A NARRATIVE STUDY OF FIRST-GENERATION COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ SUCCESS IN AN UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT—COLLEGE

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By

Holly L. Craider

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A dissertation written by

Holly L. Craider

B.A., John Carroll University, 2003

M.A., John Carroll University, 2008

Ph.D., Kent State University, 2014

Approved by

___________________________________, Director, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Susan V. Iverson

___________________________________, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Martha C. Merrill

___________________________________, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Belinda Miles

Accepted by

___________________________________, Director, School of Foundations, Leadership and Administration
Shawn Fitzgerald

___________________________________, Dean, College of Education, Health and Human Services
Daniel F. Mahony
Currently sitting in ninth place, the United States is lagging behind the rest of the world in the number of college graduates. Aware of this ranking, the federal government has put pressure on state officials to increase state completion rates. Tying state funding to performance metrics, state governors are requiring that higher education institutions determine a way to increase their graduation rates. With the increased attention on completion, community colleges, currently graduating an average of 20 percent of their students, are focusing on assisting students to get through academic programs successfully. The most intriguing population, first-generation college students, has been the target of much literature in relation to success.

The majority of literature surrounding first-generation college students has focused on the inability of this type of student to succeed on our college campuses. Relying on the results of quantitative studies, researchers have often examined this population of students from a deficit approach. Grouping the students into one category, assumptions are made regarding their ability to succeed, purporting that these students are less likely to earn strong GPAs and persist at our colleges because they are the first in their families to attend college. While researchers continue to grapple with this question, the number of these students continues to grow on our campuses, specifically community
college campuses. Due to increased numbers of first-generation students attending community colleges, researchers have directed more attention toward this population of students and more information is needed.

The purpose of this research was to explore first-generation community college students’ ability to succeed in an unfamiliar environment—college. Acknowledging the fact that they are able to succeed, I questioned the deficit theory approach previously embraced by researchers regarding this population. Utilizing narrative inquiry methodology, data was collected through in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of six students at a large community college in the Midwest. Using a three-dimensional framework, participants were asked to explore their pasts, presents, and futures in regard to their ability to succeed. The content of the narratives was analyzed using Fraser’s (2004) line-by-line approach. A constructivist framework guided the interpretation of the results.

The results of this study indicate that the tendency to understand first-generation community college students from a deficit approach should not be encouraged. Contrary to what the social constructions have indicated, these students are capable of the same academic endeavors as their continuing-generation peers. Regardless of early environments, they are able to succeed at our community colleges. Once we truly understand where they have been, who they have become, and where they wish to go, we can build on their strengths to ensure that they will succeed at our institutions.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Today, institutions of higher education face a variety of challenges; getting students to complete programs of study is perhaps one of the most arduous. As of 2011, college graduation rates in the United States ranged from a low of 28 percent in Arkansas, Nevada, and New Mexico to 54 percent in Massachusetts; the District of Columbia topped all states with a 65 percent graduation rate (Community College Week, 2011, p. 9). As of 2011, Korea led the world in the highest number of college graduates, with 58 percent of its population having finished college; the United States was in a four-way tie for ninth place, with 42 percent (Community College Week, 2011, p. 9). Fueled by the disappointing world ranking, the Obama administration charged state governors with the responsibility of raising college completion rates. State leaders were directed to position college completion at the top of their agendas. As noted in Community College Week (2011), the Obama administration called for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (p. 9). To earn this credential, an additional eight million students will have to earn an associates or bachelor’s degree by the end of the decade (Community College Week, 2011, p. 9).

No small feat, this challenge requires higher education institutions to develop strategies that will enhance the chances of student success and completion; if they are unable to increase completion rates, their funding will be impacted. According to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, state lawmakers are once
again looking at performance-based funding as a way to generate a better return on public investments in higher education. This renewed interest in performance funding derives from observations that enrollment-based funding has led institutions to focus on maximizing enrollment and thus pay insufficient attention to student outcomes. By tying institutional funding to completion and other desired outcomes, the expectation is that colleges will have added motivation to identify and implement better ways to accomplish those goals. As a result of the completion agenda, state funding for public institutions is now being tied to student success and completion.

Community colleges have an essential role in returning the United States to world leadership in higher education attainment. These institutions educate nearly half of America’s undergraduate students, and they are the primary access point to higher education for millions of historically underrepresented populations, first-generation college students, and those currently in the workforce who lack the higher education needed in the 21st-century economy (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). According to the American Association of Community Colleges 2014 Fact Sheet, our nation’s 1,132 community colleges currently enroll 12.8 million students (Association of Community Colleges, 2014, p. 1). As of the 2011-12 school year, 45 percent of all undergraduate students were enrolled in public two-year colleges (Knapp et al., 2012). Thomas Bailey, President of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, stated, “Community colleges have been extremely successful at opening doors for underserved students to begin postsecondary education. But the colleges have been much less successful at having students achieve their education goals. Fewer than 40 percent of
students who start in community colleges complete a degree or certificate within six years” (Bailey, 2014, p. 1). The graduation rate typically used for federal accountability purposes is the percentage of first-time, full-time students who complete a credential at their starting institution in 150 percent of the expected time to complete a given program: in other words, completions that occur within three years for two-year degrees, and six years for four-year degrees (Community College Research Center, 2014). Using this graduation measure, community colleges have a 22 percent completion rate. In comparison, using the same measure, nonselective four-year public institutions have a graduation rate of 29 percent (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Using the same measure (first time, full-time students who complete at starting institution) but with a two-year timeframe, 12 percent of community college students complete. Using a four-year timeframe, twenty eight percent of community college students complete (Horn, 2010).

Accountability measures required by national accrediting bodies as well as pressure from state and governmental funding agencies require colleges to measure student success (Higher Learning Commission [HLC], n.d.). Documenting and measuring success is a major challenge for community colleges. Many students attend community colleges for reasons other than obtaining a degree or certificate. Some students come with the intention of taking one class for professional development, leave, and may or may not come back years later. Others come to boost college GPA for transfer purposes; these students have no intent to complete program or graduation requirements (AACC, 2014). Regardless of their reasons for attending, these students are factored in the completion rates and consequently, the graduation rates suffer.
National data on term-to-term persistence are scant, but two Community College Research Center studies of community college students in Washington and Virginia found that a quarter of students who enroll in the fall semester do not return in the spring. Of those who do enroll in the spring, one fifth do not return for the subsequent fall semester (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Jaggars & Xu, 2011). Columbia University’s Community College Research Center President Thomas Bailey indicated that the graduation and persistence numbers are even lower for first-generation college students. In a longitudinal study conducted between 1992 and 2000, it was found that four in ten (43 percent) of first-generation students who entered post-secondary education during this eight year period left without a college degree; only 20 percent of their continuing generation counterparts left without a degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). First-generation students earned an average of 18 credits in their first year, compared with 25 credits earned by students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher. As they progressed through postsecondary education, first-generation students continued to lag behind their peers in credit accumulation: overall, they earned an average of 66 credits during their entire enrollment, compared with an average of 112 credits earned by students whose parents were college graduates (Chen & Carroll, 2005, p. v). Additionally, 33.4 percent of first-generation students had not selected a major compared with 13.1 percent of students whose parents had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Finally, first-generation students had lower first-year undergraduate grade point averages (GPAs) than their continuing generation counterparts; 2.5 versus 2.8. This lower performance
persisted throughout their entire undergraduate careers and was evident in many academic areas including mathematics and science (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

According to Green (2006), community colleges educate many traditionally underserved students, but first-generation students are one of the largest populations. According to the existing literature, first-generation students are faced with the anxieties and difficulties of any college student, but their experiences often include additional cultural, social, and academic changes (Pascarella, et al., 2003). Being the first-generation of a family to experience the culture of university life and being unfamiliar with college information may also make participation difficult. Demographically, first-generation students as compared to continuing-generation are more likely to be female, be older, have dependents, come from a lower socioeconomic status (SES), and be employed more hours (Bui, 2002; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In the university-going process, these concepts are considered to include familiarity with the college environment and campus standards, access to advising and financial resources, and familiarity with the normal functioning of a university setting (McConnell, 2000). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) explain that this knowledge, which is commonly conveyed by parents, may be lacking among first-generation students as their parents did not attend college, and this lack of knowledge may add to the difficulty in adapting to, or succeeding in, the college environment.

First-generation students comprise 36 percent of the community college study body (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014). According to the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, 38 percent of students whose parents did
not graduate from college choose community colleges as their first institution, compared with 20 percent of students whose parents graduated from college. Even more telling is that more than one third of 5-17 year-olds in the United States are first-generation students; this rate is highest among underrepresented minority groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Knowing that these students make up a huge sector of our community colleges and acknowledging the aforementioned struggles, it is important that we get to know these students in a more comprehensive manner so that we can determine how to best help them move toward completion and away from withdrawal. However, before we can begin to develop practices and initiatives to help first-generation students succeed, we must first reflect on the idea of success.

**Student Success**

Yazedijan (2008) acknowledged that success has often been narrowly defined. Based on the dominant literature, success is closely tied to program completion and graduation. The majority of previously conducted studies have focused on statistical figures to measure success; researchers have been most interested in first-generation students’ GPAs (grade point averages), persistence rates, and credit hours earned. Because researchers have tended to focus primarily on only these indicators, it has been suggested that first-generation students are not able to succeed due to perceived academic inefficiencies. According to the facts and figures, first-generation college students are thought to have more academic challenges and to need more interventions to foster their abilities. A major gap in the literature exists. Very little research actually asks
first-generation college students about their ideas of success. Furthermore, the research that does exist is rooted in pre-conceived assumptions and generalizations about this population. If we are to help first-generation students and enhance our completion rates, we ought to talk to them and inquire not about how they fail, but rather about how they are able to succeed. What could be gleaned from this research are examples of how first-generation students do excel in the community college environment in light of their experiences and future goals.

A review of existing literature reveals that studies have resulted in many preconceived notions of the ability of these students to succeed in the college environment. This study questions these preconceived assumptions by employing appreciative narrative inquiry; this form of inquiry looks at what does in fact work for these students and acknowledges that success is possible for this population.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Recognizing their abundant presence on community college campuses and keeping in mind the need for them to succeed; I sought to better understand first-generation community college students’ experiences. Additionally, aware of society’s tendency to socially construct the unfamiliar, I strove to provide an examination of the lives of these students that would challenge practitioners’ views about serving them. The best way to uncover the depth of the lived experiences of this population was to rely on what they had to say rather than on what the numbers say. It was my desire to give voice to first-generation students by affording them the opportunity to tell their stories.
The purpose of this study was to look forward, backward, inward, and outward to understand the experiences of first-generation students as they strive to be academically successful in an unfamiliar system--college. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this as a three-dimensional framework. In looking forward and backward, the study sought to understand how an individual's life history and visions for the future shape current experiences. In looking inward and outward, the goal was to understand how individuals internalize, make sense of, and respond to the outside messages that they receive.

The following questions will guide this study:

**Main Research Question:** How do first-generation community college students succeed despite the challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures?

**Subsidiary Research Questions:**

**Dimension of Space: Backward**

How have first-generation community college students’ life experiences contributed to their understandings and beliefs about the concept of success in college?

**Dimension of Space: Forward**

How do first-generation community college students’ understandings of success in college contribute to their ongoing performance in the college environment?

**Dimension of Space: Inward**
How do first-generation community college students define success and in what ways do they reflect upon the meanings of their own constructs of the notion of success in college?

**Dimension of Space: Outward**

How do first-generation community college students understand and respond to the various messages that they receive about what it means to be successful in college?

**Dimension of Space: Situated in Place**

What factors impact first-generation community college students’ desire to be successful in the college environment?

**Methodology**

Studies that move beyond simply collecting numerical data (such as enrollments, grades, and test scores) are needed to better understand the complex issues that affect underserved students’ academic achievement. The goal of this study was to move beyond these types of studies in order to enable actual student voices to be heard rather than just numbers on a report. To do this, I used the narrative methodology of research. This kind of approach allowed for the unique opportunity to hear from participants themselves, instead of looking only at statistics about them. Narrative research allows the researcher and participant to co-create the meanings of lived experiences so that the representation is as close to the actual experience as possible. It was my hope that community college administrators will be able to use the insight gleaned from these narratives as a means of strengthening the academic programming that was designed to assist these students.
Situating the Researcher

It is important to note that I, myself, am a first-generation college student. My interest in this study, however, was not to glean a greater understanding of myself or to interject my opinion into the research; rather, it was to better understand and represent a population of students that maintains a very large presence on our community college campuses, but still remains pigeon-holed and misunderstood as a result of social constructions.

Significance

This study is significant in that it addresses a qualitative gap in the literature surrounding first-generation college students. The existing literature is dominated by quantitative studies that examine this population of students in response to deficit theory. Lustig et al (2007) explain deficit theory as focusing on the limitations of individuals rather than the abilities they possess. Most of the existing studies look at numerical figures when analyzing the potential of a first-generation college student to succeed. While these types of studies are helpful in providing useful information regarding key performance indicators, they are unable to allow the voice of the student to be heard so that a better understanding of the numbers can be gleaned. The trend has been for practitioners to base programming on the results of quantitative studies, making assumptions about the abilities of first-generation students based on numbers, not testimonies. This study seeks to rely on the meaning making of first-generation students, as constructed through the narratives shared by participants, for more insight and
information regarding what truly does make these students successful in the college environment.

**Glossary of Key Terms**

*First-generation college student:* A student of whom neither parent has completed a college degree or received any postsecondary education (Choy, 2011).

*Continuing-generation college student:* A student of whom one or both parents has earned a college degree.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature relevant to the theoretical perspectives upon which the study was based. This chapter begins with the definition of first-generation college students, articulating which definition has been chosen for purposes of this study, followed by a discussion of the presence of these students in the community college setting due to the increased diversity of the overall college student population. The chapter then presents the concept of constructivism, exploring how it has influenced the research regarding first-generation college students. It reviews the research studies that have been conducted in an attempt to understand the challenges and capabilities of such students, followed by a discussion of the ways in which researchers have measured the success of this population.

Definition of First-Generation College Student and Impact of Label

While there are many definitions assigned to this population of students, for purposes of this paper, a first-generation student will be defined, according to Choy (2001), as one for who neither parent had completed a college degree and neither parent had any type of postsecondary education. The reality that neither parent completed any type of postsecondary education creates a stigma about these students. Automatically, it is assumed that these students will struggle in navigating their way through the college process, both academically and personally, as a result of neither parent having earned a college degree. First-generation college students are viewed from a deficit theory, with
the literature believing that these students have more challenges and are less likely to succeed. As a result of existing literature, institutions continue to create programming that revolves around these assumed deficiencies.

**Presence of First-Generation Students in Community Colleges**

As Reason and Davis (2005) noted, the college-going population is growing increasingly diverse. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) explained that one of the features of this diversity is a large number of first-generation students on our college campuses. Choy (2001), using results from the National Center for Education Statistics Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, indicated that in 1995-1996, 34 percent of students entering the nation’s four-year institutions and 53 percent of students starting at two-year colleges were first-generation students. Due to the large number of such students appearing on college campuses, a great deal of focus has been placed on research regarding first-generation students.

**What the Literature Says about First-Generation College Students**

Pascarella et al. (2004) acknowledged that first-generation college students have been the focus of a growing body of research. Typically, this research falls into three general categories (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). The first category includes studies that compare first-generation and continuing college students in regard to demographic characteristics, secondary school preparation, the college choice process, and college expectations. Pascarella et al. stated that,
The weight of evidence from this research indicates that, compared to their peers, first generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education (e.g., costs and application process), level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school. (p. 250)

The second category explores the transition these students face when moving from high school to college. Terenzini et al. (1996) argued that the evidence clearly shows that first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from high school to college than their peers. In addition to all of the normal anxieties and difficulties faced by their peers, first-generation students also experience cultural, social, and academic transitions. The narrow focus on high school students transitioning into college is a limitation in that this area of research excludes the transitions non-traditionally aged first-generation students may face.

The third category examines a first-generation student’s persistence, degree attainment, and career outcomes. In regard to this category, Pascarella et al. (2004) acknowledged that first-generation students are more likely to struggle with each of these areas than are their continuing generation counterparts. Pascarella explains that the investigations in this category consistently indicated that first-generation students are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a persistence track to a bachelor’s
degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or earn a bachelor’s degree after five years.

**Perceived Demographics of First-Generation Students**

The literature suggests that first-generation college students are characterized in the most underprivileged racial, income, and gender groups (Choy, 2001). Pascarella, et al. (2003) argued that first-generation students are faced with all of the anxieties and difficulties of any college student, but their experiences often include additional cultural, social, and academic challenges.

From a demographic point of view, first-generation students as compared to continuing-generation students are more likely to: be female; be older; have dependents; come from a lower socioeconomic status, and work more hours (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008). McConnell (2000) pointed out that university personnel expect that students have a familiarity with the college environment and campus standards, access to advising and financial resources, and familiarity with the normal functioning of a university setting. McCarron and Nikolas (2006) claimed that this knowledge, which is commonly conveyed by parents, may be lacking among first-generation students as their parents did not attend college.

**Perceived Major Areas of Concern for First-Generation Students**

According to the literature, there are four main areas of concern for first-generation college students: 1) access to college; 2) barriers to engagement; 3) their own personal development while in college; and 4) academic success. In regard to access,
first-generation college students experience difficulty in the college navigation process. It is believed that these students lack sufficient support networks and the knowledge and skills needed to obtain educational resources, scholarships, and advice. The information burden shifts from the adult parents as givers to the students as collectors.

The second area of concern is barriers to engagement. The literature suggests that the major barrier to a first-generation student’s level of engagement is the financial burden they face upon entering higher education. Many of these students are forced to work to cover the cost of attending college and therefore, lose opportunities to engage with students, faculty, and staff on their campuses. As a result of the need to work to provide for themselves as well as their families, first-generation college students struggle to retain a balance between being engaged in their college experience and meeting the demands of a job and life away from campus.

The third area of concern is personal development while in college. Saufley, Cowan, and Blake (1983) maintained that first-generation students enter an alien physical and social environment that they, their family, and their peers have never experienced when they begin college. They are less likely to encounter or perceive a welcoming campus environment and they do not make connections with those who might be able to foster that personal development, hesitating to reach out and ask for help (Blake, 1983). Kaufman and Chen (1999) found that first-generation college students do not use their high school experience to prepare for college and therefore, arrive to college less academically prepared. As a result, it is believed that they are more likely to leave
college and not return the following semester than are their peers whose parents possess a bachelor’s degree.

**Impact of Other Aspects of Identity on First-Generation Student Status**

Some research has examined the impact of other aspects of identity on the success of first-generation college students. Orbe (2008) proposed that we consider the multidimensional identity negotiation amongst first-generation college students. Orbe (2008) advanced a framework that seeks to provide an understanding into the complex ways in which first-generation students negotiate and perform multiple aspects of their identities. According to the author, there are six dimensions that can help us understand this: 1) individual and social identity, 2) similar and different, 3) stability and change, 4) certainty and uncertainty, 5) advantages and disadvantages, and 6) openness and closedness. Orbe reasoned that the two most important of these dimensions for understanding the experiences of first-generation students are 1) individual and social identity and 2) stability and change. This theoretical model is helpful in understanding how the personal and social identities of first-generation college students are negotiated over time.

Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, and Miller (2007) conducted a study to explore whether or not race and ethnicity had any additional impact on first-generation student status and student involvement and learning. This study looked at a stratified random sample of 4,501 undergraduate students from four-year institutions who took the College Student Experiences Questionnaire between 1998 and 2001. The College
Student Experiences Questionnaire is a 166-item instrument designed to assess where
students are expending effort related to their college experiences. The strata were the
seven racial/ethnic groups from which students self-identified, with 643 students in each
group from a database of over 20,000 students. The respondents ended up being
predominately White. Furthermore, the students in the sample were primarily from
doctoral and master level institutions. The results found that first generation college
student status had a negative effect on four of the involvement areas. These included
effort invested in course learning, frequency of attending fine arts, experiences with
student acquaintances, and involvement in scientific experiences. First generation
college student status had a positive, direct effect on academic learning gains. This
finding demonstrates the importance in refraining from making sweeping generalizations
about the impact of this status on first-generation students’ abilities.

**Perceived Challenges to Access**

Found in previously conducted literature is the argument that first-generation
students struggle against gaining access to college due to not having received
encouragement from a parent who has attended, as well as due to a lack of interaction
with the college environment. Ghazzawi and Jagannathan (2001) explored the role of
outreach programs in granting college access to first-generation students. The purpose of
the study was to assess the impact of a Business Program (“REACH Business Camp”) that helped first-generation underserved students in deciding to attend college and
considering business education as a major. The two research questions for the study
were: 1) is there a positive relationship between participation in a summer business camp and students’ decisions to attend college? and 2) is there a positive relationship between participation in a summer business camp and majoring in a business discipline? The sample included 118 high school students from three southern California school districts. The method involved sending follow-up letters to students who had participated in the summer business camp program. The students were asked if they were currently attending a college, its type, what they were majoring in, and what aspects of the program satisfied them. The results of the study indicated that 96 percent of the program participants were attending college. Some of the qualitative data revealed that the program strongly influenced their decision to attend. One participant explained that the program “fortified his desire to attend.” The other major finding was that the participants had not decided to major in business as a result of the program. Only four of the participants had indicated that they were business majors. Once again, this is an example of another finding that indicates that assumptions should not be made about this population, as the intervention of attending a business camp did not necessarily result in a more solidified decision of major.

Bryant and Nicholas (2011) conducted a study that considered means of supporting and preparing future first-generation students in the high school environment. This study surveyed college freshmen from two different institutions in order to examine the differences between first-generation and continuing generation students. Questionnaires were sent to freshmen attending urban and private universities. The
questionnaires consisted of six sections: participation information, family information, high school information, college exploration and appreciation, college decision-making, and support systems. Additional feedback was obtained from professors who had an expertise with working with freshmen. There were 306 actual participants. Of these 306, 277 were from urban universities and 89 were from private universities. Two hundred were women and 106 were men. These 306 participants were between 17 and 28 years of age. Seventy five percent of the students were White, 7.9 percent were African Americans, 5.3 percent were Hispanic, 2.3 percent were Asian, .7 percent were Native Americans, and 8.6 percent reported “other” as ethnicity. Two hundred and twenty two of the respondents indicated that one or both of their parents graduated from college or had attended, but not graduated. Eighty four reported that their parents had no college education.

The results indicated that first generation college students were much more likely to consider not enrolling in college than their continuing generation peers. Ninety four percent of the continuing generation college students reported that their friends were attending college as compared to 63 percent of the first generation college students. Additionally, continuing generation college students were more likely to discuss their college decision-making process with their peers than were the first generation college students. Finally, first generation college students felt more pressure to not attend college than did the continuing generation students.

Perceived Expectations of First-Generation College Students
Research has considered the differences in college expectations between continuing-generation students and first-generation students. Gibbons and Borders (2010) explored the expectations of prospective first-generation college students. The study investigated the differences in college-going expectations of middle school students who would be first in their families to attend college. Social Cognitive Theory was used to examine college-related expectations in 272 seventh grade students. This theory was developed to explain the processes through which a) academic and career interests develop, b) interests, in concert with other variables, promote career-relevant choices, and c) people attain varying levels of performance and persistence in their educational and career pursuits.

The sample was selected from four middle schools in a single southeastern state. Interestingly, to increase the number of prospective first generation college students, the researcher selected schools that had high percentages of students who were receiving free or reduced lunch and that had a high minority student population. Apparently, the researchers assumed that students who were in these categories were more likely to be first-generation students. Of the 272 students, 109 were actual prospective first-generation college students. Differences were found between prospective first-generation students and their peers who were non first-generation prospective college students. The prospective first-generation students had lower self-efficacy, higher negative outcome expectations, and more self-perceived barriers.

Collier and Morgan (2008) explored the differences in first-generation and
traditional college students’ understandings of faculty expectations. Their study uses data obtained from focus groups to examine the fit between university faculty members’ expectations and students’ understanding of these expectations. The site of the study was Portland State University in Oregon. Portland State is an urban, public university with an attendance of 23,000. There were two faculty focus groups that consisted of instructors who taught undergraduate courses in business or liberal arts and sciences. There were also two focus groups of students that consisted of first-generation students and those from more traditional, highly educated backgrounds (students with at least one parent who graduated from college). Parallel sets of interview questions were used for the faculty and student groups. The goal was to hear about the faculty members’ and students’ expectations of what the student should be able to do in freshmen and sophomore level courses.

For the faculty, their expectation regarding the workload was that each hour of class time should be matched by 2-3 hours of work outside of the classroom. The faculty believed that the syllabi played a major role in conveying their expectations about assignments and that their students were not paying enough attention. Furthermore, the faculty deemed it essential to improve faculty and student communication in order to increase the likelihood of student success. The faculty suspected that students fail to communicate problems when they encounter them.

Both groups of students stated that the actual time they had available for schoolwork should be the determining factor for the basic classroom priorities. Each
wished professors would be more explicit and perceived that they were not receiving enough detailed information about assignments. First-generation students had more problems related to time management, specifically in relation to how much time is devoted to their classes. These students reported having fewer outside resources to help them. They also indicated that they viewed the syllabi differently than the continuing generation students. First-generation students looked at the dress of the professor to determine if the instructor was going to be easy or difficult, whereas continuing generation students indicated that they rely on the syllabi for this information. In regard to communication, the first-generation students expressed a concern about not feeling comfortable approaching the professors with a question.

**Perceived Departure Behaviors of First-Generation Students**

Much of the research suggests that first-generation students are less likely to persist from one semester to the next due to the previously cited perceived challenges they face. Ishitani (2003) conducted a longitudinal approach to assessing attrition behavior among first-generation college students. Ishitani (2003) utilized an event history model to examine whether certain variables influenced student departure behavior, as those independent variables vary at different points of students’ academic careers. The sample was a cohort of college students who matriculated in the fall of 1995 at a four-year public university in the Midwest. It included 1,747 students and looked at their fall and spring semester enrollment status for five academic years. The major finding was that the dynamics of departure differed among the groups of different
parental educational backgrounds. There was lower persistence for first-generation college students than for those who had parents who had completed a college degree. The persistence rate declined more and more as the semesters went on for these students.

**Looking at First-Generation Students through Theoretical Lenses**

The first theoretical lens that is used to understand first-generation students is the social capital theory. Portes (2000) explained that the original theoretical development of the concept by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1980) and the American sociologist James Coleman (1993a, 1993b) centered on individuals or small groups as the units of analysis. With some significant variations, both scholars focused on the benefits accruing to individuals or families by virtue of their ties with others. Bourdieu’s treatment of the concept, in particular, was instrumental, going as far as noting that people intentionally built their relations for the benefits that they would bring later (p. 2). The literature about first-generation college students indicates that they have limited access to the information that will enable them to succeed in college, pointing out that they lack the various social networks and the resources within these networks.

Validation Theory is the second theoretical lens through which researchers view first-generation students. Rendon (1994) elucidated that there are two types of validation that students experience: academic validation and interpersonal validation. Academic validation involves a student trusting their innate capacity to learn, while interpersonal validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to foster students’ personal development and social adjustment. First-generation students are perceived as being too
hesitant to ask questions in fear of appearing lazy or ignorant.

