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“"I Am Going to College ... Now What?!”: Becoming a College Student

Renata Strashnaya

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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“I AM GOING TO COLLEGE…NOW WHAT?!“:
BECOMING A COLLEGE STUDENT

by

RENATA STRASHNAYA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2018
“I Am Going to College…Now What?!”: Becoming a College Student

by

Renata Strashnaya

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

“I Am Going to College…Now What?!”: Becoming a College Student

by

Renata Strashnaya

Advisor: Colette Daiute, Ed.D.

College enrollment rates are increasing across the nation at both 2-year and 4-year institutions (NCES, 2015). Nearly two-thirds of undergraduate students are under the age of 25 and enrollment numbers are increasing for every racial and ethnic group (NCES, 2012). The first year of college is often a critical time for growth and development for students who are transitioning from high school to college. As such, there is a call to restructure the first year of college by finding new ways to support student success (Tinto, 1993, 2002). This call is, however, in response to limited knowledge of the transition to college from students’ perspectives. Before we can restructure, scholars and educators need to better understand the transition to college: the process of becoming a college student. This dissertation study investigates how students make sense of their experience and process of becoming college students over time.

This study examined the transition to college over time from multiple perspectives—highlighting the perspectives of a diverse group of first-time college students in relation to the institution—in a large urban city university. Student narratives across multiple genres (i.e., letter to self, define a college student, and bio for website) in conjunction with responses to a
questionnaire about expectations and experiences were elicited at two critical time points: prior to attending college and after the completion of the first semester. Prior to attending college, 25 students participated in the study. Twenty of these students participated after the completion of the first semester. Faculty (n=5) narratives and the college’s mission statement were also collected and analyzed to explore the relationship between student, faculty and institution sense-making. This study used a mixed-methods approach to bring forth a detailed account about the fluidity and complexity that characterizes the process of becoming college students; thereby, capturing the transition to college as a life activity of growth and development. Through the use of an activity-meaning system design and rigorous narrative analysis (Daiute, 2014), a variability of perspectives across participants and time was hypothesized. The theoretical and methodological foundation for this study posits that becoming a college student is a dynamic and relational process mediating adult development and that student expectations prior to college are related to their experiences in college.

Recognizing that the meaning of becoming college students emerges from diverse perspectives and for diverse purposes and audiences, this study highlights different stakeholders’ interactions in a social system (i.e., public city college.) Values analysis (Daiute, 2014) was used to identify expressed diverse meanings and sense-making by different participants about the transition to college as a developmental life activity. Values are the guiding principles that individuals enact in their lives and which shape the ways individuals make sense of and understand their world as well as how they fit into different situations and contexts (Daiute, 2014). Values analysis revealed that for first-time college students, becoming an adult on one’s own terms, adopting a new work ethic, and becoming “somebody” are consistently important values over time, but in different ways. Becoming an adult on one’s own terms was the most
important value across all three genres, but it became less important across all genres after the
first semester. In contrast, adopting a new work ethic became more important over time across
all genres. Becoming “somebody” in the future grew in importance over time in the letter to self
and defining a college student narratives, but was absent in the bio for website genre. Adopting a
new label and embracing uncertainty, on the other hand, are unique values; their importance is
tied to particular narrative genres. The institutional perspective (i.e., college faculty and mission
statement) emphasizes promoting diversity; faculty members’ narratives and the college’s
mission statement are aligned in this respect. Although becoming an adult on one’s own terms is
also expressed by the institution, faculty responses and the college’s mission statement center on
different sub-values about what is important. Additionally, students’ expectations about
engaging in specific practices, such as making friends with people from different family
backgrounds or using campus recreational facilities, were generally not related to their
experiences; however, their overall expectations about connecting with new people and pursuing
new experiences were positively related to their reported experiences. Nevertheless, students
expected to partake in these activities more often than they did.

This study’s mixed methods research design serves as a template for future studies
aiming to capture the complexity of the transition to college as a developmental phenomenon and
its dynamic interaction with broader social contexts. This design explores change over time and
integrates multiple expressions around a topic by diverse participants for a deeper understanding
of principles that remain the same or diverge across different perspectives and purposes.
Moreover, this study moves beyond static representations of the transition to college by
approaching this phenomenon as a life activity and pathway to adulthood marked by change and
growth.
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I am grateful for my family of origin for instilling in me the belief that I can follow my passion and thrive, follow my heart and survive, and believe that anything is possible. Thank you, grandparents and parents, for raising me to be a curious and caring human being.

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did not see in myself. You helped me realize that my research interest in transitions (e.g., from college to professional world, from high school to college) was inspired by the way I have experienced my own life—that is, transitioning from magazine journalism to academia, from a college kid to a young professional, from a graduate student to a professor. You advised me to pursue my degree in Developmental Psychology when I was leaning toward a different subfield and, of course, you were right! I will carry your wisdom and kindness in my heart forever.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables........................................................................................................................................x
List of Figures..........................................................................................................................................xi
Abstract..................................................................................................................................................vi

CHAPTER I: EXPLORING THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE.................................................1
Introduction..............................................................................................................................................1
Building on existing literature..................................................................................................................3
  College transition as context to some other form of inquiry.................................................................5
  College transition as a developmental milestone..............................................................................6
  College transition as an ongoing process.............................................................................................7
  College transition as a developmental life activity ..............................................................................9

  Becoming a college student: Theoretical framework ...............................................................12

    Narrative as Sense-Making.............................................................................................................16

CHAPTER II: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS.......................................................20
Overview..............................................................................................................................................20
Research Design...................................................................................................................................20
Methods...............................................................................................................................................23
  Student participants............................................................................................................................25
  Faculty participants............................................................................................................................28
  Setting...............................................................................................................................................28
Data Analysis.........................................................................................................................................30
  Narrative data: Values analysis.........................................................................................................30
  Survey data: Correlation and change of score analysis..................................................................33

CHAPTER III: MAKING SENSE OF BECOMING A COLLEGE STUDENT.................35
Student perspective ................................................................. 35

(1) Becoming an adult on one’s own terms ........................................ 36
(2) Adopting a new work ethic .................................................. 55
(3) Becoming “somebody” in the future ..................................... 56
(4) Embracing uncertainty ...................................................... 58
(5) Adopting a new label ......................................................... 60

Summary of key takeaways ........................................................ 61

CHAPTER IV: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES IN RELATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION
STAKEHOLDERS’ PERSPECTIVES .................................................. 63

Faculty ..................................................................................... 63
Mission Statement ..................................................................... 66
Interaction of student and institutional perspectives .................... 67

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION ................................................................. 70

Summary of findings .................................................................. 73
Conclusion and implications for future research ......................... 79

Appendices ............................................................................... 80
Appendix A ............................................................................... 82
Appendix B ............................................................................... 88
Appendix C ............................................................................... 94
Appendix D ............................................................................... 95
References ............................................................................... 97
List of Tables

Table 1  Research Design: Research questions and activities ........................................23
Table 2  Student participants' age, race/ethnicity, and sex...............................................26
Table 3  Students’ socio-demographic information..........................................................27
Table 4  Letter to self narratives: Values analysis..............................................................39
Table 5  Define a college student narratives: Values analysis..........................................40
Table 6  Bio for website narratives: Values analysis.........................................................41
Table 7  Survey Items Representative of Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms: Connecting with New People and Pursuing New Experiences.................................................43
Table 8  Correlation Matrix for Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms: Connecting with New People (item-level analysis).................................................................47
Table 9  Correlation Matrix for Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms: Pursuing New Experiences (item-level analysis).................................................................49
Table 10 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation for Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms..50
Table 11 Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-test Results for Becoming an Adult: Connecting with New People.................................................................51
Table 12 Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-test Results for Becoming an Adult: Pursuing New Experiences.................................................................53
Table 13 Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-test Results for Becoming an Adult........54
Table 14 Faculty responses: Guiding and sub-values by genre..........................................64
List of Figures

Figure 1. Becoming an adult: Connecting with new people.........................................................45
Figure 2. Becoming an adult: Pursuing new experiences.............................................................46
CHAPTER I
Exploring the Transition to College

Introduction

Over the years, a college education has become a necessity for upward social mobility, including career and socio-economic mobility. Today a college degree is necessary for jobs that were once available for high school graduates and is, therefore, essential for many career goals (e.g., Astin & Oseguera, 2005). According to CollegeView.com, a website that provides resources and advice for college-bound individuals, attaining a college degree is a matter of opportunity because “The U.S. has been transformed from a manufacturing-based economy to an economy based on knowledge, and the importance of a college education today can be compared to that of a high school education forty years ago” (McGuire, n.d.). As such, for students who are considering or are already attending college, a college degree is not only about the prospect of learning new things, but is also about elevating (or at the very least, amending) their social status in the world. A college degree [re-] defines the way in which an individual sees him/herself in the world based on how he/she is perceived, treated, and regarded by others; in this case, of course, this is in direct relation to available opportunities (e.g., 'open doors’) and economic prospects (e.g., financial gain and stability). Even during a time of rising economic inequality, perceived upward mobility as a result of an individual’s hard work and merit remains the dream of many—including young adults who invest in the dominant ideology of the American dream (Shane & Heckhausen, 2013). Despite the reality of the inequality that permeates the American education system, many Americans perceive merit to be a key factor to social mobility in a society that legitimizes social hierarchies and views high social status as a personal achievement (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Shane, 2014).
Consequently, college enrollment rates are increasing across the board—at 2-year and 4-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). A national study found that nearly 70% of all students who complete high school enroll in college in the fall semester following their high school graduation (NCES, 2012). In 2015; for example, approximately 2.1 million of the 3.0 million individuals ages 16 to 24 who graduated from high school or completed a GED enrolled in college by the following October (NCES, 2017). Moreover, students who enroll in college immediately after high school have greater college completion rates than those who delay seeking a college degree (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). In 2009, about two-thirds of undergraduate students were under the age of 25 and enrollment numbers for each racial/ethnic group increased from previous years (NCES, 2012). At a time when employers voice their concerns about whether the United States is producing enough skilled and knowledgeable college graduates for organizations to expand and be successful (Association of American Colleges, 2014), college enrollment rates are expected to grow. According to the National Center for Education Statistics between fall 2012 and fall 2023, the projected increase is estimated to be about 15 percent (NCES, 2015). These statistics should draw our attention to the transition to college—particularly, to how students today experience this as they engage in higher education practices. For this study, the term transition refers to students’ on-going process of becoming college students for the first time in their lives—a significant life activity and pathway to adulthood. Understanding this life activity, which is embedded in cultural practices (e.g., attending class, studying, participating in extra-curricular activities, joining clubs, attending orientation sessions), helps to support the growing number of diverse students on this journey. Addressing the problem of student departure from college (or lack of student persistence), there is widespread recognition of the need to restructure the first year of college and to foster student
success (Tinto, 1993, 2002). Nevertheless, before first year college experience can be restructured, we, as scholars and educators, need to understand how students with varied prior histories make sense of the transition to college. As psychologists, we can look beyond the individual to understand and address the multiple perspectives and agents involved in this life activity. Thus, before we can argue about the best ways to engage students in effective activities and practices, we need to identify and describe those activities. As such, the focus of this research is to examine how first-time incoming freshmen experience, understand, and make sense of the transition to college as they engage in cultural practices of higher education. This engagement refers to practices that implicitly or explicitly encourage the adoption of particular norms and values construed as desirable in the context of higher education. These practices range from attending class and participating in freshman orientation sessions to managing time and seeking the help of more senior others when feeling lost or confused. As such, the practices often involve negotiations of new environments and memberships in different communities.

The next section discusses empirical and theoretical gaps in the literature specifically addressing the transition to college. Building on existing literature, I address these gaps and offer necessary next steps that would provide important insight about this life activity. Moreover, I discuss how this dissertation study addresses gaps in the literature by positioning the transition to college as a developmental life activity.

**Building on Existing Literature**

The interest in the transition to college has long been tied to the focus on persistence, referring to whether an individual remains enrolled in college/university long enough to graduate and obtains a degree as well as how (i.e., the mechanisms through which) they accomplish this. Tinto’s socialization theory (1993) dominates this literature. He argues that student persistence
largely depends on academic and social integration into college life. Others interested in retention emphasize identifying specific models for nontraditional students (Bean & Meltzer, 1985) and focusing on diversity in residence, employment, family commitments, participation in the community and college’s social life while recognizing adult learning needs (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). The interest in the transition to college is also grounded in a discussion about college access (e.g., Choy, 2001; Perna, 2006) and enrollment (e.g., Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Klasik, 2012). However, the focus of this dissertation is not on investigating retention, successful outcomes for individuals who enroll in college, college access or enrollment. ¹ This dissertation study rather seeks to define the transition to college from a phenomenological perspective and developmental standpoint. As such, the following discussion includes literature that specifically mentions the transition to college and which investigates changes and pathways related to this experience. Of interest is how the transition to college is defined (if it is defined at all) and conceptualized.

In this literature, the term “transition to college” is not directly clarified or defined; instead, the phrase is often based on either stated or implicit assumptions (i.e., it is the next step in academic pipeline) or appears as a set time point in the developmental trajectory of one’s life. It is often referred to as a crucial or critical step in achieving college success—whether it be retention, social integration, or attainment of a degree. In addition, current research often identifies the transition to college as a given point in time or phase in one’s life instead of an ongoing process—a process that is not only informed by personal characteristics of the students,

¹ This discussion does not include literature on retention, which focuses on financial constraints or selectivity of higher education institutions, nor does it review retention programs or the role of first-year programs on students’ satisfaction of or successful retention in an institution. For a review of retention programs, see Myers (2003). For more information on the effectiveness of services and communities developed in response to student needs, see Tinto (1997), Grubb (2001), and Muraskin & Lee (2004). It also does not include studies focusing on psychological adjustment or risk-factors (e.g., substance abuse, sexual behaviors) as it relates to counseling or health outcomes.
but one that is also situational and context-dependent. Even when the transition to college is defined as a process, academic factors are stressed and/or are the focus of inquiry, thus, overlooking or de-emphasizing other aspects of students’ lives. For instance, there is an underlying assumption that a college student is a traditional college student; someone who is familiar with the enrollment process and who is likely to go away to a four-year college. Even when other non-traditional students (e.g., first-generation) are studied, they are judged by the same criteria and are often compared to other “typical” students using the same set of standards. As such, nontraditional students who may be older, have full-time jobs, be financially independent, and/or be parents are judged by the same criteria as traditional students who are often younger, attend college right after high school, and are more likely to be financially supported by their parents so that they can focus on their studies.

The next three sections highlight current conceptualizations of the transition to college in the literature. The transition to college is presented as the following: (1) the context to some other form of inquiry, (2) a developmental milestone, and (3) an ongoing process.

**College transition: The context to some other form of inquiry.** The college transition is conceptualized as a set point in time in individuals’ lives—a particular point in time in young adulthood ideal for exploring changes in the attachment relationship between parent and child (Larose & Bolvin, 1998), the influence of shyness, sociability, and parental support on loneliness (Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006), and the impact of perceptions of family dynamics and university belonging and friendship quality on college adjustment (Johnson, Gans, Kerr, and LaValle, 2010; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). While research with such foci offers important insights about life factors that contribute to a positive adjustment to college (i.e., perceived security in attachment relationships to parents, higher social interaction and parental
support, perceived cohesion of the family unit, and a greater sense of university belonging and positive friendship quality), the studies fail to recognize the transition to college as a developmental process in itself worthy of investigation.

The next set of studies regards the transition to college not necessarily as a point in time—that is, a context for something else that is more interesting (or valuable) to explore—but as a developmental milestone in which the goal is a successful college transition.

