Security, Dignity, Caring Relationships, and Meaningful Work: Needs Motivating Participation in a Job-Training Program

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Abstract:
Researchers asked 17 participants in a job-training program to describe their personal struggles following an economic restructuring. Examined through a critical theoretical lens, findings indicate that the learners enrolled in the program to reclaim security, dignity, meaningful work, and caring relationships. Program planners at community colleges are therefore urged to employ democratic program planning models, ask learners about their educational needs as they see them, and listen compassionately to their responses.

Article:
Community colleges have been recognized for their agility in responding to the needs of local constituents through new and innovative educational programs. For community college educators involved in planning such programs, assessing the needs of learners is an essential task (Boone, 1997). Our objective in conducting this analysis was to assess the educational needs of 17 community college learners who have struggled emotionally, physically, spiritually, and economically with personal realities in the emergent service economy. This needs assessment is unique in that it was informed by critical theory (Freire, 1970; Fromm, 1956; Habermas, 1984; Horkheimer, 1982). By critical theory, we refer to the somewhat heterogeneous body of social thought that originated with the Frankfurt School, which involves analyses of the social forces that bear on our lives. Critical theory differs from other theoretical orientations in that its concern is not simply to document or describe social life but instead to change it; hence the term praxis, a concept that may be summarized as action guided by theory. In short, the aim of critical theory is "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244).

Operating from this orientation, we provided a space for learners to construct personal meaning of their struggles within the service economy and to describe their hopes for the future--a future enabled, in their view, by participation in a job-training program at a suburban community college in the southern United States. We interpreted the data from a critical theoretical lens (Fromm, 1956; Habermas, 1984; see also Brookfield, 2005), and our conclusions indicate that learners in this study chose to enroll in the community college as a means of reclaiming security, dignity, meaningful work, and caring relationships. This study has implications for policy and practice in that the findings reveal broad sociocultural needs that are deemed important by learners who participated in a job-training program in the service economy. We conclude the study with four key recommendations for program planners who seek to address both the economic and extraeconomic needs of community college learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Before we describe the human needs revealed through this analysis, we summarize the literature on program planning with attention to various strategies for assessing learner needs. Drawing from a critical viewpoint of program planning, we discuss structural conditions at the level of practice (Althusser, 1972; Fairclough, 2001) that constrain the discretion of educators engaged in planning programs.

Educational Needs

Many adult education scholars have called for collaboration among learners and educators--and other stakeholders as well--in identifying needs and aligning educational objectives accordingly. Herein, educational needs are understood as a gap between a present state and an acceptable norm (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Gupta, 1999; Queeney, 1995; Tyler, 1971). Program planning scholars have encouraged systematic and deliberative strategies for identifying, understanding, or diagnosing learner needs, and such strategies include focus groups, interviews, survey methods, observation, and task analysis (Gupta, 1999; Gupta, Sleezer, & Russ-Eft, 2006); dialogue with community leaders (Boone et al., 2002); focused study of target publics or communities (Christenson & Robinson, 1982; McMahon, 1970); and utilization of extant data such as census reports (Boone et al., 2002; McMahon, 1970). Adult educators have placed particular emphasis on the interpersonal skills of listening and understanding as a means of understanding learner needs (Boone, Dolan, & Shearon, 1970; McClendon & Cantanese, 1996). In this study, we demonstrate the value of listening compassionately--specifically reaching understanding through open and free dialogue (Habermas, 1984)--in identifying learners' educational needs.

Program Planning

Needs assessment is a typical starting point for planning educational programs; however, there is considerable controversy in the literature with respect to how educators translate needs into educational programs. Recognizing this controversy, Cervero and Wilson (1994) synthesized the literature on programming models and identified three distinct viewpoints on educational program planning: classical, naturalistic, and critical viewpoints.

According to Cervero and Wilson (1994), classical models began with Tyler's (1971) curriculum model and include Boone et al. (2002), Knowles (1970), and Sork (1984), among others. Program planners ascribing to versions of the classic model typically identify learner needs by answering some permutation of the following four questions in planning educational programs: (a) What educational purposes should the organization seek to attain? (b) How can learning experiences be selected that will lead to achievement of these objectives? (c) How can the selected learning experiences be organized to promote learning? and (d) How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated? Cervero and Wilson noted that classical models portray educational programmers as exercising considerable discretion in practice. That is, they are empowered to make and implement decisions with few organizational or societal constraints. Also, the organizational context is a crucial component of the classical viewpoint, which implies a certain convergence among the needs and interests of various parties who have a

stake in program outcomes.

