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Creating My Own Story: Catholic Women's College Students Narrating their Lives

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Given the complex and gendered messages college women receive about their future professional and personal lives, a woman's college experiences play an important role in helping her make difficult life choices. In this article, we present a narrative analysis of the envisioned futures of students at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States. Participants drew on a number of narrative themes when creating their rhetorical future lives, including sequencing or juggling multiple priorities, opting out of future work or family roles, using overarching principles to make decisions about future roles, and maintaining resistance to planning. Our findings suggest that holistic understandings of students' experiences must consider the complex ways in which identities, such as gender, are positioned within social narratives.

Students change in multifaceted ways during college, acquiring cognitive and intellectual skills as well as undergoing value, attitudinal, moral, and psychosocial changes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While many different developmental models of student change in college have been posited, scholars agree that college students develop in many ways while in college. In this article, we focus on women's holistic development in college contexts that seek to empower women for leadership and service in the world and consider how one facet of identity, gender, is positioned within larger social narratives that delineate the roles a person sees as possible after attaining a baccalaureate degree.

Women receive complex and contradictory messages about their roles in society from many sources. They are to be caretakers, housekeepers, paid workers, and time managers, balancing many roles and responsibilities in their lives. While both men and women face challenges in fulfilling multiple roles, gender inequities make expectations about women's roles particularly difficult to meet (Williams, 2000). It is within this gendered context that Catholic women's colleges educate women. In a recent issue of an alumnae magazine, MaryAnn Baenninger, the president of College of Saint Benedict, a regional Catholic women's college in the United States, articulated her institution's intentions for helping its students negotiate multiple expectations for their futures:

> The job of Saint Ben's is to prepare our women to make life choices that are appropriate for them. They will always be confronted with societal norms, expectations of their gender, family pressures, pop culture stereotypes, their value systems, and their personal vision of self. Our task is to provide the tools for our graduates, so they are selecting the life they want and not settling for what they are told they should have. (Baenninger, 2009, p. 4-5)

College of Saint Benedict takes seriously its role in preparing women to make life choices in a society with complex and often contradictory messages about women's roles.

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It is unclear, however, how Catholic women's colleges like College of Saint Benedict fulfill that role and how they facilitate or impede graduates' abilities to identify, understand, and resist gendered messages that they encounter in both professional and personal spheres.

We studied students at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States to understand how they constructed multiple stories about their intended life paths following college. In this article, we foreground their stories to illustrate how they envisioned the multiple roles they would play in the future and how they narrated their future priorities and decisions. We conclude with the implications of this study for Catholic women's colleges and other institutions of higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW: WOMEN'S COLLEGES IN A GENDERED WORLD

Myriad gender inequities remain in contemporary American society, and colleges are situated within that gendered context. Women perform the bulk of childcare and housekeeping tasks, even if they work outside the home (Damaske & Gerson, 2008; Gupta, 1999; Hochschild, 1989, 1997). After reviewing multiple studies on the distribution of family work, Williams (2000) concluded that American women in heterosexual partnerships do 80% of the childcare and two thirds of the housework. Men, on the other hand, are expected to be part of the paid workforce and minimize their involvement in childcare and housekeeping tasks. These differences in home responsibilities affect men's and women's participation in the paid workforce.

Ample evidence suggests that women and men, as groups, have different experiences in the workplace. The median income for full-time women workers in the US was only 77% men's median income in 2008 (Catalyst, 2010). Nearly one quarter of women report having experienced sexual harassment at work, and 58% of women report having experienced potentially harassing behaviors (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003). Women face gender bias and discrimination in hiring and promotions proceedings (Davison & Burke, 2000). The glass ceiling metaphor is a popular way to describe the barriers that women face when they attempt to access high-level employment opportunities—barriers including sexual harassment, tokenism, and gender stereotyping (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009).

Gender inequities are also present in higher education. While women constitute a majority of college students (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2009), researchers have described coeducational colleges as "chilly" climates for women (Hall & Sandler, 1984; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Sax, 2008) and found significant bias against women in classrooms at all levels of education (Allen, Bracken, & Dean, 2008; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Women continue to be underrepresented in undergraduate degree programs such as physical science, computer science, engineering, and mathematics (NSF, 2009), despite their overrepresentation in other fields, such as education and the humanities. Additionally, participation in doctoral programs remains gendered (Hoffer, Hess, Welch, & Williams, 2007).

Modern women's colleges try to ensure that women are empowered to make difficult life choices within a gendered world. According to Susan Lennon (2005), president of the Women's College Coalition (http://www.womenscolleges. org), the mission of women's colleges is simply "the education and advancement of women." This imperative requires that women's colleges continually consider how to enact contemporary interpretations of that mission.

