Educational Expectations: A Life Course Perspective

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Ardavan Darab Davaran find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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I would like to acknowledge my committee members for their assistance with completing the following thesis – Educational Expectations: A Life Course Perspective. Without Dr. Fussell permitting my use of qualitative interviews that she and other team members gathered during the years of 2006-2007 producing this thesis would not have been possible.
Researchers have long sought to understand the determinants of educational aspirations and expectations because of their positive relationship with educational attainment. While there is a large literature focused on the determinants of educational expectations prior to high school completion, there is less research focused on the determinants of educational expectations after high school. Therefore we know substantially less about the factors that influence the post-high school educational expectations of nontraditional students who have not followed the normative age graded life course. I use qualitative data gathered from in depth interviews with mothers from low socioeconomic standings enrolled in New Orleans community colleges when Hurricane Katrina hit, August 29th, 2005. The women interviewed were participants in the Opening Doors program, an experiment designed to study the effect of financial assistance and college advising on community college student’s retention and graduation rates, so the interviews include information appropriate for studying the post-high school educational expectations of nontraditional students facing adversity.

The interviews revealed that education, work, and family experiences influenced students’ educational expectations. Most notably, having children was identified as a critical factor that influenced the women to raise their educational aspirations. They wanted to create a better life for their children and believed the most effective way to do so was to further their
education. Additionally, employment experiences influenced the women to raise their
educational aspirations when they were not satisfied with their current career paths and were able
to identify concrete pathways to career development. Whether their educational expectations
aligned with these aspirations was dependent on their ability to manage role conflict that
emerged for the women trying to juggle three statuses - student, employee, and mother. Finally,
their previous educational experiences in low quality New Orleans public schools had lasting
effects, compelling many of the women to enroll in remedial courses at community college, often
leading to lowered expectations. As the transition to adulthood has become increasingly
prolonged and diverse, learning about factors that influence the post-high school educational
expectations of nontraditional students is salient to educators and educational institutions so that
they can better serve these populations.
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Introduction

Researchers have long sought to understand the determinants of educational aspirations and expectations because of their positive relationship with educational attainment (e.g., Sewell and Shah 1968). While there is a large literature focused on the determinants of educational expectations prior to high school completion, there is less research focused on the determinants of educational expectations after high school is completed. As a result, we know substantially less about the factors that influence the post-high school educational expectations of nontraditional students who have not followed the normative age graded life course. Examples of people who have not followed the normative age graded life course include those who had children before finishing high school, those who did not proceed to college directly after high school, and those who had their college educations interrupted.

There are a substantial number of individuals who do not follow the normative age graded life course, including a growing number of adults who enroll in post-secondary education (Jacobs and Stoner-Eby 1998). Educational institutions need to better understand the difficulties that these nontraditional students face in meeting their educational goals in order to better serve these populations, and assist them in maintaining their educational expectations over time. After high school, nontraditional students face obstacles and role conflicts that traditional students during high school do not. Attempts to manage their roles within families, schools, and jobs can become overwhelming. As a result they may be forced to make decisions regarding which roles to keep and which to dismiss. Adopting a life course perspective, I use qualitative data gathered from in depth interviews with female community college students in order to explore how life experiences influence their educational expectations.

All of the women interviewed were mothers from New Orleans who have faced multiple barriers while trying to reach their educational goals. They were enrolled in community college
when Hurricane Katrina hit and forced them to evacuate their homes. This led to a period of uncertainty for the women interviewed, as their displacement disrupted their lives, and for many, disrupted their social support systems as well. The interviews illuminate the mothers’ experiences coping with this adversity; in doing so, they discuss how trying to manage their competing roles influenced their educational expectations. Role conflict led many of the women interviewed to lower their educational expectations; but many were also resilient and maintained their educational expectations in the face of adversity. These women shed light on factors that helped facilitate the maintenance of educational expectations in the face of extreme adversity and help enlighten ways in which we can better serve nontraditional students in pursuit of higher education.

**Literature Review**

*Aspirations Vs. Expectations*

Educational aspirations and expectations are conceptually similar, but it is important to differentiate between the two concepts. Aspirations measure what people hope or want for themselves, while expectations measure what people realistically expect to achieve (Kerckhoff 1976). In other words, expectations are individuals’ subjective evaluations that an outcome, such as earning a college degree, will occur in the future given current information (Dominitz and Manski 1997), while educational aspirations are ideal futures. As individuals age, educational aspirations are much weaker predictors of attainment than expectations (Mickelson 1990) because as they gain experience within institutional settings, the opportunity structures surrounding them including the barriers that stand in their way become clearer, and therefore, they are better able to make realistic assessments about their expectations for achieving certain goals.
While before high school completion students are more influenced by socialization and allocation processes that occur within the household and at school, after high school the educational expectations of adults are likely to be influenced by factors such as marriage, parenthood, employment experiences, post-secondary educational experiences, etc. Ascriptive characteristics and socioeconomic status still predict educational expectations over time, but the mediating variables linking the two change. In the section that follows I review two theoretical approaches used to study educational aspirations and expectations (the “Wisconsin model of status attainment” and the blocked opportunities framework), as well as empirical findings that identify factors that influence educational aspirations and expectations prior to high school completion. I follow this with a discussion of the life course perspective and present previous empirical findings that identify factors that influence educational expectations after high school completion.

**The Wisconsin Model of Status Attainment and Blocked Opportunities Framework**

Studies that focus on the determinants of educational aspirations and expectations mostly employ two general theoretical frameworks: “The Wisconsin model of status attainment” (Sewell and Shah 1968; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969) and the blocked opportunities framework (Kao and Tienda 1998). Blau and Duncan’s (1967) status attainment approach uses socioeconomic status (SES) and academic ability to predict educational attainment, which in turn predicts occupational attainment. Building upon this work, the Wisconsin model applies social psychological concepts and posits that family and school based processes of socialization are the principle mechanisms linking social origins with status attainment in adulthood (Sewell and Shah 1968; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). Sewell and Shah (1968) and Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969) find that socioeconomic status is positively related to the amount of encouragement
young people receive, and additionally, that individuals who receive more encouragement from significant others such as parents, teachers, and community leaders have higher educational aspirations and expectations than those who receive less. Thus, the status attainment model predicts that individuals who are living in environments which value education and provide resources to succeed expect higher levels of educational attainment. This theoretical framework, however, does not factor in structural elements that influence educational aspirations and expectations.

