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Tuition-Free College in the Context of COVID-19: TN Reconnect Adult Student Narratives

By Gresham Collom, University of Tennessee; Ashton R. Cooper, University of West Georgia

Utilizing narrative inquiry and thematic analysis, this study followed up with adult students who initially participated in a qualitative project, Understanding How Students Reconnect: A Longitudinal Study (Collom et al., 2021). Five participants shared their experiences as adult students during COVID-19, which included their experiences shifting to virtual learning and the broader effects of the pandemic on their lives. Our findings indicated that while students coped with the transition to virtual learning, the overall perceived quality of education dropped and forced students to make difficult family and employment decisions. Overall, the study illuminated the barriers that exist for adult students who have faced unexpected life-events and demonstrated the need for institutions to build supports for adult students beyond tuition-free college. Our findings highlight the need for supports above tuition for Tennessee Reconnect students. While Tennessee Reconnect has substantially increased adult student enrollment in the state, increased support is essential to realize the full benefits of the policy.

Keywords: *Adult education; free college; Promise programs; COVID-19; state policy; tuition-free*

In 2018, Tennessee policymakers implemented the Tennessee Reconnect—a last-dollar tuition-free college program—to provide statewide tuition-free college funding to adult students. It was the first widely available statewide Promise program created specifically for adult students and an extension of Tennessee’s highly regarded tuition-free policy, the Tennessee Promise. Tennessee Reconnect immediately increased postsecondary enrollment among adult students, with one study reporting an increase of between 19% to 28% among all adult students in the first two years of the program (Collom, 2022). State leaders heralded the program as an inventive policy solution to increase adult student postsecondary credential attainment and integral to state policymakers’ economic aspirations in Tennessee.

Given the initial success of Tennessee Reconnect, the program clearly attracted adult students by removing a notable barrier to attendance – tuition. However, last-dollar tuition-free programs such as the Tennessee Reconnect may not effectively provide further supports to students with the greatest need. Common critiques among the literature focused on college Promise programs point to how much of the Promise funding goes directly toward middle- and upper-class students’ tuition, as low-income students’ tuition costs are commonly covered by existing funds such as the federal Pell Grant (Jones & Berger, 2018). The benefits of increased college enrollment may not be fully realized due to the lack of financial resources dedicated to costs above and beyond tuition, such as child care, housing, and other basic needs (Collier et al., 2019; Collier & McMullen, 2020).

Regardless of whether they utilize Promise funding, adult college students face many barriers to succeeding in postsecondary education, as they are more likely to care for dependents, work full-time, and return to college after prolonged absences from formal education (Jameson & Fusco, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). The barriers to success for adult college students may have been exacerbated by the sudden emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced every industry, including colleges and universities, to quickly adapt to a new, uncertain, and constantly changing reality. Without warning, college courses moved entirely online, child care facilities closed, K-12 education institutions transitioned to virtual learning, and industries were forced to lay off employees (Collier et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic seemingly amplified the aforementioned barriers to success for adult college students, as millions of people in the United States struggled to balance virtual learning, an unemployment crisis, and political and social divisions (Bullard, 2021; Shin & Hickey, 2021).

In this study, we explored the experiences of adult students who received the Tennessee Reconnect in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we explored whether barriers experienced by adult

students beyond tuition expenses after receiving the Tennessee Reconnect were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout. The research question guiding this study was: *How did adult students who received Tennessee Reconnect funds experience college in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Background

Policymakers and education advocates push for increased postsecondary credential and degree attainment in the United States to meet projected workforce needs (Lumina Foundation, 2019). The Lumina Foundation, for example, partners with states to assist with creating strategies and policies that will help increase credential and degree attainment to 60% in the US by 2027. The foundation specifically aims to increase postsecondary attainment among adult learners who do not currently have a postsecondary credential (Lumina Foundation, 2019). The Lumina Foundation's goals align with the trajectory of postsecondary education in the United States broadly. There is a growing movement in the United States to promote and support programs focused on increasing postsecondary credential attainment among adult students and students who have some college credit, but no degree (Lumina Foundation, 2021). In the following section, we provide current research on tuition-free college programs and adult college students.

Tuition-Free College Programs

Promise programs were initially conceptualized as programs to increase college attendance in poor, undereducated communities and are commonly referred to as place-based Promise programs (Perna & Leigh, 2018). One of the oldest tuition-free programs and the inspiration for most active Promise programs today, the Kalamazoo Promise program, was established in 2005 in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The Kalamazoo Promise program aimed to increase college attainment in the disadvantaged community of Kalamazoo by offering full tuition grants to graduates of public high schools in Kalamazoo who choose to attend any of Michigan's state colleges or participating private institutions. Kalamazoo Promise and other place-based Promise programs increased access and participation in postsecondary education, although socioeconomic disparities in credential attainment and employment outcomes persist (Ash et al., 2021; Collier & McMullen, 2020; Gándara & Li, 2020).

More recently, state policymakers implemented statewide Promise programs to, in part, promote economic development through a more educated workforce (Perna & Leigh, 2018). One such program is Tennessee Promise, Tennessee's original tuition-free college program and the first statewide tuition-free program in the United States, which was implemented in 2015. Funds from the state's lottery system finance Tennessee Promise, structured as a last-dollar tuition-free grant available to all graduating high school seniors. The grant can be used at public, associate degree granting institutions and private institutions who opt-in to the program. Requirements for Tennessee Promise eligibility include filling out an online application for the Tennessee Promise program, filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by the annual deadline, attending a mandatory meeting led by a local partnering organization, participating in mentoring provided by a local partnering organization, completing 8 hours of community service per academic year, and enrolling full-time at an eligible postsecondary institution (Tennessee Promise, n.d.). The small but growing body of research on Tennessee Promise is revealing, showing that the program may increase postsecondary enrollment among Black and Hispanic students and students who would not have otherwise enrolled in college (Nguyen, 2020), divert enrollment away from private colleges and to public Promise eligible institutions (Bell, 2021), and decrease dependence on student loans (Odlé et al., 2022).