**College transition: A developmental milestone.** The transition to college is viewed as a rite of passage, which is successfully resolved by some, but not others. Working under the general assumption that there are five steps in the pipeline to college\(^2\), the transition to college is seen as something to anticipate and accomplish—generally, in the first year of college. Achievement in this context refers to graduating high school and enrolling in college. Some studies focus on factors that facilitate or hinder the accomplishment of this milestone as well as how some students (and why others do not) succeed at achieving this milestone. For instance, Choy, Horn, Nunez and Chen (2000) found that students who had been at risk for dropping out of high school due to family characteristics (e.g., coming from a low socioeconomic status or single-parent family) or school experiences (e.g., repeating grades, changing schools often) were more likely to enroll in college if many of their friends had college plans. These students were also more likely to enroll if their parents or high school outreach programs frequently discussed school-related matters with them. Focusing on students who were successful in transitioning to college, Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found that students’ in-college experiences mattered

\(^2\) The pipeline to college requires students to: (1) aspire to a bachelor’s degree early enough to take the necessary preparatory steps, (2) prepare academically to a minimal level of qualification, (3) take the SAT or ACT, (4) apply to a four-year college, and (5) gain acceptance and enroll (Choy et al., 2000, p. 49).
more than their background characteristics in predicting this milestone. Identifying the transition to college as an important milestone in emerging adulthood, Lefkowitz (2005) found that this milestone was marked by perceived positive changes in the quality of relationships with parents along with changes in religious views and sexuality (more so in attitude than behavior). Such findings emphasize how different variables—student participation in school, parent and peer engagement with learning, and college preparation activities—interact with groups of individuals whose path to college may not be a given or direct route. Still, the studies discussed in this section conceived of the transition to college as a developmental milestone—something to aspire to and to accomplish. As such, the transition to college is seen in relatively narrow terms—as a success or a failure (albeit, not always explicitly). Moreover, transition often refers to enrollment in college, disregarding the experience beyond registration or first days of attendance. The next set of studies treats the transition to college as a process, thereby recognizing its ongoing nature marked by opportunities of development and growth.

**College transition: An ongoing process.** The research studies discussed in this section recognize that the transition to college is a process that is constructed over time, as students become members of academic and social communities. Focusing on the transition process from work or high school to college, Terenzini et. al. (1994) argued that the transition to college is a multifaceted phenomenon and that the nature and dynamics of the process differed depending on such factors as family and educational background, educational and occupational orientations, institutional mission and vision, encounters with peer and staff (including the purpose of those encounters) as well as varying interactions among these factors. For traditional students (students who come from families who attended college, for whom college is the next obvious step, and who are primarily White) college was seen as a continuation in their life passage. For first-
generation students, college was seen as a disjunction. For first-generation students, college was not the foreseen next step, but was a disruption to what was expected or was the norm in the family (e.g., work, marriage). According to Terenzini et al. (1994), students discussed the college transition in relation to “real learning,” which referred to learning about oneself and the ability to redesign oneself, discovering what one was good at, and becoming more autonomous. They described this transition as a cooperative activity—to be shared and experienced with others. They underscored the importance of having validating experiences not just inside the classroom, but also with friends, family, staff, faculty, and community. Moreover, Clark (2005) found that students use different strategies to adjust to the positive and negative challenges that they experience as they navigate “an ongoing process of assessing the person-environment-behavior dynamics, and adjusting strategies as those dynamics changed and evolved” (Clark 2005, p. 309). In a study about the relationship between student behaviors and institutional practices, Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2008) stressed the importance of viewing student success as a multidimensional outcome that takes time and involves adapting to change and persistence. The researchers examined and found a positive relationship between student engagement (defined as time spent studying, time spent in co-curricular activities, and a global measure of engagement in educational practices represented by a selection of National Survey of Student Engagement items) with academic achievement (grades) and persistence (from first to second year of college). In terms of evaluating outcomes (e.g., skills, values, and behaviors), Zhang and Smith’s (2001) investigation into the differences in the transition experiences of Black and White students demonstrated that college transition experiences are ongoing and that demographic characteristics, family background, and students’ prior social and academic experiences were as important as the people, programs, policies, cultures and experiences
provided by the college. In addition, in a study exploring Mexican-American students’ experiences attending an urban institution, Attinasi (1989) found that peer interactions on campus helped students navigate their new environment. This qualitative study identified social interactions as a key contributor to first-generation Latino/a students’ management of their college environments, which had a positive effect on their decision to stay in college.

The aforementioned studies emphasize the multidimensional nature of the college transition (e.g., inside and outside of the classroom) by highlighting the dynamic nature of this process and exploring how students themselves view and interpret this process (i.e., infused with “real learning,” cooperative activity, and validation). Aside from recognizing that the transition to college is an ongoing process, the overall findings suggest the importance of investigating how students make sense of this process of growth and development as they engage and interact with others—whether it is through direct contact with peers and faculty or by encountering institutional messages or policies.

**College transition as a developmental life activity.** Findings from previous studies demonstrate that the transition to college is a process marked by change, reorganization, agency and (dis)continuity. These studies underscore important facets of the college transition process—for instance, changing family relations, negotiating of new environments and memberships in different communities. However, they generally fail to investigate the transition to college as a multidimensional developmental process in itself. More research is needed to examine the transition to college by recognizing that it is a developmental process that does not end on the first day of class or during the first semester in college, but that it continues as students make sense of the world around them and their place in it. A recent study in which community college students narrated their best and worst experiences in college (Daiute &
Kreniske, 2016) supports this need. Daiute and Kreniske the values organizing 382 student narratives and found that, across multiple narratives, diverse students identified the importance of developing as an overarching value.

This dissertation builds on current knowledge and fills in existing gaps in the literature by exploring the ongoing process of becoming college students from the students’ perspective across time. Students’ narratives of their expectations and experiences are also examined within the context of institutional discourses (i.e., college mission statements and faculty narratives). As such, this study builds on current literature, particularly research that conceives of the transition to college as an ongoing process (Attinasi, 1989; Terenzini et al., 1994; Zhang & Smith, 2001; Clark 2005; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea 2008).

Additionally, most of the current literature about the transition to college is based on research conducted using questionnaires and structured interviews as the primary modes of inquiry, with academic predictors and outcomes as the main areas of focus. Although these measures and numeric outcomes inform us about whether and how participants endorse scale items about pre-determined aspects of college, such research methods do not account for broader aspects of the human experience during a critical time in adult development. More often than not, participants respond to preformed questions, resulting in the (re-)production of existing categories and narrow focus on student success exclusively in academic terms. As such, researcher and institutional accounts are often privileged over the actual experiences and perspectives of participants who are transitioning to college while simultaneously engaging with multiple social worlds. First-time college students, individuals who are attending college for the first time in their lives, can offer important insights which may enhance our understanding and definition of this developmental transition in young adults’ lives. Of interest here, is how these
individuals characterize the transition to college over time as they participate in the institution of college as well as whether their expectations prior to college are related to their experience.

Moreover, studies that only use quantitative methods often offer intriguing findings, but the discussions behind the numbers are not available. A phenomenological approach allows for a picture with a personal voice to emerge about what is actually happening and what is most important in the lives of individuals—thus, enacting meaning across diverse relational stances. Narrative is appropriate in this context, critical to our understanding about how people interpret and make sense of surrounding situations and changes in their environment and relate it to their own lives and practices. When students are positioned as active agents in the construction of knowledge rather than solely regarded as objects of research, they can inform researchers and institutions to (re-)consider perspectives and policies that do not always match the lived experiences of the populations they serve. Equally as important, a narrative approach allows us to focus on new college students—individuals who are often overlooked—to enrich our understanding about how these actors are situated in their daily lives (Daiute, 2014; Bruner, 1986). To do so, the focus needs to be on how participants narrate this life activity across multiple genres (e.g., letter, text message) and audiences (e.g., self, peers) by paying special attention to how actors are using cultural elements from a “tool kit” of cultural symbols, such as stories or rituals, to problem solve and become adult members of society (Swidler, 1986; Cole, 1996). The relationship people may have to objects and other people in specific environmental contexts often provide a variety of opportunities (Heft, 2007) and since material things structure individuals’ interactions with the environment (Latour, 2005; Valsiner, 1987), individuals appropriate diverse material and symbolic factors for various reasons and purposes. For example, we need to pay attention to the use of cultural packages (or “givens”) in narrative with a focus on
what the narrators want to do with them and in what context. It is also important to consider how participants use narrative to frame and make sense of their thoughts and experience—including those about beliefs, events and people—in culturally scripted ways (Bruner, 1991; Nelson, 1981).

Building on current literature with a focus on aforementioned limitations, the next section provides an overview of this study’s theoretical framework and rationale.

**Becoming a College Student: Theoretical Framework**

The majority of the research about the transition to college centers on retention, academic outcomes, social adjustment and related factors that affect students’ experience in college. While this research is interesting and informative, it tells us little about what is actually going on in young people’s lives—particularly, about how first-time college students make sense of the process of becoming college students as they are going through this process. As such, this dissertation study is a phenomenological investigation into the complexity of meanings stemming from freshman students’ participation in college toward understanding the transition to college as a developmental life activity. This study investigates how incoming freshman students characterize the process of becoming college students over time as well as how their sense-making interacts with the institution (i.e., college’s mission statement and faculty). This inquiry is in line with recent research that aims to make sense of individuals’ experience in a college setting, with particular focus on how one fits into his/her environment and how one’s sense-making affects his/her experience (Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Ahmed, 2017).

Building on this literature, this dissertation explores the transition to college as a developmental life activity, within the framework of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990). This inquiry necessitates consideration of person in context. Sociocultural
theorists argue that human development occurs in the context of their social interactions. People develop and change through interpreting their daily life experiences within their cultural contexts. Being that individuals develop by making sense of their experiences within cultural contexts, to understand the transition to college, this study explores how students’ sense-making changes or remains the same over time.

This study investigates how students characterize the transition to college—a term referring to students’ on-going process of becoming college students for the first time in the lives, a significant life activity and pathway in adulthood. Special attention is paid to the multi-directional relationship between individuals and their environments with the recognition that this process takes place within an institutional context—the college or university—and, therefore, involves and interacts with institutionally embedded discourses and practices, which promote specific values over others. In this way, the transition to college is explored across diverse activity meaning systems, which are daily environments marked by dynamic and constantly changing relationships with important social partners (Daiute, 2014). Individuals participate and navigate an activity-meaning system (Daiute, 2014); their narratives interact with environments and key stakeholders in those environments as they make sense of and reflect on their experiences and worldview. An examination of different points of view by different actors around an important issue is possible with an activity-meaning system design. This design identifies key stakeholders (in this case, students, faculty, and institutional mission statement) and elicits dynamic narrating, referring to “diverse expressions of experiences and knowledge by focal participants for diverse relevant purposes and diverse audiences and contexts” (Daiute, 2014, p.39).
The college/university is a site in which adolescents and young adults are socialized to be college students and in which values associated with being a college student are introduced, reinforced, and recreated based on broader societal discourse—for instance, changes in economy and upward social mobility. For example, potential students who are regarded as part of an imagined college community often encounter messages about what it means (or takes) to be an ideal college student—someone who excels at managing time, is responsible, can prioritize efficiently, studies and works hard, and is smart. Faculty at higher education institutions often set expectations about what it takes to master the college student role and students try to figure out what these (implicit and explicit) expectations are and how they can meet them (Collier & Morgan, 2008). More broadly, higher education institutions, in accordance with other organizations, promote normative conduct and values in implicit and explicit ways. For example, an analysis of community college mission statements during 1990s revealed that the institutional purpose changed from self and community improvement to economic gains and work preparation in response to demands set by the private sector (Levin, 2000). As such, institutions (re-)create societal discourses and provide the scripts which students can draw on and enact as they try to make sense of themselves during the process of becoming college students. In this study, students’ narratives are explored within the broader context provided that they occur within an activity-meaning system, which prioritizes real-life environments, relationships across stakeholders and specific narrating activities (Daiute, 2014). Across diverse developmental phenomena and sociocultural contexts, individuals use narrating as a tool to relate to and negotiate their environments and to make sense of their experiences and how they fit in the world (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992; Nelson, 1998; Daiute, 2004, 2010; 2014; Daiute, Todorova, & Kovacs-Cerovic, 2015; Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Ahmed, 2017). In this study, the transition to
college, a developmental life activity, is explored within the activity meaning system of the college in which students and institution (i.e., faculty and college’s mission statement) interact. Moreover, identifying how first-time college students navigate college life by using what is available to them—be it materials or practices—to individually tailor it for their own purposes is essential. There may be specific values that students encounter that are reflective of the educational institution they are attending or the system of higher education at large. Such values can be defined as “culturally-specific ways of knowing, feeling, and acting in response to environmental, economic and social circumstances—a definition based on socio-cultural theory” (Daiute, Stern, & Lelutiu-Weinberger, 2003, p.85). Stemming from the position that meaning is about the interaction in which individuals can take up certain practices but also transform them, the values that are being exchanged are of particular interest. Furthermore, how these values acquire meaning is not just dependent on the individual, but on the interaction between the individual and others in various situations—in other words, the individual and society (Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1986).

For the reasons outlined above, cross-actor interactions (i.e., student and academic institution) are important considerations for any inquiry about the transition to college. Recognizing that existing studies largely relied on students’ self-report measures and generally considered individual perspectives on their own terms instead of judging them against mainstream values and behaviors (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000), this study engages multiple actors (e.g., student, faculty, institution) for a more relational and dynamic understanding of the transition to college. Students’ interactions both with and within the college context serve as important sites of learning about students’ expectations and experiences during their first semester of college (and beyond). In this study, higher education
institutional discourses refer to the authorized discourses that are sanctioned by the college/university (i.e., mission statements) and unauthorized discourses espoused by faculty members working for the institution. Both official and unofficial discourses provide acceptable scripts about what it means to be a college student and suggest privileged knowledge about what it takes to be successful in an academic setting and, later, in the “real world” as a contributing member of society. These norms and values are often shared through various types of interaction and communication between institution, faculty, and student. For example, to encourage student success and retention, a college’s mission statement might emphasize persisting and overcoming obstacles as an important value in its mission statement, freshman orientation sessions, and professional development seminars.

Exploring the transition to college as a developmental life activity from a sociocultural perspective, this study’s two main research questions are as follows:

(1) How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of becoming college students over time (Research Question 1)? And, (2) how does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses (Research Question 2)? The next section discusses the importance of narrative as a sense-making approach as well as how this approach guided this study’s design, methods and analysis. This section is followed by methods and procedures, in which details are provided about how narrative activities and survey responses were integrated to address this study’s research questions.

**Narrative as sense-making.** Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) discuss the importance of identifying how students define and understand constructs often measured by psychologists. They propose qualitative studies that document engagement specifically from students’ personal perspectives. Additionally, a phenomenological approach to qualitative research provides a
unique opportunity to explore how students draw connections between personal relationships and academic development. For example, in a case study of a Hispanic first-generation student, Pyne and Means (2013) reported that minority voices are often underrepresented and invisible; how one (re-)authors himself/herself as a college student is important in recognizing the gap between what is and what should be (p. 189). Moreover, the idea of a college student—or, rather, a “good” college student—is a cultural ideal made possible through available discourses. As such, what it means to become a college student can only be understood by examining the connection between discourses and social contexts. As such, discourses cannot be fully understood apart from the specific contexts and situations in which (or for which) they are created (Wood & Kroger, 2000; Daiute, 2014). Highlighting how individuals express values, beliefs, social identities, attitudes, and worldviews, people share stories—stories that confirm, negate, and negotiate those values, beliefs, social identities, attitudes, and worldviews—through narrative. Simply put, narrating requires individuals to make sense of their lives and place in society, especially as it relates to their daily routines and the environments they occupy (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992; Nelson, 1998; Daiute, 2004). In this way, narrating is a “tool people use to engage with diverse others and with the mutual development of society and the self” (Daiute 2014, p. xvii).