The blocked opportunities framework has its roots in traditional strain theories of crime. Merton (1938) asserts that individuals who do not have access to legitimate means for achieving their goals face blocked opportunities. These blocked opportunities become a source of status frustration and often result in delinquency, as individuals resort to illegitimate means for achieving their goals. Within the educational literature the blocked opportunities framework (Kao and Tienda 1998)\(^1\) posits that disadvantaged minorities and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds face structural barriers that block their opportunities to attain their desired levels of education. This leads to two distinct reactions. Sometimes individuals with less access to education may try to compensate for their lack of opportunities by overachieving scholastically. More likely though, individuals who face multiple barriers to educational success lower their educational expectations based on their sense of the social structure surrounding them, and their place in it (Kao and Tienda 1998). Kerckhoff (1976), for instance, emphasizes the importance of societal forces that identify, select, process, classify, and assign individuals according to externally imposed criteria that target disadvantaged minorities and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These sorting processes block their educational

\(^{1}\) Kao and Tienda are referring mostly to Ogbu’s Oppositional Culture Theory in their discussion of the blocked opportunities framework. This is not the intended use of the term here.
opportunities and upon realizing this, disadvantaged minorities and individuals from low SES backgrounds often lower their expectations.

Minorities and individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds face numerous obstacles in their educational pursuits. Nontraditional students, specifically those who are enrolled in post-secondary education and who have not followed the normative age graded sequence of educational roles, face additional barriers that impede their educational pursuits. Mothers, for instance, trying to work and attend school may not be able to juggle the competing roles attached to these statuses. In such cases, I expect that mothers will choose to maintain statuses that they deem most important while dismissing others. For mothers trying to provide for their children, of the three statuses, the student status is least essential and therefore I expect that this status is likely to be dropped when they experience role conflict.

While the educational expectations of both traditional and nontraditional students are influenced by socialization and allocation processes prior to high school completion, I expect that some structural barriers that only affect nontraditional students influence their educational expectations. The nontraditional students I studied consist of “off time mothers” and “off time students” from low socioeconomic backgrounds. “Off time mothers” include women who had children prior to completing school, and “off time students” include individuals who have not followed the traditional educational path of completing high school by age eighteen and college by their mid-twenties. These women have had to overcome a vast number of hurdles and barriers in trying to achieve their educational goals.

**Previous Empirical Findings**

Research has found that parent and family characteristics strongly shape the educational aspirations and expectations of traditional youth. Parents with higher levels of educational
attainment and more financial resources raise the educational aspirations and expectations of their children. Also parents who are encouraging, parents who have high aspirations for their children, and parents who are involved with their children’s schooling raise their children’s educational aspirations and expectations (Sewell and Shah 1968; Kao and Tienda 1998; Trusty and Harris 1999; Strand and Winston 2008; Goyette 2008). Over the past forty years, for instance, women have seen a much steeper rise relative to men in their parents’ encouragement for further education. This has resulted in rising levels of educational attainment for women over the same time period (Reynolds and Burge 2007).

Socialization processes influence the educational aspirations of youth, but are insufficient to account for all of the variation in educational aspirations and expectations, especially as individuals move into and through their twenties. Kerckhoff (1976) argues, and Kao and Thompson (2003) corroborate, that from a very young age students are stratified within schools according to ability groups or tracks, and that poor children and racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately placed in low-ability groups throughout their educational careers. Additionally, Reynolds and Burge (2007) find that between 1972 and 1992 women experienced decreasing discriminatory tracking which led to their increased participation in academically rigorous high school curricula and rising aspirations. These tracking and sorting processes are examples of some of the structural barriers that low income minorities often face in school. As these students become aware that they are being sorted into low skill/achievement groups, they internalize their teachers’ lower expectations for them. Recent evidence finds that students align their educational expectations with academic feedback they receive from as early as the fourth grade (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, and Kerr 2010). This leads to low educational
performance and sometimes grade repetition, resulting in lowering educational aspirations and
expectations (Hallinan 1988; Kao and Tienda 1998; Qian and Blair; Reynolds and Burge 2007).

Both the status attainment and blocked opportunities frameworks receive empirical
support. Early socialization processes as well as structural constraints, including sorting process,
influence the educational aspirations and expectations of youth. The blocked opportunities
framework indicates which factors are most influential for the low socioeconomic standing,
nontraditional female students interviewed in this study. Drawing on this framework we are able
to see how the structural constraints they face influence their educational expectations, usually
lowering them, while also illuminating factors that enabled some of the women to maintain their
educational expectations.

**Educational Expectations: A Life Course Perspective**

The life course perspective evaluates individuals’ biographies with a particular focus on
life phases and the age graded sequence of roles, opportunities, constraints, and events that shape
lives. The concept of age-graded roles refers to the idea that life course events occur in
predictable ways with respect to age (Shanahan and Macmillan 2008: 40). This normative
concept of social time implies there are appropriate ages for specific transitions such as entry in
school, marriage, or motherhood that are experienced either early, on time, or late (Elder et al
2003). In the United States, for instance, schools divide students into grades by age. Students
are expected to have completed high school by age eighteen and college by their mid twenties.
These age norms, or age-related expectations, are used as indicators of whether one experiences
expected educational transitions on time or off time (Settersten Jr. 2003). Although substantial
literature discusses life events based on these normative beliefs, little is known about how these
age norms are actually experienced (Elder et al 2003).
The transition to adulthood is a life phase characterized by five transition markers: completing school, leaving home, beginning one’s career, marrying, and becoming a parent. Expectations are held about the timing of these transitions and about the inappropriateness of being off time, although over the last half century there has been substantial evidence that the transition to adulthood has become increasingly variable and longer lasting (Shanahan and Macmillan 2008: 155 - 156). This diversification and prolonging of the transition to adulthood is the result of the extended period of education, the growth of nonfamily living between moving out of the parental household and forming one’s own family, and the growing number of women having children out of marriage. Increased variability in the transition to adulthood results in an a rising number of individuals experiencing significant life events off time, which leads to a greater variety of status combinations young people hold (Fussell and Furstenburg Jr 2005). This presents problems for individuals trying to navigate pathways to adulthood while lacking support for their choices (Fussell 2002).