Eligibility requirements for statewide Promise programs excluded adult students, a group integral to meeting nationwide educational attainment goals (Lumina Foundation, 2021). Tennessee policymakers expanded access to tuition-free college by implementing Tennessee Reconnect in 2018. Tennessee Reconnect is one of two statewide Promise programs available to independent adult students in the United

States¹. Similar to Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect is structured as a last-dollar grant that pays the remaining balance of tuition and mandatory fees after other state and federal financial aid and scholarships have been applied. The grant may be applied toward the pursuit of an associate degree, technical degree, or technical diploma at a Tennessee community college, or technical college. It may also be used at an eligible public or private college or university in Tennessee, as long as the student is pursuing an eligible postsecondary credential (Collom et al., 2021). Unlike Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect does not require students to complete community service, participate in mandatory mentoring, or enroll full-time (Tennessee Reconnect Act, 2018).

As this program is relatively new, there is limited research on the impact of Tennessee Reconnect on adult student postsecondary outcomes and experiences. Initial quantitative analysis of enrollment responses during the first two years of the program revealed a significant increase in adult student enrollment at public institutions by between 19% to 28%, with enrollment increases most prominent among part-time and male students (Collom, 2022). Further, a qualitative analysis exploring the experiences of 23 students who received Tennessee Reconnect funding discussed how students viewed the program as a second chance at improving their livelihood. Adult students in the study indicated that their original attempts at college stalled due to life circumstances out of their control, such as needing to support their family by working full-time. Yet, participants often still experienced the barriers to success in college common among adult, first-generation, and low-income students. While participants in the study were motivated to succeed and excited for the potential benefits of college education, many struggled with the realities of online coursework, balancing work and college, and navigating institutions that often did not provide further support for adult students (Collom et al., 2021).

Critiques of Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, and many other statewide Promise programs center on the last-dollar funding structure. In a last-dollar program, funds are only applied after all other aid (i.e., Pell Grants and scholarships). Students who receive substantial aid from other programs therefore do not receive any funds from Promise programs with a last-dollar structure. A program with a first-dollar structure, however, is immediately applied and students can use other funding to cover non-tuition costs to attending college. Although first-dollar Promise programs may provide increased financial support for low-income students, they are also more expensive and less common than last-dollar programs (Collier & McMullen, 2020; Collom et al., 2021; Davidson et al., 2018; Perna, 2016). Further, first-dollar programs may not be politically or financially sustainable in the long-term (Bell, 2020; Goldrick-Rab & Miller-Adams, 2018).

COVID-19 and Postsecondary Education

To combat the spread of the virus, almost all postsecondary education institutions in the United States moved to virtual learning for the second half of the spring 2020 semester (Aguiler-Hermida, 2020; Donnelly et al., 2020; Floyd, 2021). As the United States failed to implement effective practices and policies to stop the spread of the virus, institutions were again forced to adapt for the fall semester. Colleges and universities offered a mixture of hybrid, virtual, and limited in-person courses during the 2020/2021 academic year (Collier et al., 2021).

The dramatic shift in postsecondary education was largely unpopular with college students and detrimental to their mental health and academic experiences (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Kim & Kessler-Eng, 2021). Early in the fall 2020 semester, surveys of college students found increased suicide ideations, intentions to drop out of college, and feelings of anxiety or depression across the United States

¹ Michigan Reconnect, established in spring 2020, provides in-district tuition-free community college for students over 25 (Michigan Reconnect Grant Recipient Act, 2020).

(Cao et al., 2020; Ison et al., 2021; Zolotov et al., 2020). Furthermore, institutional leaders feared a forthcoming drop in enrollment, budget cuts, and the possibility of continuing the spring semester without a vaccine for COVID-19, and many responded with mandatory staff furloughs, salary reductions, and hiring freezes (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020; Floyd, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021).

Historically marginalized students were disproportionately impacted by the unexpected changes in postsecondary education (Harper, 2021). Low-income students saw a sharp decline in enrollment in 2020, and students with disabilities and other learning challenges often did not have access to adequate remote learning and necessities to accommodate their remote learning (Department of Education, 2021). Adults students may have also been disproportionately impacted, as adult college students are more likely to have dependents, come from low-income families, belong to a historically marginalized racial group, have a learning disability, and work full-time to support their college education (Jameson & Fusco, 2014; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Indeed, adult student enrollment dropped substantially during the 2020/2021 academic year and continued to decline for the 2021 fall semester (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021).

Promise programs may be an effective tool to increase enrollment in postsecondary education. Expanding statewide Promise funding to adult learners represents another valuable policy tool to increase participation in postsecondary education, although the long-term outcomes of such programs are unknown. COVID-19 created new, and exacerbated existing, barriers to success for historically marginalized college students, including adult students. As state leaders and policymakers navigate the impact of COVID-19 and consider establishing their own Promise programs, we must consider how policy and state funding can be leveraged to provide support beyond tuition. In this study we seek to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted adult students using Tennessee Reconnect, and explore what further supports adult students need to fully realize the benefits of tuition-free college.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding the original study was Schlossberg's (1981, 1984) Transition Theory (see Collom et al., 2021). The theory developed by Schlossberg is used throughout college contexts to understand the experience of transitioning from a non-student to a student (Anderson et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016; McCoy, 2015), but provides a framework to understand "transitions of all kinds" (Schlossberg, 1981, p.3). However, due to the unexpected nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, we instead utilized a critical events approach to guide the analysis the narratives of the participants.