Women's colleges in the United States were originally founded to create access to higher education for women who were previously excluded from the system (Langdon, 2001). Many of these institutions were founded by social activists working to link the education of women to the cause of women's full citizenship (Horowitz, 1984; Miller-Solomon, 1985; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985). Specifically, Catholic women's colleges were founded as a kind of resistance to patriarchal social and Church structures, including Catholic colleges and universities which resisted the education of women (Schier & Russett, 2002). As formerly all-male institutions began admitting women, many women's colleges closed or became coeducational. The 47 remaining women's colleges in the United States emphasize missions that are committed to providing equitable educational opportunities to women by keeping women at the center of the educational environment (Langdon, 2001).

Most women's colleges in the United States today are private, 4-year institutions. Many are either independent nonprofit institutions or affiliated with the Catholic Church, and they tend to have smaller enrollments than most institutions of higher education (Harwarth, Maline, & DeBra, 1997). Still, women's colleges enrolled over 90,000 students in Fall 2005 and granted nearly 19,000 associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees to females in 2005–2006 (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2007). Internationally, women's colleges and universities are increasing in number and in share of college enrollments (Renn, 2009). Women's colleges are being developed in places where social, political, and religious resistance to women's higher education and coeducation remains.

Research confirms that United States women's colleges have a history of developing women with highly successful educational and professional paths, as women's college graduates are more likely than female graduates from coeducational institutions to choose traditionally male-dominated areas of study, earn doctorates, and be listed in *Who's Who of American Women* (Harwarth et al., 1997; Tidball, Smith, Tidball, & Wolf-Wendel, 1999). However, there are few recent studies documenting the influence of women's colleges on the future success and learning outcomes of their students. Further, few studies have focused on women's college students' life paths beyond their educations and occupations.

Extant women's college literature generally amasses diverse colleges with various missions into a single category. Few studies consider the particular environments of Catholic women's colleges or the ways that missions emphasizing both gender and religious identities create complex educational experiences for women. Because the Catholic affiliation of these colleges does not imply a unified religious commitment among students, we do not want to overemphasize the religious aspects of these institutions; however, we do believe that they represent unique environments for teaching and learning. In the research presented in this article, we consider how students at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States, which we call Aurora College and Regina College, craft multiple identities and multiple narratives about their future life paths within the contexts that Aurora and Regina create.

METHODS: WEAVING TOGETHER STORY THREADS

In order to learn more about how women's college students think about their identities and future lives, we scheduled interviews in Spring 2008 with 26 seniors at Aurora and Regina. Both Aurora College and Regina College are committed to women's liberal arts education in the Catholic tradition, and

the mission statements of both colleges stress the importance of leadership and service. Each college retains ties with its founding religious community, and members of these religious communities continue to serve as administrators, staff members, and faculty members at both institutions; however, these roles are being increasingly filled by lay people. While the missions of these two Catholic women's colleges are similar in many ways, the institutions differ in important respects. Aurora College is located in a rural community. It enrolls over 2,000 women in traditional full-time baccalaureate day programs, and it maintains an academic partnership with a nearby men's university that allows students to register for classes on either campus. Regina College serves more than 5,200 students on two campuses in a large metropolitan area. About 2,000 of those students are enrolled in a traditional women-only day program to earn bachelor's degrees. Other students include weekend students in various bachelor's degree programs, students seeking professional certificates or degrees at the associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, and women and men enrolled in continuing education. Regina College has an agreement with several nearby private coeducational colleges that allows for cross-registration among colleges; however, undergraduate day classes at Regina College remain predominantly female.

In seeking participants, we worked with institutional staff members to request involvement of students who had indicated upon entry that they intended to pursue graduate education of some sort. While all women engage with decisions related to work and life choices, we wanted to talk with people who were highly motivated professionally, as we thought that they may think more deliberately about how their professional goals would interface with their potential future roles as

family members and community members. Participants generally had characteristics consistent with the norms at the two institutions. While we had hoped for greater diversity in multiple ways, all except one of those who agreed to participate identified as White, all were of traditional college age, and most identified as coming from a family in the socioeconomic middle class. In our conversations with students, we learned that just over half of the participants identified as Catholic, though their religious identification often was not an explicit part of their stories. Most participants grew up in the Midwestern United States. Their majors varied substantially. We recognize that our participants' stories do not represent all the ways in which women construct their narratives; nevertheless, our participants did envision their futures in complex and varied ways.

