Article

The Broken Yellow Brick Road: A Narrative Exploration of the College-Going Decisions and Trajectory of a Low-Income Single Mother of Color

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Abstract: Communities frequently treated as 'have-nots' in higher education are a window into the condition of postsecondary education access, exclusion, inequities, and outcomes. This reality is no more evident than with the college-going trajectories of low-income single mothers of color. Evoking the possibilities of narrative inquiry in general, and life history method in particular, the author explores the college-going ecology, decisions, and trajectory of a 35-year-old low-income Filipina single mother. Through this empirical undertaking, particular attention is paid to the challenges present within the informant's context of information, time, and opportunity—the three dimensions of the Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories. Findings of this narrative include prolonged and disjointed experiences; poor navigational structures and asymmetries of information; and institutional constraints, barriers, and disregard. In addition to insights that reflect decision-making challenges and buyer's remorse of minoritized students; this study situates new directions for addressing concerning contexts of time, information, and opportunity for single mothers pursuing college.

1. Introduction

Understanding of the potential and perils of higher education requires expansive attention to the variety of prospective and current students in its ecosystem. One such group that has been historically excluded and misunderstood are low-income single mothers of color. Just 8 percent of single mothers who begin college will have acquired either a bachelor's or associate's degree within a duration of six years [1,2]. This issue becomes even more paramount when we consider race and income representation. The majority of single mothers in postsecondary education are non-white and racially minoritized [3]. Of the more than 2.1 million single mothers in college in America, "89 percent are low income and 63 percent live at or under the federal poverty level [4]". Beyond battling racist and classist social stigmas, low-income single mothers of color who aspire to securing degree attainment are minimized in higher education, although their presence and trajectories warrant far more thought.

At present, many institutions of higher learning purport to have a commitment to college access and college-going for low-income people, racially minoritized students, and "post-traditional students" (a term created to reflect a realization that the wording "nontraditional" is both harmful and inaccurate towards understanding certain groups, such as student parents [5]). However, research to enlighten such efforts, particularly that which is attentive to context, is minimal at best [5,6]. This narrative study illuminates the college-going decisions and trajectories of a low-income single mother of color with specific consideration paid to her contexts of information, time, and opportunity.

The focus of this study is the narrative of one student with a college-going reality just as complex as her identities. For the purposes of honoring these complexities throughout the build-up of her narrative, I begin this text by foregrounding literature that illumine aspects of the college-going ecology of "Mia," the participant centered in this text. Following this, I share the three-component anthropological framework that guides this narrative inquiry. After discussing the narrative methodological approach, the three dimensions of the framework are then used to frame the findings and discussion sections. The text concludes with future directions and implications for education science and practice.

1.1. A College Student of Today

Mia's trajectory, although a growing one in postsecondary education, is unfortunately often hidden. By this I mean she is a student very likely to be overlooked in higher education research, practice, and policy. Even phrasing such as "post-traditional" points to the ways students with children are treated as peculiarities in higher education. Thus, one opportunity in this text is to make her college-going reality far more familiar. While I focus on Mia's identity as a low-income single mother of color, in attending to her college-going decisions and trajectories, it is important to consider the implications of her having "college experience but no degree" as well as her attendance at multiple broad access institutions.

1.2. Non-First Time Students and "Some College, No Degree" Student Population

Mia is also a part of the non-first-time student population. Throughout her college-going journey she has been enrolled in multiple community colleges and a for-profit college. This not only means she has made manifold decisions about multiple institutions; it also means that she represents a large population that are accruing college experiences without any credentials as a result. To be sure, over 36 million people in the United States have spent time in college but currently have not acquired a degree [7]. "Of those individuals, over 4 million are potential graduates who have at least two years' worth of progress [8]". Accordingly, Mia's narrative provides context-relevant insights to support this population's re-entry and completion.

1.3. Broad Access Institutions of Higher Learning

Central to Mia's experience is her attending four community colleges and one for-profit college, the two sectors to which single mothers enroll in the most. At present, "44 percent of all single mother students attend public two-year institutions, while 30 percent attend for-profit institutions—which is three times the likelihood of women students without children [3]".While for-profit colleges and community colleges are characteristically different in their organizational structure and profit-maximizing goals, their point of commonality is typically in their categorization as broad access institutions and attracting similar student demographics. I expand on both community colleges and proprietary colleges below.

