

DISSERTATION

THE LIFE STORIES OF FORMER COMMUNITY COLLEGE
AGRICULTURE REENTRY STUDENTS:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF SELF-EFFICACY

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

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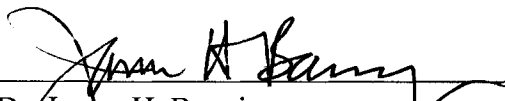
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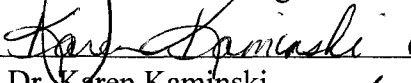
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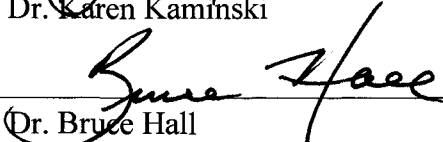
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION
THE LIFE STORIES OF FORMER COMMUNITY COLLEGE
AGRICULTURE REENTRY STUDENTS:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF SELF-EFFICACY

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to identify agriculture re-entry students and to understand and interpret their life stories in relation to the concept of self-efficacy. In so doing, I was able to determine the role of self-efficacy in their decisions to become community college reentry students.

My interviews of my participants were in-depth, private, individual, open-ended, and face-to-face. I was able to identify emerging themes from my participants' stories by using a system of cross-case matrix analysis. I reported my research findings using a narrative inquiry methodology that allowed the individual and collective voices of my participants' life stories to be clearly expressed and heard. During the interpretation of my data, I found a correlation between my participants' level of self-efficacy as it related to their decision to become community college reentry students.

In particular, I found the self-efficacy construct of motivation played an important role in guiding them toward their academic achievement. I was able to connect my participants' stories to the literature on self-efficacy and this deepened my understanding of their experience as community college re-entry students. This research will assist community college researchers and practitioners in understanding the role of self-efficacy in the academic achievement of reentry students at public two-year institutions. It also

provided me with a basis to make recommendations for further research and improvements to practice.

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For those of us born as part of the baby boomer generation, life is all about dedication, hard work, and achieving success in whatever we attempt to do. Our focus is on the journey we travel in our lives, not the final destination. We establish our short- and long-term goals, take pride in achieving them, and set new ones to pursue with the same vigor instilled in us by our traditional generation of parents. Many of my colleagues thought pursuing a doctorate at this stage of my career was a waste of time and money. In the beginning, I may have agreed with their assessment. I often wondered if I chose to pursue another goal just because I needed a new challenge in my life. I soon realized the goal of obtaining a Ph.D. became secondary to the relationships I was making along the way.

First, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Craig Hadden, who introduced me to the Colorado State Community College Leadership (CCL) program. I met Craig by chance at an administrative conference at UCLA. Craig was in the final stages of the CCL program, having just taken a dean's job at Vista Community College in California. Our chance meeting was a "critical incident" in my life. In my literature review, I learned about the new concept of critical incidents, which researchers are introducing as a part of the narrative inquiry methodology. Craig's bright future as a community college leader ended with

it through the program. Working with Kristin at the same community college was so instrumental in my success that without her continual friendship, support, and guidance, I would never have been able to complete the program. I would like to acknowledge Mr. Bob Sloger who passed away without the opportunity to finish the program. Bob was a friend and fellow community college administrator.

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From the beginning of the CCL program, we were always reminded that “life happens” on your journey through the program. I would like to thank my wife, Kathy for allowing me the time and support to pursue my goal. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my daughter Anica and her husband Mark who continually encouraged me to finish the program. I would like to thank my son Aaron and his wife Megan for giving me my first grandchild Jordyn during my journey through the CCL program. I feel great pride in my children and their spouses who have followed in my footsteps as teachers. I want to thank my parents, Laurence and Catherine, who always supported me in whatever path in life I chose to pursue. They instilled in me a strong work ethic, a desire to help others and the guidance I needed to achieve my goals.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction.....	1
Opening Vignette.....	2
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Statement of the Research Problem.....	11
Research Context.....	11
Potential Limitations.....	12
Significance of the Study.....	13
Conceptual Framework of the Study.....	14
Researcher's Perspective.....	15
 CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	18
Self-Efficacy Theory.....	19</

Participants and Sites	58
Data Collection	59
Data Analysis	60
Trustworthiness	61
Ethical Considerations	62
Conclusion	63
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	65
Overview	65
Interviews	66
Participants' Stories	67
Samnang's Story	67
Family and Childhood Memories	68
Early Education and Career Aspirations	73
Community College Experience	76
Data Analysis	77