We conducted in-person, one-on-one interviews lasting 1 to 2 hours with all 26 participants. In the interviews, we were primarily interested in understanding how students constructed their identities and articulated their plans for the future. We asked about their definitions of success, their educational and career aspirations, their expectations for their futures, and how their institution's focus on women and Catholic affiliation affected their visions for the future. As a way to better understand some of the stories that we were hearing, we convened two focus groups of 12 participants (5 at one institution, and 7 at the other) to ask students to respond to the themes that were emerging in our analysis. We recorded and transcribed all interviews and focus groups so that we could review them iteratively as we developed themes and identified unique stories among the participants.

Our analysis centered on both the "grand narratives" (Lyotard, 1984) that students drew on to make sense of their lives and also the "small stories" that represent the telling of

self and identity (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Bruner (1991) and Polkinghorne (1995) argue that understanding and telling stories constitute a way of knowing the world, and narratives can serve as the "vehicles for rendering ourselves intelligible" to others (Gergen, 1994, p. 186). Research in this tradition examines the role that cultural, institutional, organizational, and personal social scripts play in guiding how life stories and narrative identities are composed, understood, produced, and maintained (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Loseke, 2007). In order to represent how students make sense of cultural scripts, we have chosen to weave together threads of selected transcripts in story form so as to highlight the existence of stories in the data (Mishler, 1986) and present the students as narrators of their own lives (LeCompte, 1993). In order to facilitate a dialog between multiple voices, we used narrative smoothing, a process that weaves quotes at length into a plot structure (Polkinghorne, 1995). These choices of translation were made so that students' voices and stories could be seen in a more contextualized and holistic way. Such a presentation also requires that readers take an active role in composing meaning from the multiple, incomplete pieces that constitute a "whole" story (Barone, 2001, 2007; Ely, 2007).

In our conversations, students creatively constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed rhetorical lives. In the next section we present stories that 6 participants constructed about their life paths. We chose this method to portray and subsequently analyze the multiple meanings we can take from students' diverse ways of thinking about their lives. While we cannot know for certain the extent to which participants meant what they said, believed what they said, or are likely to experience their imagined future lives, there is much to be learned from the narratives that students created within the space of the interviews.

FINDINGS: (RE)TELLING STORIES OF FUTURE LIVES

Many of the participants in this study asserted that their future success involves finding a personal balance among their various future goals (Enke & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). All of them expressed multiple career, educational, and personal goals that they intended to prioritize in the future. In many cases, they constructed their own narratives after considering others whose lives they wished to emulate or disassociate from. They told stories about their possible narratives by learning from their observations of significant others in their lives and of their possibilities within their social contexts. Students described a range of plans to balance their various goals. Some women planned to balance work and family together with the help of supportive partners, while others planned to concentrate on either career or family at particular times in their lives. Some participants planned to opt out of traditional family roles in order to prioritize work, while others planned to opt out of previously planned work in order to prioritize family. Other participants developed overarching principles to guide their decision-making processes, and still others were completely resistant to planning. Each of these narratives, and their associated complexities, is discussed briefly below. The narratives are not exclusive, and some participants drew on multiple narratives at different times throughout their interview. For each narrative theme, we present a summary of the narrative and its complications, and a story from a participant (re)telling that narrative.

Rachel—Sequence is Essential: An Excellent Planner Can Balance Multiple Roles

Rachel and 2 other participants expressed the importance of good planning to successfully negotiating multiple roles. For these students,

the idea of creating a sequence and a "life plan" helped them explain how they would manage the ambiguity of their multiple roles. These women had developed a planned sequence for their lives: first, they would concentrate on their job; second, they would concentrate on family by becoming full-time or part-time stay-at-home mothers; finally, they would return to the workforce and attain career success. They did not talk about the difficulties they may face giving up their jobs in order to stay home, the challenges of reentering the workforce after raising their children, and the detrimental effects that stopping out of the workforce could have on their planned career trajectory.

Rachel is a White woman studying physical therapy at Regina College. Religion is not a big influence in her life. Rachel currently lives at home with her parents and brother, and she is financially supported by her family. While it was always expected that Rachel would go to college after high school, her mother did not attend college, and her dad went to night school after Rachel's parents were married. In her narrative, Rachel was especially articulate about the ways that she will sequence her multiple goals in the future.

> I'm very goal-oriented and planful in all aspects of my life. I'm currently in a program where I'll earn my undergraduate degree in exercise and sports science and my doctorate in physical therapy degree in 6 years. Eventually, I want to work in acute care in a hospital. I'm also engaged to be married. I want a husband, children, and a profession, and I generally think in terms of ordering these roles sequentially. I'm focusing on my education right now and preparing to get married. I plan to have a job and children when I'm done with school. I plan to take a break from work when I have an infant, but I'd like to go back to work eventually. My fiancé works overnights right now so he might be able to stay home with the kids.