1.3.1. Community Colleges

Community colleges are the primary type of collegiate institutions reflected in Mia's college-going decision ecology and trajectory. Specifically, Mia has attended four different community colleges in California in her pursuit to complete an associate's degree. Community colleges are often heralded as higher education most inclusive of the people, with missions to serve the college and workforce preparation needs of their immediate environments, as well as underserved and minoritized communities [9,10]. Community colleges, however, are unfortunately strained with doing much with a lot less than other institutions comparatively. Community colleges often take on aims including "remediation", general education, vocational education, and preparing students for transfer to four-year institutions [11,12]. This in conjunction with limited resources often creates sustained and insurmountable challenges that likely have an impact on both access and student success.

This myriad of ambitions particularly impact completion. A recent accounting from the American Association of Community Colleges illumined that less than two-fifths of community college students (38.2%) have within six years successfully completed their education [13,14]. Considering that community colleges enroll communities mostly likely to be historically excluded and subject to a myriad of systemic barriers, Mia's narrative can provide insight into community college access and completion concerns.

1.3.2. For-Profit Colleges

After multiple community college degree attainment attempts, Mia decided to attend a for-profit in Southern California as her fourth college. But what exactly are for-profit colleges? These are comprised of privately funded and profit-seeking institutions that often provide a concentrated set of degree and training offerings to students [15,16]. While proprietary colleges are often discussed as if they have no variety, they are a sector that contains very small vocational institutions to large companies whose reach extends to multiple countries and degree offerings [17–19]. The particular for-profit college Mia attended was one of the largest commercial colleges in North America. Similar to community colleges, they tend to enroll students that more selective institutions do not make themselves as accessible to.

What has come to brand the for-profit higher education sector are concerns about how some of these institutions enroll students, the amount of debt they accrue, as well as some troubling employment and certification outcomes. For-profit colleges in particular have been critiqued for what some consider a misleading enrollment culture that does not deliver on expectations [20,21]. What drew Mia to her particular for-profit college was her belief in their more streamlined education process and charisma about enrolling students often "othered" in postsecondary education.

1.4. Mia as a Low-Income Single Mother of Color

My focus on the college-going decisions and trajectory of a low-income single mother of color warrants consideration about the legacy and culture of postsecondary education. To be sure, most institutions of higher learning were not created with low-income single mothers of color in mind. Moreover, many institutions are still very much holding on to their enduring history of excluding minoritized groups that include single mothers of color.

In addition to institutional negligence, a number of sources of stress have been identified that are germane to single mothers and their college-going experience. One of the biggest challenges to their ability to attend and persist in college is childcare [22]. Another paramount challenge for single mothers in higher education are college costs, which often include fees, tuition, and transit to the physical college campus [1,23–25]. Moreover, single mothers often do not acquire sufficient financial aid and support for their expenses in college and in the process incur sizeable debt while pursuing postsecondary education [23–25]. As it relates to work, "over 54 percent of [single mothers] work more 20 or more hours per week while attending college, and 43 percent work 30 hours or more a week [4]". In considering the multiple layers of inequities, challenges, and invisibility faced by low-income women single mothers, this study will situate Mia's contexts of time, information, and opportunity to understand her college decisions and trajectories.

Mia is also a Filipina-American woman. In higher education, and society at large, Asian students are often problematically depicted as a uniform population that do not need further attention to the inequities they face. This lens extends from a flawed model-minority hypothesis that often renders distinct sub-groups invisible [26–28]. Through this narrative, Mia's college-going as a Filipina student in postsecondary education is particularly obscured. However, in reality, a heterogeneity of trajectories is reflected in the Asian/Pacific Islander student population. This text has the opportunity to unveil the conditions and inequities facing a low-income Filipina single mother pursuing a college degree.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to best explore the college-going narrative of Mia, I make use of a conceptual framework that was created to reconcile the vast limitations of present college "choice" frameworks [29]. Specifically, this paper utilizes an ecological framework, the Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories (see Figure 1) to explore the college-going decisions and college trajectories of a single mother of color. This model of college-going decisions and trajectories emphasizes three synergistic forces that shape individual college decisions [29,30]. Specifically, this framework situates three different dimensions—opportunity, information, and time—that collectively illustrate the ways a variety of different potential students make decisions regarding their higher education pathway [29]. Opportunity is a dimension about the tangible and perceived possibilities a prospective student believes they have as it relates to college-going [29,30]. Information is the knowledge indicators one harnesses and possesses that facilitates how they should proceed as it relates to college-going [20,29,30]. Time accounts for the various forms of surpassed moments and present state (for the person and society) that shapes someone's college-going [29,30].

