TRACKING COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRENDS IN SELECTION OF VOCATIONAL VERSUS COLLEGE TRANSFER ENROLLMENT: A CASE STUDY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. iv

LIST OF FIGURES .............................................................................................................. v

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................... 1

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND ANALYSIS .................................................................. 2
  Community Colleges vs. Four Year Universities ......................................................... 11
  The Great Recession .................................................................................................... 14
  Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................... 16

METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................... 22
  Data and Measurement ............................................................................................... 26

FINDINGS ............................................................................................................................ 27

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK ......................................................................... 36

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................... V

APPENDIX
  A. Data Tables for Figures .............................................................................................. VI
ABSTRACT

This research examines the role of the Great Recession on Community College enrollment. Using a case study method enrollment data over a fifteen-year period (2000 to 2015) was collected and analyzed. Trends were compared to national enrollment data. Additionally, student social profiles were compared between students enrolling college transfer and students enrolling in vocational/technical programs. Findings were interpreted within the framework of functional and conflict theories of education. Findings from this study have implications for enrollment planning for community colleges in meeting the needs of the community college students and labor markets demands. Future research should include the expansion of dimensions of student social profiles considered, use of student surveys to analyze self-report bases for program selection, and use of national samples of community college programs.
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mean Scores of Social Profile Characteristics of College Transfer and Vocational/Technical Students</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>National Four Year and Two Year College Enrollment as a Percent of Total College Enrollment, 2002 to 2013</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>College Transfer versus Vocational/Technical Enrollment At Riverside Community College, 2000 to 2015</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>National Unemployment Rate 2000 to 2015</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Annual Percent of Change in Gross National Product 2000 to 2015</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Percent Change in Unemployment, Gross National Product and College Transfer at Riverside Community College</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This research examines the potential effects of the Great Recession on patterns of program selection among community college students enrolling in college transfer programs compared to vocational and technical programs. Evidence suggests that students enrolling in community colleges have in the past several decades been increasingly enrolling in college transfer programs as opposed to more traditional vocational and technical programs (US Census Bureau 2013). This research examines how the Great Recession and a corresponding sharp increase in unemployment rates may have affected this long-term historical trend. That is, did community college students respond to this sharp downturn in the economy by foregoing longer term plans for transfer to baccalaureate degree programs and instead more often choose to complete shorter term specific job related training? This question has implications for both patterns of mobility in society in general and the mission of community colleges. It has implications for mobility since community colleges are often seen as a “gateway” path to baccalaureate degree programs and more lucrative and higher status occupations, especially for economically and academically disadvantaged students. It has implications for the mission and administration of community programs in terms of programming and curriculum development.

Relatedly, this research also examines the social profiles of community college students who enroll in college transfer programs compared to the social profiles of community college students who enroll in vocational or technical programs. The social profiles of community college students enrolled in these tracks also have implications for patterns of mobility related to varying social backgrounds of community college students as well as the administration of these programs. To examine these issues, this research uses a case study method allowing an in-depth analysis of enrollment trends and student profiles at a large and diverse community college in
Southeastern North Carolina. Admissions data will be examined at this community college over a 15-year period between 2000 and 2015, ranging from before the onset of the Great Recession and through a long period of recovery.

To place these issues into a broader context, I first provide an overview of the history and mission of community colleges in America. I then frame the relevant issues related to functional and conflict theories on the sociology of education. Next, I provide a detailed description of the methods, data used in this study. I then describe and analyze the findings and then draw conclusions and discuss implications of the study.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 1901, Joliet Junior College (JJC) was the first “junior” college established in the United States. Joliet Junior College offered a mix of post-secondary programs including pre-baccalaureate programs, adult education and literacy programs, and professional development programs (Phillipe & Patton 2000). Pre-baccalaureate programs provided students with a pathway to four-year colleges and universities. Adult Education and Literacy programs included remedial math and English classes, now more typically referred to as developmental or remedial studies. Professional development skills classes were offered to help students with skills targeted toward blue-collar occupations that did not require college degrees. These programs included instruction in professional writing, typing, and answering interview questions. Early accounts of Joliet Junior College describe its mission as serving students from all walks of life and with varied and ranging academic levels and employment goals. The mix of programs offered at Joliet Junior College became a prototype for subsequent junior colleges offering a variety of programs matched to student and labor force needs in an institutional setting that generally providing students with smaller class sizes and low student-teacher ratios (Baker 1993).
While initially such institutions were known as “junior colleges”, eventually the term “community colleges” became more common. This shift in nomenclature did not occur abruptly but evolved gradually over time, reflecting a growing emphasis on such institutions targeting course offerings and programs specifically to community employment needs and to the specific demographic composition of students attending these institutions (Beach, 2011).

In the aftermath of World War II, a presidential commission was established to investigate how higher education in the U.S. might address national needs and priorities. The President’s Commission, a publication by a group of educators sought out by the federal government, which addresses national issues, released a report in commission’s final report “Higher Education for American Democracy” (A History of American Education 2004). The report identified seven trends of that set the priorities and direction for the growth for American community colleges in the postwar period: (1) community “boosterism,” (2) the rise of the research university, (3) the idea of universal secondary education, (4) the professionalization of teacher education, (5) the vocational education movement, (6) open access to higher education, and (7) the rise of adult and continuing education and community services. (Boggs 2000). I will describe each of these priorities below.

First, “boosterism” is the idea that some of the first junior colleges were most likely established in local townships and communities without any political or formal leadership or jurisdiction (Boggs 2000). This lack of structured jurisdiction in the early 1900’s and through the 1920’s aided in the spread of junior colleges as they were able to “pop up” wherever there as a need for higher education (Boggs 2000).

Second, the rise of the research university highlighted the distinction of collegiate work and junior college studies. It was widely accepted that collegiate work provided a more
comprehensive education in the arts and sciences, and also developed the student's abilities to study and inquire (Boggs 2000). Junior colleges were believed to offer collegiate study, while a university education was devoted to the advancement of knowledge and scientific inquiry. Leaders of these institutions believed that the general education of undergraduates could be supplied by high schools or small liberal arts colleges and should be limited to the first two years of the baccalaureate program (Boggs 2000). National associations were founded and grew around the debate regarding the role of the junior college, the research university, and the liberal arts college, and the organization and sequence of the American baccalaureate degree. The Association of American Universities (AAU), founded in 1900, advanced the agenda of the research institutions. The Association of American Colleges (AAC), founded in 1914, defended the role of the small four-year college and advanced the cause of liberal learning as the primary aim for higher education. The American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC), begun in 1921, provided a forum for the evolution of the two-year and four-year institutions with which we are now most familiar (Phillipe & Patton 2000).