So, if narratives are about making sense of what individuals know and feel, what stories do students transitioning to college enact about their experience? Recognizing the multiplicity of people’s perspectives and experiences, of interest is how incoming students make sense of the process of becoming college students. Imperative to this exploration is how people use storytelling to make sense of their daily lives by complying with, rejecting, or altering perceived ideals and expectations (Daiute, 2004; Reyes, 2011). According to Davies and Harre (1999):
Social structures are coercive to the extent that to be recognizable and acceptable a person we must operate within their terms. But the concept of a person that we bring to any action includes not only that knowledge of external structures and expectations but also the idea that we are not only responsible for our own lives but that there are multiple choices in relation to the possible lines that we can produce but to the form of the play itself…but we are also the multiple audiences that view any play and bring it to the multiple and often contradictory interpretations based on our own emotions, our own reading of the situation and our own imaginative positioning of ourselves in the situation (emphasis added, Davies & Harre, 1999, p. 42).

This view rejects understanding narrative on its own or equating it with the identity of its narrator. Instead it focuses on the relationship between narrative—including stories and everyday talk—and socially constructed cultural norms and institutional discourses (Ochs & Capps, 2001), with careful consideration of the audience for whom the narrative is intended (Bakhtin, 1986; Daiute, 2013). For example, connecting small-scale events (e.g., being late to class) to broader discourses (e.g., time management as a key aspect of academic success) offers a glimpse into how powerful discourses at the institutional and societal levels are reproduced and/or interpreted in personal narratives.

Furthermore, narrative analysis illuminates cultural forces while paying close attention to how the individual actively negotiates them within an activity-meaning system (Daiute, 2014). This is an important contribution because personal narratives are constructed and situated in social and institutional worlds, and therefore should be examined through those lenses simultaneously (Daiute, 2014; Souto-Manning, 2014). In this way, how an individual views
him/herself—including his/her place in the world—is not about discovering fixed entities; instead, it is about beliefs about the self which do not necessarily form a unified coherent whole (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004). There are shifts in how people think about themselves, which is evident in their shifting positions marked by different storylines (Davies & Harre, 1999) and these shifts become more visible through engagement with multiple genres (Daiute, 2014; Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Ahmed, 2017). In this way, narratives highlight the back and forth movement between compliance and non-compliance with dominant narratives in the larger society (Bamberg, 2004) and allow individuals to connect with others and reflect on those relationships (Bamberg, 2012).

The audience—whether real, perceived, or imagined—is an integral part of understanding the story. Identifying to whom the story is being told (or even for whose benefit) highlights the possible conditions under which norms are accepted, challenged and/or transformed. Additionally, the particular cultural scripts individuals are engaging with are brought to light in their narratives. In a culture that places importance on having a coherent story about oneself, a change in audience makes a shift in focus and meaning possible. As such, each narrative is purposeful and intentional. Meaning is not ingrained in the mind of the individual but “could be understood only as an ongoing process, an active construction by people, with the help of cultural resources” (Shore, 1996, p. 6-7), which are embedded in social relations across historical time and space (Daiute, 2014; Glick, 2014; Vygotsky, 2004).

The next chapter presents this study’s research design. A detailed discussion of the study’s methods and procedures informs how data was collected and how narrative activities and items from survey questionnaires about expectations and experiences were integrated to address this study’s research questions.
CHAPTER II

Research Design and Methods

Overview

In line with the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, narratives and narrative analysis were used to address this study’s research questions: (1) a. How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of becoming college students? b. How does this characterization change over the course of the first semester? And, (2) how does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses? Narrating involves individuals making sense of their lives and place in society, especially as it relates to their daily routines and the environments they occupy (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992; Nelson, 1998; Daiute, 2004). This dissertation study utilized research methods and design that engaged participants’ multiple perspectives about a significant developmental life activity, specifically the process of becoming college students. Additionally, students’ responses to specific survey items, which complement their narratives around a major value, were analyzed for a more detailed account of the transition to college over time. Student responses were assessed via surveys administered at two time points (i.e., prior to attending college and after the first semester). Of interest were the changes and continuities in students’ expectations and experiences. As such, students’ responses to survey items were used in conjunction with their narratives to address both parts of the first research question.

Research Design

This dissertation study’s methods are guided by an activity-meaning system design, which “depicts an environment of everyday life…wherein relationships across different points of
view by different actors in the system interact in some way” (Daiute, 2014, p.38). In this study, narrating across multiple genres, time, and stakeholders is used to address the research questions in order to understand the transition to college as a developmental life activity. Three specific genres were used: letter to self, define a college student, and bio for website. A letter to self, for example, addresses the person explicitly (and potential readers implicitly); thus, allowing the individual to express and make sense of their experience in a more personal way. The bio for website genre, on the other hand, addresses a wider audience (e.g., college community); thereby, affording a different type of expression from a different position. As such, participants provided narrative responses to various prompts (representing the different genres) that allowed them to take different perspectives on making sense of the transition to college prior to attending college and then after the first semester. These systematic narrating activities allowed for a deeper analysis and exploration of differences and continuities across genres and over time. Moreover, faculty participated in narrative activities and the mission statement was used as yet another perspective to better understand how diverse stakeholders with different positions interact in making sense of the transition to college.

Recognizing the interaction of different actors in the system and their perspectives, faculty members (i.e., institutional stakeholders) also participated in the study. Faculty members were asked to respond to open-ended prompts, which were similar to the prompts completed by student participants. For consistency and to enable later comparison across perspectives, the prompts were aligned to student prompts as much as possible. Responses to the following three prompts were explored for this study:  (1) You have been asked to write a short piece for your college’s website announcing incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe these students. What do you want or think is important for the college
community to know about these students? (2) Write a letter to incoming freshman students about your experience teaching in college? What do you consider to be important? What would you like for them to know (e.g., your goals, expectations)? And (3) how would you define a college student? For descriptive purposes, faculty were also asked about which department they worked for, which classes they prefer to teach, if they were full or part time employees, how many years they have been teaching, and their job title (e.g., professor, assistant professor, lecturer).

The college’s mission statement was also obtained from the academic year of 2014 to 2015. The mission statement was available on the college’s website and served as an authorized institutional discourse. As such, the mission statement served as another facet of the institutional perspective in a system across which multiple actors are making sense of the transition to college as a life activity.

Data collected from these multiple sources was used to investigate the following research questions: (1) a. How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of becoming college students? b. How does this characterization change over the course of the first semester? And, (2) how does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses? Table 1 outlines specific research activities and analyses used to address each research question.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Research Activity</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. a. How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of <em>becoming</em> college students?</td>
<td>1. Student narratives (Time 1 and Time 2)</td>
<td>1. Narrative analysis: Values analysis (across time points)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. b. How does this characterization change over the course of the first semester?</td>
<td>2. CSXQ (Time 1), CSEQ (Time 2)</td>
<td>2. Correlation and change of scores analysis (paired t-test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses?</td>
<td>1. Student narratives</td>
<td>1. 2. &amp; 3. Narrative analysis: Values analysis (Student perspective: across time points)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Faculty narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. College mission statement</td>
<td>(Institutional perspective: single time point)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next section outlines this study’s research methods and procedures. In addition to a providing a description of the narrating activities used in this study at both time points, it describes other data that was collected. For descriptive purposes, socio-demographic data was collected prior to students’ attendance in college. Participants also responded to survey questions before and after attending college about their expectations and experiences, which expand and complement narrative responses.

**Methods**

Student participants were invited to respond to open-ended prompts designed for various purposes (e.g., letter to self, bio for website) and for different audiences (e.g., self, friend, college community). At Time 1, prior to attending college, the prompts included the following: (1) Write a letter to yourself about your experience as a college student. What does it mean to you to be a
college student? What does it mean to your family, friends, community, and society? (2) How would you define a college student? And (3) you have been asked to write a student bio for your college’s website announcing incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe yourself as a college student. How do you see yourself? What do you want or think is important for your college to know about you? At Time 2, after the first semester, the prompts were updated to the following: (1) Write a letter to yourself about your experience as a college student. What does it mean to you to be a college student? What does it mean to your family, friends, community, and society? (2) How would you define a college student? And (3) you have been asked to write a student bio for your college’s website announcing next year’s incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe a typical incoming freshman college student (imagine that one of your friends would be among this group). What do you want or think is important for your college to know about this student? The shift in genres and audience allowed for a sampling of different perspectives and changes in purpose; thereby, varying the participant’s stance. Open-ended prompts were designed to collect narrative responses from incoming students about their experiences as they interact with multiple social worlds and tailor their messages to different audiences (i.e., self, peers, and wider college community).

In addition to open-ended narrative responses, student participants were also asked to respond to items from the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) before attending college and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) after their first semester of college. The CSXQ was used to assess students’ expectations prior to ever attending college; whereas the CSEQ was used to assess students’ experiences in college after they completed their first semester. The CSXQ and CSEQ were designed by Robert Pace and George Kuh and
published by the Indiana University Center for the Study of Postsecondary Research. The questionnaires were designed to measure expectations (CSXQ) and experiences (CSEQ) of undergraduate college students. As such, these questionnaires allow for an investigation of the relationship between student expectations and experiences over the course of the first semester in college—particularly, the changes and continuities in students’ expectations and experiences. (For a list of all questions as they appeared in the online assessment, see Appendices A and B.) Furthermore, of interest were students’ responses to specific survey items, which complement and provide a more detailed and in-depth account of their narratives (collected as responses to open-ended prompts) around the process of becoming college students. In addition, socio-demographic questions, such as information about family life (e.g., educational attainment, income, living arrangements) and prior academic preparation, were included in the survey for a more holistic view of diverse college students’ lived experiences.

**Student participants.** Incoming freshmen at Big City College responded to an online assessment before attending college (end of Summer 2014) and again at the end of their first semester in college (Winter 2015). Participants were high school graduates who were enrolled in a 4-year public higher education institution for the first time in their lives. They were first-time college students and were considered freshmen during the fall 2014 semester; as such, at Time 1, participants had not yet attended a college/university as a college student for more than a week and, at Time 2, they had just completed their first semester of college. Twenty-five participants participated in the study at Time 1; twenty of the same participants participated at Time 2. First-time college students were recruited because it was important that participants did not have previous knowledge or experience as college students; thus, they were engaging in this life activity for the first time in their lives.
Tables 2 and 3 provide descriptive data about the participants in this study. Table 2 presents information about participants’ age, race/ethnicity, and sex. Table 3 presents socio-demographic data, which offers additional insight into their background, family, and college plans.

Table 2

*Student participants' age, race/ethnicity, and sex*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Participants</th>
<th>Time 1 n=25</th>
<th>Time 2 n=20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Native American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Students’ socio-demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family's Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 28% did not have siblings; of those who had siblings, 33% had siblings with a bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 11% with a master’s degree or higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 22% with an associate’s degree, 22% with a high school degree, 22% with a master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as their father’s highest degree and 12% did not know their mother’s;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• of those who knew, 40% reported a high school diploma as their mother’s and 28% as their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 20% reported an associate’s or bachelor’s degree as their mother’s and 24% as their father’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 8% as their father’s highest degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 76% lived with parents and/or grandparents—and of those, 28% lived with parents/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• grandparents and other relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 12% lived with a roommate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 88% percent lived with 2 or more people—and of those, 48% lived with 4 or more people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 68% reported a family income of $59,999 or below—and of those, 48% reported $39,999 or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 52% of the participants reported that Big City College was their first choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• All participants expected to graduate from college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 92% expect to continue their education beyond an associate’s degree, while 8% were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• uncertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 60% expect to continue beyond a bachelor's degree, while 40% were uncertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 68% were registered for 14 or more credits in their first semester of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 48% relied on more than one source to afford college tuition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 36% relied on parents (12% fully, 24% partially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 52% relied on financial aid (20% fully, 32% partially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 24% expected to work (8% fully, 16% partially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 32% relied on scholarships (12% fully, 20% partially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• • 16% relied on savings (only partially)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 68% expected to work while in school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 64% grew up in the same borough as Big City College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 20% grew up outside of New York City or the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 76% were born in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student participants were recruited at freshman orientation events and classes. Prospective participants were told about the study and received a flyer with the title of the project, criteria, and the researcher’s contact information (see Appendix D). If they were interested, prospective participants contacted the researcher via email. The researcher responded via email with a brief explanation about the study and general criteria for participation. For instance, participants needed to be high school graduates who were currently enrolled but not yet attending college/university as a college student. Potential participants were provided with a link directing them to the study’s assessment. After completing the online assessment, each participant received a $10 gift card to Amazon.com or Starbucks as a “thank you” for his/her participation. After the end of the first semester, participants were contacted and invited to participate in a follow-up assessment. Participation in the second assessment also resulted in a $10 gift card for each participant as a token of appreciation.

**Faculty participants.** Faculty members teaching at Big City College, the college in which student participants were enrolled, were recruited with a general email describing the study and a link to the online assessment (see Appendix C for a full list of questions). Five faculty members from various departments responded to the survey. Four of the faculty were full-time professors at the following levels: assistant (n=2), associate (n=1), and full (n=1). The other faculty member was a full-time lecturer (15+ years). They taught in the following departments: psychology (n=2), business (n=2), and accounting (n=1).

**Setting.** Big City College (B.C.) is a four-year liberal arts institution with approximately 125 undergraduate and graduate degree programs and is part of a larger city university system. Annual enrollment is approximately 17,000 students (13,600 undergraduate and 3,400 graduate
students). The college is known for its rigorous academics and diverse student body (students come from 150 nations and speak 105 languages). Approximately 61% of the students are female and 39% are male. Most students are White (30%), Black or African American (18%), Hispanic (15%) and Asian (14%). According to the admission’s office brochure, the students’ mean SAT score is 1150 and the faculty to student ratio is 16 to 1. Undergraduate tuition for in-state residents is approximately $3,000 per semester for full-time students and approximately $530 per credit for international and out-of-state full- or part-time students.

A student interested in attending Big City College must apply using a centralized admissions system used for all City University colleges. A freshman applicant is defined as someone who is “currently in high school or has not previously attended any college, university and/or proprietary school within or outside the United States since graduating from high school or secondary school” (http://cuny.edu/admissions/undergraduate/prepare.html).

The steps for undergraduate admissions include exploring different college options, application preparation, checking deadlines, applying, checking application status, and, finally, admission. According to the central admissions’ website for the entire City University system, the admission review process assesses an applicant’s high school academic record (i.e., academic units, grades, essays, standardized test scores, and letters of recommendation) as well as his/her extracurricular involvements and special accomplishments “along with academic achievements in light of life experiences or special circumstances” (http://cuny.edu/admissions/undergraduate/prepare/prepare-as-a-freshman.html). Moreover,

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3 This information is based on the 2014-2015 academic year, the academic year during which the data for this study was collected.
students are encouraged to check the “Freshman Admission Profile,” which states the mean grade point average and SAT scores for the previous year’s admitted freshman class.

**Data Analysis**

To address the research questions guiding this study, a mixed methods approach was utilized to analyze collected data. Narrative analysis was used to answer the following research questions: (1) a. How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of *becoming* college students? b. How does this characterization change over the course of the first semester? And, (2) How does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses? In addition, statistical analysis was used to address both parts of the first research question. To address question 1(a), means of student responses on relevant items\(^4\) on the CSXQ were recorded and plotted in a bar graph. For question 1(b), expectations prior to attending college were explored in relation to subsequent behavior in college using a correlation and paired t-test analysis.

**Narrative inquiry: Values analysis.** From the position that meaning stems from the interaction in which individuals can not only take up certain practices but also transform them, student and faculty responses along with the institutional mission statement were analyzed using narrative analysis. More specifically, values analysis (Daiute, 2014) was used to identify the different values exchanged and how these values acquire meaning not just in the individual, but in the interactions between individual and society. Values are the guiding principles people enact in their lives, which shape how individuals make sense of how they fit into and understand their world (Daiute, 2014). In addition to student narratives, faculty narratives, along with the

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\(^4\) Twelve survey items, which were conceptually representative of the major narrative values—becoming an adult on one’s own terms—were examined. Eight of these items referred to the sub-value of connecting with new people. The other four items referred to the sub-value of pursuing new experiences.
institution’s mission statement were analyzed to better understand multi-actor interactions and relationships within the context of higher education—a context in which specific values are established and encouraged. Multiple perspectives were utilized to reveal areas of tension and consistency, both of which promote change and growth.

