

Self-Identity Modification and Intent to Return

Baby Boomers Reinvent Themselves Using the Community College

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This study examines the value importance to baby boomers of the community college as a means to reinvent or modify self-view and how value importance influences intent to return to the college for further educational services. Understanding the reinvention–self-identity modification phenomenon can help institutions create more satisfying environments for baby boomer consumers.

Keywords: *baby boomer; adult learner; lifelong learning; intent to return; self-identity*

In the 21st century, baby boomers once again take center stage as an important demographic just as they did as young adults in the 1960s and 1970s. As 18- to 25-year-olds, the enormous baby boomer cohort was directly related to the increase in community colleges' growth in the 1960s and 1970s. Today the same cohort, now older adults, has returned to the community colleges as older adults for additional learning opportunities.

The purpose of this article is to examine the value importance of the community college to baby boomers as a means to reinvent or modify personal self-view. Much is known about the tangible economic value of attaining community college degrees and certifications. However, less is known about the underlying intangible value or higher end consumer goals such as a positive modified self-identity. Understanding the reinvention–self-identity modification phenomenon that emerged from this research can help community colleges create better environments and more satisfying experiences for the growing baby boomer population. Satisfying experiences can result in repeated use of the community

colleges' educational services and generated revenue for the community college from educational services used by the baby boomers.

Significance

Older adults increasingly represent a larger population in postsecondary education, mostly due to the return of the baby boomer generation, who are currently between 40 and 60 years old. Much has been written about generational characteristics that make the older adult baby boomers different from previous generations (Davies & Love, 2002; Dywald & Flowers, 1990; Grabinski, 1998; Popcorn & Marigold, 1997; Roper Starch Worldwide & American Association of Retired Persons, 1998). For example, compared to previous generations, baby boomers are more likely to live longer, to have different ideas about what retirement means, to consider age 85 versus 65 as senior and elderly, and to have a propensity for lifelong learning (Davies & Love, 2002; Dywald & Flowers, 1990; Grabinski, 1998). In addition, as a generation they have been described as idealist, individualist, self-absorbed yet family oriented, self-reliant, and the "me generation" (Popcorn & Marigold, 1997). Baby boomers have also faced a constant learning and relearning process for career moves, for personal growth, or for changing roles in a society that is much different from that of their parents (Dywald & Flowers, 1990; Grabinski, 1998).

The baby boomers accounted for 56% of the adult learners (i.e., those 25 and older) enrolled in community colleges and universities during the past decade, and now they account for almost 20% of all students in American higher education (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 1999; Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). In community colleges alone, students older than 40 represent more than 16% of the current student population (Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). Previously, similar 40- to 60-year-old cohorts, like the baby boomers' parents, accounted for no more than 9.5% of the total student population in higher education (NCES, 1995).

Many of the baby boomers are in community colleges for personal development, for job-related courses and, to a lesser extent, for transfer courses or remediation courses necessary to gain access to 4-year programs (NCES, 2002). As older adults who have more disposable income than previous generations, a longer working career span, a propensity for continuous learning, and extensive social needs, baby

boomers are poised to take advantage of the community colleges (Davies & Love, 2002; Popcorn & Marigold, 1997; Swank, Hollenbeck, Keenan, & Fisher, 2000). Demographic trends indicate that the number of traditional students (ages 18 to 25) will begin to level out, even drop off after 2011. At the same time, millions of baby boomers will be entering retirement (Administration on Aging, Department of Health and Human Services, 2003; NCES, 2002). Unlike younger students in transfer and workforce development programs who are likely to leave the community college and not quickly return, retired baby boomers are likely to return again and again for multiple learning opportunities (Swank et al., 2000).

Recent surveys on lifelong learning (Swank et al., 2000) showed that of the adults surveyed, approximately 34% of those between the ages of 50 to 59 who were pursuing postsecondary education had enrolled in a community college. A majority of those surveyed (62%) preferred to attend community seminars or workshops rather than community colleges. This preference suggests that a significant market share of baby boomers who have the option of attending the community college for lifelong learning choose not to do so, even though community colleges provide the group format for instruction (e.g., classroom, workshops, or group settings) that baby boomers prefer (Swank et al., 2000). Baby boomers in their retirement years represent a large untapped market and potential revenue for the community college, especially in the area of community educational services. The more community colleges understand how baby boomers define value importance as consumers of community college services, the more likely community colleges will be able to attract this growing population.

Theoretical Framework

This article presents a grounded theory about baby boomers' value importance regarding the community college and how value importance relates to a positive modified self-identity and the baby boomers' intent to use community college services again after an initial experience. Understanding value importance and the desired value outcome has practical applications in existing value frameworks used for market research that helps determine core needs and desires of certain target groups (Woodruff, Cadotte, & Jenkins, 1983; Woodruff & Gardial, 1996; Zajonc

& Markus, 1982; Zeithaml, 1988). Reinvention of self within a consumer framework can be demonstrated by consumers purchasing products or services that are congruent with or enhance their actual or ideal self (Malhotra, 1988).