Role Models or Peer Influences.....	125
Critical Events or Incidents.....	127
Conclusions.....	129
CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION.....	132
Introduction.....	132
Narrative Interpretation of Life Stories.....	132
Samnang's Self-Efficacy	133
Sources of Self-Efficacy	133
Processes of Self-Efficacy	135
Self-Efficacy and Academic Achievement.....	135
Critical Incidents.....	137
Pam's Self-Efficacy	138
Sources of Self-Efficacy	

APPENDICES	162
Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study	163
Appendix B: Participant Profile Sheet.....	164
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form.....	165

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This dissertation describes my narrative research project of examining the life stories of former community college agriculture reentry students. My dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter One presents an opening vignette, provides the theoretical framework for the study, identifies the research problem and research context, defines the terms and limitations of the project, discusses the significance of the study, outlines the conceptual framework of the dissertation, and offers my perspective on the research.

Chapter Two presents a review of the relevant literature, including the theory, sources, and processes of self-efficacy. I conclude the chapter with a review of the most current research literature and a review of community college vocational education. In Chapter Three, I explain why I chose the qualitative narrative inquiry design for my study, discuss the selection of participants, describe the data collection and analysis, and address issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four describes in detail the life stories of my participants, starting with their family and childhood memories, early education, and career aspirations and community college experiences. I then analyze each of their stories from the narratives, field notes, and other data I collected from their interviews. Finally, I present the results from the cross-case matrices that I used in my data analysis. The threads

familial relationships, educational backgrounds, role models and peer influences, and critical events in their lives.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the data I discovered and explain each participant's story as it relates to self-efficacy theory. I divide each story, linking the key elements of the narratives to the sources and processes of self-efficacy. I then discuss my participants' self-efficacy as it relates to their academic achievement as community college reentry students. Finally, I discuss the latest approach in the narrative inquiry research, which involves critical incidents or events occurring in a person's narrative. I conclude the chapter with the implications for community colleges and the need for further research.

Opening Vignette

Jim, a pseudonym for a real student, sat down at the table and began to explain how he had arrived at this point in his life. Jim had grown up in Detroit, Michigan, where he was born and lived with his mother and father for about a year before they were divorced. During his infant and early childhood years, Jim had never really known his biological father. His mother remarried, but that marriage lasted only a few years before it also ended in divorce. Jim's most poignant memories of his earliest childhood involved his mother's constant battles with illness. She was so sick that she had 13 heart surgeries over the course of her life. She often had walking

Jim and his mother stayed with relatives in Washington and Oregon. They settled in the San Fernando Valley in California. During Jim's K-12 educational career, he had attended more than 20 elementary and high schools. The frequency of their moves did not allow Jim to establish any long-term friendships or associations with teachers, schools, or communities. He soon became accustomed to attending a new school with new classmates, teachers, administrators, and surroundings. Jim was quick to note that these changes had occurred so often that he accepted them as routine occurrences.

Jim recalled these early experiences of school as being very boring. Changing schools so often had involved performing many of the rote memorization tasks repeatedly, and school was not challenging for him. He admitted that getting grades of B and C had always seemed acceptable to him, and his parents had little interest in his schooling. He had quickly discovered that he was good at working with his hands, and his favorite activities at school included building the stage sets or operating the lighting for school plays and other performances. He had enjoyed all different kinds of hands-on projects, and he remembered a time when he had been able to get a passing grade in a sewing class not by sewing, but by taking apart a broken sewing machine and fixing it.

The one thing that Jim remembered most about school was a drafting class he had taken when he was in junior high school. He had been only 13 years old at the time, but he remembered that he liked drafting and dreamed of being an architect some day. He still had a drawing of a building he had designed that he called the Holland

Teachers and fellow students were not easy for Jim to remember because he had changed schools so many times. He did remember his fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Ferguson, whom he described as a nice person who stuck out in his mind because she had liked his Christmas project. She had also stayed after school and helped him with his homework or other class assignments that he was having difficulty completing. Jim noted that he remembered his woodshop teacher only because he had cautioned Jim to “watch your fingers” in class.