The third theoretical lens used to view first-generation students is social identity theory. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) proposed the idea that a person has several selves that correspond to different circles of group membership. A new social context, such as the college environment, may trigger individuals to think, feel, and act on the basis of their respective social identities. Turner et al. (1987) contended that group membership creates in-group/out-group dynamics based on self-categorization. Negative messages about an individual’s social identity, such as being a first-generation student who is ‘bound to fail’, create an invalidating academic and interpersonal climate (Turner et al., 1987).

The fourth theoretical lens used to view first-generation college students is the communication theory of identity. Hecht (1993) advanced the idea that identity is located within four frames: 1) within individuals; 2) within relationships, 3) within groups, and 4) is communicated between relational partners and group members. First-generation students formulate their identity based on the various communications that occur within these frames. Crocker and Major (1989) further explained that members of groups with less power or status, such as first-generation students, develop self-protective strategies and navigate a route to positive identity.

The fifth theoretical lens through which first-generation students are understood is described by Erikson. Erikson’s (1968) theory of emerging adulthood contended that during childhood, individuals develop a set of expectations about what they will be as an
According to Lara (1992) and London (1992), first-generation students experience the ongoing negotiation of home and college life that results in trying to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds, causing the student to undergo added stress and anxiety as he or she is pulled in two different directions. Some even suggested that first-generation college students are attempting to learn an alien culture (Chaffe, 1992; Rose, 1989).

The final theory that is often used to understand first-generation students is Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. Schlossberg et. al. (1995) defined a transition as “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 27). First-generation college students are said to experience a major transition upon entering the college environment, and it is recommended that Transition Theory be used to understand their responses to this transition.

**Social Constructions of First-Generation Students**

Reason and Davis (2005) explained that there exists a wealth of evidence that has suggested our identities are critically influenced by traditions, history, context, and cultural narratives. Society has created perceptions of what groups of people are like; these crafted beliefs have longstanding roots that date back centuries. Unfortunately, these stereotypes continue to be associated with the respective groups of individuals, as children of prior generations are being brought up with the same kinds of beliefs about people who are different. It appears that it is easier to conform to the constructs rather
than to question them. People have an easier time putting others into categories, often to retain their own social privileges, than allowing them to be who they are as individuals.

The abilities, behaviors, and success of first-generation college students have been socially constructed by society in a way that has implied a deficit as is suggested in the research presented previously in this review of literature. Wording such as “less likely” and “disadvantaged” are common terminology and phrasing associated with this population of students. The studies have looked at first-generation students from a deficit theory, even in the way the research questions are presented. For example, a typical research question surrounding these students is worded in the following way, “What factors lead to a first-generation college student’s inability to succeed in college?” Deficit assumptions are made in this kind of statement; by using the word “inability” we are projecting negative expectations on the students before we have even begun the research.

**Countering the Deficit**

As is evidenced, much of the literature surrounding first-generation college students has focused on the alleged disadvantages they have in regard to familial support and interactions with resources that could be helpful to their academic success. Orbe (2004) elucidated that,

The small amount of research that does focus solely on first-generation college students typically examines statistical relations with other important variables related to college success. Given this information, it should come as no surprise
that first-generation college students on average have lower first-semester grades, are more likely to drop out the first semester, or do not return for their second year. The strength of this type of data lies in its ability to sample widely and generalize broadly. The weakness is that detail gets lost. (p. 280)

In response to the weaknesses in the quantitative research, more qualitative research has been conducted in an attempt to gain a more accurate, first-hand depiction of the first-generation college student. In his study, Orbe (2004) collected narratives from 79 first-generation college students across several different campuses in an effort to explore saliency of first-generation student status and the ways in which it is enacted during interactions with others. The two research questions of the study were: 1) How central is first-generation college status to the identities of first-generation students on different college campuses? and 2) How, if at all, is first-generation college student identity negotiated at the personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames of identity? (p. 282).

In response to a question about his identity as a first-generation college student, one student stated,

Sometimes it gets really hard—what keeps me going is that I am the first in my family [to attend college]. And I have four younger brothers and sisters that look up to me…That’s what keeps me going instead of just shutting down or throwing a temper tantrum. I just keep going. I can’t do anything else but finish. (as cited in Orbe, 2004, p. 283)
As opposed to giving up or being hesitant, as the deficit literature had suggested first-generation students would do, this student fought harder and was more motivated as a result of being the first in the family to go to college.

Another student admitted that he never thought about being a first-generation student. He revealed:

I never thought about it [first generation student status]. When I heard about the study…that was the first time I thought about [being a first-generation college student]. I don’t think that there is a big difference. Everyone comes to college not knowing any one…And we are all here, going to class on the first day.

It’s all the same. (as cited in Orbe, 2004, p. 285)

These two qualitative excerpts clearly counter the deficit theory assumption that first-generation students place a big emphasis on their status as the first in the family to go to college. Additionally, findings such as this challenge the assumption that these students are less likely to persist; on the contrary, the students are describing feelings of motivation. Looking at these two narrative excerpts reveals the important reality—not every student within a specific population (such as first-generation students) will possess the socially constructed traits and behaviors assumed of them. Every one of our students is an individual and not all are defined by one aspect of their identity. First generation student status is only one aspect of a person’s life.

Success in College
Based on much of the existing deficit literature regarding first-generation college students, one might predict that this population of students will not be “successful” in their collegiate endeavors. As was mentioned earlier in the review of literature, these students are allegedly less likely to attend, persist, or excel in the higher education realm. The question I would like to pose is: what is the definition of success? How are we measuring the success of these students and how does that match up to the definition that the students have in their own minds.

According to the literature, success appears to be closely tied to graduation. Yazedjian et al (2008) noted, “Many studies continue to conceptualize success in college purely in terms of grades and graduation rates” (p. 141). This tendency is limiting in that it fails to consider other elements that might be considered to be a success as well as a student’s own idea of what college success actually is. Some researchers have thought beyond just academic success and considered social integration to be indicative of student success. Tinto (1975) argued that persistence to graduation is predicted by students’ academic and social integration into the institution.

There are obviously conflicting ideas as to what student success actually is and how it should be measured. One type of institution in particular that struggles to define student success is the two-year college. The purpose of the community college, which ties into how administrators label success of their students, has been debated since its inception. As the roles of community colleges have evolved over the last 50 years, so, too, has the idea of student success.
History of Community Colleges

One cannot appreciate the current role of the community college without considering the history of this type of institution. Dating back to the early years of the twentieth century, the American community college has a unique history shaped by social and economic factors. Cohen and Brawer (2008) explained that the most prominent social factors that contributed to its rise were the need for workers trained to operate the nation’s expanding industries; the lengthened period of adolescence, which mandated custodial care of the young for a longer time; and the drive for social equality, which supposedly would be enhanced if more people had access to higher education.

Additionally, Cohen and Brawer noted that community colleges seemed also to reflect the growing power of external authority over everyone’s life. As they described, during the twentieth century, there was an American belief that people could not possibly be legitimately educated, employed, religiously observant, ill, or healthy unless some institution sanctions that aspect of their being. Finally, as industries began to develop and flourish in the twentieth century, there was a need for trained workers to maintain them. Workforce development was certainly at the core of early community college curriculum.

In addition to the industrial expansion, there was also a rapid growth in secondary school enrollments. Cohen and Brawer (2008) maintained that the development of community colleges should be considered in the context of the growth of all higher education in the twentieth century. As secondary school enrollments expanded rapidly in the early 1900s, the demand for access to college grew as well. According to Cohen and
Brawer, the percentage of those graduating from high school grew from 30 percent in 1924 to 75 percent by 1960, and 60 percent of the high school graduates entered college in the latter year (p.6).

The concept of “access” would become a key component to the mission of community colleges. The idea was to enable anyone who wanted the opportunity to attend college to have that chance, regardless of previous academic performance, financial ability, need to commute, age, family responsibilities, need to be employed, etc. While the community college was meant to serve all, some felt it should serve certain groups. As Cohen and Brawer (2008) noted, the states could have accommodated most of the people that were seeking a college degree by expanding their universities’ capacity. The push for community colleges came from the well-known nineteenth and early twentieth century educators who felt that the responsibility of providing general education for young people belonged to those at a junior college. Otherwise, how could those state universities become true research universities? Cohen and Brawer revealed that, in the mid-1800s, various college presidents made proposals that junior college should relieve the university of the burden of providing general education for young people were. These higher education leaders insisted that the universities had to relinquish their lower-division preparatory work in order to become true research and professional development centers. Cohen and Brawer (2008) stated, “That is, the universities would be responsible for the higher-order scholarship, while the lower schools would provide general and vocational education to students through age nineteen
or twenty” (p. 7). Evident early on in the history of the community college was the idea that its role would be to provide the general or remedial education for students. It is this idea that has plagued community colleges with the stigma of being an extension of high school, an inferior academic institution, and a junior level college. Cohen and Brawer (2008) explained:

Their standing outside the tradition of higher education—first with exclusionary of students, then with is scholarship and academic freedom for professors—was both good and bad for the community colleges. Initially, it gained support for them from influential university leaders who welcomed a buffer institution that would cull the poorly prepared students and send only the best on to the upper division. Later, it enabled them to capitalize on the sizable amounts of money available for programs in vocational education, accept the less-well-prepared students who nonetheless sought further education, and organize continuing-education activities for people of all ages. But it also doomed community colleges to the status of alternative institutions. (p. 9)

Cohen and Brawer (2008) stated that, “The question of legitimacy is one of image in the eyes of the public, the potential students, the funding agents, and the other sectors of education” (p. 301). Barr (2002) explains that funds from the state government are the primary source of income for most public colleges and universities (p. 13). At a community college such income may also be supplemented by direct support from the county or municipality where the institution is located (Barr, 2002, p. 13). As a result of
this funding structure, the community college environment becomes very political as the community and state watch the decisions that are being made very closely. At some institutions, community members are major financial stakeholders of the institution, as every four to five years they are asked to decide a levy for the college that involves some sort of funding increase. Knowing that the community can make or break the fiscal wellness of the college, administrators make adjustments and concessions in order to appease community and state influencers.

The funding that community colleges receive is also tied to completion rates in some states. Some state governments have a calculation formula that determines the amount given to the institutions by looking at graduation rates. Thus, for many, success is measured by whether or not the students are walking across a stage with a diploma.

**Community Colleges and Funding**

While the demands and expectations of community colleges continue to rise, funding continues to be of concern, putting more pressure on community colleges to be purposeful and resourceful in their programming decisions. To understand this heightened pressure, one must first understand the funding structures of community colleges as well as the current financial conditions in which these institutions are situated.

Mellow and Heelan (2008) explained that there is no national standard for public funding of higher education, and therefore the state statutes or local provisions that structure funding at individual campuses are as diverse as the communities they serve. Public tax dollars are commonly segmented into local support and state support.
Differences occur in how colleges receive both operational funding (financial support for the ongoing costs of personnel, programs, and building maintenance) and capital funding (dollars used to build buildings). The rules that govern those contributions, and the relative weight each bears in the final funding level, differ dramatically across the country (Mellow & Heelan, 2008, p. 31-32).

There are very different levels of public funding per capita among all sectors of public education. The median state expenditure per full-time-equivalent student (FTE) for elementary and secondary schools in 2002, averaged across the country, was $7,380 (Cohen, 2004; Park, 2005). Community colleges spent an average of $6,208 per FTE (Harmening and Douglas, 1999). Thus community colleges receive $1,100 less per capita than the average elementary and secondary school. In 2004, national expenditures for public two-year colleges were $24,447,430,000, or less than 20 percent of the $124,877,518,000 expended by public four-year colleges and universities (Annual Almanac of Higher Education, 2005). Mellow and Hellan (2008) explain,

The comparison of costs, then, highlights that community colleges, despite enrolling almost half of all undergraduate students, spend more than 80 percent less than their public four-year counterparts. When compared to any other educational sector in the United States, they receive fewer dollars. (pp. 32-33)

**Community Colleges and Accountability**

As described by Laanan (2001), in the last few years, external demands for accountability have heightened. Calls for accountability in higher education have led to
state mandates and accreditation standards requiring that the value of programs and services be demonstrated (p. 59). According to Ewell (1994), two major factors that caused accountability to emerge can be explained in terms of fiscal and political forces. The popularity of accountability initiatives have been associated with limited resources. Another cause of interest in accountability is the public’s sense of the purposes of higher education. Public officials are being asked to report the extent to which attending colleges and universities will yield public benefits in terms of quality of life and workplace revitalization.

Referred to as the “new accountability” (Ewell, 1994), this paradigm shift caused state initiatives to emerge that centered on it. At the heart of this shift is the notion of higher education’s role in society. Laanan (2001) explained that the former concepts of accountability viewed public higher education as a ‘public utility’ in that the benefits to citizens were in the form of increased social mobility and improved quality of life. The focus of this type of accountability was access and efficiency. Laanan (2001) articulated, however, with the new paradigm shift in accountability, higher education was now perceived as a strategic investment in which policy makers and other external agencies were most interested in assessing or evaluating the return on investment. Although old measures of efficiency and access remained relevant, new accountability mandates emerged that required the assessment of educational results and these began to receive immediate attention. (p. 60)
Most state policy makers are concerned about the quality and cost-effectiveness of higher education, and elected officials are interested in obtaining results that speak to the returns on investment of dollars spent on educational programs (Laanan, 2001, p. 59). Two issues are important in regard to the quality and cost-effectiveness of higher education. The first involves the increasing cost of public higher education in regard to limited state resources. The second deals with policy makers’ interest in how academically prepared students are and if graduates have the appropriate and necessary skills to compete in a global workforce.

At the very heart of this paradigm is the notion of higher education’s role in society. The former concepts of accountability viewed public higher education as a ‘public utility’ in that the benefits to citizens were in the form of increased social mobility and improved quality of life. The focus of this type of accountability was access and efficiency. However, with the new paradigm shift in accountability, higher education was now perceived as a strategic investment in which policy makers and other external agencies were most interested in assessing or evaluating the return on investment. Although old measures of efficiency and access remained relevant, new accountability mandates emerged that required the assessment of educational results and these began to receive immediate attention (Laanan, 2001, p. 60).

Federal versus State Accountability

Over the last ten years, community colleges have experienced new federal and state accountability mandates. In considering different types of accountability, it is
important to distinguish between federally and state-mandated accountability measures (Laanan, 2001, p. 60).

The goal of developing accountability initiatives at the federal level is to implement them for the larger nationwide system. According to Laanan (2001), typically, once federal legislation has been signed and becomes law, guidelines are written and reported in the *Federal Register* that describes how states are to develop, implement, and report on various accountability systems. An example of federal accountability is the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 (VTEA). Referred to as Perkins III, VTEA was signed into law on October 31, 1998, as the reauthorization of the 1990 Perkins act. The central goals of Perkins III are 1) to further develop the academic, vocational, and technical skills of vocational students through setting high standards, 2) to link secondary and postsecondary vocational programs, 3) to increase flexibility in the administration and use of federal funds, 4) to disseminate national research about vocational and technical education, and 5) to provide professional development and technical assistance to vocational educators. In addition, Perkins III helps to ensure that students acquire the skills and knowledge needed to meet state academic standards and industry-recognized skills standards and prepares students for a wide range of opportunities in high-skill, high-wage careers (p. 61).

An important component of VTEA is the focus on quality. Perkins III focuses the federal investment in vocational and technical education on high-quality programs. The programs must be able to integrate academic and vocational education; promote student
attainment of challenging academic, vocational, and technical standards; provide students with strong experience in, and understanding of, all aspects of an industry; address the needs of individuals from special populations; and develop, improve, and expand the use of technology (Laanan, 2001, p. 61).

Over the last ten years, numerous state community college systems have developed accountability systems. Feeling the pressure to demonstrate institutional effectiveness across different indicators, colleges have begun to report specific performance measures, as is reflected in their stated missions. Ruppert (1994) recognized that since 1990, state policy makers have been particularly interested in the educational quality, productivity, and effectiveness of public colleges and universities. Laanan (2001) observed that factors such as decreased state funding for higher education, increased costs, and growing demands for access have contributed to the movement toward greater accountability. Unlike federal accountability mandates, elected officials have looked to state-level accountability measures to guide state planning and budgetary decisions and to monitor the ‘public investment’ in higher education. (Laanan, 2001, p. 64).

Responding to the demands for accountability, states have implemented use of performance indicators (PIs). According to Laanan (2001), performance indicators are common measures employed by colleges and universities to assess and report their performance; they can be viewed as gauges to regulate the supply of resources. Indicators include results that are quantifiable statistics, such as faculty-student ratios,
and more qualitative measures, such as plans to increase minority student enrollment. The colleges report these measurements in annual reports, or report cards.

There are four commonly used statewide indicator systems in higher education. Laanan (2001) described that the first approach is the inputs-processes-outcomes system, which tends to be the system used in accountability reporting for K-12 education. The production process is the underlying model, and the primary output is to measure value added. Typical indicators include number of entering students, their characteristics and ability levels, instructional expenditure per student, and types of instruction provided. A second approach is referred to as resource and efficiency and effectiveness. In this model the most common indicator is to monitor efficiency; that is, to what extent physical resources, such as faculty, space, and equipment, are utilized and organized. A third approach is referred to as state need and return on investment. In understanding this model, policy makers are interested in assessing the current and future needs of the state in terms of preparing a skilled workforce for positions that require a set of skills and the extent to which graduates produced by public higher-education institutions are going to meet the needs. The final approach is referred to as customer need and return on investment. In this model, the customer is the focus and the primary purpose is to inform consumers of historical performance measures. With recent accountability mandates, citizens, employers, and the public at large have the right to know about past performance of public higher-education institutions (p. 66).
Colleges can no longer just assess and report results; they also must be concerned with funding performance. The institutions are competing for a limited amount of government resources and therefore, must demonstrate a high level of productivity and performance in order to receive their share of those funds. According to Laanan (2001), there are two types of performance-funding mechanisms: performance funding and performance budgeting; both are tied to results. Laanan indicated that, for performance funding, earmarked funds are tied directly to the achievement of public colleges and universities on individual indicators. In performance budgeting, legislators and governors take into account the level of achievement based on established indicators and determine the total budget for higher education.

Laanan (2001) acknowledged that legislators, policy makers, governors, parents, students, and other constituencies are all now aware of the numerous accountability mandates. Accordingly, community colleges, as well as the rest of higher education, face the dilemma of proving their worth to a public that has become increasingly skeptical and critical. In response to the accountability movement, state community college systems have created systems to measure institutional effectiveness. These systems look at things like student achievement, retention and persistence, employment success, student/client satisfaction, community responsiveness, and collaboration with business and industry. For the next decade, the nation’s community colleges will have to continue responding to the multiple measures imposed by various constituencies (Laanan, 2001, p. 71).
Clearly, there is a desire for students to complete programs of study and graduate from our institutions. While state funding is important, and graduation is always a goal, we must acknowledge that our students have their own definitions of success that impact their educational persistence and completion behaviors.

**Community Colleges and First-Generation Students**

Community colleges serve unique roles in our communities and therefore, serve unique populations of students. Due to the pressures to remain accountable, they have to be able to address the needs of the diverse population of students, while combating challenges like limited resources. One of the most highly represented populations of students on community college campuses is that of first-generation students. According to the Community College Research Center (2013) at Columbia University, 38 percent of first-generation college students choose community colleges as their first institution, while 20 percent of continuing-generation students enroll in the two-year college. With this population of students being such a large presence on our campuses, and knowing the challenges the college itself faces, it is critical that we come to understand first-generation community college students so that both the institution and the college can be successful in their goals. This study will seek to explore first-generation community college students’ personal definitions of success and how these definitions have evolved as a result of their lived experiences inward, outward, backward, and forward. The hope is that the findings from this study will enlighten community college leadership so that the definitions and expectations of success held by the students may
inform future decision making in regard to first-generation community college student success.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain to the reader the research design of my study. Crotty (1998) explains that there are five elements that comprise a research design: epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, research methods, and data analysis. I will describe each of these elements in this chapter. Important to note is that I have added my personal subjectivity as the sixth design element. Throughout the chapter, I will guide the reader through the research design that I followed, concluding with an explanation of how I accounted for trustworthiness and ethics.

Researcher’s Paradigm

Contrary to the positivist belief that there is one objective truth, I contend that there are multiple realities. As a constructivist, I hold the view that humans generate and construct their own knowledge and understanding from their interactions with the world and those around them. I value the participant’s own interpretations of reality and embraced a subjectivist epistemology in which the researcher and participants co-create meaning.

Theoretical Framework

The literature is dominated by studies that tended to look at first-generation students from a deficit approach. Researchers have focused on the weaknesses of these students rather than their strengths. The tendency has been to look at statistical numbers that explore GPAs, test scores, and persistence rates. Relying on the facts and figures
associated with these variables, researchers have told a different kind of story about first-generation students—one based on the numbers. Very little research actually asks first-generation college students about *their* ideas about college success. This study seeks to question this deficit approach as Ford and Grantham (2003) caution, “Such a perspective deteriorates expectations for students and weakens educators’ abilities to recognize giftedness in its various forms” (Ford & Grantham, 2003, p.). If we are to help first-generation students and enhance completion rates, we ought to talk to them and inquire not about how they fail, but rather about how they are able to succeed. Accordingly, this study embodies a success orientation. Beginning with the assumption that first-generation students *are able to succeed*, I employed appreciative inquiry to discover what worked for first-generation community college students in terms of achieving success.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore first-generation community college students’ life experiences to understand their ability to succeed in an unfamiliar environment—college. To glean an understanding of these experiences, I drew upon Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional framework, to look inward, outward, forward, and backward. In looking forward and backward, the study sought to understand how an individual's life history and visions for the future shape current experiences. In looking inward and outward, the goal was to understand how individuals internalize, make
sense of, and respond to the outside messages that they receive. In accordance with these goals, the research method that was used was narrative analysis.

**Research Questions**

This narrative study was guided by the following primary research question: How do first-generation community college students succeed despite the challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures?

In an effort to address Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional realm, the following subsidiary research questions further framed this study.

**Dimension of Space: Backward**

How have first-generation community college students’ life experiences contributed to their understandings and beliefs about the concept of success in college?

**Dimension of Space: Forward**

How do first-generation community college students’ understandings of success in college contribute to their ongoing performance in the college environment?

**Dimension of Space: Inward**

How do first-generation community college students define success and in what ways do they reflect upon the meanings of their own constructs of the notion of success in college?

**Dimension of Space: Outward**
How do first-generation community college students understand and respond to the various messages that they receive about what it means to be successful in college?

**Dimension of Space: Situated in Place**

What factors impact first-generation community college students’ desire to be successful in the college environment?

**Research Context**

A constructivist framework guided this study. According to Charmaz (2002), constructivism “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from the shared experiences of researcher and participants and the researcher’s relationship with the participants” (p. 677). I sought to develop close, trusting relationships so that I could get as close to the experiences of the participants as possible.

**Description of Site**

The site that was chosen for this study is a community college located in the Midwestern United States. Currently, there are four branches of the college; one campus is located in the heart of a downtown area, while the other three campuses are located in suburbs that are approximately twenty minutes from the downtown campus. Each of these campuses has its own unique culture in regard to ethnicity and socio economic background. The college as a whole services over 60,000 individual students each year. Students can choose from over 70 different majors that fall under the following four
academic areas: 1) liberal arts, 2) business, math, and technology, 3) creative arts, and 4) health careers and sciences. The college offers two-year associate degrees, non-credit programming, short-term certificate programs, and General Education Degree (GED)/Adult Basic Literacy (ABLE) classes. The college charges the second lowest rate of tuition in the state.

Students range from recent high school graduates to non-traditionally aged students who are attending college for the first time since high school or who are returning to school after years away from higher education. There are more females who attend the college than males. The majority of the students in attendance are Caucasian, with African American students being the next largest group of students. In addition, there are small amounts of Asian and Hispanic students. The average age of the students is 29. Typically, there are 500 international students in attendance each year.

In general, this particular community college is a good representation of many community colleges, implementing the open access policy and offering both two-year associate degrees as well as short-term certificates. The college is funded by a combination of state dollars, tuition, and tax dollars paid by residents of the county.

Setting

The primary source of data was retrieved from interviews conducted with the participants at a community college. I chose this particular setting, the community college, due to the growing diversity that characterizes these types of institutions. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) explained that one of the results of
this diversity is a large number of first-generation students on our college campuses. Accordingly, it made sense to focus research efforts on the places where large numbers of first-generation students can be found.

**Sample**

To qualify as a participant in this study, the individual had to meet the parameters of the definition of a first-generation college student. While there are many definitions assigned to this population of students, for purposes of this study, a first-generation student was defined, according to Choy (2001), as one for whom neither parent had completed a college degree and neither parent had any type of postsecondary education.

The characteristics of the population had the possibility of being varied as the students at this college come from all walks of life. The students were anticipated to be primarily be of African American and Caucasian background, not out of intentionality, but because of the demographics of the student population. The participants could have been male or female, as gender was not a factor in the study. The ages of the participants were expected to range from 18-59, as the student population at the college consists of both traditional and non-traditional aged students. In order for a participant to qualify as a first-generation student for the purposes of this study, neither of the student's parents had completed a college degree or any postsecondary education. Furthermore, to qualify for this study, the participant had to have completed a minimum of 12 credit hours (could have been remedial or college-level) and no more than 36 credit hours (could have been remedial or college-level). The rationale for this credit hour requirement was to make sure
that I had participants who had some college experience, but who were not at the very beginning or end of their college career. I wanted the participants to have been in a position to discuss what the process of going through some classes had been like.

To recruit participants, emails were sent to the Student Success Specialists at each of the campuses (see Appendix A). These professionals work with the retention of first-year students at the college. As a result, they have a great deal of direct contact with students likely to qualify for the study. In my email to these professionals, I explained the purpose of the study and included an attached file (see Appendix A) that was forwarded on to potential participants that also explained the study. The Student Success Specialist then forwarded my email to those whom they thought might be interested and would qualify. Potential participants were asked to contact me by phone if they were interested in learning more.

The intended sample size was six participants, ideally two participants from each of the three campuses with greatest attendance. I wanted to have one male and one female from each campus; additionally, I ideally preferred to have participants of different ethnicities represented from each campus. Recognizing the career, family, and educational demands these potential participants juggle, I was aware that the sample size may not have been as large as anticipated; at minimum, I would end up with three participants. Qualitative research, by nature, seeks to explore a small population as opposed to quantitative research which looks at greater numbers of participants in order to generalize results to a larger population.
Six participants responded to the initial recruitment script, including two males and four females. They expressed interest via email and we then set up a time to meet over the phone or in-person to further discuss the study and obtain consent if willing to participate. All six of the interested prospective participants agreed to be a part of the study and signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B). Each of the three largest campuses of the college was represented by at least one participant in the study. Demographically, four of the participants self-identified as Caucasian and two as African American. The youngest was in his early twenties while the oldest was approaching fifty years of age.

