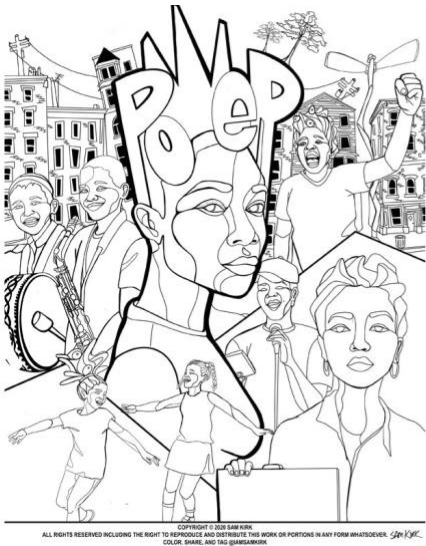


RADICAL TEACHER

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Speaking Back to the Neoliberal Community College

by Emily Schnee



ELOTERA, BORICUA, & POWER, COLORING PAGES BY SAM KIRK

As protests for racial justice explode across our country and calls to re-direct funding from law enforcement to education hit the pages of the mainstream press, the pivotal role that community colleges could play in the struggle for racial equity for Black and Latino men is clear. Yet this mission has been hijacked by neoliberal policy imperatives that rarely allow the voices of these men to be heard. This study privileges those voices in speaking back to the neoliberal community college, its discourses and policies, in the hopes that institutions of higher education will face this moment of reckoning and take note.

- Research note, 6/21/2020

As an English professor at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York (KCC), for too many semesters I had watched intelligent, curious, committed Black and Latino men disappear from my own classrooms, despite multiple efforts to retain them. According to the plethora of research on what has come to be called “community college success,” I was doing many of the right things: teaching in a first semester learning community, providing personalized early warnings at the first sign of absenteeism or academic distress, attempting to connect students to proactive advisement, and implementing an anti-racist, multicultural curriculum. Yet still the Black and Latino men disappeared from my classrooms, and KCC, at an alarming rate: Just 9% of Black men and 11.6% of Latino men who began at KCC in fall 2018 graduated in two years (“Graduation Rate by Ethnicity and Gender,” 2020).

At the same time, KCC, where in fall 2015 I began a qualitative, longitudinal study aimed at understanding fifteen Black and Latino men’s faltering academic achievement, seemed to be turning into a poster child for neoliberal educational reform. Policies intended to shorten time-to-degree and increase the college’s graduation rate began to take precedence over nearly everything else, with each and every policy rationalized with discourses of concern for racial equity. As the definition of student success became ever narrower, to exclusively mean two-year graduation, and equity became a ubiquitous buzzword, the focus of my study evolved to explore how neoliberal educational policies were *implicated* in the academic challenges faced by this cohort of Black and Latino men. The conventional wisdom on community colleges, as articulated by influential national organizations such as Complete College America (CCA), assumes that the implementation of more and better neoliberal policies will lead to improved outcomes for students, especially those who are most educationally disenfranchised. This study complicates that perspective by illustrating how specific neoliberal policies that are at the heart of the college completion agenda were lived out in the day-to-day community college experiences of Black and Latino men with detrimental educational effects.

Neoliberalism and the College Completion Agenda

Over the past four decades, the global growth and spread of neoliberalism has led to a steady privatization of the public domain, a subordination of the common good to the benefit of the market, and a conflation of support for individual freedoms with the promotion of the free market (Harvey, 2005). Proponents of neoliberalism have managed to tie the much vaunted political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom to the expansion and consolidation of global capitalism to such an extent that it makes it appear as if neoliberal policies are common sense and inevitable (Boyd, 2011; Centeno & Cohen, 2012; Giroux, 2011, 2015). Yet, as Harvey (2005) and others point out, this common sense notion can be “profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems” (p. 39). Most relevant to this study is how the slow and steady neoliberal restructuring of community colleges over the past few decades has come to be widely seen as reasonable and pragmatic, even rationalized as promoting equity for the very student populations who have been most disenfranchised by decades of policies that allowed the exigencies of the market to supplant a commitment to the common good.