With this model, college-going is an active dance reflective of how these three components develop and shape a college decision and trajectory. No one of these three dimensions by themselves can resolve the college-going enigma [20,29,30]. As we will see with Mia's narrative, their interactions yield complex realities.
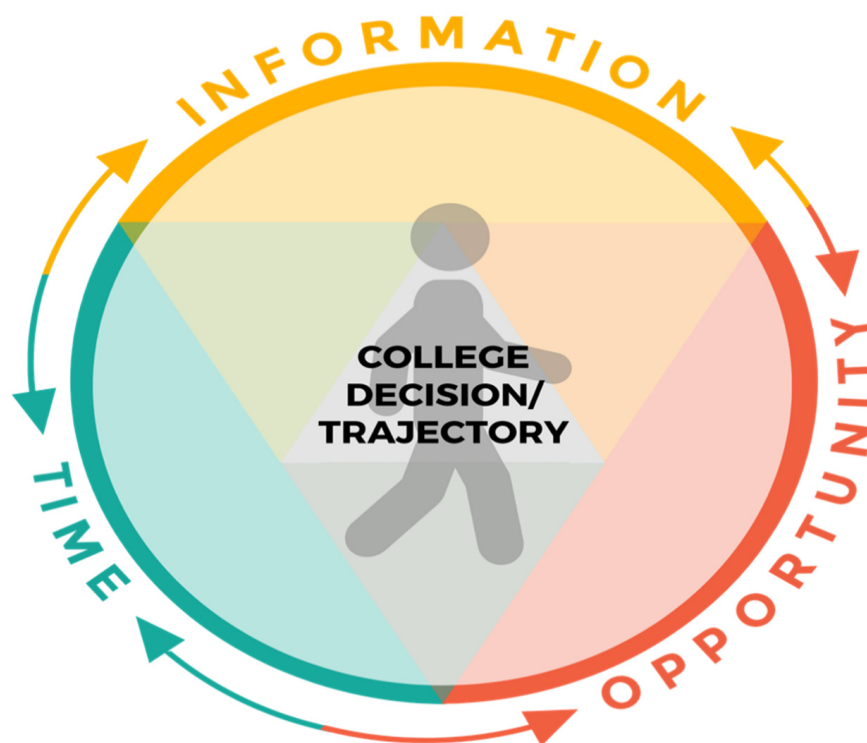
Figure 1. The Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories.

Knowing that college-going is far from a uniform endeavor, this conceptual lens pivots from relying on a college choice conceptual landscape that may only account for a subset of privileged and historically-included students [29,31]. As such, this framework was developed to unearth the intricacies of inequitable college-going narratives. Considering the likely nuances of the college-going decisions and trajectories of low-income single mothers of color, this study leverages a three-component bidirectional framework to inform its research question.

3. Research Design and Method

This study explores the following research question:

What factors contribute to the college-going decisions and pathways of low-income single mothers of color? How do the dimensions of time, information, and opportunity impact this question?

3.1. Narrative Methodology

Narrative is an important qualitative methodology in general, and a vehicle for understanding Mia's higher education story in particular. Narrative research often falls within the realm of social constructivism. Accordingly, by way of narrative, people become agents, interpreters, and explainers of their life experiences [32]. As Etherington [33] suggests, the "shape of a (narrative) story helps organize information about how people have interpreted events; the values, beliefs and experiences that guide those interpretations; and their hopes, intentions and plans for the future". There is also growing interest and support for how narratives and one story can influence and inform policy to the improve the lives of citizens [34]. In determining what research approach was best, narrative stood out as a compelling and important direction to gain insight into Mia's story.