**Negotiating Access to a Site**

I have worked at the selected site for five years. Currently, I work as the Director of the College Information and Enrollment Support Center. As a result of my employment with the college, I have easier access to the site. I have professional relationships with the administrators in the Institutional Research Office and worked with them on my IRB to ensure that they understood my intentions in regard to the protection of their students.

Important to note is that I did not hold any position of authority over the participants from the college; I was not their instructor or someone in charge of any of their financial aid or admissions decisions.

**Methods for Generating Data**
To address the research questions for this study, I interviewed participants regarding their past, present, and future. Sub-questions were used to prompt further reflection on these different perspectives. The participants were asked to complete a series of three, 90-minute interviews that sought to understand the experiences of first-generation students from perspectives that were forward, backward, inward, and outward. The intent was for the interviews to guide the students through an exploration of their past, present, and future. The interviews were conducted at a pre-arranged location mutually agreed upon by the participant and the interviewer (e.g., on campus) or over the phone, depending on the preference and availability of the participant. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

I took notes while conducting the interviews; these notes included observations of the setting and the participants’ body language. Additionally, notes also included comments about pauses, laughter, tears, and other nonverbals. After each interview, I took the time to record journal memos as a means of reflection about the interaction during the interview in regard to any thoughts or future questions I had. To manage this type of data, I created binders for each participant; all journal memos and copies of transcriptions for each participant were maintained in the individual binders.

The purpose of a narrative study is to give voice to participants so that accounts of their life stories can be shared in order to better understand specific experiences. Researcher and participant together co-construct the meaning of the experiences. Riessman (2008) explained, “Storytelling engages an audience in the experience of the narrator.”
Narratives invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to enter the perspective of the narrator” (p. 9).

In order to obtain and represent comprehensive and accurate interpretations of participants’ perspectives, I elected to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews. Wengraf (2001) noted the semi-structured interview involves a special kind of conversational interaction. The semi-structured interview has to be planned and prepared, just like other forms of research, but what is planned is a deliberate half-scripted or quarter-scripted interview (Wengraf, 2001, p. 5). Accordingly, my questions were partially prepared in advance, as the interview as a whole is a joint production by the researcher and the interviewee. This format of interviewing allowed for the least restriction amongst participants and encouraged the open and flexible sharing of their experiences, as opposed to a more rigid interview structure. Looking at how interviewees connect their responses into a sustained account, that is, a story brings out problems and possibilities of interviewing that are not visible when attention is restricted to question-answer exchanges (Mishler, 1986, p. 67).

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) explained, “Semi-structured interviews are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewees” (p. 315). The questions I asked coincided with the three-dimensional framework (Clandinin & Connelly) and sought to understand the participants inward, outward, backward, and forward.
In accordance with narrative inquiry methodology, the interview questions were open-ended, broad, and designed to elicit stories from the participants (Lieblich et al., 1998). The initial questions in each interview were very general, allowing the participants to naturally respond in story form. As each interview progressed, I followed up with more probing questions that sought further clarification or expansion upon ideas. Chase (1995) suggested that researchers listen for the gaps during the interview process and encourage further narration from the participants.

**In-Depth Semi-Structured Interviews**

After my sample was identified, and prior to actual data collection, I met with each participant, in person or over the phone, who had met the parameters of the selected definition of first-generation college student to review the purpose of the research and the extent of their involvement in the study; the participants had an opportunity to ask questions at that time. Participants were asked to sign a consent form after they had been informed about the study and had a chance to ask questions. Not only did these initial meetings allow for participant clarification of the research study, but they also fostered trust building and rapport between researcher and participant. During the first meeting with each participant, I scheduled the first actual interview.

Each participant engaged in three, in-depth semi-structured interviews. The protocol for the first interview was field tested with two first-generation community college students who met the sampling criteria for the study. I did not include either of these
students as participants in the study. After field testing the first interview, I included their feedback in revisions to the protocol.

The first interview was conducted in the middle of the month of October, after the start of a new semester and the students were back at the college. The time and location of the meeting was mutually agreed upon with the participants; if in person, it was conducted in a secure area on the college campus in order to protect the information being shared by the participant. The first interview was inclusive of broad questions that sought to learn more about the participants’ lives (Appendix C). Initial questions were very general; more probing questions may have followed as the interview progressed. After the completion of the interview, I recorded journal memos as a means of reflection about the interaction that had just taken place in regard to any thoughts or futures questions that may have needed to be addressed. I had the audio recordings of the interviews transcribed and provided a copy of the transcripts to the participants within ten days after the first interview for their review. Participants were asked to check for content, making sure that the transcripts were accurate; additionally, they were asked to notify me if anything needed to be added to the transcript.

The second interview was scheduled at the time of completion of the first interview transcription review. This interview took place approximately two weeks after the first interview, allowing time for transcription and reflection by both researcher and participant. The researcher and participant mutually agreed upon the time and meeting location; if in person, the location was a private area on the college campus in order to protect the sensitive content being shared by the participant. The interview began with a discussion of
any remaining concerns or additional comments regarding the first interview. The primary focus of the second interview included broad questions about the participants’ college experience (Appendix D). Initial questions were very general; more probing questions may have followed as the interview progressed. After the completion of the interview, I recorded journal memos as a means of reflection about the interaction that had just taken place in regard to any thoughts or future questions that may have needed to be addressed. I had the audio recordings of the interviews transcribed and provided a copy of the transcripts to the participants within ten days after the second interview for their review. Participants were asked to check for content, making sure that the transcripts were accurate; additionally, they were asked to notify me if they wanted anything added to the transcript.

The third interview was scheduled at the time of completion of the second interview and took place two weeks after the second interview, which was in the middle of December. As was mentioned previously, this time in between interviews allows for transcription and reflection by both researcher and participant. The researcher and participant mutually agreed upon the time and meeting location of this interview; if in person, the location was a private area on the college campus to protect the information being shared by the participant. The interview began with a discussion of any remaining concerns or additional comments regarding the second interview. This interview was inclusive of broad questions about goals (Appendix E). Initial questions were very general; more probing questions may have followed as the interview progressed. After the completion of the interview, I recorded journal memos as a means of reflection about the
interaction that had just taken place in regard to any thoughts or futures questions that may have needed to be addressed. I had the audio recordings of the interviews transcribed and provided a copy of the transcripts to the participants within ten days after the third interview for their review. Participants were asked to check for content, making sure that the transcripts were accurate; additionally, participants were asked to notify me if they wanted anything added to the transcript.

After all three interviews and transcripts had been completed, I scheduled a final meeting with each participant. Prior to the meeting, I emailed each participant a copy of their respective narratives and asked that they read the narrative in preparation for our meeting. During our meeting, I asked the participants to talk to me about the narrative, making sure it accurately represented their stories that were shared with me. This is referred to as member checking and added to the trustworthiness of the study, as well as to the narrative methodology that requires that the researcher get as close to the experience and meaning as possible.

Some of the participants were not able to physically meet with me; instead, they shared their comments in email format. There were not any disagreements regarding the structure or content of the narratives; rather, there was further discussion about the value they found in sharing their story.

Protection of Human Subjects

One of the areas of human subject protection that I sought to protect against involved the rights and privacy of the participants in the study. There were several ways
in which I attempted to protect these rights. One way I protected their rights and privacy was by being very transparent regarding my research intentions via the consent form (see Appendix B) that each potential participant received prior to making a final decision to participate. This consent form explicitly stated what was expected of a participant and emphasized the fact that involvement was completely voluntary and that it may have been ended at any time. During the consent process, potential participants were also informed of my role at the college. They were told that I did not hold any authority over them, as I was not their teacher, advisor, etc. I explained my role at the college, which, at the time, was a recruitment specialist; I dealt only with prospective students. I provided prospective students with information about the school through presentations and then, they would move on to working with an Enrollment Center Representative to complete the enrollment process.

It is important to note that I also explained to the students that I am a first-generation college student just like them. I wanted them to know that I was able to relate to their experiences and that they could feel comfortable speaking to someone who was not going to judge or make assumptions about them.

In this study, I was asking participants to reflect upon struggles and personal experiences that are sensitive in nature. As a result of the sensitive nature of the questions, I attempted to protect the participants by emphasizing the fact that they did not have to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. I also reminded them that all information they shared was confidential and that their names were not going to
be associated with any responses; there were no identifiers attached to the participants. I informed them that pseudonyms would be used instead of their actual names and that they would be the ones selecting the pseudonym they wished to use. Additionally, the name of the institution was not included in the study.

Once the transcriptions of the interviews were completed, I stored the audio files on my personal computer. The computer is password protected and only I have access to the files.

After the data was collected and the transcriptions had been reviewed by all participants, I conducted an analysis of the narratives. I used the model suggested by Fraser (2002). What follows is a description of the analytic process I executed.

**Analytic Process**

Merriam (2002) explained that there are several methodological approaches to dealing with narrative analysis. Each approach examines, in some way, how the story is constructed, what linguistic tools are used, and the cultural context of the story (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). Biographical, psychological, and linguistic approaches are the most common (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). The analytical approach that was utilized in this study was the psychological approach. The psychological approach concentrates more on the personal, including thoughts and motivations (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). This approach emphasizes inductive processes, contextualized knowledge, and human intention. [It] is holistic in that it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of
meaning making. It also takes into account the biological and environmental influences on development (Rossiter, 1999, p. 78).

In an effort to concentrate on the thoughts and motivations of the participants, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts obtained from the interviews. Fraser (2004) suggested a series of phases that should be followed in order to conduct this form of analysis and I used these phases as my guide in the analytical process. According to Fraser (2004), the first phase of line-by-line analysis involves hearing the stories narrated and experiencing the emotions of the participants and interviewer. Included in this phase is a reflection on the language used and the feelings described in order to detect clues about the meanings made. I used a journal to take notes about the feelings and body language. Taking notes about the time, place and emotional climates of the interviews might prove useful because they are likely to affect the subsequent interpretations made (Anderson and Jack, 1991).

Fraser’s (2004) second phase involves the interview material being transcribed. We cannot rely on our memories for an accurate record of the interview and this is why transcriptions are needed. Fraser (2004) explained that the main benefit derived is how close you are able to come to the stories. Because decisions have to be made about how to represent the utterances, transcribing is as much a form of interpretation and analysis as it is a technical activity (see Mishler, 1991; Riessman, 1993). One way I ensured that the participants’ meaning was reflected in the transcriptions was to send a copy of the transcripts to participants and ask them to return amended copies to me. At the end of the
interviews, I asked the participants to read the forthcoming transcripts, letting them know that it was okay to say no or change their mind later. Participants were told that it would be helpful to have them read the transcripts to ensure that an accurate account of what had been said was depicted. I emailed each participant copies of the transcripts from their individual interviews and asked them to provide feedback regarding any corrections that needed to be made. This is known as member checking and was a means of enhancing the credibility of the study.

Fraser’s (2004) third phase involves interpreting the individual transcripts. In this phase, I paid close attention to the specifics of each transcript. I identified the types and directions of the stories, and noted the contradictions. Fraser (2004) explained that the main challenge of this phase, however, is trying to disaggregate long chunks of talk into specific stories, or segments of narratives. Sometimes this is difficult to do because one story carries into another. At other times it may be hard because a speaker jumps from one subject to another. To account for these challenges, I divided the narrative into sets of ideas expressed and scene(s) in which some sort of plot unfolds according to Fraser’s suggestion. I numbered the lines and stories that had been separated. Fraser (2004) states that the main reason for using numbers is the greater ease it provides to readers when the author refers to different segments of the interviews.

Fraser’s (2004) fourth phase involves scanning across different domains of experience. To prevent researchers from fixating on one dimension of life, narrative researchers may want to scan stories for different domains of experience (McCabe &
Bliss, 2003; Segal, 1999. To do this, personal stories may be examined for their intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Simon, 1996) and structural aspects (Mullaly, 2002). I intended to examine the stories to see internal, external, and cultural experiences. It was important for me to look at each of these areas to see how the students viewed their experiences through themselves, through interaction with others, and through culture.

Fraser’s (2004) fifth phase involves linking the personal with the political. In this phase, researchers deliberate how dominant discourses and their attendant social conventions constitute an interpretative framework for understanding the stories (Coates, 1996, 2003; Hyden, 1994; Riessman, 2003). During this ‘phase’, attention is deliberately given to references made to popular discourses (see Brown, 1990; Cranny-Francis, 1994; Riessman, 1993).

Fraser’s (2004) sixth phase involves looking for commonalities and differences among participants. I examined the transcripts for commonalities and differences that existed among and between participants. I focused on the content, style, and tone of each participant, trying to detect any patterns. Naming, numbering, and listing the stories (as mentioned previously) aided in this process. Any connecting plots, events, and/or themes were put together for analysis. Once I determined the broader headings, I created lists of the stories that I planned to analyze line-by-line. I also included a set of criterion that was used to select the stories included in the analysis. Fraser (2004) explains that differences and similarities are thematic of other aspects of the analysis. While
considering how stories align with the initial assumptions of our research, narrative researchers may also want to note ‘findings’ that are inconsistent, counter-intuitive, surprising, and/or anomalous (Worthington, 1996).

Fraser’s (2004) seventh phase involves writing academic stories about personal stories. According to Fraser, “[A] narrative is never concluded, it is always subject to reconstruction and reinterpretation” (Hyden, 1994, p. 109). That being said, I had to keep checking that my written analysis corresponded to the stories that the participants shared with me.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I will acknowledge how each of these was addressed in my methodology.

**Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that a credible study is one where the “constructed realities of the participants match the realities as represented by the researcher” (p. 286). One of the techniques I used to ensure this happened in my study was member checking, which Lincoln and Guba noted as being “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking gave my participants the chance to review transcripts as well as their narratives to make sure that I had captured the essence of their stories. After each interview had been transcribed, I asked each participant to read it and notify me of any corrections, additions, or clarifications
that must be added in order to portray the accurate perspective. Once the full narrative had been put into essay form, the participants were asked to thoroughly read it and let me know if it accurately represented their stories.

Another way in which I established credibility was through prolonged engagement. Lincoln and Guba described this as “an investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the ‘culture’, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of self or of the respondents, and building trust” (p. 301). I spent ample time with my participants in order to develop rapport and trust with each of them.

A final way I established credibility was through peer debriefing. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined this as “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (p. 308). I provided a copy of my study to a peer in the Higher Education Administration program who was familiar with the idea of first-generation college students and the literature surrounding them and their success in college.

Judging the Soundness of Qualitative Research

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose several criteria for judging the criteria of qualitative research.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recognized a study that has transferability as being one that allows the reader to decide if the results apply to his or her context. According to
Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability is accomplished through thick description. I was able to achieve thick description through the broad nature of my interview questions; these kinds of questions encouraged the participants to think about their responses and therefore, allowed me to co-create a narrative that provided a rich picture of each participant.

**Dependability**

In order to achieve dependability in my study, I utilized an inquiry auditor. This was a doctoral student who is familiar with qualitative research methodology.

**Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that confirmability is intended to establish that the findings from a study come out of the data as opposed to the researcher’s biases and motivations. I established confirmability through the use of an inquiry auditor and two peer debriefers. Additionally, I also made my personal connection to the topic explicit wherever possible.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study is that I only met with my participants three times. As a result of only talking with them at three different points, my participants may have been reluctant to open up to me and share personal stories with me.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to tell the story of six first-generation community college students’ perceptions of their ability to succeed in the college environment in light of their past, present, and future. The story is presented first by telling individual narratives for each of the six study participants. Through these narratives, I attempt to portray the content of the stories that each participant shared about his or her life experiences, specifically in regard to education. I also introduce the presentation of underlying themes that illuminate relationships and distinctions among and between the six narratives. These relationships are found in the content of the participants’ perceptions of their ability to succeed.

Narratives of Life Experiences

The purpose of the six narratives presented in this section is to portray the ideas central to each participant’s story about the meaning he or she made of his or her life experiences, specifically in regard to the pursuit of and success in college. Based on a three-dimensional framework, participants were questioned about their past, present, and future. My analysis of the interviews, reviewed by the participants, shaped the construction of the narratives. These stories are not intended to be interview summaries. The themes that emerged from each of the participants’ interviews guide their individual narratives. These themes typically involved the issues with which each participant
grappled or believed he or she had overcome as he or she sought to succeed in college.

Not only do the themes differ for each participant, but so too does the thematic cohesiveness of each narrative. An analysis of the relationship between the participants’ narratives and meaning-making structures is presented at the end of the chapter.

It is important to note that the variations in the length of the narratives do not in any way suggest differences in the importance or depth of the respective narratives.

The following table provides a brief overview of the participants.

Table 1

Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patti</td>
<td>42-year old second-year student; female; Caucasian; grew up in inner city, working-class family; Sociology major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashonda</td>
<td>34-year old second-year student; female; African American; grew up in inner city, subsidized housing; lower middle-class family; Nursing major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>27-year old second-year student; male; African American; grew up in city; working-class family; Science major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>45-year old second-year student; male; Caucasian; grew up in military family; working-class family; Information Technology major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>49-year old second-year distance learning student; female; Caucasian; lower middle-class family; Court Reporting &amp; Captioning major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>43-year old second-year student; female; Caucasian; lower middle-class family; Nursing major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Patti’s Story

Patti, a strong-willed, determined 42-year old woman was a second-year Sociology major. Offering perspectives that revealed her humor and frankness, her interview responses were always candid and colorful. From the very beginning, Patti exuded confidence during the interviews. Having never participated in something like this, she acknowledged she had no idea what she was getting herself into, but was willing to share it all. Patti attributed much of her confidence and iron-willed nature to all that she had overcome in her life. Her childhood and adulthood were both impacted by family dysfunction that often resulted in low self-esteem, transitional living, and a longing for a sense of family, the inability to pursue her own dreams, self-reliance, and ultimately, the drive to push forward.

Family Dysfunction

Family dysfunction entered Patti’s life at a very young age; her parents divorced when she was in her early teens. During the interview, Patti remembers the good times prior to the divorce during which she received a lot of attention from her mom in regard to school. As she happily mentioned, during preschool and kindergarten, her mother would read the phonics books with her and Patti “loved it” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). This attentiveness and bonding time would lessen as she aged and as the marriage between her parents became more troubled as the years passed by; consequently, Patti’s thoughts about school would alter as well.
Patti described a time when she had thoughts about her own ability in school that were related to her parents’ troubled marriage. She recalled:

I always felt that I wasn’t smart. Everybody else was always better. No matter what I did, everybody else was better, and everybody else’s parents were more involved with their stuff. I look back now and I realize when I was thinking that, that was between—I think it was like fourth grade. Four through six. And I think that’s when my parents started having trouble, and my mother wasn’t available to help me with stuff as much as she used to. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

According to Patti, from grades four through six, her mother was “in her own drama” and she began to realize that “there was more to life than just school” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). At this point in life, she became involved in extracurricular activities such as gymnastics, swim team, dancing, and, as Patti described, “cute boys.”

Patti described life as being “chaotic” during the tumultuous years of her parents’ marriage. Left alone and unattended, Patti looked elsewhere for people who cared. She explained,

And our life was—life was just chaotic. And my mother was not—no one was available for me. I would end up adopting people who were, like, figures in the school, like the principal’s wife, or a certain counselor, or a certain teacher, or
someone that I babysat for. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

Patti remembered a particular family took her in as their own during the absence of her parents. When she was in the fifth grade, she began cleaning houses for people as a result of a school project. What started as a simple school project turned out to be so much more for Patti. As she cleaned houses every day, one of the families grew to care for her as they would a daughter of their own. Patti fondly recalled,

They would buy me Christmas presents—they would let me eat dinner with them. They always included me in their activities. And that was more my family than my home, because my parents—my father was working so much, and my mother just wasn’t there. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

As Patti moved through middle school and high school, she began finding support and attention from her teachers and the employees at the schools. Her self-esteem and belief in her academic ability was sparked when a high school English teacher suggested she go out for the debate team. Her teacher’s words of encouragement still rang in her ears: “You have a way with people and you have a way of convincing people of things, and you just don’t realize it yet” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Encouragement and interest was not coming from her parents at home, but it was starting to surface from other sources. Patti ended up securing a spot on the high school’s drill team and people started taking notice of her, especially one person in particular—the
principal’s wife. She would reach out to Patti and send her notes of encouragement, which Patti has maintained to this day. The principal’s wife encouraged Patti to run for the local city beauty pageant and drove her to all of the related events, encouraging her every step of the way. Although Patti may not have claimed the title, she was named Ms. Personality and laughed about how true that turned out to be.

Shortly after the beauty contest, Patti was kicked off the high school drill team for dying her hair a different color because “it wasn’t the proper representation for the drill team, and the coach and I got into it a couple times” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Feeling like she had no support, she dealt with it by herself and explained, “And my mother wasn’t there to talk to her. No one was—I don’t even know why I didn’t go to the principal’s wife and say, ‘This is the situation, can someone help me?’ I just gave up and quit, and then started hanging around gangs” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

Trying to explain why she turned to gangs, Patti clarified,

…it tended to be Puerto Rican families that I flocked to. And you know what it was? It was like—I don’t know if you—you’re familiar with the Puerto Rican families, but they stick together. Usually any—any family that’s really ethnic as far as like, Italians, Slovaks—they have their religion and their faith, and their sense of family. Even if you piss one of your family members off, the sense of family is so intense and strong, and I think that’s what I was looking for—was the
security of the family, and I was not getting it. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

Patti’s admiration for a family unit that remained together regardless of conflict was so strong that she was willing to do whatever it took to experience it, even if that meant joining a gang.

After her parents divorced, she acknowledges a suicide attempt at the age of 13 or 14. Patti described,

He [her dad] wouldn’t let me see my mother—like, I would call my mom, and he would say that she wasn’t—no—she never returned my calls. It turned out she was returning my calls; I just never got the messages. No one gave them to me. And I had a suicide attempt. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

Divorce would be something Patti later experienced again as an adult when she and her husband decided to do the same in 2009 after she “tried everything to get to a better point and he wasn’t participating” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

Abuse

Both of the family units in Patti’s life were plagued by spousal abuse. Patti acknowledged that her father was “sent to prison for 15 to 25 years for beating [her] mom” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). In addition to physical abuse, her mother also experienced emotional abuse. An unexpected and untimely pregnancy resulted in her mother giving up an art scholarship and getting
married immediately following high school; consequently, her mom stayed home and raised the kids. When Patti’s mother attempted to go back to school years later, Patti’s father “didn’t like it at all” because his wife “was not available at home for the things he wanted her to do” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

Patti’s own marriage mirrored that of her mother’s; she was pregnant within the first two weeks of her freshmen year at college. Patti candidly confessed, “I ended up dropping out of Ursuline, [four-year, private college] and [became] a statistic. I lived on welfare, because I had my first baby at the age of 18” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). She attempted to be independent again and enrolled in cosmetology school. After completing 900 hours, she “dropped out because [she] thought she sucked at it” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

Three years after the birth of her first child, Patti went back to college and was doing well, earning a 2.8 grade point average that semester. She would stop out the following semester due to another pregnancy. When she returned to college after the birth of her child, the dysfunction she knew as a child would come clamoring back into her life. Patti recalled, “I did go back after, you know, like a semester off, and I ended up meeting my husband, and continued the dysfunctional—what would you say—my mother was a victim of domestic violence, and I continued the tradition” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).
Patti married her husband after the two of them had a three-and-a-half year old and a six-month old; the couple would end up having five more children. Patti begrudgingly described her life as being that of Betty Crocker, the “stay-at-home mom” and she gave up college because of it. She remembered she,

…wasn’t allowed to go anywhere unless it was church related, I wasn’t allowed to go out without the kids, so I became very active in the Catholic religion because I had no other options; that was the only way to get out. In 2006, I tried going back to school and was told I wasn’t—I could go back to school as long as I didn’t take any loans for it, and because we made $96,000 a year, even though we had eight children, I couldn’t get any [financial aid]. I didn’t know of any other way to get funding to go to school. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

In an attempt to earn money to attend school, Patti went to work at a retail clothing store, but her husband told her she had to quit because “he needed dinner on the table when he got home” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). She attempted to go back to work at another store and was hired and promoted within a short time of being employed. Despite her success, her husband made her quit again because “the kids were doing bad stuff while she was at work” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). He had control of all of the money and would only give her so much money each week to spend on groceries and other household items. Patti disclosed that she wanted different things; she wanted more from life.
After becoming depressed, Patti “ended up getting a lot of counseling and self-help to figure out why [she was] sad, and [she] realized that [her] family situation really sucked” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). The counselors determined that she was in a domestic abuse cycle and did not even realize it. Patti “continued to try to improve it, and it didn’t work” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). As the situation between her and her husband grew worse, so, too, did the relationship between Patti and her children. She described,

One of the kids—a couple of the kids ended up getting into some juvenile delinquency problems—issues. And then one of the kids started taking out a lot of their anger on me; stealing my money, vandalizing my car. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

Recognizing the severity of the problems being caused by the turbulent marriage, Patti filed for divorce. A resourceful self-starter, Patti “filled out all [her] paperwork in the legal and courts and all that, not knowing what the hell [she] was doing, trying [her] best, and taking out more books and reading and reading” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

**Transitional Living**

Her parent’s divorce, as well as her own, both resulted in segments of transitional living for Patti. Prior to her parent’s divorce, Patti’s family grew up in an urban area of the Midwest which she refers to as “the hood” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). She explained,
I grew up in—mostly east side. Collinwood. Then we moved to Richmond Heights because it was getting bad with the tracks. You couldn’t go over certain—you couldn’t eat in certain areas if you were white or if you were black, and it was getting really bad. So my father moved us up to Richmond Heights. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

After the divorce of her parents, Patti spent one year living with her father in Mayfield because “she felt bad” for him (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Due to her suicide attempt, the court ordered that she live with her mother and consequently, Patti moved to Lakewood for one year. Her mother moved the family in with her boyfriend and that took her family to North Olmsted during her tenth grade year; she graduated from North Olmsted High School in 1989. The constant moving made it difficult for Patti to develop a strong social network. She admitted that, “because of the constant moving, it was hard to keep friends” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

When her own divorce happened, Patti initially moved to an apartment. Due to trouble with the children, however, she moved back into the house with her husband, contending, “We thought, okay, we’re going to have to live together so we can both monitor these kids and make this work, but we’re not going to be married” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). According to Patti, it was not long before the couple fell back into the same routine of control and dysfunction. Patti remembered,
He didn’t like the way I did the dishes, he didn’t like the way that I moved things
around the house, or if I put the knives in different spots so I could use it—you
know, because he’d put it in—so he could access it really quick—he’s like,
‘Don’t move anything in my house’. (interview 1, personal communication,
November 13, 2013)
Unable to cohabitate, she decided to explore apartment living once again; this time,
however, she could not secure a place of her own due to the number of children she had.
She explained,
…and people didn’t want to rent to me because—one, because I had too many
kids, and that’s a liability in the house, because legally you can’t have that many
children—you got to have so many to a room. (interview 1, personal
communication, November 13, 2013)
Leaving the children behind due to housing regulations, Patti stayed at a homeless shelter
for six weeks until her mother offered her the opportunity to rent a house in Collinwood.
The memories of moving to Collinwood again led Patti into a discussion about her
socioeconomic status growing up.

