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Case Title

Evaluating How Community College Students' Understanding of Success Influences Outcomes using a Mixed-Methods Research Design

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Contributor Biographies

Tanzina Ahmed is a Ph.D. candidate in the Developmental Psychology program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She defended her dissertation in June 2017 and is expected to receive her doctorate degree in September 2017. Her adviser is Dr. Colette Daiute. Her research focuses on understanding how the long-term academic trajectories of community college students are influenced by their interpretations of their educational environments, relationship experiences, and academic goals. She teaches at Bronx Community College as a full-time substitute lecturer and leads workshops on adolescence for the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

Published Articles

[insert an APA-style reference for any publications resulting from this research]

Abstract

This case study reviews a mixed-methods project that used qualitative and quantitative techniques to connect students' understanding of community college to their institutional performance within it. In doing so, this study reviews the importance of choosing suitable qualitative method, reveals the importance of experimenting with qualitative analytic strategies, and demonstrates the benefits and drawbacks of expanding a study's research questions midway through a project. Ultimately, it offers three major lessons to students of mixed-methods studies. The first lesson is on the importance of figuring out which qualitative method best works within the time-frame and needs of one's study, as demonstrated by a choice made between in-depth interviews and written narratives in the present study. The second lesson lies in the importance of maintaining analytic flexibility based on idiosyncrasies of one's collected qualitative data, as demonstrated by this study's analytic evolution from character mapping to plot and script analyses. The final lesson involves the pros and cons of complicating one's research goals when one discovers intriguing new questions. As seen in this study, research questions may shift in response to the unique features of one's qualitative data, with the answers to initial research questions giving rise to new questions in turn. However, it is important to be aware of how much time a researcher is willing to invest in a project before embarking on radical changes or additions within it.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

1. Better understand how the mixed-methods research paradigm can connect people's perspectives on their experiences to their academic performance in educational environments.
2. Anticipate the difficulties that researchers might encounter while conducting mixed-method research that connects people's perspectives to performance, as well as create ways to deal with said difficulties.
3. Evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of using interviews or written narratives within a mixed-methods study utilizing quantitative statistical procedures such as chi-square tests of independence and regressions.
4. Review the steps that are required to use qualitative data in quantitative statistical procedures such as chi-square tests of independence and regressions.
5. Evaluate the benefits and draw-backs of creating new research questions that build upon previous analyses midway through a research project.

Case Study

Project Overview: Understanding Students in Community College

This case study reviews a mixed-methods research project that used both qualitative and quantitative analytic techniques to connect students' diverse perspectives on community college to their academic performance over time. In doing so, it reviews the importance of choosing qualitative methods that investigate students' perspectives within the project's goals and time-frame, reveals the importance of experimenting with analytic strategies given the unpredictable nature of qualitative data, and explores the process of expanding the study's research questions. By reviewing all the false leads I followed and the eventual paths I chose, I hope to demonstrate that while the path of interesting research – like the path of true love – may not always run smooth, being tenacious while following it can lead to fascinating truths.

My research work centers on community colleges in the United States. In the United States, an increasing number of students entering higher education do so through the institution of community (or junior) colleges that offer Associate's degrees and the option of transferring to a 4-year college or university. Over 40% of undergraduates now begin their education at a community college due to their affordable tuition and relaxed standards for entry (21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 2012). Yet students in community college often struggle, with almost 45% of students in public 2-year institutions dropping out after their first school year (ACT Institutional Data File, 2013). Community colleges thus exist as important yet troubled institutions.

As someone who teaches at a community college, I began my project with the goal of understanding how students' beliefs about community college and their partners within it might shape their academic performance. After years of experience with both diligent and struggling students, I knew there was a great deal of diversity in how students thought of the college institution. Personal experience taught me that academically successful students often

held optimistic views on college and were usually ready to reach out for the support of college partners (such as other students, instructors, and staff). Meanwhile, less successful students appeared to be more pessimistic about college and were less likely to reach out for social support from others – even when they most needed it. I wanted to test whether my assumptions regarding more and less successful students were accurate.

