

“Why Wait Years to Become Something?” Low-income African American Youth and the Costly Career Search in For-profit Trade Schools

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of low-income and minority youth are now pursuing shorter-duration sub-baccalaureate credentials at for-profit trade and technical schools. However, many students drop out of these schools, leaving with large debts and few job prospects. Despite these dismal outcomes, we know very little about students' experiences in for-profit programs and how these institutions shape postsecondary attainment. Using data from fieldwork with 150 inner-city African American youth, we examine why disadvantaged youth are attracted to these schools and why they struggle to complete certifications. In contrast to previous research, we find that the youth in our study have quite modest ambitions and look to for-profit trade schools as the quickest and most direct route to work. However, youth receive little information or guidance to support such postsecondary transitions. Therefore, the very element that makes for-profit trade school programs seem the most appealing—a curriculum focused on one particular career—becomes an obstacle when it requires youth to commit to a program of study before they have explored their interests. When youth realize they do not like or are not prepared for their chosen career, they adopt coping strategies that keep them in school but swirling between programs, rather than accumulating any credentials.

Keywords

postsecondary education, vocational education, for-profit schools, aspirations, school to work, low-income youth

Policy makers have long promoted increasing college access for disadvantaged students as a way to reduce social inequality.¹ Youth have responded enthusiastically—postsecondary enrollment among poor and minority students has risen dramatically in the past few decades (Bailey and Dynarski 2011; Rosenbaum et al. 2015; Turner 2004). In a recent cohort, nearly 90 percent of high-income students enrolled in college after high school, and a striking three quarters of low-income students did as well (Rosenbaum et al. 2015). However, although their postsecondary enrollment rates have increased, completion rates for disadvantaged

youth have not. Only 9 percent of youth in the lowest income quartile complete a four-year degree by age 24 (compared to 77 percent of youth in the highest income quartile) (Pell Institute 2015).

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Similarly, only about 40 percent of African American students who enter college will receive a bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 62 percent of white students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 2012).

Why are the rates of postsecondary completion for poor and minority youth so low? Certainly, financial constraint, family background, and resource-poor high schools make postsecondary transitions challenging for low-income students (Attewell, Heil, and Reisel 2011; McDonough 1997; Perna and Li 2006; Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). Some scholars also argue that disadvantaged students may be overly ambitious and pursue degree programs that they are academically unprepared for—even students with below-average grades plan to obtain a bachelor's degree (Rosenbaum 2001). Lacking good information, poor students may aim for levels of education that exceed what is required for their desired careers and then drop out once they realize their “misaligned ambitions” (Morgan et al. 2012; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). However, increasing numbers of disadvantaged students are aiming for *precisely* the level of education that should launch them directly into careers: occupational certifications at for-profit schools.

The for-profit postsecondary sector includes schools offering occupational training programs in a variety of fields, most lasting less than two years. These include automotive mechanics; cosmetology; heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC); commercial driving licenses; medical assisting; computer networking; phlebotomy; and drywall technology. The majority of students who enroll in the for-profit sector are among the poorest in the nation (Baum and Payea 2011; NCES 2011). Low-income students are three and a half times more likely to enroll in for-profit institutions than are higher-income students, a trend that has increased in recent years (Pell Institute 2015). Unfortunately, students who attend for-profit institutions rarely complete credentials and carry heavy debt burdens (Cellini and Chaudhary 2014; Deming, Goldin, and Katz 2012; Wei and Horn 2013). Even among students who complete these programs, few find jobs (Deming et al. 2012; NCES 2013; Wei and Horn 2013).

Research on the effects of two- and four-year colleges on low-income students' postsecondary attainment abounds (Alon and Tienda 2007; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009; Long and Kurlaender 2009; Stephan, Rosenbaum, and Person 2009), yet we know little about how less-than-two-year certificate programs at for-profit institutions

shape the postsecondary attainment of disadvantaged students.² In this paper, we explore the role of for-profit schools by examining the postsecondary transitions and career plans of 150 low-income African American youth in Baltimore. We ask, what motivates minority and low-income youth to enroll in for-profit occupational programs? Despite the tight coupling of these programs to careers (and their short duration), why do youth have so little success in these institutions? We find that, rather than aspiring to four-year degrees, most youth in our study seek employment in modest professions after high school. These disadvantaged young adults are searching for any stable job opportunities they can find; their family circumstances, overcrowded housing, and financial vulnerability create an urgency to launch quickly into work. The transparent school-to-work connection that for-profit schools seem to provide—as well as their quick timelines—appeal to youths' desire to begin their careers and their need to earn money. These schools' effective advertising for their short-duration programs plays to youths' vulnerability and eagerness, appearing to provide the quickest path to the stable life they crave. However, these students rarely complete these shorter programs, and they leave with crippling debt and few viable employment prospects.

Our findings contribute to previous research in several ways. First, we add to our understanding of why the “new forgotten half” has such low educational attainment despite such high rates of postsecondary participation (Rosenbaum et al. 2015). Second, we explore students' experiences in the growing for-profit sector, an understudied but increasingly popular postsecondary pathway among low-income youth. Third, we extend previous research on aspirations and educational attainment, by showing that even for youth with lower educational and professional goals, lack of information is critical. We argue that disadvantaged youths' poor understanding of careers and postsecondary education is especially detrimental to their attainment, because it makes them vulnerable to costly for-profit programs that require them to commit to occupations they know little about.

BACKGROUND

Disadvantaged Youth, Information, and the Postsecondary Transition

We focus on the postsecondary transition and early career paths of very low-income African

American youth in Baltimore, whose paths out of poverty are among the most difficult in the nation (Chetty et al. 2014). Most of the youth in our study were born in or spent some of their childhoods in neighborhoods with poverty rates exceeding 50 percent and with African American populations of 80 percent or higher. Of these youth, 68 percent had parents with less than a high school education, and most were living in high-rise public housing and on public assistance when they were born (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). About half of our respondents grew up with one or both parents suffering from drug or alcohol addiction, and just as many saw a parent incarcerated during their childhood.