**Economic Hardship**

Patti was one of four children. To support the family, Patti’s father owned an
auto body shop that he “built up from the bottom” (interview 1, personal communication,
November 13, 2013). Having grown up in the “hood”, Patti and her siblings were not
invited to play with other people’s kids when they moved to the suburbs. She added, “A
lot of people looked down on us, especially my sisters, because they had more Midwest etiquette than I did” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Although she got along with everybody, Patti never could infiltrate these new social circles because “[her] parents were not in the—in the ‘in’ groups, like active in the community or have a prominent job that was considered worth something” (personal communication, November 13, 2013). She continued,

They just—we came from being poor up to the burbs, and we had stuff, but we weren’t spoiled, and my parents made us work for what we wanted. Like, we didn’t get Nikes and Guess jeans and all that, but the deal was if you worked and you got the money for it, and you put it in your bank account, he would pay half of whatever and you could pay the other half. So it taught us good work ethic, being honest. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

The economic hardship that plagued much of Patti’s life would be the determining factor that drove her desire to attend college. She explained,

I wanted to—I wanted employment. I wanted secure employment. I want to be able to have healthcare. I want security to be able to support my family, and I don’t want to hustle, and that’s what I’ve been doing, like, you—you know, you just do what you can to survive. Robbing from Peter to pay Paul. I wanted to be legit and honest and get a good job and I knew that I needed to go back to college. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)
An advertisement she saw about a transitional program for women would be the catalyst for her return to college.

**Transitional Programming**

Having just gotten out of a homeless shelter, Patti indicated that she did not understand everything that was involved with returning to school; she did not know how to get started. Serendipitously, she saw a sign advertising a program entitled *Women in Transition*. Based on Patti’s interpretation, the sign claimed that this free opportunity helped women “become an active participant in the community and not rely on welfare; it helped show women what’s available to take control of their lives” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Patti called and interviewed for the program; she was accepted.

Explaining the program, Patti indicated, “They went over self-esteem, time management, career exploration, finding your niche, and finding a good job if you pushed it and found your passion” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013). As she progressed through the program, Patti paid particular attention to anything that involved going to college. She stated,

I really was attracted to going to college. Any information—and they kept giving us information, like they would have speakers come in—and this woman talked about financial aid, and she talked about the FAFSA, and how you could probably go to school for free if you really put your mind to it, because there’s all these
scholarships out there. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

Patti viewed the program as a preview of college; she attended five-hour sessions three to four days a week. Additionally, she was assigned daily homework and weekly projects. For Patti, it solidified her desire to attend college. She explained,

I always knew I wanted to go to college so I could be somebody, but after going through everything I did, I didn’t know if it was possible still, and this program helped me to realize it was possible. That I could do it. (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

She added, “And if it weren’t for them I don’t think I would have gone back, because it was too confusing” (interview 1, personal communication, November 13, 2013).

**Community College Experiences**

Patti shared that she considered two-year and four-year educational options. To assist with her decision, she reached out to her sister, who had attended college. Patti described,

After talking with my older sister, who is—I call her a professional student, and learning about the difference between a community college, private college, the universities, you know, the bigger colleges, she explained that the community college is a junior college. It’s a nice way to break in. It’s not as expensive. It’s like less than half the price. You’re receiving good education. Get those general requirements in there; see if you even like it before you dump all that money into
it. So that’s why I chose the smaller college, you know, community college first.

(interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013)

A second year student at the college, she affirmed that the choice to attend the community college was the right move for her.

When describing her experiences at the college, she smiles,

I truly enjoy the community college. There are three campuses and there’s a different flavor of people at each one. I’ve met a wide variety of people from all different income levels, all ethnic backgrounds, all different cultures. It’s been amazing. (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013)

In addition to enjoying her peers, Patti also praised the staff and faculty at the college. Resourceful, Patti would take the business card of those staff members who offered her an exceptional experience and wrote the significance of that moment on the back of the card so that she could remember to reach out to them if she ever needed additional help.

A self-described fearer of mathematics, Patti especially appreciated her math faculty. She indicated that she hated math; not able to perform simple subtraction, Patti tested into developmental math, the same level that her seventh grader was completing in school. Emphatically, Patti admitted, “Let me tell you, I feared math. My professor in my math class offered me a developmental math education student of the year award. And it’s a scholarship. And she says, ‘I think you deserve this’” (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013). This encouragement and belief in her paid off; Patti disclosed that, at the time of the interview, she had a 99 percent in the class.
In addition to assisting her with coursework, another faculty member identified a work-study position for Patti to pursue. Fueled by the encouragement, Patti applied and earned a position working as a student advocate that assists fellow students with finding resources for medical coverage, housing assistance, dental care, and miscellaneous benefits. She affirmed her love of the position because she can relate to these students; she had once been through the same scenarios and in need of similar help.

Outside of faculty help and work-study experiences, Patti took advantage of specific services offered at the college. One such service was the ACCESS Department. This federally funded service assists students with disabilities; Patti self-disclosed having ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). From this program, she received assistance with slowing down and having the computer read her books to her for comprehension purposes. Another federally funded program she utilized was the TRIO program. Designed to assist low-income and first-generation youth and adults to enroll in and complete a post-secondary education, the program assists students with enrollment and retention, making sure that they meet with academic counselors at least four times a year to ensure the students make it to graduation.

Tutoring was also something Patti utilized, specifically the “study jams.” Patti described,

Study jams are usually before midterms or finals, and what they do is they’ll have pizza, popcorn, and drinks and the teachers and aids will volunteer their time to help with math, social studies, history, all different subjects. So not only do you
have your teachers, advisors, and student assistants, but you have your peers. And the stuff you can learn from your friends and your fellow students, is amazing, because you’re reading this stuff and you’re only getting it one way, and then you’re like, ‘what do you think about this?’ and they throw it at you different, and you’re like, ‘oh, light bulb’. (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013)

Reflecting on all that was available at the community college, she declared, “So it’s like—it’s really—they’re encouraging success. If you don’t succeed here, it’s because you didn’t ask, and you didn’t want it bad enough” (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013). She added,

I feel like I have been starved for years, and you just sat me in front of a smorgasbord of every delicacy; beautiful food, fish, steak, which is my favorite, everything, and you told me I can have whatever I want. And I’m like, what do I take first, because this is all so good? (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013).

For Patti, her expectations of college turned out better than expected.

Expectations of College

Initially, Patti wanted to go to college to see if she could learn something and do well her first semester. Anxiety ridden, she only took two classes to see how she would do; she just wanted to start and see what happened. After a successful first semester, Patti raised her own expectations of herself. She explained,
And as I came back for the second semester, passing wasn’t good enough. I want—I want to do well, and I want to take advantage of the opportunities that are before me, because I feel really blessed that I’m receiving help to go back to school. Because not everybody gets that. Not everybody can afford it. I just—I appreciate it, and I just want to do well so they keep doing the Pell Grants and the scholarships so other people, hopefully somebody else like me, will be able to get through. (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013).

As far as her expectations for the college, she indicated, “They’re being surpassed” (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013). She clarified,

I didn’t think there’d be as much help, as much assistance, personal relationships—you know, when you think of a professor, you think of somebody up on a pedestal, kind of like closer to God. You don’t get personal with them. You are just a number. And that’s not how it is. They realize we’re human, too, you just have to communicate with them. Like I said, there’s just so much—there’s so much available that I didn’t—like the clubs, I didn’t realize the clubs. (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013)

The faculty, the staff, the opportunities, the resources—all of those components contributed to Patti’s success.

**College Success**

For Patti, college success is made up of the little things; showing up to class on time, remembering to turn off your phone before you walk in the classroom, getting to
class on time every single day for a full week, not missing a class for the semester, completing homework or a paper, getting a quiz back and getting a nine out of ten. It also comes from the support of others. She described, “Success is your teacher remembers your name because you’ve attended. That’s cool. Success is being recognized by your—the professors, the advisors, your coworkers” (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013). It also means giving back to others. She acknowledged, “Being able to help a fellow student when they’re stuck on something, they can’t get it. That feels good, too. That’s success” (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013). Jokingly, Patti added, “And getting to the break. Winter break, happy dance, getting to every Friday is a happy dance” (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013).

Candidly, Patti discussed the challenges of achieving that success when parental responsibilities interfered. She shared,

I have missed a few classes because I had to go take the kids to doctors’ appointments and things, which kind of got me mad, but made me step back and go, okay, we need to sit—what is—is it really an emergency that they go that day? (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013).

She admitted that sometimes the children want more from her; they want more time and more attention. Patti disclosed, “You know, I did have a problem with my 19-year-old recently, and she said, ‘All you do is work, study, go to school’ and I said, ‘The problem?’ And she said, ‘I want your time’” (interview 2, personal communication,
November 27, 2013). Consequently, Patti realized that success is the ability to reevaluate a situation and readjust. She stated, “So success is realizing that something isn’t working and you’ve got to tweak—you’ve got to rearrange this. This has got—there’s got to be a better balance” (personal communication, November 27, 2013).

Realistic in her thoughts about college success, Patti shared,

College is stressful. College is a big commitment. But life is stressful and life is a commitment. You have to want it if you want to succeed, and you have to be able to step back and reprioritize, and reevaluate, and adjust your goals. Not just once a year. It may happen every two weeks. But if you really want it, you’re going to get it. (interview 2, personal communication, November 27, 2013)

For Patti, knowing the end goal helped keep her motivated through all the ups and downs and resulted in her success each semester.

Goals

For Patti, she has goals for every aspect of her life—spiritual life, personal relationships, work, school, and health. Depending on the time of life and situation in which she was in, her goals have evolved. During marriage, for example, she described,

I had goals of trying to pay the bills on time on a regular basis. Goals of trying to make sure the kids’ laundry was done ahead of time so we weren’t looking for uniforms. Every week, we had a goal. Let’s make it to Sunday. That was the goal. (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013)
After the divorce, her goals became more meaningful to her; she began to think about what she wanted, as opposed to what someone else wanted for her. She described,

And after the divorce, that’s when goals started becoming more important to me. And realizing what the importance was. How significant it was to have a goal. Because I realized after the divorce looking back that I had no goals that were of importance. That were of value. That can make an impact on my life. And after the divorce, I realized I wasn’t even sure what my goals were. (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013)

Patti referenced the Women in Transition program, indicating it was what made her rethink the thought of goals. She stated,

I swear that was one of the biggest steps. That was like getting to the top of a mountain and realizing, wow, look at all the stuff that’s available to you. They really helped introduce the idea of a solid, concrete goal. How to visualize it. Different ways to look about getting to it. How to get over the barriers. How to step back and reevaluate where you are at the moment. What do you need to do to get to the next level? (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013)

In her words, goals are

…something to aim for. If you’re living life and you have no goals, you’re not going to get anywhere. You’ve got to have some idea of what you’re trying to get to. What you want as the end result. Because if you don’t know where you’re
going to, you’re going to be walking around in circles and going, why aren’t things working out for me? (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013)

One strategy that worked for Patti was writing down her goals; having the ability to see them helps her visualize her future and where she wants to be. It serves as a reminder of what she needs to do to get there. Patti’s long-term goal is to, “…receive a college education, to receive a degree, a piece of paper, that says I have succeeded four years of torture and survived” (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013). She added that she eventually would like to go to law school after earning her bachelor’s degree in Sociology.

Solid in her long-term goal, Patti changed her daily life to ensure that it would be reached. She disclosed,

Because of my goal, I do not go out and drink and drive, because I know if I’m drinking and driving, I could lose my scholarships. I make better choices about who I’m hanging around with. What I’ve learned is, if I am associated with drugs and I’m receiving scholarships or a Pell Grant, I can lose all my funding. So I don’t want that in my life at all. I’ve kind of lost my social life due to school, but I keep telling myself, it’s only for 16 weeks. As soon as 16 weeks is up, I can enjoy a little bit and go out and do stuff. I’ve missed some activities with friends and family because I couldn’t—because I had—you know, I had to balance work
and school and I couldn’t fit it in because I had to study or had a paper due.

(interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013)

Patti viewed these sacrifices as temporary; they were necessary in order to get to the end goal. She affirmed, “This is not forever. I can do this” (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013). She expected herself to make it and that made the difference.

In regard to the expectations the college had for her, Patti indicated, “The College wants to make sure that I succeed” (interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013). She added,

I think it’s important to them [the college] that I succeed. The more people that succeed at this school that they can get to graduate and go on to decent paying jobs makes the school look good. Because they show that they’re showing that they care about students and they’re going to do anything that they can to make them succeed. And, in turn, they’re going to get more funding form the state.

(interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013)

In order to succeed, she believed that the expectations of the teachers were reasonable—show up when you say you’re going to be there, be prepared, be considerate, follow the rules, do your best, and communicate if there is a problem.

In Patti’s eyes, she believed she would succeed. While she had the support of family and those at the college, she indicated that it ultimately comes down to what she thinks of herself. She adamantly advised, “You can’t put your value of yourself in what
other people see of you. It’s what you believe of yourself, and I understand that”
(interview 3, personal communication, December 16, 2013).

**Rashonda’s Story**

Rashonda, a determined, focused 34-year old woman was a Nursing major from an urban area. Attempting to balance raising two children as a single mother, her interview responses were quick and to the point. Not afraid to talk about her past, Rashonda opened up about what life was like for a child growing up in the “inner city”. Direct in her responses throughout the interviews, she came to an understanding of how that life intersected with her life as a student. For Rashonda, it was the determination to exceed societal expectations that would ultimately result in her ability to overcome the challenges of geographic location, family dysfunction, transitional living and schooling, support networks, academic challenges, and parental responsibilities.

**Geographic Location**

Within minutes of beginning to tell her story, Rashonda discussed the geographic location in which she was raised. Referring to it as the “projects”, she candidly shared what life was like in this area. She explained,

*Where I grew up, in the inner-city projects, it wasn’t the best environment. It was low-income housing. Well, when you watch the news now and you hear about all the shootings and the killings in the inner-city, you know, you say, ‘oh my gosh’. It was the projects; it was the hood, it was what we called the*
hood. It was violent. It wasn’t fun. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

As a result of the prevalence of violence, Rashonda always had to “watch [her] back” and “look after [herself] and her siblings” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2014). Accordingly, a sense of responsibility developed for her at a young age. She understood, early on, that life was about more than just her; she had to think about others when making decisions, a reality that would impact her choices moving forward in life.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges that Rashonda repeatedly confronted as a result of her environment was the reality of low communal and societal expectations. She acknowledged, “Nobody actually expected you to actually make something of yourself because you are from the projects” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30 2013). According to Rashonda, it was not just society that expected failure from children growing up in the “inner city”; her own peer groups projected the same outcome on her. She described,

To actually make it through, it [living in the inner city] makes it 110 percent harder, especially when you have people behind you that don’t expect you to make it or people behind you with a lot of negative because it’s not on their agenda. It makes things harder. It’s like they’re sending you out by yourself, without a lot of support, because they don’t know any different; they’re still stuck in their comfort zone. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)
It was precisely this lack of support that ended up being Rashonda’s biggest drive. Referring to living in this environment, she described,

> You see it and you’re living it, and you were indifferent or you wanted to be a different person. You don’t necessarily take on the traits of your environment. I think that’s what it is for me. I didn’t grow up to be a hard-core person and mean, evil, or wear a chip on my shoulder. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Having lived through the struggles and uncertainties of the “projects”, Rashonda wanted more for herself. According to Rashonda, she “took [her] experiences, or the way [she] lived, and decided [she] wanted to change it or decided [she] wanted to do something different from it” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

**Family Dysfunction**

Growing up in a single parent household, Rashonda acknowledges, “My dad wasn’t really in the picture” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013). The oldest of three, Rashonda lived in a single-family home with her mother and two sisters. She explained that her immediate family was “kind of separated” (interview 1, personal communication, January 4, 2014). According to Rashonda, they “did a few things together, but everybody had their own agenda” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

Rashonda was very frank when describing what the “agenda” was for her family members. She disclosed:
My family—let’s put it this way: If you had to take a pie of 100 percent and you break it down, 50 percent of my family does drugs; 45 percent of my family sells drugs; the other 5 percent—I’m a part of the other 5 percent that doesn’t do either. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Rashonda made it clear that this “agenda” would not be that of her own family. She declared, “I wanted things different for my family; I wanted it to be different from how I was raised” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

**Economic Hardship**

In addition to not wanting her own family to be separated with different agendas one day, Rashonda very clearly indicated that she refused to have her kids know the economic struggle she faced as a child. Matter of factly, she affirmed,

I know what it’s like to not have. I know what it’s like to drink powdered milk. I know what it’s like when you don’t have sugar and all kinds of things. Some people have those experiences and some don’t. That’s like my kids. My children are spoiled. They don’t struggle; I try not to have them struggle like I did. They don’t experience the things that I went through. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Raised in a low-income community, Rashonda watched as people struggled to survive financially. She stated,

Everybody struggled to get what they had and those that didn’t struggle to get it, they took it. That was just how I was raised. You were raised to be independent,
you know, always look after yourself and your siblings. Always make sure your family eats first. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

With her father not in the picture, Rashonda’s mother always had a job, primarily in the customer service area, but did not make more than minimum wage. Although always employed, Rashonda clarified that her mother did not have a career. Labeled the “go-to person”, Rashonda’s mother was the “rock” of the family (personal communication, December 30 2013). Emotionally, she remembered,

I watched my mom when I was growing up; that’s why I’m more of a family person now. I don’t want her to have to be the go-to person. I go to my sisters to make sure they’re okay. I make sure they’re all doing okay. That’s how it helps me, because I’m more humble, I think, because I’ve seen people do it by themselves without the support, without any help from family to keep positive. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

In order to survive, the majority of her family members sold drugs and made a lot of money, but never “shared it” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013). Jaded by the selfishness, Rashonda commented,

Most people get money and they become selfish, so that’s another reason I don’t value money at all. I believe that the love of money is the root of all evil. That’s a part of what makes me who I am because I actually enjoy my job. I don’t go to work just to make money; I enjoy what I do. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2014).
Family dysfunction and financial hardship experienced by the family resulted in another area that was key to Rashonda’s story—transitional living and schooling.

**Transitional Living and Schooling**

After attending a Catholic school for kindergarten through second grades, Rashonda transitioned to a public school her third grade year. The determining factor that caused this change was economic hardship; the bottom line was that the family could not afford Catholic schooling anymore after her father left. Remembering the alteration in her schooling, Rashonda recalled,

> It was totally different. It was a totally different change, coming from Catholic school to public school, but I’ve never struggled with, as far as education-wise, as far as learning. I’ve always been a quick learner, so getting good grades and the transition wasn’t a problem for me, it was just the whole changing environment; the whole change in the household environment because I went from a two-parent home to a single-family home. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Rashonda would not be afforded much time to settle in to her new educational environment; due to her mother’s many moves, she attended six different schools prior to high school.

The frequency in moving resulted in an infrequency of meeting friends and establishing a social network. Rashonda commented, “Meeting new people was like—actually getting friends, finding new friends and people you could actually connect
with, I went to a lot of different schools so I had a lot of different experiences” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013). It was not until her eighth grade year that Rashonda met a few friends with whom she became very close. Unfortunately, after ninth grade, the friends would break apart and take different paths. Once in high school, Rashonda joined a new social circle of girls that remained close until their graduation.

As Rashonda reflected on moving around and attending different schools with various circles of friends, she began to discuss her academic experiences.

**Academic Challenges**

Thinking back, Rashonda remembered doing well academically in her early years of education. Once reaching high school however, her academic success faltered. She recalled,

My high school years, it was horrible: I cut school, I didn’t want to go, I got caught cutting school, my grades were crappy. When I look at my transcript, I try to make up for it now because I did so bad in high school that I wanted to do better in college. I would say out of my graduating class of 194, I think I was maybe 98, which would put me halfway through maybe, 50 percent.

(interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Adding that she did not graduate with high honors, Rashonda acknowledged that her self-esteem in regard to her educational abilities was lacking; she did not have confidence in herself. She explained,
That’s another reason why I waited so long to go back to school because I really didn’t think that I could actually accomplish anything because I didn’t have that confidence in myself; I barely made it out of high school. I just made it.

(interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

In regard to encouragement, it was limited for Rashonda. She emphasized,
My mom—the encouragement that I got from my mom was, get up and get out of the bed. You’re not going to sleep in my house. You’re not going to go to school, you won’t be here. That was the encouragement. You can’t lie around in here all day. You got to get up, you got to go somewhere. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Rashonda reiterated that her father was not in the picture and therefore, provided no support or encouragement regarding her academic pursuits.

As far as other family members, Rashonda made it known that she did not get support from them either. She emphasized, “My grandmother had six children; out of six children, my mother is the only child of hers that does not do drugs” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

There was one person, outside of her family, that made a lasting impression on Rashonda. Fondly, Rashonda described, “There was a guidance counselor—there was one woman that I will never forget” (personal communication, December 30, 2013). Having been her mother’s elementary school teacher, this woman “actually kind of held
Assisting Rashonda with acquiring her first job, the guidance counselor encouraged her and made her believe she could do it. Refusing to enable Rashonda, the counselor acted as a go-to person for support and confidence. Smiling as she remembered her, Rashonda clarified,

She made sure I was on the right track if things went wrong. She was my go-to person, but she didn’t enable me. She pushed me to actually—she gave me encouragement, she said I could do it. That one person, I could definitely count on if I was having a bad day. That’s the only person I would say as far as encouragement. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

The impact her guidance counselor had on her life was long lasting; it made her confident and aware of her academic abilities. Rashonda confidently shared,

I would say I’m very, very intelligent. I’m very smart when it comes to the street and I’m very smart when it comes to my interests, as far as nursing and what my interest is in school, because when I’m interested in something, I’ll take it and I’ll learn from it. (personal communication, December 30, 2013).

Although her confidence grew, Rashonda would not continue on to college after graduating high school; an early pregnancy posed a new challenge for her—parental responsibilities.

**Parental Responsibilities**
For Rashonda, college was not at the forefront of her mind after completing high school. She explained, “My twelfth grade year, college was not on the table. That was not one of our discussions. I actually had my daughter right out of high school. I graduated in June, I think I got pregnant in August” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013). Being a parent became the main priority for Rashonda. She acknowledged,

I had a child; I wasn’t thinking about college, I was thinking about being a family and doing this. I’ve always worked, so I had a job. That’s never been an issue, I’ve always supported my family, but I didn’t make the right decisions at a young age. I should’ve waited before I had a kid because it taught me how to be independent because you’re pregnant now, you have kids, and it’s not a family thing, so you end up being a single parent. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

When her daughter turned two, Rashonda became a single parent. Recalling the challenges of raising a child on her own, she emphasized, “You have to learn to take care of everything and to handle everything on your own, so it kind of makes you grow up a lot faster” (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

Due to being a single parent, Rashonda waited ten years to go back to college and had no regrets about that decision, clarifying,

If I would’ve went back sooner, I don’t think I would’ve been ready. I was established; I had three kids already. I’m still a single mom, but I’ve got my
mind made up. I’ve had jobs; I’ve had plenty of jobs. I wanted a career. At this point I knew—I went in knowing what I wanted and I set my goals so I actually sat down and it helps keep me motivated. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Her decision to attend college was not well-received by her parents. In their minds, there was no way she could raise kids at the same time she attended college. When she quit her job to go to school, she went to them to discuss her decision and she received pushback. Rashonda recalled,

I got so much negativity. They asked me, ‘How are you going to quit your job? You have three kids. What you going to do, go off to go to school? How are you going to support your family and go to school? I don’t think it’s a good idea. You shouldn’t do this’; blah, blah, blah. So much pushback. It was what I wanted to do, and I had to make a decision for myself, so I decided, you know what? I’m doing it. And I didn’t get a lot of support at all. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Her parents’ concern regarding raising a family as a single mother with no job was not unwarranted; Rashonda acknowledged it was a struggle. She confessed,

Being a single mom, trying to go to school, no job. Of course I had college support from food stamps, but I never got a cash income. That makes it even harder for you whenever you decide what to do with your life. That just makes it harder, period. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)
Regardless of the struggle, Rashonda knew she was making the right decision for her. Employed since the age of fourteen, she always had a job, but she wanted more than that. Rashonda affirmed,

I wanted to have a career. I didn’t want to just have a job anymore. I want to actually enjoy what I do. I want to actually be able to say I’m a nurse, or I work at such-and-such, not just, I work at this grocery store. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

As a child, she wanted to be a pediatrician, but that dream was deferred when she did not attend college immediately after graduating high school. She explained,

When I was a kid growing up, I wanted to be a pediatrician. I never went back to school immediately after graduating high school, so I kind of screwed up. So I said, hey, why not be a pediatric nurse? I looked it up and saw what information I needed to go to college and I went down and put in an application. (interview 1, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Recognizing the convenience attending the community college down the street from where she lived, Rashonda began her college career.

**Community College Experiences**

Although convenience was a factor, it was not the only reason Rashonda chose to attend a community college versus a four-year school. Hesitantly she admitted,

I didn’t think I had the potential to go to a four-year college. I didn’t think I was good enough for a four-year college and I didn’t think I was smart enough for
it. That was really why until last year. When I started Speech, I was like, I'll start as small as I can, then work my way up. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

This lack of self-esteem regarding her academic abilities would dissipate as she began to interact with her instructors. Rashonda noted,

I’ve met instructors that have made a huge impact on my life, that have motivated me, that have given me the encouragement to see that I can keep going, that I can make it, that this is possible. I met a few instructors at the community college like that and that was comforting, to know that somebody actually believed in me and were rooting for me, or they see you for who you are outside of just the people who are so judgmental or your family, who only see you the way they want to. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

It was this encouragement from faculty that motivated Rashonda to not only pursue, but to accelerate in a rigorous academic major—registered nursing.

While the faculty members at the college were supporting her, family members at home were still discouraging her. Frustrated, Rashonda disclosed,

It’s funny; they still don’t understand it. They don’t understand it the way I do; like I said, they can’t relate to my struggle when I’m studying or when I get a good grade and I’m excited about it and they’re just like, ‘oh, that’s it?’ Or when I got a scholarship and I shared that information with my mom; it was $4,000
and she said, ‘oh, that’s all you got?’ To me, it was the best thing in the world.

(interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Rashonda wondered if the reason for the discouragement was rooted in resentment. She explained that when she told her mother that she got her first ‘B’ on her nursing exam, her mother wondered why she did not get an ‘A.’ Still seeking clarity, Rashonda pondered,

I think, like, it’s more of resentment because I actually did something; because I followed my dream. I set a goal and I’m trying to accomplish it. My mom used to say she wanted to be a nurse, but she never went to nursing school. She never went back to school. She never did anything to get the job, to better herself, to further her education, or anything. It was her choice, just like I made some decisions, she could’’ve made the same ones or seen what opportunities were available for her. Sometimes I feel like, because I did make a decision, I get the pushback from her. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Despite the pushback from her family, Rashonda decided to continue to pursue her dream and found more support at the community college.