A review of the existing literature gave me further reasons to believe that students' interpretations of community college and college partners might influence their academic performance. Scholars such as Deil-Amen (2011), Francois (2012) and Carrasquillo (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with dozens of community college students. Collectively, they found that students reported relying on many "institutional agents", ranging from instructors, advisors, other staff members, and other students, for help in dealing with college difficulties. Support from a variety of institutional agents helped students navigate the confusing community college institution and feel more integrated into the college institution, which could help them achieve greater academic success.

Finally, I realized my work could fill in an important hole in the research literature. The existing research on students' perspectives of community college used qualitative methods, such as interviews and written narratives, to understand how students interpreted and navigated the college institution (Carrasquillo, 2014; Daiute & Kreniske, 2016; Deil-Amen, 2011; Francois, 2012). Yet these studies had the same limitation. Though they often assumed that students' beliefs and experiences of social support were related to academic performance, they did not test whether students' perspectives related to institutional measures of performance (such as GPA). Seeing this missing piece of the puzzle, I rushed in to complete a study that would bridge that gap between qualitative and quantitative data.

Thus, flush with high hopes and hubris, I designed a dissertation study that asked students to write about their college lives in the fall semester. After the academic year, I

planned to collect information on students' academic performance, as captured by year-end GPA. During the analysis phase, I would discover whether more academically successful students reported differences in their perspectives of the college institution and related partners compared to less successful students. (I would discover these differences with chi-square tests of independence, which will be examined later in the paper). In doing so, I would connect students' subjective interpretations *of* community college to their institutional performance *within* community college and demonstrate that students' ability to make sense of the complex realities of community college relates to their academic success.

However, complex research can humble even the most hubristic scholar and my dissertation would feature more turns than I anticipated. Though I began with one set of research goals and planned analyses, I ended up creating and carrying out a rather different study – one that taught me valuable analytic skills that I can carry onto future projects. Though the research process was arduous, I learned the importance of choosing qualitative methods that connect well with quantitative statistical techniques, the importance of experimenting with analytic strategies, and the benefits and drawbacks of answering new research questions midway through one's study. Within this case study, I hope to demonstrate the importance of maintaining sensible limitations even as one pushes forward in exploring important research questions.

Challenges During Data Collection: Interviews or Narratives?

The first challenge I faced came before I ran my study and centered on how I would collect data on students' interpretations of community college. What qualitative technique would best serve my goal of comparing more and less academically successful students in their views of college? The process of deciding on a qualitative research method demonstrated the importance of weighing the benefits and drawbacks of each method, especially in how they functioned within the context of my project. Initially, I planned to

conduct semi-structured one-on-one interviews with student participants to get an in-depth look at how they were making sense of their college experiences, challenges and relationships. Earlier researchers demonstrated that it was possible to use interviews to "dive deep" into students' experiences within community college (Carasquillo, 2014; Deil-Amen, 2011; Francois, 2012). If I chose to do individual oral interviews with students, I could gather a great deal of data from each student on how they made sense of their college lives.

However, I ran into one major issue – namely, that it would be difficult for me to collect data from a large group of participants within a single fall semester. I needed qualitative data from a relatively large group so that I could compare a robust sample of more versus less academically successful students. However, it is very time-consuming to interview people. If I conducted interviews, I would find it hard to interview enough academically successful and unsuccessful students in the fall in order to compare their differing interpretations of community college within chi-square tests of independence (i.e. chi-square tests).

(To understand the need for a large sample of students, I must explain the benefits and limitations of chi-square tests. A chi-square test determines whether there is a significant association between two nominal (or categorical) variables (Laerd, 2015). I conducted chi-square tests to answer questions regarding differences in how more and less successful students interpreted community college. For instance, would more successful students write significantly more often about social support compared to less successful students? Chi-square tests offer qualitative researchers a chance to find significant differences in people's perspectives based on their position within different groups.

(However, a chi-square test requires a participant sample be large enough such that there are *at least* five people (or data produced by people) in each category being counted by the test. To answer my question on social support with a chi-square test, I would need to

contrast data from *at least* five more successful students who had written about social support against data from *at least* five less successful students who had written about social support. Given the unpredictable nature of qualitative research, I could not guarantee that *any* of my participants would write about social support. However, by collecting data from a large group of participants who wrote on diverse topics, I increased my chances of including *many* more and less successful students who would write about social support. Thus, I increased my chances of discovering differences in how more and less successful students wrote about social support (and other topics) within chi-square tests. Similarly, other researchers who work with qualitative data that they hope to use in quantitative statistical tests should collect information from as many participants as possible. One never knows what one's participants will write of or the exact sample size necessary for tests such as chi-squares).