The naturalistic viewpoint--for example, Brookfield (1986), Houle (1972), and Knox (1982)--recognizes that organizational impediments may complicate program planning. For example, program planners may have to reconcile discordant needs among learners, educators, and other stakeholders. This viewpoint accounts for the competing interests that often emerge in practice. Like the classical viewpoint, the naturalistic viewpoint affords programmers considerable discretion, but this viewpoint also recognizes the complicated judgments that accompany programming practice. Authors of naturalistic models encourage program planners not only to identify learning objectives but also to make judgments on the best way for these objectives to be met (Cervero & Wilson, 1994), which implies an ethical component of planning practice.

In contrast to classical and naturalistic viewpoints, the critical viewpoint (Freire, 1970; Griffin, 1983; Hart, 1992) takes into account structural constraints that limit the discretion of programmers. In this view, educational programs are seen as structurally determined. As such, institutions may reproduce hegemonic relations in which marginalized individuals submit to the very structures that oppress them. Although critical models offer educational programmers an understanding of the ideological consequences of program planning, they privilege theory at the expense of practical applications, according to Cervero and Wilson (1994). We anticipate that this study will not only describe the educational needs of job-training participants but also demonstrate how the critical viewpoint can guide practice, thereby responding to Cervero and Wilson's criticism.

CONTEXT
The site for this larger study was a community college located in a metropolitan area in the South where the local economy had undergone significant restructuring, particularly since 2000, as the production of tobacco, textiles, and furniture plummeted, consistent with trends across the region (Peacock, 2007). Replacing these industries were industries that provided intangible services such as customer service, health care, and education. In the South in general, employment in the service sector has increased 45% since the late 1980s, including employment "both in high-paying professions and in low-wage jobs" (Peacock, 2007, p. 25). Nationally, this ongoing shift is expected to continue for the better part of a decade. In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor predicts that service-providing industries will account for approximately 18.7 million of the 18.9 million new wage and salary jobs generated by 2014 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005).

In late 2003, a coalition of public and nonprofit agency leaders announced their intention to ameliorate the problems associated with these shifting economic conditions by offering an educational program referred to herein with the pseudonym New Skill. Coalition members provided the start-up funds necessary for program planning, which resulted in an educational program that was specifically designed for those who had lost their jobs in traditional industries and who needed to reenter the workforce quickly, presumably in a new industry. The program goal, therefore, was to retrain participants within a three-month period. Also, the training program was designed to prepare participants for jobs in industries with expanding workforces in the local economy, and representatives of these industries were called in to consult with program planners on their employment needs.

Two components of the New Skill program included a 120-hour dental administrative assistant course and a 160-hour payroll specialist course. The goal of each course was to prepare learners for entry-level positions in office environments. New Skill promotional materials predicted $20,000 as a starting annual salary for dental administrative assistants and $18,000 for payroll specialists. With the exception of one male, participants in both courses included women with vast experience in the service sector and who were either unemployed or underemployed. Their ages ranged from late adolescence to late middle age. Participants were predominantly African American, but two were White.

METHOD
Data Collection
Prior to data collection, we contacted college administrators and the appropriate instructors to negotiate access to each course. One researcher visited class meetings to observe students and to establish rapport with them during informal interactions before and after class and during breaks. This researcher, a Black woman, had extensive graduate training as a social worker and significant experience with working-class people of various ethnicities. Her professional background and ethnicity were important because they helped her to establish rapport--if not a sense of solidarity--with study participants. It should be noted, however, that socioeconomic discrepancies, particularly level of education, may have existed between this researcher and study participants. Learners in each course were invited to meet with this researcher privately and confidentially to participate in interviews. Seventeen learners agreed to participate and signed consent forms.