3.2. Life History Method

Life history method, in particular, was used to understand the educational aspirations and narratives of "Mia", whose real name remains concealed to protect her identity. This method particularly positions the researcher to explore the evolution of an informant's beliefs, behaviors, and experiences [35]. Through life history, my primary goal was to treat Mia's story with dignity, sensitivity, and care. As Goodson and Gill [36] state, "life history research ought to honor and respect the narrative of the storyteller first and foremost, and at the same time be open to opportunities for dialogic encounter and collaboration". Thus, through life history, I was able to unfold the contours of Mia's story while being attentive to her voice and interpretation of her experiences.

When approaching a study, it is important to consider the approaches most relevant and useful to the aims of the research and communities it involves [37,38]. The aims of life history are particularly important for this study and its use of the Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories. Because opportunity, time, and information are ecological components, the constructs require some level of propinquity to informants in the data collection process. Such proximity is useful to ascertain the contextual narratives that cannot be understood with surveys or other forms of basic research. Use of the model also suggests an attempt to understand new developments and variation in college decisions and trajectories. Life history supports unpacking what has occurred throughout the trajectory of one's life and, in this case, their college trajectory.

3.3. Data Collection

The primary form of data collection for this study was several rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with Mia. In particular, life history interviewing was used. Life history and narrative interviews are considered as unstructured tools that are used to uncover rich life histories against the backdrop of the participant's situational context [39]. Once Mia agreed to participate in the study, a first round of face-to-face interview was conducted utilizing a loosely structured protocol. Through such an interview protocol, Mia was allowed to diverge from narrow topics and to further explore additional concepts and elements germane to her experience. I conducted further in-person interviews, approximately one to two months apart, in order to account for new recollections and developments. To accommodate Mia's schedule, a few interviews also took place via telephone. Throughout my interviews with Mia, I would focus specifically on one of the dimensions of the framework so that my questions and inquiry were guided by the theoretical framework. For example, in my first initial interviews with Mia, I would focus

specifically on the time dimension as a way to frame and understand time and timing as it relates to her trajectory.

3.4. Data Analysis

The goal for data analysis is to allow the data to inductively direct what insights can be gleaned about Mia's narrative. In particular, this study makes use of the analysis of narrative approach. Through analysis of narratives, "we examine narrative data to focus on discovery of common themes or salient constructs in the storied data, and organize them under several categories using the data [40]". In order to activate this approach, I proceeded in the following manner. After substantive data collection, interviews were transcribed. Then, the constant comparative approach was utilized in order to conduct the analysis of the narrative. With constant comparative method, new insights or data are acquired and then compared to previously acquired data from the study [41,42]. The constant comparative approach is particularly useful for this study because synthesizing data requires an approach where new data is intentionally woven and put in conversation with prior statements by Mia.

4. Findings

Throughout the course of interviewing, I documented the ways the intersection of Mia's life, identity, single motherhood, and the higher education landscape shaped her college decisions and pathways. Particular notice was paid to the context of opportunity, time, and information. Accordingly, three themes developed from data collection: prolonged and disjointed experiences; poor navigational structures and lack of information; and institutional constraints and barriers.

4.1. Context of Time: Prolonged and Disjointed Experiences

My time with Mia began with us outlining her college-going trajectory. She shared, "The first three institutions were community colleges in California. The fourth university was a for-profit college, you know one of the more popular ones. When that didn't work out, I ended up at another community college (See Table 1)".

Table 1. Mia's College Trajectory.

Type of College	Duration of Time Spent at This Institution
Community College #1	1.5 years
Community College #2	6 months
Community College #3	3 months
For-Profit College	1.5 years
Community College #4	2.5 years

At the time of our first interview, Mia had spent at least 17 years in and out of multiple colleges. She has accumulated approximately 120 units but at present has no degree. Because of the opportunities expended through this duration of time, she has also reported that she has maxed out of her Pell Grant eligibility.

When asked what brought and kept her in college, Mia mentioned in one of her first interviews:

"I just wanted to start college. And then when you look at your child you understand you want and need to make life better for them. One thing you don't realize is the cards may already be stacked against you. I started at a place [community college] close by but when it didn't work out, I realized at each new college, none of these places were really accepting new credits. So, it's not just life happening. The system itself doesn't really help you unless you fit a mold. So many years have been wasted and I still have no degree".