Judgments based on the adult learner's perceptions as a consumer assign different levels of value importance as determined by the learner's desired end state (Woodruff & Gardial, 1996). The level of value importance assigned can affect consumer behavior in that consumers may place a substantial value on a service or product but may not desire to use it again or display any loyalty toward the product or service, given other options. A consumer's loyalty or intent to use a product or service again is an indicator of high value importance (Barnes, 2001; Gwinner, Gremler, & Bitner, 1998; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Neal, 1999; Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002; Woodruff & Gardial, 1996).

Reinvention can be defined as a cultural norm and consumer activity. The reinvention phenomenon as it relates to the baby boomer cohort can be considered as a quest in defining oneself and is somewhat existential in nature. The questions of youth, "Who am I?" or "Who will I be?" become the question, "Who could I be?" in middle age (Odone, 1998).

The quest for self-definition has also caused the baby boomer cohort to become inner-directed consumers (Kahle, 1995). To baby boomers, reinvention is an actionable consumer activity (Malhotra, 1988). The amplified "inwardness" behavior demonstrated by the aging baby boomers is also reflected in the way they purchase goods and services. Marketers have keyed in on the aging baby boomer mantra, "Who could I be?" based on the ageless consumer ideal. Market and lifestyle industries have created an idealized culture of an "ageless consumer" (Katz & Marshall, 2003). Positive ideals of aging grounded in improved health, independence, well-being, and mobility, converging with an aging consumer society, have replaced the negative stereotypes of decline and dependency in aging, making reinvention quite acceptable (Katz & Marshall, 2003).

Method

A qualitative grounded theory approach was used to gain an understanding of how a cohort of baby boomers attending a community college defined value importance in their educational experiences as consumers and an overall understanding of their valuing process and consumer

behavior in the community college setting. This study, conducted over 2 years, was purposefully designed to include baby boomers who had varied life experiences and were actively attending a community college at the time of the study.

Two sites were used. The initial site, Site A, is a large (16,000 full-time equivalent [FTE] students), comprehensive Florida community college with five campuses serving a large regional population. It is located in a highly diverse, densely populated metropolitan area. Site A was chosen because the target demographic of ages 38 to 58 (cohort age at the time of the study) makes up approximately 19% of students attending the college. At Site A, 13 baby boomers were chosen to participate in the study.

Site B was chosen for purposes of discriminant sampling to test how the emerging themes from the initial site would hold up if more information were gathered from similar participants in similar situations but different locations. Site B is also a sizeable (13,000 students), comprehensive community college in Florida. The baby boomer population makes up about 8% of the total student population. At Site B, 4 baby boomers were chosen to participate in the study.

Access to sites used in this study was given by the academic administration of each campus. At Site A, an e-mail request went to all instructors on campus asking if they had baby boomers in their classes, if they would announce the study, if they would distribute flyers, and if they themselves would be willing to participate in an interview if necessary. At Site B, department heads and student services programs on campus helped identify faculty who had older students in their classes. Participants were also recruited through posters distributed in campus public areas and by referral from participants already interviewed. A lunch certificate was promised to anyone who helped recruit a qualified baby boomer. During the course of the study, participants were added using discriminant sampling and constant comparative analysis techniques. Discriminant sampling is a technique used to test how emerging theories and propositions from the initial site hold up if more information is gathered from similar participants in similar situations but different locations. Constant comparative analysis helped verify stories and situations told by the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically at Site B, some baby boomers who were not attending the college were recruited through baby boomer participants, as well as faculty who had baby boomers in their classes.

A core group of 17 participants using different community college programs and at different stages in their programs supplied the initial data

that were investigated and provided the foundation for the analysis. All 17 were interviewed at least once, and 8 of the 17 participants were interviewed twice. Comparative interviews were done with 3 baby boomers who were not attending a community college at the time of the study. Confirming and comparative interviews were also done with 2 faculty members who periodically have baby boomers in their classes.

In total, data were collected via 30 interviews with 22 individuals and four field observations. Twenty of the individuals interviewed were baby boomers between the ages of 41 and 54. Of the baby boomer participants, 12 were female, 8 were male, 15 were White, and 5 were African American. The modal age for the participants was 48 years with a mean of 47.5. Two additional interviews with faculty members who were not baby boomers (ages 32 and 63) were conducted to collect comparative and confirming data.

Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 and 1/2 hours. All but three interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Data from the three interviews that were not audiotaped were constructed from interview notes. Interview notes were confirmed with member checks.

Interview questions were initially open-ended, grand tour questions designed to guide participants to talk about how they valued their experiences at the community college, the antecedent and present conditions that shaped their experience and value judgment, their proficiency as learners, and their expectations of the community college experience. Data collected from the guiding question generated evolving subquestions that continued to develop as a result of the themes that emerged.