With increasing variability found across the life course, the concept of agency has been defined as “the active process of choosing appropriate institutional involvements, organizational memberships, and interpersonal relationships (for oneself).” (Shanahan 2000). Planful competence refers to one’s thoughtful self-controlled process of selecting a social setting, including specific institutional involvements and interpersonal relationships, that best match their goals. In other words, planful competence refers to exercising agency in the life course, with its socially constructed set of age-graded opportunities and limitations (Clausen 1991). Clausen’s conceptualization of planful competence is similar to Schneider and Stevenson’s (2000) idea of aligned ambitions. In their study, Schneider and Stevenson found that adolescent youth with aligned ambitions were much more likely than those with unaligned ambitions to achieve their
goals. Those who exerted planfullness, or who had concrete plans for achieving their goals, were more likely to succeed while those who did not were more likely to fail. When agency is restricted though, planful competence has little consequence for achieving later outcomes. For example, Shanahan et al. (1997) provides evidence that among men whose lives were disrupted by the Great Depression and World War II, planfulness had little effect on educational attainment compared to members of cohorts who were not affected by these events.

The choices people make over the life course regarding their institutional involvements and interpersonal relationships define, in part, their statuses and roles. A status refers to a position one occupies within a social structure, while roles are the expectations attached to a particular social status. People often experience role conflict when the demands of competing roles become overwhelming (McIntyre 2008). This can occur when the expectations of being a student clash with the expectations of being an employee, or a mother, as I expect is often the case for off time students enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions.

The women interviewed all experienced significant life events off time. Some of them are off time adult students, re-entering school to further their education after having children, marrying, or working full time. Others are women who had children off time while in high school but remain on time in school, thus, they did not follow the normative sequence of the transition to adulthood. All of the women interviewed were mothers who lived in poverty and experienced Hurricane Katrina. In addition, they all had to juggle the roles of being a mother as well as a student, and for many, an employee. Conflicting roles often became overwhelming, which led to lowered educational expectations. In the section that follows I review research identifying factors that influence adults’ educational expectations.
Change in Educational Expectations Over Time

Some of the same factors predicting educational expectations also predict their stability over time. SES, for instance, positively affects the stability of educational expectations over time, as individuals from higher SES backgrounds have the most stable expectations from adolescence through the mid twenties (Hanson 1994; Trusty and Harris 1999; Trusty 2001; Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008). In addition, from adolescence through one’s mid twenties, minorities, including African Americans, maintain high expectations compared to whites after controlling for SES. These findings are corroborated across studies that focus on the stability of educational expectations (Hanson 1994; Kao and Tienda 1998; Trusty and Harris 1999; Trusty 2001).

Only Hanson (1994) and Alexander et al (2008) examine educational expectations using explanatory measures during the high school years as well as the post-high school years; they find that educational expectations are influenced by family and work expectations and experiences, as well as school experiences in the post-high school years. Trusty (2001) and Trusty and Harris (1999) assess educational expectations in the post high school years (two years after high school), but limit their explanatory variables to those measured during the eighth grade, so they do not take into account statuses individuals have acquired in the mean time or expect to acquire in the near future. Trusty and Harris find that similar factors associated with educational expectations are also associated with their stability over time.

Hanson (1994) uses data from High School and Beyond, and includes explanatory measures gathered late in high school as well as after high school to assess the factors associated with the stability of educational expectations. She finds that expectations over time are less influenced by individual and family characteristics measured during high school, while they are
increasingly influenced by family, work, and post-secondary school experiences after high school. While background characteristics still have a strong positive relationship with later educational expectations, other variables explain the relationship between individual background characteristics and later educational expectations. Expecting to marry and have kids at a later age, forming college expectations early, higher GPA, and early college attendance were all significantly associated with maintaining high educational expectations between one’s senior year of high school and 6 years later. Additionally, working, marrying, and having children within four years of completing high school were all significantly associated with lowering expectations over this same time period (Hanson 1994).

Alexander et al., (2008) also assesses the influences of educational expectations over time. They use data from the Beginning School Study (BSS), a panel study of Baltimore City schoolchildren who began the first grade in 1982. The sample consists of 55% African Americans and 45% whites who are representative of all SES levels in the area. They measure expectations at the end of high school, at age 22, and again at age 28 with a focus on how post-secondary school experiences affect educational expectations over time. Rather than assuming, as previous research had, that only “cooling out” processes (a decline in educational expectations) or “holding steady” (no change in educational expectations) occurs over time, Alexander et al. also examine the possibilities of “warming up” to education (a rise in educational expectations). Overall, they find that the most typical pattern is “holding steady,” followed by a “cooling out” process. Consistent with the blocked opportunities framework, “cooling out” was often found to be a response to unsuccessful attempts to attend college, and was concentrated among disadvantaged individuals from low SES backgrounds with weak academic records. However some “cooling out” was only temporary because some youths
“warmed up” over time by age 28. Those who had positive past school experiences, and who had attended college since graduating high school were most likely to have stable or raised expectations, while those who had not attended college within 10 years of high school or who enrolled in two-year colleges part time were especially prone to lowering expectations.

Both Hanson and Alexander et al., agree that “as youths move beyond high school, the importance of family background and schooling at the upper grades fades against that of more immediate conditions and experiences…” (Alexander, Bozick and Entwisle 2008: 391). While background characteristics remain relevant, as individuals transition to adulthood the effects of social demographics on later educational expectations are mediated by more immediate conditions such as their recent educational experiences, marriage, and having children.

These findings suggest that research which measures expectations in high school and attainment shortly thereafter do not adequately account for factors that influence the post-high school educational expectations of nontraditional age students. With a growing adult population enrolled in post-secondary education, as well as increased variability in status combinations during the transition to adulthood, there are unexplored factors that affect the educational expectations of nontraditional students. Hanson and Alexander et al., have identified some of the post-high school factors that influence expectations over time. Early college attendance is positively associated with stable expectations while marriage and having children are factors negatively associated with post-high school educational expectations. The women interviewed add to these findings by providing insight into their experiences that shed light on how these factors affect their educational expectations. Furthermore, the women identify additional factors that have not received attention by scholars that facilitate maintained or increased educational expectations in the post-high school years.
Data and Methods

Data

The data for this study come from a larger research project which follows students who were enrolled in an experimental study at Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College in New Orleans, Louisiana which was designed to study the effect of financial assistance and college advising on community college student retention and graduation rates. The experiment, called the Opening Doors program, enrolled 1,019 student volunteers at the beginning of each of the Spring, Summer, and Fall semesters of 2004. To qualify students had to be between the ages of 18 and 34, a parent of at least one dependent child under the age of 19, have a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, have a high school diploma or General Education Degree (GED) and a passing score on a college entrance exam, and not have a degree or occupational certificate from an accredited college or university (Broch and Richburg-Hayes 2006). A one-year follow-up telephone survey was in the field when Hurricane Katrina occurred, disrupting the study with only 492 of the original 1,019 re-contacted (referred to as the pre-Katrina follow-up survey). Several of the principle investigators redesigned the study to investigate adversity and resilience after a disaster.