When studying critical events in education, Woods (1993) noted that critical events are "highly charged moments and episodes that have enormous consequences for personal change and development" (p. 356). Like Schlossberg's (1984) unanticipated transitions, critical events are typically unplanned and uncontrolled but can aid in understanding complex situations and are an essential part of change in educational contexts (Webster & Mertova, 2007; Woods, 1993). Webster and Mertova (2007) identify critical events by having the following qualities;

- existing in a certain context;
- impact on the people involved;
- have life-changing consequences;
- are unplanned;
- may reveal patterns of well-defined stages;
- are only identified after the event;
- are intensely personal with strong emotions. (p. 83)

While Woods (1993) posits critical events as being critical in teaching and learning, we utilize the approach as having the ability to positively affect education administration and policy making. In the same way Woods deems critical events as affecting student learning, teacher development, restoring ideals in teachers, and boosting morale—so to can critical events in policy and administration affect student learning, administrator development, restore program ideals, and boost morale. In situating the study around the

critical event of the pandemic, we were able to understand the cascade of events that happened as the participants navigated virtual learning and being a reconnect student.

Methods

Data from this project derives from a larger qualitative project about reconnect students. In this analysis we examined narrative data from five reconnect students who were affected by COVID-19 and their institutions' shift to virtual learning. Broadly, we sought to understand how COVID-19 and institutional restrictions/restructuring affected their educational experiences and their lives.

Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted that narrative inquiry is a methodological approach to explore and explain phenomena as experienced by individuals. Rather than seeking out scientific truth (Reissman, 1993), narrative inquiry attempts to “endow experience with meaning” (Kramp, 2003 p. 105). The narratives that people tell are not only stories of what happened during a particular time, but how the individual understands their experience in relation to their unique identity (Cooper, 2020). Reissman (1993) affirmed this stating “[Narrative inquiry is] a systematic study of personal experiences and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects” (p. 70). In essence, narrative inquiry as a method seeks to center the experiences of the participants and the meanings they create in their experience. As such the narratives within narrative inquiry are units of analysis themselves, rather than only the themes that developed from them (Kramp, 2003; Reissman, 1993). Specific to this study, narrative inquiry provided a methodological approach to understand how Tennessee Reconnect students experienced the reconnect program and navigated their lives amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

We utilized narrative inquiry because of its usefulness in making sense of past experiences and events for reasons to create change and inform policy decisions (Lyons, 2006; Reissman, 2008). Narrative inquiry allowed us to closely understand how the lives of the participants influenced their experiences within the reconnect program. Not only is it important to understand the influence of the reconnect program on the students, but how they interpreted the benefits and disadvantages of being an adult student while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences and perspectives of the participants can help shape how institutions respond to the needs of adult students within reconnect programs and addressing issues not directly related to the learning environment but still affect student learning.

Participants & Data Collection

Interview data were collected over Zoom between May – September 2020. Adult students who initially participated in the longitudinal multiyear qualitative project, *Understanding How Students Reconnect: A Longitudinal Study* (2018), were invited to participate in a follow-up interview regarding their time as a student during COVID-19. In-depth, unstructured narrative interviews lasting between 90 – 120 minutes were conducted with five students (see Table for list of participants) to explore their lived experiences following their institutions shift to virtual learning and the broader effects of the pandemic on their education and lives.

Table. Demographic Information for Study Participants

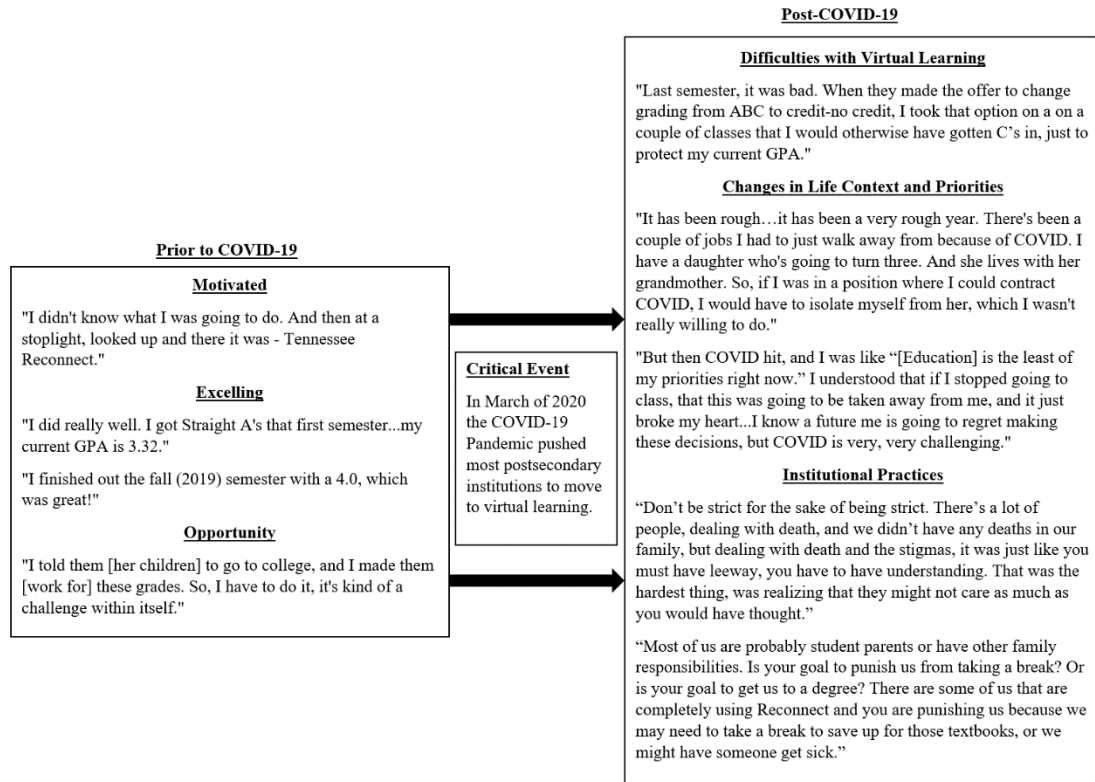
Participant	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Sex	Years out of formal education	Marital status	Primary caregiver?	Major
Andrew	White	29	Male	10	Single	No	Architecture
Garden	White	30	Female	4	Single	No	Cinematography and Animation
Jay	White	52	Male	19	Divorced	No	Business Administration/Supply Chain
Joan	Hispanic	45	Female	25	Married	Yes	General Studies
Roger	White	29	Male	N/A	Single	No	Mechanical Engineering