Third, is the trend toward universal secondary education. The report established the goal that all individuals should have equal access to education and that it should be the work of the nation’s federal government to assure funding as equally as possible to all schools in order to assure the nation’s youth of a well-rounded education (Boggs 2000).

Fourth, the professionalization of teacher training was an important factor in the evolution and geographical spread of junior colleges. Graduates of professional teacher training provided through normal schools and junior colleges alleviated staffing shortages in the elementary and secondary grades. Educational leaders of the Progressive Era portrayed these education reforms holistically as a system stemming from kindergarten and continuing through
high school to "terminal" vocational and general education, or continuing on to the baccalaureate degree, and perhaps to graduate and professional education conferred by the research universities (Boggs 2000).

The fifth trend is identified as the “vocational education movement.” This trend reflected the nation’s expanding industrial capacity and the need for formalized vocational training beyond high school. The student demand for such programs came from several sources. In some cases, students would seek out such training directly after high school. In other cases employers referred employees for such training to obtain a necessary credential or skill set and in yet other cases enrollment came from older adults with labor force experience who were seeking occupational or career changes.

A sixth trend was “open access to higher education.” As educational attainment in the population as a whole was increasing, school systems responded by creating more levels of instruction. For instance, many public school districts constructed junior high schools to relieve the over-crowding in elementary and high schools (Boggs 2000). Junior highs, like junior colleges, often began as solutions. When junior highs opened, the four-year high school became a three-year institution. The restructuring of K–12 education freed high school facilities for the operation of junior colleges. This school expansion and restructuring, along with the passage of mandatory secondary education accelerated this trend.

Finally, the expansion of adult and continuing education programs spurred community college expansion and gave it a distinctive mission. These programs include but are not limited to adult literacy programs, GED® and other high school equivalency programs, as well as English as a Second Language. Additionally, courses such as Nurse Aide Level I and Plumbing and Electrical licensing (journeyman’s) courses are offered. Even contractor’s licenses are
offered via Continuing Education. The emphasis on these programs represented a relatively short-term and inexpensive way for those enrolled to gain a specific skill set for employment or to enhance existing skills without the commitment of two years of full-time enrollment.

Contemporary community colleges hold the collegiate function central to their mission. In addition to the traditional-age student seeking the first years of a baccalaureate degree, collegiate (also known as transfer) courses enroll (1) career preparation students, such as nursing students seeking knowledge in the basic life sciences; (2) reverse transfer students (who begin at a university and later choose to continue at a community college); and (3) part-time casual students (who enroll for personal rather than degree-completion reasons) (Phillipe & Patton 2000). Collegiate courses may involve core courses or distribution requirements in general education, articulated technical programs in the sciences and mathematics, dual-credit programs in high schools where talented juniors and seniors can earn college credits, and alternative delivery programs—such as evening and weekend courses, televised courses, and courses delivered online.

Waves of immigrants coming to the United States have also fueled the growth of community colleges. The educational needs and backgrounds of junior college students diversified as enrollments grew. Some immigrants come with little or no formal education or language skills, others come with extensive education but few language skills, while a third group consist of those with English language skills but little formal education. English-as-a-second-language instruction represents as much as one-third of all humanities instruction at community colleges (Boggs 2000).

Community colleges, as open admissions institutions, hold a unique position in this juxtaposition of secondary and postsecondary education. For not only did higher education
assume the role of setting college preparatory standards, but also of providing pre-collegiate instruction for those able but insufficiently educated to succeed in the rigors of a regular collegiate program (Boggs 2000). Community colleges increasingly have been called upon to provide remedial and developmental programs and services to those students without adequate levels of academic preparation to succeed in college. This incorporation of community and professional skill services also aids the expansion of the community college.

Community colleges play a significant role in meeting immediate and short-cycle needs of the immigrant, the disabled, and the unemployed with a wide range of courses and programs. Community colleges expanded the scope of higher-education offerings by adding to the curriculum practical and pragmatic courses of study that meet the educational needs of an advanced, complex, and technological society (Boggs 2000). The federal government has encouraged this expansion through incentives to colleges that serve such groups as displaced homemakers, students with disabilities, those needing adult basic education, and the unemployed seeking job retraining. Programs targeted for these students have broadened the curriculum, subsidized enrollment growth, and provided access to college for those who otherwise could not afford it, thereby widening the demographic profile of students served. The demand for higher education has risen as the value of a high school education has declined in the marketplace of jobs and careers (Boggs 2000).

Programs and services for adults the continuing education of workers in the skilled trades, technical occupations, and the allied professions, and courses and programs of general interest and value to personal and corporate development in the local community have always been a distinguishing feature of community and junior colleges. Early junior and technical colleges also provided adult education and community services programs. After World War II,
and particularly during the presidency of Edmund Glazer at the AACJC, this function grew in prominence. Gleazer's vision was that community colleges would render educational services to the entire local community, not just too traditional college-age groups. Providing credit and noncredit courses and nonacademic educational services (e.g., films, lecture series, fine art exhibits, and musical performances) to the area served became a priority for community colleges in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, adult and continuing education and community services have been regarded in two ways. One holds them as absolutely necessary to general and liberal education and vocational and technical education in the community college. The second views community services not so much as a separate function of the college, but as an intrinsic quality that distinguishes community colleges from the rest of higher education. From this perspective, the role of service to the surrounding community has become fundamental to the definition of the public community college mission.

By using the aforementioned educational innovation as well as other factors such as the return of veterans from the war, the baby boom and a growing need for skilled workers community colleges expanded nationwide. (Boggs 2000). In the 1960’s, with the opening of more than 457 public community colleges, the network that is today’s 1600 community colleges (all branch locations being counted) formed. Each community college is its own distinct institution but the existence of pre-baccalaureate programs and the relatively low cost of tuition are among the common ties that are shared by all (Phillipe & Patton 2000).

The National Science Foundation estimates that as of 2010 more than half of all skilled laborers come from a community college background (National Science Foundation, 2010). The National Science Foundation’s Advanced Technological Education (ATE) program utilizes community college educators to lead programs that involve universities, secondary schools, and
business to prepare and strengthen the skills of the nation’s technological workforce. ATE programs prepare technicians in strategic areas including agriculture, environmental technology, biotechnology, engineering technology, manufacturing, information technology, telecommunications, cyber security, and process technology (National Science Foundation, 2008). Programs like those mentioned by the National Science Foundation allow for the establishment of community colleges in both rural and urban communities as well as providing marketable appeal to students of all walks of life and with all sorts of occupational and academic goals. A nearby university is no longer a security blanket but rather the economy and labor market of a specific area can be enough to draw in community colleges boasting numerous vocational/technical programs (Phillipe & Patton 2000).