The researcher began each interview with an open-ended prompt such as "I want you to tell me your story. How did you get to this point in your life?" Such open-ended questions are typical of narrative interviewing, a data-collection strategy that enables participants to select the life experiences that they believe to be important. More structured interviewing strategies, in contrast, may result in the study participant accommodating the perspective of the researcher (Casey, 1995; Chase, 2005). As such, this study provided a space for participants to speak openly and freely about their life experiences and about the meanings such experiences hold. Follow-up questions prompted interview participants to reflect on the meaning of work, their likes and dislikes related to work, and their definitions of success. Toward the end of the interview, each participant responded to a question such as "What do you want your future to be like?" We took responses to this question to represent each participant's desired future state, broadly conceived. Interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. All were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis
In this study, needs were originally understood to be the gap between present conditions and an acceptable norm (Boone et al., 2002; Queeney, 1995; Tyler, 1971), and given our critical theoretical orientation, we were attentive to a broad array of material, emotional, spiritual, and relational needs. Our objective was to enable participants to construct personal meaning of the social processes that affected their lives. Given our definition of needs, we sought (a) to understand how each participant experienced his or her present conditions and (b) to contrast this status quo to the participant's desired future. In this way, we hoped to produce a synthesis of educational needs that are unique, perhaps, to the lived experience of this particular population. By the same token, however, we were also attentive to any differences among individuals within

this population.

Working from this orientation, we subjected transcripts to a preliminary exploratory analysis (Creswell, 2008), and we expected to organize data in two categories: participants' present conditions and their desired future states. This scheme was based on our operating definition of needs; however, it proved to be inadequate because participants also described current states that they hoped to maintain and potential future states that they hoped to avoid. Having recognized the limitations of our conceptual framework, we revised our definition of needs. Table 1 explains how participation in the job-training program was viewed as a means of (a) maintaining positively evaluated current states, (b) overcoming negatively evaluated current states, (c) avoiding negatively evaluated future states, and (d) achieving positively evaluated future states. Text segments were then coded and organized according to this scheme. This revision to our conceptual framework accounted for an unanticipated development and speaks to the dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995) of the study.

Table 1 Refined Conceptualization of Educational Needs

	Current State	Future State
Positive evaluation	Maintain	Achieve
Negative evaluation	Overcome	Avoid

Text segments within each category presented in Table 1 were then explored with the purpose of generating secondary codes, and our orientation to critical theory informed this round of data interpretation analysis also. As codes emerged, they were constantly compared with the data and repeatedly modified until they were deemed a credible match with the data. Throughout this process, we explored alternative or rival explanations as a quality check (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Coded text segments were then mapped onto a matrix so that the salience of each theme could be assessed. As a result of this process, we arrived at four salient themes, which we believe to be valid within the parameters of the particular setting, population, and theoretical framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

FINDINGS
As noted above, 16 of the 17 participants in this study were women; thus, gender emerged as an important factor in this study. As others have noted, the current economic restructuring is problematic from a gendered perspective because innovation, technology, information, and masculinity are privileged in the service economy, and everyday social activities carried out by women--relationship building, conflict mediation, organizing, and knowledge translation--are often obscured or taken for granted (Bierema, 2006; Fenwick, 2004; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002). Accordingly, challenges for women inherent in late capitalism have intensified, further exacerbating longstanding inequities. Even though millions of women have taken on paid labor in addition to their domestic workload, women remain overrepresented among the poor, both nationally and worldwide. For this reason, community college policies and practices are women's issues (Herideen, 1998), and it is all the more important for educators to think critically about their approaches to program planning. The four themes that emerged from the data analysis--security, dignity, caring relationships, and meaningful work--should be understood within this context. Each theme is described below.

Security

Our first finding both recognizes the instability of the service economy and counters today's omnipresent discourse of lifelong learning. First, we describe alienation from stability, or the precarious position in the workplace in which study participants found themselves. This lack of stability was marked by a constant fear of job dismissal, the lack of a regular work schedule, and chronic underemployment. Then we discuss how the discourse of lifelong learning opposes the needs and interests of learners participating in this study.

One health care worker employed in a residential care facility for the elderly had been dismissed from her job because, as she explained it, she took too much time with her patients. This constant threat of job dismissal emerged as a salient theme in our data. Another interview participant who worked as a cashier in a grocery store described the way productivity was quantified as a way of identifying inefficient workers. For each cashier, productivity quotas were calculated weekly, and the management scrutinized these quantitative indicators of productivity: "If each week you don't have what they think you should have, then you get written up. And if you get written up too many times, you could lose your job." In this scenario, quantitative assessments of productivity served as a threat of job dismissal-- and this interview participant was acutely aware of the consequences of low productivity.