Throughout, Mia lamented about the myriad of ways her time was harmed by the ecosystem and infrastructure of the community college setting in particular. In one interview, I asked "How were experiences prolonged?"

Mia replied,

"Let's just take how starting and finishing at a community college works against the schedule of single mom. You are in a major but there are only so many that classes you can take to finish the major and degree and they keep getting full. So as a single mom, I can't just wait around or take classes at the drop of a dime. I am actively planning my life around myself, my kid, work because I need money, family, and what my son needs. It's already hard enough to finish a community college or transfer within four years. Then you add having to plan around your son, you know, this life, this gift, that is more important than you".

"What would make this better, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I think we [single parents] just aren't a priority. Some of my friends that went to other types of colleges say their schools would prioritize class registration for some student athletes or certain students in certain programs. Why can't something similar be done for student parents? On a bigger scale, I wish these people with power would ask themselves if they would be okay going to college like this. Because I feel like higher-ups are not bothered by us having these long and drawn-out experiences, but would never want this for themselves or their own".

Of the timing concerns, Mia said her for-profit college was more amenable while still presenting other challenges. She stated in one interview:

"The for-profit made sense for my schedule and that time in my life. It seemed more accomadating to real people. But right now, in America, if you say you went to a for-profit or online school, people think you went to a scammer school. I mean I know in my circle we talk about it here and there. I even know people who went to ones that shut down and they still say they haven't gotten closure. I guess it's just hard all the way around. Like if you go to one, it's at your own risk, even though they get you out, even if not under the best circumstances. But they are still like those warnings, 'enter at your own risk.' At least they get that people and especially moms don't want to spend forever in school. We can't afford to, and most colleges don't even care about that".

In reflecting on interruptions and stop-outs, Mia offerred this:

"It got to a point where my optimism was waning and I was getting desperate. I think people don't know how much of a toll it takes when school doesn't work out for you for so long. My hunger and zeal were turning into frustration. I would see signs of inefficiency and be triggered and ready to leave. You just gradually build a distrust because you realize college constantly fails to care about students like you and take you seriously".

When recounting her departure from her fourth and fifth college Mia mentioned,

"The for-profit college was actually easy but it was too expensive and we thought it would close any minute. A lot was going on. My fourth community college and last college, I couldn't continue because my financial aid and credits didn't align. I went to get everything settled but they were withholding financial aid because of a technicality. It just made no sense. I told the lady I just need a break. No help. So many people have these fucked up and long community college stories and are terrified to come back".

When talking about the status of her pursuits, "I want a college degree more than ever. But this last college they really messed me up so much. I mean it was so many issues broken within the system and before with the previous three community colleges. This is my life".

4.2. Context of Information: Poor Navigational Structures and Lack of Information

"College is a different world for us. Information and college is a whole different matter if you have little money or are single mom. You aren't just looking to learn about a major or career options or how colleges offer general stuff. I didn't even know what I needed to know to make better decisions until years of making even worse decisions. I think most of

the single moms I know are just used to having very little or no information at all when in reality we need more detailed information about what we might be getting ourselves into than anyone else".

Mia said of her concerning information context, "People really don't understand what it means to think about information and these colleges, especially community colleges". Wondering what she meant, I asked Mia to expand.

"Here is the thing. You need to process and put together a lot to even go to the right college and get a degree. I am not even talking the academic part. Just navigating the system with puzzle pieces of information".

"Can you share more on what that looked like?" I added.

"Yeah. As a single mom there is only so much energy I can devote to figuring out this school stuff, outside of figuring out what I am doing to do well in these classes. The fact is there is very little information you have to go on in selecting the best community college. The one closest to you might care less about single mothers. So now you are stuck trying to finish in a space not built for you because it was not clear in the beginning that there is so little to support you".