Rachel feels empowered to plan for the future and to tackle its complexities. In her story, sequence is essential to helping her balance the multiple roles she wants in the future. Nearly all of the participants talked about actively planning for the future, rather than letting the future "happen" to them. Determining a sequence for multiple goals was one way of planning actively for the future. In this way, many of the student narratives, including Rachel's, emphasize a focus on individualized agency (or the *self-made self*) in which participants see themselves as directly responsible for, and in control of, their own life paths (Francis & Skelton, 2008). Such a perspective deemphasizes the role that social structures and power imbalances have in producing what choices the self sees as possible. This perspective also constructs selves that believe they are personally responsible if their futures do not turn out as planned. Some women may not recognize or acknowledge gendered external and institutional structures that continue to constrain women's abilities to aspire to particular futures (Williams, 2000).

Maria—Work and Family are Both Important Priorities, and Equality in My Relationships Can Make Both Possible Simultaneously

Maria and 8 other participants explained that work and family were both important priorities for their future; however, rather than seeing these roles as sequential, they expected to juggle their work and family responsibilities at the same time. Past research indicates that work and family roles are not necessarily in competition and that women's lives can be enhanced by multiple roles (Williams, 2000). For example, studies have shown the quality of role experiences to be more important to women's health and well-being than the number of roles or the time spent in each role (Barnett, 2005, 2008). Other researchers

suggest that the complex negotiation of work and family roles is better understood as a public policy problem, rather than a private issue for individual women to confront (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003).

Maria is double majoring in English and secondary education at Regina College. Her father is German Bohemian and her mother is Chicana; Maria identifies as Chicana because it embodies a movement and a people who are trying to come together and create social change, and it takes into consideration her heritage and social standing in the United States. Maria was raised Catholic, but she now considers herself spiritual but not religious. Maria has worked since she was 15, and she was raised to put her family's needs before all other responsibilities. Maria expressly describes the expectations she has for her future partner in accommodating her goals to be a professor and have a family.

> After graduation, I want to teach or travel for a year before entering a PhD program in Chicano Studies. I love teaching and I would like to be a professor. My goal is to publish a book one day. I also want to have a family in the future. I don't intend to deviate from my professional and educational goals in order to raise my family and have a relationship with a partner; I expect my husband to be understanding of my goals and passions and to be willing to work around my plans. I think that as long as I'm with a partner who is understanding and is able to work around what I want to do, and I can work around what he wants to do, then it will work. At least that is what I am banking on. I think that women can "have it all" if they set goals and work hard. Women should not allow society to limit what they can do or be, and they should not allow themselves to be sidetracked from their goals. I know lots of women who are able to balance work and family roles. One of my mentors

on campus is able to balance work and family specifically, because she has a supportive partner.

In her narrative, Maria is envisioning that a supportive male partner will make her multiple future roles possible simultaneously; at the time of the interview, Maria had not yet found a partner that met her expectations. Many of the students in our research had clear expectations for future partners and family to support their aspirations and future role negotiation. Few of the participants expected to be without male partners in the future. Many interview participants hoped for equality and communication in their relationships, and support from their partners that exceeded the models of their parents, campus role models, and friends. Many students staked their future goals on finding a male partner who would uncompromisingly support their personal and professional goals and plans for success. Yet, research shows that men and women have different ideas about family roles and compromise (Doucet, 2004; Hochschild, 1989, 1997), and many of these young women may find themselves unable to satisfactorily resolve issues of balance in their households. Multiple studies show that women in heterosexual partnerships continue to perform most of the housework, whether or not they work outside the home (Damaske & Gerson, 2008; Gupta, 1999; Hochschild, 1989, 1997). The heterosexual work–family balance that many participants desired may be difficult to achieve, even with a supportive male partner.

Gwendolyn—In Order to Achieve My Career Goals, I Will Opt Out of Traditional Family Roles

Five participants, including Gwendolyn, noted that their career goals were most important to them and that they would opt out of traditional

family roles associated with women in order to pursue their careers. For these women, a traditional family with a male partner and child was simply not a priority. These women did not talk about forgoing a traditional, heterosexual family as a sacrifice or a forced decision. Instead, they seemed to acknowledge that they had agency to choose the options most important to them. These decisions, however, were not necessarily supported by their family and friends. Indeed, research shows that women may face social criticism about their life choices, whether or not they hold a paid job (Damaske & Gerson, 2008).