Similarly, the mix of program and curriculum offerings in such intuitions also evolved. Some institutions focused on college transfer programs, operating essentially as “prep” schools, especially targeting “less talented” students who would not otherwise be prepared to enter four-year institutions directly from high school. Often included in the curriculum of these institutions, for instance, were non-credit remedial courses, especially in foundational skill areas such as English and mathematics. Other institutions focused on offering post-secondary vocational training designed to prepare students to enter the directly labor force direction upon completing such training. Such vocational programs included postsecondary training in skilled blue-collar trade positions such as welding, truck driving, carpentry as well as training in white collar jobs not requiring four year degrees for such jobs as bookkeeper, paralegal, and nursing. Many of the later such institutions were known as technical schools or vocational colleges. Although there were a variety of such post-secondary institutions with different foci, eventually, the trend became a combined model of the “community college” with a combination of both college
transfer and vocational programs. For many institutions, the combined model created and continues to create what Brint and Karabel refer to as “contradictory pressures” for such institutions to provide both college transfer and vocational programs (Brint & Karabel 1985).

Although college transfer programs provide students with additional academic program options and have largely increased community college enrollment, as well as providing a lower-cost option, they do not guarantee success. A study found that starting in a two-year college transfer program could actually reduce a student’s likelihood at completing a Bachelor’s degree by as much as 30 percent (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009). In their study of North Carolina high school seniors, Bowen, Chingos and McPherson consider different factors regarding college transfer versus university enrollment and their relationship to degree attainment.

Students entering two-year colleges are very different than university students so simply comparing degree attainment wouldn’t be an accurate measure of what is happening (Bowen, Chingos, McPherson 2009). In order to make a clean comparison the study was limited to students who took the SAT (indicating they had plans to attend a university). Excluded were four-year institutions with SAT requirements below 1150 because students who are deciding between two-year and four-year schools are most likely to be considering a less selective four-year school (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009). To further even the data playing field students are divided into ten “propensity” groups based on their likelihood to start at a two-year college. This decision is based on the following: high school grades, SAT scores, gender, family income, parental education and educational aspirations (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2009).

As it turns out, in North Carolina, students who wish to earn a Bachelor’s degree are 36% more likely to do so starting at a four-year institution versus in college-transfer. When comparing
these findings to national data the consistency is rather striking. The conclusion here is that two-year students are significantly less prepared for college than students entering four-year institutions. This is due to factors such as the competitiveness and higher admissions standards for four-year universities versus two-year institutions. One last measurement of graduation success is transfer students versus freshmen enrollees in “flagship” programs, or programs designed to assist with the high school to college transition. When socioeconomic factors, such as those mentioned earlier in this text, are removed, the transfer students do graduate at a more successful rate, most probably due to having already had an opportunity to adjust from high-school to one type of college setting before entering a university setting (Bowen, Chingos, McPherson 2009).

Community Colleges vs. Four Year Colleges and Universities

Most modern community colleges are considered “gateway programs” for students going on to four-year universities; however, there are a number of distinct differences between the two-year community college and the four-year university. First and foremost is the difference in admissions requirements. Most public community colleges operate on an open-door policy meaning that there is no grade point average requirement for admission as long as the student can provide an official high school transcript (or transcript of an equivalency diploma). Similar to four-year universities there is an academic placement test required upon admission to all community colleges, to test students’ English and mathematics knowledge and place them into corresponding core classes, however students are not denied admission based on performance on these placement tests.

A second key difference between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities is in the workload, expectations, and credentials of faculty. Community college
professors typically do not have research obligations and most often are not actively engaged in research. Faculty workloads reflect this difference with higher teaching loads for community college professors. By contrast, most university professors are expected to maintain an active research agenda and have academic careers in research in addition to their role in the classroom. Credentials of faculty also reflect this difference, with a much higher proportion of university professors holding doctoral degrees and a much higher proportion of community college professors holding terminal masters degrees. Recruitment of faculty also differs with more emphasis on research expertise and experience in university settings and more emphasis exclusively on teaching and practical expertise in community college settings. Faculty at two-year institutions, for instance, are more likely to have work-based experience in the field in which they are teaching. Given the greater emphasis on research and publishing, university settings are much more likely to have tenure systems. Finally, recruitment for faculty also differs with recruitment for university positions much more likely to be national and international in scope compared to community college positions which are more likely to be local and regional in scope.

Third, consistent with a more exclusive emphasis on teaching in community colleges, class size is and student-teacher ratio is generally lower in these settings, although there is also a significant degree of within group institutional variation on these parameters.

Fourth, community colleges much more typically offer non-college credit bearing remedial courses (sometimes referred to as developmental courses), especially in English and mathematics. These classes are for students whose placement test scores did not meet the minimum requirements to take college-level English and/or mathematics. Students can enroll in
these remedial classes as a refresher and are required to pass them with a grade of "C" or higher before being able to move on to college-level English and math courses.

Fifth, the most distinct difference in these two settings is the existence of vocational/technical programs and professional development and adult literacy programs in community colleges. While these programs do not exist at every community college they do exist in the majority of two-year institutions nationwide. Oftentimes, as I have mentioned previously, these programs meet certain employment requirements for the surrounding communities. Additionally, some community colleges host adult education and literacy programs such as high school equivalency or credit completion programs for students who did complete traditional high school. Additionally, literacy programs for English language learners as well as for students struggling with English and math skills also exist. While these differences may seem great they do allow for students of all academic standing and backgrounds to find their place in the academic world.

A sixth significant difference between university and community college settings is that the latter are almost all commuting campuses without live-in residence halls or dormitories. Likewise, community colleges typically do not have corresponding or elaborate "campus life" or "student affairs" divisions. Scheduling is often different as well with typically many more evening and weekend classes and programs on community college campuses designed to accommodate a higher portion of part-time and full-time working students.

Finally, tuition costs at community colleges are typically much less than in university settings. Lower tuition costs are associated with typically higher levels of public support, especially at local levels, lower salary and instructional costs, and less student service costs associated with residential, extracurricular, and athletic programs. According to the College
Board the national average tuition cost for in-state residents attending a state university is $9,410. The national community college in-state average is $3,435 (College Board 2015-2016 academic year).

To summarize, the history of community colleges shows a strong connection between the labor force needs and development of such institutions. A central mission of community colleges has been to provide students with skills, knowledge, and credentials to meet existing labor force needs particularly targeted to local and regional market demand. The current study examines the impact of the Great Recession of 2008 on community college enrollment patterns specifically, how this economic downturn affect overall enrollments and the pattern of enrollment between college transfer and vocational programs. As background, I will provide a brief description of events leading up to the Great Recession and the implications for the U.S. economy as a whole.