Although they grew up in Baltimore, they are like many low-income minority youth around the country who face significant challenges transitioning from high school into postsecondary education or work (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2014; Danziger and Ratnor 2010; Newman 1999; Wight et al. 2010). A robust literature finds that disadvantaged economic and family contexts loom large as explanations for why low-income and minority youth fall short of completing postsecondary degrees (Alexander et al. 2014; Bowen et al. 2009; Duncan and Murnane 2011). These youth also attend poor-performing schools and grow up in neighborhoods marked by violence, poverty, unemployment, and instability (Anderson 1990; Sharkey 2012; Wilson 1996).

In terms of postsecondary success, disadvantaged and minority youth suffer not just from financial hardship but also from information poverty (Deil-Amen and Turley 2007; Morgan 2005; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Today, the gap between the educational plans of high- and low-income youth in the United States is quite small (Baird, Burge, and Reynolds 2008; Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). However, the large gap between plans and attainment is partly driven by low-income youth with poor academic preparation and little information about careers and the education needed to enter them (Jerrim 2014). Despite similar expectations, race and class play an important role in the kind and amount of information youth possess when developing their occupational and educational plans. Low-income youth lack access to social networks of employed adults who could provide quality information on education and careers (Galster and Killen 1995; Hardie 2015; Harding 2009; Royster 2003). For example,

Harding (2010) finds that poor youth in Boston face competing cultural scripts about education and work, and not enough good information to follow through on any of them. Analyses of national data show that youth with uncertain or inaccurate information about the relationship between their education and desired occupations have lower educational attainment, less stable employment, and lower hourly wages over time, compared to youth with better aligned plans (Morgan et al. 2012, 2013; Sabates, Harris, and Staff 2011).

Many poor youth do not know enough about the academic rigor and hard work that four-year college requires, and they rarely realize that even at community colleges they may be required to take remedial courses before they can begin earning college credits (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Howell, Kurlaender, and Grodsky 2009; Rosenbaum 2001). Even high-achieving poor youth lack good postsecondary information, and they tend to apply to nonselective schools below their academic potential; they also misunderstand financial aid benefits and tuition costs (Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2013; Grodsky and Jones 2007; Hoxby and Avery 2013).

In some ways, students who plan to work after high school (or obtain certificates at for-profit trade schools) are left with even less instruction about how to develop or achieve their career goals than students headed to two- or four-year schools have (Arora et al. 2011; Kerckhoff 2002; Mortimer et al. 2002). Many high schools focus on a “college-for-all” message and provide little guidance on alternative postsecondary pathways (Rosenbaum 2001). While some scholars have found that college-for-all norms encourage students to work harder in high school (Domina, Conley, and Farkas 2011), others argue that the norm leads students to see few connections between high school and their chances for college or work, which can contribute to misaligned career plans (Deil-Amen and DeLuca 2010; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 2001). This information gap compromises the ability of youth who enroll in the growing for-profit sector to complete even short-duration occupational programs.

Occupational Education at For-profit Institutions

When youth do not get career guidance and occupational exploration in high school, they are left to

make career decisions on their own (Rosenbaum 2001). Attending an occupationally oriented postsecondary program seems like a reasonable choice for low-income students who lack financial resources to fall back on, role models who have attended four-year colleges to advise them, and adequate college preparation in high school (Beatrice 2002). These programs make the connection between education and work explicit, compared to the difficulty of fumbling through a confusing catalog of community college courses (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2009). Such programs can give youth marketable skills and credentials that are easier to obtain than a four-year degree (Kerckhoff 2002; Oakes and Saunders 2008; Rosenbaum, Stephan, and Rosenbaum 2010). Employers seek young adults with such certificates (Kerckhoff and Bell 1998) and encourage ongoing career education among their employees (Bills and Wacker 2003).

Many students are responding to these attractive alternatives. Over the past 15 years—especially in the wake of the recent recession—the number of students enrolling in trade schools has risen dramatically (Imagine America Foundation 2012). Many of these trade schools operate in the for-profit sector, which is a highly diverse group of institutions united by a common orientation toward career-based education (Deming et al. 2012). Less-than-two-year institutions, which confer certificates, make up 15 percent of all for-profit schools (Horn, Li, and Weko 2009; NCES 2013). Between 2000 and 2009, for-profit institutions increased the share of students they enrolled from 4 to 11 percent of full-time enrollments at postsecondary institutions (Baum and Payea 2011). Low-income youth are overrepresented in for-profit institutions, with 19 percent of poor first-year students attending for-profit institutions, compared to only 5 percent of nonpoor first-year students (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2011). More African American and Hispanic students begin their postsecondary educations in for-profit institutions than in public or private two- or four-year schools (Institute for Higher Education Policy 2011).

Low-income students attending school full-time in the for-profit sector pay a higher net price than do similar students at other types of institutions (Baum and Payea 2011). Among all students at for-profit institutions, 90 percent take out student loans (Wei and Skomsvold 2011), because

these schools rarely provide institutional aid (Baum and Payea 2011). Students at for-profit schools have slightly higher rates of obtaining a one- or two-year degree or certificate compared to a nonprofit certificate program (Deming et al. 2012). However, evidence suggests that students who complete a degree at a for-profit institution tend to be less satisfied with their programs, have higher unemployment rates, have lower earnings, and have more trouble paying off loans than do youth who attend nonprofit colleges (Deming et al. 2012; Wei and Horn 2013). Graduates with two-year degrees from for-profit schools tend to earn only about as much as high school graduates (Denice 2015). For students attempting to earn four-year degrees at for-profit schools, completion rates are abysmally low at just 14 percent, and loan default and unemployment rates are high (Baum and Payea 2011; Deming et al. 2012).

What little research we have about student experiences within institutions that offer postsecondary occupational training is quite mixed. Rosenbaum and colleagues (2009) found that compared to community college students, students enrolling at occupational colleges (both for-profit and nonprofit) were more likely to obtain the credentials they sought. They attribute this difference to institutional procedures that cater to low-income, non-traditional students' schedules and provide consistent, mandatory advising sessions. However, the authors acknowledge that these occupational schools are not a representative sample but, rather, showcase the potential of some high-performing programs. By contrast, a federal investigation of for-profit institutions that offer both certificates and associate degrees found evidence of fraudulent practices at 15 institutions across six states (Kutz 2010). For example, applicants were misled about the actual costs of attendance and encouraged to falsify financial aid documents (Kutz 2010). As a result, the federal government has crafted new regulations regarding how these schools should market themselves and function to ensure their graduates are not left unemployed with large debts they cannot repay.³

Today, more low-income youth attempt postsecondary education than ever before, yet most do not complete a credential. To date, research has focused on the socioeconomic and academic factors that hinder students' degree completion or pointed toward a combination of high ambitions and poor information in explaining the low rates of postsecondary attainment among disadvantaged

students (Attewell et al. 2011; Sabates et al. 2011; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). However, many disadvantaged youth now enroll in for-profit occupational programs precisely because the training is tightly coupled with the modest careers they hope to obtain—yet even these students rarely obtain a credential. Why?