A picture of a lack of transparency from her prior institutions and troublesome navigating began to emerge with more interviews. Mia continued in a later interview:

"I am having a hard time even thinking about information and what would have been most useful. So many of these schools aren't who they say they are. That's the information no one is going to broadcast, even if they started deciding they need to share more. We are the people but most of these schools aren't for the people. Everyone wants to feel like they are helping the poor single mom. That they are laying out a path. But we [single mothers] are putting the pieces together. And the worst thing is the picture is not pretty".

During another interview, she expanded further on her information concerns at specific institutions along her trajectory:

"When I was at my first community college it was just rough. There was really no kind of compassion or organization [of information]. I am working and providing for a kid. Then I have to go to a school where you have to talk to eight people to get one answer. I was here when I was dealing with domestic violence. And for me this hurt because I am not asking college to be superman. I asked for specific resources. I mean I get it, but then I don't. With all the book smarts colleges have, they should know these situations are dire".

When reflecting on how she ended up at "many problematic institutions," Mia often highlighted that a lack of useful information as a barrier. She also asserted she would have made different decisions had she known more information:

"I didn't know if I transferred from a private college, the for-profit for example, the credits wouldn't transfer to my next public college. My credits were counted but I still had to retake the classes at a different place. I think that is super messed up and accurate and precise information would have benefitted me the entire time. It was just such a huge mess".

Overall, of her college-going decisions and trajectories, Mia reflected, "Not a lot of support by way of information for single moms. People are not giving you information about options and how to do it. I would have actually appreciated information about how others did it successfully too".

4.3. Context of Opportunity: Institutional Constraints, Barriers, and Disregard

Mia's journey was plagued with the fallacy of opportunity. One paramount interest in this study was how Mia conceptualized opportunity. In one session she shared:

"To me opportunity means it is a space that wants to improve your life and can deliver on that actual thing. In this case for me it was a degree. So, these colleges weren't really opportunities or the opportunities I thought they were. They were just events that filled up space in my life. This created missed opportunity I really could have spent working more or spending time with my son. I am waiting for the day college will improve my life. They should be concerned about this too".

Mia, speaking further on opportunity structures, offered in one interview:

"There is always that one community college. You get to school. Then you get a parking ticket because you are late and just need to park somewhere to get to class on time because you had to drop off your kid. I would just be honest with professors. Despite so much I stayed on top of things and even led several organizations. But you know deep down these spaces are not working for you, they are working against you".

In a later meeting with Mia, she offered:

"When I was in a four-year for-profit institution, I just sensed they could do something but just didn't. It would be too much of an inconvenience. Someone told me, 'Well if we provide this for you, then we have to do it for others.' And in my head, I trusted you and believed the hype. Like can I get a used book?"

When asked about what resources were present or lack thereof, Mia would often stare off or sigh deeply. On one occasion she chose to expand with, "the resources are kinda smoke and mirrors to be honest".

When I requested for Mia to elaborate, she stated:

"I will say my last institution was the only one that had some kind support loosely for single mothers. A lot of what was instrumental to my staying as long as I did were resources students created themselves. It was student mothers creating resources. There was one Facebook group that held me together and organized food events that were crucial. But how is that enough? Why is support limited to mostly what we provide?"

Toward the end of time interviewing her, I asked Mia about the perceived opportunity that brought her to her first community college and what she thinks of college opportunity now. She replied:

"The biggest thing I found is that there is a difference between tolerating students and wanting them there. There is a difference between wanting them to be successful and just letting them struggle to find their way. Many of the people who made my experience were strong women of color students who were moms. We too want to feel like we belong and that all that we are is welcomed. Our families are just as proud and hopeful for us too. It means something for a college to want to be good to you. But they aren't. I think single mothers especially deserve so much more".

I asked in response, "Do you think there will be a college that will be good to you?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I don't think so. I think a lot of colleges secretly despise poor people and people who don't resemble the kinds that they think make their college look good. Case in point, a single mother. So why would they create something that makes me feel loved and allows me to believe so much more is possible for me? I think some colleges need to have a heart check. Deal with who they really are and how this hurts certain people. Taking someone's money and allowing them to enroll is totally different than making sure they are good. So does higher education care if I am good? Again, I really don't think so. I am the story no one wants to talk about".