The Great Recession

The Great Recession that began in 2008 was the sharpest and deepest economic downturn in the U.S. economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The full explanation of the causes of the great depression is still being debated, however, it is widely accepted that mortgage debt crisis was one of the largest contributing factors (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011). Economists define a recession as: a decrease in gross domestic product (GDP) over two or more consecutive quarters (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011). Federal government attempts to keep the economy afloat after the deindustrialization of the 1980’s and 1990’s finally sank in 2000 (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011). At the peak of the mortgage business in 2003, the financial sector was comprised about 10% of the labor force and generated 40 percent of the profits of the American economy (Fligstein and Shin 2007); Krippner 2010). Banks were loaning at money with all-time low
interest rates and still seeing good return. Additionally, the federal government set up various programs to assist low-income families in purchasing homes under relaxed rules for eligibility (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011). Over $5.2 trillion worth of these “unconventional” home equity loans were sold between 2003 and 2007 (Nadauld and Sherlund 2009). These loans were then sold to investors. By 2007, 70 percent of all loans made were “unconventional mortgages” (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011).

The Great Recession, which according to economists began in December 2007, can be defined by the loss of 8.5 million jobs from December 2007 to February 2010 as well as the doubling of the unemployment rate from 5 % to 10.4% (Hout, Levanon and Cumberworth 2011). The majority of jobs lost during the Great Recession were skilled labor jobs such as construction, manufacturing and transportation (Hout, Levanon and Cumberworth 2011). The loss of these jobs only fueled inequality, particularly wealth inequality. The majority of the middle class’s wealth can be found in home equity, however, with a failing housing market and housing prices falling nearly one in five families found themselves “upside down” on their home loans, owing more than their home was worth (Hout, Levanon and Cumberworth 2011).

Recovery from the great recession has been erratic and uneven. Solid, strong job growth cannot be measured until as late as 2011 (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011). As of August 2015 the unemployment rate was at 5.1%, just below the average of 5.6% (US Census Bureau). The official end to the great recession was declared in September of 2010 after a committee of economists met to review unemployment, poverty, and housing and labor market statistics. What they found was, in June of 2009 was that the factors which most directly contributed to the start of the great recession (a broken housing market and massive job loss) both reached a common
low point thus providing what economists labeled as the “turning point” for the nation’s economy (Fligstein & Goldstein 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Two rival theories in the sociology of education are relevant to the current analysis: functional theory and conflict theory. The functional theory of education suggests that educational requirements reflect the demands for knowledge and skills needed to prepare students for adult roles in labor force and society as a whole and that educational attainment is a consequence of individual capacity and application. The conflict theory of education, by contrast, suggests that the amount and quality of education individuals receive is largely determined not by individual merit but social class background and that largely reproduce educational attainment across generations. I will first describe these rival theories in general and then apply these theories to the issues under investigation in the current study.

The functionalist theory of sociology interprets each part of society in terms of how it contributes to the stability of a whole society. Its founder, Emile Durkheim, was particularly interested in how social order is possible and how society remains relatively stable. In line with this overall perspective, the functionalist theory of education focuses on the way that education serves the needs of society. Functionalists see education primarily in terms of a socialization function both in terms of conveying basic knowledge and skills to the next generation as well as contributing to an overall efficient division of labor in society. According to this perspective education is viewed as a way of fitting everyone into their particular role in the social hierarchy based on merit and skill. That is, education is a sifting/sorting tool based on an individual’s knowledge and skill level and matching that knowledge and skill to appropriate tasks that need to be performed in the division of labor in society.
Kinsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945) formulated a functional stratification theory of stratification in an article published in *The American Sociological Review*. Davis and Moore argued that in the interest of functional efficiency for society as a whole, the most competent individuals should fill the most important and demanding tasks in society. Society evolves in such a way to create an incentive system to insure that the most competent individuals fill the most demanding and exclusive tasks. An incentive system is necessary to insure that the most talented individuals are willing to take on the arduous training and responsibility necessary to fill the most important and demanding tasks in society. In modern industrial society, this arduous training takes place largely and increasingly in educational settings in which individuals are shifted and sorted based on their demonstrated knowledge and skills needed to fulfill the most important and demanding tasks in society. According to this functionalist formulation, education recognizes and rewards individuals who are the most talented, have the most ambition, and work the hardest to get ahead. In advanced societies, education is seen as the primary means in society to prepare people for economically productive roles in society. Furthermore, according to this perspective, educational requirements are constantly increasing as the result of technological change. Education is becoming even more important with rapid increase in the skill and knowledge requirements of jobs in an increasingly high technology and information-based society.

Applying sophisticated empirical analyses, researchers in what has become known as the "status attainment" model extended the assumptions of the functional model to the study of the general process of social mobility in society. Primarily focusing on the prestige scores of occupations, research in this tradition used path analytical models that specified educational attainment as an intervening endogenous variable that mediates between family background and
occupational achievement. In other words, these models demonstrated that most of the effect of family background on subsequent occupational achievement was indirect through increasing the probability of educational attainment, which also had strong direct effects on occupational attainment. In other words, these models specify that educational attainment has the strongest effects on occupational attainment and that educational attainment while influenced by family background is primarily a matter of individual capacities and achievement. This basic status attainment model was initially formulated by Blau and Duncan (1967) and subsequently extended and refined. The status attainment model has been criticized for relying on occupational attainment and income as stratification outcomes and measures of family background rather than measures of individual and familial wealth, which are more sensitive to the effects inheritance and social class and less dependent on educational attainment. The status attainment model has further been criticized for neglecting the effects of social and cultural capital, which are also more sensitive to the effects of inheritance and social class.

Also consistent with the assumptions of a functional theory of education, neoliberal models in economics emphasize the importance of education as a form of human capital that greatly enhances the prospect for future income and occupational attainment. According to this perspective, individuals can “invest” in their own human capital by acquiring skills, knowledge, and experience in ways that increase the premium for wages that they can then command in an open and competitive labor market (Schultz, 1961; Becker 1993). Under the meritocratic assumptions of this theory, those who know the most and know how to do the most are most likely to succeed.

A rival theory, social conflict theory, is a Marxist-based theory which argues that individuals within society have access to different types and amounts of both material and non-
material resources based on who their know or to whom they are socially connected, in other terms, their social class. For conflict theorists, education maintains social inequality by preserving the power for those who dominate society. For conflict theorists the educational system has the same sifting/sorting effect as the aforementioned functionalist, however, instead individuals are being sifted and sorted based on social class as well as social and human capital rather than based on merit. The resulting social inequality is meant to hold the lower class in their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy while preserving privileges for the upper class.