METHODS

Sample and Data Collection

To answer this question, we draw on data from a longitudinal qualitative study of families and children who hail from many of Baltimore's high-poverty neighborhoods. Families were originally recruited because they participated in the Moving to Opportunity program (MTO), a federal housing assistance intervention implemented in five cities, including Baltimore (Orr et al. 2003). From 1994 to 1998, 4,604 families voluntarily participated in the program, with 636 in the Baltimore site (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2011).⁴ In 2010, a qualitative follow-up study of the Baltimore children who were then entering young adulthood was launched; this study more broadly examined the transition to adulthood among urban youth.⁵ The research team (including both authors) chose a stratified random sample of 200 youth (ages 15 to 24) whose parents had participated in the MTO program in Baltimore City.⁶ From this sample, 150 youth were interviewed, resulting in a 75 percent response rate. The sample includes youth who range in age, including respondents still in high school (ages 15 to 18) and those in the years after high school (ages 19 to 24).

Our fieldwork was conducted with youth in low-income families who participated in a housing experiment, so we cannot generalize to all young adults or all poor youth. However, these data do allow us to examine in detail the postsecondary decision-making processes and institutional experiences of low-income youth in a large urban area. This gives us the advantage of looking at not only youth who are engaged in delinquent behaviors or who have failed to launch—such as high school dropouts, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, or those who had children out of wedlock—but also youth who are attempting to follow more mainstream postsecondary pathways. Contrary to popular media and television shows about Baltimore (e.g., *The Wire* and *Homicide: Life on the Streets*), the extremes—like drug dealing and

getting “caught up”—are not the norm, even in these high-poverty neighborhoods. Instead, the majority of the youth we spoke with were in the midst of beginning college and trade school, working, or doing both at the same time (for more information on the sample, see DeLuca et al. 2016).

The research team conducted fieldwork and semistructured in depth interviews with the respondents. The interview guide included open-ended questions in several domains: employment, education, neighborhoods, friends and family, risky behavior, and mental health. As part of the education module, youth were asked about college and career preparation, employment in high school and after, postsecondary decision-making processes, and experiences in postsecondary institutions. Most interviews were conducted in respondents' homes, and all but six respondents still lived in the Baltimore area.⁷ Respondents' names, including those of their family members and their elementary, middle, and high schools, have been changed to ensure confidentiality. To facilitate comparisons across institutions, we did not change the names of their postsecondary schools. Alongside interviews, we conducted ethnographic observations. We spent dozens of hours in their homes and neighborhoods, watching family routines, playing with children, and eating with them at local restaurants.

The interview protocol included many structured questions and follow-up probes (see Online Appendix A), but the team was trained to memorize the guide so that interviews were conducted more like conversations and less like surveys with yes-and-no answers. We opened the interviews by asking respondents to tell us “the story of your life.” When we asked about their entry into schools and jobs, we asked them to “tell us the whole story” behind these transitions. This allowed us to collect data on what youth did, what their decisions and school choices meant to them, and how these outcomes related to their family background, peers, and neighborhoods. It was clear to us during the interviews that few people had ever given these youth an opportunity to tell their stories. They responded enthusiastically; most interviews lasted at least 90 minutes, and they often went up to three hours.

Data Analysis

The research team used the interview guide and emerging findings from field notes to create

a codebook for the data set, covering all topics of interest. Four coders used this codebook and the Atlas.ti qualitative software analysis program to code the transcripts. For this paper, we ran query reports on the codes of primary interest, including college or training advice, future plans, training, and school (see Online Appendix B for codebook definitions for these segments). In addition to reading full transcripts, we read all of the retrieved coded segments within these larger codes, focusing on youths' decision-making processes regarding college in general and their experiences in different kinds of postsecondary schools specifically. We used these data to create trajectories for each of our sample youth, identifying each time they entered and left any educational institution after high school.

We then conducted secondary coding focused on career aspirations and occupational interests, how youth connected their career aspirations to educational decisions, where they obtained information about postsecondary schools and jobs (e.g., parents, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, commercials), any difficulties or accomplishments they reported after attending these schools, and any characteristics or practices of postsecondary programs and institutions that appeared to shape whether youth completed these programs.⁸ Both authors reviewed all coded segments as well as transcripts and field notes for all cases used in these analyses.

FINDINGS

"I Don't Really Have High Standards"

In sharp contrast to research labeling young adults as "overly ambitious," youth in our study had relatively modest dreams (Baird et al. 2008; Goyette 2008; Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). In line with national trends, most of the high school graduates we spoke with tried postsecondary education; however, most were not aiming for bachelor's degrees. Instead, they were preparing for immediate employment, in part because their family and financial circumstances required it (Bozick and DeLuca 2011; Newman 1999). Many wanted to pursue working-class jobs as police officers, construction workers, administrative specialists, certified nursing assistants (CNA), or truck drivers.

Twenty-one-year-old Elijah talked excitedly about his dream job—to run his own automotive

shop. He explained, "Like [it's my] fantasy, a big garage, automotive garage where you can wait for your car, you know [with an area where] you can eat if you want." For the past four years, Omar, age 22, has been driving a forklift, moving pallets in a grocery store warehouse. He told us, "I'm proud of myself. . . . [I'd work] as long as they let me stay there! . . . [L]ike it could be a career." Melissa, age 20, wants to join the Baltimore Police Department, "to get violence off the street," and regularly asked officers in the neighborhood about the job.

Adam, age 19, has long had his eye on construction—something he sees as the ultimate job:

You gotta make sure the streets safe and no cracks in the streets. . . . It ain't no rushing job or no sitting back job, just sitting around and it's challenging . . . everything got to be right in the construction field. It can't be no wrongs or no mess-ups.

Still in high school, 16-year-old Andrew plans to attend trade school to get his commercial driving license. When asked where he saw himself in five years, he expressed modest goals: "I don't know, hopefully I'll be graduated, in trade school, got my permit, my L's (license)."