The employment situation for the learners in this study was constantly in peril indeed, but the lack of a regular work schedule also threatened participants' security, as the text segment below demonstrates.

> Participant: I like the pay but I don't have the hours. It's not a job that I could work the rest of my life because. ... It's not a real, like a real job.
> Interviewer: What would make it a real job?
> Participant: Probably being able to work steady hours.

Thus, although this study participant was satisfied with her wages, she was not satisfied with the irregularity with which she accrued them.

In other cases, work schedules were tightly coupled with economic conditions. One woman currently working in cosmetology explained how unfavorable economic conditions imposed an immediate hardship for her: "When people's budgets ... get tight, the hair appointment is one of the first things people cut. And if they don't get their hair done, then my budget is cut. I have bills that still go on." As this example demonstrates, individuals employed within the service economy may not enjoy a buffer between their livelihood and tumultuous economic conditions, thereby escalating threats to economic security. The New Skill program represented a means of reclaiming security for the learners who participated in this study. It also offered an opportunity for increased earnings, as is reflected in one woman's explanation of her need to move out of retail sales: "I need to get out. ... I need to not be paycheck-to-paycheck all the time."

When asked what they wanted their future to look like, all but three study participants evoked a theme of security, as the following selected quotations demonstrate:

1. "Security; I want to be secure."

2. "Stable. That's pretty much how I want it. Stable. Happy and stable. ... Nice. Financially stable. Financially stable and happy."
3. "I'm hoping to find something better, more stable. ... My goal is to find a job so I can support my kids."
4. "Be able to provide for me and my husband and hopefully, one day have kids."
5. "I want to eventually work in a dental office as an assistant and preferably do that until I'm able to retire."
6. "I always had more hopes and dreams of something better. ... I want a career, not just a job."

Given these statements, it was apparent that a primary rationale for participating in the New Skill program was to achieve economic security. Accordingly, the economic benefits of job training should not be diminished.

Although economic outcomes are certainly important, these findings demonstrate that outcomes of educational programs designed to meet the needs of learners in the service economy should not be reduced to employability skills. The nature of employment was as important in meeting learners' needs as were the wages rendered. For many, a career as a dental administrative assistant or a payroll specialist meant an increased degree of independence, which was highly valued by participants in our study. They anticipated that the job skills they were developing would not leave them dependent on a single employer; that is, highly trained but vulnerable to unemployment as a result, for example, of job exporting (Butler, 2001). As a result, they believed that they would be able work in these fields in various locations and for various employers. One woman explained it this way: "I can go anywhere I want to go. I'm not liable to work for one company." A payroll specialist student explained it as follows: "Well, everybody has to have payroll done I guess. It's sorta safe ... you know that you might have a job."

The employment stability desired by participants in this study contradicts the norms of the post-Fordist economic system in which responsibility for economic risks such as job loss is scaled down from the nation-state to localities and individuals (Peck, 2002; Sandlin, 2004; also see Aronowitz, 2001, 2005). Accompanying this rescaling of economic risks is a discourse of lifelong learning in which unemployment is not a failure of economic policy but an educational deficit of the unemployed (Ayers, 2005; Ayers & Carlone, 2007). As constructed by this discourse, economic activity at the global scale transcends regulation, the nation-state lacks the moral authority to influence markets, and local communities have no choice but to adapt to global demands (Peck, 2002; Uitermark, 2002). Also within this discourse, communities and the working-class individuals therein are expected to compete with one another within a deregulated free market to attract capital investment (Uitermark, 2002), and "what they get out of it is what they deserve" (Peck, 2002, p. 334).

Given an open and safe social space to counter this discourse, learners participating in this study expressed a strong aversion to lifelong learning as a means of sustaining employability. They did not want to engage in perpetual job training. Instead, they wanted to complete their education and proceed to other phases of life, such as having children, providing for their families, contributing to the welfare of others, or participating in education for leisurely purposes.