Focusing on “narrating as a site of development because it is an activity of social cohesion entailing interactions among individuals’ values and actions, which relate dynamically in culturally heterogeneous societies” (Daiute, 2004, p.112) enables us to grasp what is shared and culturally agreed upon—explicitly acknowledged and implicitly practiced (macro)—as well as the values people share individually (micro). By including multiple actors (e.g., students, faculty), this study’s research design allowed for narratives of shared and conflicting meanings. Of particular interest were the values that participants take up (confirm), resist (contest), or negotiate/transform (center)—values that are often expressed by institutions and other “elite agents” in their lives (Daiute, 2004). Incoming college students’ narratives across multiple genres highlighted the contradictions, tensions, and negotiations surrounding what is taken up, altered, or rejected. For example, are students’ narratives aligned to institutional discourses espoused by the faculty and college? If so, how? To better understand this, faculty narratives and the institution’s mission statement were also analyzed using values analysis—for instance, what are the values that institutional actors identify, support and promote? The goal was to learn about how incoming students interact with institutional discourses. Employing values analysis in this study provided a more dynamic and interactional approach to our current understanding about how new college students, including those in positions of less resources and power, negotiate “varied social spaces and the achievement of coordinated action with societal others, to protest,
or to affirm, or to enjoy” in a heterogeneous society which is marked by inequality in “resources, knowledge, experiences, social positioning, and in many other ways” (Glick 2014, p. 51).

For the student perspective, values analysis was used across three genres to understand how students characterize the process of becoming college students (Research Question 1). Before attending college, participants were instructed to respond to the following letter to self prompt: “Write a letter to yourself about your journey to become a college student. What does it mean to you to become a college student? What does it mean to your family, friends, community, and society?” At this time, 21 participants wrote letter to self narratives. After the first semester, participants were instructed to respond to a similar prompt: “Write a letter to yourself about your experience as a college student. What does it mean to you to be a college student? What does it mean to your family, friends, community, and society?” Twenty participants wrote letter to self narratives. These narratives were analyzed using values analysis to answer both parts of the first research question: 1a. How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of becoming college students? 1b. How does this characterization change over the course of the first semester? It was expected that similar and different values would be found across participants and time. In the define a college student genre, participants at Time 1 (n=23) and Time 2 (n=18) responded to this prompt: “How would you define a college student?” Values analysis was used to analyze participants’ responses, thereby, exploring both parts of this study’s first research question. In addition to the letter to self and define a college student prompts, participants were asked to write a short bio for their college’s website. Before attending college, participants responded to this prompt: “You have been asked to write a student bio for your college’s website announcing incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe yourself as a college student. How do you see yourself? What do you
want or think is important for your college to know about you?” After the first semester, participants responded to a similar prompt: “You have been asked to write a student bio for your college’s website announcing next year’s incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe a typical incoming freshman college student (imagine that one of your friends would be among this group). What do you want or think is important for your college to know about this student?” Twenty-three participants responded at Time 1 and sixteen of the original 23 participants responded at Time 2.

Survey data: Correlation and change of score analysis. Students’ responses on a specific set of survey items were collected and analyzed as a complement to their narratives. These items were selected because of their relevance and connection to an overarching value (i.e., becoming an adult on one’s own terms). The survey items were used selectively to complement narrative data by combining reported details about students’ expectations and experiences with their narrative responses across multiple genres and time. For example, students’ responses about how often they expect to make friends whose interests differ from their own were compared not only to their actual experience (i.e., if they made such friends), but also to how important making new friends was in their narratives. Using survey responses in this way offered details that could not be captured by participant responses to open-ended prompts alone. For example, narrative analysis identified the value of connecting with new people as important, but student responses on relevant survey items shed light on specific connections students expect to make (e.g., friends with different interests, from different family backgrounds, or whose political beliefs are different) as well as how often they expected to make such connections and if their expectations matched their experience.
More specifically, student responses on selected survey items were used to explore the overarching value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms by comparing student expectations and experiences in relation to two sub-values: connecting with others and pursuing new experiences. Students’ responses on these survey items serve as a complement to the values analysis used to analyze their narratives. Specific survey items were selected based on their conceptual relevance to key sub-values from the values analysis. As such, 8 survey items were selected in connection to the sub-value of connecting with new people and 4 survey items were selected in connection to the sub-value of pursuing new experiences (both are sub-values of the overarching value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms). To learn about the difference between students’ expectations prior to college and their experiences in college (after the first semester), a change of score analysis (i.e., a paired samples t-test) was conducted, including an item by item analysis and a combined score analysis for each sub-value. In addition, a Pearson’s correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between participant responses at two time points, including an item by item analysis and a combined score analysis for each sub-value.\(^5\)

The next two chapters provide a more detailed account of the mixed method and analysis used in this study. Chapters III and IV describe and highlight the results of this investigation. Each chapter focuses on a specific research question and presents the findings of the data analysis outlined in this chapter. In addition to presenting the findings, each chapter describes how different analyses were conducted.

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\(^5\) Table 1 (p. 31) outlines this study’s research questions, activities, and analyses.
CHAPTER III

Making Sense of Becoming a College Student

Student Perspective

This chapter addresses the research questions “How do incoming freshman students characterize the process of becoming college students,” and “how does this characterization change over the course of the first semester?” While the transition to college is often presumed to be a single point in time (e.g., entry into higher education) or a milestone marked by success or failure, this study presents a developmental definition of the transition to college. This dissertation study builds on current literature and offers new insights about the transition to college as a developmental life activity, referring to students’ on-going process of becoming college students for the first time in their lives.

Students characterize the transition to college in complex and relational ways. As expected, students use similar and different values to make sense of becoming college students over time. Findings reveal that for first-time college students, becoming an adult on one’s own terms, adopting a new work ethic, and becoming “somebody” are consistently important values at both time points, but in different ways. Becoming an adult on one’s own terms was the most important value across all three genres in the fall, but became less important after the first semester. In contrast, adopting a new work ethic became more important over time across all genres. Becoming “somebody” in the future grew in importance over time in two genres (i.e., letter to self and defining a college student narratives), but was absent in the bio for website genre. Adopting a new label and embracing uncertainty, on the other hand, are unique values across the different narrative genres. For example, adopting a new label was only expressed in
the defining a college student narrative at both time points, whereas embracing uncertainty was important in the bio for website narrative after the first semester of college. Additionally, students’ expectations about engaging in specific practices, such as making friends with people from different family backgrounds or using campus recreational facilities, were generally not related to their experiences (i.e., whether they reported making such friends or using campus recreational facilities); however, students’ overall expectations about connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences were positively related to their reported experiences. Still, students expected to engage in these activities more often than they did.

The next section presents major findings of the values analyses of students’ narratives across time. Tables 4 through 6, which appear below, illustrate the results for each genre across time and highlight key findings.

(1) **Becoming an adult on one’s own terms.**

“Being a college student has made me just realize how close to this ‘open waters’ adults talk about. This is my last hoorah before I actually become a person. Like right now I am a student, but after, I will graduate and actually be educated to take on challenges…I am a college student so I can be more educated in a topic that I want to make into a career, and that makes me happy.”

~ Christie (Time 1; Becoming an adult on my own terms [value]: pursuing career goals [sub-value])

According to first-time college students in this study, like Christie, the transition to college is about becoming an adult on one’s own terms. Using Christie’s narrative above as an example, the clue in her statement pointing to the value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms is evident here: “Being a college student has made me just realize how close to this ‘open waters’ adults talk about. This is my last hoorah before I actually become a person.” Moreover, she states: “I am a college student so I can be more educated in a topic that I want to make into a
career, and that makes me happy.” This last statement serves as a clue to the more specific sub-value of pursuing career goals.

Becoming an adult on one’s own terms is an overarching value and includes the following sub-values: pursuing new experiences, pursuing career goals, pursuing major/course interests, and connecting with new people. Prior to attending college (Time 1), becoming an adult on one’s own terms was the most important value across all three genres (letter to self, 52.4%; define a college student, 41.7%; bio for website, 70%). While it remained a key guiding value at Time 2, it became less important across all genres after the first semester (letter to self, 30%; define a college student, 27.8%; bio for website, 31.3%). Moreover, differences emerged in sub-values expressed across genres and time. For example, participants did not voice the sub-value of connecting with new people in the define a college student narrative at either time point; whereas, pursuing new experiences was relatively stable (i.e., of similar importance) across genres (letter to self, 17%; define a college student 14.3%; bio for website, 23.1%). Prior to college, in a letter to self, Zoe writes: “Being a college student is important to me. It means that I’m ready to slowly leave my bubble that I grew up in and expose myself to different things” (Becoming an adult on my own terms [value]: pursuing new experiences [sub-value]). Another example of this sub-value is evident in Niyati’s narrative (after the first semester of college) in which she introduces an incoming freshman student in a bio for the college’s website. She writes: “John is a student who will be attending Big City College next year. He is a driven student who is eager to take part in various clubs around campus, including the Speech and Debate club and the college newspaper. He is also an Honors student, which offers him an Opportunities Fund among other benefits. He hopes to study abroad in Spain with his stipend.” Unlike the sub-value of pursuing new experiences, it is possible that connecting with new people
(sub-value) is important on a personal level (letter to self), as well as, in a narrative that is more social in its design and is intended to reach a broader audience, including these new people (bio for website). For example, at Time 1 in her bio for website narrative, Danisha states: “I see myself as someone [who] is often shy at times within class so I often tend to hold back on participation…What’s important [for the] college to know about me is that I try to build a relationship with a lot of people that I encounter daily like my professors because I feel relationships are [important] to being successful in college” (Becoming an adult on my own terms [value]: connecting with new people [sub-value]). In the more straightforward task of defining a college student in which connecting with new people did not come up, the other three sub-values—pursuing new experiences (14.3%), career (9.5%) and major/course interests (11.9%)—were similarly endorsed. For example, Nicole describes a college student as “someone who takes interest in what they study because they pick what they learn” (Becoming an adult [value]: pursuing major/course interests [sub-value]) whereas Janine’s focus is on someone who is “a student working to further his/her education to prepare for a career” (Becoming an adult [value]: pursuing career goals [sub-value]). For more detailed results of the values analysis of all narratives across time by genre, refer to the tables on the following pages.

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6 Tables 4 through 6 present values analysis results across all genres and over time. All subsequent results and key findings highlighted in this chapter refer to these tables.
Table 4
Letter to self narratives: Values analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Value (per narrative text)</th>
<th>Across all letter to self narratives n (%)</th>
<th>Time 1 Letter to self narratives n (%)</th>
<th>Time 2 Letter to self narratives n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an adult on one’s own terms is important</td>
<td>17 (41.5%)</td>
<td>11 (52.4%)</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-values of becoming an adult</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>7 (17%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Pursuing career goals</td>
<td>4 (9.8%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Pursuing major/course interests</td>
<td>4 (9.8%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Connecting with new people</td>
<td>2 (4.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a new work ethic is important</td>
<td>10 (24.4%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-values of adopting a new work ethic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Staying focused and persisting</td>
<td>3 (7.3%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Accepting hard work and responsibility</td>
<td>5 (12.2%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Managing time</td>
<td>2 (4.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming “somebody” in the future is important</td>
<td>14 (34.1%)</td>
<td>6 (28.6%)</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-values of becoming “somebody”</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Making proud/not disappointing (self and others)</td>
<td>8 (19.5%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Obtaining a good professional life and financial independence</td>
<td>6 (14.6%)</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>41 (100%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>21 (100%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>20 (100%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

*Define a college student narratives: Values analysis.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Value (per narrative text)</th>
<th>Across all Define a college student narratives n (%)</th>
<th>Time 1 Define a college student narratives n (%)</th>
<th>Time 2 Define a college student narratives n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an adult on one’s own terms is important</td>
<td>15 (35.7%)</td>
<td>10 (41.7%)</td>
<td>5 (27.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-values of becoming an adult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>6 (14.3%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
<td>3 (16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing career goals</td>
<td>4 (9.5%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
<td>1 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing major/course interests</td>
<td>5 (11.9%)</td>
<td>4 (16.7%)</td>
<td>1 (5.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a new work ethic is important</td>
<td>16 (38.1%)</td>
<td>8 (33.3%)</td>
<td>8 (44.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-values of adopting a new work ethic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Staying focused and persisting</td>
<td>3 (7.1%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Accepting hard work and responsibility</td>
<td>5 (11.9%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
<td>2 (11.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Managing time</td>
<td>8 (19%)</td>
<td>2 (8.3%)</td>
<td>6 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming “somebody” in the future is important</td>
<td>5 (11.9%)</td>
<td>2 (8.3%)</td>
<td>3 (16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-values of becoming “somebody”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Obtaining a good professional life and financial independence</td>
<td>5 (11.9%)</td>
<td>2 (8.3%)</td>
<td>3 (16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a new label</td>
<td>6 (14.3%)</td>
<td>4 (16.7%)</td>
<td>2 (11.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42 (100%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>18 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6
*Bio for website narratives: Values analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding Value (per narrative text)</th>
<th>Across all</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an adult on one’s own terms is important</td>
<td>21 (56.8%)</td>
<td>16 (76.2%)</td>
<td>5 (31.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-values of becoming an adult</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>9 (24.3%)</td>
<td>6 (28.5%)</td>
<td>3 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing career goals</td>
<td>1 (2.7%)</td>
<td>1 (4.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pursuing major/course interests</td>
<td>6 (16.2%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>1 (6.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Connecting with new people</td>
<td>5 (13.5%)</td>
<td>4 (19%)</td>
<td>1 (6.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a new work ethic is important</td>
<td>11 (29.7%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>6 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-values of adopting a new work ethic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Staying focused and persisting</td>
<td>2 (5.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Accepting hard work and responsibility</td>
<td>1 (2.7%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (6.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Managing time</td>
<td>8 (21.6%)</td>
<td>5 (23.8%)</td>
<td>3 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing uncertainty</td>
<td>5 (13.5%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5 (31.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-values of embracing uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Turning to others for help/guidance</td>
<td>3 (8.1%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (18.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Navigating campus resources/programs</td>
<td>2 (5.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37 (100%)</td>
<td>21 (100%)</td>
<td>16 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tables above illustrate that becoming an adult on one’s own terms was a consistent value; it was important across all genres. It also became less important after the first semester across all genres. One possibility for this is that other major values, such as adopting a new work ethic, became more important over time because they were more relevant to students’ experiences in college or were strongly reinforced by administration, faculty and peers. This could also be the case for striving to become “somebody” in the future. A second explanation could be that while self-discovery continues to be important for students, it is more important
prior to attending college because over time students shift their focus to discovery and mastery of new norms, policies, and environment.