The new study focused on the 492 re-contacted participants, for whom much more detailed information on mental health and social support was available than in the full study sample. Of these 492, 402 individuals (81.7%) were relocated between 8 and 18 months after Hurricane Katrina and re-interviewed by telephone about their evacuation and displacement, mental and physical health, employment, as well as education (referred to as the post-Katrina follow-up survey). The phone survey data was supplemented with in-depth interviews with a sample equally divided by their current location, with half having returned to the New Orleans
metropolitan area and the other half currently living in Houston, Dallas, Baton Rouge, or elsewhere in Louisiana outside the New Orleans metropolitan area. These 57 interviews covered the same topics as the survey, allowing participants to speak at length on each topic (referred to as the qualitative sample). These interviews form the basis of this study of educational expectations among a group of disadvantaged community college students who confronted a common obstacle to their educational goals.

The Opening Doors study sample was recruited from Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College (LTC). Delgado was the largest community college in Louisiana, enrolling nearly 15,000 students while LTC’s enrollment was just over 700 students. Delgado had a much larger pool of both academic and occupational programs, with over 50 leading to an Associate’s degree, while LTC’s programs were exclusively occupational with only some leading to an Associate’s degree. Consequently, the two colleges had different student bodies: More than two thirds of the students at Delgado were women, while over two thirds of the students at West Jefferson were men. Delgado students were evenly divided between those who were traditional age, and older college students, while most LTC students were over the age of twenty-five. Half of Delgado students were African American and the other half white, while at LTC there were twice as many African American students as white students (Broch and Richburg-Hayes 2006). The selection criteria of the Opening Doors Program, especially the criteria of being a parent of a child less than 19 years old, drew a disproportionate number of Delgado students into the program.

Opening Doors students were randomly assigned into the program and control groups. Control group participants received a twenty dollar gift card to a discount store, as well as a list of academic support services. Program group participants received an annual $1,000 dollar
scholarship given in four $250 payments, so long as they maintained at least a C average and were enrolled at least half time, for up to two years. In addition, program group members received counseling from advisors with only 75 to 150 assigned students, while control group members were assigned to academic counselors with a student load of between 500 and 700 students. The program group counselors were more proactive, contacting students to notify them of important dates and deadlines, monitoring their progress, and intervening with students who were not meeting requirements by helping them resolve problems (Broch and Richburg-Hayes 2006). Because students enrolled in different semesters, they participated in the Opening Doors Program for one to five semesters before Hurricane Katrina. Assessing the effects of this program was not within the scope of this project.

This original study, which was not intended to study the effects of adversity on community college students, takes advantage of the pre-disaster measures of respondents’ social, economic, and psychological resources to understand post-disaster responses. Because its original purpose was to study college retention and graduation, many of the measures are appropriate for a study of change in students’ educational expectations. The unique feature of this study is the extreme challenge that all students confronted and its effects on their continued participation in community college.

The original sample consisted of 1019 community college students while the post-Katrina sample consisted of 402 participants. Although attrition occurred, the characteristics of the post-Katrina samples remained similar to the characteristics of the baseline sample. Using t-tests I find that the only significant difference between the baseline sample and the post-Katrina sample is that a slightly larger percentage of the post-Katrina sample was female (see Table 1).
Table 1 – Comparison of Post-Katrina Sample Characteristics Vs. Those Not Included in Post-Katrina Sample (All measures come from data recorded at the time of the baseline sample).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Baseline Sample</th>
<th>Post Katrina Sample</th>
<th>% or Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>% or Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>Site</td>
<td>Delgado Community College</td>
<td>80.71%</td>
<td>79.35%</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Louisiana Technical College</td>
<td>19.29%</td>
<td>20.65%</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographic Characteristics</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>90.11%</td>
<td>96.02%</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25.19 (4.52)</td>
<td>25.5 (4.43)</td>
<td>.28</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>1.82 (1.12)</td>
<td>1.80 (0.99)</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Household size</td>
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<td>3.69 (1.52)</td>
<td>.53</td>
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<td>Race</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>10.19%</td>
<td>.94</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>82.50%</td>
<td>81.84%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.27%</td>
<td>2.99%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.94%</td>
<td>1.45%</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Economic Characteristics</td>
<td>Unemployment benefits</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
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<td>SSI</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Food stamps</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public housing</td>
<td>59.32%</td>
<td>62.19%</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental support</td>
<td>16.37%</td>
<td>15.17%</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>18.48%</td>
<td>14.68%</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Characteristics</td>
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<td>52.35%</td>
<td>49.75%</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Current hours</td>
<td>33.31 (9.88)</td>
<td>33.69 (9.77)</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Characteristics</td>
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<td>76.82%</td>
<td>79.60%</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finished GED</td>
<td>19.61%</td>
<td>16.92%</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finished technical training</td>
<td>8.91%</td>
<td>11.19%</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finished AA</td>
<td>0.32%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Finished BA</td>
<td>0.10%</td>
<td>0.25%</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In comparison, the qualitative sample had some marked differences in composition (see Table 2). This sample was purposively selected to include the most typical members of the original sample, and as a result only included women below the age of thirty, half of whom had relocated to the Houston or Dallas area and half of whom returned to New Orleans Parish or another flooded neighborhood most affected by Katrina. There were no white women in qualitative sample (the post-Katrina sample is about 12% white) which was almost exclusively African American (about 90%), and the women in the qualitative sample were on average about two years younger compared to the post-Katrina sample since it selected only women below the age of thirty, mostly from Delgado Community College (93%). It is likely that these demographic characteristics account for the differences in economic and employment characteristics between the two samples, as more women in the qualitative sample than post-Katrina sample received welfare (21% in the qualitative sample compared to 10% in the post-Katrina sample), as well as parental support (26% in the qualitative sample compared to 13% in the post-Katrina sample).
Table 2 – Comparison of Qualitative Sample Characteristics vs. Those Not Included in Qualitative Sample (All measures come from data recorded at the time of the baseline sample).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Post-Katrina Sample – Not Re-Contacted</th>
<th>Qualitative Sample</th>
<th>SIG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% or Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>% or Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Site</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delgado Community College</td>
<td>77.10%</td>
<td>92.98%</td>
<td>92.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Technical College</td>
<td>22.90%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic Characteristics</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>95.36%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>25.87 (4.51)</td>
<td>23.26 (3.07)</td>
<td>23.26 (3.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>1.84 (0.59)</td>
<td>1.60 (1.00)</td>
<td>1.60 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size</td>
<td>3.73 (1.56)</td>
<td>3.42 (1.17)</td>
<td>3.42 (1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>11.88%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>80.58%</td>
<td>89.47%</td>
<td>89.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.45%</td>
<td>1.75%</td>
<td>1.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment benefits</td>
<td>5.51%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSI</td>
<td>15.07%</td>
<td>12.28%</td>
<td>12.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>21.05%</td>
<td>21.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food stamps</td>
<td>60.87%</td>
<td>70.18%</td>
<td>70.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public housing</td>
<td>16.23%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support</td>
<td>12.75%</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently employed</td>
<td>50.14%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
<td>47.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current hours</td>
<td>34.33 (9.60)</td>
<td>29.13 (9.96)</td>
<td>29.13 (9.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished high school</td>
<td>78.55%</td>
<td>85.96%</td>
<td>85.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished GED</td>
<td>18.26%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished technical training</td>
<td>11.59%</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished AA</td>
<td>0.29%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finished BA</td>
<td>0.29%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methods**