Gwendolyn is a White agnostic studying political science and sociology at Aurora College. Gwendolyn's father was a high school history teacher and coach, and she describes herself as "raised with more masculine traits." Her mother could not work outside the home, do housework, or actively care for children because of a disability, so in Gwendolyn's childhood, parenting and housekeeping roles generally were not her mother's responsibility. In her narrative, Gwendolyn prioritizes her educational and career goals over a role within a traditional family structure.

> Because I have student loans, I'm hoping to find any paying job for after graduation, though I'd really like to teach English in Japan. I plan to earn a doctorate by beginning graduate school in the next 5 years. In 10 years, I'd like to be in a government position abroad, have my master's degree, and have my student loans paid off. In 50 years, I would like people to think of me as a hard worker and as an intellectual who knew my subject matter. Also, I want to have made a difference, likely through volunteering. I know my parents would like me to get married, but I definitely prioritize professional success. I know I'll need to move around a lot in my future career, and I don't think a partner will fit into that plan. I

value a family, but not a traditional one. I want to adopt a child, mostly because I was adopted, and I know there are many children who need adoptive parents. I don't necessarily expect to find a partner to do this with, though, and I expect my child to take my last name. My future family will probably include an adopted child and caring for my parents as well. I'll see myself as being successful if I have a good career, am able to pay the bills, and have a good relationship with my family. I want to be a leader—not just "low-level"—in a government position. I don't want to limit my career because I am a woman.

Gwendolyn's narrative reflects the importance of her educational and career goals, and hints at the difficulty her parents may have in understanding her future life choices. She says that she does not want to limit her career because she is a woman, but her story implies that she does not want to limit her career by taking on the traditional roles of wife and mother.

Williams (2000) has posited that domesticity, as a gendered system entrenched in American society, entitles employers to demand workers with immunity from family work, charges men as ideal workers, and frames women as caregivers. Because caregivers cannot perform as ideal workers, women can only choose to be ideal workers without the privileges that men workers enjoy. Women who value their career goals may choose to opt out of traditional family roles only because they do not see them as compatible with their other goals. According to Williams, the conflict between work and family occurs, not because of people's choices or because of biological destiny, but because of our system for organizing work under the system of domesticity. This system constrains the life choices of both men and women and specifically discriminates against women.

While many participants seemed cognizant of the ways that domesticity discriminates against women, they did not seem aware of the ways that domesticity constrains their life choices. Gwendolyn, however, articulated that her professional choices for the future would limit her personal roles, and she spoke openly about the tradeoffs she would make.

Rebecca—In Order to Achieve My Family Goals, I Will Opt Out of My Previously Planned Work

Rebecca and 3 other participants noted that their family goals, as defined by bearing, raising, and caring for children, were most important to them. As such, they planned to opt out of careers in which they had previously been interested to focus on raising children. Two women expressed that raising children was more important to them individually than their work goals. Two others implied that there was some aspect of biological determinism involved or that women were "hardwired" and therefore predestined to be concerned about having a partner and children. They acknowledged that some professional careers were more compatible with family responsibilities than others.

Rebecca specifically changed her professional goals in order to accommodate her personal goals, changing her aspiration to be a doctor into a quest to be a nurse. Because her family is not able to help with college expenses, Rebecca works two off-campus jobs and donates plasma to pay for school. When Rebecca was growing up, her mom worked a night shift 3 days a week and then was home with Rebecca and her brother. Her dad worked days as a project manager and then coached sports. Generally, Rebecca's mom did the cleaning, and her dad did things outdoors, and they both cooked. Rebecca says she wants to mirror her family's life in her own: living in the suburbs, raising two children, finishing school prior to having children, and working in a hospital or clinic with a flexible schedule. A White Catholic, she is majoring in biology and Spanish at Aurora College.

> After a year off of school, I intend to pursue my RN, and then complete a dual degree with a master's in epidemiology and nursing. In 10 years, I hope to be working as a nurse and have a child or two and probably have completed my dual master's degree. I'm getting married 2 weeks after graduation. I pretty much changed my professional goals in order to accommodate my personal goal of having a family. For nearly my whole life I wanted to be a doctor, but then I met several doctors who told me that they weren't able to see their families on a regular basis. I decided that wasn't the life I wanted to lead. My fiancé and I talked about the kind of life we wanted, and we decided we both wanted to be very involved parents. My goal to be a doctor wasn't really compatible with that, so I changed my career plan. My father has really high expectations for me—maybe because I'm the only girl in my family or because I am the youngest—and he's asked me when I'm going to give up the "nursing crap." I've stuck with my resolve to work in the health care field, but not to be a doctor. I really want to have a family and a career. My fiancé and I want to have two kids, just like our families growing up.

Rebecca did not include in her story an awareness of the financial and status differences that are implicated by her decision to become a nurse rather than a doctor. She also does not discuss the career choices that her fiancé has made in order to be able to be an involved parent.