Reliability of interview questions and confirmation of interview data were done through iterative comparison of data coming from the baby boomers' interviews at both sites, interviews with baby boomers not attending a community college, and interviews with faculty members who had baby boomers in their classes. At both sites, field observations were also done in classrooms and community college support groups containing baby boomers and were used to confirm conditions or interactions described by the participants who were attending a community college. Final verification of the researchers' interpretation of the interviews and stories told was done via member checks at the end of the analysis.

The overall analysis consisted of inductive and thematic categorizing of the narrative data in three progressive stages. The analysis began with an open coding process at the individual interview level and then from all interviews at Site A. Interviews from Site B were incorporated for

cross-comparisons: that is, similar participants, in similar situations, but at different locations. In addition, nonattending baby boomers outside the core 17 participants, faculty interviews, and field observations were incorporated not only in the initial stage but also in subsequent stages for confirmation and comparison. In the second stage of analysis, general categories with properties and dimensions that emerged from the initial stage of data analysis were compared and examined for interconnecting relationships, especially along the dimensions of the category properties. In the third stage, categories were reduced from many cases into concepts and sets of relational statements that formed central categories, a framework, and an analytical narrative to explain what emerged as central themes and concepts. The analytical narratives serve as examples of the processes and help illustrate the constructs that emerged from this study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

The findings of this study provide new perspectives on the value baby boomer students place on their interactions with the community college. Community colleges have generally focused on raising the socioeconomic status of adults who need more money through better job opportunities or transfer to institutions for degrees leading eventually to careers (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). Although some participants in this study were looking for improved incomes, all possessed some sense of financial security and self-reliance.

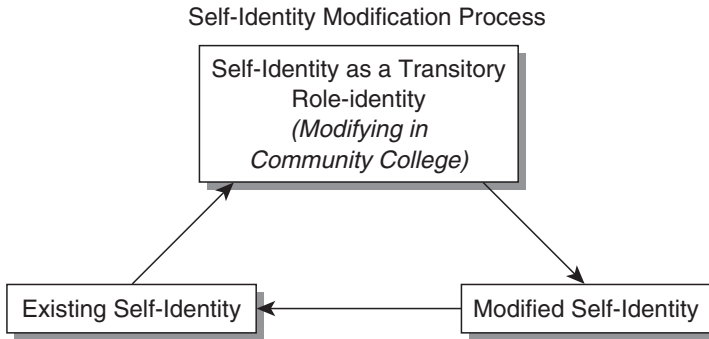
I have my early retirement coming in and my wife works so we're okay. I could get a job without a degree. This is really a shot to improve my education and help me with life after the retail world. (Tony)

I'm taking a hit financially for now. If it doesn't work out, I'll go back to what I was doing. I can take care of myself as far as making money. (Don)

Participants' value importance appeared focused on utilizing the community college to reinvent their self-view. Reinvention emerged as a central theme in this study. The following examples from the interview data illustrate a recurring theme of participants trying to adjust self-identity.

You know things happen to you and you lose some of your identity. So I needed a new me. (Jane)

Figure 1
Self-Identity Modification Process



Okay, so, like, I'm reinventing myself. Yeah, that's a good way to put it. That's a real good way to put it. Reinventing myself, yes, I am! (Michelle)

I'll always be me, mind you. Hey, I'm tweaking [who I am]. (Caryn)

Reinvention in this study is operationally conceptualized as self-identity modification (SIM; see Figure 1). The SIM model emerged from the interview data. Value importance connected with SIM influenced the participants' intent to return to the community college for further educational services and emerged as a major influence in the valuing process of the participants of this study.

SIM is a simple self-change model that describes how participants reinvent how they see themselves (their self-identity), utilizing the community college as the modifying agent. The model presented in this study is similar to the social psychology models in that there is a start (existing self-identity), a transition (transitory role-identity), and an outcome (modified self-identity). SIM, however, departs from the other change models in that the degree of change does not have to be profound; nor is it the expectation of the participant that it be profound or permanent. The modified self-identity becomes existing self-identity and the process can start once more when there is a new desire to tweak or modify again.

The SIM process can be used for tweaking, shifting, or restacking a set of role identities that make up the master status of self-identity. It is also

used for creating new master statuses for self-identity, as in the case of John, a retired military person whose master status of soldier is moving to master status of civilian.

Some people don't realize how hard it is to move from one world to another. It's a culture shock in some respect, especially how you see yourself fitting in. (John)

SIM can be a continuing change process that focuses more on further modification of self-identity (I can change if I want to) as a response to small or large internal and external changes in participants' lives.