As has been widely documented, including in the pages of this journal, neoliberalism has become the dominant political, economic, and ideological force shaping public higher education in the United States (Harvey, 2005; Newfield, 2016; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Neoliberal policies have resulted in a dramatic decrease in public funding for higher education; an increased reliance on tuition dollars to cover college budgets; a conceptualization of students as consumers and education as a commodity; the subjugation of faculty governance to centralized administrative decision-making; a loss of academic freedom; a diminished role for the liberal arts; and an overall restructuring of colleges and universities, in the image of corporations, to emphasize the efficient achievement of measurable outcomes (Newfield, 2016; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004; Ward, 2015). The public university is no longer primarily a place to think or explore but to prepare students for competition in the global economy (Giroux, 2011).

Neoliberalism is nowhere more prevalent than the 21st century community college (Ayers, 2005, 2009; Boyd, 2011; Levin, 2007; Sullivan, 2017). Once dedicated to serving local communities and considered the most egalitarian institutions of higher education, community colleges have been fundamentally reshaped by the imperatives of the global economy. What were once considered colleges for the common good have become institutions in which completion takes precedence over learning, and students are seen as consumers and education a commodity to be measured using industrial paradigms focused on efficiency and outputs (Ayers, 2005, 2009; Boyd, 2011; Levin, 2007). As Sullivan (2017) contends, the neoliberal agenda for community colleges is “quietly undoing basic elements of democracy” (p. 165).

Given the place of community colleges at the bottom rungs of the stratified higher education arena, this tight

linkage between education and the economy only serves to reproduce existing inequalities (Ayers, 2005; Carnevale & Stroh, 2013; Levin, 2007). Thus, it is deeply ironic that the very neoliberal policies that have caused massive social, economic, and educational inequality are now being packaged as the solution for those students who have been most deeply disenfranchised by them. As Boyd (2011) argues, the discourse employed by many community colleges, which “embed[s] neoliberal principles in a perceived democratic language,” makes the adoption of this paradigm seem to be “a result of common sense, [one that] is good for students, is good for the community, and an inevitable and proper development. But the perception may be different from the reality” (p. 247).

Neoliberal policies have invaded all aspects of higher education, but one organization that serves to exemplify the breadth and pervasiveness of this agenda is Complete College America (CCA, 2020; Ward, 2015). Founded in 2009, CCA is funded by large corporate philanthropists such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and has forged “alliances” with policymakers in 47 states and many large U.S. cities, including New York, with the goal of transforming higher education (“Our work,” 2020). The depth and reach of CCA’s legislative impact can be measured, for example, in the profound changes to state policies on remediation that have led to the wholesale dismantling of developmental education in public colleges and universities across the U.S. (“Spanning the Divide,” 2021). CCA locates college completion “at the center of a movement to restore the promise of higher education as the most powerful way to advance social mobility, economic opportunity, and racial justice” – a mission that is difficult to contest (“Our work,” 2020). The four pillars of CCA’s work are summed up in the clever and catchy slogan: “Purpose, Momentum, Structure, Support.” Upon closer scrutiny, these catchwords are defined in ways that unmistakably illuminate the neoliberal premise of its work: “Purpose” involves the close alignment of college to occupational goals ensuring that there is “a clear connection between learning taking place in the classroom and the competencies associated with careers.” “Momentum” entails rapid progression to degree completion through continuous full-time college enrollment. “Structure” ensures that colleges implement tight curricular roadmaps – also known as guided pathways – that “make the path to a degree or valued workplace credential clear.” “Support” rationalizes the ballooning investment in student services with the aim of achieving the vague goal of “remov[ing] barriers to academic success” (“Strategies,” 2020). Further, CCA, in conjunction with its legislative allies, advocates to make state funding for public colleges and universities contingent on increases in colleges’ graduation rates, a clear example of its reliance on quantitative metrics to determine an institution’s worth. Yet despite its close partnerships with legislatures in nearly every state, CCA seems to have *no* position on tuition as a primary revenue stream for public colleges; a search of the CCA website for the word “tuition” yielded no results.

In a clear appeal to neoliberal inevitability, CCA pitches its policy agenda as a “win-win for students and the schools they attend” (“Partners,” 2020). Its website unabashedly states that CCA’s primary goal is to “shift policy” to make

college completion the “# 1 priority of colleges and universities” (CCA, 2020). By explicitly linking this policy goal to equity for historically underrepresented students, with specific references to closing “achievement” and “equity” gaps, CCA appeals to the “common-sense” aspects of its neoliberal policy agenda (“Metro Momentum,” 2020). CCA’s and its allies’ tremendous success in making the tenets it promulgates both widespread and virtually uncontested must be seen in the context of forty years of neoliberal ideology that has, as Harvey (2005) explains, had “...pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (p. 3). What follows, in this piece, is a deep exploration of how these very policies were lived out in the community college experiences of a small cohort of Black and Latino men enrolled at Kingsborough Community College.