Data Analysis

We utilized thematic analysis (TA) to understand and interpret the narratives of the participants. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), TA offers insight to the data by analyzing meaning across a data set, rather than finding meaning within a single data item (Reissman, 2008). TA is a useful way to analyze data because it identifies what is common about a topic across multiple narratives, then allows the researcher(s) to make sense of those commonalities (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Reissman, 2008). The commonalities between narratives are not inherently important because of their similarities but become important in their ability to answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Braun and Clarke (2012) provided a six-phase process for doing thematic analysis well. The process includes, 1.) Familiarizing yourself with the data, 2.) Generating initial codes, 3.) Searching for themes, 4.) Reviewing potential themes, 5.) Defining and naming themes, and 6.) Generating the research report. We familiarized ourselves with the data by rereading each interview transcript and producing a narrative report separately. Producing the narrative reports helped us to each begin to generate codes and potential themes across all narratives. Once we had codes and potential themes, we worked together to develop our current three major themes: *Difficulties with virtual learning*, *Changes in life context and priorities*, and *harmful institutional practices* (See Figure). Additionally, we also engaged in peer review of our codes and themes to ensure that they aligned with the research questions and purpose of the study. By using an external auditor who was familiar with our research and the Tennessee Reconnect program, we were able to ensure the clarity and trustworthiness of our study as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Figure. Themes and Representative Quotes



Participant Narratives

Jay, 52, Male

Jay originally returned to school when he was 49 to pursue an associate degree in business administration. Prior to returning to college, Jay worked as a fleet manager with a local trucking company. He shared that earlier in life he was unmotivated. Jay briefly attended college when he was in his early 30s but dropped out shortly after enrolling. Nevertheless, Jay found a good career as a truck driver and worked his way up to a fleet manager position. At that point, Jay knew if he wanted to move up in his field, he needed to get a college degree. Jay saw the Tennessee Reconnect as an opportunity to continue his upward trajectory.

Jay excelled at the local community college and shared how most of the coursework was easy for him:

It was interesting in how similar it was when I was going to high school. Which I started with a very basic math class which was what I had learned in high school that that might have been why it seemed so similar. My second math class was my worst by far, but after that one I got into a more, and more of a study habit and figured out how to study better.

Jay graduated with his associate degree and a 3.48 GPA and still had his job as a fleet manager. He then transferred to a public university to pursue his bachelor's degree. Jay was an example of how tuition-free college for adult students could work.

Jay shared how his experience at the large, public university was similar and he kept excelling in his coursework:

I did really well. I got straight A's that first semester. It did get harder once I went full time. Yeah. I've managed I think my current GPA is 3.32. Which advising continues to tell me is a great GPA.

When the COVID-19 Pandemic hit and higher education transitioned to virtual learning, Jay's experience as a college student changed:

Last semester, it was bad. When they made the offer to change grading from ABC to credit-no credit, I took that option on a couple of classes that I would have otherwise have gotten C's in, just to protect my current GPA. You know, there's been no situation where I would have failed. But it did become a lot more difficult when you didn't have direct access to the professors. You know, there's, there's still access there, you can go into their office hours, they all have Zoom office hours set up. But it's not the same as being able to directly walk up at the end of class and say, 'Hey; this is what I was curious about.' And getting a quick answer. This semester, I'm all online again. There were some in person classes available. But some of my classes that was online only. So, I opted to go completely online rather than splitting up between campus and, and off campus.

The sudden transition to online learning was difficult for many students, and possibly even more so for adult learners who have never experienced online courses before. Jay, who was confident in his ability as a student prior to the pandemic, found himself struggling with all his courses.

Jay was also struggling outside of coursework. He shared with us how he had to quit his lucrative job driving trucks due to concerns about COVID-19 infection:

It has been rough...it has been a very rough year. There's been a couple of jobs I had to just walk away from because of COVID. I have a daughter who's going to turn three. And she lives with her grandmother. So, if I was in a position where I could contract COVID, I would have to isolate myself from her, which I wasn't really willing to do. So, I was driving for a trucking company that contracted with [a large corporation]. But we came to find out that some of the warehouse workers had COVID, but were asymptomatic. And as, what was the term, 'as essential workers', even asymptomatic they were allowed to work. But they were loading the trucks, which means they're sweating all over the boxes that they're putting in. Cuts and scrapes and bruises are an everyday occurrence. I just wasn't, I wasn't willing to take that chance of coming into contact with it. So, I had to walk away from that job. It made me feel kind of like a bum that I've just been stepping down and down just to keep everything going. Which has led directly to my debt moving up. And just keeping steady employment in this situation is more difficult.

Jay left his job as a truck driver and started delivering pizzas for Dominos. He shared how he:

Went from making \$60,000 prior to the pandemic to \$19,000. It is really embarrassing and the fact that any job you're doing a good job at your job. When I'm delivering for Domino's. It's just a job that an 18-year-old should do, not a 52-year-old.

Jay shared that he started to become more comfortable with online classes but was nervous for his job prospects following graduation:

I don't really have a direct target that I'm aiming for...there's no there's no bullseye that I'm shooting for. My plan was to get a degree... I can try to market that. But I don't have a company that I'm going for, or a specific position that I'm shooting for...some of the students when you talk to them, they're like, yeah, I want to be in this specific job title at this company. And I was like, well, I just want my degree, so that I can continue moving up the chain. I'm getting a little worried about it. Because every time I keep watching on handshake, and everything, the jobs being offered, and everything is always dispersed throughout the country...I've got a daughter living in Oak Ridge who's not going to move to Texas with me if I that's where I have to go to get a job.

Garden, 30, Female

Garden returned to college at 28 after she saw a large billboard advertisement for the Tennessee Reconnect while driving home from her job as a bartender:

I was angry, and I was tired, and my feet hurt, and I didn't know what I was going to do. And then at a stoplight, looked up and it was there – Tennessee Reconnect. It was three o'clock in the morning. You know, no one's out. I was leaving the bar. Yeah, I checked it out.