The qualitative sample interviews were collected in 2006 and 2007 by three trained interviewers living in the New Orleans area. The interview schedule included questions regarding the participants’ experiences growing up in New Orleans, as well their experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina. Since the original study was based on college retention and graduation rates, the in depth interviews maintained a focus on educational experiences as well as future educational plans.

Using the process of narrative analysis (Mishler 1986), the interviews were broken into narrative segments in which the interviewees told stories of experiences that affected their educational trajectories. I use an issue-focused approach analyzing the qualitative data in order learn about factors that influenced the educational expectations of the respondents. Within this approach, I use four distinct analytic processes – coding, sorting, local integration and inclusive integration – to produce the final analysis of the interview material (Weiss 1994). I describe these processes in the following paragraphs.
I began analyzing my data by creating an excerpt file for each interview that contained all data that seemed could potentially inform my analyses. I proceeded by combining the processes of coding and sorting, grouping cases conceptually in order to identify factors that influenced the educational expectations of the women interviewed. I created separate word files that each represented a specific code, or topic, adding dialogue to them from the interviews that fit the coding scheme. I read each interview multiple times as new topics emerged. After completing the initial coding process I had identified about twenty distinct topics.

I then used Weiss’ (1994) local integration technique – the process of organizing and integrating the data – analyzing the codes further in order to identify larger themes that emerged. The themes that emerged revolved around Hurricane Katrina and educational, work, and family experiences. I integrated the codes that fit into these larger categories which left four main themes: the influence of Hurricane Katrina on educational expectations, the influence of previous educational experiences on educational expectations, the influence of children on educational expectations as well as aspirations, and the influence of employment experiences on educational aspirations and expectations.

Making use of a life course perspective and the blocked opportunities framework as theoretical frames, I concluded my analyses using Weiss’ (1994) technique of inclusive integration, knitting a coherent story to what previously were isolated areas of analysis that resulted from local integration.

**Results**

The women interviewed were all enrolled at Delgado Community College or Louisiana Technical College in New Orleans, Louisiana when the study began. Whether specific individuals expected to acquire a set of skills, an Associate’s Degree, or to transfer to a
university, they all expected some further educational training. The interviews reveal how their life experiences, particularly those since the study began, have affected their educational expectations.

**Adverse Events**

**Hurricane Katrina**

As people age they encounter adverse circumstances. Living through the Great Depression or WWII, as mentioned earlier, presents adversity that can make achieving goals very difficult even when individuals have well thought out plans. Hurricane Katrina was an adverse life event that forced all of the women interviewed to make adjustments to their plans. This sometimes resulted in the women lowering their educational expectations. While some had to put school on hold, others decided to discontinue completely. Some of the women relocated and attended community college (or attempted to in the forthcoming case) while others returned to New Orleans and waited for schools to reopen. Alexandra, who lives with her family in New Orleans with her partner and child, speaks about the difficulties of getting back in school after Katrina.

**Alexandra:** Of course, after the hurricane, everything was flooded so we couldn’t go to school. I tried to register for classes in Houston when I got to Houston but they didn’t have any classes that I could take. All my classes were full or any classes that I could take towards my major… [Then in] spring Delgado was opening back up. They were holding classes only in building 1. Cause all the rest of the buildings were still under construction. And still now most of the buildings are still messed up. Like the library, you can’t go in the library at all. In spring they were opening back up. So [I] ended up going to school but I didn’t go full time.

Although Hurricane Katrina was a barrier to continuing her education, Alexandra maintained her plans to complete a BA, although it would be delayed. Lindsey, on the other hand, had been
displaced to the Dallas area, and lowered her educational expectations when Hurricane Katrina hit.

  Lindsey: I was going right before Katrina. I had started going back and I had been there for a little over a year...And I had been going back, and when I got comfortable with going and I was like, oh I’ve got it now. I’m going to finish, I’m going to finish. And here comes Katrina. And it was like, okay. I guess I’m not going to finish.
  Interviewer: And have you been back at all since the hurricane?
  Lindsey: No.
  Interviewer: Do you plan to go back?
  Lindsey: I just haven’t made up my mind yet.

Lindsey had struggled in the past trying to complete her AA, but finally seemed poised to attain a degree in education to begin her quest to become a teacher. After Katrina, she moved to Dallas and no longer had her mother nearby to watch her children. In addition, she would have to take multiple electives at the Dallas community college that she was not required to take at Delgado. These consequences of Katrina led Lindsey to lower her expectations.