This study also explored the narrative value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms using students’ survey responses. Student participants were asked to respond to the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) before attending college and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) after their first semester of college. The CSXQ was used to assess students’ expectations prior to ever attending college; whereas the CSEQ was used to assess students’ experiences in college after they completed their first semester. Used together, these questionnaires allowed for an investigation of the relationship between student expectations and experiences over the course of the first semester in college. As such, student expectations were recorded prior to college and later compared to student experiences, which were reported after the first semester of college. A quantitative analysis of data collected from student participants allowed for a more in-depth and detailed exploration of the guiding value becoming an adult on one’s own terms. For instance, whereas values analysis highlighted the importance of connecting with new people, student survey responses shed light on specific details, such as, how often students expected to make acquaintances from different ethnic backgrounds or whose interests are different from theirs. Within the major value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms, two sub-values (i.e., connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences) were investigated using statistical procedures. Table 7 identifies selected survey items that are representative of activities that illustrate these values (i.e., connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences).
### Table 7

**Survey Items Representative of Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms: Connecting with New People and Pursuing New Experiences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-value</th>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Socialize with faculty member</td>
<td>Socialized with faculty member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Meet other students at some campus location for a discussion</td>
<td>Met other students at some campus location for a discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Make friends with others whose interests are different</td>
<td>Became acquainted with others whose interests are different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Make friends with students whose family background is different</td>
<td>Became acquainted with students whose family background is different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Make friends with students whose race or ethnic background is different</td>
<td>Had serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic background is different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Have serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values are different</td>
<td>Have serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values are different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Have serious discussions with students whose political beliefs are different</td>
<td>Had serious discussions with students whose political beliefs are different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Have serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic identification is different</td>
<td>Had serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic identification is different</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Go to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, or theater on or off campus</td>
<td>Went to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, or theater on or off campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Use a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself</td>
<td>Used a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Use recreational facilities</td>
<td>Used recreational facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Work on campus committee, student organization, etc.</td>
<td>Worked on campus committee, student organization, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Survey items at Time 1 refer to CSXQ, the survey students responded to prior to college about their expectations. Survey items at Time 2 refer to CSEQ, the survey students responded to after the first semester of college about their experiences.
As previously mentioned, students’ responses on these survey items serve as a complement to their narratives. Specific survey items were selected based on their conceptual relevance to key sub-values from the values analysis. As such, eight survey items were selected in connection to the sub-value of connecting with new people and four survey items were selected in connection to the sub-value of pursuing new experiences (both are sub-values of the overarching value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms). In this case, the survey was used selectively to complement narrative data by combining specific details about students’ expectations and experiences with their narrative responses across multiple genres. For example, students’ responses about how often they expect to make friends whose interests differ from their own was compared not only to their actual experience (i.e., if they made such friends), but also to how important making new friends is to them in their narratives. Using survey responses in this way highlights important details that were not specifically discussed by participants in the open-ended prompts, but which help to delve more deeply into understanding key values. To use the aforementioned example, students’ narratives identified the sub-value of connecting with new people as important, but it is their responses on relevant survey items that shed light on specific connections they expect to make (e.g., friends with different interests, from different family backgrounds, or whose political beliefs are different). Their survey responses also illustrate whether their expectations matched their experience with regards to making such connections.

Figures 1 and 2 report the means of participant responses prior to college and after the first semester. Figure 1 shows how often students expected to engage in activities representative
of connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences. Figure 2 shows how often students reported engaging in these activities.

![Becoming an adult: connecting with new people](image)

**Figure 2.** Becoming an adult: connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences. This figure illustrates how often participants expected to engage in each specific activity identified by survey items 1 through 8 (Table 7).
Examining participant responses prior to college highlights what incoming freshmen think is important in their sense-making about becoming college students and provides additional information about how often they expect to partake in these activities. Prior to college, participants expected to meet other students at a campus location for a discussion and to make new friends and have serious conversation with other people who were different from them often. For example, on a scale from 0 (never) to 3 (very often), students expected to make friends from a race and ethnic background (M=2.60) or family background (M=2.56) different from theirs quite often. On the other hand, participants were less likely to expect that they would frequently socialize with a faculty member outside of class (M=1.16). This is something they expected to only happen sometimes. In terms of pursuing new experiences, participants expected to attend an art exhibit/gallery, a play, dance, or other theater performance on or off campus.
Often (M=2.08) and they expected to use the campus lounge to relax or study (M=2.36) and recreational facilities on campus (M=2.32) most often.

Table 8

*Correlation Matrix for Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms: Connecting with New People (item-level analysis)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Items: Time 2</th>
<th>Survey Items: Time 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: Socialized with faculty member</td>
<td>Item 1: Socialize with faculty member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: Met other students at some campus location for a discussion</td>
<td>Item 2: Meet other students at some campus location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: Became acquainted with others whose interests are different</td>
<td>Item 3: Make friends with others whose interests are different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: Became acquainted with students whose family background is different</td>
<td>Item 4: Make friends with students whose family background is different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 5: Became acquainted with students whose race or ethnic background is different</td>
<td>Item 5: Make friends with students whose race or ethnic background is different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 6: Had serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values are different</td>
<td>Item 6: Have serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values are different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 7: Had serious discussions with students whose political beliefs are different</td>
<td>Item 7: Have serious discussions with students whose political beliefs are different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 8: Had serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic identification is different</td>
<td>Item 8: Have serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic identification is different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05. **p<.01.
Comparing participants’ expectations to their reported experiences after the first semester adds another layer of understanding about whether expectations, either specific or overall, match lived experiences. As such, statistical analyses were implemented to investigate the relationship between expectations and experiences. A Pearson’s correlation was conducted to assess the relationship between participant responses at two time points, including an item by item analysis and a combined score analysis for each sub-value. Tables 8 and 9 present the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for each item within a specific sub-value.

For becoming an adult on one’s own terms: connecting with new people, a correlation analysis of each item (items 1 through 8) showed that there was no relationship between participant expectations and experiences, apart from one item. Meeting students at some campus location for a discussion (item 2) was the only item that was statistically significant ($r=.593$). There was a positive correlation between participant expectations about meeting students at some campus location for a discussion and their reported experiences about having done so during the first semester of college. For all other items, such as making friends or having serious discussions with people who are from different family or race/ethnic backgrounds, there was no relationship between expectations and experiences. As such, prior to college expectations did not match in college experiences.
Table 9

Correlation Matrix for Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms: Pursuing New Experiences (item-level analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Items: Time 1</th>
<th>Survey Items: Time 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: Went to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, or theater</td>
<td>Item 1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: Use a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself</td>
<td>Used a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: Use recreational facilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: Work on campus committee, student organization, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: Go to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, or theater</td>
<td>.659**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: Use a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself</td>
<td>.536*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: Use recreational facilities</td>
<td>.693**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: Work on campus committee, student organization, etc.</td>
<td>.754**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05. **p<.01.

For becoming an adult on one’s own terms: pursuing new experiences, a correlation analysis of each item (items 1 through 4) showed that there was no relationship between participant expectations and experiences, apart from one item. Going to an art exhibit/gallery, dance, play or theater performance on or off campus (item 2) was the only item that was statistically significant ($r=.659$). There was a positive correlation between participant expectations about going to an art exhibit/gallery, dance, play or theater performance on or off campus and their reported experiences about having done so during the first semester of college. For all other items, such as using campus recreational facilities or working on a campus
committee or student organization, there was no relationship between expectations and experiences. As such, prior to college expectations did not match in college experiences.

Interestingly, when item scores within each sub-value were combined, there was a positive correlation between expectations and experiences for each sub-value. Table 10 shows the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix for both sub-values, connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences, of the overarching value becoming an adult on one’s own terms.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-value</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th></th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>8.80</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>.572*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>18.52</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>5.29</td>
<td>.473*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05.

Note: The information in this table is based on a combined item score analysis for each sub-value of Becoming an Adult on One's Own Terms.

Participants who expected to connect with new people more frequently were more likely to report having done so after the first semester of college (r=.473). Similarly, participants who expected to pursue new experiences more frequently were more likely to report having done so during their first semester of college (r=.572). These findings illustrate that in most cases participant expectations about engaging in specific activities (e.g., making friends with people from family backgrounds different from their own, using campus recreational facilities) were not related to their experiences; however, their overall expectations about connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences (that is, two sub-values of becoming an adult on one’s own terms) were positively related to their reported experiences. For a change of score analysis, a paired samples t-test was conducted. A paired-samples t-test was used to determine whether the
mean difference between responses across two time points was statistically significant. Tables 11 and 12 present descriptive statistics for both sub-values as well as the results from an item by item paired sample t-test. Table 13 presents the results of the paired sample t-test for a combined item analysis.

Table 11
*Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-test Results for Becoming an Adult: Connecting with New People*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: T1 socialize/T2 socialized with faculty member outside of class</td>
<td>.444 1.247 -.176 1.065 1.510 17</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: T1 meet/T2 met other students at some campus location for a discussion</td>
<td>.722 .958 .246 1.199 3.200 17</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: T1 make friends/T2 became acquainted with others whose interests are different</td>
<td>1.444 1.381 .757 2.131 4.440 17</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: T1 make friends/T2 became acquainted with students whose family background is different</td>
<td>.500 1.200 -.097 1.097 1.770 17</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 5: T1 make friends/T2 became acquainted with students whose race or ethnic background is different</td>
<td>.111 .963 -.368 .590 .490 17</td>
<td>.631</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Item 6: T1 have/T2 had serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values are different

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.556</td>
<td>1.247</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>1.176</td>
<td>1.890</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.076</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Item 7: T1 have/T2 had serious discussions with students whose political beliefs and opinions are different

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<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.500</td>
<td>.924</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.959</td>
<td>2.300</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Item 8: T1 have/T2 had serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic identification is different

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.389</td>
<td>1.195</td>
<td>-.205</td>
<td>.983</td>
<td>1.380</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: T1 refers to Time 1, prior to attending college. T2 refers to Time 2, after the first semester of college.

Table 11 shows that there is a statistically significant mean difference for three items in the sub-value of connecting with new people. There is a mean difference between responses prior to college and after the first semester for the following items: meeting other students at some campus location for a discussion (p=.005), making friends with others whose interests are different (p =.001), and having serious discussion with students whose philosophy of life or personal values is different (p=.035). As such, there is a statistically significant decrease from expectations prior to college and reported experience after the first semester about how often participants partake in these three activities.
Table 12

Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-test Results for Becoming an Adult: Pursuing New Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: T1 go/T2 went to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, theater</td>
<td>.389</td>
<td>.979</td>
<td>-0.097</td>
<td>.876</td>
<td>1.686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: T1 use/T2 used a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself</td>
<td>.2778</td>
<td>1.363</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
<td>.956</td>
<td>.864</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: T1 use/T2 used recreational facilities</td>
<td>.722</td>
<td>1.127</td>
<td>.162</td>
<td>1.283</td>
<td>2.718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: T1 work/T2 worked on a campus committee, student organization</td>
<td>1.222</td>
<td>1.517</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>1.977</td>
<td>3.419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: T1 refers to Time 1, prior to attending college. T2 refers to Time 2, after the first semester of college.

Table 12 shows that there is a statistically significant mean difference for two items in the sub-value of pursuing new experiences. There is a mean difference between responses prior to college and after the first semester for the following items: using campus recreational facilities (p=.015) and working on a campus committee or student organization (p=.003). More specifically, there is a statistically significant decrease from expectations prior to college and reported experience after the first semester about of how often participants partake in these two activities. In other words, participant responses on these items indicate that their expectations are significantly higher than their reported experiences.
Participants overall expectations about how often they will engage in activities that are reflective of each sub-value (i.e., connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences) are higher than their reported experiences. The difference between expectation and experience scores is statistically significant. Table 13 shows the results of a paired t-test for each sub-value (combined item analysis). There is a statistically significant mean difference between expectations and experiences for each sub-value, that is pursuing new experiences (p=.005) and connecting with new people (p=.003). As such, students’ responses indicate that they expect to pursue new experiences and connect with new people more often than they actually do.

Table 13
*Descriptive Statistics and Paired Samples t-test Results for Becoming an Adult on One’s Own Terms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>Std. Error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with new people</td>
<td>4.667</td>
<td>5.678</td>
<td>1.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1-Time 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>2.611</td>
<td>3.398</td>
<td>0.801</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1-Time 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: T1 refers to prior to attending college. T2 refers to after the first semester of college.

In conclusion, analyzing reported responses on survey items collected at both time points extend this study’s narrative findings about a major value that characterizes the transition to college, that is becoming an adult on one’s own terms. In being asked to consider specific activities that reflect this value in greater detail, participants highlighted the importance and frequency of engagement in these activities over time. Comparing participant expectations to
their reported experiences after the first semester also shed light on whether expectations, either about specific activities or overall sub-values, matched their lived experiences.

(2) Adopting a new work ethic.

“To be a college student means that you are now in a place where you have to lead yourself and direct yourself to complete things you know you need to have done because no one is going to hold your hand like they did in high school.”

~Danisha (Time 2; Adopting a new work ethic [value]: working hard [sub-value])

Interestingly, the major value of adopting a new work ethic became more important over time across all genres (letter to self, from 19% to 30%; define a college student, from 33.3% to 44.4%; bio for website, 21.7% to 37.5%). In fact, it became the most important overarching value at Time 2 for all genres except letter to self (in which case, all three overarching categories were of similar significance). Adopting a new work ethic, which included the sub-values of staying focused and persisting, accepting hard work and responsibility, and managing time, increased in importance over time. This outcome is likely due to students’ participation in higher education practices. For first-time students, adopting a new work ethic to meet the multiple demands of college life became a major part of becoming a college student. In his bio for website at Time 2, Lee writes: “Don’t miss any classes because they are very important to you. Always manage your time wisely to work efficiently toward your grade” (Adopting a new work ethic [value]: managing time [sub-value]). This sub-value is also voiced by Zhen who, in his definition of a college student after the first semester of college, writes: “A student who can keep a proper balance between studies and social life. He/she should also be able to manage time well.”

While adopting a new work ethic was an important value across genres at both times, there was also a shift in what this value entailed—specifically an increased recognition of the importance of managing time. This was true for two genres: the letter to self (Time 1, 0%; Time
2, 10%) and define a college student (Time 1, 8.3%; Time 2, 33.3%). In the third genre, bio for website, the importance of managing time was expressed as a priority at both times (Time 1, 21.7%; Time 2, 18.8%), which may explain why there was no increase in its endorsement. To sum up, over time participants realized that prioritizing and managing one’s time was a valuable skill that they needed to develop or a skill that served them well in navigating college life.

(3) Becoming “somebody” in the future.

“As a little girl daddy always told you how important going to college was and how it would give you a better life. Everybody who had all the things you wanted went to college and had great jobs. So, I know it made sense for you to go to college considering the kind of life you want. In the world you live in today everyone is getting college degrees, and you know people can’t get a good job without a degree. So don’t give up on your degree, everyone around you is pushing you to get one because they know it will help you get everything you want.”
~Sandra (Time 1; Becoming “somebody” in the future [value]: obtaining good profession life and financial independence [sub-value])

Becoming “somebody” in the future is another overarching value that characterizes the transition to college, but it does so in a different way than becoming an adult on one’s own terms or adopting a new work ethic. Becoming “somebody” in the future, a value reflected in Sandra’s statement above, grew in importance over time in the letter to self narratives from 28.6% to 40%, increased in importance in the define a college student narratives from 8.3% to 16.7%, but received no mention at all in the bio for website genre. These findings indicate that on a personal level (letter to self) and in the definition of college student, this major value became more important over time. For example, in a letter to self after the first semester of college, Shana writes: “Dear self, going to college may seem like a lot of work at times but it will be worth it in the end. It’ll help you get further than your parents did because they didn’t have this opportunity” (Becoming “somebody” in the future [value]: obtaining good profession life and financial independence [sub-value]). This value is also expressed in Manusha’s definition of a
college student prior to college, in which she states: “A college student is one with focus on education, and out to make something of themselves.” It is possible that students are reinforcing what the media, the president, their high school teachers, college advisors, parents, siblings, peers and other adults (including older college students and graduates) are telling them; that is, in order to be “somebody”—mainly, to obtain a good professional life and financial independence (sub-value)—one needs a college education. The increase in this value being voiced over time is likely due to the ongoing repetition or support of this message by the institution (e.g., faculty, administration, office brochures). Interestingly, while becoming “somebody” was prominent across the letter to self and definition of college student genres, this value was missing in the bio for website narrative, which addressed a broader audience (e.g., institutional agents and peers). As such, the bio for website narrative was less about addressing the self or conjuring up personal definitions and more about addressing others (e.g., peers, administrators, professors). Participants are taking up the value of becoming “somebody” in the future, which is embedded in societal and interpersonal messages, in their personal letters and definitions, but are not reinforcing it in their bio for website narratives intended for a broader audience (including future students). In their bios for website, they are transforming what becoming a college student is all about by endorsing other major values more strongly and by introducing a new key value—embracing uncertainty (discussed below). As such, they are also shifting the focus away from the role that the future plays in making sense of becoming a college student (becoming “somebody” in the future) to the more immediate present (embracing uncertainty).