One of the main contributors to Rashonda’s success at the college was her involvement in the work-study program; she was hired as a Student Ambassador by the college. As explained by Rashonda, the Student Ambassador program involved a variety of responsibilities; as an ambassador, she was responsible for the first line of service provided to new and returning students at the college. The job duties ranged from
assisting students with the enrollment process to serving as a peer mentor in
developmental education courses. The hiring process was very selective and a series of
interviews and trainings were required of her. According to Rashonda, being an
ambassador was one of the best experiences at the college. She explained,

I got to meet a lot of counselors, a lot more different people, I got to work with a
lot of different people. I got to learn more avenues of the college, to get in more
in-depth with financial aid and how things are run and how it works. (interview 2,
personal communication, December 30, 2014).

In addition to learning the ins and outs of the college processes and people, she was able
to give back to her peers by assisting them through the same items that she herself had to
deal with upon entry to the college. Fondly, she declared,

That was one of those experiences that actually helped give me confidence in
myself as well, to know that they actually thought I was excellent enough to
mentor other people when I didn’t even think I was smart enough to be there
in the first place. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Outside of the Student Ambassador program, Rashonda took advantages of other
resources at the college in order to be successful. Both tutoring and academic counseling
were mentioned as some of the services she utilized most. She indicated that counseling
services were particularly helpful. Rashonda noted,

They [the counselors] would sit down with me and help me make my schedule,
make sure I’m on the right track, make sure that I’m taking the right classes for
what I’m going to school for and not veering off into something else. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Additionally, she completed the Student Leadership Certificate program and also participated in a local volunteer project that involved building a playground for inner-city children.

For Rashonda, what she had thought college would be like for her and how it actually turned out were different.

**Expectations of College**

Not sure what to expect of this unfamiliar territory, Rashonda admitted she did not really have specific expectations upon enrolling. She confessed, “I didn’t go there with any expectations. I was more afraid than anything. I didn’t have any expectations going in. I was scared because I was older; I didn’t know what to expect” (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013). She acknowledges that, in the beginning, she did not think she was going to make it:

I really didn’t think I was going to make it all the way through. I was having that negativity that everybody was giving me, it kind of worked on me. But then I kept going and somebody seen me struggle and somebody told me, you can do it. Somebody gave me the motivation to know that I could do it. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Once she believed in herself, her fear subsided and her expectations changed. She confidently assured,
Now, my expectation is, I’m going all the way, as far as I can go, as far as I want to go, I’ll put it that way. It’s like there’s no stopping. It’s like an expectation, there’s no stopping. I have a title. I have a name. I am who I wanted to be, and I’m happy doing it. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Rashonda was focused on making it, on being successful.

**College Success**

For Rashonda, college success began prior to stepping onto a college campus. It involved beginning college without knowing one hundred percent what she was doing, but knowing with certainty that she wanted to do something. College success involved support and encouragement as well as career counseling. She stated,

College success means, to me, going in without knowing what you’re doing, without an idea, but just knowing you want to do something; getting the support while you’re there; the encouragement to keep going; the guidance to actually make the final decision on what you want to do; and, actually somebody believing in you enough to complete it. That’s success for me. You complete it, or someone is helping you believe in yourself enough. Maybe not even someone—just believing in yourself enough to complete what you set your goals to do. That’s college success. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Goals are a driving force behind Rashonda’s success.
Goals

According to Rashonda, "Having a goal is making a decision to want something and then setting a way to get there" (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013). She believed that everyone should have goals since everyone “wants something” (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013). Rashonda contended that, “I think it’s important to have goals because if not, you don’t have any direction. You don’t know where you’re going” (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013).

The feeling that accompanies goals is what Rashonda highlighted during her discussion of goals. She described,

It makes you feel good when you accomplish a goal, and so if you set it— and it’s not for anybody else, you do it for self-preservation. That’s what I think it’s for. Goals should be for self-preservation, not for anyone else, not to make anyone else happy but yourself. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

The goal that is currently driving Rashonda is finishing nursing school, while her long-term goal is to work for a few years and then, move out of state. In order to reach her goal of completing the nursing program, she explained,

I go to school full-time, I work part-time, so my goal when it comes to school is just to study. I have to set a goal to study for an hour. I have to set a goal to stay at the school for an extra hour; that’s how I know I’ll be able to get my study time in. As far as my schooling, I try to stay one day ahead. It’s so hard because I’m a single mom. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)
Being mindful of her long-term goal keeps her disciplined day-to-day. She described,

Those long-term goals, I can’t do any of those long-term goals, not one of them, without doing the short-term ones first. If I don’t study, I don’t get the grades. If I don’t pass the test, I can’t be a nurse. I can’t do any of it. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Early confidence in major and career selection enabled Rashonda to be more aware of what her goals were for her future. She recalled,

When I first went in, I knew what I wanted to do because I wanted to go to school for nursing, so I knew what I had to do—what I wanted to do. Setting those goals and knowing that’s what it was is what kept me motivated as far as studying, knowing that if I don’t get that grade then I won’t become a nurse and I won’t be able to support my family like I want to. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Aware of what she wanted to become, she set short-term goals to help her reach that dream. From setting aside scheduled hours to study to utilizing the tutoring services, she made it a point to do whatever it took in order to accomplish the end goal.

She credited her instructors for setting reasonable and helpful expectations for their students; for Rashonda, the goals set by the instructors made her own a sense of accountability and independence. She pointed out,

Expectations by your teachers are basically—they want you to be independent, to be an adult. It’s not like high school anymore where they’re holding your
hand and saying okay, this is due on this such date. You have a syllabus that shows your schedule, and you’re supposed to do your work. Homework is supposed to be done before you get to class, not when you get to class. The expectations of the teachers are not above and beyond. They’re not hard expectations, but they are going to help you become an independent person.

(interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

She argued that those students who do not apply themselves are wasting their time in college, as the teachers are not making unreasonable demands. Adhering to their expectations, Rashonda capitalized on their guidance and used the instructors’ objectives to fuel her pursuit of her personal goals.

In regard to the college as a whole, Rashonda believed its main expectation was that a student succeeds. She clarified,

They want to see you succeed, which will help the success rate, which will help the graduation rate. They give you the opportunities and the resources that will help you. I think the goal is to have students better themselves, or help them better themselves, but the students have to have the motivation to do it themselves.

(interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

In her eyes, it’s like a partnership: if the student succeeds, the college also succeeds; the success of the student benefits everyone involved. Appreciative of all efforts the college invests in the students, she remained willing to give her best as a student.

While she continued to feel the encouragement from the faculty and staff at the
college, the familial encouragement was absent. She admitted,

I don’t really have much conversation anymore in my family as far as school goes. Nobody asks me. As far as—outside of my kids, they’ll ask me how was school, how was class, how’d you do on your exam? But my mom, dad, nobody asks me how was school, how are things going. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

The lack of concern regarding her education is not what bothered Rashonda; it was the jealousy that impacted her. She stated,

Just the jealousness of it also makes me—it motivates me, actually, to make me want to keep going so when someone does ask, I can say, ‘oh, I graduated already, I have that’. It makes me feel good because it’s what I did. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Definitively, she recollected,

I’ve gotten more support from the college than from my family. It was more of—they pushed me, you can do this, you got this. They looked at me in a totally different view from others. They see what I can do, they gave me the benefit of the doubt, they gave me the motivation and inspiration to keep going. I’ve got a lot of people expecting me to get good grades. It made me feel like I didn’t want to let them down. You’ve got somebody that believes in you. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)
In addition to the college expecting a lot of her, she had another group of people who were just as influential in motivating her—her children. She described,

I know that my kids look up to what I do, so I know I can’t let them down. I have to set an example. It wasn’t pressure on me, it is more I wanted to give them something to be proud of. (interview 3, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

Also, she believed that if her kids have expectations that their mother goes to school and gets good grades, it gives her the right to have the same expectations of them.

Sam’s Story

Sam, a 27 year-old male was a science major in his second year at the college. Incredibly laid back, and naturally shy, he willingly shared his story because he knows he “has to talk” in order to get ahead in life (personal communication, 2013). Familiar with what life was like growing up in a poor, separated family, the driving force behind Sam’s life and educational goals was the desire to provide a stable and supportive environment for his son. With this ultimate desire in mind, Sam shared how he strove to learn from the challenges of family separation, economic hardship, and academic challenges to make it a reality.

Family Separation

Born when his mother was 15 and his father 14, Sam learned what it was like to be a part of a separated family, as his parents chose not to stay together. Initially, his grandmother, who lived down the street from his mother, raised him while his mother
was finishing high school. She asked his mother if she could ultimately have him as her own child, but Sam’s mother would not allow that to happen. Regardless, Sam still enjoyed a very close relationship with her over the years. He also was close to his three sisters.

Despite the separation of his parents, Sam had a happy childhood. He clarified,

It was awesome growing up. Everybody loved me. I felt loved from both sides of my family. My mother’s side and my father’s side. They were so young when they had me that they didn’t decide to be together, but I didn’t lack any love because of it. I basically had two different families. I could just be around and receive love from them. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Although both parents were working to support themselves, they still made time for him and remained an active part of his life.

**Economic Hardship**

While both parents were able to be present in his life, they also spent a great deal of time working. Sam’s father worked at a leading aluminum production company and his mother worked at several different places, including grocery stores and banks. Sam disclosed,

I mean, I was poor. I was poor. My mother, she would struggle sometimes. There were times that our lights got cut off and stuff. There were times where we had enough to eat, but it was just because my mother worked so hard. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)
Growing up in a separated and economically challenged family impacted Sam. He described how those experiences directly influenced his desires for his future. Sam explained,

> It just makes me really want to be—it makes me really into my family because I had a really good family upbringing. Also, because my mother and father weren’t together, it makes it that much more important for me to have a family unit and for me to be there for my son or his mother, for everybody in my family. It makes it that much more important for people, because I know how important it is.

(interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Economic hardship and family separation were not the only influencing factors in Sam’s childhood; his early educational experiences also impacted his future endeavors.

**Academic Challenges**

The academic challenges that Sam faced while in school were not due to a lack of ability; rather, they were rooted in his interest in creativity. Sam explained,

> I’ve always been in the arts, just really being creative in any way possible.

> Probably the main thing that is really important in my childhood is I always screwed off. When I was in class as a child, I would flip my paper over and instead of going along with what they said in class, I would draw pictures. I would say art and being creative overall is a huge part of who I am. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2013)
A self-described ‘C’ student, Sam described that he never did well in school as a child. He attributed his grades to boredom, explaining,

I think I was kind of, like—I was kind of bored at school, really. I was just, like, I was able to be creative, I wasn’t able to do a lot of school that I wanted to. I was always the kind of person to do what I wanted to do, and I’ve always loved to learn. Always loved to learn, but it’s just the process of learning in school was always kind of boring to me, you know. How you are fed information and then later on, in a test form, you’re supposed to regurgitate the information back. That just sounded boring. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

His first grade teacher detected this boredom as well as his abilities. When the teacher invited his mother to come in and observe Sam in class, he acted in the same manner, turning his paper over and drawing throughout the class period. The teacher explained to his mother, “Your son is very smart, he just isn’t engaged. He’s very creative, he’s very intelligent, but he’s just not focused on what he needs to be focused on” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014). As a result of his disengagement, Sam’s teacher held him back and he had to repeat the first grade; this would be something that impacted him long-term. He remembered,

Could you imagine? Could you imagine your whole time being in school, knowing that—you know what I mean? I was supposed to be in a grade higher, and I’m not. I’m pretty sure it casted a lot of doubt in my mother’s mind how
intelligent I was or wasn’t. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

After he failed the first grade, his parents became more involved in his schoolwork, making him get copies of all of the work he did in class as well as his homework. It was a challenge for them at times, however, because it was “hard for parents to do homework with their kid, because they’re so removed from doing math and stuff like that” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Sam remembered one particular elementary school as being very engaging; learning became fun for him at that school and he flourished. He explained, I really liked it because the teachers—a lot of the teachers would find creative ways to teach you and give you a chance to do the right thing. They had this room that was full of, like, candy, toys, and books, and at that time—at that time it was cool for us kids to read, because they had cool books like Goosebumps. We would be excited about these books and, you know, eating candy and going in there and playing checkers and playing games, so we would do the right thing throughout the week if we could, to get the opportunity to do that. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2013)

He still remembered his favorite teacher from grade school; it was his fourth grade teacher. During a challenging academic year when proficiency tests were the primary focus, this teacher created memorable slogans for the students to recite to retain the material. Sam fondly recollected, “That was my favorite—fourth grade was my favorite.
That’s when I was most engaged and that was the time that I needed to be most engaged” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014). For Sam, if the teachers offered alternative, creative ways to learn, he flourished; if not, he remained bored and disengaged.

While he may have been a ‘C’ student in the classroom, he always did well on standardized testing. He explained,

I always did really good on tests. Even if I didn’t necessarily do super good in the class, I think I’ve always been good at doing tests. You know, when you’re doing multiple questions—multiple-answer tests, I think it’s pretty easy. One of the answers is clearly not right; another one is kind of off, and you kind of know that one isn’t right, and then there’s two of them that aren’t right; and then there’s two of them that are possibly right. You’ve kind of got to decipher between those two. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

He added that he also could do math in his head and had always done it that way, rather than the way the teacher suggested.

Sam remembered the transition from elementary to middle school as being particularly challenging. Referring to it as “culture shock” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014), he remembered being “introduced to a lot of different things that you didn’t think about in school, you know, because you’re being introduced to smoking, cigarettes, smoking drugs, drinking, and a lot of different things” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014). While Sam tried to figure out what all of
those activities were, he remained out of trouble. He stated, “I kind of—I’ve always been a good kid. Of course, you try to find out what different things are, but I never really was, like, into drugs or anything like that” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Frustrated, Sam recollected that his initial experience at high school was positive; he was “developing school spirit and everything was going good” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Unfortunately, one day, they announced that the school was being shut down due to asbestos found in the walls. At the same time, Sam was also enrolled in a medics program designed for young people who wished to pursue a career as a medical doctor. Sam explained,

I enrolled myself in the program for, really, one big reason: because I didn’t want to go to the other high school they were forcing us to attend. I never wanted to be a doctor because I don’t like blood, but I didn’t want to go to the other school. The medics program was just centered around, like, science and math, but that whole experience for me—I kind of disengaged again, then I knew I didn’t want to be a doctor, so I stopped going there and went to get my GED. (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Passing the practice test, Sam did not have to take any preparatory classes for the GED; he took the actual test and passed it on the first try.
After earning his GED, Sam acknowledged that school was the last thing on his mind. Instead of enrolling in school, he worked at a lot of different places. The frustration from these minimum wage jobs would be the catalyst to go to college.

**Community College Experiences**

Having had no parental support to go to college, he thought working was the next step. He shared,

My parents didn’t know how smart I was, I didn’t know how smart I was, and so nobody expected me to go to college. I didn’t expect me to go to college. There was no pressure, it wasn’t, ‘you’re going to college’. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Additionally, no one had put money to the side for him to attend college. He stated,

You have to be in a position to put a lot of money aside if you’re going to pay for your kids’ tuition at college, so if I was going to go to college, I was going to have to pay for it myself and I was going to have to find a way myself. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

With the frustration of earning minimum wage building, Sam began considering college as a real possibility, and necessity.

For Sam, he knew he deserved more than the meager pay he was earning in dead-end jobs. Working in restaurants, nursing homes, and other service-related industries, there was no room for advancement or higher pay. He explained,
I mean, I was at the point in my life, too, where I was just fed up. Of like, going
to work and not getting paid, not getting paid well. It’s such a heartbreaking thing
when you go to work and you never advance, you’re always getting paid around
minimum wage, you’re not even close to making $20,000 a year. You can’t live a
life like that. Even when you’re young, you can’t do much—there’s not much
you can do when you’re stuck in a rut like that. (interview 2, personal
communication, January 10, 2014)

His decision to attend sprang from a discussion with a friend who was going to the local
community college. As the friend told him about his experiences, Sam became more
interested and willing to go in and see what the school had to offer.

Testing into Honors English, Sam gained the courage to enroll in his first
semester. He enjoyed the creativity his English class offered and he forged through his
remedial math course, remembering his love for the subject. The positive experiences
made him “reevaluate” his thoughts about going to school and he decided to stay for
another semester because of the fact that he was “engaged and did really, really well”
(interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Admittedly, Sam flirted with the thought of attending a four-year university.
Attending his aunt’s graduation ceremony left him picturing himself there. He fondly
recalled,

I actually went down to Tennessee because my auntie graduated from Tennessee
State University. It was so beautiful to me, because her college was full of black
people and they were all graduating and they were all in their robes and had those hats on. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

He added,

I was really proud of her, but I was proud of everybody that was there because it wasn’t something I was used to seeing, you know. It was motivating. I will say that it also piqued my interest, as well. It showed me that I could; if I wanted to, I could. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Although intrigued by attending a four-year university, he decided to continue his education at the community college and was confident that the decision was best for him. He acknowledged,

It’s definitely a much better idea to start off at a community college than it is to go to a four-year because a lot of the classes are generic. You can take classes anywhere and you can take them to your four-year, so it does make a lot of sense. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Pleased with his experiences at the community college, one experience stands out to Sam—his participation in a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) program. Seeing Sam’s potential, a math teacher at the college invited him to become a part of group. Proudly, Sam shared that his team placed third out of an assortment of “really prestigious colleges” (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014). He added,
I was really an instrumental part of creating our project—a STEM poster that basically talked about a subject that was either science, technology, engineering, or math. We did our poster about local farming and how the state could be one-hundred percent sustained, or we could find sustainability, basically, in just getting food from our own growers, our own farms. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

In addition to this experience, Sam also recognized his participation in the Student Ambassador program as significant. Able to gain firsthand information regarding the processes, resources, and people at the college, the program helped him persist from one semester to the next. He indicated, “I know if I’m in trouble, or if I feel like I need help with this or that, I knew where to go” (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014). More importantly to Sam,

It’s helped me because I’ve seen other people, been able to help other people, when they were in situations where they needed help. I’ve been able to help them, and it feels good, you know, when you can turn somebody’s day around or when somebody’s going through an issue and you point them in the right direction and they come back to you and thank you for it. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Being in school and working at the college, Sam had learned the necessity of juggling one’s academic and personal lives. Emphasizing the importance of family, Sam mentioned the need to prioritize. He stated, “I would say the biggest thing I’ve had to
learn is how to prioritize and to make sure that I handle the things I need to handle, not just with school, but with home, because family is so important” (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Thinking of his son, Sam reiterated,

Time is more important than money to me because you can always make more money, but when you waste away your time, you can’t get it back, you know. I can’t make my son younger again and spend time with him, you know, so I have to find ways to spend time with him. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

In addition to prioritizing, Sam also utilized services at the college that fostered his ability to succeed in college. While not requiring tutoring for English purposes, he used it for math and other subjects. Additionally, he made it a point to meet with academic counselors to ensure he was taking the appropriate courses.

**College Expectations**

For Sam, the main reason he decided to attend college was to increase his chances of getting a career. He explained, “My expectation was to get a career. That’s what I really want. I want to get a career that’s worthwhile, that’s meaningful. I would love to have something that would add to my purpose” (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Having worked miscellaneous jobs for years, he wanted more; he wanted an actual profession that he would undertake for a significant portion of his life, not just a job that he would work for six months at a time. For Sam, it was about
fulfilling his purpose and finding a career that would enable him to do so. With the idea of a career in mind, Sam would be very interested in what college success meant for him.

**College Success**

Recognizing that people come to community colleges for various reasons, Sam still emphasized college success as equating to completion. He contended, “College success is passing. If you don’t pass, you’re really wasting your time, your money, your energy, so I would definitely say it’s completion. If you don’t finish, then it was really all in vain” (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014). While he believed it necessary to complete and get a career, he was still struggling with what that career would be for him. He admitted,

> I’m still in the situation where I don’t know what I want to do. I know I love math and I love science, and I love to be creative. I don’t know if I want to put myself in one category. I don’t know if I want to call myself a physicist or if I want to call myself an electrical engineer. I don’t know if I want to just be one thing. (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

What he did know for sure was that he wanted to continue completing his courses and transfer to a four year to move one step closer to reaching his ultimate goal of having a profession, whatever it may be.

**Goals**
For Sam, his life journey was about steps; he attempted to take small strides that would eventually lead to his realization of his dreams. His goals were a part of that footpath. Sam described,

To me, goals are like steps, you know, and you need your first goal to get to your fifth goal. If you don’t acquire your first goal, or step on your first step, you can’t reach the second step or third step, so it’s just the type of thing where you have to be patient, diligent, and—it’s something that isn’t necessarily tangible, but you can see it, you can feel it, you know when you’ve gotten there, that you’ve reached that milestone and you feel better. (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Having small steps in mind is critical for Sam; rather than trying to get to the big dream in one fell swoop, he preferred to take it piece by piece. He clarified,

I think that if you just have one big goal that’s hard to reach, it’ll be easier to get discouraged. If your goal is, I want to end up on the moon, and that’s your goal, say, ‘okay, I want to get to the top of a skyscraper; then from that point, I want to reach the stratosphere; then from that point, I want to reach whatever, the stars, you know’. (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Sam believed that accomplishing small steps was proof that he was doing the right thing to get to his ultimate goal; it was encouragement that he should continue to keep striving to become the person he wanted to be. The person he wanted to become was “not the
typical American” (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014). He explained,

My main goal is to live right now. Of course, I’m working towards the future, but you get so caught up in what’s next? What do I want to do next? And we don’t think about right now, and we don’t make ourselves the best person we can be today because if you live in the past, you’re depressed; if you live in the future, you have anxiety; but if you live in the moment, you can truly be happy. (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Although he focused on living in the now, he still had his goal of completing school in mind and it impacted his daily choices. He discussed making school a priority in order to be successful and complete it. Sam acknowledged,

If you really want to be successful in school, you’re going to have to study. So, maybe I can’t go out like I want to go out, you know. It’s, like, I’ve got class on Sundays at 8 o’clock in the morning, so on Saturday nights; I’ve got to go to bed. I can’t stay up and watch movies and I can’t go out to a club or the bar, whatever. They really want you to succeed and as long as you’re willing to give them a certain amount, they’re going to give that amount back, from what I’ve noticed anybody else might want to do on Saturday nights. (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014)
Deciding college was worth it to him; he was willing to make the necessary sacrifices. Knowing that the college wanted him to succeed encouraged him to believe that short-term sacrifices were long-term gains.

Citing the plethora of offerings the college had, Sam full-heartedly believed the college wanted him to succeed. While he acknowledged the high expectations his faculty hold for him, he also indicated that the same level of help is available to students. According to Sam, faculty members make themselves accessible to students and continually encourage open communication in order to reach the mutual goal of student success.

In addition to the support he received from faculty, his family and circle of friends believed in him. He happily confided,

I get a lot of support; I get a lot of support, now, me being older, a lot more mature. My family, my mother and father, they didn’t’ see it before, but they notice it now, and I’ve been told by a lot of people that I’m exceptional. (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Cognizant of this belief others have in him, Sam admitted that, “It adds to the pressure to deliver, to do something positive” (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014). He naturally became confident in himself when he saw how sure they were of his abilities. Jokingly, he added, “You don’t want somebody thinking you’re Superman and then you perform like PeeWee Herman” (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014).
For Sam, it came down to the right kind of self-talk and self-creation. Becoming serious again, Sam ended the interview with this thought:

If you tell yourself you’re smart, you’ll believe it one day. So it’s really about—it’s really about creating the right environment for yourself, your children, the people around you and in your world, because as the perceiver, as the experiencer in life, we all affect each other, you know. If I tell you something every day, eventually you’ll believe it and it’ll affect you. It’s so easy for somebody to say one thing, and they might not even remember, but it might be either the best thing or the worst thing that you ever heard in your life. (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014)

Thomas’ Story

Thomas, a 45 year-old male, was a second year Information Technology major from Topeka, Kansas. Genuinely honest and open during the interviews, his answers revealed his vulnerability in sharing such confidential information. Proud of his story, Thomas shared his journey in order to demonstrate that anyone can overcome obstacles to succeed. Taking life one day at a time, Thomas triumphed over transitional living and schooling, family dysfunction, esteem challenges, lack of support, and mental illness to pursue his dream of attending college and succeeding.

Transitional Living and Schooling

Born into a military family, Thomas’ family did not remain in one place for an extended period of time. Having not spent four years in any given place, Thomas
recalled, “I was born in Kansas, we went to Florida, went to Massachusetts, we went to Hawaii, Alaska, Ohio, and then, California. So we basically hit the four corners of the United States, almost” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). He remembered living in four states before he even started his education; he completed grades one through three in Alaska, four through nine in Ohio, and ten through twelve in California. For Thomas, the constant moving impacted his performance in school. He acknowledged, “Now, I know there’s other people out there that say moving around a lot was great for them, their grades didn’t suffer from it, but mine did from moving around a lot” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). Changing schools mid-year during third grade, Thomas became less willing to try in school, stating,

- What the hell, why should I try when we’re just going to move again? And even when we didn’t move, I was put in another—I went to one school and then the next year I got changed to another school. All this changing schools stuff really rattled me. (interview 1, personal communication, November, 8, 2013)

Accustomed to military life, Thomas admitted to considering that as his profession. He recollected, “I don’t remember my parents ever encouraging me to go to college, and I was against going to college because I was going to go in the military” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). A career in the military would not be in Thomas’ future, as he was given an F4 reject due to high blood pressure.

In addition to the stress of constantly moving, Thomas also faced the anxiety from a household full of tension.
Family Dysfunction

Thomas’ household consisted of his parents and his younger brother, none of whom were close to one another. The majority of the tension in the home resulted from the dysfunctional marriage of his parents. Thomas described,

There was a lot of fighting and arguing with my parents’ distrust of each other and stuff, so that made it really bad, too, when we were trying to go to school and deal with this yelling, fighting, they were hitting each other and stuff. (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013)

After finding out her husband had cheated on her, his mother “flipped out and put all [Thomas’] clothes on the front doorstep” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). Divorce would be something that Thomas would deal with again later in life, as he ended up separating from his own wife.

The tumultuous home life impacted Thomas’ social and academic life. He disclosed that his friends were hesitant to come over to the house because they thought his father would yell at them. Thomas revealed, “I was really shy and stayed away from people while I was growing up because maybe I didn’t want to let them know about my family situation where my mom and dad were fighting a lot and stuff” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). He added, “I always had problems at school, and it probably related to my mother and father fighting and stuff” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013).
Dysfunction in his family was not the only determinants in Thomas’ academic struggles; lack of support and esteem challenges were also contributors.

**Lack of Support/Esteem Challenges**

Academics became less and less important to Thomas, as he did not get support or encouragement from his family. When his mother discovered he needed assistance with his homework, she would actually do the homework and Thomas would “just copy it over and turn it in that way” (interview 1, personal communication, November, 2013). He added, “While I was in school, I never heard, ‘hey, you better do better in school so you can go on to college’. I never heard anything like that” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013).