Garden had previously attended a large public university and received a degree from a discredited for-profit private institution. She worked a variety of jobs, including bartending, marketing, and stand-up comedy. She enrolled in computer animation and film program and excelled as a student initially. Garden also emphasized how her institution supported her through TRIO programs and adult student advising.

The following year, Garden shared with us how COVID-19 impacted her time in college her plans for the future:

I finished out fall (2019) semester 4.0. Again, which was great. And then spring semester hit. And I'm was only two semesters away from graduating, all of my classes were in person. And they're all studio like TV studio classes. So, when the pandemic hit in the classes shut down. It kind of was the worst possible thing to have happen. Because everything I was doing, I had to do like hands on. And there was no way I could pay like \$5,000 for a switchboard for no good reason. So, I worked with most of my professors, the ones that I could not do like, at all, I just got an incomplete.

Garden stated that she did not feel comfortable doing most of her work online, in part because her personal laptop was over 10 years old. Because of the sudden transition and her difficulty transitioning to remote coursework, Garden looked at possible transfer opportunities:

I kind of saw the writing on the wall, and realize that I had like three weeks that I could apply to schools for a transfer. And so just in a manic episode, I applied to 5 universities and got accepted to two immediately.

When garden interviewed previously, she shared how she was excited to get a degree where she could work a normal job and live a comfortable life. She shared that the pandemic caused her to change how she viewed her college education:

It became a realization of over the span of the pandemic, really, because all of my boyfriend's closest friends live in New York and Los Angeles. And during the pandemic, all of us talked on the phone constantly. And we're just on FaceTime. And I kind of put it to a couple of my friends that work in Broadway right now. And so, they were kind of like, look, here's the thing, these big cities are

emptying out and I don't think they're going to fill backup. These are also were established places are for you to do the things that you want to do. And if anything, like all of my friends that have lived, especially in New York for over a decade, they're like, this is the closest we're gonna get to the artistic revolution of the 70s. And how things happen, there were so many rich people moved out into the suburbs, and artists and everything just moved in. And so that kind of solidified it for me was like, I should just transfer. And then I went over to all of my advisors and my professors and got seven letters of recommendation. And so, I was like, that's perfect. And I also my big deciding factor was before my final grades for the spring semester were in. And because I took one incomplete and took one C which broke my heart and 1000 pieces, and the other two were A's. I wanted to transfer as quickly as possible before my GPA dropped.

Garden said her experience during the pandemic had been awful, and that she had suffered financially and mentally. However, she ended the interview with a positive spin on her experience and optimism for her future academic career:

I came out of this. Like not doing drugs. That's awesome. Flat out only like smoking occasionally. And honestly, even with drinking like I just, I'm so old. I scheduled days that I drink. Like oh well, I'm off on Wednesday. So, Tuesday I'm going to have a bottle of wine.

Andrew, 29, Male

Andrew did well in high school and graduated with a 3.8 GPA and 16 college credits, even though he admitted he did not enjoy school. He initially enrolled in a 4-year public regional school with a major in exercise science, but dropped out shortly after:

I chose [exercise science] just because I've always been very healthy person the whole life and chose something pretty practical. I was like, well, you know, people are always breaking hips and tearing tendons. I had undiagnosed ADHD. Until I was like, 24. And I look back, I was like, oh, that's why I did all that. Yeah, like all over the place. And then so getting some of the core classes, and I was just like, not my thing. I thought it was but it wasn't what I really wanted to do, honestly, yeah, just kind of slowly figured that out. And then some other things that happened to like, my father passed away. And then I decided to take a break from school because of that, and yeah, I mean, I came back here.

Andrew moved with his parents to a larger city and helped them start their family-owned brewery and restaurant. He said when his parents offered him the job, he decided to work and forgo college.

Andrew worked at his parents' business for 3 years before hearing about the Tennessee Reconnect and tuition-free college:

It was just from a friend who was coming back from a job that he was doing. And he was just trying to figure out what his next step was going to be because he went off on like, adventure travel and a whole bunch. And he's like 'Did you hear about this? They're doing this like, free college.'

Andrew had thought about returning to college for a few years. He said he was disappointed that he had failed at college earlier, and was thinking more about what he wanted to do with his life. Tennessee Reconnect offered him the opportunity to return to college because that's "what I wanted to do in my life, and be proud of it." Andrew enrolled in a local community college with a major in architecture. His initial experience was positive, but he did note the costs beyond tuition associated with his chosen major. "Especially in the architectural design class, they wanted you to get drafting equipment...rulers and then special pens, mechanical pencils."

The beginning of the COVID pandemic also forced most of Andrew's courses to transition to virtual learning. He shared how some professors were better than others when it came to delivering online courses:

It's fully virtual. I have classes four days a week. Some of them cancel, some of them don't. One of them doesn't even have zoom meetings. Her teaching methods are a little weird...I think it's lazy. But the [other professor], she's great, wonderful, super helpful. She's actually tried to set up with tutoring if we need it, or spend time after class and help us out.

Andrew also shared how his coursework would have been difficult, and expensive, during the pandemic were it not for his internship with a local engineer:

We have a lot of things that we have to draft. So, like a drafting board have been really, really helpful. As far as like trying to find tools to get straight edges, and then straight lines, and then making sure things are the way he wanted, you know, drafted, as far as in this piece of vellum paper, or just any of the equipment that would have been helpful. As far as tracing paper, I didn't have access to those, nor did I really know where to get them. I once went to a Michaels, and they had the wrong size. So, I didn't really do it on that one. If I didn't have my other job, who happens to be an engineer in Oakridge, and he owns a small lab. He has like really old pieces of vellum. And he has a light table and a drafting table. I had an upper hand on probably even the department, you know, with the stuff that I had, which was really cool and helpful. But at the same time, everyday students just don't have either the money or know where to get materials.

While Andrew benefitted from his resources and knowledge from previously attending college, he indicated that some students seemed to struggle much more than him:

There's one in the AutoCAD class, I think some of the people are adult learners and they went back to school just to learn that skill. There's another older adult learner who needs a lot of help with AutoCAD. I spend time emailing back and forth with her and helping her out.