Jim’s most vivid memories were of his mother and her struggles with her health and life in general. She had never finished high school and worked doing clerical and other administrative duties for a loan company. She had also enjoyed acting in local USO shows or doing tap dancing and ballet performances. They had lived in North Hollywood and Burbank for a short time, and she had aspired to be an actor. Jim remembered that she had always referred to her occupation as being an actor, but said that she was doing this or that other activity on a temporary basis. Jim’s mother had often admitted that she was not a very good mom and that she just did not know what to do with Jim during his rebellious years.

Jim acknowledged that he had spent many of his younger years out from under the umbrella of parental concern. When he was 15 years old, he had run away from home to live on the streets or with his friends. Jim looked back on his behavior at that time as a rebellion against parental control and admitted that he

away from home. The police had held him and called his mother, who said, “Well, throw him in juvie, because I don’t know what to do with him.” After about 45 minutes, the police had taken Jim to a local motel and told him to be out of town in 2 days.

Jim had then decided to call his stepdad, who sent him a bus ticket so he could return to Detroit. He was 16 years old at the time, and his stepdad had told him to go to school or go to work and not just sit around the house all day. He had chosen to go back to school and, at the urging of his sister, he had decided to try to find his real father, whom Jim had not seen since he was 5 years old. By the time Jim was 17, he was able to track down his biological father and live with him for a short period prior to his father’s death about a year later. Jim did not have childhood memories of his dad and only remembered that he had worked for Chrysler Corporation for 37 years.

For the next 20 years, Jim had lived in the Detroit area and shared an apartment with friends or an occasional girlfriend. He described that time as simply “living life” and trying to make a living by working at a variety of jobs. He had worked for Big Boy or Denny’s restaurants as a dishwasher or short order cook and did odd jobs to earn money to pay his rent and buy food. As long as he

call from his sister, who asked that he come to California to assist her in caring for some horses that she had bought along with a small ranch with the proceeds from her lottery winnings. Jim had said he was not looking for a handout, but he agreed to travel to California to live with his sister, her husband, and his niece and nephews.

Jim had been scared one day while tending to the horses. A horse he was leading lunged at him, startled by a dump truck delivering dirt to fill holes in the corral. Jim decided that he needed to learn more about how to take care of horses. With the encouragement of his sister and her family—the first people in his life who really encouraged him to seek higher education—he had decided to enroll in an equine program at the local community college. Therefore, 23 years after finishing high school, Jim had stepped into a college classroom for the first time.

That first class, which was in colt breaking, had changed his life for the better. In contrast to when he had finished high school and thought that college was too expensive and he was not intelligent enough to succeed there, he had earned a grade of A in his colt breaking class. For the first time, he had not been bored in school; he excelled in the classroom and in his studies and served as Associated Student Body President. That initial class had been the first step of his journey into higher education. He soon learned that he had a passion for education, and that class led to

their life stories to determine if there was a connection between self-efficacy and their decisions to start or return to community college.

Theoretical Framework

Self-beliefs are a significant component of most theories of human motivation. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy defines self-efficacy as people's judgments of their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance. People are more likely to perform tasks that they believe they are capable of accomplishing and less likely to engage in tasks about which they feel less competent. Individuals who believe that they are competent become more motivated to perform difficult tasks. In addition, these individuals are more motivated to put forth greater effort and show more perseverance in overcoming obstacles that may have prevented them from achieving success in the past.

According to self-efficacy researchers (Bandura, 1986; Bores-Rangel, Church, Szendre & Reeves, 1990; DeWitz & Walsh, 2002; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992; Pajares, 2002; Schunk, 1991), self-efficacy is instrumental in determining the level of success in academic achievement of individuals

Schunk (2003) concluded that self-efficacy serves an important function in the level of motivation put forth in the learning process. Self-efficacy plays a significant role in students' academic performance in respect to learning or performing at designated levels. Self-efficacy is instrumental in determining the choice of tasks, the effort put forth, and the persistence or achievement of a student (Schunk, 1991).

Investigations on self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings have been well researched and documented. According to Pajares (1996), "The empirical connection between self-efficacy and academic performances and achievement has by now been reasonably secured" (p. 563). Many investigations have utilized a quantitative approach to measure the self-efficacy levels for domain-specific skills such as mathematics (Betz & Hackett, 1993). Pajares (1996) contended, however, that although these studies provided domain-specific measures of self-efficacy, they missed the mark in developing a more complete account of self-efficacy for a specific academic skill. Many other studies have attempted to measure a general sense of efficacy or confidence by using a quantitative omnibus test that decontextualized the self-efficacy into a generalized personality measure (Pajares, 1996). The debate continues among quantitative and qualitative researchers over which research design provides the best indicator of self-efficacy.

