WHERE TO GO FROM HERE? DISENTANGLING COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AROUND PARTICIPATION IN ALTERNATIVE POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

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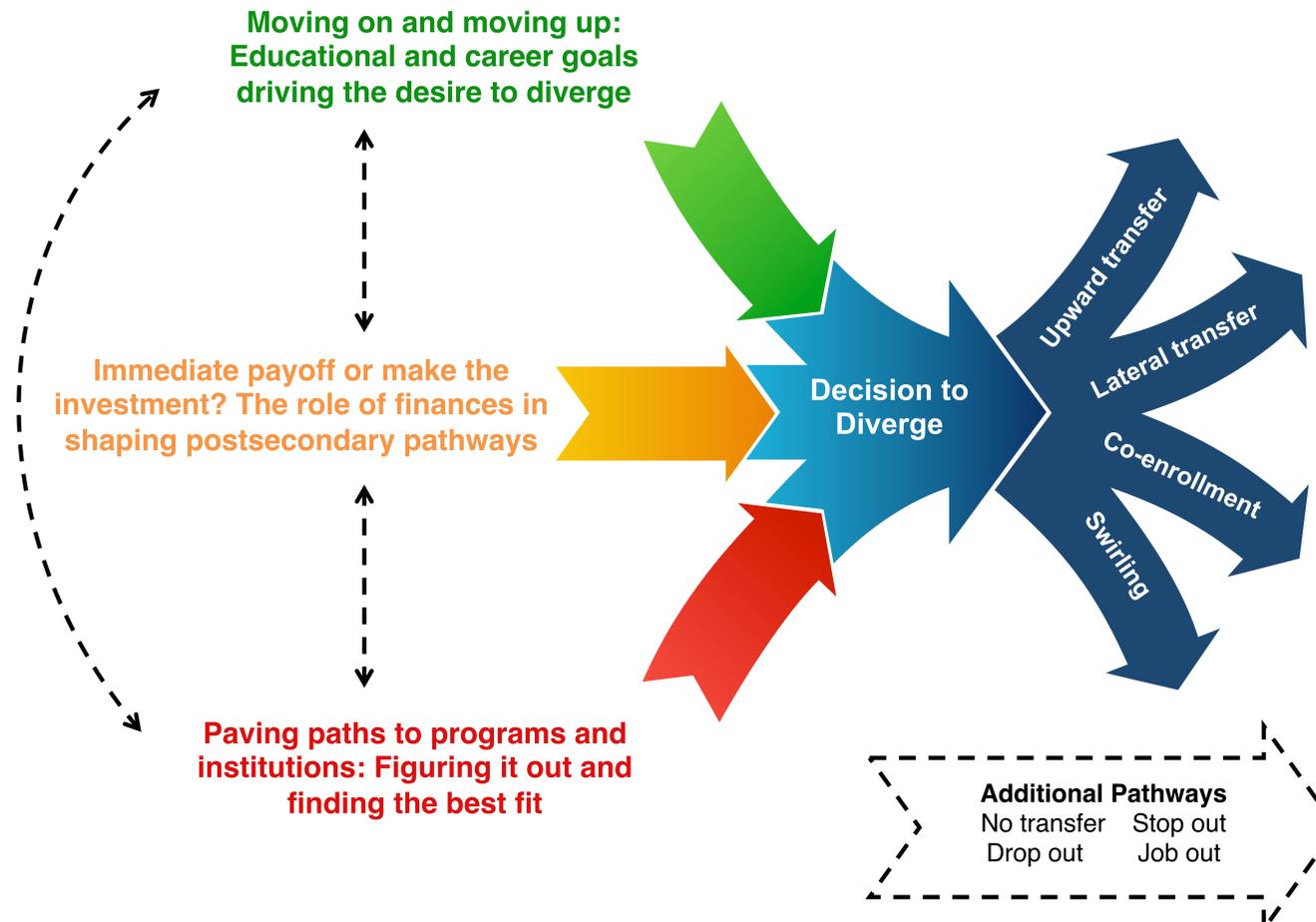
Introduction