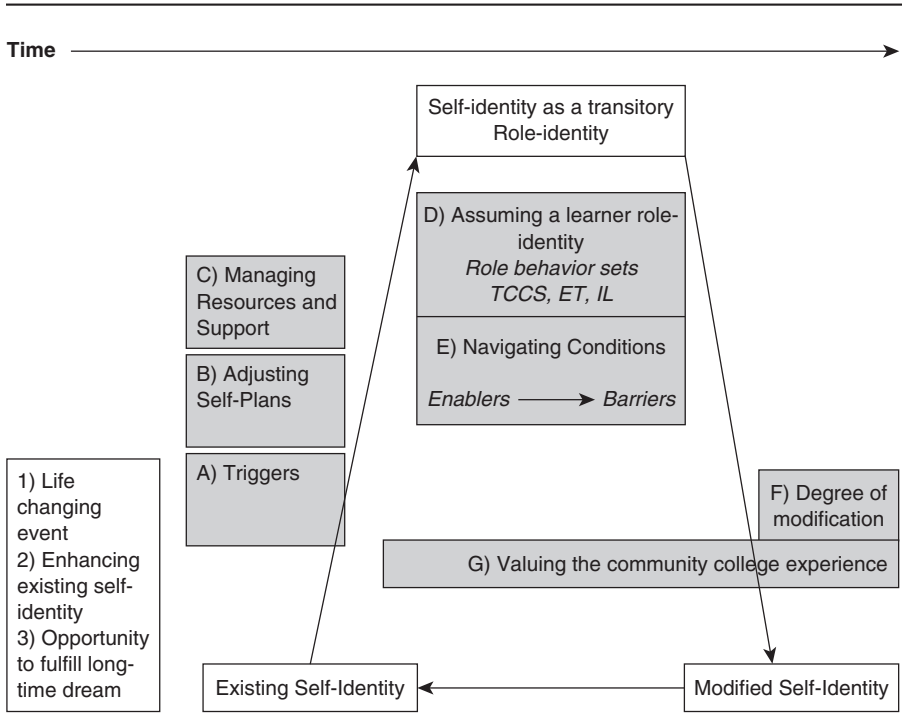
One phenomenon that emerged from the data is that a preference by the participant can be developed for the transitory role as a favored way to modify again. Thus, the transitory role of learner becomes a preferred means to a desired end state of self-identity or ideal self-view. If the desire for reinvention is there and a preference for the learner role identity is not developed, other competing transitory roles may also be used as a means to a desired self-identity. For example, buying a motorcycle, driving the motorcycle, and becoming a weekend outlaw biker could be a transitory role and used as a means to a modified self-identity—a freewheeling, exciting person.

All and all the experience of being a student again and going to [community college] was good. It helped me transition from the military into civilian life. I enjoyed being a student and I could fall right back into it if I decide to go back and I will, like maybe photography, I miss the stimulation . . . but like when I first started I'd get frustrated feeling out of place and sometimes I wanted to say [forget it] to the whole thing, get on my Harley and just ride. Easy rider and all that you know [laugh]. (Betty)

Constructs Supporting Self-Identity Modification

There are seven constructs of SIM that support the model and show general steps or stages older adults go through to achieve a modified self-identity utilizing the community college (see Figure 2). The constructs fall under the general stages of SIM: existing self-identity, transitory role-identity, and modified self-identity. In the context of a consumer activity, value importance is brought in, formulated, and assessed through these stages. The following construct descriptions and examples from the interview data illustrate how the stages and seven constructs influence value importance in the context of a consumer activity.

Figure 2
The Self-Identity Modification (SIM) Process Using
the Community College as Modifier



Note: TCCS = typical community college student; ET = excited thinker; IL = integrated learner.

Existing Self-Identity

1. Triggering the SIM and community college experience. This is a construct that frames and explains external events or internal epiphanies that motivated the participants to use the community college to modify themselves in some way. Three triggers were identified in this study. The triggers fell into three categories: life-changing events, desire to enhance existing self-identity, and opportunities to pursue a lifelong dream. Value importance was brought in through expectations. Depending on the trigger, value importance was based on initial value perspectives: what the

participants perceived cognitively about the community college (classes available, cost, location, etc.) and emotional anticipation about the experience (will I fit in; how will the community college, younger students, faculty, friends, and others perceive me; etc.). The triggers fell along a dimensional range that went from internally to externally driven. Life-changing events tended to be very external events and carried substantial emotional perspective:

I retired from the army in 1988, and after I retired, I retired the end of February of '88, and I went to work for a . . . company in March of '88. I liked it 'cause they ran it a lot like the military. I stayed with them until December of '99, and in December of '99 they decided they didn't need my position anymore so they did away with it. And here I was in '99; I was out on the street . . . I feel like I have a lot to give but nowhere to give it. (Stan)

Opportunities to pursue lifelong dreams appeared more internally driven and also carried substantial emotional perspective:

I earned a living for 30 years doing something I never liked and now I have an opportunity to get back and do what I want. I'll earn much less money teaching school than I earned as a secretary. It's more a . . . it's just doing what I want to do. I always wanted to teach; I want to do this. It's doing something that has meaning to it. (Lani)

Desires to enhance existing self-identity were usually described as driven internally and externally. Enhancing existing self-identity had substantial emotional perspective but could also carry substantial utility:

I would either have status quo or be going backwards, so if I wanted to continue to grow, I needed to get a degree. And believe me when you're stagnant for a while at my age things fall apart, body, mind, earning power—one of those things was starting to be my self-esteem. (Sondra)

My younger brother got his master's recently and during holiday get-togethers I hear all about how it got him where he is today. I feel kind of pigeonholed career wise without some kind of degree. But to show him I could do something like that, too . . . that would be worth every penny. (Andy)

2. *Adjusting self-plans.* Adjusting self-plans frames the degree to which a participant was able to step out of familiar role behaviors and role

identities to modify his or her self-identity. The self-plan's value is its use as an internal self-regulating system. Self-plans helped give the participants a flexible and strategic framework for connecting old self-identity, transitory role-identity, and expected modified self-identity.

