, when those resources are available, what those resources can provide, and how to use them appropriately. An instructor noted that many new community college students do not have this knowledge, saying, “And so I guess that’s the problem, there is a group that does not ask the questions that need to be asked, who don’t even know that they need to be doing that.”

Another element of this expectation is that community college students are able to navigate multiple resources. Most community colleges have myriad support services at students’ disposal, from advising and tutoring to informal interactions with faculty. The expectation is that students not only will know about all of these resources and when to use them, but also *which* resource to use for any given problem. As such, role alters expect community college students to be reflective enough to diagnose and solve problems on their own. They are also expected to develop skills that will enable them to self-advise or independently develop solutions to various educational and bureaucratic obstacles. An instructor explained: “We look at it as making sure that you understand what’s here and get you jump-started. At the same time, our goal is to make sure that you’re able to function yourself.”

*Develop a sense of agency.* Finally, once community college students have identified a problem and places that might assist them in solving it, they are expected to take the initiative to seek out that help. We refer to this as having a sense of *agency*, in that role incumbents are expected to take action for themselves rather than waiting for others to do so for them. Exhibiting help-seeking agency is a behavioral hallmark of the community college student role.

One instructor summed up this expectation by saying, “And you have to keep telling them, ‘You are a college student now, I’m not going to outline everything for you. You’ve got to read [materials about campus policies, procedures, and services]; you’ve got to know where you stand.’” Note that she used the words “college student,” explicitly linking the behaviors in this quote to individuals’ status (or lack of status) in the role. Her words emphasize the need for students themselves to take action by reading and understanding what needs to be done.

Agency is seen in a variety of behaviors. Students demonstrate agency when they seek out and demand help when they need it—in essence, becoming their own advocates. Study participants were very clear that such self-advocacy was an essential part of the community college student role, and those individuals who were unable or unwilling to proactively seek out help were unlikely to be successful. One instructor summed up this sentiment when saying,

Students who do not seek out advising, students who do not ask questions or who do not have self-advocacy skills to go, “something doesn’t look right here,” may truly not get the help that they need until they apply for graduation and receive that letter saying, “oops, you still have these four requirements.”

Another instructor described the expectation that community college students avail themselves of their help more succinctly: “Whether they take advantage of [available services] is their personal decision.” A student described this role-related expectation from the student perspective, saying, “That’s the important thing [in asking for help], is a student has to do their part.” This student noted that she was not having success in community college because she was not “doing her part.”

Clearly, reflection and self-awareness are necessary in all three phases of the help-seeking process. Students cannot recognize that they need help if they are unable to assess their strengths and weaknesses, and they are unlikely to be able to identify the correct type of help or service without the ability to reflect on their own needs. Students need to have enough self-knowledge to understand what they need and how to get it. Readers should note that self-reflection and help seeking are not the same thing. For example, a student can reflect on learning without translating that reflection into help seeking, while others may seek out help without first thinking about what type of assistance they really need. Still other students may decide, upon self-assessment, that they do not actually need to seek out additional assistance.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This article used interview data from students, faculty, and staff at three Virginia community colleges to refine, extend, and clarify the role of a community college student. Analyzing nearly 170 interview transcripts, we identified four distinct components of the role: academic habits, cultural know-how, balancing multiple demands, and help seeking. We also found that the community college student role differs from other roles with which students might be familiar because of its fluidity and the greater degree to which self-awareness and reflection are necessary for successful role enactment.

These findings extend the existing literature on college readiness in a number of ways. First, these findings present a more holistic view of college readiness than most authors, who usually focus on academic readiness (Conley, 2011; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012; Porter & Polikoff, 2012). Those who do note the importance of nonacademic skills in college readiness and success do not clearly define those skills (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Conley, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Roderick et al., 2009). For example, Byrd and MacDonald (2005) noted the importance of time management in college success, but did not specify what this means in terms of discrete behaviors or strategies. To a new college student, just being told to manage one's time better is unlikely to be sufficient to modify behavior to meet collegiate standards.

Our data clarify the nonacademic components of college success that contribute to academic readiness. They also identify actions, behaviors, and strategies that meet the socially defined notion of what college readiness looks like in practice. Not only does this move the college readiness literature toward more specificity of terms and constructs, but it also provides practitioners and policymakers with better grounded research findings to guide their work.

Our findings also focus on a large but underexamined group of students—those attending community colleges. Many of the most prominent explorations of college readiness focus explicitly or implicitly on traditional, four-year, residential college students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Conley, 2005; Roderick et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008). Conley (2005), for example, assumed that the transition to college includes concerns about dining hall food and residential housing, issues that are not salient for community college and commuter students. Though it is likely that the classroom-based nonacademic demands of the college role are similar among institution types, examining community colleges explicitly ensures that the college readiness literature is able to speak to the specific experiences of and demands placed upon students attending two-year institutions.