Troubling the Neoliberal Narrative

The Study

Through ethnographic interviews, conducted once per semester over a three-year period, this study explored the impact of the policies that represent the cornerstones of current thinking on community college completion: decreasing time-to-degree, implementing guided curricular pathways, and expanding student services – or as CCA would call these reforms, “momentum, support, structure, and purpose” – all in the context of increased reliance on tuition to fund college budgets.

First, it is important to note that Black and Latino men represent just a thin demographic slice of the student population at KCC. In fall 2018, Black students made up 33.9% and Latinx students 17.7% of KCC’s student population; men represented approximately 43% of students (“KCC fall 2018: At a glance,” 2019; “Percent enrollment by ethnicity,” 2018). Yet the fifteen Black and Latino men who participated in this research represent a tremendously diverse group of students, one for whom one-size-fits-all educational policies are being prescribed with deleterious effects. The study participants, who were recruited from three first-semester learning communities in fall 2015, all self-identified as either Black or Latino men and ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-two. Ten had just graduated from high school, two were adults who had been out of school for decades, and three were in their early twenties with a few years of full-time work experience under their belts. While all of the participants were full-time students when the study began, half of them worked 30 or more hours per week and were entirely, or mostly, financially independent; one-third of the participants held part-time or seasonal jobs and were mostly supported by their parents while in college. A couple of the participants were minimally or sporadically employed during the study period. The study participants came from families with a range of educational backgrounds. Though the vast majority were first generation college students, several had one parent who did some college without completing a degree. The participants themselves entered KCC with a range of academic preparedness (and were intentionally recruited to reflect this diversity): Eight placed directly into college level

English composition, while seven placed into the lowest level of developmental English and took more than one semester to exit the developmental sequence.

Further, the participants and their families came from a variety of countries and language backgrounds, and held a range of immigration statuses. Ten were U.S. citizens, though half of these were the children of immigrants. Two were Legal Permanent Residents, one had Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and two were undocumented. Those born out of the United States came from Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Mexico, and Trinidad. Though the vast majority of the participants were native or dominant speakers of English, several were raised in bilingual households, and three were English Language Learners who struggled with the demands of academic English.

This diversity, which is corroborated in other studies of Black and Latino community college men, goes against the standardizing grain of neoliberal educational policies which prioritize efficiency and productivity over individuality and tend to see all community college students as benefitting from the same interventions, namely those that emphasize continuous full-time enrollment and on-time degree completion as equivalent to college success (CCA, 2020; Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010). Despite their differences, the study participants held many experiences in common, all of which revealed troubling complexities and contradictions to the neoliberal college completion narrative, the focus of this essay.

Momentum I: Financial Challenges to Continuous College Enrollment

"If financial aid had accepted me, I would have definitely gone back."

Unsurprisingly, financial concerns were the most significant obstacle the vast majority of study participants faced in college, though these challenges took a variety of forms. Eight of the participants were ineligible for financial aid (or *believed* they were ineligible for financial aid) due to their immigration status or because their parents made marginally more than the cut off for state and federal financial aid. This was a particularly bitter pill to swallow for those students who worked full time and were, for all intents and purposes, financially independent of their parents, but for whom parental income was considered the basis for financial aid eligibility because they were not yet 24 years old. During the study period, six of the study participants left college intermittently, or permanently, due to issues with finances and financial aid.

Anthony (all names are pseudonyms), who exemplified students in this predicament, was placed into developmental English when he entered KCC after a several year hiatus from formal education. He was working full-time at a supermarket stocking shelves overnight and often went straight to class without sleeping. He passed all of his classes that first semester and did so well in developmental English that he was able to skip one level in the remedial sequence. Anthony was poised to return for a second semester when he discovered that he owed the college money and that this barred him from registering for classes. For Anthony the rationale for leaving college was clear:

I didn't go back because I had to pay out-of-pocket. I was 23 years old and I wasn't making that much. If it wasn't for that, I would have gone back... I couldn't pay out of pocket... if financial aid had accepted me, I would have definitely gone back.

Anthony, who never returned to KCC after his first semester, despite his 3.4 GPA, illustrates the predicament of financially independent young adults whose parents' income bars them from receiving financial aid and for whom even the relatively low community college tuition charged at KCC (currently \$4800 per academic year for full-time study) represented an insurmountable hurdle.