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return to or begin a community college career. The goal of my inquiry was to take a narrative voyage of discovery into the lives of these students without knowing at the outset what I would find. As in Jim's case, I wanted to know what motivated these individuals to become community college occupational reentry students.

When people have a low level of self-efficacy, they avoid tasks and activities that they believe they are unable to do. Conversely, activities that they have a high level of confidence in doing will increase their level of competence and increase their belief system. In addition, as their level of competence to complete specific tasks increases, so does their level of perseverance to accomplish those tasks. In Jim's case, his initial success (i.e., getting an A grade in his first college class) motivated him to take additional classes and work hard to earn high grades. People who judge themselves as efficacious in given situations will become more resilient to tougher obstacles and will become more confident in their ability to overcome these hindrances to their success.

Bandura (1977) concluded that self-efficacy comes from four sources: (a) authentic mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) social persuasion, and (d) physiological indexes. Mastery experiences have the greatest effect on self-efficacy. People who engage in tasks and successfully master them show an increase in their level of self-efficacy. Unfortunately, those individuals who are unsuccessful often interpret such results as failure and consequently lower their belief in their ability to master those tasks in the future. Others, who

People also form their self-efficacy beliefs through vicarious experiences, but Jim moved so many times that he did not have a chance to adopt any meaningful role models in his life. When learners observe role models performing various tasks, the learners can model their behavior on the role models and improve their level of self-efficacy. Although modeling is less influential than mastery of experiences in changing self-efficacy, modeling can improve one's belief system—especially if the individual does not have prior experience in performing the task (Pajares, 2002).

There were few individuals in Jim's life who offered him much encouragement through social persuasion. Living in many different states and attending many different schools prevented Jim from developing any long-term relationships with friends, who might have influenced his belief system through positive persuasion and encouraged or empowered him to seek higher education at an earlier age. Jim's parents simply instructed him to go to school or go to work, leaving him with limited choices. For many years after he finished high school, Jim chose to go to work rather than attend school. Jim was bored in school; he was uninspired by schoolwork and the classroom environment. Spending less than 1 or 2 years in each school, he felt little peer pressure to get good grades. With the exception of a few scuffles, he was able to move from school to school and adapt very quickly to new teachers and classmates. Jim's level of self-efficacy was unaffected simply because he did not feel any anxiety or stress to perform in the classroom. The influence that self-efficacy might have played in Jim's eventual decision to pursue a college degree is unknown.

Statement of the Research Problem

The research problem for my narrative inquiry involved the role of self-efficacy in the decisions of former community college agriculture students to become community college reentry students. A person's current belief system about his or her academic ability is dependent upon the culmination of life experiences up to a certain point in that person's life. My inquiry focused on documenting and interpreting my participants' life stories in order to determine what, if any, role self-efficacy may have had in their academic achievement.

A narrative inquiry utilizing the "four directions of inquiry: inward and outward, backward and forward" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) allowed me to determine the true belief systems of my participants toward their academic achievement. Inward inquiry determined the feelings, hopes, and aspirations of the participants, while outward inquiry delved into the external environment that influenced their decisions to pursue an occupational education at a community college. The key to backward and forward inquiry was to use a temporal approach to look into their past experiences, their present situations, and their future aspirations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Research Context

I wanted to know about (a) their early childhood experiences; (b) their relationships with parents, siblings, relatives, or friends; and (c) their perceptions of their family's socioeconomic status. In addition, I asked questions about the many different aspects of the participants' educational experiences. Did they have any strong role models in their family? Did their peers have a major influence on them? What were their earliest recollections of their educational experiences? Did they have any strong role models in school? Did they have teachers who made a difference in their lives? Was school a good experience for them? What was their level of self-efficacy toward their academic achievement in school? Did they ever feel a change in their belief system toward their education? If so, when did that occur? What event(s) happened in their lives that changed their belief systems?

These questions guided the narrative inquiry process in determining the participants' levels of self-efficacy. After I conducted the interviews, transcribed them, and analyzed the data, I was able to determine their levels of self-efficacy.