Sometimes you just have a hard time presenting yourself to people. I mean you have to think about it sometimes. I've been a working mom for years. Now sometimes I'll say I'm a student at [community college] and it's weird. I mean I'm still a mom although my kids are grown. But I prefer to say I'm going to be a teacher. So that's how I describe myself now, "a teacher to be." (Lani)

I've had people tell me I'm dumb and stupid all my life and maybe I'd accepted that as who I was. But I'm in college and I'm proving them wrong. And on top of that I'm a good role model to my kid. (Kathy)

3. Managing resources and support. Related to but different from adjusting self-plans, managing resources and support frames the properties and purpose of an external regulating system for participants. To manage the SIM process, participants needed to build or adjust external support and resource systems that allowed them to continue with their endeavor.

My family is my support. Very, very, much so. Without it, it wouldn't fly. . . . My computer had pretty much slowed. It was obsolete . . . it didn't work. Mom and Dad helped me take care of that. At first financially, and then had me in contact with somebody who could [fix the computer]. That shows me that they were definitely behind me . . . gives me a good feeling. (Larry)

Transitory Role Identity

4. Assuming the learner role identity. This is the construct that frames and explains a particular transitory role identity with role behavior sets that the participants used to navigate the community college experience and accomplish their modification. Value importance is formulated in the transitory role identity stage as value perspectives are mitigated or enhanced or as new value perspectives are created. For example, three role behavior sets were identified in this study: typical community college student, excited thinker, and integrated learner. The role behavior sets formed a continuum from utility-based cognitive behaviors to more affective relational behaviors. Each served a purpose depending on the value importance placed on

the role behavior set. Value perspectives initially brought into the classroom could evolve when participants moved from one set of role behaviors to the next, affecting the value importance of the learner role identity.

A. Typical community college students. The typical community college student role behavior set is based on conforming to the norms of the younger traditional students who are in the classroom. Typical community college student norms described by participants included a performance orientation, more concern about what specifically will be on tests, and what grade they received rather than concern for the total content and context of the class. The value importance of the typical community college student role behavior is that it can be used for mimicking or blending in with the younger students to cope with alienation, or in some cases disguising overqualification.

I pretended I was like the young students around me looking like I knew what was going on. I kept bugging the poor kid next to me [about] what he thought would be on the quizzes; what page that was on and so on. I sat in the back of every one of my classes. . . I was afraid I would get called on or something. (Jane)

I've been to graduate school . . . you do well because they're teaching to a broader audience. It gives me a little advantage . . . basically you can sit back in class, wait for what you need to know, and come out looking like an Einstein as far as grades. You get the first two or three As and you're a group leader on projects. and so on. . . Yeah, it makes you feel smart relative to the class for the hour or so you're there. (Leonard)

B. Excited thinkers. The excited thinker role behavior set is based on competing with the norms of younger traditional students. The behavior perspective is very content-oriented versus grade- and performance-oriented. If there are other baby boomers or older students in the class, they may form a cohort. The value importance in this role behavior set is that the classroom is a place of excitement and mental energy and is a chance to show off. Once comfortable with their learner role identity, some participants assert more control of the classroom, especially during discussions.

I'm stoked about learning now, and I, just different times during this year I've had this feeling like I really just wanted to learn everything. Like, if I could just get a funnel and stick it right here [pointing to head] and just let people just start pouring things in, you know. (Maria)

A faculty member supports Maria's sense of excitement:

God love them, they are the students you dream about in terms of their enthusiasm, interest, and the quality of work they turn out. But I got to tell you some times they are a real pain in the ass—you can't get them to shut up and I've even had an occasion when I had a group of the older students, well, the boomers, and we carried the class for an extra half hour that night about American culture in the sixties. You should have seen the younger students rolling their eyes and looking at me like do something about this. But, you know, it was a good discussion, and I admit I was getting into it, too. (Faculty member)

C. Integrated learners. The integrated learner role behavior set is based on developing and defining the participants' own norms, criteria, and expertise as learners and its usefulness for modifying their self-view. The role behavior set is context- as well as content-oriented. Although most participants maintained high GPAs, the participants' standards rather than the community college's standards gauged performance for the integrated learner category. Instead of trying to assume a past role identity as a younger, traditional-age student of the community college, the mature students' role becomes integrated into their lifestyle as a viable role identity and tool for excitement and self-actualization within the context of how they view themselves.