Thomas remembered his parents mentioning college in passing, almost as if feeling obligated to ask, “Do you want to go to college?” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). Even when they posed this question to him, he was closed off to the idea, explaining, “And the reason why I was so adamant about not going to college was because I had already set my mind that when I get there, I’m going to fail” (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013). In regard to his teachers, Thomas indicated that they were more concerned with taking care of him emotionally, rather than pushing him to excel in school. He described,

A lot of the teachers were really sympathetic to me and saw that I had my own problems and drawbacks and—I don’t know if I want to say it this way, but I got to be known as teacher’s pet a lot because I just took care of business and the
teachers would always see that I’m not making a lot of friends. I had a couple friends, you know, but the teachers felt for me. (interview 1, personal communication, November 8, 2013)

The emotional challenges that Thomas experienced during childhood and his own divorce would contribute to the development of his mental illness; this illness would involve additional challenges academically and socially. Fighting through childhood and his illness, Thomas did graduate from high school, but chose to not attend the ceremony. In his mind, he was done with school; college was not an option, but working was.

**Community College Experiences**

After being declined entrance to the military for medical reasons, Thomas worked various odd jobs for nearly thirty years, including restaurant positions. Tired of the service industry and impacted by his disability, Thomas sought the advice of a work counselor who encouraged him to investigate completing a certificate course. After completing a certificate in home inspection and construction, Thomas found it difficult to find employment, as professionals who have been working in the field for years monopolize the home inspection industry. Discouraged, he returned to the work counselor for additional help. This time, the advisor recommended that Thomas complete a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) to see if he would qualify for financial aid to attend a college and get training there; the certificate granting entity could no longer provide educational funds toward his schooling because he qualified for free money through his disability.
Learning that he qualified for federal assistance through the Department of Education, Thomas decided to enroll in the local community college. Through the assistance of the work-study students on the campus, Thomas found the enrollment process easy to navigate. The fear of failing academically, however, came rushing back and impacted his enrollment status. He remembered,

But I was still really afraid; I was gun shy of school the first time around, because I was, like, if I’m going to fail, I don’t want to fail a bunch of classes. I’m just getting into it so I want to see how this year is going to go. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

Sticking to small steps, Thomas took two courses—math and English.

Fondly, Thomas shared that he did really well in the courses and attributed his success to the effective teaching of the faculty members. Vividly, Thomas compared his first semester in college to his first time riding a roller coaster. He described,

You know, the way I can explain that is, you know how you get into a long line for a roller coaster ride and then, by the time you get to the front you’re like, wow, I’m in the front; and then, you know, the ride lasts a few minutes and you want to go wait in line again. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

Focused on the fact that he could do the work, he decided to attend another semester and continue at the community college.
Despite his success, he still received pushback and discouragement from his parents. His mother, with whom he lived at the time, would worry about him staying on task, constantly asking him if he had completed his homework. His father, on the other hand, discouraged him saying, “‘You’re going to get finished doing this and you’ll never get a job, because of, still, my illness’” (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013). Despite the lack of encouragement from his family, Thomas found it in the people at the college, specifically as a result of his work-study position as a Student Ambassador.

Working as an ambassador has afforded Thomas the opportunity to interact closely with deans, staff members, and faculty at the college. He shared,

The dean, he’s pretty good. He always says ‘hi’; I feel like he’s not talking down to me because I’m just a student, you know, he treats me like I’m an equal or something. That’s how I felt. So do all the other people in there. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

Having these connections and opportunities in various departments on the campus increased Thomas’ knowledge of the college’s policies and procedures; consequently, it heightened his confidence in his ability to not only navigate his own way through the school, but also to assist others in need of help. He explained,

I like helping people and the best thing besides that is the fact that there are—a lot of them are really appreciative. As far as I’m concerned, I’m going to go up; I’m going to ask people if they’re okay with what they’re doing. Because, of course,
some of them are too shy to ask for help. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

In addition to the benefits of the work-study program, Thomas also took advantage of other services available at the college. Specifically, he utilized academic tutoring and disability services. Through the support of these resources as well as his individual work ethic, Thomas began achieving success. He shared,

A couple of times, I got way behind in one of my classes, but my teacher was impressed that I still went and made up old homework; and she was like, ‘wow, I didn’t think you were going to be able to do that. I thought you were just going to drop those assignments and take a zero or something and then go’. And I said, ‘no, I’m trying to—I want to pass and I want a grade’. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

Even during his moments of academic accomplishment, Thomas’ success was still threatened by his esteem issues. He admitted, “I did gain confidence, but still, I’m more of a pessimist, I guess. I still think that it’s going to bomb, but sometimes it’s really surprised me what I pulled out of the hat” (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013). Thomas shared his admiration for those students who could handle taking six to seven courses at a time, finding it amazing and impossible for him. He shared,

I’m lucky I could do two, but I’m still doing two because I’m falling back
I’m afraid of failing, so I want to—I want to keep on top of it so I’m only taking, like, two classes per semester right now which is going to take me a long time to get done, but it will get done. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

It was this anxiety that impacted Thomas’ initial thoughts regarding what college would be like.

**College Expectations**

Impacted by his own esteem challenges and fear of the unknown, Thomas expected that college would be overwhelming and difficult. He feared the kinds of assignments he would have to complete, always doubting his abilities. Contrary to his presumptions, Thomas discovered that college was not so bad; he could do it. He explained, “But when I kept taking classes after my initial, first English class, I was finding that it was comfortable” (personal communication, December 10, 2013). His expectations were exceeded in regard to the faculty support. He appreciated their willingness to be patient as he asks plenty of questions. He added,

The thing that helps me so I don’t get timid about asking questions is because I think, you know what, there’s probably someone else in here that wants to ask the same thing and they’re just too shy to ask. (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013)

Although he got ample support from his teachers and staff, he still struggled with his inner battle with his self-esteem and belief that he can get past the difficult math
courses; his initial expectation that college was going to be difficult proved to be true for Thomas as he progressed to the upper division courses. He confessed, “I think for me it’s getting a little bit harder, but I’ve been having difficulty with math so that one’s been holding me up” (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013).

Regardless of the challenges, Thomas is still striving for success.

**College Success**

For Thomas, college success “equals a degree” (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013). Disappointed by learning that the college’s graduation rate was low, he emphasized the importance of the students earning their associate’s degree in order to achieve college success; that is his primary goal.

**Goals**

As a result of his esteem challenges, Thomas prefers to take one day at a time. He indicated, “The only goal I really have is to keep going to school until I get a degree or I fail out. It might sound bad, but I’m kind of a pessimist; I have to say that I’m a pessimist” (interview 3, personal communication, January 5, 2014). Ideally, he would like a degree in IT, but continues to take it day by day. Believing the college wants students to pass, he relies on its services to reach his goal. Additionally, the support he receives from his older children encourages him, but also adds pressure. He explained, “It puts a little extra stress. Don’t forget I’m the pessimist guy saying, ‘I’m going to fail, I’m going to fail, when I’m really not failing’” (interview 3, personal communication, January 5, 2014). He reiterated,
Like I said at the beginning, I’m just playing it day by day; taking my classes, paying attention, taking notes. I personally feel I’m doing the best I can and when I’m not feeling that way, I’ll try and get a hold of a tutor that might help or go back to counseling. (interview 3, personal communication, January 5, 2014)

**Gina’s Story**

Gina, a 49 year-old female, was a second year Court Reporting and Captioning major from Youngstown. Indicating that she had never been asked to tell anyone her life story, she was eager to share all that she had been through. Marked by pure emotion and genuineness, Gina’s responses were an illumination of what drove her life decisions—her son. With him in mind, Gina shared how she strove to learn from the experiences of economic hardship, academic challenges, lack of support, and parental responsibilities in order to provide an exceptional life for her son.

**Economic Hardship**

Having grown up poor, Gina shared how that experience intersected with her educational pursuit. Supporting a family of nine, Gina’s father worked three different shifts at a steel company: eight to four, four to twelve, and twelve to eight. When he had vacation time from the company, he would pick up hours working for the city Park and Recreation Department. The family never hurt for food, as they learned how to can as small children. Gina described,

> We always had a lot of food, because we learned how to can. Every fall, I remember I would be a block away, and I would smell tomato sauce cooking from
our house, because we would pick twelve bushels of plum tomatoes, and we
would can them. We would make applesauce. We would can peaches and pears.
And I remember coming home from school in the first grade and my father
saying, ‘Head to the basement’. And I would be down there washing jars,
standing on a, you know, a crate, washing jars. And it was like a factory.
(interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)
The lack of income was not evident in the amount of food they had, but it was assumed
based on the types of clothing the children wore to school.
The effects of the economic hardship the family faced tarnished Gina’s early
memories of school. Embarrassed, she recalled,
I remember being humiliated at school, a feeling I have all till this day. Even
though we went to a Catholic school, I felt like we were—we were very poor. We
all wore uniforms to school, but I remember thinking that the other kids, their
blouses were—they had more, they had more socks. I remember feeling different
than them. I remember not having school supplies, borrowing crayons, borrowing
pencils, and I was always the last picked on a team when we split up for kickball
or something at school. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)
Gina’s feelings of humiliation and inferiority heightened as she progressed through
school. Attending a private, Catholic high school, her peers were people whose parents
“owned malls, you know, and the 49ers” (interview 1, personal communication, October
24, 2013). She recollected,
I mean, all these kids that I went to high school with, they were very, very wealthy. At least in the grade school they were all basically from, you know, the city, but when I went to the high school, they were from the suburbs, and, you know, they were driving, you know, Corvettes to school, and then I really, really felt shunned and out of place. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

The financial burden her family faced contributed to the academic challenges she faced.

**Academic Challenges**

Not naturally a part of the clique, Gina wished to gain the approval of these students. Willing to jeopardize her own success, she found herself in trouble as a result of this desire. Gina revealed, “I remember we had a substitute teacher, and I did something and acted out, and I started getting attention from my class, and I became the class clown” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). Although she earned the attention of the cliques, she never really enjoyed the role of class clown. Gina added, “When I was in school, I just, I wanted to go home, I wanted to be at home with my mother” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013).

The humiliation that she felt in her high school would result in Gina’s desire to attend a vocational school with one of her friends. Spending the morning away from her high school to attend the vocational program, Gina was introduced to smoking by her new peers. Her smoking habits continued and landed her in trouble when she returned to the Catholic high school, where she was caught smoking cigarettes in the women’s
restroom. Afraid of her strict father, Gina begged the high school not to contact him about her transgression; instead, they told her to go to counseling in a trailer located on the premise.

Even after speaking with a counselor, Gina would continue to miss days of school. Working at a pizza shop until one or two am every night, she made excuses of being too tired to attend; her aunt, with whom she was living, was too timid to confront her and her strict father was not around to discipline her. Gina’s rationale for missing school was, “I have money. I’m fine. I don’t need to go to school. I have a job” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). Her excessive absences resulted in Gina being dismissed from the Catholic high school. To Gina, this meant more time to work and earn money. Worried about hurting her mother, Gina asked her if it bothered her that she did not have a diploma. After realizing her mother’s wish for her to graduate high school, Gina moved to the suburb with her aunt to graduate from a public high school.

It was at the public high school that Gina found her first mentor. Fondly, she explained, “The guidance counselor there was awesome, I’ll never forget him” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). She described how he assisted her with determining what courses she needed to take to finish high school and how he made sure she got credit for everything she had taken at the Catholic high school. With his help, she graduated from high school one year later.
For Gina, high school graduation did not equate to going off to college; she was not encouraged to do so. Gina shared,

My aunts and other people in the family used to say, ‘Oh, grow up and marry a doctor. Oh, grow up and marry an attorney. Oh, grow up and marry an engineer.’ No one said, ‘Grow up and be a doctor. Grow up and be a nurse’. It was always that you grew up and married someone. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Gina did enroll at Youngstown State for one semester, but confessed that instead of going to class, she would, “listen to Lionel Richie albums and different albums that were in this room, and when I was supposed to be done with college, when it was over, I would go home. I never did anything” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). Getting a job was more important to her than attending school.

Securing decent jobs was never an issue for Gina. She enjoyed employment as an auditor at Wells Fargo, a clerk for the financial consultants at Smith Barney, and an employee for a gas and electric company. Gina always went after the job she wanted until she got it. She told the story of wanting to get a job as a telephone operator with the phone company; ever since she was a little girl, she wanted this job. There was a woman named Stella who lived across the street from her and she was a telephone operator. Gina would watch as every day, a taxi cab would pick Stella up and take her to work; years ago, taxi drivers would provide free rides to the telephone operators because they worked late hours. Intrigued by this woman, Gina would ask her mom to “cross her” (interview
1, personal communication, October 24, 2013) and she would go across the street to find out more about Stella’s profession. Gina confessed, “I would secretly go up into my parents’ bedroom when no one was around, and I would call the operator, and I would say, ‘Is Stella there?’” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013).

Upon graduating from high school, Gina immediately applied for a job at the telephone company, but, to her chagrin, there were no openings. A determined and persistent individual, Gina never gave up on that dream, giving her resume to company employees who frequented the restaurant at which she was working part-time. After following up with phone calls, she ended up getting a full-time job with AT&T. Dedicated to the job, she drove a car that had no heat back and forth between Youngstown and Canton every day for ten months.

As she went through life working various jobs, she would occasionally think back to a moment in high school when she and her mother went to a meeting with a recruiter from a court reporting school. He told them about the program that was available at the community college and Gina realized it was what she wanted to do. She remembered every detail of that experience with the recruiter. She recalled,

I can see it as clear as day. He told us all about the court reporting program, and he even told us that when he was in the Army, he met and saw a girl in Italy named Gina, and she gave him a coin, and he took it out of his pocket and he showed it to us. But anyway, he told us all about the program, and I don’t remember what figure he gave us, but I want to say it was around $1,800 for the
When we left, I said, ‘Mom, I want to sign up. I want to do this,’ and she said, ‘Gina, I don’t know where we’ll get that kind of money’. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Looking back, Gina indicated that, had she gone to that school, she would have been a court reporter since the age of seventeen or eighteen. It would take someone showing interest and seeing her potential again for Gina to make the decision to enroll.

**Making the Decision**

Living in New York and at the end of an unhappy marriage, Gina met a gentleman that lived in New York City and they began to spend time with one another, having conversations about their family and their lives. Gina distinctly recalled that he and the rest of his family were all educated; he had earned his master’s degree from Rutgers University and his daughters had graduated from Columbia University and Boston University, respectively. Admiring his educational pursuits, Gina admitted to being, “smitten by him” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). She described,

So he said to me one time while we were having lunch, ‘What did you take in college?’ And he said, ‘Wait, I’ll get it was—I’ll bet you were a liberal arts major’. Well, I was mortified. I didn’t go to college. But I was also sort of thrilled that he thought I went to college. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)
That moment was a defining moment for Gina; she left that lunch wanting a college degree. She recalled,

When I left that lunch that we were having, I started thinking to myself, you know, it was sad that I couldn’t answer with—that I had a degree in anything, but I was also kind of happy, thinking, gee, I must have impressed him to the point where he thought I had a college degree. So the more the relationship went on, the more I was ashamed of myself that I did not have a college degree. So I started thinking about how wonderful it would be, you know, if I would get a degree and make more money for my son. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Although she was motivated by this exchange, and desired to go to college, the fear of being “too old” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013) and the anxiety over how long it would take made her question the choice. Driven by the desire to provide for her son, she took the leap and enrolled in a community college in Rochester. Enrolled in a court reporting program, she took one course and earned an ‘A’. Gina happily remembered,

And I was thrilled. I could not believe that I went to college on Monday and Wednesday nights and I took this course, and I got an ‘A’. I wish I still had the paper that I wrote, you know, for the final. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)
At the same time, she attended a seminar at the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse and was “so impressed” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). She described,

I felt like, first of all, I was walking into a scene of Law and Order when I was in the courtroom. But then the court reporter started to tell us how he was, you know, sort of front row to a lot of things; cases, and a lot of famous people, and different things. It was just interesting. So I left there very excited about becoming a court reporter. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

The divorce, a geographic move, and challenges with her son resulted in her dropping out of the program in Rochester.

When Gina and her son arrived back in Ohio to live, they faced challenges with the Catholic school he was attending. According to Gina, “They told me they could not meet his needs. They kept telling me something was wrong with him” (personal communication, October 24, 2013). They wanted her autistic son to be put on medication. Not happy, Gina continued to advocate for her son and work with the school to see if he could stay. Still upset, Gina explained,

Finally, the Catholic school, about 40-some days before the end of the first grade year, told me they wanted me to put him in another school. And I begged them to keep him there, because it was flashbacks about my days in the Catholic school as well, but it was also humiliating for me, and I’ve never dreamed that he would go anywhere but a Catholic school. There were 40 days left in the year. I was
blaming myself because I thought, if I would have never got a divorce, if I would have just stayed in the marriage, this wouldn’t have happened. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Frustrated and running out of options, Gina took her son to a psychologist to appease the school and he indicated that there was nothing wrong with her son; he had an adjustment disorder that was common for children with autism.

Angrier, Gina had a meeting with the Superintendent of the school and demanded that her son be able to stay at the Catholic school. She told him,

My son is very spiritual. He’s been raised Catholic since he was born. He knows a lot of the terms. He never comes home from school and tells me about English or math or science or reading, but he comes home and he tells me about the saints, he tells me about the Blessed Mother, and he tells me about these things he’s learned in his religion class. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

The Superintendent decided that he would allow her to home school her son for the remaining forty days of school, but that he could attend school for the lesson regarding mass. Determined to have her son succeed, Gina found a Catholic nun that lived twenty miles away and she took her son to this woman to be tutored and home schooled. This resulted in a very demanding, busy schedule for the two of them. Gina described,

So he went from the year before being where he took a bus in front of my house, wore, you know, a white shirt and tie, went to school, went to the aftercare
program, and I picked him up at 6 o’clock, to a year later, me driving him twenty miles to a nun, twenty miles home, at three o’clock to the school for the mass, and my world was torn upside down. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Officially diagnosed with autism in 2010, Gina’s son required various kinds of therapy. She explained,

So for twenty weeks, I took him for speech, occupational, and social skills classes a couple of times a week. I also started searching everywhere for a Catholic school that would take him, because I never gave up. I drove to Philadelphia and I interviewed schools there, I drove to Cincinnati, I went to Pittsburgh several times in their suburbs, I called Boston, I called several, several Catholic schools and visited them, in multiple cities, and no one could guarantee me that they would keep him. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Due to the amount of attention she was devoting to taking care of her son, college was not at the forefront for her; he was. She recalled,

I concentrated on him for a long time. I was very, very depressed. Very emotional. I mean, I would pretty much help him with school, get him his clothes, his food, and lay in bed and just cry, and be depressed most of the day and the evening. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

A year after her son’s diagnosis, Gina began to think about college again; specifically she thought about the gentleman who had believed she had previously
attended college and she thought about her friends who had asked her about it throughout the years. She began to picture herself as a successful court reporter. She remembered,

Part of me is picturing myself as successful—as a successful court reporter, making $100,000 a year like they tell you can make, or even $40,000, from, you know, working at home. I’m going to be a court reporter, I’m going to have a job, and I’ll be successful, and I’ll be independent, and I’ll be able to earn my own money, and I will not need anyone to support me. I will be able to support my son. (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013)

Her positive self-talk and ability to visualize success resulted in her enrolling as a distant-learning student at a community college.

**Community College Experiences**

Acknowledging that court reporting was not offered as a Bachelor’s degree at a four-year university, Gina knew she had to attend a community college; furthermore, it was the type of institution from which she had always envisioned earning a degree. In 2012, Gina enrolled in the Court Reporting and Captioning program. She described the enrollment process as “being a piece of cake” (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Proudly, she explained,

And enrolling in the college, you have to enroll, you have to apply for financial aid, and one of—that’s one thing that does not intimidate me. I don’t know where I picked it up along the way, but I can follow instructions, especially on the computer, I can complete documents, I’m good at getting documentation that I
need, whether it’s enrollment for college, or financial aid, or whatever. (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013)

Breezing through the enrollment process, Gina registered for three courses her first semester; she earned all ‘As’.

Gina described her experiences at the community college as being “wonderful” (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013). Crediting her professors, she affirmed, “I think all of the instructors are very supportive. They encourage you to the max. They don’t ever discourage you. And they are always there to help you” (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013). A fully online student, Gina appreciated the instructors being available by email and telephone. Enrolled in a rigorous program, Gina shared that many of the students drop out after not being able to reach the required typing speeds. Aware of this, the instructors, always encourage you to keep going, no matter how long it takes you. They keep telling you, ‘You can do this’. They seem to be able to, you know, go the distance with you, no matter how long it takes. (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013)

Another key piece to her success at the college and in the program was her ability to interact online with other women who were in similar situations as her; they were also single moms and were non-traditionally aged, as she was. Gina identified her instructors, her peers, and the financial aid office as being the key resources she utilized to succeed.
Perhaps the biggest catalyst for success was her son. Hearing the smile in her voice, Gina explained,

I think my son sees me going to college and he’s happy about it. And I think for him to see me going to college is encouraging for him, because I’m in school like he is, but I also stress to him that he has to go to college, and he can’t wait until he’s 49 or 48 like I was, and, you know, he has to do great in school because he’s going to go to college right out of high school or shortly after. So for that reason, it’s good. (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013)

Knowing that earning this degree will provide her the flexibility in her career that she needs for her son, she is determined to succeed. She described,

With a degree, like a court reporting degree, I can do something at home with it, I can do some freelancing with it, and that is what is most important to me. That I can fix it into my life, or arrange it into my life, instead of my life having to change because of my job. And I need to be able to have sort of control, because I would not be able to commute now. I have a little boy that needs me and I’m all he has, so I need to incorporate a career into my lifestyle with my son. (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013)

Gina has a clear idea of what college success means to her.

**College Success**

For Gina, “College success means being able to go—to attend college, to get the support you need so that you are able to make a passing grade, and graduate” (interview
3, personal communication, December 6, 2013). In her eyes, college success involves support from professors, which includes being able to communicate with them and receiving the appropriate assistance from them. Succeeding in college meant receiving the tools necessary to reach her goals.

**Goals**

In Gina’s eyes, “A goal is a thought and a plan, and a plan to better yourself in some way, or to accomplish something that you’ve not accomplished before” (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013). Having had to live in “survival mode” (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013), Gina explained that goals are a necessity. She stated,

> I think it’s always good to have a goal. I always have a goal and I always have a plan A, and sometimes I have—I always have a plan B, but sometimes I have a plan C and D as well. I think it’s important to have goals so we keep focused on getting to the goals so we keep focused on getting to the goals, because if you lose sight of the goals, you lose sight of the focus. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013).

Gina’s main focus is to graduate from the community college so that she can support her son. She emphasized,

> My goal is to first be successful in the program at the community college and become a court reporter. I want to then get into the workforce, and if I work independently, meaning if I work like as a contractor, I want to be able to buy my
own benefits and purchase those for my son as well, and the ultimate goal is to buy a house in a good school district so we can live in a home again instead of a rental. And then I have no other thing in mind except to travel with my son and take him places. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013).

The idea of these goals impacted Gina’s daily choices. Focused on bettering life for her son, Gina made sacrifices in order to reach her dream. She described,

I have time to prepare mail, to go grocery shopping, to do laundry, to assist my son with his homework, and to do my own homework, that I don’t really have any life at all. But it is worth the sacrifice to me if I will be able to accomplish my graduation and become a court reporter. So my goals impact me because I sacrifice. And the sacrifice is a reminder. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Another reminder for Gina was the experience she had working in a local school cafeteria. Occasionally picking up hours working at the school, Gina acknowledged that it was the kind of work she had not done in years. She stated,

To get out of the house and go start washing big, large pots and pans, and, you know, preparing meals, it’s difficult for me. But I use it as a reminder that this is what I will be doing if I don’t finish college. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

To ensure that she reached her goals, Gina took daily steps toward them. Her faith being incredibly important in her life, she woke up and prayed every day. She
described, “I pray first, because I think God is very, very important. I believe that faith gets you through a lot of things” (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013). In addition to praying, Gina made a mental inventory of all that was needed to make it through the day. She shared,

I sort of go through an inventory, a mental inventory, in my mind without writing it down. I get up, and I think to myself, I know we need milk, so I have to run to the store. I have to take two quizzes for my, you know, administrative office management class. My son needs to go to a thing, and I kind of go over in my mind what today is and what needs to be done and I sort of prioritize those. And that’s what I do every single day. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Part of her daily ritual also included making sure to read court reporting blogs or articles to keep her focused on staying interested and up-to-date with her field of interest.

Gina revealed that her ability to reach her goals was fueled by her innate desire to achieve. She indicated,

I think I would always have these goals because I also have something about me that always wants to do better. If I get a job that pays $12 an hour, I’ll work very, very hard to get it. And then I’ll get it, and I’ll work for a while, and then I’ll think, well, gee, maybe I can get a job that pays $15 an hour. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)
Proudly, she admitted that she constantly desired to improve herself; her son is the driving force behind that wish. She disclosed,

But I think that I’m always trying to improve, and with him, he has been my inspiration. When I had him, a whole new world opened up for me. I suffer and I struggle with the fact that I didn’t go to college a long time ago. And that I’m not in a position now where I’m slowing down. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Looking back, Gina revealed what hurt the most. She explained,

The thing that hurt the most is that I did not know I could. Sometimes now, I still don’t—you know, I told you there’s a little voice inside of me that says, ‘You’re too old for this’, and then, I look at my son and I want to do it all the more.

(interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

When the going gets tough, Gina remained mindful of her son and of the expectations the college had for her. She explained, “I think that on a long-term goal, the college and the professors’ expectations of me and the other students are to stick with the program” (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013). To do that, they expected the students “to complete the assignments that are given and to ask for help. The college expects you to be committed” (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013).

Afraid to have anyone label her a quitter, Gina is determined to complete the program and succeed. She reflected,
I have a network of friends, instructors, and family that think I’m superwoman. They think that if I get a thought in my mind, that it’s going to automatically just be done. And they tell me, ‘We would believe you’re a court reporter. We don’t have any doubt in our minds that you will do that’. So that impacts me in a way that it makes me want to achieve it. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Most importantly, she refused to disappoint her son. Referring to her goals as Project Tomasso (named for her son), she was committed to doing whatever it took to stay focused and become a court reporter. She shared,

If I took up the offers that some of the people I’ve met around here, other mothers, other friends, other acquaintances that want to take me out for a drink—and I refuse across the board. I don’t have the time. I don’t want to leave my son. Even if I had a sitter, I don’t want to leave my son. I don’t want to be out on the road, because I have work to do. I can’t afford to go out and drink and wake up one day and be sick. (interview 3, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

**Janine’s Story**

Janine, a 43 year-old female, was a second year Nursing major from a rural town. Offering perspectives that revealed her frankness, her interview responses were always very candid and detailed. An independent woman, Janine attributed much of her iron-willed nature to all that she had overcome in her life. Her childhood was impacted by
family dysfunction that resulted in low self-esteem, transitional living, a longing for a family and social network, and, ultimately, a desire to push forward. Developing a sense of purpose, Janine shared her story of overcoming her challenges in order to succeed academically.

**Family Dysfunction**

Janine began her story by describing the dissolution of her parent’s marriage; they were divorced by the time she was three years old. Reflecting on the cause of the divorce, Janine recalled, “My mother had a lot of issues, mental problems. She was like a hoarder, and my father couldn’t take it anymore which was kind of why they divorced” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013). Winning custody of the four children, Janine’s father built a new home for the family. While he worked to do so, the children were placed in foster care. Janine recalled,

> Because he got custody and he was actually building our house, he had no place for us to live. So they split my siblings and me and put us in foster homes, and I have an older brother and sister, and they got sent to the same foster home, and I got sent to a different foster home and my infant brother was sent to a different foster home. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Two years later, her father had finished building the home and had remarried; within a couple of weeks of the marriage, all of the children were moved into the new home.