5. Discussion

The rationale behind this study was to situate new insights and directions gleaned from the college-going narrative of a low-income single mother of color. Accordingly, what might higher education learn from Mia's story? I want to first encase this discussion within the parameters of the model of college-going decisions and trajectories. While interrelated and interdependent, information, time, and opportunity each have specific insights I wish to elucidate in unpacking this college-going narrative.

5.1. Information

Mia's telling of her college trajectory reflects gross information asymmetries. Prior to enrolling, Mia didn't have much information about suitable college options for her and how they would meet her goals and support her. Research by Roy et al. also corroborates different struggles for student parents in acquiring and ascertaining information about practices and policies germane to student-parents [43]. Through the information dimension,

we can see how college opportunity is marred for students likely detached from K-12 networks and are more or less on their own when assembling information to support their unique college-going decision and trajectory [20]. In considering how this can be averted, multiple social institutions, whether they be K-12 institutions, colleges, churches, or libraries, for example, must be cognizant of how they can bridge information gaps especially for students who likely find themselves in information deserts.

It should also be clear through the provision of more nuanced and holistic of college-going information what resources, or lack thereof, institutions have to offer for student parents in general, and single mothers in particular. Mia mentioned that if she was cognizant of the lack of resources present for students who have children and are working, for example, she would have either delayed attendance or not went to certain colleges at all. From this we have two important implications. On one hand, colleges and universities can grow in transparency about what they actually offer and provide and eliminate vague and inaccurate messaging so students do not feel misled. On the other hand, colleges must also make sure the provision of their actual information is being received through available, cohesive, and streamlined channels. For example, having centralized student counseling services for student parents will ensure the onus is not on students to gather all the information they need across multiple offices and have to make sense of possibly incongruent information.

5.2. Time

Mia's experience reflects a long and convoluted journey in postsecondary education. While it may be shocking to some that her college-going narrative is both lengthy and still unfinished, she attests to there being virtually no mechanisms that intervened. Accordingly, we must consider what might be possible if institutions, such as community colleges, provided preliminary counseling. Such an approach would allow counselors to meet individually with prospective and new students so the counselor/institution can learn about that student's trajectory and be mindful of challenges the person experienced at prior institutions as well as ways to proactively support them. At the community college level, for example, a centralized commitment to preliminary counseling for students funded by states might help these institutions better support students that are re-entering and have been mobile across different peer campuses.

In understanding the complexities and challenges of time as it relates to Mia, it is worth considering how colleges and universities can better cater to and specialize in meeting the needs of student parents in course-taking trajectories. Initiatives such as guided pathways may be a useful effort to further tailor and build upon through an equity-minded lens in addressing retention and completion for low-income single mothers especially. Through a justice-oriented implementation of guided pathways, they can experience a "structured approach with a set of clear course-taking patterns [44]". Working towards an intentional course sequencing infrastructure where students such as Mia are prioritized might facilitate a greater likelihood of the completion of a college degree, particularly at the community college level.

5.3. Opportunity

What Mia found in higher education was not necessarily opportunity, but place holder experiences that still did not materialize into a postsecondary degree. Sallee and Cox [45] especially push for nuanced ways collegiate institutions must be equipped to support an assortment of students. Specifically, Salle and Cox found through their study the importance of thinking holistically about the single mother's college experience, as many might think only addressing child care is necessary [45]. Through Mia's narrative we see that there were no points she was successfully informed, welcomed, and retained at multiple institutions. Re-envisioning this requires scholars, practitioners, and scholar-practitioners to think about what is needed from the moment a student such as Mia becomes interested in a particular college to their successful matriculation. This vantage

point is what will enable institutions to become realized college opportunities and not just perceived college opportunities.

Additionally, Mia illuminated that most of the supports that she experienced that made her prior colleges even somewhat viable opportunities were student-led. Part of what will allow prospective students to know some colleges are suitable opportunities is knowing that institutions are aligning their programming with their purported care for student parents. Institutions can provide financial support for student-led initiatives so single mothers are not having to use their own resources to further their student success. At the same time, institutions can be working to develop their own initiatives and events that do not rely on the innovation and labor of their students. One such event could allow students to bring their village and children to school in recognition of the ecosystem around that student parent. Tailored events and initiatives will also ensure that momentum to support student parents will not end with the pioneering students who led the charge for them.