Dignity

The second salient theme in this study was that participants found their work in the service economy to be "demeaning" because they experienced mistreatment and dehumanization on the job. This alienation from dignity was exacerbated by high rates of unemployment and the consequent lack of alternative employment, which rendered chronic and acute power asymmetries between managers and employees. In the following quotation, an interviewee described her interactions with managers.

They'll yell at me at the top of their lungs. I can't sit there and scream back or I'm going to get fired. You have to swallow your pride. I'm not used to somebody sitting there and just yelling at me. My mom doesn't yell at me. Dad doesn't yell at me. I'm not going to have anybody else yelling at me, but I have to have ... if I've got a manager that's going to scream and yell, that's what I have to take until I find a new job. Can't just scream and yell back or I'm going to lose that work which brings in that money which pays my bills.

This quotation demonstrates clear power inequities and the resultant mistreatment of this woman. She both despises the abuse and recognizes it as unacceptable. At the same time, however, she recognizes that she depends on her employer as a necessary source of income. As a result, she states multiple times throughout the interview that in the service economy "you have to swallow your pride." The quotation above also intimates the hope this woman has that the educational program in which she is enrolled will help her find employment that is less alienating. Said another way, she envisions the educational program as a way to bridge the gap between her intolerable current state and a better future.

In addition, participants in this study who worked directly with the public experienced dehumanization at the hands of customers. One woman who cleaned houses discussed the rude treatment she received from homeowners: "I understand that they're paying to have the house cleaned, but I just don't like someone that's complaining about everything." This interview participant demonstrated familiarity with the dominant narrative of capitalism--the one in which labor is a commodity to be controlled by the employer; however, to her, such power relations did not justify the insolence she faced on a daily basis.

Caring Relationships

The need for external affirmations of dignity directly relates to the third salient theme of this study: caring relationships. Study participants described a hurried work environment that prohibited meaningful interpersonal interactions with coworkers, clients, and patients. One woman who served drinks in a bowling alley described her alienation in the following way:

The bowling alley is so busy I don't have time to sit down and go like, "How's your day? What are you doing?" ... until it closes, and that's 3:00 in the morning and it's time to go home. I don't ever really talk to my coworkers.

Another employee at a large global logistics facility explained that the management scheduled her and her coworkers to have lunch at different times, so they were not able to develop meaningful relationships. She expressed discontent with the large, impersonal, and intimidating dining facility, where she always found unfamiliar faces because of frequent employee turnover and constant shuffling of lunch schedules. Instead of eating lunch with strangers, she chose to eat

alone in her car.

One study participant recounted a sense of alienation of a different sort. She worked in retail sales, where she said she "could get someone to purchase something that they absolutely did not want." This statement demonstrates how the drive to increase sales may lead to alienation not only of the consumer but also of sales agents. Although she did not recognize her work with customers as manipulation, we interpreted this narrative as evidence of alienation in that her communication on the job was not carried out to increase understanding but was, instead, purely instrumental (Habermas, 1984) toward manipulating customers' desires.

This same individual had recently accepted a middle-management position. A sense of alienation from caring relationships was also manifested in her task-oriented behaviors and in her lack of concern for others:

> My coworkers would describe me as courteous, easy to come and speak to but at the same time interested in getting a job done. I don't care how you get it done, I don't care what you have to cut I don't care what you have to do just get my job done. I want it finished before I come back. If everything went that way, I was the easiest person to get along with in the world. If I had to come into things that I knew should have been done I became more of a dictator. ... I was someone that at that point demanded this to be done right now. I don't care what you have to do, I don't care if you are taking your lunch break or not, you need to do this now. I don't care if you suppose to leave in 5 minutes. ... I am very driven to get a job done.

In this example, caring relationships were not enduring bonds among equals; instead, they were distorted by power relations and contingent on passive compliance with the management's expectations. Even while acknowledging her demanding style, this middle manager bemoaned the effect that her promotion had on her relationships with her colleagues:

> When you move into middle management, people start to shut themselves down to you. ... I am the same person that I was before ... but for some reason that shift in the management scale always makes people a little more cautious about the things they say to you.

In this case, like the other cases described above, study participants recounted a sense of alienation similar to that described by Fromm (1956), in which "everybody remains utterly alone, pervaded by the deep sense of insecurity, anxiety and guilt which always results when human separateness cannot be overcome" (p. 86).