Now I feel that any day that goes by without learning something is a day wasted and that is a code I'll live the rest of my life. This experience gave me more than a career. I'm a new person . . . there are many new possibilities for me now. [Community college] is a good place to explore possibilities! I see using the community college again on down the road. [It's a] good way to refresh your head and your worth. (Jane)

I'm not afraid to use the college anymore. I see it as a resource for me especially as I get close to retirement and pursue interests, maybe a business, and maybe even a new career. I don't think my retirement will be like my folks'. (Ned)

5. Navigating conditions. This is a construct that frames how participants in their transitory role identity steered through conditions generated in the community college experience. For navigating conditions, value importance is expressed in terms of the ability to steer away from barriers and toward enablers to a desired degree of modification in the transitory

role given the conditions generated by the experience. The inability to navigate successfully can impact value perspective. The dimensionalized ranges of the construct consisted of enablers and barriers. For example, the community college can create enabling conditions for dealing with barriers to SIM outside the community college. It can positively enhance an emotional/affective value perspective.

I go and visit my faculty friends, hang out in the computer lab. I try to get my homework done. I could stay here all day sometimes, and I feel really, I'm happy about it. I'm happy I'm in school. I'm enjoying the time I spend there. Makes my home life, with the exception of my grandkids, seem sort of unexciting and nobody [at home] really wants to talk about my school . . . my boyfriend will talk about it a little bit, but then he wants me to shut up and he starts saying some derogatory things, so then I get pissed and I leave [and] sometimes [go] back to the library if it is open. (Maria)

The community college can also create conditions considered barriers to SIM by the participants. Barriers were defined in this study as obstacles, restraints, and hindrances that restricted the efforts of the participants in using the community college as a self-identity modifier. Barriers can negatively affect a cognitive value perspective (what is thought to be known about the community college).

One of the negatives about [the community college] is that I don't think the academic advisors listen to the older students or prospective [older] students thoroughly enough to understand what they want to do or what their background is up to that point. I was under the impression they would be more helpful than they were in that way. (Lani)

Modified Self-Identity

6. Degree of modification. This construct frames the participants' dimensionalized goal and outcome of their reinvention effort. The degree of modification formed a continuum, from modest to more profound levels of SIM. A lower degree of modification is seen in the following example:

I was basically relearning things—sort of a waste. No big change as a result, but I liked the folks in the class. Talking to them sort of gave me a bigger picture of the world than what I was used to. I came out feeling a little more informed [about the world around], a little changed in that way. (Stan)

The following shows a higher degree of modification:

You lose some of your identity. So I needed a new me. . . . I'm a new person.
(Jane)

7. *Valuing the experience.* This construct frames forming value perceptions about the degree of modification that is filtered through cognitive/affective value criteria. Valuing the experience starts with the initial value perspectives of the community college. Value perspective assessments reoccurred during the participants' experience (especially in their transitory roles as learners) where initial value perceptions percolate and are adjusted. As the participants' value assessments are adjusted through their experiences, the cognitive and affective value perceptions are mitigated or enhanced. The buyer–seller relationship is linked to the value assessment as a conceptualized association with the community college that can be objective, transactional, and affiliated with a cognitive value perception (discrete, short-term, and detached) or subjective, relational, and affiliated with an affective value perception (entrusted, long-term, and connected).

The cognitive value criteria are based on what is known about the tangible services rendered at the community college. The cognitive value criteria described by participants consisted of the following:

1. The utility of the service: What good will a certification, class, or degree do for my career or avocation?
2. The cost defined as the value of the service against similar options for similar services.
3. Quality defined in terms of faculty expertise and facilities.
4. Ease of access and exit from the community college: How easy is it to get in and out of the community college programs quickly?
5. The buyer (student)/seller (community college) exchange as a transactional, short-term, and low-involvement relationship based on money for services rendered.

In contrast, the affective value criteria described by the participants consisted of the following:

1. Connection with the community college: Can I connect and relate with the community college experience?
2. Cost defined as social risk in modifying self-identity: Will I lose status? Will family and friends accept what I'm doing? Will I fit in?
3. Quality defined in terms of the experience and relationship with the community college.

4. Ease of access back into the community college as more important than getting in and out quickly.
5. The buyer–seller exchange as a high involvement, longer term relationship based on a relational commitment to understanding the participant’s needs, and the mutual benefit to both the participant and the community college.

In the last stage of SIM, the participants made a value determination about the community college. The value determination was based on the value importance they placed on the community college’s usefulness in helping them achieve a new self-view. Value importance was based on an assessment of the transitory learner role identity and the community college in facilitating the participants’ SIM. Value importance for the participants was influenced by the degree of modification and by cognitive and affective value perceptions about how they felt they had changed and their exchanges with the community college. Value importance was an important factor for the participants in determining their intent to use the community college again for SIM.