It is also interesting that participants, at both time points, only emphasized the importance of making proud/not disappointing (self and others), a sub-value of becoming “somebody” in the future, in the letter to self narratives. Prior to attending college, for example, in her letter to self,
Evy stated: “I would love to see myself graduate and succeed in life. Throughout this all I want to make my family proud.” In a letter to self after the first semester of college, Veronica expressed this sub-value in this way: “Dear Veronica, it’s you again. You know why you’re here: to be the best you that you can be. You’re on your way and I know Grandma is smiling. Everyone’s proud of you, and you are happy. This is what they meant when they said things would get better. You’re on a rollercoaster that only goes up, my friend. Love, Veronica.” This sub-value of making proud/not disappointing was missing from student narratives in other genres. A possible explanation for this is that making yourself and others proud (or at least not letting yourself or others down) is of personal importance; as such, this value is expressed in a letter one is writing to him/herself—or, in other words, for one’s own eyes. As such, this sub-value is meaningful to students on a personal or intimate level.

(4) Embracing uncertainty.

“Don’t worry too much about anything. Just start your work little by little and you will see what is ahead of you. Don’t feel lost, but if you do, anyone on campus is willing to help.”
~Sunita (Time 2; Embracing uncertainty [value]: turning to others for help/guidance [sub-value])

Embracing uncertainty was a guiding value in the bio for website narrative. What is especially interesting about this value is that it was expressed after the first semester of college (31.3%) but not before. Embracing uncertainty contained two key sub-values: turning to others for help/guidance (18.8%) and navigating campus resources/programs (12.5%). Participants stressed the importance of reaching out to others for guidance (e.g., more senior peers, staff, faculty) and seeking out appropriate resources and programs on campus as necessary components of growing comfortable in their new surroundings and embracing the unknown. The following example from Zoe illustrates this guiding value. In her bio for website narrative after
the first semester of college, Zoe writes: “I think it’s important to know that no matter where he or she is coming from, they’re terrified to a certain extent...No matter where they are from, college is a new experience and therefore the staff and fellow students should do their best to help the new students transition from their past into their future” (Embracing uncertainty [value]: turning to others for help/guidance [sub-value]). Whereas Zoe’s narrative highlights the importance of turning to others for help and guidance, Kaitlin, a fellow freshman student, expressed the importance of embracing uncertainty with a focus on resources. In her bio for website narrative after the first semester of college, Kaitlin declares: “Don’t be nervous, the only time you should be nervous is when you don’t try your hardest...if you have any problems, use the college resources to your advantage. You pay for them and they are there to help you. Don’t be shy or too proud to ask for help until it’s too late” (Embracing uncertainty [value]: navigating campus resources/programs [sub-value]).

It is not surprising that participants expressed the value of embracing uncertainty after their first semester in a genre that calls for them to speak to a wider audience (i.e., their college community). Moreover, although this particular prompt remained similar over time, after the end of the first semester (Time 2), participants were writing about “this student” (a future incoming freshman) as opposed to “me” (a current incoming freshman). As such, it is possible that this change allowed for participants to detach—to some degree—from themselves, while simultaneously reflecting on their own experience and admitting vulnerability. One way of looking at this finding is that the bio for website narrative allowed participants to let others (from peers to administrators) know about the importance of overcoming uncertainty during the first semester of college. They wanted to share with their college community what has been most helpful for them to learn or what they wish they would have done (or seen others do
successfully) to become comfortable in their new environment. Becoming comfortable with their college environment includes becoming familiar with new norms and navigating unfamiliar practices. The sub-values of turning to others for help/guidance and navigating campus resources/programs, which often take time to develop, express participants’ willingness and desire to settle into and become a part of their new environment. They do this without positioning themselves as fearful or resistant—in fact, it is quite the opposite because they recognize and endorse the value of embracing instead of hiding or withdrawing from uncertainty. Moreover, they show their vulnerability in becoming college students. Rather than focus on what an ideal college student should be in societal terms, they use this narrative to express their need or wish for help and guidance.

(5) Adopting a new label.

“One who is attending college is a college student. Whether they know anything or not, they still fall in the college students category.”
~Jane (Time 1; Adopting a new label [value])

Another noteworthy finding is that the overarching value of adopting a new label was only expressed in the define a college student narrative. In this genre, at both times (although more so at Time 1 than Time 2) participants voiced the importance of adopting a new label in the process of becoming a college student. Prior to attending college, George defines a college student as “A student that is enrolled in a post-secondary institution,” which is similar to Niyati’s response after attending college, in which she states: “Anyone who is a full or part time student at a college.” Adopting a label—college student—is expressed as a required step into higher education. This step requires individuals to disconnect from their previous identification with high school and secondary education status. Participants expressed that this happens as soon as a
person enrolls in college. Although this was not explicitly stated, adopting a label implies adopting a new status along with the expectations and stereotypes that come with identifying as a college student. For example, someone who is 18 years old or older, attends school full-time (and does not work), spends most of the day studying or completing academic work, and graduates within 4 to 5 years. This image prevails even if today’s college student no longer reflects this stereotype—including 18-year-old first-time college students because they, too, are often “nontraditional” in other ways (e.g., lower income, first-generation, work part or full time).

**Summary of key takeaways.** Values analysis of student narratives across three genres (i.e., letter to self, define a college student, and bio for website) over time (prior to college and after the first semester) highlights the different ways in which students use narrative to make sense of the process of becoming college students. Consistent values included becoming an adult on one’s own terms, adopting a new work ethic, and becoming “somebody” in the future. Exploring these overarching values over time shed light on key changes in how first-time college students make sense of becoming college students as they engage in college life. Unique values included adopting a label, which was important in defining a college student, and embracing uncertainty, which was voiced in the bio for website. Identifying values across genres allowed for a more dynamic exploration about how first-time college students make sense of becoming college students. In the process of narrating across genres and time, participants revealed the multiplicity characterizing the transition to college, a developmental life activity. Moreover, applying quantitative methods to complement the findings of the qualitative analysis allowed for a more in-depth investigation of a major guiding value, becoming an adult on one’s own terms. For example, the results of a paired samples t-test showed a significant mean difference between students’ expectations and experiences with regards to two key sub-values of becoming an adult.
on one’s own terms: pursuing new experiences and connecting with new people. In general, incoming freshmen expected to partake in activities that reflected each of the two sub-values more often than they did. By closely examining the specific values that students enact in making sense of becoming a college student, these findings highlight the relationship between students’ expectations and lived experience.

This chapter centered on the study’s first research question and summarized important findings from students’ narratives. The following chapter addresses the second research question focusing on findings from faculty responses as well as values highlighted by the college’s mission statement. Connections to student narratives are explored.
CHAPTER IV

Student Perspectives in Relation to Higher Education Stakeholders’ Perspectives

This chapter addresses the research question “How does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses?” Faculty narratives and Big City College’s mission statement were collected and analyzed to explore the interaction of student and institution sense-making. The institutional perspective (i.e., college faculty and mission statement) emphasizes promoting diversity; faculty members’ narratives and the college’s mission statement are aligned in this respect. Similar to the findings from the student perspective, becoming an adult on one’s own terms is also expressed by the institution; however, faculty responses and the college’s mission statement center on different sub-values. Whereas faculty members were more focused on becoming an adult on one’s own terms in relation to the pursuit of career goals, the mission statement highlighted the pursuit of major/course interests. Within the guiding value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms, students endorsed four sub-values: pursuing new experiences, pursuing career goals, pursuing major/course interests, and connecting with new people. Across all genres they enacted the sub-values of pursuing new experiences and pursuing major/course interests most frequently. As such, the student perspective—specifically, the prevalence of pursuing major/course interests—was more closely aligned to the college’s mission statement (pursuing major/course interests) than to faculty members’ perspective (pursuing career goals).

Faculty

Faculty members (n=5) responded to three prompts: (1) How would you define a college student? (2) Write a letter to incoming freshman students about your experience teaching in college. What do you consider to be important? What would you like for them to know (e.g.,
your goals, expectations)? And, (3) you have been asked to write a short piece for your college’s website announcing incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community.

Describe these students. What do you want or think is important for the college community to know about these students? The use of multiple genres allowed faculty members to enact diverse positions and insights. Table 14 shows the guiding values, including sub-values, for each genre.

Table 14
*Faculty responses: Guiding and sub-values by genre.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding value (per narrative text)</th>
<th>“Define a college student” narratives</th>
<th>“Letter to incoming students” narratives</th>
<th>“Bio for website” narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Becoming an adult on one’s own terms</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
<td>n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing career goals</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pursuing new experiences</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing uncertainty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating campus resources/programs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a label</td>
<td>3 (60%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting a new work ethic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting responsibility and hard work</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting a face on diversity</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All participants responded to the first genre (n=5); however, only 4 out of 5 responded to the other two genres (n=4).

For faculty members, the major value they expressed differed by genre. In the genre defining a college student, faculty members focused on the importance of adopting a label. To
become a college student, it is important to adopt the label of “college student,” which according to faculty responses means “someone who attends college,” “someone who takes classes at a college,” and “someone enrolled in college or university, and who is actively taking courses.” As such, upon enrollment and attendance, an individual becomes a college student by abandoning ties to any previous labels, such as high school student. Enrolling in college comes with a new label and set of expectations. This is similar to students’ sense making about becoming a college student in their define a college student narratives, in which they also focused on adopting a label upon enrollment and attendance.

In the letter to incoming students, faculty voiced the value of pursuing career goals, a sub-value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms. One professor writes: “Dear future student: My goal is to empower you through my teaching, with knowledge to be able to be a contributing member to society when you graduate. Since accounting is needed in every business you should take the core classes and try accounting and see if you like it for your future.” Another professor puts it another way: “Since most [incoming students] lack writing and math skills necessary for corporate jobs, it is important to develop such skills. It is important to network and get to know successful people in your intended field.” In both instances, faculty members focus on the importance of pursuing career goals (a sub-value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms) in their narratives. Interestingly, two of the faculty members discussed the importance of pursuing career goals over pursuing interesting or new courses. They encouraged the incoming freshman student to take courses that may seem boring or unappealing because that is what one must do to graduate and/or obtain a particular profession.

In the bio for website narrative, faculty members prioritized putting a face on diversity. Here is one example: “Students come from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Many are
international too.” Incoming freshmen were positioned as representatives of diverse backgrounds. When narrating for a website at a college that promises to embrace and encourage diversity of its students, faculty members identified putting a face on that diversity as a key value.

**Mission Statement**

Putting a face on diversity was a major value in the college’s mission statement. The mission statement presents a welcoming message about the college offering something for everybody; thereby, making it accessible to all individuals, no matter what their background is or where they come from. Putting a face on diversity is endorsed by phrases such as “proudly situated in one of the most dynamic and diverse communities in the country” and “committed to student success … of all backgrounds.” Becoming an adult on one’s own terms (specifically, the sub-value of pursuing major/course interests) was another key value. This guiding value (and sub-value of pursuing major/course interests) is captured in the opening statement: “Big City College transforms lives by providing access to outstanding undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts and sciences, business and education, and a vibrant Core Curriculum in the liberal arts.”

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7 Mission statement: Big City College transforms lives by providing access to outstanding undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts and sciences, business, education, and a vibrant Core Curriculum in the liberal arts. We are an urban, public institution, proudly situated in one of the most dynamic and diverse communities in the country. We are committed to student success and to our historic mission to provide an affordable, high-quality education to students of all backgrounds. We seek to develop knowledgeable students who are engaged in the life of the college and our community, and are prepared to think critically, lead responsibly, act ethically, and contribute globally.
Interaction of Student and Institutional Perspectives

For students, becoming an adult on one’s own terms and adopting a new work ethic were major values across genres and over time. Faculty members, on the other hand, were more focused on becoming an adult on one’s own terms, specifically in relation to the pursuit of a future career. In fact, two faculty members voiced the importance of taking courses that students may not be interested in taking in order to increase their odds of success in their future field or career. Although students also enacted this sub-value in their narratives, they placed more importance on the pursuit of new experiences and major/course interests. Here is an example of a student expressing the sub-value of pursuing major/course interests: “It’s very exciting and yet nerve-racking to know that I am becoming a college student. I’ve been waiting for more independence (in terms of education) since junior high school… I’m feeling optimistic, mostly due to the change of environment but also by the freedom to choose what road I want to take” (George, Letter to self at Time 1).

What was also interesting—and something that students did not voice—was the importance faculty placed on putting a face on diversity. This value centered on the importance of disclosing or highlighting one’s background and interests. Three of the faculty members identified putting a face on diversity as a key value in the bio for website narrative. In the bio to website narrative, one faculty member emphasizes that “Students come from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Many are international too” while another simply states the college needs to know that “they are a diverse group” (referring to freshman students). This is likely due to the social nature of the genre, which is intended for a wider audience (i.e., college community and beyond) and, as such, serves as a platform for getting to know incoming students. The website also serves as a platform where faculty can align themselves with, endorse, or reject the college’s image and
official messages. It is possible that faculty prioritized the need for students to highlight their backgrounds to promote putting a face on diversity over learning about who they hope to become, why they are there, and where they are going. Of course, underlying the value of putting a face on diversity is the notion that the wider community can make assumptions about who students are based on where they come from or which ethnicity/race/gender category they identify with. Faculty’s endorsement of this value is in line with the college’s mission statement, which prides itself on being “committed to student success … of all backgrounds.” As such, another possible explanation is that faculty members have taken up and reinforced this guiding value in their narratives. Interestingly, student participants did not.

Furthermore, becoming an adult on one’s own terms was an important major value across all genres and times in students’ narratives. This value was also important in the mission statement, which highlighted becoming an adult through the pursuit of major/course interests. This particular line in the mission statement speaks to this value: “Big City College transforms lives by providing access to outstanding undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts and sciences, business, education, and a vibrant Core Curriculum in the liberal arts.” Becoming an adult through the pursuit of major/course interests was important to both, the college (mission statement) and students. In her definition of a college student (Time 1), Nicole writes: “someone who takes interest in what they study because they pick what they learn.” Again, faculty in this study did not support this sub-value; instead they stressed the importance of pursuing future career goals over current coursework interests.

This chapter presented findings from the institutional perspective. Important values endorsed by the college’s mission statement and faculty were identified. Findings were discussed on their own and in relation to one another (i.e., faculty narratives and mission statement) as well
as in relation to student narratives. Exploring the interaction of key values across stakeholders addressed this study’s second research question: How does the activity of going to college interact with higher education discourses? However, due to the small number of faculty members who participated in this study, these findings are limited and serve to inspire further inquiry about the transition to college through the lens of a cross-actor analysis. Five faculty members participated in this study and only four provided narrative responses to two out of the three genres. Future inquiry into the transition to college investigating the interaction of student and institutional perspectives within an activity meaning system would benefit from a larger faculty sample from multiple departments, expanding on this study’s preliminary findings and allowing for more generalizable results.

The next chapter discusses this study’s findings, implications and suggestions for future research. It also notes the limitations of this dissertation study and offers recommendations for future inquiry.
CHAPTER V

Discussion

In light of recent higher education trends (e.g., large number of students—including “non-traditional” students—enrolling in college) and concerns about success rates (e.g., retention), a developmental and lifespan-based definition of the transition to college is necessary to expand our knowledge on this topic. While the transition to college is often presumed to be a single point in time (e.g., entry into higher education) or a milestone marked by success or failure, this study presented a developmental definition of the transition to college. A developmental definition of the transition to college refers to students’ on-going process of becoming college students for the first time in their lives—a significant life activity and pathway into adulthood. By engaging the student perspective from multiple points of view and in relation to institutional discourses, the process of becoming college students emerged as relational and dynamic. For example, becoming an adult on one’s own terms was an important guiding value enacted by both, the students and the institution. Over time, this guiding value became less important across all genres for students. This change occurred as students enacted new values (i.e., embracing uncertainty) or endorsed other values more frequently after attending college than before (i.e., adopting a new work ethic). Faculty members and the college’s mission statement also expressed the overarching value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms; however, each stakeholder focused on a different sub-value. Faculty members more readily endorsed pursuing career goals, whereas the mission statement focused on pursuing course/major interests. Although students endorsed both sub-values, they focused more on pursuing course/major interests; thus, aligning more closely with the mission statement than faculty narratives. By including diverse voices within a system, this study’s design allowed for range of
expressive activities across different stakeholders for diverse purposes and audiences.

