5-2024

Master Narrative of College Access Belies Reality for Today's Students

Jonathan S. Lewis
uAspire, jonathanl@uaspire.org

René A. Hernandez
Virginia Tech, r.hernandez@vt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol9/iss1/6

This Guest Perspective is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of College Access by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
Master Narrative of College Access Belies Reality for Today's Students

Cover Page Footnote
The ideas discussed in this essay were developed through a research study funded by Stuart Foundation. This essay was written primarily in what is now known as Newton, Massachusetts, located on the ancestral lands of the Massachusett Tribe, the tribe of Indigenous peoples whose name was appropriated for the Massachusetts Bay Colony and later the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

This guest perspective is available in Journal of College Access: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol9/iss1/6
The college access field has become unmoored. Enrollment among traditional-aged students has been in retreat since 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), and just over one-third of Americans report feeling confident in higher education (Brenan, 2023). The pandemic appeared to amplify the desire among high school students for alternatives; nearly two-thirds of teens polled by ECMC Group (2023) indicated openness to pathways other than a bachelor’s degree. Major employers and at least 16 states have committed to “tear the paper ceiling” – that is, eliminate degree requirements as a prerequisite for employment, or to develop alternative methods of industry certification (Opportunity@Work, n.d.; Smalley, 2023). Viewed in aggregate, it seems clear that both interest in and pursuit of American higher education is waning – a jarring reality for those of us committed to college access and student success. How did we get here?

Past research on college-going behaviors indicates that students’ postsecondary pathways are driven by a variety of personal, familial, and social factors, only some of which students can control or influence (e.g., Iloh, 2019; Perna, 2006). It is not difficult to find structural and environmental stressors (e.g., affordability, family, work, politics) that would nudge high school graduates away from pursuing higher education, and simultaneously dissuade the 40 million adults with some college but no credential from returning (Gallup & Lumina, 2023; Causey et al., 2023). It may be surprising, therefore, that survey respondents also indicate that postsecondary education is more important than ever for career advancement (Gallup & Lumina, 2023). This finding is supported by federal data linking postsecondary credentials with higher pay (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023) and projections that by 2031 nearly three-quarters of all jobs will require some postsecondary education or training (Carnevale, Smith, Van Der Werf, & Quinn, 2023). Moreover, the pitched legal battles over race-conscious admissions (Bleemer, 2020; Carnevale, Mabel & Campbell, 2023), legacy admissions (June & O’Leary, 2023), and the pre-pandemic pay-for-admissions scandal (Jaschik, 2019) within elite colleges also suggest a high-stakes competition for access to certain institutions. It seems that where some perceive higher education as a risky endeavor, one likely to reinforce
Guest Perspective: Master Narrative

intergenerational wealth gaps (Haneman, 2022; Hicks et al., 2021; Houle & Addo, 2019), others see a vehicle for likely upward mobility (Kwakye & Oliver, 2022; Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021). What accounts for these inconsistencies? In addition to diverging perspectives across demographic groups, we believe that we are observing – and also participating in – the reenactment of longstanding master narratives about what postsecondary education means (Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016, 2021). Master narratives – a construct from the field of narrative psychology – are defined as “culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors” (McLean & Syed, 2016, p.323). To be considered a master narrative, a story ought to be easy to adopt and straightforward to apply, quietly reliable yet not heavy-handed.

We have been tracking the beliefs and behaviors about higher education among a small group of California high school graduates, relying on the master and alternative narrative framework to guide participant interviews as well as data analysis. We selected this conceptual framework because we were motivated to understand the ways in which personal narratives develop over time through their interaction with family, peers, social structures, and systems (Hammack, 2008). Implicit beliefs and attitudes toward postsecondary education and career options vary both across and within communities (Gallup & Lumina, 2023; Quadlin & Powell, 2022) and this variation manifests in the form of different challenges for individuals. For example, in some places, students and high school counselors report that prestigious universities are the most desirable option after high school; in others, the expectation is for a high school graduate to find a job or begin a career path that will enable the financial support of oneself and possibly the extended family. Others feel compelled to balance both work and school simultaneously. In these instances, the choice to follow or depart from the master narrative will have repercussions for their future pathways and career development.