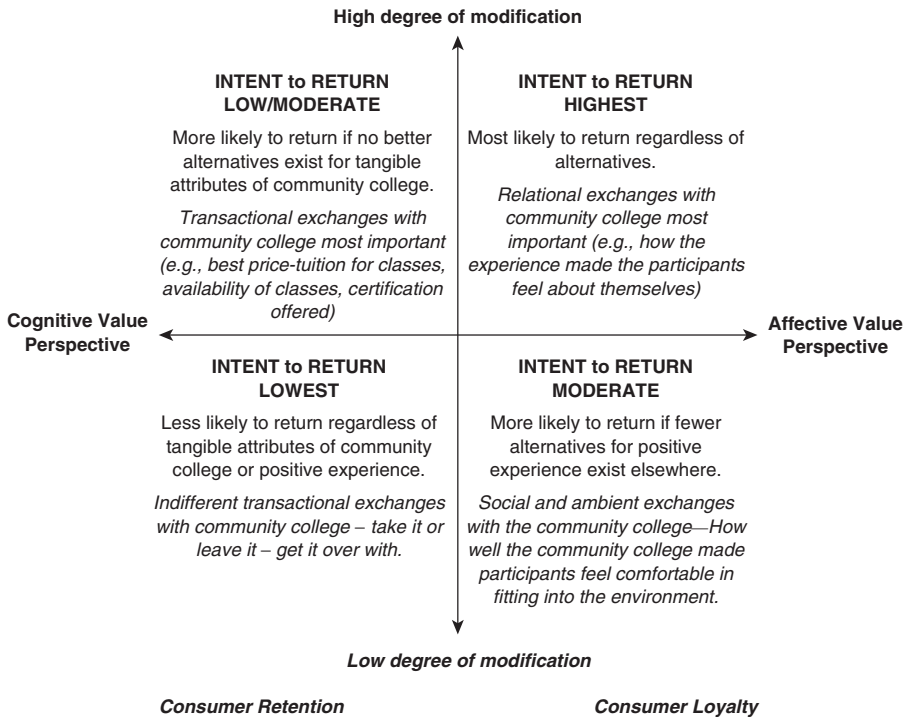
Determination of Value Importance and Intent to Return

Like all grounded theory approaches, the findings of this study carry considerable limitations for generalization. The findings can only speak for the substantive population and setting. However, the model presented in this study brings attention to substantial examples of how the baby boomer participants of this study placed value importance on their community college experience. From the examples, two important considerations are brought to the forefront:

1. While modifying self-identity, a preference by the participant can be developed for the transitory role as a favored way to modify again. Once the participants feel comfortable with the transitory role identity, develop some expertise in playing the role, and have success with that role in modifying self-view, there is a preference to use that role again when they want to reinvent or tweak who they are. Evidence of the preference for the transitory role would be the participants’ intent to return for more educational services.
2. The degree of modification across value perspectives developed while valuing the experience affects, and can point to, the participants’ intent to return.

By crosscutting the last two constructs of the SIM model (6. Degree of Modification; and 7. Valuing the Experience) along their dimensioned

Figure 3
The Intent to Return



continuums, a framework can be created for examining intent to return (see Figure 3). The 2×2 model creates an axis and quadrants of perceived high to low degrees of modification and perceived cognitive to affective value perspectives. Where participants' value perceptions and degree of modification ended up across the framework influenced their described intent to return.

In addition, the four quadrants of the 2×2 model can be used to examine competitive advantage in attracting and keeping participants. The left side of the 2×2 model represents consumer retention or secured patronage; the right side of the 2×2 model is based on consumer loyalty. Consumer loyalty is built more on established relationships, ones with emotional investment (e.g., I want to go to the community college

because they know my desires); whereas retention is built on secured patronage, the reliance and assumption of retaining the same target group of consumers based on price and product (Barnes, 2001; Neal, 1999). Community colleges have traditionally assumed secured patronage in that they will always have incoming cohorts of traditional-age students and working adults to attend their facilities based on community colleges' accessibility (e.g., I go to the community college because it is the only option that I can afford or the only higher education institution that will let me participate) (Alfred, 1998).

Individuals who perceived a low degree of modification and described the value more cognitively had the lowest intent to return regardless of accessibility, convenience, cost, or a positive experience. Although a few participants minimally described their perceptions in this quadrant, most participants were more likely to describe how they perceived traditional-age students' (ages 18 to 25) value perceptions in this category.

Of course you could go to community college for some type of training that someone might require without much mental strain. Like if my boss made me go. (Don)

A baby boomer participant describes her perception of the traditional-age student:

What's going to be on the test? Oh, I hate that question now. I can see the teacher's body cringe when they hear that. I cringe now. . . . Those kids don't care about anything else especially what they could learn. Just a grade to get by. As far as what I see, they're never going to look at this stuff again. They basically want to check the class off their list, get it over with, and move on. How valuable is that? (Lani)

Participants who perceived a high degree of modification and described the value more cognitively expressed a low to moderate intent to return. They placed importance on product and price and preferred discrete transactional exchanges or business relationship with the community college. They were less likely to return if better alternatives exist for cost, convenience, and accessibility.