Several other participants who were eligible for financial aid had problems getting their aid in a smooth and timely fashion due to the bureaucratic exigencies of the financial aid application process. This was the straw that broke the camel's back for several frustrated participants who lost semesters of study because of delays and disruptions to their financial aid.

Giovanny was typical of this group of students. At the end of the first semester, Giovanny discovered that:

Something was wrong with my financial aid and I still haven't received it yet. I'm still figuring out what was wrong... There was a correction I had to do, because I think I put a wrong number in a wrong category. They were like, you got to re-do it, your mom's got to bring in all these papers, you got to bring in your mom's documents, taxes and everything.

After many visits to the college bursar's office that semester, Giovanny gave up on understanding what went awry and resigned himself to quitting college and working at a grocery store for a year in order to pay what he owed KCC. He described a meticulous process of giving his mother money to hold every pay period until he had amassed the several thousand dollars he owed KCC. Looking back on this time period, even after Giovanni returned to KCC, reapplied for and received financial aid, he said, "It was just a spiral." He was never able to understand exactly what had gone wrong.

Giovanny was not at all unique in this experience, which was echoed by several other study participants who missed semesters of college due to problems with their applications for financial aid. According to internal college data, more Latinx and African-American students fail to complete the financial aid process than White or Asian students. While in fall 2016 African American students made up 34.4% of the college population, and Latinx students represented 17.9% of the college population, respectively, they comprised 37.7% and 19.3% of the students who didn't complete their financial aid applications ("Percent Enrollment by Ethnicity," 2019). Study participants in both groups – those attempting to pay for college on their own and those eligible for financial aid but who faced bureaucratic obstacles that prevented them from receiving it – lost semesters of study, or left college altogether, because of finances.

The much touted New York State Excelsior Scholarship was rolled out midway through this study, in spring 2017, but did not prove to be a panacea for the study participants.

In the end, there were just too many strings attached to the Excelsior Scholarship – such as the demand for continuous, full-time, “on track” enrollment – that did not take into account the realities of these students’ lives (“Excelsior Scholarship Program,” 2020). Gabriel, the one student in the study who did take advantage of the Excelsior program after transferring to a four year college, ended up sticking with a major that he didn’t like because he would lose the Excelsior Scholarship if he didn’t graduate on time. Gabriel embodied the disjuncture between “doing well” academically, as defined by neoliberal policy imperatives, and the pursuit of one’s educational dreams. “I’m doing really well, but I’m not really interested, to be honest with you...I just want to get my work done and get good grades,” he confessed in our final interview. Gabriel felt that the scholarship did not allow him any time for intellectual or career exploration, as he couldn’t fail “even one class” or he would lose the scholarship that made attending college financially feasible for him. This represented a perilous contradiction for a low-income student from an immigrant family who believed a college degree would be pivotal to his future life chances.

The challenges the men faced in figuring out how to pay for college, and the negative impact this had on their ability to maintain “academic momentum,” highlight a fundamental incongruity in the neoliberal paradigm. The focus on efficiency and outcomes, which prioritizes on-time graduation above all else, is undercut by the model’s dependence on students’ (ever increasing) tuition dollars to fund public college budgets. The reliance on tuition made the path to graduation much more complicated for many of the study participants and illuminates one of the troubling contradictions of the neoliberal paradigm. It is notable that Complete College America is silent on the issue of free tuition and fails to advocate for full state funding of public higher education as part of its policy agenda. The men’s experiences clearly support a move away from tuition-based higher education funding and, at the very least, the urgent need to simplify cumbersome, outdated financial aid requirements, which acted as deterrents to timely college completion and added much stress, anxiety, and frustration to the men’s lives.

Momentum II: Impact of Employment on Continuous College Enrollment

Work: “It is as bad as it sounds.”

The deleterious impact of paid employment on almost every participant’s academic momentum also flies in the face of the push for continuous full-time enrollment and on-time graduation that is at the center of the college completion agenda and illustrates another contradiction between neoliberal policy mandates and the study participants’ lived experiences. The push for on-time graduation is most clearly manifested at KCC in the national “15 to Finish” campaign, which was found, pre-pandemic, plastered all over the campus (in the form of glossy posters with the vaguely menacing message “The Longer You Stay, The More You Pay”). This initiative, which is a pillar of CCA’s platform, pushes all students to complete five academic courses per semester in order to graduate with 60 credits in

two years. This heavy course load proved to be extremely challenging for most of the study participants.