Potential Limitations

Narrative inquiry has its foundations in storytelling. Narratives are stories, and narrative analysis "takes as its object of investigation the story itself" (Riessman, 1993, p.

their levels of self-efficacy regardless of whether or not self-efficacy played a role in their decisions to seek higher education at a community college.

Memories are emotionally significant. According to Lieblich et al. (1998), “memories are personal creations; they consist of choices, distortions, and inventions of past events in a manner that befits the individual’s current goals, interests, or moods” (p. 79). Self-efficacy begins in early childhood, and the foundation of one’s belief system is influenced by the interplay of socioeconomic, familial, educational, and peer influences. Another challenge and potential limitation of this study was whether the participants were willing to share their earliest childhood memories and innermost thoughts in response to my questions about their life stories.

In addition to the limitations of the narrative research design, I limited my study through the selection of participants. I focused on individuals who were former community college agriculture students who started or returned to a community college sometime after they had completed their secondary education. I relied on my gatekeepers to select potential participants, and I did not limit the study population based on gender, age, or ethnicity.

Significance of the Study

experiences enabled me to determine whether self-efficacy may have influenced the individual's decision to start or return to community college.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

Researchers of self-efficacy theory have used both quantitative and qualitative research designs. To state a knowledge claim, those choosing to use a quantitative approach—often called the scientific method or the positivist or postpositivist research design—utilize a reductionistic approach that reduces ideas into small, discrete sets of ideas that can be tested with variables, hypotheses, and research questions (Creswell, 2003). Postpositivist researchers have investigated the theories of self-efficacy through a variety of instruments that usually measure specific task-oriented activities that relate to such phenomena as mathematics, writing, reading, or career choices (Pajares, 1996). On the other hand, constructivist researchers use a different research design to state a knowledge claim.

“The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3). The goal of social constructivism research is to rely heavily on the participants' views of the world in which they live. The constructivist focuses on the interaction among individuals and the processes that take place between them. Constructivists develop subjective meanings of the experiences they

approach was the most appropriate research design framework for what I wanted to accomplish in my research. The use of a social constructivist approach for my study allowed me to determine what role, if any, self-efficacy had played in relation to higher education academic achievement in my participants' lives.

Researcher's Perspective

I have been an educator for 36 years. During that time, I have taught on the secondary level for 13 years and at the community college level for 18 years, and I have been an administrator for the past 5 years. During my 31 years of classroom teaching, I had the opportunity to influence many students' lives both in and out of the classroom. My relationships with these students extended far beyond the classroom and into their families, and I had the opportunity to make lifetime friends. As an occupational agriculture instructor, I was able to make home visits and interact with parents, siblings, and relatives of the students I instructed at both the secondary and community college level.

Through these relationships, I was able to see many changes in people that resulted from changes in their belief systems. At both the secondary and community college level, I was able to observe a person's level of self-efficacy change through Bandura's (1977) sources of self-efficacy. I have seen how mastery of experience involved in a task as simple as welding two pieces of

face beamed with pride. Instantly, his level of self-efficacy soared because he had mastered a skill and become a role model to other students in the class. The goal of my research was to learn more about my study participants who for some reason, at some point in their lives, experienced changes in their level of self-efficacy and became excited about starting on their pathway toward higher education.

As a classroom teacher, I was able to observe these changes in self-efficacy as students mastered new skills; however, I did not know why these students had such low levels of self-efficacy initially. If I had had the opportunity to research their life stories, I might have been able to identify what contributed to their levels of self-efficacy.

As an administrator, I have had the opportunity to work with many former community college agriculture students who started or returned to community college several years after completing their secondary education. These people may still have been involved in a community college career technical program as advisory committee members, industry supporters, or even as adjunct faculty members. I researched their life stories to learn more about their paths to higher education. I specifically wanted to learn whether self-efficacy had a role in their decisions to start or return to community college.

My perspective as a researcher also included a characteristic that I share with my potential study participants. I am

Marine Corps Reserve certainly changed my motivation to achieve academic success in higher education. It was not until I returned from active duty in the Marine Corps that I began to dedicate myself to my higher education, subsequently completing associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees.

In conducting this research study, I guarded against the possibility of my personal life story influencing my interpretation of my participants' descriptions of their life stories. As I listened to them and developed my narratives, I was conscious of my own individual biases and subjectivities. This approach ensured that I produced a complete and accurate accounting of my participants' life stories.