5.4. Higher Education as a Purveyor of Buyer's Remorse

Mia's college-going decision narrative illuminates many struggles. One such one is that of buyer's remorse. Buyer's remorse is an experience of deep regret with regard to a purchase someone has made [46,47]. Furthermore, "buyer's remorse is a form of cognitive dissonance—A period of mental discomfort caused by conflicting beliefs and attitudes [48]". As Mia weighed her prolonged experience and lack of healthy information and opportunities in postsecondary education, her anguish and regret heightened.

It is important to note that buyer's remorse continued to be an ever-present phenomenon in Mia's experience. At this moment of her having substantial college experience but no degree, the concept applies to each of her previous institutions in specific ways. While the association of buyer's remorse with college-going decisions is not discussed in higher education, in reflecting on the gravity of Mia's experience, it is one that needs to be taken seriously.

One feature that makes situating buyer's remorse in higher education a challenge is the assumption that higher education is an advantageous social institution and form of a "public good". A report by researchers [49] found "a majority of respondents believe that American colleges and universities benefit both society-at-large and individual graduates". The public imaginary's logic of postsecondary education as a public or private good is incongruent against the individual reality of postsecondary participants such as Mia. In her attempts to advance towards a degree, Mia encountered what might be considered anything but that descriptor. Moreover, it becomes questionable how across multiple destinations there was not a point of interruption such that her aspirations for postsecondary education degree attainment could be realized or advanced.

5.5. Future Directions for Scholarship and Practice

Mia's story also has implications for how the field can be better attentive and responsive to low-income single mothers of color in research and practice. Future studies can focus on just one of the dimensions (information, time, or opportunity) as it relates to trajectories of single mothers, single fathers, and single parents in general in postsecondary education. For example, by understanding the information contexts of a collective of student mothers, researchers may be able to find even more themes and patterns around the quality and quantity of information prospective students are able to harness [20,29,30]. A study of this nature can further explore if any information they harnessed matches their experience.

Institutions of higher learning would be best served to invoke the possibilities of institutional research to first understand who and to what extent single mothers/student parents exist within the student body, and what can be done to improve their access and experience. As Swing and Ewing Ross offer, "focus on students can be further enhanced by intentionally grounding institutional research initiatives and reports in a student-focused perspective [50]". Statistics of the student population specifically can help institutions

determine what demographics they are enrolling and who they are not. These numbers can also illustrate who has left as well. Qualitative research can provide other nuanced institutional information. By this, colleges and universities can specifically outsource interviewing to a third party to ensure students have a safe and less biased source to share their experiences. Through surveys and interviews, something such as parking/transportation may arise as an insurmountable financial and time burden, as it became for Mia.

Institutional research can also be utilized to help colleges and universities explore why students leave or stop-out, which was a frequent issue in Mia's trajectory and paramount challenge nationally. To the extent institutions are equipped with resources to do so, colleges and universities should leverage optional exit interviews. This will enable institutions to get a sense of why students choose to leave and if there are patterns causing these departures. One powerful hope for Mia was that no other students and low-income mothers of color in particular experience what she did. It should not have to take a narrative such as this for institutions to be aware of the distress their own students are experiencing. This is not possible without institutions taking accountability in understanding why students are leaving and placing primacy on then shifting the narrative.

Another way to possibly improve conditions is having university personnel engage in deep training from experts about how to better support certain student demographics, such as student parents in general, and single parents/mothers in particular. This safeguards students from being tasked with the burden and labor of making the college student-ready, or even just survivable, as Mia pointed out. Moreover, it signals there is an investment in making the campus conceptually and practically accessible and productive for single mothers and student parents.

6. Conclusions

The title of this text situates a "yellow brick road," a symbol of a path to contentment and attainment, that is broken. Higher education is often positioned as a type of yellow brick road as many people are directed to it as a route to success and prosperity. Mia's narrative, however, begs the question, "What happens when that particular road is fundamentally flawed?" As postsecondary education grapples with such realities, it will have to re-envision what it is to actualize its potential for students it has historically failed and excluded. This is going to require that researchers and institutions alike rethink college-going as a one-size-fits-all infrastructure and attend to complex time, information, and opportunity contexts for students often treated as have-nots.

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