On a few occasions, study participants reflected on the effect the demand for productivity and earnings had on caring relationships. Study participants constructed stern critiques of those who disregarded the humanity of others. One employee in a nursing home criticized her coworkers:

> The people that come here now is all for money. They just get a paycheck and that's it. People don't care about people like they should. I think they care about their dog more than they care about people.

Another former employee at an elderly care facility described the emotional toll the uncaring environment took on her:

> I don't like seeing people hurt and in pain and depressed all the time. At the nursing home that I worked in I had people in Stage 3 and 4 ... ulcers from the people not turning them like they were supposed to. And I had a lot of the people I worked with didn't even take time with the residents. They wouldn't be nice to them or anything. They were just rushing around and they would yell at them and force them into doing stuff. It was just so heartless. ... That's just got to me. I went home from work crying almost every day. I just couldn't do it.

This interview participant struggled with the emotional stress of an uncaring environment. In an act of resistance, she was unwilling to conform to the demands of management that employees avoid caring relationships, and she explained that she was fired for taking too much time with patients. The interviewer followed up on this comment, just to confirm the point:

> Interviewer: Speak to me a little bit about your experience at the nursing home. They fired you because you were too slow. Did they tell you that?
> Participant: Yes. They said that I did not move quick enough.
> Interviewer: In terms of what? Taking care of patients or anything?
> Participant: Anything. I do take my time. I'm not one of these people that I can deal with the resident and just rush through everything or yell at them. I can't do that. They're still people. I'm not going to treat them like they're dead when they're not. So I would take my time. Sometimes I would sit down for a minute and talk to them. I would be a little gentle with them and actually act like there was somebody who actually cared. And they didn't like that. You're supposed to just do your job and be done with it.

In the case of this individual, resistance to the demand for productivity came at a high price, and she was forced out of her job. She came to the job-training program, therefore, hoping to find a career in which she could exercise her human capacity for caring relationships.

In other instances, participants overcame alienation by reclaiming caring relationships at work. One woman who briefly worked in retail sales described the fun she had with her coworkers. She referred to the group of coworkers and friends as a "sisterhood." Another study participant who currently worked in a hair salon described her caring nature as follows:

> I like helping people; I am a mother now, so I like taking care of people you know, just like literally taking care of people. Like if I am a hairstylist, I am like, "Are you okay?" I am just like that type of person, like a nurturing kind of person.

Having reflected on her caring nature, this new mother sought a career as a dental administrative assistant so that she could nurture patients and ease their anxieties of visiting the dentist.

Meaningful Work
Caring relationships contributed to a sense of meaningful work, which was the fourth salient theme of our findings. In addition to caring relationships, meaningfulness was defined as challenging work, as work that is important and makes a difference in the lives of others, and as

work that leads to achievement (e.g., work on completing one's education). With the exception of caring relationships, the participants in our study did not speak of meaningfulness when discussing their current situations. On the contrary, when discussing the status quo, they tended to discuss alienation from meaningful work. For example, one retail sales associate complained, "I am sick of retail. I need something challenging." As demonstrated in this quotation, comments related to meaningfulness often accompanied participants' descriptions of an ideal future state. In most cases, meaningfulness was presented as an anticipated result of the learning experience. One study participant described meaning in her idealized future state in the following way:

> I feel like a career, which is what I'm looking for now; that's why I'm in [New Skill] ... to wake up every morning knowing you're going to go into the office that day and enjoy your day and get a good pay at the end of the week but at least knowing that you're doing something good for other people and for yourself.

The desire to enhance the lives of others was a subtheme relating to meaningful work.

Also related to meaningfulness, women articulated continuing their education as meaningful in and of itself. For one woman, a primary purpose of enrolling in a New Skill course was to boost her self-esteem. Although she anticipated that the earnings would help support her as she returned to college to finish her bachelor's degree, she emphasized a more affective goal for completing the course:

> Finishing my undergraduate degree is meaningful to me because I want to finish something that I started. It's, going to mean closure and completion of something that I started and didn't finish. It's going to be really meaningful. It's not going to make my resume look any different maybe, but it will mean confidence in a way that I can't explain. It will just mean amazing confidence.