As noted above, Williams (2000) has posited that domesticity frames women as caregivers who cannot perform as ideal workers. Because caregiving is not compatible with the ideal worker, women are often

forced to choose to opt out of the workforce at particular times in their lives, or to choose jobs that require less education, lower levels of skill, and fewer or more flexible hours, and that provide lower wages and fewer benefits. The beginning of the 21st century brought new attention to well-educated women who "opted out" of careers to start families or raise children (Moe & Shandy, 2010). While only a minority of women are opting out of the workforce, their decisions are significant because they "expose flaws in how our society accommodates women who seek to combine paid work and raising children, with time as a finite resource" (p. 4). In general, participants in our study did not articulate the ways that cultural expectations about parenthood (and motherhood), inflexible work options, and limited childcare options contributed to their choice to opt out of previously planned work.

Mal—Overarching Principles Will Guide My Future Decisions about Work and Family

Seven participants, including Mal, described overarching principles that would guide all choices in their lives, including future decisions about work and family. These overarching principles varied from person to person: for example, two students desired to maintain their Christian values in all of their decisions; another was committed to working for social justice. Mal was dedicated to being a caretaker by serving people with disabilities. In general, participants expressing overarching ethical commitments tended not to be as concrete about their futures as other students we interviewed. They plan to keep their commitments in mind and to make other decisions about the futures as the need arises.

Throughout her narrative, Mal indicated a commitment to serving people with disabilities. Mal is studying biology at Aurora College. She is agnostic. She described herself as a feminist,

indicating that women's rights are very important to her, and expressed that she wants to have a more equal division of responsibilities in the home than her parents had. Mal described her family as lower middle class; her mother works as a realtor and her father works as a pipe fitter, and her parents fulfilled gendered roles when it came to parenting and housework. Her father attended a trade school and her mother did not attend college.

> I hope to pursue graduate school in occupational therapy right after graduation. If I'm not accepted to school, I guess I'll search for a job. The summer before I started college, I had a really powerful volunteer experience where I helped children with disabilities learn to swim. I also worked at a camp for people with disabilities. I have a commitment to serving people with disabilities, and I really want to weave that throughout my life. I want to be a caretaker—through both family and work responsibilities—throughout my life. In 10 years I expect to have young children and to have worked out a plan where I am at home with my kids about 2 days a week and my husband would be home a few days a week. I want to continue working part-time while my children are young, but I recognize that this may cause me to progress more slowly in my career. Eventually, I want to get my doctorate as well, because I may end up running a clinic or group home. I plan to be involved in leadership in some way, and I may have already started a swim program for people with disabilities. In 50 years, I want to be noted as someone who was a good person who helped people whenever I could and who reproduced children who were doing something good.

Mal's commitment to serving as a caregiver for people with disabilities ran throughout all of her interview responses and is evident throughout her narrative. All of her goals are seen in relation to that commitment.

In a recent study on college students, Ropers-Huilman (2010) found that students were motivated to action in a variety of spheres largely by a passion for a cause. Mal's narrative of her future life fits this profile in that she wants to serve people with disabilities, and intends to craft her life around that desire. Scholars have pointed out the ways in which this intention to provide care for others is gendered. In a study of women's moral development, Gilligan (1982) found that women were likely to make more decisions using an ethic of care, whereas men were more likely to use an ethic of justice. Similarly, Noddings (1984) identified caring as a primarily feminine capacity. Women are situated differently than men to provide care to others, and expectations about who will provide care are often gendered (Hamington, 2010). It is within this gendered context that Mal plans to provide care for those with disabilities.

Meredith—I am Resistant to Planning

Meredith and another participant expressed that they were consciously resistant to planning for the future. They strove to live in the moment and not plan ahead. They resisted permanence and ongoing connections, because they want to dabble in multiple experiences all over the world. Both women described ways they lived in opposition to their parents' wishes, yet they also seemed somewhat reliant on their parents for financial support and in their decisions where to attend college and what majors to pursue.

As an example of this theme, we share Meredith's narrative below. Meredith is a nursing major at Regina College. She is white, and she grew up in an isolated area in the Midwestern United States. While nearly everyone in that area is conservative Christian, Meredith's family is very liberal and she described her parents as pseudo-hippies.

Her parents taught her to value feminism and social justice activism, but she now identifies more with humanism than feminism. She was very excited to move to a city, and she says that her parents are no longer major influences in her life. Meredith is not Catholic and she has kept herself as distant from Catholic teaching at Regina as possible.