Joan, 45, Female

Joan embraced the identity of being a non-traditional student. As a 45-year-old married mother of four, Joan acknowledged that college was not on her mind graduating high school. She recounted, "I didn't really see this [as] feasible, I guess the major thing was because I was a teen mother. So, after I graduated high school, I decided to stay home where I am still a housewife." Though she did not have a college education as her children navigate primary and secondary school education, she took their education seriously, becoming what she called an educational advocate for her kids. Joan's decision to pursue higher education came as her youngest child started their junior year of high school pondering "What's next? What I am going to do next?"

As a first-generation student, Joan acknowledged that she did not know much about what it meant to attend college. While she visited a friend in her dorm, she admitted that she did not understand how to really navigate the college environment. Joan did look into attending college early on into her marriage but decided against it, citing being a single-income family and having small children. Now, Joan along with all the members of her family (husband and children) all attend college—together. She said the experience helps her to understand what her children are experiencing, but also pushes her to do well in her classes.

I feel like I take it really seriously, a ‘B’ is not sufficient for me. I pushed myself, and then I push [sic] my kids. So, I can’t live up to the standard if I don’t do it for myself. I told them to go to college, and I made them [work for] these grades. So, I have to do it, it’s kind of a challenge within itself. Plus, the learning, it’s a neat experience.

Moreover, Joan credits her ability to navigate higher education and the reconnect process well, to having to fill out applications and advocate for her children.

I had practice [with my daughters] to understand the application process. Signing up for this or that, for Promise and Hope and all you know? I understood all of that coming in. It’s not like having to ask a bazillion questions for dual enrollment and stuff, that was harder. But, by the time I got to that point [applying for reconnect] it was just a matter of just learning what reconnect required and stuff like that.

COVID-19 did not present much of a challenge for Joan personally, but she acknowledged that it was more problematic for her children. She preferred the flexibility of her classes being online, whereas her children desired to be in person, and struggled mentally and emotionally. Joan attempted to use the online pivot of her classes to get ahead, and while some of her professors supported her work ethic, others did not. Eventually she did contract COVID-19 and had to complete her assignments while sick. Joan chose to take a positive perspective with this experience with COVID-19 and higher education. She made it a point to say that other people were dealing with much more serious issues like death than she was, but was critical of rules imposed by faculty and administrators just for the sake of rules.

Don’t be strict for the sake of being strict. There’s a lot of people, dealing with death, and we didn’t have any deaths in our family, but dealing with death and the stigmas, it was just like you have to have leeway, you have to have understanding. That was the hardest thing, was realizing that they might not care as much as you would have thought.

For Joan, COVID-19 exposed some areas that she believes Tennessee lawmakers should understand about the lived experiences of individuals who may utilize the Reconnect grant. She addressed the “digital divide” or lack of broadband and Wi-Fi in rural areas, but also issues that discouraged her from pursuing higher education earlier. Things like childcare, employment, textbook, and other unexpected costs. Expenses not covered within the Reconnect program, from Joan’s perspective, could potentially discourage students from completing college if the expenses begin to accrue along with their other life scenarios.

Most of us are probably student parents or have other family responsibilities. Is your goal to punish us from taking a break? Or is your goal to get us to a degree? There are some of us that are completely using Reconnect and you are punishing us because we may need to take a break to save up for those textbooks, or we might have someone get sick. People may have had to drop out because of the digital divide or because they didn’t have work, or kids in school...I think we just need to remember the goal is to finish not, you know, punish us.

Roger, 29, Male

Roger struggled with school from an early age. Though encouraged by his parents, he decided in the sixth grade that he was not a fit for college. The idea of going to college for Roger was tied to his internal emotions and the pressure from people who he respected, he recounted:

In my mind, in my heart [college] scared me...because I had this expectation from my parents and the teachers in my private school. They tried really hard to connect with me to make sure I was

successful in my education, but there was just a lot of emotional weight that I did not know how to express.

After eventually receiving his GED, Roger decided that he could try going to college, and decided to enroll in pre-college classes. The classes, he felt, provided little pressure to succeed and the opportunity for him to see if he could succeed in college. As he began to feel confident about his ability to succeed in a college classroom, he was encouraged by his girlfriend to apply for the Pell Grant but was denied due to the amount of money that he made working at a restaurant. Roger refused to take out loans and dropped out.

Moving to Knoxville, Tennessee allowed Roger to take perspective on his life and his pursuit of higher education. Coupled with a relationship with an undergraduate student, he began to define education for himself, rather than how others defined it for him.

The way I approached it was I already understand what college is now. It's developing the framework and putting you under stress. Its putting you under a certain deadline, [and] it's causing you to be uncomfortable in a specific field so that you can go into that field and pick up where the people who are getting out that field left off.

With his newfound understanding of education, Roger also acknowledged areas that he struggled with (e.g. the formality of education, homework and assignments) and decided to speak to an academic advisor. With help from his personal networks, he decided that he wanted to use the Reconnect Grant to return to school to be an engineer. As Roger began taking classes in Knoxville, he began to form positive relationships with his instructors, especially his math professor and utilizing tutoring services to improve his writing skills. However, as COVID became more prevalent, and everything began to change so too did Roger's perceptions about his education.

But then COVID hit, and I was like "[Education] is the least of my priorities right now." I understood that if I stopped going to class, that this was going to be taken away from me, and it just broke my heart...I know a future me is going to regret making these decisions, but COVID is very, very challenging.

Roger refused to ask for help because he understood that everyone was having a hard time and commented on his English professor's refusal to adjust his in-person class to an online format. Roger recalled an email that stated the professor did not know how to teach class online, or how to work zoom. Roger's math professor, however, approached supporting students and Roger differently. Even after Roger stopped attending classes, his math professor continued to send him emails encouraging him to come back to class or to at least turn in his assignments.