According to conflict theorists Bowles and Gintis (1976), schools are the bourgeois way of controlling the workforce. Schools perpetuate inequality by replicating social inequalities within the school system rather than promoting an equal opportunity approach. With the teacher acting as the “managing director” and with students playing the role of laborers, Bowles and Gintis argue that the typical classroom setting is reflective of the inequalities in the labor market. According to Bowles and Gintis, schools have a “hidden curriculum” that beyond the stated curriculum teaches children that getting ahead is exclusively a matter of individual effort and achievement and that students should always follow the rules, not complain, and respect authority. They describe how lower class school systems use disciplinary practices that mirror what those students will most likely experience as lower class laborers. The cumulative effects of this “hidden curriculum” are to produce a docile workforce that is easy to control and exploit.

A second way in which primary and secondary schools reflect existing social inequalities is through funding. Nationally, almost half of all property taxes (actual percentages vary by state) are used to fund primary and secondary education. This translates into vast differences in school systems in spending per pupil with nicer schools having superior facilities in the upper-middle class neighborhoods and less funding with poorer facilities for those schools located in lower
income communities. Students at different schools have access to very different tools for
learning, such as is access to computer labs, updated textbooks, or higher teacher salaries that
attract more qualified teachers. Former teacher and social critic Jonathan Kozol (1991) describes
the American education system as one that is marked by “savage inequalities.”

A variation of conflict theory is status-conflict theory, which is based upon Max Weber’s
tripartite theory of stratification. In addition to class divisions in society, Weber argued that there
are also related divisions based on status and power. These axes of inequality overlap but are
analytically distinct. Class refers to the possession of material resources accumulated by
advantage. Status distinctions refer to cultural or life style differences that convey different levels
of honor or respect from others. Power, as defined by Weber is the ability of an individual or
group of individuals to achieve objectives despite resistance from others.

Drawing on this general theory, Randall Collins (1979) argues that educational
credentials are markers of social class distinctions that create artificial barriers of entry for some
and exclusive forms of certification of expertise for others. Collins maintains that education
largely reproduces existing class inequalities in society since acquiring educational credentials is
more of a matter of social class background than individual achievement. Furthermore, as
educational attainment in the general population increases, credential requirements for
occupational positions increasingly exceed the technical requirements for those positions. In this
way, education is largely reproduced across generations but at higher levels of educational
attainment in the population as a whole. Instead of certifying technical expertise, education
functions largely as class-based training in a lifestyle.

Also in line with status conflict theory is Pierre Bourdieu’s (1979) theory of cultural and
social reproduction. The theory of cultural reproduction entails three fundamental ideas: (1)
parental cultural capital is inherited by children, (2) children’s cultural capital is converted into educational credentials, and (3) educational credentials are a major mechanism of social reproduction in advanced capitalist societies (Bourdieu & Passerson 1977). It is important to understand that, cultural capital, by definition is, “the non-financial assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means” (Sullivan 2001). Examples can include: education, intellect, style of speech, and dress or physical appearance. Bourdieu’s theory explained the education system as a catalyst for cultural and social reproduction. The extent to which the education system encourages or discourages topics such as social stratification, resource inequality and discrepancies is not specifically known. It is believed, though, that the primary means through which education determines an individual’s social status, class and hierarchy is through the distribution of cultural capital. The accumulation of this cultural capital determines the individual’s access to resources and opportunities (Sullivan 2001). Essentially, an individual from a family rich in cultural capital will be afforded all of the opportunities for upward social mobility based on social status. His or her educational attainments may or may not reflect pure intellect but rather a combination of intellect, status, class and hierarchy.

Both of the functional and conflict theories agree that the education system serves a sorting purpose, however, they disagree on exactly how that sorting takes place. Functionalists maintain that education sorts primarily based on individual merit while conflict theorists maintain that education sorts primarily based on family and social class background.

Consistent with technical-functional theory it would be expected that with the onset the Great Recession there would be a reduction in the proportion of students selecting college transfer programs. Instead, students would more often seek practical and technical skills and knowledge in vocational or technical fields directed toward specific jobs especially those
positions that would be insulated from outsourcing or downsizing such as positions in health or personnel services. Consistent with status conflict theory, however, we would expect little or no reduction of students selecting transfer programs with the onset of the Great Recession, with students essentially "holding steady" on the prospect of longer term and higher status returns on educational investments. The status conflict theory would suggest that even in the absence of clear prospects for future employment in specific jobs or careers, students would hold out for enhanced status that a four-year degree would potentially yield. This longer term strategy would incur higher risk but also a potentially higher economic return from white collar administrative, professional, or managerial positions that would likely require a college degree to attain.

Moreover, status conflict theory would predict that students selecting college transfer programs compared to vocational or technical programs would more likely come from more privileged social backgrounds. Technical-functional theory, however, would expect only individual variation between students selecting college transfer and vocational/technical programs based on individual aptitude, talent, and skills regardless of social backgrounds.

METHODS

The current study employs a case study method. To examine the potential impact of the Great Recession on community college enrollments, I focus on an in depth and longitudinal analysis of enrollment patterns at Riverside Community College located in Southeastern North Carolina. That is, I examine enrollment trends and student composition at Riverside Community College over a 15-year time span from 2000 to 2015. The fifteen-year time span provides an opportunity to examine enrollment trends before the onset of the Great Recession and continuing through a long period of recovery. Focusing on a particular community college allows an in-depth and detailed analysis of both enrollment trends and student profiles for all students.
enrolled during that period. The purpose of this grounded approach is to identify trends, patterns, and processes that may be suggestive for more general models of explanation.

RCC represents a robust test case for this analysis. With current enrollment of just over ten thousand students RCC is large enough to provide a variety of options for both college transfer and vocational programs. Located in a mid-size metropolitan area surrounded by accessible rural areas, RCC attracts a diverse student population. With the case study, I am using archival data with students as the unit of analysis that includes the intended majors for each student as well as a variety of demographic characteristics of each student. These data represent the total population of new admissions for each academic year. Therefore, the aggregate measures of variables used in this analysis are not population estimates but the actual population parameters resulting in high confidence in the accuracy of student profiles for this case.