- Mismatch between enrollment and completion rates, particularly at two-year colleges.
- Research has pointed to factors contributing to declining college completion, including limited or nonexistent structures aimed toward points of transition among higher education institutions (United States Department of Education, 2011), referring to the increase in student movement among postsecondary institutions of all levels and related issues surrounding articulation and credit transfer.
- Students going to college are gradually deviating from the traditional educational pathway of attending a singular institution in pursuit of a postsecondary education and engaging in alternative enrollment patterns (e.g., upward transfer, lateral transfer, co-enrollment, swirling) to achieve their educational goals (Bahr, 2009, 2012; Crisp, 2013; Wang, 2012; Wang & McCready, 2013; Wang & Wickersham, 2014).
- Empirical work explaining student mobility, particularly divergent student pathways, remains limited (Johnson & Muse, 2012).

Research Question

How do community college students, once enrolled, decide to further choose among competing postsecondary pathways?

Study Design

- Part of a larger, NSF-funded project (PI: Dr. Xueli Wang, University of Wisconsin-Madison).
- Purposive sample consisting of 17 students majoring or taking courses in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) and potentially participating in divergent pathways over two years.
- Mixed methods consisting of descriptive statistical analysis of survey data and narrative inquiry and grounded theory for interview data.
- Combination of open, narrative, and emotion coding to capture experiences and build narratives.
- Narrative spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), plot structures (Creswell, 2013; Yussen & Ozcan, 1996), and thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) to examine and construct stories, as well as arrange, explore, and compare evolving themes.

Moving on and moving up: Educational and career goals driving the desire to diverge

Immediate payoff or make the investment? The role of finances in shaping postsecondary pathways

Paving paths to programs and institutions: Figuring it out and finding the best fit

Decision to Diverge → Upward transfer / Lateral transfer / Co-enrollment / Swirling

Additional Pathways
No transfer   Stop out
Drop out   Job out

Illustrative Quotes of Emergent Themes

"I want to have my own—be in charge of an entire building and say I am the guy but no one will give you that if you don't have a bachelor's degree in something or you need some kind of management or computer science or whatever, you need that, you need a piece of paper."

"There is some financial difficulty with the idea of having them [my parents] pay for going to Metro Engineering College, which is the school I want to transfer to. It's like $50,000 a year, so I'm looking into trying to find employment now that I've graduated so I can focus on transferring in the future."

"I've looked into Bayshore College because they allow you to kind of build your own major, the same thing for Southeast College and Central College. CC I didn't end up thinking about any further because I had talked with their admissions. They had nothing for transferring my program. BC they were like "You can transfer into our adult learner program, but you'd kind of have to build everything from there." …And SC, there were some students in my program who went to SC and they had very bad experiences in their computer science program. So for me Metro Engineering College seemed like well this is probably the best option for me."

Preliminary Findings

- Student's decision-making process full of interactions and intersections as they select to diverge into alternative educational pathways.
- Students' awareness or lack thereof when selecting into divergent pathways.
- Decision-making and selection process evolves along students' educational trajectories and additional educational options become available.
- Decision process also leads students' to diverge with respect to field of study, particularly across different STEM fields or outside of STEM.
- Alternative salient pathways: Jobbing out, stopping out, etc. and their relationships with success and completion.

Implications

- Strengthen institutional collaboration and articulation for smooth transitions and credit transfer.
- Revisiting measures of success and completion in higher education and taking into account students' educational goals: Success for whom?
- Jobbing out may offer immediate benefit to students, but what about the longer term?
- Two-year colleges part of a university system versus a technical college system: potential differences between pathways available and those that students follow and how such variation may impact students' educational trajectories, goals, and outcomes.

For Further Information

For more information on this study and a copy of the poster, please contact me at *krconrad@wisc.edu*.

For more information regarding the NSF-funded Expanding STEM Talent research project, contact Principal Investigator Dr. Xueli Wang at xwang273@wisc.edu, or visit our website at **stemtransfer@wceruw.org.**

Funding Sources