Roger understood that many of his current decisions stemmed from his past experiences. Noting that they are things that he just needs to learn from. In attempting to get his education back on track, he reached out to an academic advisor, however according to Roger, she signed him up for classes without understanding his financial situation nor taking the time to try and understand it. He knew that he would no longer be eligible for the Reconnect program or the Pell Grant, but based on previous life experiences, he remained optimistic about his life working out because of his ability to navigate society without having a degree. He still wants to return to school, but only once he has saved up enough money to pay for it himself.

Once I actually go back to school, I think I'm going to go back and get my AutoCAD certification. That way I can go right into the job market, I can pay for the certification program, I can save up the money before I do it, pay for it.

Discussion

Participant narratives revealed their motivations for returning to college were similar and reflective of participant experiences in our larger study (Collom et al., 2021). However, each experienced the critical event of COVID-19 and the sudden transition to virtual learning differently. In this section, we discuss the following themes; institution's response and support, changes to their life context and priorities, and comfort with virtual learning.

Prior to COVID-19

Before COVID-19, participants shared similar stories about their journey back to college. Their stories reflect the findings highlighted by Collom et al. (2021), in which the authors found that adult students using Tennessee Reconnect often faced barriers earlier in life that lead to the decision to drop-out of not enroll in college. Four of five participants in this study had previously attended college and dropped out, while one decided to forgo college to be a stay-at-home mother. All participants noted that they felt the drive to return to college and were motivated to be a student again. The Tennessee Reconnect served as a catalyst in their decision to return to college due to the decreased financial burden. All five participants excelled when they returned to college initially and were enthusiastic about their future as a student.

Post COVID-19

In March of 2020 the COVID-19 Pandemic forced most postsecondary institutions to move to virtual learning. Economic fallout from the pandemic negatively impacted college students, causing increased unemployment and food and housing insecurity (Raifman et al., 2021), as well as widespread reports of increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Bianchi et al., 2021). While the participants in our study each experienced the critical event of COVID-19 and the transition to virtual learning differently, their narratives reflected the reported effects of the pandemic felt nationwide. Three key themes emerged from participant narratives: Difficulties with virtual learning, changes in life context and priorities, and harmful institutional practices.

Difficulties with Virtual Learning

Emergency online learning forced people and institutions to adapt to virtual learning environments that they otherwise did not opt in to (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Both Floyd (2021) and Strayhorn (2021) acknowledged the difficulties with emergency online learning. They pointed to the lack of financial resources available to community colleges, lack of training, and overall hesitancy to convert traditional in-person class lectures to virtual lectures that were either synchronous or asynchronous.

All participants in the study reported difficulty, either directly or indirectly with the transition to virtual learning. Joan noticed how her children were affected “mentally” and “emotionally” due to their desire to be in-person alluding to their preferred method of instruction and learning. Likewise, two of the participants shared that their professors openly admitted to not knowing how to teach online and that professors also seemed to struggle with the transition. Roger’s interaction with his English professor illustrates this fact as he was told to “tune in” if he wanted to the professor continued teaching using his normal methods via Zoom, potentially utilizing what Strayhorn (2021) called “sage on a stage” teaching (p.7). Similarly, Andrew stated that one of his professors was “lazy” when teaching online referring to the level of engagement in the online course. The experiences of the reconnect students echo recommendations shared by Strayhorn (2021) and Kim and Kessler-Eng (2021) to evaluate the virtual teaching competencies of faculty and provide the necessary tools and training for effective online instruction.

Further, two participants spoke about how the transition created extra financial burden for them and others because they were now expected to purchase or find access to the supplies (e.g. AutoCAD, drafting tables, lightboards, newer laptops) that would have been provided for them during a typical semester. Joan called this burden the “digital divide” as she spoke about the lack of consistent Wi-Fi access for students in rural areas. Likewise, Garden pondered how she was going to be able to complete the online content due to the age of her laptop. Due to the rapid onset of COVID-19 and transition of colleges, these types of needs were common across all institutional types (Floyd, 2020; Kim & Kessler-Eng, 2021). An intended outcome of the Reconnect program is to decrease the barriers to degree attainment for adult-learners. Despite the resources to enroll in and attend classes, the pandemic created additional barriers to success in those classes potentially undermining the goals of the program.

There is already competition for resources among higher education institutions, especially community colleges (Floyd, 2021), and with the limited resources that institutions had at the time of the pandemic onset, few were prepared with a plan to handle the wave of needs of students, faculty, and staff (Strayhorn, 2021). Strayhorn (2021) suggested adapting current faculty and staff training to adapt to virtual learning environments, as it allows institutions to “lead from the future” (p.8) which includes anticipating future needs and advances in educational methods. An institution in New York conducted a needs assessment of distance learning needs, and reallocated already limited resources to address student connectivity issues and devices needed for distance learning, offered student training on the institutions learning management system, and moved support services online (Kim & Kessler-Eng, 2021).

Changes in Life Context and Priorities

The COVID-19 pandemic may have caused adult learners in higher education to reevaluate their life priorities (Floyd, 2021). Disproportionately, low SES individuals and People of Color were affected by the pandemic and the financial burdens that it caused (Department of Education, 2021). COVID-19 affected Students of Color and Students who are caregivers for “entry into higher education and for continuing and completing their studies” (Department of Education p. iv). Floyd (2021) also highlighted the decline in enrollment among community colleges, which supports the U.S. Department of Education’s (2021) finding that showed a decline in enrollment in higher education, particularly among low-income students. Moreover, students with disabilities and other learning challenges were affected due to lack of adequate support and accommodations for remote learning (Department of Education, 2021; Meleo-Erving et al., 2021).

