

Narrating the Future:
Understanding How Student Narratives Relate to Outcomes
In Community College

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Abstract

Community colleges are an increasingly important entry point into higher education for adults in the United States (21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 2012). As they attend community college, students often hold diverse opinions on and engage in complex meaning-making around the college institution (Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Deil-Amen, 2016). Students' diverse understandings of community college might influence and predict their academic success. To investigate that assumption, this study asked 104 community college students to reflect on their college experiences within three genres (types) of narratives. Narratives were analyzed using plot and script analysis. After Spring 2015, students' Grade Point Averages (GPAs) were collected. This study then used dynamic narrative inquiry within quantitative analyses to connect students' subjective understanding *of* community college to their institutional performance *within* community college.

The study discovered that students used narrative genres as cultural tools to make meaning of their development and experiences within the community college system. Students used different genres to express, make meaning of, and navigate their experiences, relationships, and goals within the community college system in various ways. Different genres elicited different forms of meaning making aimed at achieving different goals and directed toward different imagined audiences.

Furthermore, students' meaning-making processes enacted within narratives were related to their year-end academic performance. More academically successful students with higher-than-average GPA narrated differently across all genres compared to less successful students with lower-than-average GPA. More successful students narrated in ways that suggested that they affiliated more with the goals of the college institution, found more opportunities and

affordances in college, and showed a greater understanding of how college partners could help and hinder their progress. Additionally, more successful students created more complex narratives that reflected the sense-making and problem-solving lessons of the community college system. Academic success was related to the ways in which students used narratives as cultural tools to mediate their relationship with the college institution and navigate the college system.

Finally, students' enactment of meaning-making with plot elements and scripts was related to and predictive of year-end academic performance. A focus on experiences was related to lower GPA and attempts to solve difficulties and conflicts in college-appropriate ways was related and predictive of higher GPA. Students' use of plot and script elements to make sense of the community college system thus predicted their year-end academic outcomes.

In summary, community college students used narrative genres as cultural tools to make meaning of their progress and experiences within the college system, and these meaning-making processes were related to and predictive of academic outcomes. How students made meaning of their college lives connected to, predicted and perhaps explained their success in the community college system. Educators and administrators in community college should utilize the findings of the present study to prepare students to navigate the college system and to help struggling students who may signal future problems within their narratives. Future research could build on these results by exploring how different populations of students make meaning with a greater variety of narrative genres and how students' meaning-making processes relate to a greater variety of academic outcomes.