Her mother also remarried for a short time and the children had visitation with her for a period of time until she disappeared. Janine recalled,
She just kind of got out of our lives and she was actually homeless for a number of years, and the—really the only way we knew where she was or what was going on was through her mother, my grandmother, and occasionally we would see her either on the news or in the newspaper. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Janine disclosed that, being so young when her parents divorced, she did not really understand at the time why she could not see her mother anymore. She recollected,

I didn’t understand being ripped away from my mother and being placed in a foster home and not being able to visit her or see her without supervision. I didn’t understand what she had done and why my sister didn’t like her, and my younger brother, of course, was too young to know anything. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Having been too young to understand what happened to her mother, Janine had an affinity toward her, as opposed to her older siblings who had a negative opinion about their mother. Consequently, Janine’s stepmom tended to favor the other children and Janine felt “left to just flounder. I was kind of forgotten about, so to speak” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013). The relationship between her and her stepmom would only worsen as time lapsed.

Janine recalled her high school years being particularly challenging as a result of her stepmother. Constantly comparing Janine to her biological mother, her stepmom would erode her self-esteem. Janine described,
And so my stepmom decided to compare me constantly to my mom, and, you know, tell me all of the time that I was fat and that I was worthless and that, you know, all this stuff then, you know, I didn’t realize how much it really affected me until—until I went to—probably until I went to nursing school and realized that, you know, she was kind of full of shit. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Janine’s problems with her stepmom heightened even more after her father died. Passing away six months after her high school graduation, the loss of her father enabled her stepmom to take control; Janine was kicked out of the home. Lacking stability at home, Janine remained close to her foster family throughout her childhood, as they considered her family and treated her as such.

Family dysfunction was not the only challenge in her youth; economic hardship would also threaten her happiness.

**Economic Hardship**

Janine recalled that her family was not wealthy by any means. Her father’s income was the main financial support for the family, as her stepmother only received Social Security pay. She recalled,

>We tended to shop at Kmart or Gold Circle or Hills, you know, or those types of stores and not at the malls and department stores, and so, you know, the clothes that I wore were—tended to be hand-me-downs and so I did not make
friends—and I’m—I’m very much an introvert, and I did not make friends easily.

(interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Already sensitive due to the ridicule of her stepmom, Janine was easily rattled by the bullying she experienced at school. Sadly, she recalled, “I remember being in kindergarten and having my clothes made fun of by other kids” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013). Janine lacked social support and attempted to find it through sports teams and activities at school; ultimately, financial hardship would lessen her chances of finding it in those programs.

Participation in Activities

Attempting to become more outgoing, Janine joined the volleyball team at her middle school. The desire to attend her eighth grade trip to Washington, D.C. and knowing she would have to pay for it herself, Janine got a job that year, which ended up interfering with her success at volleyball. She remembered, “I didn’t’ really do that well on the volleyball team in eighth grade, so I didn’t—didn’t end up going out for anything further when I got to high school until senior year” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013).

Outside of athletic teams, Janine was very involved in the band, as she had been playing a musical instrument since the fourth grade. She admitted,

I wasn’t good sometimes, in terms of like, practicing and stuff, and I don’t have a musical ear, and so I didn’t—unless I needed to, I wasn’t good at reading music.
So practicing, for me, was not pleasant. Because I really didn’t know how to read music. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Despite her struggles with becoming proficient in musical performance, she remained very involved in the marching and jazz bands until her father got sick; at that point, her time centered on taking care of him and visiting him in the hospital or rehabilitation facilities. Disappointedly, she added,

So by the time I got to that point, my dad was pretty much sick and most of the time either in the hospital or in a rehabilitation center trying to get therapy to get better, so, I missed out on a lot in terms of parental involvement. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

It was not just her musical performance that was struggling; impacted by the pressures to work and the effects of her father’s illness, Janine’s academic performance was affected.

**Academic Challenges**

Janine admitted that education was a challenge for her during her high school years. She recalled,

Academically, in high school, I didn’t do really well, although I liked a number of my classes. And I did fair; I’d say the first two years I did fair or average, earning mostly ‘Cs’, maybe a ‘B’ here and there. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)
For Janine, it came down to needing to work in order to help her dad with medical bills. She explained, “I was working, and I just didn’t have the discipline to do the work in school. It didn’t really interest me, and I had nobody who was really encouraging me, so I didn’t really care” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013).

For a short time her junior and senior year, Janine joined one of the technical programs at the high school; it was called Attentive Office Education. The program provided instruction regarding secretarial work and skills. Although Janine enjoyed it, her grades in the program suffered because of her job. She remembered,

And I enjoyed that, but at the same time I ended up getting another job that I worked at McDonald’s after school, and so I basically worked from the time I got off until close, and it didn’t close until 11, then you had to clean up. And, then I had to get somebody to give me a ride home, and so by the time I got home it was 12, 1 o’clock, and then I had to try and go to sleep and then get up to go to school, you know, 6 o’clock in the morning, catch the bus around 7. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

The demand of such a schedule caught up with her; she was falling asleep in classes. Consequently, she indicated that she barely graduated high school and was convinced that one of her teachers passed her just to “do something nice” for her dad (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013). She disclosed, “Whatever the lowest GPA is, pretty much, that you could get out of high school with is probably what I had. Like a 1.5 or 1.8 or something. It was very low” (interview 1, personal communication,
November 14, 2013). Despite her low GPA, people in her foster family still asked her about her plans after high school. Feeling obligated to give them some answer, she would tell them, “Maybe I’ll be a nurse,” to which her foster mother responded, ‘Why not be a doctor?’” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013). That encouragement would remain with her throughout her life.

Although nursing was an interest at the time, Janine was not solid in her plans for her future. A daughter of a Navy man, she considered joining the military in order to follow in her father’s footsteps; she even went as far as taking the ASVAB and did well on it. Her weight, however, would pose a challenge. She recalled,

I needed to lose like 50 pounds in order to be able to, you know, enter whatever branch of the military. And not really—kind of realizing that, you know, I wasn’t going to be doing that. That wasn’t going to be happening. So I kind of gave up on that thought. (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013)

Having given up the hope of being in the military, Janine went back to the familiar—working. She remembered, “So I was just working. Not really knowing what I was—you know, not really knowing but also not really thinking about what I was going to do with my life. Just working; working to survive” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013).

After reconnecting with her stepmother and living with her temporarily, Janine would end up moving in with her foster family again. Aware that Janine had worked six different jobs between ages nineteen and twenty-one, her foster family sat her down and
told her, "You’ve got to make a decision. What are you going to do with your life?"
And, it was kind of like, wow. I don’t know” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013).

With the encouragement of her foster mom, she found a job as a live-in health aide for a hospice patient. Recognizing her skills working with patients, one of his family members told her she would “make a real good nurse” (interview 1, personal communication, November 14, 2013). While working at a nursing home, her colleagues would discuss going to nursing school and she began to think about it more and more. A mission trip she took while working at a nursing home was the defining moment in her decision to pursue a nursing degree.

**Community College Experiences**

Once arriving to the community college, Janine admitted that she remained to herself the first few weeks. She stated,

The first few weeks of class, basically that’s what I did. I’d park in Lot 1 and I went to Health Careers and then I walked over to Liberal Arts and then I either went home or I went to the library to get on a computer. (interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013).

She continued this pattern until a staff member from the college came in to talk about other opportunities on campus. At first, Janine was resistant to the information. She remembered thinking to herself, “I’m 40 years old; this information does not pertain to me” (interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013). After hearing the
presentation, however, Janine began to inquire more about other college offerings outside of the classroom setting. She described, “So I started paying attention and I starting slowing down a little bit” (interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013).

Now more comfortable at the college, she began to utilize the services available to her. She recalled,

Basically, I’m kind of a, I guess, what you would call a goody-two-shoes. I basically do what you’re supposed to do. At some point I’d been told that you’re supposed to see a counselor every semester. I used the Career Center Online.

The tests that they have, the personality tests and everything, I did those.

(interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013).

Janine also explained that she became involved in activities beyond those related to academics and career pursuits. Interested in the idea of college fraternities and sororities, she applied and was accepted to Phi Theta Kappa, a nationally recognized academic organization. She also completed the Leadership Certification program and became a part of the Honors Program. Interested in serving others, Janine joined “Conversation Partners”; she volunteered one hour per week to help develop the speaking skills of an English as a Second Language student.

For Janine, academics were not a challenge for her. She recalled speaking up in class if she had questions and speaking to professors after class if she needed further assistance. She also mentioned, “I took advantage of the math tutors my first semester
and the second semester. I take advantage of the writing center tutors” (interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013).

Reflecting on the expectations she had of college prior to attending, Janine disclosed, “What I expected of them [the community college] was that they were going to give me an education with quality professors. I actually got a whole lot more, because Tri-C really offers a lot” (interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013). Taking advantage of all that was offered to her, Janine found herself being recognized across the campus. One of the experiences she cited as being pivotal to her community college experience was being a Student Ambassador. In this role, she became familiar with her peers as well as the faculty, staff, and administration at the campus.

When contemplating her notions of student success, Janine considered the relationship between success and engagement. She stated, “I think that to be a successful student, there has to be some level of involvement on the campus, whether that be attending a speaker or a workshop; something that you’re involved in” (interview 2, personal communication, December 12, 2013).

**Goals**

For Janine, goals were essential. She contended, “Goals are important. I think that if you don’t have any goals in life then, basically, you’re not going to go anywhere. You’re not going to do anything. You’re not going to accomplish anything” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013). As she described, a goal is a “thought about what you want to do with your life” (interview 3, personal communication,
December 17, 2013). Janine definitely had specific thoughts about what she wanted to do with her life. Short-term, she wanted to earn a temporary position at a major hospital to get her foot in the door. Long-term, she wanted to graduate from the community college with two degrees (in Nursing and Health Information Technology) and get a job.

As she progressed her goals have changed a bit. In addition to getting a job as a nurse after graduating from the community college, she indicated an interest in attending a four-year school and then, pursuing a master’s degree in counseling. She clarified, “I’d like to do some form of counseling; not specifically social work, but some type of community-based counseling. I like to help people. I like to help people realize their potential; encourage them” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

Aware of those goals, Janine made daily choices that would help her reach them. She explained that she made conscious decisions to take advantage of all of the community college had to offer in regard to programming and opportunities. Knowing she wanted to be a counselor someday, she joined sustained dialogue and social justice groups on campus. She added that her upbringing impacted her daily choices as far as being the best person she could be. She explained,

You help people when they need to be helped and you help them without expecting something in return. It’s just about being a successful person in my life. I think that being a successful person in life, my desire for that, you know, is something that was instilled in me from my youth from a variety of people in my life. (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013)
Janine believed the college wanted the same for her. She stated,

I think that the community college just wants me to be a well-rounded person who has the ability to think things through and make good decisions in life that benefit not only me but other people in the community and the world. (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013)

Contending that success does not necessarily equal money, she believed the college wanted the students to find happiness by discovering what it was they wanted to do with their lives. She clarified, “I think they’re maybe, looking at ways to help students now make decisions about their futures; not so much based on, you know, money, but based on what do you really want to do with your life?” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

Aware of financial aid regulations, Janine emphasized the importance of receiving assistance with finding one’s purpose, as students cannot afford to waste time “playing around with things for the first year in terms of what classes to take and deciding what you really wanted to major in” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013). She reiterated, “You have no credits to waste” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013). In her eyes, the college was concerned with helping people decide what career would make them happy. She described,

They want people to be, not successful in terms of a good job, they want you to be successful in terms of happiness, you know, what makes you happy? Are you really going to enjoy doing what you’re doing for the rest of your life? Don’t be a
Taking advantage of the college’s assistance with career exploration, Janine was confident in her decisions about her future plans.

Two individuals at the college made her confident in her ability to fulfill those plans; the campus president and the dean of student affairs. Considering her first for scholarship or work opportunities on campus, they have provided her with the encouragement she needed to believe she could make her dreams come to fruition. She added, “Having people in your corner rooting for you is definitely helpful” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

Themes Underlying the Narratives

The narratives presented above describe the distinctive life experiences of six men and women. Regardless of the individual paths, all encountered conflicts and struggles along the way that helped shape who they are and who they wish to be in regard to academic and life success.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore first-generation community college students’ life experiences, in an effort to understand their ability to succeed in an unfamiliar environment—college. In this section, I describe themes that illustrate the underlying story of how the participants understood and negotiated their ability to succeed despite the challenges.

A Range of Environments
Among the most striking qualities of the six narratives when considered together was the array of possibilities among the participants’ environments and experiences. Each participant had such a unique set of environmental influences. The interviews provided the participants with an opportunity to share those and to reflect on how those various situational experiences impacted their thoughts about success.

For Patti, her life had been dominated by abuse and control. This environment caused her to often seek fulfillment and love outside of the home environment. She would reach out to gangs to find a family; she would also contemplate suicide when it got to be too much to handle. The tumultuous environment followed Patti into adulthood and she found herself in the very same cycle of abuse and control. This living condition would be what delayed her thoughts about education.

Rashonda had been challenged with overcoming life in the “hood”. She watched as family members and peers made poor decisions in order to survive. She witnessed violence, theft, and drug addiction. For Rashonda, it was a motivating force for her to do whatever she could to find a way out of that environment in hopes for a better life. Refusing to ever let her kids live that way, Rashonda sacrificed and focused in order to excel in school and reach her goal of being able to give her children a stable and safe life.

Despite his parents being separated, Sam’s environment was full of love and support. Although the family lived poorly, he never felt neglected or unsatisfied. For Sam, the environment that presented the most difficulty was the educational situation.
He was faced with overcoming his own battle with creative learning versus traditional ways of education.

As a result of the turmoil in his home, Thomas dealt with battling the psychological battles of pessimism and mental illness. Being around the constant fighting between his parents, Thomas became skeptical of those who wished to be involved in his life. Never quite being able to trust their intentions, he would push others away and remain to himself.

Gina’s early environment involved working at a young age; not having a lot of money, Gina would help the family can fruits and vegetables every night after school. Work became a priority in her life and would always remain at the forefront of her mind. Growing up poor, Gina found herself in an environment of humiliation at her Catholic grade school. For Gina, this would serve as a motivator later in life. Having an autistic child, Gina acquired the motivation to fight for what her son deserved and did all she could to prevent him from experiencing the same difficulties she did as a child.

Similarly, Janine was the object of ridicule as a child; the difference was that Janine’s family was the one who made her feel belittled. As a result of her step-mother, Janine would struggle with developing self-esteem and deciding a life plan.

The common experience of each participant, except Thomas, was economic hardship. Other common life situations involved family dysfunction, esteem challenges, parental responsibilities, and support issues.

Influential Interpersonal Interactions
Regardless of the life experience, one commonality amongst the participants was the impact of mentors. Each participant remembered and identified someone in his or her life who had “made the difference.” For a few of the participants, it was a teacher; for others, it was a guidance counselor; and for the rest, it was a person of stature within the college.

Patti and Sam both identified teachers who positively impacted their lives and educational pursuits. Patti smiled as she recalled the developmental math teacher who saw potential in her. She fondly recalled, “Let me tell you, I feared math. My professor in my math class offered me a developmental math education student of the year award. And it’s a scholarship. And she says, ‘I think you deserve this’” (interview 2, personal communication, November 13, 2013). Encouraged to apply for a scholarship in a subject that had been a major anxiety, Patti suddenly developed confidence and belief in her academic ability. A fourth-grade teacher whose educational pedagogy involved innovative and creative ways of learning was Sam’s unforgettable person. Typically bored with school, Sam recalled, “That was my favorite—fourth grade was my favorite. That’s when I was most engaged and that was the time that I needed to be most engaged” (interview 1, personal communication, January 10, 2014). He attributed that engagement to the method of instruction this teacher employed.

For Rashonda and Gina, their guidance counselors made the most impact. Rashonda identified her female high school counselor as the key figure she would “never forget” because the mentor “actually kind of held [her] hand all four years” (interview 1,
personal communication, December 30, 2013). Similarly, Gina recalled, “The guidance counselor there [at her high school] was awesome, I’ll never forget him” (interview 1, personal communication, October 24, 2013). Taking the time to discuss requirements for graduation, Gina credited him for her completion of high school.

Thomas and Janine unearthed motivation as a result of interactions with people of stature within the college. For Thomas, it was having the dean of student affairs, an educated, professionally successful person, treat him respectfully. He proudly remembered, “The dean, he’s pretty good. He always says ‘hi’; I feel like he’s not talking down to me because I’m just a student, you know, he treats me like I’m an equal or something” (interview 2, personal communication, December 10, 2013). Feeling respected by someone of such stature affirmed Thomas’ sense of worth, something with which he had struggled for most of his life. Janine identified two prestigious college employees with whom she had influential interpersonal interactions—the campus president and the dean of student affairs. Considering her first for scholarship or work opportunities on campus, they provided her with the encouragement she needed to believe she could make her dreams come to fruition. She acknowledged, “Having people in your corner rooting for you is definitely helpful” (interview 3, personal communication, December 17, 2013).

**Self-Esteem to Self-Efficacy**

Each of the participants revealed a struggle with self-esteem throughout their lives. Accordingly, developing self-efficacy was common amongst the participants.
They faced the challenge of acquiring confidence and self-worth and then, relying on that newfound self-esteem to achieve self-efficacy. For some, they were fearful of the rigor of college and doubted their ability to succeed. For others, they knew they could handle college, but were not driven to attend until an academic experience validated their intelligence.

Afraid of mathematics and dreading college because of it, Patti was doubtful in her ability to get a degree, as math was required. After a teacher realized her potential and offered her a scholarship, she grew confident and began to visualize herself completing an education. Choosing to attend a community college, Rashonda noted,

I didn’t think I had the potential to go to a four-year college. I didn’t think I was good enough for a four-year college and I didn’t think I was smart enough for it. When I started Speech, I was like; I’ll start as small as I can, then work my way up. (interview 2, personal communication, December 30, 2013)

After a successful first semester, she realized her potential. Initially intimidated by a speech class, Rashonda would go on to major in a very difficult program—nursing.

Doubt was not preventing Sam from beginning college; he knew he could achieve. Rather, Sam wondered if college courses would be engaging enough to keep his attention. Testing into Honors English, Sam gained the desire to enroll in his first semester. He enjoyed the creativity his English class offered and he forged through his remedial math course, remembering his love for the subject. The positive experiences made him “reevaluate” his thoughts about going to school and he decided to stay for
another semester because of the fact that he was “engaged and did really, really well” (interview 2, personal communication, January 10, 2014).

Similar to Sam, Janine knew she was intelligent; she just had not been convinced that college, specifically a major in nursing, should be her next step. Additionally, she still was dealing with the words of her stepmother that indicated she was worthless and incapable of accomplishing anything. Once she began excelling in the nursing program, however, she became more confident in her decision and in her major.

Thomas, plagued by pessimism, admitted being “gun shy of school the first time around” (interview 2, personal communication, November 8, 2013). After successfully completing math and English his first semester, Thomas compared the experience to that of riding a roller coaster, stating,

You know, the way I can explain that is, you know how you get into a long line for a roller coaster ride and then, by the time you get to the front you’re like, wow, I’m in the front; and then, you know, the ride lasts a few minutes and you want to go wait in line again. (interview 2, personal communication, November 8, 2013) Success in the first semester made him eager to try another.

Similarly, Gina doubted her abilities to succeed in college. Earning an ‘A’ in her first course in the court reporting program would remove those doubts. Gina happily remembered, “And I was thrilled. I could not believe that I went to college on Monday and Wednesday nights and I took this course, and I got an ‘A’” (interview 2, personal communication, November 6, 2013).
Sense of Purpose

Each of the participants discussed the importance of purpose in their lives. Uncertain of many things, such as the ability to succeed or the support they would get, each relied on a sense of purpose to direct their choices. Empowered by self-efficacy, the participants were able to ascertain a plausible plan that consisted of actions that would propel them closer to their ultimate goals and to fulfilling their purpose.

For Patti, her purpose was to prove to herself that she could achieve and to provide an example for her own children to follow. Recognizing the importance of networking, Patti began keeping the business cards of all at the college who helped her through the process, reaching out to them any time she needed assistance. Giving up the party life, Patti sacrificed time with her friends and her children to complete homework and studying.

Rashonda’s intention was to provide a better life for her children. Sacrificing time for her children and her studies, she created a schedule that allowed for both activities. Additionally, as an ambassador, she networked with key professionals to make sure she reached her goal. Knowing she wanted to be a nurse kept her driven to do whatever it took to reach that objective.

Sam sought to provide the same stable family unit full of love and comfort that he had received as a child. Sam acknowledged he no longer could “go out to the club like he wanted to” (interview 3, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Instead, he spent Friday evenings at home, sacrificing late nights, in order to be awake for his early
morning Saturday class. Additionally, an introvert, Sam forced himself to talk, recognizing the importance of networking with the right people to get ahead in life.

For Thomas, his purpose was to go after a life-long passion of working with computers and to prove to himself that he was fully capable. Knowing he often required further clarification during lectures, Thomas took the action of asking questions and staying after for extra help. Additionally, he took advantage of his position as a student ambassador, getting to know the dean and others who would assist and encourage him in his journey.

Like Patti, Rashonda, and Sam, Gina’s purpose was to provide a stable and flexible life for her and her son. Driven by the desire to give him the kind of life he deserves, she persisted through rigorous coursework. Developing a plan to complete the program, Gina devoted her time to practicing her speed. When she was struggling and felt her insecurities coming on, she reached out to professors for the encouragement she needed to continue, keeping her son in mind all along.

Finally, for Janine, her purpose was to earn a degree that would allow her to help others, not expecting anything in return. Like many of the others, she identified and took advantage of opportunities available at the college. Whether it was a leadership activity or a sustained dialogue interaction, Janine embraced every chance to take the necessary steps toward living out her purpose.

Conclusion
Throughout each of the interviews, participants made meaning of their experiences in regard to their ability to succeed in an unfamiliar environment—college. While each got to that success via different paths and for different reasons, they all got there. These narratives serve as eye opening glimpses into the most personal moments of first-generation students’ lives; their past, their present, and their futures. With these previews in mind, we are enabled to consider how we might better serve this student population on our campuses to ensure their success.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Introduction

The academic abilities, behaviors, and success of first-generation college students have typically been socially constructed by today’s society in a way that suggests a deficit; this assumed deficiency dominates research as was demonstrated in the previously presented review of the literature. Deficit research focuses on the weaknesses of individuals rather than their strengths. Wording such as “less likely” and “disadvantaged” is common terminology and phrasing associated with studies examining this population of students. Countless first-generation college student studies focus only on the academic lack of success of this group of students in regard to their ability to achieve and process information; researchers focus only on what the statistical numbers tell them, making assumptions based on these figures. According to Orbe (2004), the research that does focus solely on first-generation college students typically examines statistical relations with other important variables related to college success (p. 280).

In conducting the current study, my intent was to question this assumptive approach to understanding first-generation college students and provide the details that are so often lost. Rather than allowing my study to be guided by a set of socially constructed presumptions, I instead sought to create a research design that enabled participants to organically share their stories. Moreover, the questions that drove the study were in accordance with appreciative inquiry. As an alternative to the customary deficit driven
research inquiries, my questions recognized the ability of students to succeed and sought to understand how the success was achieved.

The purpose of this study was to look forward, backward, inward, and outward to understand the experiences of first-generation students as they strive to be academically successful in an unfamiliar system--college. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to this as a three-dimensional framework. In looking forward and backward, the study sought to understand how an individual's life history and visions for the future shape current experiences. In looking inward and outward, the goal was to understand how individuals internalize, make sense of, and respond to the outside messages that they receive. In accordance with these goals, the research method that was used was narrative analysis. The participants were interviewed regarding their past, present, and future. Sub-questions were used to elicit these different perspectives. Allowing for the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant, this research design afforded a genuine opportunity for the voices of first-generation college students to be heard. Accordingly, it provides practitioners and fellow researchers with the encouragement to reconsider their thoughts about the “stories” the numbers in the deficit model research have depicted. Instead of relying on a series of statistics about first-generation college students, I instead turn to the source itself—real, live first-generation students.

The purpose of this study was to explore first-generation community college students’ success in an unfamiliar environment—college. One main research question
guided this study: How do first-generation community college students succeed despite the challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures? In congruence with a three-dimensional framework exploring spatial experiences, five subsidiary questions also framed the study: (1) How have first-generation community college students’ life experiences contributed to their understanding and beliefs about the concept of success in college? (2) How do first-generation community college students’ understandings of success in college contribute to their ongoing performance in the college environment? (3) How do first-generation community college students define success and in what ways do they reflect upon the meanings of their own constructs of the notion of success in college? (4) How do first-generation community college students understand and respond to the various messages that they receive about what it means to be successful in college? (5) What factors impact first-generation community college students’ desire to be successful in the college environment?

The best way for me to address this three-dimensional research design and the corresponding research questions was to utilize narrative methodology. This kind of approach allowed for the unique opportunity to hear from participants themselves, instead of looking only at statistics about them. Narrative research allows the researcher and participant to co-create the meanings of lived experiences so that the representation is as close to the actual experience as possible. Riessman (2008) explains, “Storytelling engages an audience in the experience of the narrator. Narratives invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to enter the perspective of the narrator” (p. 9). Through three in-depth semi-
structured interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions that were designed to elicit comprehensive stories.

Rich in content, three major themes were prevalent across the participants’ narratives: 1) influential interpersonal interactions; 2) self-efficacy; and 3) sense of purpose. One notable difference that made each narrative distinctive was the range of environments from which the participants had come. Additionally, the stories provided insight into what student success means as well as the importance of goals in relation to achieving this success. What follows is a discussion of these themes in relation to the research questions as well as to pre-existing literature. Additionally, the chapter will examine what these findings mean to practitioners and future research. It will seek to answer the question, “So what?” explaining the significance of the stories in regard to practitioners effectively understanding and serving the vast numbers of first-generation students that attend our community colleges.

Discussion

The following portion of the paper will consider the findings in accord with the existing literature. In this section, I will review what has been said or not said about these themes, specifically in regard to first-generation college students.

Range of Environments

In accordance with three-dimensional research, participants were asked to look backward and share their early experiences in relation to academic success. As they looked back into their lives, the participants shared accounts of the environments from which they
came. Scanning across the narratives, a distinction became clear; it was evident that there was a range of environments in which they experienced their formative years. Most important to note was that none of the environmental experiences was exactly the same; each participant had unique surroundings consisting of various individuals and circumstances.