> I'm a nursing major, just like my mother. I don't know if I want to be a nurse, though, because I'm terrible with people. I hope that nursing may help me improve my social skills and become a more caring person. I took a semester off during college, so I'm graduating a year late. After graduation, I want to move to either Europe or South America and be a bum. I really want to be a bum, and a college degree isn't going to stop me. I plan to move back to the US and go to graduate school at some point, but I don't know what I'll study. I don't really plan for the future; I just do what feels right in the moment. I don't see a family in my future because family is too permanent—too much of a commitment. I might find another person with which to have intense, intimate connections, but I don't intend to have kids. I want to be remembered for acting in my own interest and not bending to others. I see something I admire in most people I meet, yet I'm also immensely disappointed by people, and I'm discontent in most of my relationships.

Meredith's narrative indicates that she does not view college as a time to plan or prepare for the future. Instead, Meredith resists planning for the future and strives to live in the moment. This theme is particularly striking given other participants' preoccupations with planning for the future. The complexities of this narrative are also evident, given Meredith's admitted discontent with her chosen major and in her relationships.

Evidence suggests that education increases

future orientation, or "a willingness to delay present gratification for some future good" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 555). Indeed, enrolling in higher education can be thought of as a future-oriented task because it involves giving up time and money now to improve later life. Future orientation is generally considered an essential developmental mechanism by psychologists and is a precursor to identity development and the capacity for intimacy (Seginer, 2009). We acknowledge, however, that a preoccupation with planning, avoiding uncertainty, and the future orientation adheres to a Western understanding of the world; cultures may also emphasize living in the present or learning from the past (Hofstede, 2001). Meredith's narrative is consistent with living in the present.

Reflections on the Students' Narratives

The students envisioned their futures in multiple ways, creating narratives which to some extent reflected the institutional culture in which they were educated. Most participants reported ambitious educational, career, and personal goals, and seemed relatively unconcerned about how those multiple goals would coexist or conflict in the future. They seemed confident that they would be able to prioritize and accept tradeoffs. They also seemed to believe that they would be in economic positions that would enable a wide range of professional and personal choices. All of the participants we spoke to seemed confident that their imagined futures would be achieved. In this sense, they were tapping into a sense of being empowered, perhaps as the missions of Regina and Aurora colleges would like them to be. Overall, participants in this study were less overtly concerned about future work and family balance than we expected, given literature that suggests that college-educated women wrestle with decisions associated with their professional and personal paths (Williams, 2000).

After we interviewed participants individually, we invited them to come to focus groups to talk about what we were learning about their individual and collective stories. Both at Aurora and Regina, we asked students if they could help us understand why we did not hear much of a struggle at this point in terms of thinking about how they would balance their multiple life roles in the future. Their responses helped us to understand their broader contexts. Some students were not certain enough about future relationships or careers to imagine a conflict between them. Others expressed self-confidence that they would be "fine," no matter what happened. Still others had seemingly come to conclusions about what sorts of compromises they expected to make. A few spoke of women in their lives who had "done it all," and the students trusted that they would be able to follow in their role models' footsteps. While students were aware that their role models had made compromises in their lives, they did not seem to be aware of specific challenges that their women role models faced. And many participants did not have specific plans for negotiating their future goals. Nonetheless, the students in this study seemed optimistic about their ability to achieve both their work and family goals.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF BOTH SYMBOLIZING AND FACILITATING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

What might it mean that Catholic women's colleges position themselves as contexts that strive to promote "the education and advancement of women" (Lennon, 2005) so that their graduates may be true to themselves (Baenninger, 2009, p. 5)? As institutions with a specific mission, US women's colleges hold an important position in the higher education landscape, one that both symbolizes and facilitates women's empowerment.

Students in this study, who had chosen to attend a women's college and had indicated upon enrollment that they intended to attend graduate school, drew on multiple narratives as they envisioned their futures. In our analysis of participants' stories, we found some narratives that (re)affirmed and conformed to fairly narrow understandings of the expected life path of White, college-educated, middle-class, heterosexual women, as well as narratives that stretched those narrow understandings.

Some student narratives suggest a willingness to embrace dominant cultural discourses about middle-class, heterosexual women's life paths: emphasizing planning, valuing marriage and child rearing, and balancing work and family roles. Some of the student narratives suggest that students see replicating their parents' lives as their primary possibility. Others understand their options as inevitabilities that have been predetermined by either biology or religious beliefs. Many students seemed comfortable according a great deal of power to the dominant narratives that regulate what a middle-class, heterosexual woman "should" or "could" be or do. These students appropriated the "could" and "should" narratives and retold them in ways that underscored a personal belief in empowered, personal choices. This choice rhetoric deemphasizes the role that social structures and power imbalances play in determining which choices are heard and understood by others.