Hurricane Katrina had lasting effects on the women interviewed, as the region in which they all lived in was severely devastated. Delgado Community College and Louisiana Technical College were both closed for prolonged periods, and once they opened they had limited space and minimal resources. Thus, the educational plans of the women interviewed were thwarted. In the face of such adversity, lowering expectations was a likely response. I use the transcripts to identify how women explained the changes to their expectations.

Previous Educational Experiences’ Influence on Educational Expectations

New Orleans Public Schools/Remedial Coursework

The majority of the women interviewed grew up in low income neighborhoods in the city of New Orleans and attended its poorly funded public schools. Many referred to the New Orleans public school system’s inadequacies, specifically the lack of basic education that is imperative for succeeding in higher education. Carrie, a twenty-eight year old mother of one
child who was living in Houston when she was interviewed, discussed these inadequacies.

**Carrie:** In New Orleans…you either had to be [at] a magnet school or a private school…That’s sad… New Orleans school system, they don’t get kids ready for college. I don’t know what the hell they are getting them ready for. But it’s not college.

This sentiment was shared by many of the respondents. While these women were not sorted within schools the way Kerckhoff (1976) discusses, they were sorted at a meso-level, since suburban white flight had left the public schools underfunded. Consequently, many of the women were not well educated. Claudia, a mother of two living in New Orleans, for instance, discussed passing multiple math courses despite not knowing the material.

**Claudia:** The hardest thing [in] school for me is math…When I was in New Orleans public school, and the public schools over there is crap, I made it through school… But somebody should have caught me in math…I shouldn’t have been passing it the way I did. I feel like they let me down because I shouldn’t have got the grade. But I didn’t realize it until I got out of school because I need [those skills and don’t have them]…they just let me go through with it…My 12th grade year, my geometry teacher, that’s the only woman, the only teacher that I ever had that really got me to understand math…But by my 12th grade year it was too late… she got me too late.

Claudia’s example shows how a structural element of society – poorly funded New Orleans Public Schools – has had lasting effects for her over time. When asked what could stand in her way of receiving a BA, her response was simple.

**Claudia:** Math. That’s it… In reading and writing I’m excellent.

Claudia’s experiences are an example where the low quality of the New Orleans public schools created a barrier Claudia must overcome in order to achieve her goals.

People like Carrie and Claudia who received poor high school educations but aspire to further their education often enroll in community colleges. Many of the women interviewed had to enroll in remedial courses before they could begin earning credits towards their community college degree. These remedial courses lowered some women’s educational expectations.

Latoya has three children and was living in New Orleans with her partner when she was
interviewed. She was considering lowering her expectations because she did not want to take remedial courses. She currently works rather than attend school.

**Latoya:** I was going to Delgado for medical coding ...[but] I didn’t want to be in remedial [courses]... [So] it’s up to me to want to do it [enough] to take the patience and the time.

Valerie, another mother living in the Houston area, expressed frustrations with having to take remedial courses, but they did not seem to adversely affect her educational expectations. In fact, she even expressed that remedial math helped her out.

**Valerie:** [I went] to Delgado to start on my culinary degree but I didn’t know you had to take all them remedial classes...And that pissed me off severe. I was like man by the time I graduate my child going be like old enough to go to high school... [but] remedial math, [it] actually helped [out].

The fact that many of these women received poor primary and secondary educations and therefore had to take remedial courses in community colleges suggests that sorting processes that occur at younger ages can lead to qualitatively lower levels of education and have lasting effects.

Consistent with the blocked opportunities framework, there were two distinct reactions to having to take remedial classes. Latoya was very discouraged that they would not count towards her degree and appeared to be leveling her expectations. Valerie expressed initial disgust in having to enroll in remedial courses, but found that they were helpful. Valerie appears to be resilient; she has maintained expectations to attain a BA in finance and has enrolled in online courses. She is trying to compensate for structural barriers she has faced (and still faces) and persists in school despite beginning in remedial status. Consistent with theory, some have tried to beat the odds, while others lowered their educational expectations after becoming discouraged by their remedial status.
Children and Raised Educational Aspirations

Previous research has found that having children within four years of completing high school lowers educational expectations (Hanson 1994). The women interviewed, on the other hand, discussed how having children positively influenced their educational aspirations, as they felt that furthering their education was the most effective way to create a better life for their children. While other life circumstances influenced whether their expectations aligned with their aspirations, a clear theme emerged for the women interviewed; their children provided them with motivation to raise their educational aspirations. The mothers focused on how further educational attainment would open up opportunities for their children and also increase their earning capacity so that they could better provide for their children. Rebecca, a mother of one child, discussed these ideas when she was asked about what motivates her to persist in school.

Rebecca: I understand struggle...[and] I can’t afford to stay in the position where I am. I’ve been down too long. ...I need her (her child’s) outlook on life to be different. I need her to know what opportunities that she can be afforded. I don’t want her to be limited. I want her to have options...I want her to see more than what I’ve seen...So that’s my motivation.

Robyn, a mother of five, hopes to increase her income so that she can better care for her children.

Robyn: I’m going to go back to school. I may not take criminal justice, because if it takes too long, I don’t want it. But...I can’t just work at a minimum wage job. I have to get a career because I have kids.

As was the case for many of the mothers interviewed, Robyn and Rebecca discussed their children as the primary factor motivating them to raise their educational aspirations.

Previous research has focused on the constraints that marrying and having children have on educational attainment, usually leading to lowered educational expectations. While having children presents added responsibilities and time constraints for parents, the low SES mothers interviewed provide evidence that having children raised post-high school educational
aspirations. Whether their expectations aligned with their aspirations depended on whether they were able to navigate around barriers that impeded their educational progress.

**Children’s Influence on Educational Expectations**

While many of the mothers identified having children as a factor that raised their educational aspirations, as previous research suggests, some also identified having children as leading to lowered expectations. The women interviewed held different statuses than traditional students do during high school. They were students and mothers, and many were employees. In addition, they had all recently had their lives disrupted by Hurricane Katrina, which exacerbated the difficulties of trying to manage their competing roles. This resulted in role conflict for many of them, which often leveled their educational expectations.

**Time Management Between Competing Roles**

The critical factor the interviewees identified as lowering their educational expectations was their inability to manage time between work, school, and the responsibilities of motherhood. Of the three statuses (student, employee, and mother), student was the most expendable, and therefore, when mothers did not have enough time to manage all three, they often dropped the student status. Sheila, for instance, who was living in the Dallas area with her partner and two children, was enrolled at the University of Phoenix taking online courses at the time of her interview.