For these youth and many others, these humble occupational aspirations were coupled with the desire for the quintessential elements of the "American Dream"—a steady job, a place to live, and minimal financial worries. Emily, age 22, attended a two-year college briefly and then started Job Corps, a federal education and job-training program—neither of which she completed. Capturing a common sentiment from the youth in our study, Emily said, "I don't really have a lot of high standards in the life that I want. I really just want transportation, a nice steady job, a nice pay, enough to keep my bills up." Eighteen-year-old Taniya aspired to have a career as a medical assistant; in five years, she hoped, "Probably [I'll be] an RN, working, making good money, got my own place, you know, support myself, maybe, hopefully a car. That would be nice. Don't even have to be a brand new car, a nice little used car."

These youth wanted a stable life and saw a "good job" as the way to achieve this, but most had very limited knowledge about potential careers and how to enter them. Terry, age 23, had spent most of his childhood in foster homes

and most of his teenage years homeless. Ever determined to work, he discussed a number of different occupations:

Maybe one day I might want to get my CDL . . . your commercial driver's license so you can like truck, drive trucks and stuff. I ain't really interested in that but I'm just throwing that out there, you never know, like your taste buds change over time. And just like anything else, your interests change, you get older, you get more mature. I wanna do a lot of things but my main thing I wanna do is like working with kids and I wanna, you know, that's my dedication, like working with people and mainly kids. I believe that's my strong—I'm good with kids. . . . I think that's what I was called to do, man, to inspire them.

Terry also mentioned wanting to go to college, becoming a counselor, working in community activism, and doing "something with music." He discussed multiple, competing aspirations with very different educational requirements. At the end of his interview, Terry reflected, "Nobody sits down and asks me these kind of questions, you know what I mean, you helpin' me now understand myself." Terry was developing goals and plans as he was talking with the interviewer—no one had seriously discussed these with him in high school.

The youth we interviewed lacked cohesive career plans and demonstrated multiple and competing ambitions, yet these were not the youth of the "Ambitious Generation" (Schneider and Stevenson 1999). They were not aiming for jobs that required graduate school degrees or the jobs they had seen actors portray in movies. Yet even these working-class ambitions were out of reach for these youth, who were cut off from good information about careers.

"Because It Was a Trade School"

Considering youths' modest but eager plans for work, it is not surprising that many expressed a desire for career education, both while in high school and after graduation. A small number of respondents (17) enrolled in college after attending one of the few selective college-preparatory schools in the city, but others sought hands-on

career guidance at one of the high schools in Baltimore that offered career-focused programs. Delmont, age 19, picked his school "because it was a trade school and they had carpentry that I was really interested in." Similarly, for Leona, age 17, a career-oriented school was preferable to her neighborhood school, which did not have "training programs" but only "math class, science class, stuff we had in middle school." Instead, Leona wanted "a counselor to come in and like we sit down and we actually determine different career paths that I can choose . . . like trades. And then from there they put me into the programs to start me off." Some students expressed regret that they did not receive vocational training. Rico, age 21, wished that his school had offered occupational programs: "It wasn't really like no trades there. . . . Maybe like an auto mechanic shop, a wood shop, something. Something I just could have learned something in."

However, even respondents who ended up at high schools that offered career or trade programs were given little guidance regarding postsecondary career training, as Bart, age 21, explained:

Interviewer: And so when you were in that informational technologies track, did people talk to you about going to college to continue it or did they talk about training programs?

Bart: No training program. They did like suggest we go on to college, but we didn't really learn that much.

Although most students said that someone at their school talked to them about plans after high school, the counselors and teachers emphasized only two- or four-year colleges, leaving the many students who were interested in work and postsecondary occupational schools on their own. The information about college was also limited, consisting mostly of large group sessions and little or no one-on-one time with a counselor. As a result, students lacked a clear understanding of what college was and how, if at all, it related to their career interests. Monique, age 15, admitted that she would like to consider college, "but I'm scared. . . . I still don't know what it is. . . . Like I know what middle school, elementary school, and high school is for. But that's when I thought like what's college, what is it for? We don't need it." Cassidy, age 20, told us that he did not see the difference between a community college, trade school, or four-year degree: "It ain't nothing

important. It's just explore, living on campus or something like that."

"The Commercial Is Convincing"

By the end of our study, only 25 percent of high school graduates who pursued postsecondary education had attended a four-year college, and only 39 percent had enrolled at a community college.⁹ Instead, the modal option was trade school—53 percent of respondents who pursued postsecondary education enrolled in an occupational program at some point after high school.¹⁰ Yet when we asked Ashanti, age 20, whether anyone ever talked to her about career programs, she said, "No, but I have done research on them on my own but they never talked to me—I actually visited Allstate [a trade school] probably a couple months ago."

To learn about career preparation and trade schools, youth turned to the limited information sources available to them in their social networks. This led many women to pursue cosmetology, CNA, or medical technology assistant programs. Dana, age 19, graduated from one of the best college-prep high schools in Baltimore and was heavily involved in poetry and debate. Yet, instead of pursuing a four-year degree, she took a certificate course in phlebotomy at the Red Cross and later pursued a CNA certificate at Fortis, because

I would hear some of my friends that probably graduated before me say, "I took a CNA course," and I'm like okay, maybe that's something I can do, I don't wanna go to college, can't really afford it anyway, so that was another excuse, so I said I'll try this out.

Iyeshia, age 22, was planning on getting her CNA certificate because that was what "everybody" was doing:

Interviewer: What other options are there? Do you know of people that are doing other stuff besides CNA stuff?

Iyeshia: *Nothing* but CNA stuff. Like everybody is doing something far as with the hospital. Nurse's assistant, dental, and all that. That's what mostly everybody, most my friends is doing like it's crazy.

However, the most compelling source of information about trade schools came from the enticing

commercials and websites the for-profit schools produced. When Jayden, age 22, was asked how he learned about ITT, the technical school he attended, he said, "Commercials . . . yeah, the commercial [is] convincing when they show people riding in yachts and big cars." Andrew got little concrete advice about trade schools from his teachers: "[T]hey just be sayin' . . . like if you don't wanna go to college go to a trade school and all that, [but] that's enough information for me, anyway, 'cause I can find a mechanic trade school. I be seein' 'em on TV, on commercials."