Given the importance of collecting qualitative data from as many students as possible in the fall semester while collecting data on my own, I found myself in a quandary. How could I collect meaningful data about my students' perspectives on their college lives if I did not have the time or ability to conduct interviews? My dissertation adviser, Dr. Colette Daiute of the Graduate Center at CUNY, recommended another research path that utilized written narratives. Furthermore, given her understanding of narrative analysis – she literally wrote the book on it – she was an invaluable source of analytic help. A student researcher is best served when she can use the expertise of her mentors.

Narratives are written or oral accounts of people's every-day lives that allow them to communicate events, activities, characters, social interactions, cultural settings, and meanings to others (Daiute, 2014). Narratives can exist in the form of written histories, newspaper stories, interviews, gossip, and technological innovations such as text messages. People use narratives to communicate with and influence other people, to understand and deal with the social world they live within, and to change the society they live in. Narratives can also

demonstrate how people make sense of their daily life experiences, as well as how they resolve *conflicts* (relational problems) and *difficulties* (organizational or practical problems) that arise in diverse environments.

To collect qualitative data from as many students as possible on their views of community college, I asked my student participants to write within several genres (or types) of narratives. Daiute's (2010; 2014) past studies using narratives revealed that different narrative genres can be used by people to engage in different forms of meaning-making on their experiences. For instance, Daiute and Kreniske (2016) discovered that community college students can use two different genres (the Best Experience and Worst Experience genres, which asked students to write about their best and worst college experiences) to align with or criticize the college institution in varying ways. I expanded on this work by asking my participants to write three narratives on their college life: a Letters narrative (which prompted them to write a letter to an important partner about college) as well as the Best Experience and Worst Experience narratives. By asking students to narrate for different audiences and for different purposes, I captured the complex and even contradictory ways in which they made sense of community college.

(It is worth noting that while written narratives are easier to collect and transcribe than oral interviews, they still feature a fair amount of labor. It took me about a month to transcribe 312 hand-written narratives. Practical considerations on the difficulty of transcribing data matter!)

In choosing to utilize narratives instead of interviews, I made several trade-offs that both expanded and contracted the possibilities of my study. By forsaking interviews, I lost the rich detail that would likely come across in an interview format. After all, students might say more to an interviewer than they would write in response to narrative prompts. I also lost my ability to ask follow-up questions on topics of interest. Nonetheless, there were several

benefits to using narratives. First, narratives were more practical for my study insofar as it allowed me to collect data from 104 participants within the fall semester – a task that would be nigh-impossible had I stuck to interviews. Collecting written narratives was more logistically possible, especially when I received permission from the local Institutional Review Board to go into classrooms and gather narratives from students en-masse.

There was another important benefit to using narratives over interviews. First, narrative prompts left greater room for interpretation on the part of the students than did most interview protocols. My prompts were written in an open-ended way that allowed students to decide the focus of their writing. For instance, my Worst Experience prompt was: *"Write a story about your worst experience in college so far. What happened? Who was involved? How did it all turn out?"* The open-ended nature of this prompt allowed students to decide what experiences they would highlight and whether they would introduce or neglect to detail their problem solving strategies. In an interview, I would have asked students who did not initially talk about solving college difficulties to elaborate on their problem solving skills. In a narrative study, I did not have the chance to probe students further. Yet this turned out to be an important feature rather than a flaw. What students wrote and left unwritten – what they *highlighted* and what they *neglected* – demonstrated how they made sense of community college.

This process of choosing a qualitative research method demonstrated the importance of understanding the pros and cons of each potential method. While interviews can provide detailed information on how participants interpret their experiences, gathering such data can prove challenging within a limited time-frame. Written narratives are easier to obtain and still allow researchers to gather information on the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which people make sense of their experiences. Yet narratives are limited in their scope of inquiry compared to interviews. Interviews and narratives – like every other qualitative

research method – have their benefits and drawbacks, and choosing one over the other means making certain trade-offs in the research process. Every methodological decision within a study matters and brings with it a unique set of practical and analytic considerations.