Students like Joan had to balance being a parent to students navigating the transition to online learning, as well as her own course load. Evident from her narrative, her children experienced negative mental health outcomes in dealing with the rapid transitions. She noted that in dealing with people who are caregivers or non-traditional students, that Reconnect, and other aid programs should take those important aspects of their lives into consideration. This sentiment is accented by her claim, “the goal is to get us to a degree, not punish us.” Other students like Roger and Jay had to reevaluate their life choices to determine what was important—health (e.g., financial, physical, emotional, and mental) or education. Understanding life contexts and student needs in higher education contributes to student belonging and student success (Hagerty et al., 1996; O’Keefe 2013; Strayhorn, 2018). Without addressing the emergent needs and life contexts that Reconnect students experienced during the pandemic, institutions created barriers to belonging and potentially harmed student success and persistence in college.

Institutional Practices

“Don’t be strict for the sake of being strict!” Joan’s words serve as a reminder for institutions to reevaluate their practices, especially in lieu of the ongoing pandemic. Floyd (2021) acknowledged that institutional adherence to pre-pandemic policies caused operational issues for higher education leaders. In their attempts

to create stability and “islands of sanity” (Floyd, 2021, p.4) there was little regard, initially, for the issues that students were facing such as job instability and unemployment, becoming primary caregivers, and technology issues (Harper, 2021; Strayhorn, 2021).

Roger and Andrew both mentioned their faculty’s reluctance and sometimes refusal to adapt to the new virtual learning environment, causing learning difficulties for both. Garden decided to take an incomplete in a course because of her inability to afford the materials for it, though she was enrolled prior to her institution shifting to virtual learning. Historically, higher education has served White, male, affluent, non-first-generation students well due to their ability to navigate the complex institutional organism (Harper, 2021; Strayhorn 2021).

The shift to virtual learning in higher education was unexpected for all involved in higher education, as a result many institutional policies were reactive rather than proactive and, as the U.S. Department of Education (2021) identified, was more so harmful to non-traditional, low SES, and Students of Color. Kim and Kessler-Eng (2021) suggested conducting a Maslow’s hierarchy of needs type of assessment for students, faculty, and staff to determine the most urgent needs. This type of flexible and forward-thinking institutional practice established a fund for students to get needed technology devices, conducted ongoing virtual learning training for faculty and staff, and transitioned additional staff to address student needs such as mental health, food insecurity, advising and class scheduling issues. Likewise, Strayhorn (2021) suggested that administrators adopt practices with the notion that flexible virtual environments are here to stay, and institutional policies should be future oriented and not uphold the status quo of business operation.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As more states adopt tuition-free college policies and expand access to funding to include adult students, steps must be taken to ensure that postsecondary institutions have the funding necessary to support the influxes of students seen in states like Tennessee (Nguyen, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic not only exacerbated already existing barriers to learning for adult students, but also created new ones. Adult college students are more likely to care for dependents and work full-time (Jameson & Fusco, 2014). The fallout of the pandemic limited access to childcare, forced organizations to lay off employees, and pushed not only postsecondary education but also K-12 education fully virtual (Collier et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2021). This led to adult college students balancing work, their dependents virtual learning, and their own virtual learning. State and institutional policymakers must leverage policy and available funds to provide further financial support to students who need it or direct them to already existing programs or initiatives. Current statewide Promise programs focus on enrollment and put little focus on student support (Collom et al., 2021).

State policymakers currently considering implementing a statewide tuition-free policy must carefully consider how the funding structure and eligibility requirements (last-dollar vs. first-dollar, income limitations, age restrictions, degree level supported) of the policy may impact program outcomes. Based on the observed effects on enrollment in already existing statewide tuition-free programs, implementing a tuition-free college program would likely large increase in enrollment from historically underrepresented groups such as Black and Hispanic students (Nguyen, 2020) and adult students (Collom et al., 2021). However, there is little value to increases in enrollment that do not lead to substantial increases in degree attainment, the primary goal of Tennessee Reconnect.

First-dollar funding programs (i.e. Kalamazoo Promise) have been shown to reduce the effects of socioeconomic advantage when considering enrollment, performance, and persistence (Collier & McMullen, 2021). Our analysis shows that adult college students continue to struggle with access to childcare, balancing work and school, and adapting to the rigors of modern-day education (Collom et al., 2021). Policymakers must consider the costs and benefits to creating a Promise program which not only provides tuition-free funding but supports students above and beyond tuition. Prior to implementing a statewide Promise program, state higher education governing bodies and institutional leaders alike must critically reflect on whether their existing policies and practices are equitable and created to support all students, regardless of

age, ethnicity, or gender. Further, states with existing Promise programs such as Tennessee should consider testing the potential benefits of a first-dollar versus last-dollar program through rigorous, random assignment testing to determine potential changes in return on investment.

COVID-19 forced many students into a full virtual learning environment. The transition was unexpected and often difficult for students to adapt to (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020; Cao et al., 2020; Kim & Kessler-Eng, 2021). As online courses and degree programs become more common and postsecondary education reacts to the ongoing impact of the COVID virus and its variants, institutions must ensure both students and instructors are informed and prepared to excel in an online environment. Instructors must be trained to effectively build an engaging online course that are accessible to all students. Students must be trained on how to navigate online systems, access support virtually, and how to access necessary technology and internet access. During COVID-19, many institutions attempted to provide support to their students in regard to virtual learning, including wireless hotspots, faculty training on virtual learning, and virtual tutoring; although responses were often not uniform and varied by institution, even within systems (D'Amico et al., 2021). However, further analysis is necessary to determine which responses yielded improved student outcomes and can be replicated more broadly by postsecondary education institutions.

Conclusion

Our study consisted of five unique narratives from adult students receiving tuition-free college during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The participants' experiences highlighted the how the pandemic forced postsecondary leaders to make difficult choices which often disproportionately impacted adult students. The pandemic will likely have long-lasting effects and potentially force many adult students out of formal education altogether. Our study is the first which explores adult students utilizing a Promise program and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. More evidence is needed to determine the widespread impact of the pandemic on adult student college outcomes. Researchers should further explore how financial aid programs such as Tennessee Reconnect may or may not alleviate some of the impacts of the pandemic and what needs or barriers remain among adult students. To maximize the potential benefits of tuition-free programs, researchers must work with policymakers and local organizations to share what adult students went through during the pandemic, and ensure students receive the support they need moving forward.

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