Nyesha, age 16, was considering a for-profit school to train for cosmetology. However, her teachers and counselors talked only about college. When asked about how she got information about trade schools, she explained, "I just knew about trade schools. Because there were commercials on TV." Rico admitted that the for-profit advertisements were his only source of information for career preparation: "I was looking at the commercial [for ITT trade school] the other day. . . . Like you can work on dirt bikes. I was thinking about calling them. I never really like looked at [other information]. I just looked at the commercial."

"Why Wait Years to Become Something?"

The commercials provided a striking visual that made the connection to a career seem transparent at for-profit schools, but one feature of these schools stood out above all else: their short duration. To the youth in our study, this was by far the most appealing factor. Growing up in families struggling to make ends meet meant that many respondents were living in overcrowded housing, where family conflict was common and privacy was in short supply. Like many disadvantaged youth, they had little scaffolding during the transition to adulthood (Settersten and Ray 2010.) Instead, they had significant pressure to become independent ("Eighteen and you're out!" said one youth's mother). In neighborhoods where life expectancy was 20 years younger than in more affluent areas (cf. DeLuca et al. 2016), there was also a palpable sense that, as 15-year-old Veronica told us, "life is short."

These circumstances meant the postsecondary transition was high stakes, with no time to waste. Veronica said she thought about becoming a lawyer, but "that take too much time. . . . I want to do

hair, so that's it." College was a luxury they could simply not afford. As Crystal, age 21, put it, "Why wait for years when you can become something in the course of a year [at a trade school]?" Iyeshia was considering a trade school not only because it was offered free through a local program but also because "that's something quick."¹¹ Ashanti later pointed out that trade schools are attractive because they take less time, so you can be "over and done with before you know it, and that's what I need, in and out." William, age 18, was interested in music production and architecture. He and his friends had been writing their own "beats" since sixth grade and recently starting selling them online. William had done some research on these careers, but he did not see much of a difference between going to a for-profit trade school or a four-year college to be an architect. He was planning on attending a "music school" for production first, since it was "only 23 weeks."

Students were eager to move forward in their lives, so they quickly launched into programs and careers that were familiar and seemed attainable in a brief amount of time. But this urgency for an "expedited" transition to adulthood often led them to commit to a program of occupational study (and pay in full for it) before they had an opportunity to explore their career interests more broadly.

"I Didn't Even Know What It Was"

Despite the short duration of these for-profit programs, most youth did not persist. They knew little about the careers they were pursuing, and some were unpleasantly surprised to find that the trade schools required skills they lacked. Jayden's experience at a trade school clashed with the ideas he had picked up from television:

Jayden: Yeah, the commercial is convincing when they show people riding in yachts and big cars. But they don't tell you that these people already *went* to college *already*, they coming back to advance themselves. They don't let you know none of that.

Interviewer: So when did you find out that part?

Jayden: When I got to school and they just jumped into things instead of starting from ground one. They jumped into things you *supposed* to know. How am I supposed to know that? I never went to school for that! I was trying to

tell them I went to a city, a public city school that hardly taught you anything. I really needed my mind refreshed. I had to stay over almost every class to learn what they was talking about.

Other students realized that they did not have an interest in their chosen trade after all. Only after entering their programs did they learn even basic information about these professions. Kim, age 20, was one of a handful of students who sought career preparation at a community college. She admitted to enrolling in a gerontology class but did not know what gerontology meant:

I'm gonna be honest with you, I didn't even know what it was. I just heard gerontology, oh, that sounds serious, like I'm about to, you know, I'm about to get into this. And then I found out what it was about and my final grade in the class was a B.

Frustrated, Kim left soon after. Ayesha, age 20, went to a for-profit school for medical assisting, but she never finished. She said, "It was something I was trying to fulfill but I wasn't interested in it." Other students enrolled in phlebotomy programs because they sounded impressive, but they had no idea they would have to draw blood. Many did not have the stomach for inserting needles, as Jackson, age 22, explained after attempting a medical technician program: "It was nerve wrecking!"

When students realized they did not enjoy aspects of the occupations they were pursuing, or lacked the skills needed to succeed, they dropped out, switched to other postsecondary institutions, or "swirled" among several programs over the course of a few years (de los Santos and Wright 1990; Goldrick-Rab 2006). As these youth regrouped their plans, career guidance was still scarce. Whitney, age 21, had taken courses in construction and culinary arts in high school. She recently quit a cafeteria job at a local military base to take a 15-week CNA course. Whitney aspired to several occupations, none of which was in line with her current training. She said, "I wanna work with babies when they first come home, out of the womb, in the nursery, I'd like to do that. Or I would like to do construction, I'll build my stuff. I wanna build my own house from scratch. I would like to do that." Whitney had previously gone to trade school for

construction, but she did not finish. Midway through her CNA program, she discovered she did not have the stomach for looking at wounds, and she left the program.

After graduating high school and a brief stint selling drugs, Ray, age 23, had completed a job readiness program and received a CPR certification. He then pursued telecommunications at a for-profit school but did not graduate, and he was currently in a different trade school for HVAC. He sees bigger plans in his future, but he has little idea of how to get there:

Ray: I wanna do somethin' with that [HVAC]. I ain't gonna stop there, that's just somethin'.

I wanna do somethin' better. I wanna have my own hotel too. . . . I thought about building my own shopping center, gettin' it built.

Interviewer: How would you go about doing that?

Ray: I don't even know. Get some money. Find some architects or something.

Ray also discussed other jobs he was interested in, including truck driving. However, Ray was in a program specifically designed to prepare him for one job: HVAC technician.

These fits and starts made it difficult for students to finish any of the programs they started—38 percent began one or more postsecondary institutions and left without a degree or certification. Jackson explained the difficulty of making all of their attempts add up:

At Baltimore City Community College (BCCC), I couldn't transfer my credits over to TESST [a for-profit school] because that was a completely different program . . . from computers to health. And then it was in a different type of school because it wasn't *college* college. It was a trade school, so I couldn't transfer nothing over, but if I would've finished the medical assistant program, I could have took my credits, and took them to BCCC from the medical assistant program to go towards nursing. Only if I was going for nursing I would be able transfer my medical assistant over to BCCC for a degree.