We find that, at least in the colleges included in this study, the community college student role is similar to existing frameworks generated from other higher education student populations. For example, our finding that reflection and self-awareness are key elements of the community college role mirror Conley (2005) and Roderick et al.'s (2009) focus on "non-cognitive skills." Our findings also mirror those of Collier and Morgan (2008), who studied faculty and student perspectives on college success in a four-year residential environment and concluded that "university success requires mastery of the 'college student role'" consisting of "implicit expectations' and 'tacit understandings'" (pp. 425–426). They identified similar components of the university student role as those emerging from our data.

Our findings, therefore, support the relevance of other higher education literature to the large but often understudied population of students enrolled in public, two-year institutions. They also underscore that, contrary to popular belief, community college students are held to new and challenging nonacademic expectations, just like their counterparts in other institutions of higher education.

Our findings also support the literature indicating the importance of psychosocial identity in college persistence. A large body of research shows that college success is at least in part predicated by students' sense of comfort and belonging in college, as well as their ability to see themselves as potentially successful college students (See, for example, Bandura, 1993; Cox, 2009; Leese, 2010; Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1993). Helping students develop a college-going identity is a fundamental challenge for college readiness efforts.

Psychosocial identity theory and role theory converge in their recognition that new identities emerge out of psychological discomfort, and that minimizing this discomfort can help individuals successfully navigate the transition to new social positions. Just as college readiness authors writing in a psychosocial identity framework note the need to help students develop a "college student identity," role theorists would note that encouraging individuals to understand a new role and integrate it into their self-concept increases the likelihood of a successful role-related transition (Burke, 2004; Ebaugh, 1988; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Stets & Burke, 2002; Stryker & Burke, 2000). In focusing on the specific behaviors and attitudes necessary for college success, our data provide insight into the ways that a college-going identity and a psychosocial shift toward college success can be encouraged among potential and new community college students. Providing new college students with a clear set of role-related behaviors and strategies can help them enact the role and, ultimately, integrate it into their self-concept, allowing for increased likelihood of developing a college identity and a smoother transition to college.

Moreover, our data extend current understandings of the psychosocial transition to college by paying attention to the cultural elements of the community college student role. Though many have criticized the idea that new students should leave their home cultures behind (Guiffrida, 2006; Rendon et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999), our findings indicate that successful students must, at a minimum, learn about and participate in postsecondary culture, even if it conflicts with their home culture. For example, proactively asking for help is a culturally constructed expectation and one that can be anxiety-provoking or even identity-threatening for students who do not see themselves as belonging in college (Cox, 2009; Gardenhire-Crooks, Collado, Martin, & Castro, 2010). By clearly highlighting these expectations, our findings help explain why developing a college-going or college-belonging identity is so challenging for some students. They also provide a framework for helping students develop awareness of these normative behaviors and their importance as well as strategies for integrating them into their behavioral repertoires and, ultimately, their identities.

A number of directions for future research emerge from our findings. First, our data are drawn from three community colleges in a single state. Though we have no reason to think that these colleges—or the expectations held by college faculty—are substantially different than other community colleges, we cannot be certain that our findings are broadly generalizable. Future research should, therefore, test this framework with a larger sample of students and colleges.

Second, our data draw only from the community college sector. Therefore, while our findings align with other studies of the college student role and it is reasonable to assume that many college role-related expectations are the same across institution types, we cannot say for sure that this is the case. Future research should explicitly compare the non-academic expectations placed upon students in various higher education sectors in order to generate a truly comprehensive understanding of how the role is similar and different across institution types.

Third, we purposefully did not disaggregate our data by student characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, gender, or age. Our goal was to generate a definition of the community college student role. By definition, roles are comprehensive and socially identifiably the same for all individuals seeking to inhabit them (Blumer, 1969; Turner, 1990). Therefore, we assume that the general outlines of the community college role are the same for all students and view our data in the aggregate.

However, it is likely the case that individuals from different backgrounds *experience* the community college role differently. The same set of expectations may feel different to subgroups of students or be more challenging to enact for some students than others. Understanding how role-related

expectations are experienced by student subgroups would add significantly to our understanding of variations in college success across the population. As such, an important direction for future research is to use the framework presented here to examine variation in experiences among students with different social characteristics enacting the community college student role.

In conclusion, the data presented in this article provide a description of the normative expectations to which community college students are held, as well as the behavioral strategies by which successful community college students meet these expectations. Currently, these expectations are held by instructors, but they are rarely articulated to aspiring and new community college students. Our findings increase our understanding of what it means to be college-ready in a more holistic and inclusive direction, and can serve as a framework both for future research and for interventions aimed at improving college readiness and completion rates.