Riverside Community College is the sixth largest of the fifty-eight community colleges in North Carolina. With over sixty technical programs and an additional twenty college-transfer tracks there is something to meet almost every student’s needs. Riverside Community College, like all others in the North Carolina Community College system, is funded primarily by the state of North Carolina under the direction of the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges and authorized by the North Carolina General Assembly. A Board of Trustees governs Riverside Community College locally. Riverside Community College is accredited by: The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

In the mid-1950’s, the need for job training in southeastern North Carolina was especially dire. The local economy had slowed since the end of World War II. In 1955, the area’s largest employer, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, announced that it would relocate its corporate headquarters to Jacksonville, Florida. The company’s departure was a huge blow to the area’s
economy. Fortunately in 1957, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill to create a system of Industrial Education Centers around the state. On April 3, 1958, what is now Riverside Community College was founded as one of seven Industrial Education Centers in the state.

Riverside Community College opened a 32,000-square foot facility included shop areas, classrooms, chemistry labs, physics labs, library and a small administrative office and offered courses for high school students during the day and classes for adults at night. Popular courses included radio and television repair service, heating and air conditioning service, internal combustion engine repair and draftsmanship. Graduates were trained for a specific job and went to work right after graduation. The demand for classes was strong right from the start. The 32,000-square foot facility was intended to serve 500 students but 750 students actually attended in the first year.

In addition to providing job training for individual student needs, courses were developed for new or expanding companies and industries that were new to the area as well as those long established. As the job training demands of the community increased, the school quickly outgrew its facilities. The center’s leaders also realized that separate training programs were needed for adult students and the high school students. In 1963, the North Carolina State Legislature approved the Community College Act, which formally established as strictly a training center for adults. High school students continued to use the facility under the supervision of the public school system.

Several decades later, and with the addition of many programs, buildings, faculty members and students, Riverside Community College is still open for business in the same coastal town in Southeastern, North Carolina. Over the years, Riverside Community College has adapted to meet the labor force needs of the coastal region it serves. Riverside Community
College expanded and adapted programs to the needs of major employers in the region. For example, capitalizing on Riverside Community College coastal location, RCC established a Marine Technology and Boat Building Programs that targeted sources of employment in local marine related industries.

In addition to its local economic impact, political considerations at RCC are also important contextual factors. Political considerations are relevant in several ways. First, RCC is funded largely by state funds and is located within both municipal and county jurisdictions. In 2008 Riverside Community College asked local voters to favor a bond referendum that would allow the construction of several new buildings on the main campus as well as a remote campus in a neighboring county. Convincing local voters of the benefits that would go along with expanding the community college proved challenging but not impossible. The bond referendum of 2008 passed with majority voting and all construction associated with the passing is underway, some already complete. Second, is the role of government officials in university governance; RCC is led by a president who reports directly to a thirteen-member board of trustees. The board of trustees is selected in three groups of four members with a final and thirteenth member added by the community college. The first group of trustees is selected via the board of education’s public school administration (and cannot be a member of the board of education) for all counties being served by the community college. Each of the four members must be voted on by the board of education, if more than one county’s board of education is involved in selection each board of education will be represented by a single vote (Citation). The board of commissioners of the county in which the community college is located will elect the second group of four trustees. If the administrative area of the community college consists of more than one county those counties must jointly elect board members for this group. The
governor of the state in which the community college is located selects the third foursome of board members. The thirteenth board member is either the president of the student government association at the community college in question or is the chairman of the executive board of the student body.

Data & Measurement

The data for this project were made available with permission from RCC. The data are derived from admissions records at RCC. The unit of analysis is individual students enrolled at the beginning of each academic year in the fall semester for the years 2000 to 2015. The total number of cases over this 15-year time span equals 131,197. While new students are admitted and enrolled during the spring and summer semesters the fall semester is considered the census semester for data collection as seventy eight percent of the college’s enrollment is in the fall semester. The data are self-reported and derived from student application forms. For the current analysis, a group of specific variables were used based on admissions records.

Academic major was collected for each student. Separate codes are used for each of seventy-eight academic majors in which students may be enrolled. For the current analysis, a dichotomous variable, academic track, was created which collapsed all students enrolled in college transfer programs as equal to 1 and all students enrolled in vocational or technical programs as 0. To gauge the effects of the Great Recession on patterns of community college enrollment, the percent transfer students at RCC in each year from 2000 through 2015 will be related to (1) the percentage of community college enrollment as a proportion of enrollment in 4 year institutions in United States as a whole (2) annual changes in the national unemployment rate, and (3) annual changes in the Gross National Product. Data for the percentage of community college enrollment as a proportion of enrollment in the United States as a whole
available from 2002-2012 are derived from United States Census Bureau and National College Board data. Data for annual change in the national unemployment rate are derived from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Data on annual change in the Gross Domestic Product is derived from the National Bureau for Labor Statistics 2015 report.

I also examine potential differences in the student profiles between college transfer students and vocational education students for the most recent 2015 class of admitted students at RCC. These students are coded as (1) for college transfer and (0) for vocational. The profiles will include comparisons of mean scores for college transfer and vocational/technical programs by age, sex, ethnicity, veteran status, and financial aid status. Age is measured in years old at time of admission. Sex is measured scoring males=1 and females=0. Veteran status is measured as 1= veteran and 0= non-veteran. Full-time versus part-time student status is a dichotomous variable in which all students enrolled in nine or more credit hours as full time are coded as 1 and all of those eight credit hours or lower are coded as 0. The nine-hour threshold for full-time corresponds to Riverside Community College’s definition for full time student status. Ethnicity is measured by a series of dummy variables as follows 1= white, non-Hispanic, and 0=other, 1=black, non-Hispanic and 0=others, 1=Hispanic and 0=others, 1=-American Indian/Alaska native and 0=others, 1=Asian or Pacific Islander and 0=others, and, 1=other, unknown, or multiple and 0=others.

FINDINGS

Figure 1 below depicts the proportion of national community college versus university enrollment using data from the United States Census Bureau for an eleven-year period from 2002 through 2013. The data used to derive Figure 1 can be found in Table 1, Appendix A While enrollments increased in absolute numbers for both 4-year and 2-year enrollments, the pertinent
comparison here is the proportion of these enrollments relative to each other. Over the course of eleven years, national community college enrollments as a proportion of total college enrollment was very stable hovering around 30% with a low of a low of 29% in 2004 to a peak of 31% in 2011. Likewise, University enrollment was similarly static ranging from a low of 68% nationally to a high of 71%. This would indicate that, nationally, the Great Recession did not significantly affect overall community college enrollments.

Figure 1. National Four Year and Two Year College Enrollments as a Percent of Total College Enrollments, 2002-2013

![Chart showing national four-year and two-year college enrollments as a percent of total college enrollments from 2002 to 2013.]