The lack of information about careers and their desire to launch quickly contributed to the problem of committing to a career without knowing much about it, but the nature of the for-profit trade

programs themselves required this commitment. The for-profit schools appeared to involve a shorter commitment than a bachelor's degree, but the structure of the curriculum made choosing a career program far more consequential than choosing a major at a four-year college. Students could not switch from one program or field to another and retain credits, as middle-class youth in college frequently do.

"I Want It under My Belt, Just in Case"

Switching programs was one common response to changing interests, but other youth adapted preemptively to uncertainty. Having seen others around them fail to complete their programs, they intentionally hedged their bets by pursuing one path but also embarking on a "backup" plan in another field. Some respondents invested in more than one credential—sometimes attempting to earn them simultaneously. Others selected programs of very short duration (like phlebotomy), expecting that they would have to return to school repeatedly to secure the credentials necessary to stay employed. Respondents had practical reasons to hedge their bets through multiple credentials, but the pathways they took reflected their lack of career information. Their plans were circuitous and sometimes at odds with each other. It was costly to pursue multiple for-profit credentials, no matter how short the program.

Sheri had spent the last few years working at Wendy's and a plastics factory. She had a certificate in cosmetology (and her boss at Wendy's wanted to promote her to manager), but she had just started a training program to certify her in early childhood education. She hoped to run a day care center, but she reasoned that she would still take the recertification test necessary to keep her cosmetology license current: "Right, something that I wanna have under my belt just in case I wanna draw back on daycare."

Brooke was sick of the low-wage jobs she had been stuck in since age 14, and she planned to complete a medical certification program through the Red Cross that fall. To keep busy until the next round of Red Cross classes started—to "feel like I am accomplishing something"—she enrolled at BCCC, thinking that "I could get certified in something else that I like [while I wait]." It was not the first time she had tried community college—she

had attended both BCCC and Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) before. She completed a year of classes this time around at BCCC, but it turned out the Red Cross program had a three-year waitlist. Frustrated, and with too few credits to get her associate's degree, Brooke left BCCC and enrolled at the for-profit American Career Institute (ACI) for medical coding, expecting to graduate in 12 months. Brooke appreciated that the classes at ACI were packaged to prevent the kind of registration errors that had cost her time and dollars at BCCC. "Everything is on point" at ACI, she said.

However adaptive these dogged strategies were, they rarely led to credentials. There was still another downside to this trial-by-error approach—it was costly. Brooke, one of the few who could actually report the price, told us that the cost of her program was \$14,000 per year: "I get a little financial aid . . . but I got two student loans, one for \$4,500 and the one is for \$2,500. The remainder I just pay every month with the monthly payments of \$197. It's killin' me." The most appealing aspect of ACI, in Brooke's view, was the school's pledge to find her a job. Unfortunately, within a year of our last interview with Brooke, ACI closed due to "financial" problems.

The research that we have on for-profit institutions confirms their high costs and the resulting debt students incur (Baum and Payea 2011; NCES 2008; Wei and Horn 2013). Although the majority of students received financial aid, it was rarely enough to cover the entire cost (see Goldrick-Rab 2016). Some students had to take out loans, which they had to start paying back before they even graduated, and still others had debts from programs they never finished. Jackson's trade school loans were so burdensome that he had to quit school to spend more time at his job (he never received any certification from these programs).

Additional analyses confirm respondents' accounts. We looked at the costs of attending a local four-year public school, private two- and four-year colleges, and for-profit trade schools, using the net price for a student from a low-income household (\$0 to \$30,000) (see Online Appendix C: Table 1). The costs of attending the two most popular community colleges in the area, CCBC and BCCC, were \$5,154 and \$9,639, respectively, two to four times lower than the price at the most popular for-profit trade schools (TESST-Baltimore, which cost \$25,362, and Fortis-Baltimore, which cost \$19,398).

Graduation rates for the for-profit schools exceeded those for the community colleges (most likely a factor of their shorter-duration programs), but the loan default rates were dramatically higher at the for-profit institutions. For example, at TESST and Fortis (Baltimore campuses), the loan default rates were 34 and 20 percent, respectively, whereas at CCBC and BCCC, they were 13 and 17 percent. But even more striking, the net prices and loan default rates were also higher at the for-profit schools than at several of the four-year colleges in the area (including the University of Maryland). Although we cannot truly equate the one-year cost of a for-profit trade school with the four-year cost of college, it is reasonable to ask whether the costlier but higher-quality baccalaureate institutions, some of which graduate over five times more students, are as expensive as they seem in the long run—especially considering the average returns for a bachelor's degree and the number of attempts students make at for-profit schools.¹²

Despite leaving programs without degrees or certifications, a number of students planned to try again, hoping they would hit upon a career that would "click." Jaquan, age 22, had financial aid trouble at a technology trade school, but he still hoped to get his certificate. He found out about the popular trade school from commercials, began the program, then quit before he received his certificate because he had to work more hours to begin paying off his loans. When asked where he would like to be in five years, he said, "Hopefully by then I should at least have a certificate in something . . . so I would have a better opportunity at getting a gooder paying job in the networking field, or any type of job, really, with that skill." Similar to the low-income minority women who attended two-year community colleges that Deterding (2015) and Nielsen (2015) studied, respondents clung to the idea of postsecondary education as a way to make something of themselves, even when these plans seemed to fall more and more out of reach.

"I Mean My Job Doesn't Pay"

Among respondents who attended a for-profit trade school, only about 31 percent had received a certification at the time of their last interview.¹³ For those students, there was joy in the accomplishment, but few felt completely secure in their

occupational futures. Both Jessica, age 23, and Chanel, age 21, were successful high school students who attended local four-year colleges on scholarships. They were academic stars in high school, but they found college challenging and left after two years. With no “advice or encouragement” from her family, first-generation college student Chanel struggled: “I don’t think I was really prepared for college, anyway, because of the [high] school I went to . . . when I got to college, it was just, like, throw in my face so, I was like, ‘wow, I ain’t used to this.’”