Making Sense of Data: Choosing An Analysis Strategy

Once I decided on my research design, which asked students to write narratives on their college lives in the fall and collected their GPA after the academic year, I faced the challenge of analyzing my qualitative data. Given 104 participants who had written 3 narratives each, I ended up with 312 narratives to review. During this phase, I discovered another challenge – choosing an analysis strategy that served the goals of my study and allowed me to compare participants in their interpretations of community college. During this process, I learned to experiment with my data and remain flexible in my goals and procedures. Experimenting with qualitative analysis turned out to be the key to fulfilling the aim of my project: to connect people's subjective interpretations *of* community college to their institutional performance *within* community college.

Following Daiute's (2014) selection of narrative analysis strategies, I first attempted to conduct character mapping on a sample of 14 students who were randomly chosen from my participant group. (I used random sampling to ensure a representative group of study participants). Character mapping is a form of narrative inquiry that focuses on understanding the "characters" created throughout a narrative by the author (i.e. person who writes the narrative) (Daiute, 2014). It revolves around the idea that the author creates both a narrator (a person who can be said to 'represent' them) and a list of other characters. They can also investigate how non-narrator characters (such as "he," "she," and "they") can be used to express the author's "hidden" beliefs, emotions, and experiences (Daiute, 2014).

Unfortunately, analytic strategies that work in the abstract don't always work with actual data. At first, I assumed that students would write narratives that supplied plenty of

information on the psychological states, actions, and thoughts of third person singular ("he," "she") and third person plural ("they") characters. However, such was *not* the case for the majority of my narratives, which was likely due to the narrator-focused design of my genre prompts. (This was a finding that surprised me only in retrospect). Across all the narrative genres, students usually focused on their *own* psychological states, actions, and thoughts. Character mapping was an unsuitable analytic strategy when students largely eschewed the beliefs, emotions and experiences of other characters.

After three months of fruitless work, I realized that I needed to find a new analytic strategy that would fit with my data-set and fulfill my research goals. On my adviser's suggestion, I attempted plot analysis, which identifies the basic plot elements that create the underlying story "structure" of the narrative (Daiute, 2014). During plot analysis, the plot elements analyzed include the initiating action (i.e. the action that begins the narrative), complicating action(s) (i.e. actions that build from the imitating action), high point (i.e. the climax, greatest conflict, or turning point of the story), resolution strategy(ies) (i.e. strategies used by the narrator and other characters to deal with conflicts and difficulties), and ending (.ie. the final ending where the conflict is finished). Once I identified each narrative's plot elements, I honed in on certain elements. For instance, I was interested in how students thought of their college partners. I discovered that when students wrote resolution strategies, connecting with college partners was the most *common* strategy they used to resolve college difficulties. This finding was important in answering my research questions.

Once I had completed plot analysis, I conducted script analysis to deepen my plot findings. Script analysis builds on plot analysis to identify the overall meaning, intention or goal of a narrative (Daiute, 2014). Scripts are shared ways of knowing that authors use to organize their interpretations of the events they recount. In my study, script analysis revealed several scripts that students used to make sense of their college lives and relationships. For

instance, some students in my study organized their Worst Experience narrative with the Communicating Experience script to focus on their college difficulties *without* introducing solutions to their problems. Meanwhile, other students organized their Worst Experience narrative with the Solving Problems script to highlight how they solved their greatest college difficulties with various resolution strategies. While students who used the former script viewed community college as an institution that victimized them, students who used the latter script viewed community college as an institution that empowered them to solve their problems. While plot analysis revealed more on students' relationship experiences, script analysis investigated students' implicit beliefs of the community college institution. Both worked together to answer my research questions.

It took me two years to finish analyzing my narratives, given the long process of moving from character mapping to plot and script analyses. However, this process taught me the importance of experimenting with different analytic strategies and abandoning what didn't work for strategies that suited to my unique data. Though few researchers are eager to depict the struggles they experience in finding a workable qualitative analytic strategy, struggling with such can prove necessary to connect research questions to the actual data elicited from research designs. My drift from plot to script analysis also allowed me to make the most of my data, giving me further findings that I could showcase in conference and journal papers. Venal though it may be, researchers save time and energy by mining a single set of data repeatedly!