Figure 2 depicts Riverside Community College’s college transfer enrollment versus vocational/technical enrollment over a fifteen-year span from 2000 to 2015. The data from which Figure 2 is derived can be found in Table 2, Appendix A. College transfer enrollment exceeds vocational/technical enrollment every year for the fifteen-year span and represents and overall represents about two thirds of total enrollment at Riverside Community College over this time span. The overall pattern is one of a slight and gradual increase in the proportion of transfer enrollments overtime with the exception of a spike in transfer enrollments in 2006. This spike
precedes the onset of the Great Recession and coincides with the implementation of several new college transfer programs at Riverside Community College. Most of this spike in enrollment came from the establishment of a new programs transfer agreement between the Riverside Community College’s Associate Degree Nursing Program and the Bachelors of Science Nursing program at the local four-year state university. With the establishment of this popular program and others, there was an initial sharp increase in transfer enrollments from 55% in 2005 to 77.3% in 2006. After 2006, the proportion of transfer enrollments subsides over the next two year period to 65.3% 2007 and 59.5% in 2008, the first year of the Great Recession. After 2008, the percentage of college transfer enrollments continues its pre-2006 pattern of gradual and steady increases overtime from 59/5% in 2008 to 67% in 2015. The temporary spike in transfer enrollment between 2006 and 2008 probably reflects pent up demand for the new nursing transfer program that normalizes within a relative short time, returning to the pre-2006 pattern of gradual transfer increases overtime.
Figure 3 depicts the national unemployment rate for the same fifteen-year period, 2000 to 2015. Data for this figure are found in Table 3, Appendix A. The time line indicates lag effect in the increase in unemployment following the initial onset of the Great Recession in 2008 with unemployment rates sharply rising in the following year from 5.1% in 2008 to 9.8% in 2009 and reaching a peak of 11.3% in 2010. After the peak of unemployment in 2010, rates of unemployment more slowly decrease over a long period of recovery from 2011 to 2015, from 10.2% in 2011 to 5.3% in 2015. By 2015, unemployment rate was barely above the national unemployment rate of 5.1 in 2008 at the start of the Great Recession.
Figure 4 depicts the annual rate of change in the Gross National Product from 2001 to 2015. Data for this figure are found in Table 4, Appendix A. This Figure shows a sharp drop in GNP growth from 1.8% growth in 2007 to -0.3 in 2008 representing a -2.1 decline in growth coinciding with the start of the Great Recession. GNP growth experienced additional decline from -0.3 in 2008 to -2.8 in 2009. GNP growth remains below the 0 mark, in the negative range until the beginning of recovery from the Great Recession in 2010 with a sharp increase from the previous year’s record low of -2.8 to +2.5.
Since 2010, growth rates have leveled off at around 2% annually, an improvement since the depths of the Great Recession but still historically sluggish.

**Figure 4. Annual Percent Change in Gross National Production, 2000 to 2015**
Figure 5 depicts the percent of annual change in unemployment rate, GNP, and percent of college transfer enrollment at Riverside Community College from 2001 to 2015. Comparing percent annual change of these variables overtime allows a direct comparison of trends standardized to the same scale. The time period under review spans pre-recession, recession, and post-recession recovery, which provides a test for potential effects of The Great Recession on transfer vs. vocational/technical enrollment, patters at Riverside Community College. Except for a pre-recession spike in transfer enrollments, the trend lines depicted in Figure 5 suggest an overall pattern of gradual rate increases in transfer enrollments (with some modest year to year fluctuation) both pre and post-recession. This pattern of overall gradual increases in transfer enrollments is also consistent with national trends. In short, the data suggest that there was no observable effect of The Great Recession on patterns of transfer vs. vocational enrollments at Riverside Community College.
In addition to examining the potential effects of the Great Recession on community college enrollment patterns, I also looked at the social profiles of college transfer versus vocational technical students at Riverside Community College. For this analysis, I utilized admissions data from Riverside Community College for the most recent year, 2015. The total number of cases for this analysis is 8131. For this analysis, I compare mean scores of available demographic characteristics of the student populations between those enrolled in transfer versus vocational/technical programs. Specially, I compare mean scores of sex, age, ethnicity, veteran status, and fulltime status between transfer and vocational/technical student populations. With the exception of age, all of these variables are nominal level variables in which mean scores can be interpreted as percent by multiplying each score by 100. These mean scores are not population
estimates but actual population parameters based on the entire student population for 2015 enrollments. The results of these comparisons appear in Table 1 below. These findings show that the social profiles of college transfer versus vocational technical students are nearly identical, with only negligible differences between them. Both populations have about 46% male enrollment, about 78% full time enrollment, and about 7% veteran enrollment Average age for both college transfer and vocational/technical students is 27. The largest difference between these two student populations is in ethnicity but the magnitudes of these differences are also negligible. White-Non Hispanic enrollment of students in college transfer programs is only 2% higher than White-Non-Hispanic enrollment in vocational/technical programs and correspondingly Black and Hispanic enrollments in college transfer programs are also both 2% less in college transfer programs than in vocational/technical programs...

Overall, students enrolled at Riverside Community College are likely to be older, have a higher proportion of veterans, a higher proportion of part-time students, and a higher proportion of non-white students than is typical for students enrolled in four year colleges and universities, but there appears to be no significant internal differences in enrollments at Riverside Community College between students enrolled in college transfer and vocational/technical programs
Table 1: Mean Scores of Social Profile Characteristics of College Transfer and Vocational/Technical Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>College Transfer Mean Score</th>
<th>Vocational/Technical Mean Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>26.59</td>
<td>26.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETHNICITY</td>
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<td>.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black, Non-Hispanic</td>
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<td>.16</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
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<td>Others, Unknown, Multiple</td>
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<td>.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrollment Status</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Full-time</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
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</table>
CONCLUSION

This study examined community college enrollment trends over a fifteen-year period from 2000 to 2015. The primary purpose of the study was determine if the onset of the Great Recession of 2008 had any effect on overall community college enrollments as well as the proportion of community college enrollments between college transfer programs and vocational/technical programs. In addition, I compared the social profiles of community college students enrolled in college transfer programs and vocational/technical programs to determine if these programs attracted or recruited students of similar or different social backgrounds.

