In what ways are community college students making decisions about their academic majors and/or potential careers?

- **In what ways are students' intersecting identities relevant to their academic majors/ careers decision-making process?**

- **What is the role of family, friends, and institutional agents (primarily faculty) in this process?**

Nia Brown

Nia Brown is a 19-year-old, transfer student, of African American descent, currently pursuing a Biology (marine) major at PCC. With the consistent guidance and support from her parents and different institutional agents, Nia dreams of one day becoming a marine biologist, architect, teacher, or even psychiatrist. Nia would be happy with any of these career paths as long as she gets the opportunity to help people and live by the water. In her words Nia explains, **"and so I knew that no matter what I do, whether I change a major completely into, like saying if I became a teacher or if I went with Marine biology or even opening up my own psychiatric therapy, it all has to revolve around being near water because that makes me feel more complete, it makes me feel at ease and happy with helping people in their healing process."**

Although Nia is still somewhat open to her career options, several factors are grounding her major/occupational decision process. First, Nia has engaged in different activities that have allowed her to explore in depth aspects of her career aspirations. Second, Nia has had consistent support from her parents, faculty, and advisors as she has ventured into college and her major. Finally, while Nia is very in tune with her talents and needs and has a strong sense of agency undergirding the process of solidifying her professional identity.

Nia has always wanted to become a marine biologist but at her prior institution, decided to major in psychology. Nia made this decision because part of her also wanted to help people with mental health needs. However, after she transferred to PCC, she realized that her real passion was becoming a marine biologist. Nia explains, **"[when I came to PCC I decided] I'm done with it as a major. I'm sticking to Marine biology until I transfer out to my actual four year university, hopefully next year I will, and then I would pick up a minor in architecture, they just don't offer a minor in architecture here, but psychology is more of just a personal thing that I love to do to help people, but not something that I would go into a full career to charge people for."** In terms of marine biology, Nia had actively explored different aspects of this profession while she was younger and in high school. Nia explains **"Yeah, when I was younger I would go on college trips all the time, and I specifically targeted colleges that let you shadow their students for a week or a day, and I got to see what it's like being a Marine biologist, and being on the field and going into research labs versus actually being on boats all day and things like that... I know that there's a lot of different categories of Marine biologists. There's some who drive the submarines around there, some who build submarines and vessels that go underground. There's some who just collect data of shells and fish to track**

how they move and where they live and what affects what to deal with the population." Nia herself wants to be the type of marine biologist that works in a submarine and even has already spent time in one.

Throughout her time at PCC, Nia has received instrumental support from her parents, faculty, and counselors, which have given her navigational capital to make crucial decisions in her college journey. From a very early age, Nia says her parents told her that attending college was important, only if it applied to her career. Nia's dad attended trade school while her mom attended Syracuse University. According to Nia, her parents were very adamant about her attending college with a **"purpose."** Nia explains, **"Yeah, before I officially signed up for the major, my mom sat me down and said, "What do you like about this major? What's the best part to you? How would it help you in the future to get to your end goal? What excites you about it?" And then we also talked about the different classes and programs that I get to be in".** Nia has discussed her major with her parents and played out different scenarios of possible careers that she can pursue.

In terms of her professors, Nia has made a connection with one African American professor in particular, who has shared a lot of her interests and shared many different resources available in and out of PCC. Nia says, **"My first day here, I went straight to class, I was here on time for class, and my first teacher happened to be a very helpful teachers, professor Connor, and he was very adamant and giving everyone information because he knows that there's first-year students versus fourth-year students here, and so he told us how PCC has a radio station that most students didn't even know about and how we have the health center in a building did that no one even knows about that gives free testing, he was so...".** In addition to discussion resources on campus, Professor Conner talked about possible internships that she can pursue that are related to her interests. Nia discusses how she found his suggestions for internships essential **"Yeah, definitely for me because the field that I'm in, I need a specific job, it's great to have a job. So you learn management skills and people skills and being able to articulate yourself in different formats, but also I feel like it's also necessary to have those skills that I need, so that I know when I get in the field what to do and how to do it. So I'm not relying on someone to help me every single second, I'm able to carry out a task if they say something versus a regular job where... I work at Starbucks right now that it's really great, but I'm not going into a coffee company, so I can do a lot of different orders, and I can work as a cashier, but Marine biology doesn't always take that kind of measurement."** Besides the information Professor Connor has shared with Nia, she is pleased that she has been able to connect with a black professor since she did not have many who she could connect with in her prior schooling. Nia says **"And I was very excited to have a community feeling, you don't get a lot of schools, at least I don't, where a lot of black students, get to be heard and get to do things together, and get to be a community without being targeted for things that they're not doing, and so I was very excited to be able to do that".**

Nia's own sense of agency and direction have given an additional protective factor in her quest for major/career exploration. Nia understands that is fear, which often interferes with students' ability to explore their interests and pursue their passions. Nia explains, **"I would say ignorance**

and fear. The fear of being stuck somewhere, the fear of disappointing everyone because you want it to do what you like to do instead of doing what everyone tells you, you need to do. So a lot of students won't go for what they truly want, the college that they want, or the subject that they want because their fear is that they won't make it in, or they won't do well in it, when in actuality they most likely would make it in, and they would do it. But just like other people, they push them not to do anything new because they don't want that person to get their hopes up, and they do terrible. So it's like people around you telling you that you can't do something because of their fear of you being upset about it and then you telling yourself you can do something because of your fear." Besides this self-awareness, Nia is also not likely to quit on a major/class or blame herself for obstacles that she may face in her academic journey. Nia says, **"For me, it depends on how many classes I'm not doing well. If it's like... because I need math and science with Marine biologists, if it's one specific course that I'm not doing well in, then I would assume that it wasn't a good fit for me, that specific one, and then I'll try again with something else… It's all about finding the teacher who can explain what you need to the way that you need it. .."**