Expanding My Boundaries: Answering and Adding to My Research Questions

Once I expanded from plot analysis to script analysis, I was able to better understand how students made sense of the community college institution and related partners. Next, I turned my attention toward comparing how more and less academically successful students interpreted community college. Doing so proved to be straight-forward after the difficulty of

analyzing narratives. However, that process led to the discovery of new research questions that complicated my project and extended my time-line, even as it added depth to previous findings.

I found it easy enough to answer my questions regarding differences between more and less successful students. First, I organized students into groups based on a median-split of year-end GPA, with more successful students having a higher-than-average and less successful students having a lower-than-average GPA. I then converted my narrative data into categorical and continuous variables within the quantitative program SPSS and ran a series of chi-square tests comparing more and less successful student groups in their use of plot elements and scripts.

(Incidentally, these chi-square tests were all viable, due to the robust size of my participant sample. Given 104 students, I placed 58 students in the more successful group and 45 students in the less successful group. Thus, I had more than enough students to find at least 5 students in each group that wrote about each topic I analyzed. Gathering over 100 research participants worked!)

By going beyond the qualitative/quantitative binary and utilizing narrative data within chi-square tests, I discovered that more successful students narrated differently across all genres compared to less successful students. For instance, successful students narrated more often with the Analyzing College Partners script. This difference demonstrated that successful students focused more on how college partners could affect them, demonstrating a link between academic success and the social sensitivity students demonstrated toward their college partners. Findings such as these validated my hypothesis that more and less successful students expressed different understandings of community college even at the start of the school year.

However, I discovered new questions which could both complicate and illuminate my past findings. If students began the fall semester with certain beliefs of community college, could these beliefs predict their year-end GPA, even after accounting for factors such as students' age, gender, income, fall GPA, semester status, and so on? Did these diverse understandings of community college uncovered within narratives have a link to students' year-end GPA that stood apart from other variables?

I was reluctant to explore these questions, since doing so would require complicated regressions that would predict year-end GPA using narrative data from the fall. Apart from delaying graduation, I worried about my ability to answer these questions. Since I was primarily trained as a qualitative researcher, I would struggle to run complicated regressions. However, if I answered this question, I would do what that no other study conducted on community college students had done so far – test whether students' conceptions of community college could predict their academic performance within it. For the sake of doing what had not been done before and conducting research that would be of interest to other scholars in my field, I chose to complicate my study by examining these research questions.

In doing so, I went through a multi-step process. First, I consulted guides such as Laerd Statistics (2015) on regression analyses and the steps involved in running them. By familiarizing myself with regressions, I developed a better understanding of their potential benefits and pitfalls. While conducting regressions, I also discovered another reason to rejoice in my sample of 104 students. I had to withdraw the data of six students from regression analysis because they had neglected to provide information on important variables (such as fall GPA) that were incorporated within my regression models (Laerd, 2015). Data from these students were not included within the regression results, though they were still included within the general narrative results and within the chi-square tests. Other researchers utilizing qualitative data within quantitative analyses may also find that they cannot use data

from all participants within all analyses. Thus, mixed-methods researchers are well served by engaging as many participants as they can during their initial data collection period.

Second, I added a new adviser who had expertise in statistical analyses to my dissertation committee. This adviser – Dr. Jacob Shane of Brooklyn College – was especially helpful when it came to transforming my narrative data into quantitative variables suitable for regressions. Given the contradictory advice on variable transformation that I had found within textbooks, it was important to have a consistent source of statistical support that was far more responsive than any textbook could be. Given my unease with regressions, it was also important to have access to an expert who could review my analytic steps, results, and writing. Such a guide through the wilds of research is invaluable indeed.

Third, I spent several months running regression models. I had to make several choices on what variables to include and exclude, given how much data I had collected on students' lives. A review of the regression models that Porchea and colleagues (2010) used to predict the academic performance of community college students proved useful in deciding which variables to include in my regressions. Eventually, I honed in on control variables that were either standard in practice (such as age and gender) or had previously predicted outcomes (such as previous GPA and remedial courses). Should you struggle in your own work, I would suggest a similar review of the research literature. Though you will never find an exact match to your study, you may be able to find work that can serve as a model.