As mentioned previously, the vast majority of study participants were employed while also attending college full time. Half worked 30 or more hours per week; one-third of the participants held substantial part-time jobs (roughly 20 hours per week), and only two were sporadically employed during the study period. Not only did the many hours the study participants devoted to paid employment detract from their schoolwork (as corroborated by many other studies), but many of the participants described their employment as stressful, deadening, and even outright dangerous (Wood et al, 2011; Palacios, Wood & Harris, 2015). Over several semesters of interviews, Kenya described his more than full-time employment with a cellular company as not only the number one obstacle to his academic momentum, but as antithetical to what drew him to higher education. Kenya was an elite runner while in high school who hoped to get an athletic scholarship to a four-year college. His dreams were dashed by a knee injury, but at the start of the study period he still savored the idea of attending a residential college and one day having a “real” college experience that allowed him the time and freedom to explore and grow intellectually. Kenya believed that his on again-off again college enrollment was solely attributable to his demanding work schedule. When queried about the challenges he faced in college, he explained:

Work! Work is the one thing that’s messing me up. I wish I had the means to not work and just go to school, but that’s not the case...I’m working 48 hours per week and they’re working me like a dog... it ruins my mood, stunts my creativity. When I come to school, my mind is wandering, I have a chance to really think about things, [but] the day-to-day really stunts creativity.

Miguel was another of the study participants who worked full-time and paid his tuition entirely out of pocket due to his undocumented immigration status. He described his job as a delivery worker for a fast food restaurant which involved riding an electric scooter that did not have functioning brakes, often late at night and in all kinds of weather, in order to cover a large delivery area. When explaining why he stuck with this job, at first he rationalized: “You need the money, you know. It’s not as bad as it sounds.” But, on second thought, he admitted how much this work threatened his well-being and sense of personal security. “No, it *is* as bad as it sounds,” he corrected himself. Only his steadfast commitment to higher education as a way out of his undocumented immigration status and his passion for his art major kept him moving steadily towards his degree.

Kaleb attributed his decision to leave college to his work in various retail stores: “It started burning me out. I think that’s one of the reasons people drop out when they are working and going to school and they have a really stressful schedule.” Kenya concurred and explained how being in college can quickly become secondary when working full-time: “It’s really easy not to go to class... [when] I’m working 10 hour shifts,” he admitted. Although Brandon did not attribute his decision to leave college to the demands of his full-time job as a personal trainer at a local gym, he depicts

his daily routine as an endless, draining cycle of work-school-family: "It's pretty much cut and dried. If I'm not here [at KCC], I'm working, or with my family," he explained.

The push to increase the college's graduation rate through continuous full-time student enrollment took a heavy toll on the study participants and ultimately led several of them to drop out. This finding is not novel; much prior research confirms that Black and Latino male students with heavy workloads are less likely to persist in college and more likely to see their employment as an impediment to their academics (Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010; Wood et al, 2011). Ironically, even a decade old report funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on why students fail to graduate from college acknowledges the devastating impact of work on college completion (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). Yet, the emphasis on academic momentum remains a central feature of the college completion agenda despite the harmful repercussions of it for this student population.

Support: Resistance to College Services

"I don't like to get help, even though I need it."

Like most colleges, KCC has experienced a rapid expansion in student services in recent years. This is a well-documented feature of the neoliberal university (Newfield, 2016). The fact that almost none of the study participants accessed *any* support services during their tenure at KCC, or were even aware of the array of support services available on campus, calls into question the extensive investment in these areas of college life in terms of increasing equity for Black and Latino men. This contradiction is of special concern in that the ballooning of administrative and student service positions comes at a time of dramatically decreasing state investment in public higher education. Thus, funds spent on the reorganization of advisement academies and counseling services come at the expense of full-time faculty jobs and other interventions – such as the free tuition, books, and transit fare that are the backbone of the Accelerated Studies in Associates Program, for instance – that have been demonstrated to have strong positive outcomes for community college students (Scrivener et al, 2015).

An overwhelming majority of the study participants – 12 out of 15 – reported *never* accessing any supportive services or participating in *any* co-curricular programs or activities at the college, despite the fact that several recognized that they might be helpful to them. As Stanley, a recent immigrant from Haiti who left the college after his first year when he was placed on academic probation, willingly recognized, "I don't like to get help, even though I need it." This resistance, common among the study participants, led him to rebuff his professors' suggestions that he visit the writing center and access other academic support services and had a direct impact on his academic failure and ensuing dismissal from the college.