### *Notes*

1. Most likely, this is true for students in four-year institutions as well, particularly students attending commuter or open-access four-year institutions. However, the data upon which this article is based are from community colleges, so we limit our discussion to this type of institution.

2. It should also be noted that roles and role-related behaviors are ideal types. Individuals do not adhere to every aspect of a role's definition in every situation, though as noted, if they veer too far from the expected behaviors, they will be sanctioned.

3. This research is part of a larger study of College 101 courses (Karp et al., 2012). Quantitative research finds a relationship between participation in these courses and positive student outcomes (c.f., Boudreau & Kromrey, 1994; Cho & Karp, 2013; Schnell & Doetkott, 2003; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Yamasaki, 2010; Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Calcagno, 2007); and this study sought to understand the mechanisms by which student success courses may positively influence students. The study found that student success courses provide important information to students, but cover many topic areas in a short period of time. Such breadth of content inhibits students' ability to explore topics in detail or build their skills. Additional detail on these courses, the study's methodology and data analysis, and the study's findings can be found at <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/college-101-applied-learning-student-success.html>.

4. Research teams were led by full-time researchers holding doctoral degrees. Other members of the research teams included PhD candidates and full-time researchers holding master's degrees. Junior researchers were trained in conducting semistructured interviews prior to the site visits by senior research staff.

5. Three participants declined to be recorded. In those cases, we took handwritten notes that were typed as soon after the interview as possible.

6. All audio files were transcribed by an outside company that specializes in transcription. Researchers provided the transcription company with a list of common terms to aid accurate transcription. Once transcripts were returned, each file was reviewed for sections of the transcript labeled “inaudible.” If a transcriber labeled a section as “inaudible,” a member of the research team reviewed the audio file and corrected any errors found on the transcript. All transcripts and notes for participants who declined to be audio recorded were analyzed using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

7. These big-bucket nodes focused on broad themes related to the research questions for the larger study, which examined how student success courses are structured, taught, and may potentially influence student outcomes. Examples of big-bucket nodes include “course format,” which captured the structure and modes of delivery for student success courses; “pedagogical approaches,” which included statements about classroom strategies, the instructor’s approach, and teaching philosophy; and “skill transfer,” which captured comments about how student success courses taught skills that could be applied in other college courses.

8. Our use of *self-awareness* is similar to the metacognitive notion of self-regulated learning (SRL) (Zimmerman, 1990, 2001). SRL conceives of learners as “metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process” (Zimmerman, 2001 p. 5). An SRL perspective sees academic self-regulation as occurring through three cyclical phases: the *forethought phase*, in which students analyze the task at hand and develop sources of self-motivation; the *performance control phase*, during which students employ metacognitive monitoring; and the *self-reflection phase*, which requires students to evaluate the learning process (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Corno, 1986; Wolters, 1998; Zimmerman, 2001; Zimmerman et al., 2011, p. 142). SRL and other metacognitive theories of learning focus on students’ ability to think about and self-regulate the acquisition of content knowledge. Our notion of role-related self-reflection is similar, in that it too requires students to think about their behavior, reflect upon it, and modify their actions accordingly. However, we relate these activities to the acquisition of normative behaviors and cultural expectations, rather than academic content.

9. Whether the presence of a middle-class culture and culturally defined notions of motivation, effort, and commitment are appropriate is an issue worthy of discussion but outside of the scope of this article. We would certainly contend that such culturally constrained norms disadvantage certain groups of students and that it is worth finding ways to make college success less dependent upon class-based normative understandings. However, our data indicate that these class-based expectations do exist and in many ways are reified; since our goal is to present a model of what community college students currently are expected to do, we take these norms and expectations at face value for the purposes of our conception of the role.

At first blush, this finding seems to contradict the notion of fluidity within the role. But, a closer read of the data indicate that fluidity and inflexibility co-exist within the community college student role. The less forgiving and more inflexible nature of the role refers to the expectations and normative standards themselves—the outcomes of the role, if you will. Fluidity, on the other hand, is related to the



behavioral strategies that help students meet the standards. Our data indicate that college instructors have clear, culturally based standards of behavior for students; how students reach those standards, however, is fluid since students can meet the standards in a variety of intersecting and overlapping ways. Instructors clearly want to feel respected and want to believe that students take college seriously, for example, and will not make exceptions for students who do not display this respect. Strategies students use to demonstrate respect include modes of dress, language, interpersonal behavior, work ethic, and reliability, among others.

10. As in the previous section, given the scope and focus of this article, we take the cultural components of these expectations at face value, even though others (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rosebaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006) have argued both for and against maintaining, and even explicitly teaching, middle-class norms within educational institutions.