Alternative narratives, as the name suggests, depart from, and sometimes serve to contradict, master narratives. McLean and Syed (2016) describe how the stories that each of us tells about ourselves – our personal narratives – develop and are internalized through a “negotiation between self and society” (p. 325). Master narratives are part of the narrative ecosystem to which we have access, and as we move through our lives we engage in a dynamic process of reification and reconstruction of master narratives, each in dialogue with the others.

Although the authors of this essay have some characteristics in common, we do not share ethnic or religious identities; we come from different generations; and we were born in different countries, speaking different languages. And yet, despite that variation we
Guest Perspective: Master Narrative

both internalized the master narrative that college was the best path for ourselves after high school, and that immediate enrollment at a prestigious, residential, 4-year college is the ideal for almost everyone. The master narrative of college going that we received also was linear – an uninterrupted path with few significant deviations. We absorbed a belief that most students would graduate on time and report a positive return on investment as their next life chapter begins, with a fulfilling, remunerative career, and a solid social network. This master narrative was built for each of us by different influencers (e.g., family members, the cultures of our high schools, the media) explicitly and implicitly, throughout childhood and adolescence. Through our research, we have heard that these messages are still being broadcast by parents and friends, more often by teachers and counselors, and certainly in popular media representations of postsecondary pathways.

Of course, contemporary high school graduates may struggle to reconcile their burgeoning pathways with these master narratives, in large part because the narratives exist as subtext. Indeed, part of the power of master narratives comes from their ubiquity and relative invisibility. Those of us with a vested interest in both our students’ success and the success of our field likely also experience some inner conflict, and perhaps a range of emotions as we reflect on our own paths. After all, most of us have found some form of professional success, and perhaps personal satisfaction, through advanced degrees. Such beliefs, however, may implicitly serve to perpetuate outdated master narratives for our students.

The distressing truth is that increasing numbers of students do not fit the storyline that we were given because college today is objectively out of reach financially for so many. Irrespective of financial barriers, many are overwhelmed with the academic or social experience, or are unable to engage due to mental or physical health concerns. Tens of thousands will continue to enroll and stop out each year (Causey et al., 2023), likely with debt but without a solid plan to return, necessitating a change in their narrative. Relying on population-level data on labor and wages (Carnevale, Cheah, & Wenzinger, 2021) we believe that a direct path through an affordable bachelor’s degree program is still the optimal path – “nice work if you can get it” (Gershwin & Gershwin, 1937). Realistically, however, both survey and enrollment data suggest that increasing numbers of high school graduates are rejecting the college-going narrative entirely and may instead craft rich alternative stories that are fluid and non-linear. From what we can tell, among those who pursue a non-college pathway, their future education and training will almost certainly coexist alongside commitments to family and community, and changes in circumstances will necessitate revisiting and in some cases revising earlier decisions about where to live and what work to pursue (Education Strategy Group, n.d.).
Guest Perspective: Master Narrative

Although a linear master narrative still dominates, it need not be determinative. As practitioners and researchers committed to college access and success, we need collectively to build new alternative narratives that fit a diverse student population. We must explicitly describe the wide range of possible storylines, highlighting that many are nonlinear and cyclical (Cortez, 2023). We must also amplify stories – successful and not – of those who pursued non-traditional paths. Doing so would have positive effects on both the individual and the community, by enabling narrative self-authorship -- a worthy developmental milestone for young adults (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1998) – and beginning to shift the master narratives with which each new class of students must contend.

REFERENCES


ECMC Group (2023). Question the quo: Gen Z teens have changed their priorities for education and work. Minneapolis, MN: Author.


Guest Perspective: Master Narrative