Both women had their four-year educations fully paid for, but they still struggled to pay their living expenses, and both cited money as another reason why they left. Yet, after leaving college, Jessica took out a loan for \$15,000 and Chanel for \$10,000 to attend for-profit programs that lasted less than a year and promised a quick route to a career. Jessica pursued cosmetology and Chanel studied general nursing. Both finished their programs and found employment—Jessica at a salon and Chanel caring for her uncle and another patient as a geriatric nursing assistant (GNA). Jessica described her experience in cosmetology school positively, “I loved it. . . . It was work like chemistry, electricity. It was just a challenge . . . it taught me new skills.” However, neither woman seemed completely satisfied with her chosen occupation. Chanel’s pay was too low and the job was too physically demanding. She said, “[T]his job, it really, you can hurt yourself. A lot of people got back problems and stuff, and that’s why I really don’t wanna do it.” Jessica eventually grew tired of the salon and discussed going back to college to get a degree in accounting.

Other respondents who took a direct route to trade school also struggled to find good jobs with decent pay. Amanda, age 22, received her CNA license and was working at a hospital. Such a job would typically have benefits and security, but Amanda was employed through a temp agency (a common occurrence in our study). When we met her, she was pregnant with her second child and facing homelessness: Her live-in boyfriend did not want another child, and he refused to renew the lease on their apartment if she continued with the pregnancy. Amanda did not have maternity leave or health benefits through her job, but she could at least apply for Medicaid. But housing was another matter—without a voucher, she was faced with difficult decisions: “I have nothing. . . . Because I mean my

job doesn’t pay. So it’s not enough where I can afford [an apartment] like this ‘cause we pay 700. [If he leaves] I don’t have anywhere to go. So it will be tough.”

Gary, age 23, completed two certifications, one through high school as an HVAC technician and the second through a job training program as a CNA/GNA. Gary had a job working in HVAC that he continued after high school, but like other youth, he was dissatisfied with the low pay (hired as a temp) and the inability to advance. After years of odd jobs and spells of unemployment, Gary was admitted to a competitive job-training program at a community nonprofit that paid him while he got his certification. Employed for about one month, he enjoyed his job but was already looking for ways to “advance” himself in the medical field through getting other technical certifications. Gary’s hold on steady employment seemed stronger than most. He had not incurred any debt in pursuing his certification and saw his current job as an opportunity to advance in the health care industry. He had a stable home life, living with his retired father who owned his own home.

DISCUSSION

Prior research has found that misaligned ambitions and informational uncertainty result in lower educational and occupational attainment, and our findings describe the strategies disadvantaged youth use to navigate the postsecondary education market with these information deficits. We show that these youth are not necessarily aimless and drifting—rather, they are desperately searching for careers that will provide them with security and meaning. Although research has characterized the current generation as “overly ambitious” (Baird et al. 2008), the youth in our sample have modest dreams. Yet for youth who lack resources and know-how, even small goals can be unattainable. This information poverty contributes to the social reproduction of inequality during the postsecondary transition, hurting youth who have modest aspirations just as it does youth who aim for jobs requiring bachelor’s degrees or more (Holland 2013; McCabe and Jackson 2016; McDonough 1997). Like the working-class young men Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1995) studied decades ago, these youth are active agents, navigating the postsecondary transition amid limited choices and profound structural constraints. In the absence of information, these less ambitious youth enroll in

for-profit institutions whose programs appeal to their sense of urgency. However, like the youth in Willis's and MacLeod's studies, their efforts rarely led them to escape poverty. The low-income minority youth in our study who attended for-profit institutions ended up in more debt and with fewer job prospects than they might have had they attempted two- or four-year nonprofit schools (Baum and Payea 2011; Deming et al. 2012; Wei and Horn 2013).

Many of the low-income African American youth we spoke with saw postsecondary education as a vehicle to achieve a stable career. However, most lacked a clear idea of what that future career would be as well as the information needed to pursue their interests (Morgan 2005; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). For-profit trade schools appealed to students for many reasons: Their programs appeared tightly linked with familiar occupations, their marketing tactics were convincing, and most importantly, they were "quick." These attributes, combined with little guidance on postsecondary pathways, led youth to commit eagerly to expensive, highly structured programs before they could explore which careers were the right fit. When youth with little career preparation entered into narrowly focused and costly programs, it was difficult for them to change their minds once they realized they did not like their trade, they were unqualified for it, or that the field lacked jobs. Some youths adapted by switching programs or attempting multiple credentials, but most ended up swirling, acquiring not credentials but more debt along the way.

The narrowly focused structure of the for-profit career programs penalizes indecision and career exploration, but the institutions themselves are not the sole problem. The youth's deeply disadvantaged origins produced social and economic pressures that pushed them to leap quickly into the for-profit schools. So did the lack of career counseling they received in high school. Although we did not observe teachers and counselors—and cannot say exactly what information students received—the fact that students did not perceive much career guidance or assistance is significant. Their postsecondary information poverty was so pervasive that youth were at a significant disadvantage before they even began the for-profit programs.

CONCLUSIONS

The for-profit trade sector is a small part of the postsecondary landscape, but enrollments in for-profit postsecondary institutions are increasing,

especially among low-income and minority students. Yet youth who attend these schools face dismal economic and attainment outcomes (Baum and Payea 2011; Deming et al. 2012; Wei and Horn 2013). We lack research that delves into students' experiences in these schools, particularly in less-than-two-year for-profit schools. In this paper, we try to fill this gap by identifying the challenges disadvantaged youth face in for-profit programs and revealing some of the potential mechanisms that may contribute to the low postsecondary completion rates and large debt burdens among low-income students.

Understanding how for-profit institutions work, why students are attracted to them, and why students have such trouble succeeding once they enter can help educators address information deficits before students graduate high school. High schools should not only encourage and prepare youth for college but also provide opportunities for students to prepare for a range of postsecondary destinations (Deil-Amen and DeLuca 2010; Oakes and Saunders 2008; Rosenbaum 2001). Our findings indicate that youth want career education early on in high school, and previous research suggests that such career and technical education can help youth in the labor market (Levesque et al. 2008). In particular, career academies can improve employment outcomes, particularly for young men, and have beneficial effects on marriage and parenting (Kemple and Willner 2008; Kerckhoff 2002). Early findings on career and technical education programs of study also point to increased student achievement (Castellano et al. 2012). Perhaps higher-quality career experiences, along with targeted and cohesive guidance and support, could have assisted these youth in exploring their options prior to graduation, leading them to make more informed postsecondary decisions (Rosenbaum et al. 2015).