Finally, I conducted a series of standard multiple regression models that linked students' use of plot elements and scripts within narratives to year-end GPA. These findings added greater strength to my earlier work on the differences between more and less successful students. For instance, chi-squares revealed that successful students were more likely than less successful students to use the Analyzing College Partners script. Regressions revealed that students' use of the Analyzing College Partners script in the Worst Experience

genre predicted higher year-end GPA, even after accounting for variables such as fall GPA. In tandem, these results demonstrated that students who had more academic success over time were more socially sensitive to conflicts with college partners. Social sensitivity matters in a variety of ways.

There are both benefits and drawbacks to complicating any research project with new questions and analyses. One benefit I found was that by expanding my questions, I added complexity to my existing findings and built on the qualitative analysis I had already conducted. I also learned how to conduct complicated regressions using qualitative data – a research method I hope to use in future studies. However, I had to spend an extra year investigating my new questions, conducting regressions, and writing up results. If you find yourself stumbling on new questions during your analyses, take stock of how important your questions are, how well-equipped you are to handle new analyses, whether you can find helpful guides and partners, and whether the results you find will illuminate your previous answers. Though complicating your research work can have benefits, some work may be best delayed until after your initial goals are concluded.

Reflection and Practical Lessons Learned

Reflecting on this study, a number of points emerge that are relevant for researchers interested in mixed-methods work that uses qualitative data within quantitative analyses. Below I focus on three major lessons which rose from my research.

The first lesson is on the importance of figuring out what kind of qualitative method best works within the time-frame and needs of your study. Do you wish to take an in-depth look into people's experiential knowledge of their world? If so, you may wish to conduct interviews or focus groups with your participants. However, these methods will consume a great deal of time and energy and may limit the size of your participant sample. This may limit your use of qualitative data in quantitative techniques. Narratives offer an alternative

option. You may gather less in-depth information and lose the chance to ask follow-up questions. However, you can still use different narrative genres to gather valuable data on people's interpretations of their environments and experiences. It is also relatively easy to turn narrative data into a series of categorical and continuous variables for use in later quantitative strategies, such as chi-squares and regressions. Ultimately, every qualitative method has its benefits and drawbacks and should be chosen carefully at the start of a mixed-methods study.

The second lesson lies in the importance of maintaining flexibility while analyzing qualitative data. It is possible to begin with one analysis strategy and switch or expand to another, based on idiosyncrasies of your qualitative data-set and evolving research questions. By experimenting with analytic strategies, you may better understand how your participants interpret their experiences and environments. Furthermore, being open to shifting analysis strategies will help you stay engaged with your project and alert to the possibilities of your data-set. You may even find reasons to improve and add to your repertoire of analytic skills.

The final lesson involves the importance of complicating your research goals when you discover new questions and analytic options. Your research questions may shift in response to your changing analytic strategies as well as the unique features of your qualitative data. However, if you choose to evolve your research questions and analytic strategies mid-project, be aware of the trade-offs. While you may end up with a more complex set of findings that build upon one another to create a strong argument for the validity of your results, you may spend months or years changing gears. Be aware of how much time you are willing to invest in your project before embarking on radical changes or additions within it.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. How can the mixed-methods research paradigm be used to connect people's perspectives to their performance within culturally relevant environments? Provide examples of other research questions this paradigm might be used to answer within environments outside of community college.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using interviews and narratives within a mixed-methods study? Is there any way to alter either or both research methods to make them more suitable for use within a mixed-methods study?
3. Why might it be important for researchers using mixed-methods approaches to collect data from as many participants as possible? What difficulties can researchers encounter if they do not have a large enough pool of participants?
4. What other narrative genres and prompts would you choose to ask community college students to complete? What type of information might you elicit from students using these alternative genres and prompts?
5. Why did Ahmed choose to run chi-square tests of independence and regressions in her study? What alternative quantitative statistical tests could she have used?
6. Why did Ahmed switch from character mapping to plot and script analysis while analyzing her narratives? Why were both plot and script analysis important in answering her research questions?
7. If you were conducting this study, would you choose to add a complex new research question midway through the project? Why or why not?
8. Did Ahmed's conclusions about the importance of social sensitivity in community college make sense in light of her analytic strategies? What other conclusion could she have come to, given her data?

Further Readings

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