Furthermore, the transition to college is often described from a “top-down” stance in which elites, such as faculty, administration, and governing board, define and make decisions about the process of transitioning to college, which affects incoming students’ experiences. In college, like in many other broader systems, those in positions of power and influence define the transition to college in the form of official documents (e.g., mission statement) and unofficial discourses and materials (e.g., lectures, orientation speeches). Incoming freshmen, on the other hand, have their own developing understanding and knowledge about what it means to become a college student, which is grounded in their daily practices. Involving first-time college students as “historians of their own experiences and guides for future development” (Daiute & Kovac-Cerovic, 2017, p. 62) is critical for establishing a developmental understanding of the transition to college. This study examined diverse narratives along with an official document (i.e., the college’s mission statement) as expressions of institutional and student perspectives. As such, it identified a range of perspectives across participants and stakeholders in the social system; in this case, Big City College. Although the number of participants representing each stakeholder with different power roles is not the same, all actors are nonetheless part of an interactive system in which meaning-making occurs. Recognizing that individual narratives and the mission statement may differ in how they are produced (for example, considering the amount of time and people each takes to prepare or revise) and to allow for an analysis of a system, all expressions were methodically analyzed using values analysis. As such, this study’s analysis considered stakeholders from multiple power positions. The mission statement, designed and implemented by elites with more power (e.g., college’s administration and governing board), along with faculty members’ narratives represented the institutional perspective. Moreover, incoming
freshman students, as stakeholders with less power in an institutional setting, were focal participants in this study. Students were central to this study’s investigation of characterizing the transition to college over time as a complex and multi-dimensional process.

Understanding the transition to college as a developmental life activity requires thinking about the college environment as an activity meaning system in which students develop into adulthood by making sense of their experiences. Inspired by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this view of development stresses the importance of individuals’ social interactions with important stakeholders across different activity meaning systems (in this case, Big City College) that they encounter in daily life (Daiute, 2010, 2014). This dissertation addressed how students characterize the transition to college over time as well as how students’ sense-making about becoming college students interacts with the institutional perspective (i.e., faculty narratives and college’s mission statement). This study builds on previous research that conceives of the transition to college as an ongoing process (Attinasi, 1989; Terenzini et al., 1994; Zhang & Smith, 2001; Clark, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008). Moreover, this study responds to a call for a multidimensional approach to studying developmental phenomena in college settings (Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Ahmed, 2017). It does this by exploring how students make sense of becoming college students as they engage in college life over the course of the first semester. Student narratives enact diverse stakeholders’ and students’ relational perspectives – which are created within and share social interactions in the features of diverse expressive genres (i.e., letter to self, define a college student, bio for website). Aimed at different audiences, these expressive genres allow for complex meaning-making (Daiute, 2014; Daiute, Todorova & Kovacs-Cerovic, 2017; Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Ahmed, 2017). In this study, I explored student narratives, faculty narratives, and the college’s mission statement using values analysis, a form of qualitative
narrative analysis that identifies guiding principles individuals enact in their lives to make sense of and understand their place in their daily world (Daiute, 2010; 2014). After applying values analysis across diverse expressions aimed for different audiences and purposes by multiple stakeholders, I quantified the narrative analysis, examined changes over time, and related specific sub-values to survey items—all of which allowed for more detailed and comprehensive results. Students' responses to questionnaire items highlighted the relationship between student expectations and experiences over the course of the first semester in college. Their questionnaire responses complemented narrative data and provided insight about how specific activities relate to becoming an adult on one’s own terms, a major guiding value expressed in their narratives over time. Zooming back from the detailed analysis, I offered a qualitative definition and summary of transition to college as a developmental process rather than relying solely or primarily on age group distinctions, college starting dates, and success or failure measures. In addition to exploring the interaction of a range of perspectives across stakeholders, I emphasized students’ sense-making over time because they are at the center of this developmental process and are often overlooked or subjected to definitions, policies, and interventions outlined by others who hold more power.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study's mixed methods design reveal that students characterize the transition to college in complex and relational ways. As expected, over time, students use similar and different values to make sense of becoming college students. For first-time college students, becoming an adult on one’s own terms, adopting a new work ethic, and becoming “somebody” are consistently important values at both time points, but in different ways. Becoming an adult
on one’s own terms was the most important value across all three genres, but it became less important after the first semester. In contrast, adopting a new work ethic became more important over time across all genres. Becoming “somebody” in the future grew in importance over time in two genres (i.e., letter to self and defining a college student narratives), but was absent in the bio for website genre. Adopting a new label and embracing uncertainty, on the other hand, are unique values across the different narrative genres. For example, adopting a new label was only expressed in the defining a college student narrative at both time points, whereas embracing uncertainty was important in the bio for website narrative after the first semester of college. Moreover, students’ expectations about engaging in specific practices, such as making friends with people from different family backgrounds or using campus recreational facilities, were generally unrelated to their experiences (i.e., whether they reported making such friends or using campus recreational facilities). Students’ overall expectation about connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences, on the other hand, were positively related to their reported experiences. Nevertheless, students expected to engage in these activities more often than they did.

These findings build on previous research studying the transition to college. For instance, becoming an adult on one’s own terms is a guiding value that adds support to earlier findings about what incoming freshmen identify as important to them on this journey. Terenzini et al. (1994) found that students discussed the importance of “real learning,” which was defined as learning about oneself and the ability to redesign oneself, discovering what one was good at, and becoming more autonomous. In addition, students described their transition as a cooperative activity—to be shared and experienced with others—that is, peers, family, administration, faculty, and community (Terenzini et al., 1994). Attinasi (1989) also found that peer interactions
on campus helped students navigate their new environment. Attinasi’s (1989) qualitative study about Latino/a students’ experience in college found that social interactions contributed to first-generation Latino/a students’ successfully navigating their college environments as well as positively affecting their decision to stay in college. These earlier findings support the importance of connecting with new people (sub-value of becoming an adult on one’s own terms) in the pathway to adulthood. Recognizing that faculty at higher education institutions often set expectations about what it takes to master the college student role while students try to figure out what these (implicit and explicit) expectations are and how they can meet them (Collier & Morgan, 2008), this study found that becoming an adult on one’s own terms was also enacted by the institution (i.e., faculty and college’s mission statement). Within this overarching value, pursuing career goals dominated faculty narratives whereas the mission statement aligned more with the student perspective in prioritizing major/course interests. Moreover, this study’s overall findings support recent research about college as a site of development by focusing on students’ orientations to the institutional environments and their place in it (Daiute & Nelson, 1997). For example, Daiute and Kreniske (2016), using values analysis, found that immigrant and U.S.-born students endorsed the community college as a context for development in different ways. While U.S.-born students focused more on developing the self, immigrant peers emphasized a more collective orientation by expressing the importance of developing with or for others (Daiute & Kreniske, 2016).

Additionally, for students in this study, adopting a new work ethic grew in importance over time. A possible explanation for this change is that during their first semester in college first-time college students realize that their academic work ethic may require a shift because in college, there is often more work—harder work—that needs to be completed independently.
outside of the classroom (e.g., there are no reminders, less hand-holding) and is accompanied by strict deadlines. As such, in this study, adopting a new work ethic is an important guiding value in first-time students’ sense-making about becoming college students. This finding supports popular advice (or warnings) to college students about this significant aspect of college. For instance, in *Insights for your college-bound students for The Psychology Teacher Network*, Appleby (2014) explains: “For most high school students — especially bright ones — the educational day ends when the school day ends because they were able to learn all they need to know while they were in school. Learning does not end when the class day ends in college. In fact, learning often begins when classes end because so much learning takes place outside the classroom.” In addition, it is perhaps unsurprising that incoming freshman students also endorsed the value of becoming “somebody” in the future. This finding is in line with college students’ belief in meritocracy, an established ideology in American society, with promises of social mobility and higher social status that is often said (or implied) to accompany a 4-year degree (Shane & Heckhausen, 2013).

Moreover, adopting a new label and embracing uncertainty were expressed as unique values; their importance was expressed in particular narrative genres. Adopting a new label is important to students because it is a new way to make sense of and signify to the world who they are and how they fit into society (e.g., “college students,” “those enrolled in higher education”) as well as to break from previous identifications and labels (e.g., “high school student,” “someone who hopes to go to college”). Embracing uncertainty, more likely, stems from students’ reflection about their experience in college (perhaps, explaining why it is a guiding value after the first semester of college). Embracing uncertainty is expressed only in the bio for website genre, which is aimed at a public audience; in this way, first-time students are calling
attention to the importance of asking for help (e.g., resource centers, tutoring) and seeking advice from more experienced peers. They do this in a way that does not necessarily mean that they have actually done this themselves, but in expressing this value to others, they are acknowledging that embracing uncertainty is an important part of becoming a college student. This particular finding relates to a recent study that presented over 9,500 incoming college students with stories from older students who described different types of challenges that they faced in coming to college and discussed how these challenges were ordinary and how they improved over time (Yeager et al., 2016). Incoming freshmen then responded with reasons why they thought these challenges were common and described what they expected their own experiences to be like. These exercises helped close the institutional achievement gaps in full-time enrollment and grades between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and other students at the participating schools by up to 40% (Yeager et al., 2016). As was the case in the Yeager et al.’s study, embracing uncertainty was important to students at Big City College* when expressed publically or to a wide audience—such as, to a future student via a bio for a college website. This message about embracing uncertainty was marked by a sense that everything will be alright and provided new students with the comfort of knowing that these challenges are normal and that they will be just fine. At the very least, it assures new students that there is always going to be someone who gets it or someone they can (and should) turn to when they find themselves in a state of uncertainty. Tough (2014) argues that when students “stumble” or “run into trouble,” it impacts how they see themselves. This is especially true about high achieving first-time students from low-income household who, as a result of a setback, begin to question about whether or not they belong in college (Tough, 2014). Perhaps, normalizing the need for help from others and utilizing available resources allows incoming students to embrace
uncertainty by recognizing that they are not alone and that this is in fact just part of the process of becoming a college student. The guiding value of embracing uncertainty also supports Clark’s (2005) findings in which eight first-year students identified the importance of devising different strategies to navigate “an ongoing process of assessing the person-environment-behavior dynamics” (Clark 2005, p. 309).

In addition, to complement student findings from narrative analysis and to examine change and continuity over time, student responses on survey items prior to and after the first semester of college were analyzed using a correlation and change of score analysis. Findings demonstrate that students’ expectations about engaging in specific practices, such as making friends with people from different family backgrounds or using campus recreational facilities, were not related to their experiences. The two exceptions to this finding were meeting other students at some campus location for a discussion and attending an art exhibit, play, dance or theater on or off campus. Students who expected to do this, were more likely to do so. In terms of students’ overall expectations about connecting with new people and pursuing new experiences, their expectations were positively related to their reported experiences. Nevertheless, students expected to engage in these activities more often than they did. There was a statistical significance between how often students expected to pursue new experiences and connect with new people and their reported experience.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

A multi-faceted and relational developmental definition of the transition to college benefits future inquiries and investigations on this topic. Operationalizing the transition to

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8 Items from the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) at Time 1 and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) at Time 2.
college from a developmental perspective offers a blueprint for future research to continue to expand our understanding of this process as significant life activity and pathway into adulthood. The mixed methods design and analysis presented in this dissertation is valuable to our understanding about how students characterize the transition to college over time as they engage in higher education practices. In addition to investigating this life activity from multiple perspectives, the relationship between expectations and experiences was explored for a deeper and more holistic understanding about how students make sense of this life activity, a process marked by growth and change. This study’s mixed methods research design serves as a template for future studies aiming to capture the complexity of developmental phenomena with a focus on its dynamic interaction within and with broader social contexts. Furthermore, the mixed methods design described in this study offers a fresh approach for a meaningful investigation into the process of becoming college students as well as related inquiries (e.g., transferring to different institutions or long-term participation in college life) in a more relational way (e.g., exploring relationships between stakeholders through multiple genres and perspectives). For instance, in future inquiries, this design invites additional stakeholders—administrators, parents, and peers—to participate in the meaning making process of becoming a college student. This design is also suitable for lengthier investigations (e.g., the end of the first year and re-enrollment in the second year of college) with a focus on changes and consistencies over the course of the first year of college and beyond. For example, current findings reveal that expectations are generally higher than experiences (e.g., students think that they will make friends from other backgrounds or with different beliefs more often than they do), but a lengthier investigation would reveal if this holds true over time or if later experiences are—in some ways—more aligned to pre-college expectations.
Furthermore, by using one method to complement another, findings are more likely to be grounded in social realities. As such, with a design that has both qualitative and quantitative components, researchers can get closer to answering their specific research questions in “an expansive and creative form of research, not a limiting form of research” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p.17). This is especially true in psychology, a field that aims to understand, examine, and describe human beings. With a special focus on how people use cultural tools for mediating self and society relations (Daiute, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978), this dissertation study presented a purposeful mixed methods research design that responds to a call for coordinating quantitative and qualitative approaches in supporting and complimentary ways (Pascarella, 2006).

With a focus on practice and growth of first-year programs aimed at improving students’ experience in college, promoting engagement, and increasing persistence toward 4-year degrees, findings from this study can be used to continue or revise a conversation about what may be important for these first-year initiatives to offer new students. The first year of college is identified as a critical time for institutional intervention to keep students engaged in school and to improve student experiences in college. While current programs, if they exist, focus on student learning outcomes, tutoring, advisement, and peer and faculty support, increased opportunities for senior-freshman mentorships and safe spaces to explore desires and challenges around becoming an adult or adopting a new work ethic may be beneficial to students seeking to fulfill personal goals while adjusting to shifting demands on their time. This study’s design can also be implemented to gain a better understanding about how different freshman-oriented programs influence students’ sense-making about becoming college students. For instance, how do students make sense of their experience in these programs as expressed through diverse genres
designed for different audiences and purposes? Moreover, how do such programs address important values such as becoming an adult on one’s own terms, becoming “somebody” in the future, or adopting a new work ethic? Furthermore, what else can be implemented at the institutional level to promote embracing uncertainty not just hypothetically, but in practice? In other words, the insight provided by this study is useful for enhancing current higher education practices and curricula by (re-)thinking what is important to freshman students as well as how we assess and learn about what works and what doesn’t.
Appendix A

Student Online Assessment (Time 1)
Question 1: Consent Form Hi! My name is Renata Strashnaya and I am a graduate student......................
  ___ I agree to participate in this study about the transition to college.
  ___ I do not agree to participate in this study about the transition to college.

Question 2: I am
  ___ 17 years old or younger
  ___ 18 years old
  ___ 19 years old
  ___ 20 years old
  ___ 21 years old
  ___ 22 years old
  ___ 23 years old
  ___ 24 years old
  ___ 25 years old
  ___ 26 years old or older

Question 3: I have recently
  ___ received my high school diploma
  ___ received my GED
  ___ other
If other, please specify: _________________________________________________________

Question 4: This fall I will be attending college for the first time as a freshman college student.
  ___ Yes
  ___ No

Question 5: This fall I will be attending:
  ___ Big City College

Question 6: When I was applying to college, this college was my first choice.
  ___ Yes
  ___ No
If not, which college was your first choice?________________________________________

Question 7: How would you define a college student?

Question 8: You have been asked to write a student bio for your college’s website announcing incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe yourself as a college student. How do you see yourself? What do you want or think is important for your college to know about you?
Question 9: Create a checklist of the steps you took to get to college. (Suggestion: You can number your list or use commas to separate your steps.)

Question 10: Describe a day in the life of a Big City College student. (Feel free to use your imagination.)