To examine overall community college enrollment trends, I compared the proportion of total community college enrollment to total enrollment in 4-year colleges and universities from 2003 to 2011 using United States Census Bureau data. This time period spans pre-recession and post-recession periods, which allows for any potential effects of the Great Recession to be detected. I compared these national enrollment trends with two key economic indicators of The Great Recession--changes in the annual unemployment rate and changes in the annual rate of growth of the Gross National Product. As expected, rates of unemployment sharply increased as a result of the onset of the Great Recession beginning in 2008 and then slowly receded during a slow period of recovery. Likewise, rates of growth in the Gross National Product fell precipitously as the Great Recession worsened and but then quickly rebounded and leveled off at historically sluggish rates of growth through the long period of recovery. National enrollment trends for four year versus two-year institutions, however, held steady over the eleven-year timeline at around 70% for four-year university enrollment and college enrollment and near 30% for community college enrollment. This pattern revealed no significant observable changes in
national enrollment trends between community college and four year enrollments as the result of the Great Recession.

While overall enrollments remained steady, it is possible that the Great Recession had an effect on the type of enrollments within community colleges. To consider this possibility, I used an in-depth case study of enrollment patterns over a fifteen year period from 2000 to 2015 in a large, comprehensive community college located in the Southeastern region of the United States designated here as Riverside Community College. The fifteen-year time span for analysis covers enrollment trends leading up to, during, and after the Great Recession. For this time period, I examined the proportion of community college at Riverside Community College enrolled in college transfer programs versus vocational/technical programs. Examinations of these data show that through most of this fifteen-year period, there was a gradual increase in the proportion of community college students enrolled in college transfer programs. In recent years, roughly two thirds of the student body at Riverside Community College has consisted of college transfer students while the remaining roughly one third has consisted of vocational/technical students. This pattern of gradual increase in college transfer enrollments overtime held steady for most of this fifteen-year period except for a brief pre-recession spike in college transfer enrollments beginning in 2006. The spike in enrollment in college transfer programs continued through 2007 and then stabilized to the pattern of more gradual increases through the end of the period under review. The temporary spike in college transfer enrollment is likely due to the addition of new and popular academic programs established at Riverside Community College 2006. The increase in college transfer enrollments continues through 2007 and may represent "pent up" demand for these programs, which subsequently stabilizes. Comparing these trends with changes
in unemployment rates and annual changes in the Gross National Product reveal once again no observable Great Recession effects on patterns of community college enrollments.

Although there is no apparent association between indicators of Great Recession and national enrollment trends or observed Riverside Community College enrollment patterns, this does not preclude the possibility that the Great Recession did affect enrollment patterns. There may be unknown or unmeasured overall effects due to opposing factors that produced no net effects or there may be unknown or unmeasured within group effects. For instance, although there were no significant changes in the total proportion of Riverside Community College students enrolling in college transfer vs. vocational/technical programs as a result of the Great Recession, there may have been differences within these groups. For instance, among students enrolled in college transfer programs, there may be overtime differences in the pattern of specific majors they choose such as between liberal arts and more vocationally oriented college majors. Likewise, within group differences overtime among students enrolled in vocational/tech programs could also have changed overtime such as between industrial arts programs (e.g. welding) and human service programs (e.g. dental technician).

The lack of observable effects of the Great Recession on Riverside’s enrollment pattern is consistent with the assumptions of a status-conflict theory of education. According to this theory, education is attained by individuals based on social status and for the purposes of gaining or holding onto a particular social status. Students enrolled in college transfer programs appear to be “holding steady” in their aspirations for college degrees and presumably higher status occupations despite downturns in the economy. Under the assumption of functional theory of education, it would be expected that students would make academic decisions about academic majors that would more closely match or follow market demand. Under the assumptions of this
theory, we might have expected a decline in college transfer enrollments and a proportional increase in more practical vocational/technical enrollments but this did not occur. One possible mitigating factor in this decision making process is the availability of student loans. The widespread availability of student loans may provide students with the capacity to remain in school, pursuing higher degrees longer without feeling the immediate effects of an economic downturn. The downside of this as a long-term plan is the increasing amount of student debt accumulated and lack of employment prospects in the future that would be needed to repay student loan debt.

To examine the social profiles of college transfer versus vocational/technical students the following variables were considered: age, gender, ethnicity, veteran status, and enrollment status (measured as part-time or full-time). These variables were used to identify potential differences between the social profiles of college transfer and vocational student populations. Overall, there appear to be no significant differences between the social profiles of community college students enrolling college transfer versus vocational/technical programs along these dimensions.

Under the assumption of conflict theory, it would be expected that individuals from disadvantaged groups would be more likely to enroll in vocational/technical programs whereas students from more privileged students would more likely enroll in college transfer programs. However, the social profiles of students for these two groups were nearly identical along the social dimensions measured.

This result is consistent with the assumptions of functional theory, which would predict that differences in students enrolling in these programs would be attributed to individual rather than group differences. That is, differences would be attributed to individual differences in aptitude and interest rather than social background. The current study is lacking the data
necessary to measure individual differences in aptitude and inclination but the data available did not show any differences based on the social factors examined. One of the major limitations of this study, however, is that the social profile does not include measures of economic or social class or social background, factors which according to conflict theory would most likely be responsible for tracking students from disadvantaged backgrounds into vocational/technical programs and students from more privileged backgrounds into college transfer programs.

Another limitation in the current study is the case study method itself. While Riverside Community College is the sixth largest in the North Carolina Community College System and although enrollment trends locally mirror national trends this case does not give us the entire picture of community college enrollment state to state or region by region.

Time constraints as well as limited resources prohibited the inclusion of a student survey for this study. Creating and distributing a survey to students asking about their enrollment decisions and other social influences would have provided information about student perception of factors relevant to their choice of programs from their own point of view and about the specific mechanisms and sources of influence involved in this decision making process. Other data that might have been useful but were not available include data on specific major selections within broad categories of college transfer and vocational/technical programs, data regarding student aptitude and performance, and more specific data on student social class backgrounds.

The primary policy implication of this study is related to enrollment planning for community colleges and efforts to meet the supply and demand of programs and majors. One of the measures by which community colleges in North Carolina are evaluated is the percent of students who find employment, particularly employment in their specific field of study. Other obvious outcome measures include the percent of college transfer students who successfully
transfer and complete their baccalaureate degrees. Decades of changing and shifting have brought us to the community colleges today, which enroll, nationally around thirty percent of all students. Maintaining relevant programs with up-to-the-minute labor market skills and transfer pipelines is an important priority for community colleges.

1 Riverside Community College is a Pseudonym used to protect the identity of both the institution whose data was analyzed as well as any identifying student data
WORKS CITED


V


Data Table for Figure 2: College Transfer versus Vocational/Technical enrollment at Riverside Community College

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<th>% Voc Tech</th>
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Data Table for Figure 3: National Unemployment Rate 2000 to 2015

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Data Table for Figure 4: Annual Percent Change in Gross National Product (GNP) 2000 to 2015

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