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## APPENDIX A. ROLE-RELATED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview protocols were created for each category of respondent (administrator, instructor, and student). All protocols focused on generating a clear image of the structure, content, and pedagogy of student success courses, as well as how these courses relate to other supports offered by colleges and how these courses might encourage student academic success and persistence. A subset of questions examined the expectations that staff and faculty hold of incoming students; this issue was examined in multiple ways in order to ensure reliability and validity of responses. For example, understanding where students are viewed as deficient or in need of assistance provides insight into strengths or skills that should be possessed by college-ready students. All interview protocols were semistructured.

To examine the administrator and instructor perspective on the behaviors, attitudes, and norms exhibited by college students, interview protocols for these individuals included the following questions:

From your perspective, what are students' greatest needs?

- What campus services and resources are most important to meeting those needs?

- How effectively do those services and resources work to help students succeed? How do you know?
- Currently, how effectively do those services and resources work to help students succeed?

How do student success courses connect to other student support services at this college?

- How might student success courses and other student services be organized or coordinated to better support students?
- What are the gaps? Where do you tend to lose students?
- What types of student supports are built into your department/division? (*Probe: Writing Center, in-house tutoring, and special mentoring or advising*)

To examine students' understanding of what is expected of them, students were asked:

What did you know about what you need to do to be successful in college before you enrolled here? (*Probe: How did you get this information?*)

- What did you learn about college while in high school?
- Are there other people (family or friends) who told you about college?
- To what extent is what you learned in your student success course different from what you already knew about college?

If you weren't enrolled in a student success course, (how) do you think you might have learned about campus resources, study skills, and the other things you are learning about in that course?

How is this semester going?

- How are you doing in your classes?
- What challenges have you had to confront? (*Probe about anticipated challenges. How will you know if/when you need help?*)
- Any surprises (good or bad)?

Let's talk about what it's like to be a college student.

- Do you think any differently about your plans for the future since starting college? If so, how have things changed?
- Has the student success course affected how you think about college or your future? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think that is?
- What's the most important thing you've learned about yourself since starting college?

## APPENDIX B. INDUCTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT

As noted, the research team developed big-bucket codes for analyzing the entire qualitative dataset aimed at understanding the development, implementation, and potential impacts of student success courses. Most of the data coded under this first phase of analysis was not relevant to the findings discussed here. (More information about these findings can be found at <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/college-101-applied-learning-student-success.html>.)

Among the big-bucket nodes, key for this paper was the “expectations of students” node, as it captured the ways that students, instructors, and administrators expressed the normative behaviors, attitudes, and nonacademic skills of college-ready students. For purposes of big-bucket coding, this node included data that illustrated *“What is expected of students in both student success and nonstudent success college courses (norms). Includes generalized statements in student interviews about responsibilities of college students.”* Examples of text coded within this node include the four following responses:

Most of my history classes in high school would be, they gave us notes, like fill-in-the blank or something. But the lectures in college, they don't give you anything. You have to take all the notes yourself.

If you go in their class and be disruptive and you know just aren't very nice, then they're not going to be very nice to you, and they're not going to be lenient, especially if you turn in an assignment late.

There's a general sense that students need to funnel themselves into the structure that the college makes available. The college has the services and students need to find them and use them on their own.

You've got to be more organized now because you have school; most people are working. If it gets to be too much, take off your full-time job and mark you down to part-time and stuff like that.

Upon completion of the big-bucket coding, all text included in the “expectations of students” node was re-evaluated and inductively recoded. First, we read all data included in this node, looking for themes or content that was repeatedly mentioned by respondents. For example, we found repeated references to knowing how to take notes, using a syllabus, showing respect, and taking college seriously. We composed a list of these common items, including relevant quotes. For instance, under the broad topic of “showing respect,” we included the quote in which a student said, “If you go into their class and be disruptive, then they're not going to be very nice to you.” We also identified quotes or data elements that were not easily categorized, such as when an instructor said that students need “stick-to-it-ness.”

As the list of elements grew, we revised our categorization and combined similar points into broader groupings. For example, the “help-seeking” component of the role was created from the following data elements that were related to new expectations around seeking and receiving help:

- Taking initiative (“advocate for yourself, learning to be proactive, learning to plan”)
- Self-reliance (“I want to meet students, maybe not halfway, maybe 80%. I want to meet them there, but they’ve got to put in the work . . .”)
- Take responsibility for one’s own learning (“They don’t know that you need to come to class on time; you need to come to class with your materials. You need to be responsible for what assignments are given and not throw the responsibility on the teacher or the blame game.”)
- Ask for help (“It’s OK to say you don’t know, but you have to follow up on that and get help.”)
- Be proactive (“We have students who are coming in during the last few weeks and they say they don’t understand anything. Well, there’s no way we can bring them up to speed.”)

To generate each of the four components of the role, we followed the same process of refining the list of elements, eliminating outliers that were mentioned by only a few respondents, and consolidating similar elements. Throughout the process we wrote informal memos and thought pieces to clarify our thinking and met with the larger research team to refine our framework.

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