A common refrain among the study participants when queried about their use of college support services was a) that they had no time and b) that men don't like to ask for help. Almost every study participant reported a daily routine

that involved hours on public transportation to travel from home or work to school and back again, leaving them little time on campus beyond what they spent in classes. Going to tutoring or seeking other support was almost never factored into the experience of college for these men, a finding that is corroborated by other studies (Bukowski & Hatch, 2015; Gardenhire-Crooks et al, 2010; Ingram & Gonzalez-Matthews, 2013).

Many of the participants underscored Palacios, Wood, and Harris's finding that "help-seeking can be erroneously associated with weakness and femininity," which leads to conflict between men's identities and the behaviors expected of "successful" college students (2015, p. 189). Giovanni is one of the many study participants who attributed his reluctance to access the many supportive services available on campus to gender:

For guys, what I know is like, guys don't want to take help. They have a stereotype saying that "guys don't need help, guys can do things on their own," that's why they have the mentality that, "oh, we don't need the help, we can do this thing on our own."

Manny, an adult student in his 50s, concurred with this analysis of why he does not access support services at the college. He explained that "men feel embarrassed and their pride comes into play, they don't want to feel that they are less smart than somebody" so they remain silent and don't ask for help.

Other study participants described a lack of familiarity with help-seeking behaviors that emanated from their families and was reinforced by negative experiences seeking help at the college. When queried, several of the study participants sheepishly acknowledged that they *should* be accessing support services, though this verbal recognition did not change *any* of the participants' behavior during the course of this three-year study. After describing some of his protracted academic struggles to pass courses in his major, Manny stated outright:

I should be asking for more help, but I am so used to doing things for myself... coming home [as a kid] there was no one to help me study, so I did it for myself. This is why it is hard for me to go to tutoring... I don't know what people's attitude is going to be.... I avoid putting myself in a position where I am going to feel uncomfortable.

When Kelvin reflected on the problems he faced with his financial aid application, which caused him to cut back to part-time attendance for a couple of semesters, he acknowledged that "trying to do it on my own and doing it wrong" had not served him well.

Other study participants attributed their reluctance to seek help from college offices to the quality of the services offered. William, one of the students who successfully transferred to a four-year college, offered a harsh appraisal of the support services available at KCC and an alternate explanation as to why students may not make use of them. William was blunt in his assessment of the transfer advisement office, for instance, a sentiment that was echoed by other participants seeking advisement: "They're useless.

90% of the time they don't know what they are talking about ... they are so unhelpful it's kind of ridiculous." Miguel also resisted accessing support services at the college after experiencing bias in his encounters with the financial aid office. Miguel was initially charged out-of-state tuition because of his undocumented immigration status and when he went to the financial aid office to correct this, he was loudly rebuked by a staff person who told him, incorrectly, that he wasn't eligible for in-state tuition. He felt that he had been both publicly shamed and put at risk by having his immigration status revealed to the many students and staff present in the office. Understandably, he never went back.

Another participant, Alex, eschewed any advisement at the college after failing all of his classes in the first semester. He invented a complex and creative system for determining which classes to take based on identifying easy graders through Rate My Professor reviews and balancing that with the cost of required texts and the class schedule. He believed this approach served him in good stead as he was able to raise his GPA to a 3.5 and ultimately transfer to a four-year college. Kaleb too had a negative perceptiveness of college supports, which he saw as unhelpful and undermining. He explained his strong mistrust of those in a position to help at the college:

You're by yourself, you're by yourself... I'm talking about anyone in the school that's an authority, that has any type of authority... I don't feel that I can go to you and you'll help me in any way. I feel like I am by myself and anything that I have to learn, I'll have to learn it on my own.

The constellation of experiences and attitudes that led almost every study participant to reject the college's growing web of support services – services that were ostensibly designed and funded to improve college completion for precisely these students – reveals another troubling contradiction in the neoliberal funding paradigm. The fact that the college rationalizes the expansion of such services, in a moment of budgetary crisis, as part and parcel of its commitment to increasing racial equity only compounds this contradiction.

Structure: College as Obstacle

"The school doesn't change policy for you. I learned that the hard way."