**Interviewer:** So how realistic do you think it is that you will finish [school]?
**Sheila:** Right now, I don’t know, because it’s hard. It’s a lot of pressure on me, and I’m so tempted to quit even right now. So I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** What is the number one thing that makes you want to quit?
**Sheila:** The time management. It’s time demanding, and I don’t have time for it.

**Interviewer:** What would help you stay in?
**Sheila:** I don’t know. Less work hours. So, I mean, I don’t know. My job – I mean, I’m gone from the house 50 hours a week. And when I get home, I only get to spend an hour and a half with my kids. And I’m so mentally exhausted I don’t feel like sitting
down and looking at the computer. I’ve been looking at the computer all day at work, not
to mention I have to take care of myself and get ready for tomorrow…So I’m really
exhausted.

Sheila has two children and works long hours in order to provide for them. While she has
aspirations for further educational attainment, the responsibilities of motherhood are taxing. She
is trying to juggle the roles of a student, an employee, and a mother, while also trying to adjust to
her move to Dallas. Trying to manage all these roles she is considering quitting school. Sheila’s
case clearly shows the leveling effect of role conflict on educational expectations.

Robyn had difficulty juggling her roles as well. Earlier she discussed her aspirations to
go back to school, but moved on to discuss why her expectations are lower.

Robyn: I have to get a career because I have kids…But I need a job to support my
family. I’d rather go to school. But I can’t…because I need to support my family.

Role conflict is likely to emerge amongst women today during the transition to adulthood
as this period has become increasingly prolonged and diversified, with women taking on a
variety of statuses during this life phase. It is especially difficult for mothers from low
socioeconomic backgrounds to manage during this period because they have fewer resources
available to them, as well as low earnings. The role conflict that emerges for nontraditional
students, especially those who are particularly disadvantaged, stands in their way of achieving
certain goals. Educational institutions have been built for traditional students, and for the women
interviewed, the obstacles they faced were very difficult to overcome. This means that many of
them lowered their educational expectations, even when their aspirations remained high.

While all of the mothers had difficulties juggling the roles of their competing statuses,
some were able to align their educational expectations with their aspirations. Resources that help
alleviate role conflict were identified by some of the mothers as a mechanism which allowed
them to align their educational expectations with their aspirations.
Support Networks and Childcare Availability

Having available childcare was a critical factor the mothers identified that allowed some of them to align their educational expectations with their aspirations. Lindsey, who was living in Dallas after being displaced by Katrina, discussed how no longer having her mother around to help watch her child made her unable to pursue her educational aspirations.

Lindsey: At home I had more help. Like as far as my mom, where here I don’t have [help]...I have to help with him with his school work and I don’t want to interfere with that at all. I don’t know, I’m just so big on school work with him, I don’t know...[And] after I would leave, my mom tended to him for me to where as now I have to tend to him because Bruce is always working. So it’s like the help is not there where my mom would have stepped in and helped me with him [before].

In New Orleans, Lindsey had an intact support system that helped manage her role conflict. Having her mother nearby to watch her child enabled her to enroll in post-secondary education and pursue her educational goals. With the supports of her mother not available in Dallas, Lindsey had lowered her expectations.

While many of the women did not have childcare available to them, Amber, a mother of two living in Dallas, was able to work and go to school because of childcare made available to her via the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) program which works with people to help them further their education. Amber expects to complete a Bachelors Degree in business.

Amber: She wasn’t in daycare when we was in Louisiana. My mom would watch her... [Now] they’re in daycare, and they’re going to give it to me for free... They said they was helping Katrina people out, and they was like well you can get into school. And we was like I can’t go to school because I don’t have a babysitter. Now...they’re going to give it to me for free.

This program resolved Amber’s role conflict and allowed her to maintain or even raise her educational expectations.
Most of the off-time mothers interviewed were not so fortunate. They did not have access to free or subsidized childcare or enough earnings to afford market rate childcare. Women who did not have family or friends to watch their children were constrained in pursuing their educations, and this often lowered their expectations. The top priority of the mothers was to care for their children, and if they did not have anyone trustworthy to care for them in their absence, they were unable to go to school. Thus role conflict caused many to lower their educational expectations. While all individuals may experience role conflict as they get older and take on new statuses, the low SES women interviewed have fewer resources available to them to help juggle their conflicting responsibilities.

**The Influence of Employment on Educational Aspirations and Expectations**

In contrast to most traditional age students who have not had full time jobs, most nontraditional age students have, and their employment experiences are likely to influence their educational aspirations and expectations. People who have settled into steady work may lower their educational expectations even if they have not achieved their aspirations. For others who are not satisfied with their work, their previous employment experiences influence their educational aspirations and expectations.

**Job Satisfaction and Life Satisfaction**

Many of the women interviewed had worked what they referred to as dead end jobs. Some had applied for better jobs, and had not been hired because they lacked educational credentials. These women envisioned an unsatisfactory future, and furthering their education was seen as a solution. Alexandra, for instance, did not find the occupational trajectory of her current job appealing.

**Alexandra:** I was working at Quiznos because I was still working there after I had the baby and the manager there, she said something like, if you keep it up you are going to be
a manager like me. And I looked at her and I was like, I don’t want to be a manager like you. So, I told my mom, “Trey is a few months old and I want to start going back to school.” At first I was going to go straight to SUNO or Dillard. But my mom was like, if you are going to go back to school, you might as well get your basic stuff done and go to Delgado because it’s a slower pace, hands on. So I decided to go to Delgado.

Similarly, when Amber moved to Dallas after evacuating New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina she realized the importance of earning a college degree.

**Amber:** Moving out here made me want to really get my degree and make sure I get it because it’s like if you don’t have a degree in certain states you can only go so far. You can’t make good money, and with me being engaged and having kids I want to be able to live a life that I don’t have to struggle and constantly worry about I wonder if I’m going to have the money for this or I wonder can I do that? I want to be able to know I have the money for this whether I’m going to work 40 hours or whether I’m on a set salary. I’m going to have what I need, and it’s not just because the job is paying me a certain amount of money and it’s going to stop after a while and I can’t get any higher after that. I want to be able to keep on going and go higher and higher.

Amber’s and Alexandria’s perceptions of their futures without additional education clearly motivated them to raise their aspirations. Job dissatisfaction as well as unsatisfying perceptions of the future may also raise the educational expectations of adults if they are able to manage the role conflict that arises in adulthood, thus allowing them to align their expectations with their aspirations.