Question 11: The following is a mission statement from Big City College:

Big City College of the City University of Large Urban City transforms lives by providing access to outstanding undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts and sciences, business and education, and a vibrant Core Curriculum in the liberal arts. We are an urban, public institution, proudly situated in one of the most dynamic and diverse communities in the country. We are committed to student success and to our historic mission to provide an affordable, high-quality education to students of all backgrounds. We seek to develop knowledgeable students who are engaged in the life of the college and our community, and are prepared to think critically, lead responsibly, act ethically, and contribute globally.

Which 3 things do you hope will be true or are the most important to you? Is there anything you would change about this statement?

Question 12: Write a letter to yourself about your journey to become a college student. What does it mean to you to become a college student? What does it mean to your family, friends, community, and society?

Question 13: Create a text message to a friend about what a typical day will be like for you as a college student.
Question 14: During the coming year in college, how often do you expect to do the following?

Drop down options: Very often Often Sometimes Never

- use the library as a quiet place to read or study
- read assigned materials other than textbooks in the library (reserve readings, etc.)
- use a computer or word processor to prepare reports or papers
- participate in class discussions using an electronic medium (e-mail, list-serve, chat groups, etc.)
- search the World Wide Web or Internet for information related to a course
- ask your instructor for information related to a course you are taking (grades, make-up work, assignments, etc.)
- discuss your academic program or course selection with a faculty member
- discuss ideas for a term paper or other class project with a faculty member
- discuss your career plans and ambitions with a faculty member
- socialize with a faculty member outside the classroom (have a snack or soft drink, etc.)
- ask your instructor for comments and criticisms about your academic performance
- work with a faculty member on a research project
- complete the assigned readings before class
- take detailed notes during class
- contribute to class discussions
- try to see how different facts and ideas fit together
- apply material learned in class to other areas (a job or internship, other courses, relationships with friends, family, co-workers, etc.)
- use information or experience from other areas of your life (job, internship, interactions with others) in class discussions or assignments
- explain material from a course to someone else (another student, friend, co-worker, family member)
- prepare a paper or project where you had to integrate ideas from various sources
- ask other people to read something you wrote to see if it is clear to them
- revise a paper or composition two or more times before you are satisfied with it
- ask an instructor or staff member for advice or help to improve your writing

Question 15: During the coming year in college, how often do you expect to do the following?

Drop down options: Very often Often Sometimes Never

- go to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, or other theater performance, on or off campus
- use a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself
- meet other students at some campus location (campus center, etc.) for a discussion
- use a learning lab or center to improve study or academic skills (reading, writing, etc.)
- use recreational facilities (pool, fitness equipment, courts, etc.)
- attend a meeting of a campus club, organization, or student government group
• work on a campus committee, student organization, or service project (publications, student government, special event, etc.)
• meet with a faculty member or staff advisor to discuss the activities of a group or organization
• make friends with students whose interests are different from yours
• make friends with students whose family background (economic, social) is different from yours
• make friends with students whose race or ethnic background is different from yours
• have serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values are very different from yours
• have serious discussions with students whose political beliefs are very different from yours
• have serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic identification is very different from yours

Question 16: In conversations with others at the college during the coming school year, how often do you expect to do each of the following?

Drop down options: Very often     Often     Sometimes     Never

• refer to knowledge you acquired in your reading or classes
• explore different ways of thinking about a topic or issue
• refer to something one of your instructors said about a topic or issue
• follow up and read something related to the topic or issue
• change your opinion as a result of the knowledge or arguments presented by others
• convince others to change their minds as a result of the knowledge or arguments you stated

Question 17: How well do you think you will like college?
___ I will be enthusiastic about it
___ I will like it
___I will be more or less neutral about it
___ I won’t like it

Question 18: Do you expect to graduate from college?
___ Yes     ___ Maybe     ___ No

Question 19: What do you think most of your grades will be at the end of the first semester?
___A+, A     ___A-, B+     ___B, B-     ___C+, C     ___C-, D     ___D+, F

Question 20: Do you expect to continue your education beyond an associate’s degree?
___ Yes     ___ Maybe     ___ No

Question 21: Do you expect to continue your education beyond a bachelor’s degree?
Question 22: Overall, my high school grades were mostly
___ A’s  ___ A’s and B’s  ___ B’s  ___ B’s and C’s  ___ C’s
___ C’s and D’s  ___ D’s  ___ D’s and below

Question 23: IF you had to choose, who would you say has encouraged or supported you to go to college the most?


Question 24: My high school curriculum was mainly
___ General  ___ College Prep  ___ Technical/Trade  ___ Don’t know  ___ Other
If other, please specify:


Question 25: How many credits are you registered for this semester?
___ 6-9  ___ 10-13  ___ 14-17  ___ more than 18

Question 26: Which courses will you be taking this semester?


Question 27: In college, what do you plan to major in?


Question 28: How many hours a week do you plan to work while in college?
___ 0  ___ 1-10  ___ 11-20  ___ 21-30
___ 31-40  ___ 41-50  ___ 51 or more hours per week

Question 29: How much time do you plan to spend outside of class working on your classwork (reading, writing, meeting classmates, studying. Working in a lab) each week?
___ 0  ___ 1-5  ___ 6-10  ___ 11-15  ___ 16-20
___ 21-25  ___ 26 hours or more
Question 30: How will you afford your college expenses this semester? (Check all that apply.)
___ Parents will provide financial assistance
___ Partner will provide financial assistance
___ Work to pay for college expenses
___ Financial Aid
___ Scholarships
___ Loan(s)
___ Savings
___ Other

Question 31: How many people live with you? (Do not count yourself.)
___ 1
___ 2
___ 3
___ 4
___ 5
___ 6+

Question 32: Who do you live with? (Check all that apply.)
___ your parent(s)/grandparent(s)
___ your children
___ your relative(s)
___ your partner
___ your friend(s)
___ your roommate(s)
___ by yourself

Question 33: Where were you born?
___ in the United States
___ outside of the United States

Question 34: Where did you grow up?
___ Brooklyn
___ Bronx
___ Queens
___ Manhattan
___ Staten Island
___ outside of NYC, but in New York state
___ in another state in the USA
___ in another country outside of the USA

Question 35: Approximately, what is your family’s household income?
___ $0-19, 999
___ $20,000-39, 999
___ $40,000-59, 999
___ $60,000-89, 999
___ $90,000-109, 999
___ $110,000 and above

Question 36: Mark all that apply: My mother has a(an)
___ high school diploma or equivalent
___ associate's degree
___ bachelor's degree
___ master's degree
___ doctorate degree
Question 37: Mark all that apply: My father has a(an)
___ high school diploma or equivalent
___ associate's degree
___ bachelor's degree
___ master's degree
___ doctorate degree
___ other
___ none of the above
___ don't know

Question 38: If you have siblings who are 18 years old or older, please mark all that apply: My sister(s)/brother(s) have
___ high school diploma or equivalent
___ associate's degree
___ bachelor's degree
___ master's degree
___ doctorate degree
___ other
___ none of the above
___ don't know

Question 39: What is your sex?
___ Male
___ Female

Question 40: What is your racial/ethnic identification?
___ American Indian or other Native American
___ Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic)
___ Black or African American
___ Asian or Pacific Islander
___ Hispanic/Latino
Appendix B

Student Online Assessment (Time 2)

1. Consent Form

2. I am ___ years old. ___18 ___19 ___20 ___21 ___22 ___23 ___24 ___25 plus

3. This fall (2014) I attended college for the first time as a freshman college student. 
   ___True ___False

4. I attended _____Big City College

5. For this upcoming Spring semester, I:
   ____registered for all of my classes
   ____registered for some of my classes
   ____plan to register soon (before the beginning of the semester)

6. How many credits are you registered for or will register for this upcoming Spring semester?
   ____7-10
   ____11-13
   ____14-16
   ____17 plus

7. How would you define a college student? ____________________________________________

8. Describe yourself as a college student. How do you see yourself? What do you want or think is important for your college to know about you? ________________________________

9. Write a letter to yourself about your experience as a college student. What does it mean to you to be a college student? What does it mean to your family, friends, community, and society?

10. Create a text message to a friend about what a typical day is like for you as a college student.

11. You have been asked to write a student bio for your college’s website announcing next year's incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe a typical incoming freshman college student (imagine that one of your
friends would be among this group). What do you want or think is important for your college to know about this student?

12. Describe a day in the life of a Big City College student.

13. The following is a mission statement from Big City College: Big City College of the City University of Large Urban City transforms lives by providing access to outstanding undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts and sciences, business and education, and a vibrant Core Curriculum in the liberal arts. We are an urban, public institution, proudly situated in one of the most dynamic and diverse communities in the country. We are committed to student success and to our historic mission to provide an affordable, high-quality education to students of all backgrounds. We seek to develop knowledgeable students who are engaged in the life of the college and our community, and are prepared to think critically, lead responsibly, act ethically, and contribute globally. Which 3 things do you think are true based on your experience at the college? Which ones are not? Is there anything you would change about this statement?

14. Think about the person you would say is your biggest supporter (i.e., who encourages you to be a college student). Who is this person? Is this the same person who encouraged you to go to college?

15. How well do you like college?

16. If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?
   --yes, definitely
   --probably yes
   --probably no
   --no, definitely

17. Do you expect to graduate from college? ___yes___maybe___no

18. I expect to receive (you can select more than one option):
   --an associate's degree
   --a bachelor's degree
   --a graduate degree
   --none of the above/other

19. My grades at the end of the first semester were mostly: ___A's___B's___C's___D's___F's

20. Were your first semester's course grades as you expected? ___yes___maybe___no
   Why or why not? ____________________________________________________________________

21. Do you think your high school grades were similar to your first semester college grades?
   ___yes___no
   Why or why not? ____________________________________________________________________

22. During the fall semester, how did you afford college expenses? (Check all that apply.)
   --Parents provided financial assistance
   --Partner provided financial assistance
   --Worked to pay for college expenses
   --Financial Aid
   --Scholarship(s)
23. How many hours a week do you work while in college?
   0    1-10   11-20   21-30   31 plus

24. On average, how much time do you spend outside of class working on your coursework (reading, writing, meeting classmates, studying, working in a lab) each week?
   - 1-5
   - 6-10
   - 11-15
   - 21-25

25. During your first semester in college, how often did you do the following?
   very often   often   sometimes   never
   - used the library as a quiet place to read or study materials you brought with you
   - contributed to class discussions
   - tried to see how different facts and ideas fit together
   - applied material learned in a class to other areas (your job or internship, other courses, relationships with friends, family, co-workers, etc.)
   - Tried to explain material from a course to someone else (another student, friend, co-worker, family member.)
   - Talked with your instructor about information related to a course you were taking (grades, make-up work, assignments, etc.).
   - Discussed your academic program or course selection with a faculty member.
   - Discussed your career plans and ambitions with a faculty member.
   - Socialized with a faculty member outside of class (had a snack or soft drink, etc.).
   - Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor’s expectations and standards.
   - Went to an art exhibit/gallery or a play, dance, or other theater performance, on or off campus.
   - Participated in some art activity (painting, pottery, weaving, drawing, etc.) or theater event, or worked on some theatrical production (acted, danced, worked on scenery, etc.) with other students, friends, or family members.
   - Participated in some music activity (orchestra, chorus, dance, etc.) on or off campus.
   - Used a campus lounge to relax or study by yourself.
   - Met other students at some campus location (campus center, etc.) for a discussion.
   - Used a campus learning lab or center to improve study or academic skills (reading, writing, etc.).
   - Used campus recreational facilities (pool, fitness equipment, courts, etc.)
   - Played a team sport (intramural, club, intercollegiate).
• Worked on a campus committee, student organization, or project (publications, student government, special event, etc.).
  o Talked with a faculty member, counselor or other staff member about personal concerns.

26. During your first semester in college, how often did you do the following?

Very often  often  sometimes  never

• Became acquainted with students whose interests were different from yours.
• Became acquainted with students whose family background (economic, social) was different from yours.
• Became acquainted with students whose age was different from yours.
• Became acquainted with students whose race or ethnic background was different from yours.
• Became acquainted with students from another country.
• Had serious discussions with students whose philosophy of life or personal values were very different from yours.
• Had serious discussions with students whose political opinions were very different from yours.
• Had serious discussions with students whose religious beliefs were very different from yours.
• Had serious discussions with students whose race or ethnic background was different from yours.
• Had serious discussions with students from a country different from yours.

27. Directions: In conversations with others (students, family members, co-workers, etc.) outside the classroom during this school year, about how often have you…?

---very often  ---often  ---occasionally  ---never

• Referred to knowledge you acquired in your reading or classes?
• Explored different ways of thinking about the topic?
• Referred to something one of your instructors said about the topic?
• Subsequently read something that was related to the topic?
• Changed your opinion as a result of the knowledge or arguments presented by others?
• Persuaded others to change their minds as a result of the knowledge or arguments you made?

28. Directions: In thinking about your college or university experience up to now, to what extent do you feel you have gained or made progress in the following areas?

-very much  -quite a bit  -some  -very little

• Acquiring knowledge and skills applicable to a specific job or type of work (vocational preparation).
• Acquiring background and specialization for further education in a professional, scientific, or scholarly field.
• Getting a broad general education about different fields of knowledge.
• Gaining a range of information that may be relevant to a career.
• Becoming aware of different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life.
• Developing your own values and ethical standards.
• Understanding yourself, your abilities, interests, and personality.
• Developing the ability to get along with different kinds of people.
• Putting ideas together, seeing relationships, similarities, and differences between ideas.
• Learning on your own, pursuing ideas, and finding information you need.
• Learning to adapt to change (new technologies, different jobs or personal circumstances, etc.).

29. What is your sex?

☐ Male
☐ Female

30. What is your racial/ethnic identification?

☐ American Indian
☐ or other Native American
☐ Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic)
☐ Black or African American
☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
☐ Hispanic/Latino
Appendix C

FACULTY ONLINE ASSESSMENT

1. Consent form

2. Please select from the following options:
   - I am a Professor
   - I am an Associate Professor
   - I am an Assistant Professor
   - I am a Lecturer
   - Other: __________________________

3. My position is:
   - Full Time
   - Part Time
   - Other: __________________________

4. I have been teaching at the college/university level for:
   - 0-2 years
   - 3-5 years
   - 6-8 years
   - 9-11 years
   - 12-14 years
   - 15 plus years

5. I teach in the following department:
   - Department ______________________

6. I prefer to teach the following course(s):

7. How would you define a college student:

8. Describe a day in the life of a Big City College student:

9. You have been asked to write a short piece for your college’s website announcing incoming freshman students and introducing them to the community. Describe these students. What do you want or think is important for the college community to know about these students?
10. Write a letter to incoming freshman students about your experience teaching in college. What do you consider to be important? What would you like for them to know (e.g., your goals, expectations)?

11. The following is a mission statement from Big City College:

Big City College of the City University of Large Urban City transforms lives by providing access to outstanding undergraduate and graduate programs in the arts and sciences, business and education, and a vibrant Core Curriculum in the liberal arts. We are an urban, public institution, proudly situated in one of the most dynamic and diverse communities in the country. We are committed to student success and to our historic mission to provide an affordable, high-quality education to students of all backgrounds. We seek to develop knowledgeable students who are engaged in the life of the college and our community, and are prepared to think critically, lead responsibly, act ethically, and contribute globally.

Which 3 things do you believe to be true or do you think are most important for college students at this institution? Is there anything you would change about this statement?
Appendix D

Flyer: Call for Participation

I am going to college...
Now what?!!

Are you a recent high school graduate?
Are you starting college this Fall?
Are you interested in participating in a study about the transition from high school to college?

RECEIVE $10 GIFT CARD FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO ALL OF THE QUESTIONS, YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY ABOUT STUDENTS’ TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE.

For more information on eligibility and participation, please contact Renata Strashnaya, Ph.D. Candidate at The Graduate Center, CUNY, at renata.strashnaya@gmail.com or rstrashnaya@gc.cuny.edu.
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