Our data also hint at some of the institutional mechanisms that may be exacerbating the challenges youth face at postsecondary trade schools. Policies that require students to pay to hold slots, pay back loans prior to receiving a degree, and complete additional licensing exams after course work is done, along with the high cost of trade school in comparison to a community college, are just some of the issues youth mentioned as roadblocks to successful completion. These practices surprised students and many did not know about them until they had already signed on the dotted line. Both authors examined the schools' websites

for information on these practices, and as researchers we had trouble learning the “fine print” of these programs. This suggests the problem is not just that youth are trying to cope with little career information by exploring their interests at for-profits but that some of these institutions are also engaging in practices that exploit this vulnerability, lack of information, and direction.

In 2015, the for-profit educational chain Corinthian College closed its campuses, imploding amid lawsuits and allegations that the chain had engaged in a “deception in recruiting students, bogus reporting of job placement data and a strategy of combining high tuitions and debt levels with a substandard educational profit” (Huelsman 2015). Documents revealed its exploitative demographic targeting and showed that Corinthian preyed on students who were “isolated” or “impatient but want[ing] quick solutions” as well as students who were “stuck” and “unable to see and plan well for future.” In some ways, these words describe many of the youth in our study. More research is needed on postsecondary career education, and for-profit institutions specifically, to understand how these schools recruit students, how much they inform students about attendance costs and loan burdens, and the consequences of these practices for educational attainment.¹⁴

We must also look more closely at the role of other postsecondary institutions that provide career and technical education. Community colleges can also assist youth who want technical education by offering more affordable and comprehensive options than for-profit trade schools. However, although many community colleges offer occupational certificates and associates degrees, students in these programs have low completion rates (Alfonso, Bailey, and Scott 2005; Rosenbaum et al. 2009). Additional research that examines how community colleges can better serve career-oriented youth is also needed, so that these schools can be a viable and attractive alternative to the costly degrees and limited curricula students find at for-profit schools.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the William T. Grant Foundation, which provided the primary support for the fieldwork, analysis and writing for the MTOQ10 transition to adulthood study through a major grant (#553399). Additional support for the writing time of the second author was provided by a William T. Grant Foundation

Faculty Scholars Award and by the Century Foundation. We would also like to thank our co-investigators on the Moving to Opportunity study, Kathryn Edin and Susan Clampet-Lundquist, as well as the rest of the fieldworkers who made this possible: Melody Boyd, Barbara Condliffe, Jennifer Darrah, Bridget Davis, Kaitlin Edin-Nelson, Marisa Edin-Nelson, Philip Garboden, Jackie Hwang, Carly Knight, Tanya Lukaskik, Anna Rhodes, Eva Rosen, Peter Rosenblatt, Tracey Shollenberger, Elizabeth Talbert, Siri Warkentien, Anna Westin, and Queenie Zhu. Jessica Wallace and Margaret Prisinzano, students from Saint Joseph’s University, along with Melody Boyd and Peter Rosenblatt, diligently coded all the transcripts. We thank Kevin Wells for providing additional research assistance, and we are grateful for feedback from the Poverty and Inequality Research Lab at Johns Hopkins. Finally, we are grateful to the youth in Baltimore for letting us into their lives, giving us their time, and generously sharing their stories.

RESEARCH ETHICS

This research protocol was reviewed and approved by the institutional review boards at both the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins University. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research, and adequate steps were taken to protect participants’ confidentiality.

NOTES

1. The White House, April 26, 2016. “Fact Sheet: Celebrating Progress in Expanding College Opportunity for Every Student on College Signing Day.” Retrieved April 26, 2016 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/26/fact-sheet-celebrating-progress-expanding-college-opportunity-every>).
2. There is little research on for-profit institutions in general (or students’ experiences there), and most of it does not distinguish between less-than-two-year, two-year, or four-year programs (for an exception, see National Center for Education Statistics 2011).
3. The White House, June 8, 2015. “Fact Sheet: Protecting Students from Abusive Career Colleges.” Retrieved April 26, 2016 (<http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-protecting-students-abusive-career-colleges>).
4. Families were assigned to three treatment groups: a control group, which was not given a housing voucher but was followed over time; a Section 8 voucher group, which was given a traditional housing voucher that did not include geographic restrictions; and an experimental group, which was given a housing voucher and was required to move to neighborhoods in census tracts with poverty rates of 10 percent or lower. The experimental group was also provided with modest housing counseling.

5. We do not explore differences in outcomes for youth who moved from the inner city to less-poor neighborhoods. Most youth returned to Baltimore City over time and thus are navigating the same postsecondary institutions and labor market.
6. The sample was stratified by gender, age, and treatment status (experimental complier, experimental noncomplier, control group). This was done as part of the larger study, which aimed to explore how neighborhoods shape youth outcomes.
7. Bridget Davis flew to meet three of these youth again in person (all in North Carolina). The other three interviews were done via telephone.
8. Fifty-two youth participated in career training, attending either a vocationally oriented high school or a for-profit school offering career certifications. Among these youth, five were attending a vocational high school at the time of their interview, and 19 had previously attended a vocational high school (six had pursued career training after high school). Twenty-eight had not attended vocational high school but had enrolled in a trade school.
9. These college attendance rates and patterns mirror those found in data on all Baltimore City students (Durham and Olson 2013).
10. Among the 116 youth who were not in high school at the time of our study, 77 percent earned either a high school diploma or GED, and 28 percent dropped out.
11. No respondent attended a non-profit trade school, but a few participated in low-tuition or tuition-free programs at community organizations. Motivations and experiences were very similar for youth attending these nonprofit community programs as for students at for-profit trade schools. The primary difference between them was the money spent.
12. We do not know whether the youth in our sample could have gotten into more selective schools or kept up academically once there. But even among the youth who had intended to go to college, taken the SAT, or completed college-preparatory courses, almost none mentioned the high-performing local universities, and only one attended a selective local university.
13. It is possible that more students eventually completed credentials, since the 15- to 24-year-olds would have been only 17 to 26 when our study ended.
14. Some institutions have been found guilty of preying on vulnerable youth, but others are part of progressive regional workforce strategies to link employers with young adults. These institutions offer models of how to reach and assist nontraditional students and promote efficiency in structure and operations as well as respond to current market needs among both students and employers (Hentschke, Lechuga, and Tierney 2010; Mandernach et al. 2015; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2009).

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

The online appendices are available at soe.sagepub.com/supplemental.

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