This is not a put down, but as far as shopping for college, community college is like a super Wal-Mart. You can get good stuff at good prices if you look around. There are other options out there that are just as good. (David)

Participants who perceived a low degree of modification and described value more affectively expressed a moderate intent to return. They placed importance on how well the community college made them feel comfortable in fitting into the social environment. They were more likely to return if no other alternatives for a positive experience exist and more likely to leave if they felt they did not fit in.

Not all classes are like this at [community college], but sometimes I go to the first day of classes at the [community college] the first thing I see are these little desks and when my anatomy doesn't fit comfortably it's a turn off. On top of that I get the impression the younger students, kids, really, are judging why I'm there. My church has a lot of activities and personal enrichment courses that I know I'd be more comfortable with both the furniture and the people. If they offered the history course there I'd go. The CC just needs to be aware that one size does not fit all students, especially older ones. (Bridgette)

Participants who perceived a high degree of modification and described the value more affectively expressed the highest intent to return. They recognized and placed importance on how well the community college made them feel about themselves. Equally important were relational exchanges with community colleges, that is, relationships built on trust, loyalty, and commitment to the institution.

What this experience did for me! . . . I mean I drive by the campus near my house with a whole new respect for what community college did for me, how I look at myself and the world around me. For one thing, from this I look at the world and want to devour all the knowledge I can. The more I learn, the more I discover there is to learn. To get a classroom fix I'd go back to community college after graduation. (Lani)

A key variable in the participants' intent to return to the community college for future services was the development of relational exchanges and affective value perspectives about the relationship with the community college in helping them accomplish a successful degree of SIM. All participants in this study expressed a substantial affective value perspective, regardless of the level of modification. The higher the levels of modification success at or beyond their initial expectation, the more likely the participants were to express intent to return.

Discussion

As postsecondary environments become more competitive, community colleges can benefit from revenues generated from nontraditional students like the older adult baby boomers. This article brings to the forefront new variables for consideration in serving older populations like the baby boomers who are attending community colleges. The first is that, although the baby boomers as consumers may use the community college in a utilitarian fashion, the value importance attached to using the service can be much more affective in nature and tied to phenomena like reinvention or SIM. Second, a preference by the participant can be developed for the transitory role as a favored way to modify self-identity in the future. Once the participants feel comfortable with the transitory learner role identity, develop some expertise in playing the role, and have success with that role in modifying self-view, there is a preference to use that role again when they want to reinvent or tweak who they are. Third, community colleges may want to consider strategies that entice retiring baby boomers to use their services over and over again, especially in community education and continuing education. Such a strategy might focus on consumer loyalty rather than on consumer retention. Secured patronage represents the environment that community colleges conventionally operate in by serving traditional students and workforce development needs. Market share in secured patronage environments can be lost to competition if more attractive and less costly options are available. Consumer loyalty focuses on consumer relationships that remain in spite of other options available and a cultivated return on investment through repeated buyer-seller exchanges that replace specific one-shot exchanges. Moving more toward a “consumer loyalty” market strategy may represent unrealized capacity for community colleges in improving services to older adults like the baby boomers.

The value importance of SIM is associated with intangible higher end consumer goals and self-actualization and less with the utility of getting a community college certificate. Encouraging older adult students in their transitory learner role identity to use role behavior sets like those described by “excited thinkers” and “integrated learners,” or by creating environments that nurture those behaviors, can create the positive experiences that influence and enhance a successful SIM. Helping the baby boomers develop a preference for the learner role identity to adjust their

self-view can also increase the chance the baby boomer will use the community college's services again. Associating positive affective and emotional experiences with a product or service can create a stable and durable relationship between buyers and sellers, leading to loyalty (Barnes, 2001; Fournier, 1998). These types of associations can distinguish the difference between loyalty and retention. Developing consumer loyalty toward the community college can increase the chance that when given a choice of similar alternative options for educational services, the baby boomer as consumer will choose the community college rather than other alternative options.

For community colleges interested in attracting the aging baby boomers, this article provides a foundation for understanding value importance as it relates to the phenomenon of reinvention or SIM and the aging baby boomer in the community college setting. In a broader sense, understanding underlying value importance can be a useful tool in understanding the populations that community colleges serve as well. Secured patronage as a competitive strategy may work well where there is a stable economic need to serve traditional-age students (18 to 25) and working adults (25 to 35) and where there are limited options available for degree, certification, or continuing education. Developing consumer loyalty may be a better focused competitive strategy in areas where traditional-age students (18 to 25) are decreasing, the working adults' age is increasing (35+), the population of adults reaching retirement age is increasing, and where there are competing options for services. The key to developing consumer loyalty among older adults is understanding value importance as defined by older adults, not necessarily by the status quo value propositions currently presented to them by the community college. The baby boomers' potential as an educational market is apparent, and the opportunity to provide services certainly should be taken into consideration by community colleges, especially in community and continuing education programs. As baby boomers enter their retirement years, this market population will become even more relevant to the community college.

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