Not only did the research participants eschew supports intended to bolster their college completion, this study revealed many instances in which the participants felt their academic progress was stymied by the college itself. Despite the investment in more staff and services, despite the rhetorical commitment to educational equity for this particular student population, to many study participants the college often felt like one more obstacle they had to work around to get a college degree. Interestingly, this was particularly the case for students in highly structured occupationally-oriented majors, those which most closely resemble the "guided pathways" approach to community college education advocated by CCA and many other community college reform agents, in which students' trajectory through college is mapped out for them in a tight

sequence of required courses (Bailey, 2017; Jenkins & Cho, 2014).

Kaleb, an academically strong student from Trinidad, left KCC in utter frustration after getting an "unofficial withdrawal" grade in a required course that was a prerequisite for his major. Though he admitted to missing a fair number of classes due to health issues, Kaleb contended that the attendance policy was not clearly articulated, and that he did not learn he had no chance of passing the course until the very end of the semester when the professor told him not to worry about missing the final exam. The unofficial withdrawal (which converts to an F) made him ineligible to apply to his intended major for an entire academic year as there is only one annual admissions cycle. After repeated, unsuccessful efforts on his part to negotiate a different outcome, he dropped out. Many months later, Kaleb was still bitter about this experience and KCC in general:

I learned that it doesn't matter your circumstances, if there is a certain policy in place, there is no way to get around that. It doesn't matter if that's your last class to graduate or if that's your last class to apply into another program. I learned that ... the school doesn't change policy for you. I learned that the hard way... It was a complete turn off. I really did not want to come back to this school.

Brandon, an adult student in his 40s, also experienced insurmountable obstacles in his chosen allied health major. Despite doing exceedingly well in his liberal arts and general education courses, Brandon struggled with the academic expectations of this occupational program which he described as both opaque and overly reliant on high stakes multiple choice exams for which he felt the classes did not adequately prepare him. After getting a C-minus in a foundational course, he found himself in a bureaucratic labyrinth of requirements about which he felt he was never properly advised. When he received an email telling him that he had been dismissed from the program and must find a new major, he was shocked and dismayed. Brandon approached the program to understand what had happened and was told that this information "was in the handbook. 'Didn't you read the handbook?' Of course I didn't read the handbook," Brandon explained. "I was bothered for a really good time," he revealed. Brandon left KCC rather than choose another major. He recounted that he felt like the college had a "corporate mentality" and had told him, "thanks a lot for your money. Get out."

Several study participants who excelled in their liberal arts classes strained under the prescribed curriculum of the occupational majors they had come to KCC to study. Of the six study participants with occupationally oriented majors, two dropped out of KCC early in their academic careers; two experienced the devastating academic setbacks described above; one was struggling to pass required courses in his major at the time the study concluded; and just one had successfully transferred to a four-year college to pursue his chosen major. These students' experiences fly in the face of the guided pathways philosophy which has come to predominate thinking on community college success and call into question the emphasis neoliberal reforms place on preparation for occupational attainment as the definition of

student success (Bailey, 2017; CCA, 2020; Jenkins & Cho, 2014). Setbacks that the study participants perceived to be minor, such as failing a particular class, proved to have devastating consequences when they disrupted the flow of tightly structured programs and led students to leave KCC in anger and disappointment. These findings are in line with other studies that show that community colleges themselves often have policies, practices, and procedures that negatively impact low-income students, many of whom are also Black and Latinx (Long, 2016; Harper & Kuykendall; 2012). The much touted, and pervasive, guided pathways approach to community college education – which calls for curricular “road maps” in the form of tight sequences of required courses – left little room for “snags in the road,” as Brandon called them, and ultimately proved detrimental to participants’ motivation to complete their college degrees. Though they did not work for many participants in this study, calls for guided pathways remain a core fixture of the community college completion agenda (Bailey, 2017; CCA, 2020; Jenkins & Cho, 2014).

Purpose: Mobility, Learning, and Growth

“I love school....it creates the person you come to be.”

Though pursuit of higher education was absolutely connected to their aspirations for upward mobility, for many of the study participants college was also a source of deep personal fulfillment and human growth. These parallel motivations for college attendance are too often left out of the neoliberal paradigm. Many participants’ beliefs about higher education are in tension with policies that view educational equity reductively as equivalent only to degree completion and occupational advancement, with little consideration for intellectual growth and student learning. Several of the most intellectually curious and academically engaged participants in the study changed their majors several times and faced their most serious academic challenges in lockstep vocational majors rather than in liberal arts courses. Though all of the study participants did aspire to upward mobility through higher education, this was not their only or primary source of motivation to attend college, especially on a day-to-day basis. Several of the participants were clear that long-term aspirations for economic mobility were not enough to get them up in the morning after working the night shift.