That completion of this course was attributed to self-esteem is an important finding because previous research has suggested that low self-esteem is a significant barrier for community college students, particularly those who are women (Herideen, 1998).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Cervero and Wilson (1994) applauded the critical viewpoint on program planning for its recognition that program planners are subject to structural forces that are beyond their control. At the same time, they criticized the critical viewpoint for privileging theory at the expense of practical applications. This study is a modest attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Although this approach enabled salient findings to emerge, it is not without its shortcomings. In particular, the researchers were affiliated neither with the college nor with potential employers. But program planners associated with community colleges may not be perceived as neutral, which may compromise the willingness of learners to speak freely. Therefore, more research is needed to shed light on how program planners might engage potential learners in authentic dialogue about educational needs. Despite the limitations of this study, findings translate into four recommendations for program planners to bear in mind during the program planning process.

Plan Democratically

If we accept Habermas's (1984) proposition that communication that is sincere and free of coercion can lead to rational solutions to societal problems, then we can envision the possibility of realizing a democratic program planning process in the community college. Boone's (1997) community-based programming model is perhaps the embodiment of such a democratic planning process. Boone reaffirmed that the community college is ideally situated to facilitate democratic and community-based programming:

> Through community-based programming, community colleges commit to working with the people rather than for the people. As neutral institutions, they commit to serve by working with the people, their leaders, and other community organizations to resolve critical issues in a time of unbridled concern over special interests, (p. 18)

In our view, Boone offered an idealized role for the community college. In particular, the community-based programming model offers a means for learners to participate in the decisions that affect them, to approach community problems from a moral and ethical framework, and to decide on solutions to community problems through democratic processes. A democratic program planning process requires that all stakeholders be represented at the planning table. It also requires program planners to insist on equity in the program planning process so that those who are perceived to hold less power and status will not be marginalized (Ayers & Carlone, 2007).

Listen Compassionately

The unstructured, narrative approach to collecting data relating to learner needs prevented the researchers from imposing dominant discourses on study participants. In other words, narrative interviewing opened a social space for learners to produce discourses that directly countered dominant discourses of flexible labor and lifelong learning. This strategy enabled learners to construct their own accounts of life in the service economy. By listening compassionately and interpreting data through a critical theoretical lens, we both refined our conceptualization of needs and identified four salient themes relating to these needs. It is unlikely that these needs would have surfaced if we had approached needs assessment from a classical viewpoint on program planning.

Acknowledge Competing Interests

Study participants sought long-term careers, not, short-term jobs that might disappear locally as a consequence of market fluctuations. This desire for employment security contradicts many employers' demands for flexible labor, or a contingent workforce. Other needs motivating participation in the job-training program--dignity, caring relationships, and meaningful work-- may also conflict with the interests of employers, particularly in industries in which a compliant workforce and efficiency may be priorities. Compliant workers, for example, may be expected to accept authority even when doing so is demeaning or contradictory to basic human values. Similarly, caring relationships and meaningful work may conflict with demands for efficiency, in that developing relationships with peers may be viewed as a waste of time when employees are "on the clock." As such, if program planners are to address the needs of learners, they must acknowledge that different stakeholders may have competing interests.

Negotiate Diplomatically

Program planners may find themselves in a difficult position when program stakeholders hold competing interests in the outcomes of an educational program. Cervero and Wilson (1994, 2001) acknowledged the politically contentious nature of program planning, and they insisted that planning responsibly requires educators to negotiate the power and interests that converge on any given educational program. This advice may be particularly salient for program planners in community colleges because (a) learners who come to the community college are often already disadvantaged (Levin, 2007) and (b) such disadvantage may be exploited either as an unintended consequence of structural inequality or even deliberately (Apple, 2004; Freire, 1970). Indeed, Ayers and Carlone (2007) observed a community-based program in which the interests of business, industry, and economic development agencies took precedence over the interests of individuals, families, and human services organizations.

Within a culture in which the competing interests of employers and learners are often obscured (Ayers, 2005; Ayers & Carlone, 2007), we encourage program planners in community colleges to engage in the politics of education (Cervero & Wilson, 2001) and to recognize learners as more than economic entities. The four themes that emerged in this study represent basic human needs. Developing programs that address such needs will require diplomacy, struggle, and perseverance; however, there may be no more noble mission than to champion security, dignity, caring relationships, and meaningful work.

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