Other student narratives push back at dominant cultural discourses: opting out of either work or family roles or resisting planning for the future. Some of the student narratives suggest that they felt empowered to choose their own futures, even if their choices were inconsistent with dominant culture discourses about women's life paths. Many of the participants felt that their future options were flexible and that they had the opportunity to choose from a range of possible futures.

The underlying perception is, perhaps, a belief that a woman only has two opposing choices: either conforming to externally determined narratives about what a woman's life path is or should be, or constructing some sort of alternative existence.

Most participants left unquestioned the possibility that their envisioned life paths have been constructed and informed by institutionalized social structures. Students spoke of looking to role models for examples of future lives, but they generally imagined rhetorical lives in which they were "self-made selves" (Francis & Skelton, 2008). Yet each of these narratives is institutionally and culturally informed, and we foresee gendered complexities that each of the students may face in enacting her rhetorical future. While students' understandings of their own life choices could be viewed as empowerment or agency, it is important to recognize—and help students recognize—the ways in which those choices are embedded in institutionalized social structures that inform understandings of what is appropriate, possible, or available to envision for the future. Students have learned about possibilities for future roles through family systems that themselves may have reinforced or complicated traditional notions of women's roles. Colleges must take those learnings into account as they engage with students and their families. Students must be given space to both honor and think critically about the examples of their families of origin and their role models.

We expected that participants would offer insight into how the college environment had helped them to think about the many complexities they would face in their futures, particularly because these students attended colleges with missions attentive to complex gender and religious identities. While study participants cited a number of college experiences (such as study abroad experiences,

interactions with faculty and peers, and class readings, assignments, and discussions) that contributed to their thoughts about and plans for work and family paths, in no case did students say that an institutionally sponsored program offered a model for their future or allowed them to explicitly envision their future life paths. Neither did participants say that institutionally sponsored programs helped them understand the complexities they may face in living their future roles; instead, students most often referenced their perceptions of their parents' lives or the lives of their role models and professors as they created their narratives. Most often, these examples did not prompt students to question dominant narratives about women's roles or to recognize the ways their own narratives for their futures are informed by institutionalized social structures.

Our research has implications for further research in the United States and internationally. How can colleges and universities help to foster campus climates in which multiple stories, voices, and understandings of gendered realities can flourish? Can colleges create environments in which it is possible for students to envision how transgressions can critique, upset, and interrupt dominant narratives (Davies, 2006)? Where and how do women (and girls) and men (and boys) learn gendered roles, and in what ways can they be disrupted and unlearned? Where do people find examples of possible stories for their selves and their futures, and how do women and men choose among those possible stories? Significantly, how can educational institutions prepare women and men for the gendered complexities they will face in living their future lives?

Colleges that are interested in the holistic development of their students can help students—both men and women—think about the multiple future roles they may fill, acknowledging the importance of both individual choices and social systems that will affect their lives. Women's colleges try to combat educational inequities and to holistically develop women who are empowered to make difficult life choices within a society filled with gendered messages. Yet, women at these and other postsecondary institutions envision their lives in very different ways and craft multiple narratives around work and family paths. Educators who are aware of these multiple narratives can consider how they intersect or interrupt the institutions' missions and society's grand narratives about gendered roles.

Findings from this study imply that the role of colleges is more complex than that of creating alternatives for women students' futures. Student affairs practitioners must be thoughtful about how their programming for students may (re)affirm messages that there are either traditional or nontraditional roles for women and men. These either/or messages fail to acknowledge the multiple roles that students may choose for their futures. Further, students must understand that larger social structures complicate their life choices. Understanding the embedded and complex gender expectations that operate within society and relate to personal life narratives is and will be a lifelong challenge for all students; therefore, student affairs practitioners might think creatively about how to support students in these important decision-making processes.

Student life programming frequently encourages students to fill leadership roles, emphasizing that both women and men can do or be anything they want to be; however, student affairs practitioners must also provide creative spaces where students can reflect critically on leadership within the context of their multiple life priorities. While it is empowering for students to learn that they can do or be anything, students must also understand that they may not be able to do or be everything all at one time.

Finally, student affairs practitioners must consider the norms of their offices and the tacit expectations conveyed in the services and information provided to students. For example, what do career services offices communicate about the expected future roles of women? How can orientation programs, residential life programs, and mental health services contribute to institutional discourses about gender and future roles? How does the segmenting of college services lead to the fracture of discussions about students' holistic lives and futures? What role do peers have in fostering students' thinking about the future, and how can colleges be involved in those discussions? By making explicit the multiple narratives that are constructed for and by college students, those who are committed to college students' development can help women and men make informed choices about their many possible futures.

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