Miguel, for example, desperately hoped that a college degree would lead him on a path to a professional career and help him legalize his immigration status. Yet he also pursued his passion for art in college, despite his own father’s objections to this major as impractical and unworthy of study. Miguel defended his choice of major and students’ right to their educational ambitions as ultimately essential to their long-term academic success:

A lot of people are just studying things because they think there’s going to be money, but they don’t even like it. I remember I asked this kid once, “what’s your dream, what do you want to do?” He was like, “construction worker....” I was like, “Bro, what’s your passion?” And he was like, “I wanna be a DJ” and I was like, “study for that.”

Alex, a recent immigrant from Colombia who was also undocumented, echoed this commitment to college as being about personal growth and exploration not simply social mobility. For him, college was the process not just the end goal. Alex expressed disappointment in what he perceived as an overly instrumental attitude towards higher education at KCC, arguing, “Students come here just to pass a class, not to explore, not to learn, but life is about learning.”

When work compelled Kenya to take a semester off from college he described feeling what he called “an itch,” the feeling that “I really, really want to come back to school.” His rationale was deep and personal and in great contrast to his full-time work which he described as deadening. He explained, “I love school....90% of the person you become is from school... it creates the person you come to be.” Manny, a Puerto Rican man in his 50s who entered KCC after a period of incarceration, never expected to attend college. He was overjoyed at the opportunity KCC gave him to read, write, and learn. His motivation for remaining in college was simple: “The feeling I get when I leave here is happy. Tremendously happy.”

Of course, there was no unanimity among the study participants as to the purpose of college. A couple admitted outright that they saw little use for what Evens called “bullshit classes.” When asked what he would most like to change about KCC, Evens responded:

Don’t have no bullshit classes... I understand English and math, you need math to do your budget, but what the hell do you need history for? Sociology, biology for? You don’t need none of these classes that don’t focus on the major.

Hector, an African American young man, who dropped out of both KCC and the study after the second semester, put it plainly: “I don’t like school.” But the vast majority of participants were passionate about learning, a reminder that college completion for Black and Latino men must be about more than preparation for the job market.

Concluding Thoughts

One small study is not going to stem the inexorable tide of neoliberal educational reform which has washed across all facets of public education in the United States. However, I do believe that these findings provide strong evidence that the college completion agenda – with its laser focus on efficiency and outcomes – exacerbated the educational inequalities faced by the Black and Latino men who participated in this study. Not only did the implementation of neoliberal policies *not* lead to improved outcomes for the study participants, they were, in fact, often implicated in their educational struggles. Policies, like those promoted by CCA and explored in this study, that focus exclusively on time-to-degree and college completion while ignoring the massive obstacle of tuition-based funding formulas, served to reinforce and deepen long standing educational disparities.

My hope is that these findings inspire other qualitative studies that look beyond the numbers to students’ lived experience of neoliberal reforms. Perhaps a corpus of such

studies, if combined in meta-analysis, might begin to make some small chinks in the armor of college completion dogma. These studies must be part of a structural analysis of neoliberal reforms that moves beyond penalizing public colleges and their students for their poverty all the while replicating inequities that are hard baked into our economic and educational systems. If we really want to make college completion our “#1 priority,” as CCA claims, then we must take seriously the impact of years of austerity budgets that lay the responsibility for funding public higher education on individual students and their tuition dollars. What would likely have had the most profound and positive impact on the study participants’ abilities to remain in college is a shift from a tuition-based funding model to one that not only funds free college tuition as a public good, but provides other material supports to students (such as books and free transit passes).

Data collection for this study ended before the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to remote instruction upended higher education. The crisis that the pandemic has sparked will likely have lasting implications for community colleges. As of early 2021, first-time community college enrollment nationally had dropped 21%, with first-time enrollment for Black, Latinx, and Native American students down by about 29% (Lanahan). Thus, community colleges find themselves in a moment of reckoning. Either the current crisis will serve to deepen the trends noted in this analysis – an increased reliance on tuition to make up for state budget deficits; continued emphasis on increasing graduation rates through continuous full-time enrollment; and the implementation of rigid, occupationally oriented curricular pathways – or, more hopefully, will spark a new approach, one that reassesses what educational equity means and proposes varied and flexible paths for how to achieve it for all students, including and in conversation with Black and Latino men.

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