Previous research has not identified this relationship, but it has lacked a focus on adults. Additionally, previous research in this areas measured educational expectations during a time period when finding a job was less difficult than it was in 2006-2007 when these interviews occurred. In contemporary society it seems quite possible that adults from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have unsatisfying occupational trajectories may raise their occupational aspirations, and therefore their educational aspirations. If they are able to manage competing
statuses that arise during adulthood, they will align their educational expectations with their aspirations, resulting in raised expectations.

**Opportunities with more Education and Acquired Skills**

Some women, especially those who worked in occupations they considered to be careers, envisioned opportunities available to them through higher education and specific skill acquisition. Faith, who has four children, wanted to go back to school to acquire computer skills that she could use in order to move up from her job as an administrative assistant.

*Faith:* I do want to go back to school to brush up on some more administrative office skills so I can move up instead of being an assistant. I want to work in office working with the big people. Because basically I just know the simple computer stuff like Microsoft Word and Powerpoint, Excel. The lady at my job taught me Outlook and Access. But I know there’s more to computers than that and I want to learn all about the programs. When I go find another job, there’ll be a print on my resume for all the stuff I know. Like on my job right now, they teaching me about accounting. Looking at people’s time sheets to see if their hours are right. I do want to go back.

Rachel, a mother of two, worked in accounting at the time of her interview. Her boss was pushing her to further her education in order to advance in her job.

*Interviewer:* Will you be able in your current job to advance?
*Rachel:* Yea.
*Interviewer:* So if you continue going to school, will that open some doors for you?
*Rachel:* Yea. And you get paid much more.
*Interviewer:* Has your boss let you know?
*Rachel:* Oh, yea. She’s always telling me. Now I’m going through a training with her. She pushes me. At first I didn’t like her. She’s real bossy. I look at it as if she see potential in you, she’s going to push you. She’s like well, let me show you why I push you so hard. I started as a receptionist. Now I practically own this company.

Career specific motivations to reach higher levels of educational attainment are influences that affect adults more than adolescents. Youth understand abstractly that education is beneficial for their futures. As they gain more employment experience in occupational settings they gain a clearer understanding of their career path and the opportunity structures available to
them. This allows them to plan more competently for their futures. Individuals like Faith and Rachel who are able to identify specific educational training as a path for career advancement are likely to raise their educational expectations if role conflicts do not obstruct their plans.

**Discussion**

The majority of previous research on determinants of educational expectations has centered its attention on traditional age students who have followed the age graded sequence of educational roles. Consequently, such research has neglected post-high school determinants of educational expectations for nontraditional students. There is a substantial number of individuals who do not follow the age graded life course, as well as a growing adult population enrolled in post-secondary education (Jacobs and Stoner-Eby 1998). To better understand the variety of pathways in the transition to adulthood scholars need to indentify the factors that influence the educational expectations of these populations, as people that experience critical life events off time face hurdles that those who follow the age graded life course do not.

The women interviewed were nontraditional students who were off time low income New Orleans mothers enrolled in community college. The New Orleans Public Schools did not prepare them for college. Many were compelled to take remedial courses in community college, which some identified as lowering their educational expectations. Some were resilient and maintained their educational expectations despite the barrier posed. The split reactions are consistent with the blocked opportunities framework.

The expectations of the women interviewed were also lowered by Hurricane Katrina. Typically, those who have concrete plans for achieving their goals are more likely to do so than those who have ambitions but no realistic plans for moving forward. Facing an adverse event like Hurricane Katrina can make it difficult for people to achieve their goals, even when they
exert planful competence (Claussen 1991), or have aligned ambitions (Schneider and Stevenson 2000). When a huge obstacle such as World War II, the Great Depression, or Hurricane Katrina interrupts a person’s life planfullness may not be enough to sustain expectations.

All of the women followed in this research experienced Hurricane Katrina, were displaced, and lost at least a semester in the community college where they were enrolled. Some remained in the areas they migrated to and were able to re-enroll in community college, so long as other restrictions did not prevent them from doing so. Others returned to New Orleans, but when the community colleges reopened resources and spaces for students were still lacking. Additionally, the lack of resources available to the low SES mothers for helping cope with the adversity further limited their ability to achieve their goals. They were constrained by elements they could not control, and for some, this led to lowered expectations.

As previous empirical findings would suggest (Hanson 1994; Trusty and Harris 1999; Trusty 2001; Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008), facing extreme adverse circumstances led many of the low SES women interviewed to lower their educational expectations. Contrary to previous findings though, the women identified having children as a critical factor that influenced them to raise their educational aspirations. They wanted to create a better life for their children and believed the most effective way to do so was by furthering their education. Their ability to manage their statuses as mothers, students, and employees ultimately determined whether they aligned their educational expectations with their aspirations. Support networks and outside programs that were available to assist with childcare were crucial factors that enabled some of the women to manage their role conflict and maintain their educational expectations. Nevertheless, many of them did not have access to these resources and therefore had expectations that did not match their aspirations.
For women who worked and were able to manage the roles of their conflicting statuses, dissatisfaction with employment raised some of their educational expectations. The women that viewed their jobs as careers and needed higher educational credentials or specific skills in order to advance sought further educational training. Also, women who were unsatisfied with the jobs available to them at their education level and who foresaw an unappealing future for themselves in their current jobs raised their educational expectations. These experiences are likely to occur for adults who have been in the labor market, and are factors unexplored in previous research.

As individuals diverge from the age graded life course, making the transition to adulthood more variable, factors that influence the post-high school educational expectations of nontraditional students will be more salient to educators and educational institutions. I used qualitative data gathered from in depth interviews with low SES female community college students who are from New Orleans and have children to identify some of these factors. Applying the blocked opportunities framework with a life course perspective helped illuminate influential factors that affected the educational expectations of the women interviewed.

Future research focusing on educational expectations would benefit by focusing more on post-high school educational expectations. Moving beyond the scope of previous research and indentifying factors that enable and influence individuals to maintain or raise educational expectations is crucial in order to attain a complete understanding of the factors that affect the educational expectations of nontraditional students. Using quantitative analyses to empirically test the effects of the factors identified as influencing post-high school educational expectations is an important next step because furthering research in this area can help enable schools to better serve nontraditional students in pursuit of higher education.
References