There is very little research that examines the range of environments from which first-generation college students originate; rather, there is a small body of existing literature that focuses on attempting to generalize the “common” background characteristics of first-generation college students in regard to demographics and environment. Furthermore, these generalizations typically imply a deficit. The literature suggests that first-generation college students are characterized in the most underprivileged racial, income, and gender groups (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; & Warburton et al., 2001). Moreover, the literature claims that, from a demographic point of view, first-generation students as compared to continuing-generation students are more likely to be female, be older, have dependents, come from a lower socioeconomic status, and work more hours (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

It is not unusual to conduct a search of first-generation students on a search engine and receive results that include studies that use the terms “first-generation” and “minority” interchangeably. In much of the literature, first-generation students and minority students are grouped together; this particular study, however, is evidence that this should not be the case. Not all first-generation students are minorities and not all minorities are first-
first-generation college students. In this study alone, four out of the six participants were Caucasian. Researchers and practitioners should not automatically assume that minority groups are going to be the only or even the majority in the first-generation population.

Rather than treat these students as individuals with unique environmental experiences and influences, the research has focused instead on only the fact that they come from families with neither parent completing college. It is critical that researchers begin to shift their attention toward learning more about the contexts in which first-generation students developed, as the environments shaped who these students have become and offer much insight about whom they wish to be. Perhaps most important for researchers is the commitment to resisting the temptation to lump these students into a category; it is essential to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of each individual so that practitioners can begin to treat them as such.

The variety in environments experienced by the participants is telling; it suggests that researchers and practitioners should refrain from pigeonholing this population as coming from one common environment. As was evident, some had financial stability, while some watched their utilities be cut off; some lived in the inner city, while others experienced their early years in the suburbs. Looking backward, it was clear that none of the participants’ environmental situations was exactly the same. One commonality across all of the narratives in regard to environment, however, was the occurrence of an interaction(s) with an influential person(s) who impacted the participants’ ideas about themselves and about success.
Influential Interpersonal Interactions

Each of the participants individually acknowledged an influential interpersonal interaction that impacted their thoughts about success. Of significance is that the exchange did not always occur with the same kind of person; for some it was a speaker at a program; for others, it was a high school guidance counselor. Additionally, the timing of the interaction varied across participants. For some of the participants, the interactions occurred during their formative teenage years; for others, the interactions took place after they entered the community college.

Concerned with first-generation students’ transition to college, the existing literature focuses on the interpersonal interactions that occur once the students are on our college campuses. Graham (2011) discusses one particular federal program that exists—the TRIO Program. TRIO programs began in 1964 to “help disadvantaged students enroll and complete college” (Graham, 2011, p. 33). One component of the TRIO program that is highlighted by Graham is the mentoring piece. Students have a mentor with whom they interact regularly to ensure that they are progressing through their college coursework toward planned completion. In an article entitled, “10 ‘Best Practices’ for Serving First-Generation Students”, featured in a recent edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education, Doubleday (2013) listed mentoring as one of the best practices.

Background-appropriate advising and mentoring have been shown to be effective in increasing first-generation student retention in the federal funded TRIO intervention program such as Student Success Services (SSS) or Educational Opportunity Program
Students in SSS/EOP programs who have a mentor show a 7 percent increase in retention compared to comparable freshmen receiving ‘regular advising’ (Muraskin, 1997). According to Muraskin (1997), however, substantial numbers of first-generation students are not admitted to TRIO programs due to lack of space and receive little if any additional support.

What happens to those who are not admitted to the TRIO programs? At some colleges, they may be a part of other initiatives such as peer and one-on-one faculty and staff mentoring. These forms of mentoring are programmatic in nature and have planned communication points. After being randomly paired, students are sometimes required, or strongly encouraged, to meet with their mentors at critical junctures throughout the semester and typically have specific subjects to discuss. The mentor/mentee meetings, somewhat choreographed, risk losing an organic element, as topics of discussion are pre-planned. Additionally, when randomly paired with a potential stranger on campus, students may not be as willing to open up and share information or concerns with this person as they might be willing to do with someone they already know at the college.

In her review of mentoring programs, Johnson (1989) admits that, “The term mentoring is being used to describe many forms of faculty/staff and student contact at the undergraduate and graduate level” (p. 125). It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers such as Healy and Welchert (1990) find the definitions of mentoring to be ‘inconsistent’ and ‘idiosyncratic’.
Although faculty, staff, and administration may perceive structured mentoring efforts to be successful, research has shown that students do not feel the same. In their article, “Student Responses to a Community College Faculty Mentoring Program,” Howard and Grosset (1992) address this concern. In a study of 160 students who had been assigned faculty mentors, students gave an average rating of 2.6 to the item that asked if mentoring ‘made a difference in my success’ (Howard & Grosset, 1992, p. 52). As Howard & Grosset (1992) note, on a five point scale, from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest rating, this appears to be fairly low. In contrast, faculty responses to the survey revealed that they felt the mentoring program was serving its purpose and reaching the established goals. Furthermore, while 100 percent of the faculty reported that they discussed goals with the mentees; students contended that there was no discussion of practical ways of reaching those goals. Finally, while the mentoring program had developed touch points throughout the semester, only a quarter of the students reported that they saw their mentors more than twice a semester.

Outside of the literature regarding structured, intentional mentoring programming, there is little focus on general influential interpersonal interactions. As was evidenced in this study, the participants did not discuss participation in any formal mentoring relationships; rather, they identified meaningful interpersonal interactions with teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators. Not planned or designed, these exchanges happened in their natural settings. Also important to note is the occurrence of these interactions both in the higher education setting and the K-12 setting as well.
At the heart of these interactions were memorable messages—each of the influential people left the participants feeling a sense of potential and, in some cases, purpose. Knapp et al. (1981) defined memorable messages as verbal messages that people remember and consider influential in some way. According to Kranstuber et al. (2012), people reported receiving these messages at critical, important, and/or confusing times in their lives, often when they were seeking guidance in order to make sense of a situation (p. 46). Medved et al. (2006) indicated that memorable messages may be acted on in the moment, but are usually remembered and ‘pulled forward’ for sense-making, particularly in transitional and confusing moments in one’s life (as cited in Kranstuber et al., 2012).

Teachers were identified by all participants as key people with whom they experienced influential interpersonal interactions that resulted in memorable messages. Teacher communication behaviors have been shown to influence student learning, feelings of satisfaction, motivation, and empowerment (e.g., Chesebro & McCroskey, 2000; Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Frymier & Wanzer, 2006; Morgan & Shim, 1990). A few of the participants also identified high school guidance counselors and college administrators as having been the source of these communications. One participant recognized her foster parent as having been an influential person in her life. Knapp et al. (1981) indicated that family memorable messages have been identified as influential to individuals’ education and careers. Not a part of any formalized mentoring program or communication script, all of these messages were delivered organically in natural settings.
Although varied in nature, the influential interpersonal interactions brought six people from very different backgrounds to a place of common ground—encouragement. Regardless of background or childhood environment, the participants all had some type of exchange with someone who provided support and belief in them; this dialogue, verbal or nonverbal, would serve as a catalyst for achieved self-efficacy.

**Self-Esteem to Self-Efficacy**

Each of the participants struggled with self-esteem challenges throughout their lives and consequently, had a difficult time of becoming an agent who made appropriate decisions to move toward success. Looking inward, the participants acknowledged the struggle to achieve self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), all people are able to identify goals they would like to accomplish as well. Having goals and putting plans into action to achieve them are two different situations. While all of the participants identified goals as integral to their current successes in college, they also all admitted the challenge of seeing the dreams to fruition. Bandura (1977) noted that self-efficacy is the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute a plan to obtain goals. Attaining that self-conviction was a struggle for all participants, but became necessary for their continued success.

Current higher education literature has explored the relationship between self-agency and college adjustment for new students. Research has revealed that students with high levels of self-esteem are more equipped to adjust both socially and academically within the college environments. Chemers (2001) found that academic self-efficacy and optimism were important for first-year students’ adjustment and performance. In another
longitudinal study, Napoli and Wortman (1998) found that students who had higher levels of self-efficacy were more likely to report higher levels of college adjustment.

Sedlacek et al. (1994) have found that noncognitive variables such as positive self-concept and the availability of supportive individuals are predictive of academic success in college for first-generation students, and can sometimes be even more important than traditional measures of cognitive skills. Considering her findings in a study of factors that result in lives of achievement among first-generation college students, Rodriguez (2003) noted,

This study revealed that, in addition to widely accepted academic-success-promoting factors such as adequate financial aid, parental support, academic preparedness, and college counseling, several additional positive influences were active in the academic lives of the participants. These influences, not discussed explicitly in prior research on first-generation students, contributed substantially to the success of these individuals both in college and in their lives after college.

(Rodriguez, 2003, p. 10)

Qualitative in nature, the study consisted of in-depth interviews that attempted to get at the main factors that aided in the participants’ academic success. One factor that emerged from the interviews was what Rodriguez labeled “positive naming”. She explains, “Positive naming occurred in most of the participants’ lives when someone who cared about them or knew them well helped them develop their potential” (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 19). Encouraged by the positive labeling, the participants excelled. Rodriguez (2003)
notes particular interactions that were most salient in the development of self-efficacy—those with instructors. Additionally, she shares that many participants described coursework that was extremely difficult, but they loved it, in part because their teachers expressed a strong belief in their worth and abilities. Their teachers engaged these students, showed them that they cared, and expressed confidence that they could do the work (Rodriguez, 2003, p. 20).

Similar to Rodriguez’s findings, this study revealed that genuine, organic interactions--between student and teacher, student and administrator at the college, student and high school or college counselor--make a difference in the self-efficacy of a student. In addition to the impact others have on participants’ levels of self-efficacy, there is also a developmental factor. Bandura (1993) argues,

The attention of our discipline has centered heavily on how the mind works in processing, organizing, and retrieving information. The mind as a computational program became the conceptual model for the times. Research on how people process information has clarified many aspects of cognitive functioning. However, austere cognitivism has neglected self-regulatory processes that govern human development and adaptation. Effective intellectual functioning requires much more than simply understanding the factual knowledge and reasoning operations for given activities. (p. 117-118)

Much of the first-generation literature focuses on the academic abilities of first-generation students rather than on the self-processes by which human agency is exercised. People
impact their functioning through personal agency. According to Bandura, “Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives” (p. 118). Moreover, much human behavior, which is purposive, is regulated by forethought embodying cognized goals. Personal goal setting is influenced by self-appraisal of capabilities. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the higher the goal challenges people set for themselves and the firmer is their commitment to them (Bandura, 1993, p. 118).

The plans that the participants made to succeed were driven by a common consideration—a sense of purpose.

**Sense of Purpose**

In looking outward and forward, each participant sited a sense of purpose as a driving force in their current success. Emphasizing the importance of goals, they acknowledged that an awareness of purpose enabled them to create the necessary plans to reach those dreams. Additionally, having a concrete intention and objective influenced their decision making in the present.

According to Nomi (2005), the accomplishments sought by those who attend community colleges are having a steady, secure job; making a lot of money; and making a theoretical or practical contribution to science (p. 5). Nomi states,

The accomplishment that most students rate as being very important is to have a steady, secure job, but this is even more important to first-generation community
college students: 87 percent of them cite this as a very important accomplishment, compared to 82 percent of moderate parental education and 77 percent of high parental education students. (pp. 5-6).

She concludes,

Thus, first-generation students are more likely to attend community college to improve their job skills or obtain an associate degree, whereas moderate parental education and high parental education students are more likely to attend community college for the purpose of transferring to a four-year college. (Nomi, 2005, p. 6).

Nomi (2005) suggests that first-generation students are less likely than their peers to attend college for the purposes of fulfilling their parents’ desire for them to enroll. Instead, First-generation students are more likely than their peers to enroll in specific courses and programs for career-oriented reasons. The major reasons they cite more frequently than do their peers are to meet requirements for a chosen occupation, increase earning power, make a career change, develop computer or technology skills, advance in a current job, enter the workforce after children are grown, and enter the workforce after major life change. (Nomi, 2005, p. 6-7)

While previous research presents career-oriented purposes for attending the community college, the current study offers other perspectives.

Many of the participants in this study revealed that their children were the sense of purpose that drove them toward success in college. Some, who had been exposed to financially challenging upbringings, wished to provide a stable financial environment for
their children. Not always financial in nature, the reasons children were identified as their purpose also involved providing a positive example for the kids to follow; they wanted to show their children that education was possible and that they were capable of achieving and succeeding.

For some, the purpose was to do something for themselves, as they had experienced a controlling or manipulative relationship in the past that prevented them from pursuing their own dreams. After developing healthy relationship behaviors and acquiring self-efficacy, the participants were ready to achieve self-fulfillment according to their personal desires and goals. Furthermore, the confidence in their abilities fueled this sense of purpose.

While the participants certainly wanted to succeed in school for personal reasons, they also discussed the importance of using what they learned to help others. According to the participants, the purpose was to engage in a meaningful career, not just the next available job. Possessing a true desire to help others, the participants cited a purpose of making life easier for others through their work.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Implications for Practice

The research process and the results of the study suggest several practical implications for student affairs professionals, as well as faculty. Among the most undeniable realities that emerged from the findings was the distinctiveness of each of the participants’ stories. While there were a few themes that emerged across the six narratives,
each participant had his or her own story to tell regarding his or her past, present, and future experiences. This variation serves as a reminder that each student on our campuses must be viewed as unique. In order to treat them as individuals, we must afford students opportunities to discuss whom they have been, who they are, and whom they wish to become.

Once given the chance to talk about their experiences, the students had a great deal to say. Furthermore, both the initial excitement in participating, and the feedback provided once the interviews were completed indicate that first-generation students are genuinely interested in sharing their journeys so that they can be better understood. One participant indicated that this was the first time anyone had inquired about her life. Many indicated how much they enjoyed the interview process and were saddened when it was over, emphasizing that they would gladly have future conversations about the topic. Reflecting upon their past, present, and future experiences; the participants seemed to undergo developmental growth as they processed what those occurrences meant to their evolution as both individuals and college students. They expressed excitement at the possibility that others would be reading their stories and hoped the shared journeys would prove beneficial to the success of other students who were similar to them. The apparent interest in the study and the positive feedback suggest that there is an unmet need for students to have opportunities to discuss their experiences to foster their personal and academic growth. Consequently, it is critical that students are afforded opportunities to engage in sustained, meaningful conversation and reflection.
Opportunities for such conversations and contemplation can occur in many different environments on college campuses. Formally, such reflection can be incorporated into the curriculum of academic courses that require some component of self-understanding. Perhaps a few possible courses into which this could be integrated might be mandatory first-year experience or career construction courses; exploratory in nature, these classes ask students to call upon past, present, and future life events that have and continue to shape their thoughts about ability and purpose. Faculty might require students to engage in journal writing as well as monitored respectful discussions with classmates. As was evidenced in this study, providing students the opportunity to give life to their stories and engage in a telling of their past, present, and future enabled them to also make meaning of lived experiences.

Just as the participants proved to be unique individuals, so, too, were the environments from which they came. An awareness of the rich difference in environmental surroundings is an indication that we must look for these students in a variety of places; furthermore, we must provide support to them once they are found. Recognizing that these prospective students often are not aware of educational opportunities or the ways to access those possibilities, we must consider the creation of multiple pathways for these individuals to reach our doors. Researchers and policymakers have addressed the importance of curricular and institutional structures that enhance links between secondary and postsecondary education (Lee, Smith, and Croninger, 1995; Lewis, 2003). Primarily focused on the academic and access needs of first-generation students, the structures that
have been created include bridge programs, dual enrollment partnerships, and career reflection workshops in the high schools (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). Bragg et al. (2006) identified community colleges as playing an important role in expanding access to college by enrolling students who are members of ethnic minority groups or who are low income, first-generation, or underprepared for college-level work (pp. 6-7). Bragg et al. (2006) explained,

Because of their open access mission and state and local governing bodies that are similar to—and sometimes the same as—those for K-12 schools, community colleges are often better suited to work with both K-12 schools and other community and civic organizations than four-year institutions. (p. 7)

First-generation students are not only attending high schools in the inner city; these students are present in the suburban secondary schools as well. Accordingly, we must extend our pathways to include outreach to those institutions and to their first-generation students.

While working with the elementary and secondary schools is a recommended activity, community colleges should also consider the other environments in which they may be able to reach first-generation students. As was demonstrated in this study, some students were introduced to college via other avenues. For one participant, the pathway was a transitional program sponsored by the community college. Having lived in a homeless shelter, this person needed a glimmer of hope and the advertisement for the program was the possible path to a second chance.
Knowing the tendency of first-generation students to pursue work, not college, after high school, another pathway should be partnerships with local businesses that oftentimes employ these individuals for minimum wage. Purporting the benefit of educating and training employees for both the business and the college, the two institutions become partners for developing loyalty to the business and perhaps most importantly, to the region. As was found in the current study, many first-generation students know they can do more and want to do more; they just need to know how they can do more. If we put college admissions representatives in contact with human resource departments at some of the major local employers such as the hospitals, we create the possibility of being in the right place at the right time for a worker who is first-generation and who is hungering for the chance to find a pathway to a more rewarding and stable life.

The results of this study also point to the importance of influential interpersonal interactions. Even more significant is the suggestion that these interactions need not be a part of a structured program. In the second interview, I asked participants about their decision to attend college; they were asked if it was a result of someone’s encouragement. Interesting was that this was the only direct question about influential interpersonal interactions. Although the participants were asked about this directly in this particular question, they had actually brought up the idea in the very first interview without being prodded. This demonstrates the significance of these kinds of interactions with others in regard to their overall academic pursuits and success.
Identifying individuals with whom they had developed some sort of natural relationship, the participants recognized that the interactions with those people had made a major impact on their lives. Not someone who was randomly assigned to them in a formal mentoring program, these influential individuals were teachers in whose classrooms they had spent ample time; they were guidance counselors with whom they had developed a trust; they were the high school staff members that had taken an interest in their students’ lives; and they were the administrator who took the time to say hello. From this study, the findings imply a need for student affairs members and faculty to engage in these kinds of interactions with first-generation college students. Not requiring a great deal of time, the exchange might consist of an encouraging sentiment or a simple hello. One participant mentioned that just having her teacher know her by name had a major impact on her desire to succeed. Occurrences such as these should become the norm, rather than the exception. This will require effort amongst administration to create a truly caring campus culture that encourages staff and faculty to become more invested in the students’ lives and move beyond simply getting the students through the system. College employees already know how to answer typical procedural questions; they know how to process the paper work required for a student to graduate. What could be enhanced, however, is the willingness and desire of each person to contribute to the student experience in a meaningful way. In order to alter the campus culture in this way, there must be buy in amongst the staff and faculty. To achieve this buy in, we must inform the employees of their role in the bigger picture on our campuses. Although they may sit at a front counter and feel undervalued,
the reality is each and every person, regardless of position, has the ability to greatly impact a student’s journey at the college through memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1981). As was demonstrated, it only takes one small interaction to change the course of a student’s life. Employee development efforts should include workshops regarding interpersonal communication with emphasis on an understanding of how our words and actions can greatly impact someone else, most specifically our students.

Influential interactions proved helpful in increasing the levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy amongst the students. Having undergone a variety of experiences in which self-esteem was challenged and life events became seemingly overwhelming, the participants struggled with developing self-agency. Unaware of what they were capable of achieving, many indicated an uncertainty in regard to creating a plan to reach their goals. Bandura (1982) purports, “A capability is only as good as its execution” (p. 122). According to Bandura, “Operative competence requires orchestration and continuous improvisation of multiple subskills to manage ever-changing circumstances” (p. 122). It is time that student affairs practitioners and faculty at community colleges accept the responsibility of developing students in ways that exceed academic preparedness; we must teach them how to be adaptive to, and prepared for, life’s unexpected twists and turns.

Student development can occur through conversations between academic counselors and students. When students bring concerns about academic challenges to the counselors, there should be moments of unpacking the concern and encouraging the student to problem solve to uncover how it should be addressed. Instead of simply handing them a sheet of steps
with minimal explanation, counselors should be required to expand upon the reasoning behind the steps and an acknowledgment of the students’ ownership in the process. At the core of this conversation should be a discussion of the student’s purpose.

The study proved that once students had a solid sense of purpose, they were more driven to persist and succeed. Because of the importance of purpose in the students’ success as well as the success of the college, it is prudent for student affairs professionals to consider how a realization of it is achieved. According to the narratives gleaned from this study, many first-generation college students have received very little guidance in regard to developing purpose; they have discovered it on their own. We have an opportunity to assist them with this self-discovery. When advising students, probing questions should be asked; this encourages the student to engage in self-reflection. Moreover, having students vocalize their thoughts about why they want to be a nurse helps them talk through the decision to make sure it is in alignment with their interests, values, and life goals.

Perhaps one of the most compelling implications of this study is the need to reevaluate the programming that is in place in support of these students. So much of it is formalized and structured, often benchmarked off what the latest community college is doing. Relying on the statistical research, practitioners often assume these students require intensive academic interventions and neglect to realize that the students are not automatically deficient in academic abilities just because they are the first to attend college; instead, the first-generation community college students are very capable. What they desire
instead is meaningful interpersonal interactions that develop their self-efficacy and sense of purpose.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study is indicative of the need for continued research regarding first-generation community college students. Further research should consider different methodological approaches than the ones used in this study as well as build on the results of this study. Although narrative research proved useful in gleaning comprehensive life stories, other methodological approaches such as case study or grounded theory could be used to obtain a different perspective. Case study would explore the experiences of a few participants in greater detail, while grounded theory would generate theory about these interactions in regard to student success.

This study focused on first-generation students who were born in the United States. An area for future research might include an exploration of first-generation students who come from immigrant families. The existing literature on first-generation students does not routinely consider this segment of students. Rather, like the current study, it concentrates more on those native to the United States, while sometimes including studies on Latino students. It is recommended that future research be done regarding those who are from immigrant families. Our community colleges continue to become diverse and that diversity includes students who are not native to this country. Schwartz et al. (2011) noted,

The United States has been undergoing an unprecedented wave of immigration for nearly half a century. Since 1965, when restrictive immigration quotas were lifted,
more than 25 million immigrants have entered the United States on a documented basis (as cited in Jaeger, 2008). The proportion of immigrants in the United States increased by 24 percent between 2000 and 2009, and foreign-born individuals now account for 13 percent of the overall U.S. population. (as cited in Grieco & Trevelyan, 2010)

Just like the national landscape, the college landscape has seen an increase in the number of immigrant students on our campuses. In three samples gathered by Schwartz, Weisskirch, et al. (2011) at 30 colleges and universities around the United States, 26 percent (3,251 out of 12,346) of the students surveyed (with international students excluded from consideration) reported that both of their parents were born outside the United States (p. 305). The numbers are not to be ignored; students from immigrant families are an important part of the college population and are deserving of consideration and attention. Knowing that students born outside of the United States experience unique sets of circumstances and experiences, it is also possible to surmise that first-generation immigrant students would have additional concerns and life stories than their first-generation United States born counterparts that were explored in this study. These concerns and experiences must not go untold, as we must understand this segment of first-generation community college students in order to better serve them.

It is clear that there is still a great deal to learn about first-generation community college students. I would suggest that more emphasis be placed on additional qualitative research, as this kind of research allows for a unique opportunity to hear from the students
themselves in regard to their experiences and thoughts about college. If higher education practitioners wish to better serve this population of students, it is time to listen to their accounts of how we can improve what we do for them.

**Limitations of the Study**

The major limitation of the study is that I only interacted with my participants on a handful of occasions; furthermore, some of these interactions were over the phone due to convenience sake for the respective participants. Despite the trusting relationships that developed between the participants and me over the course of the interview process, it is possible that they would have been willing to share even more if additional time had been spent together. Had there been opportunity for additional interviews or other meetings, I might have been able to learn even more information about past, present, and future life experiences of the participants.

Additionally, embodying the dualistic role of researcher and employee at the research site might have been a limitation. Aware that I worked for the college, the participants could have felt hesitant to provide negative feedback regarding their experiences at the community college. Although told that I held no position of authority over them, it was still possible that the participants refrained from sharing any deprecating comments either because they did not want to make me feel insulted or out of concern that I would share those sentiments with my colleagues.

Finally, another limitation of the study was the research site. It represented only one community college amongst over one thousand in the nation. Broader perspectives
may have been gleaned through interviews conducted with first-generation students from a variety of community colleges.

**Strengths of the Study**

Committed and invested, the participants were the strength of the study. Having never participated in a research endeavor such as this, they willingly took risks for the greater good of informing educators about who they are and how they are able to succeed. Engaging in in-depth interviews, the participants shared extensive details that provided a comprehensive picture of their experiences; this allowed for a greater understanding of their stories and the meaning they made of them.

Another strength of the study was the genuine co-creation of meaning between participant and researcher. Utilizing member-checking, participants were asked to review the transcript after each interview for any edits they wished to make. Additionally, they were encouraged to read the narratives that I constructed to determine if I had accurately represented their stories.

The diversity amongst the participants was also a strength in the study. The sample included four females and two males. In addition to traditional on-campus students, there was also a distance learning student who engaged in hybrid learning. Four of the participants were Caucasian and two were African American. There were students from each of the three largest campuses of the college. Some of the participants came from rural environments with a higher level of family income, while others experienced life in the inner city due to financial challenges. Finally, the ages of the participants
varied greatly, with the youngest being in his early twenties and the oldest being close to
fifty.

**Summary**

The results of this study indicate that the tendency to understand first-generation
community college students from a deficit approach should not be encouraged. Contrary
to what the social constructions have indicated, these students are capable of the same
academic endeavors as their continuing-generation peers. Regardless of early
environments, they are able to succeed at community colleges. Once higher education
professionals truly understand where they have been, who they have become, and where
they wish to go, we can build on the strengths of first-generation students to ensure that
they will succeed at our institutions.
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APPENDIXES
Appendix A

Recruitment Script

My name is Holly Craider and I work as a Recruitment Specialist at [college name]. I have been working at the college for three years and have worked at both the Metropolitan and Eastern Campuses. Additionally, I am pursuing my doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration at Kent State University. The pursuit of this degree involves conducting research and I am excited to tell you about this research opportunity.

Being a first-generation student myself, I am very interested in learning more about people like us. Aware of the potential for first-generation students to experience “culture shock” upon entering college, the question that drives this study is, how do these students succeed despite the challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures? The hope is that, through your stories, you may share information that could lead to future strengthening of programs that are designed to assist first-year students.

I am inviting you to participate in this study and share your stories with me. Participating would involve three, 90-minute interviews in which I will ask you questions about your past, present, and future experiences that can and may shape your success in college as a first-generation student. The interviews will be audiotaped and then, those tapes will be transcribed. Your name will not be used in any publication or presentation; rather, pseudonyms will be used. The name of your institution will also be omitted.
If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at hcraider@kent.edu. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for considering this opportunity.

Sincerely,

Holly Craider
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Holly Craider, doctoral student at Kent State University. The purpose of the research is to look forward, backward, inward, and outward to understand the experiences of first-generation students as they strive to be academically successful in an unfamiliar system--college.

What will you be asked to do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in individual interviews with the researcher. You will be asked about your past and current experiences as well as your future goals. You will also be asked about your educational experiences at your community college. Your involvement will include three, 90-minute individual interviews. The interviews will be audiotaped, and the tape will be transcribed following the interview.

Risks

- The major risk of this study is discussing very personal and private information that could potentially result in feelings of emotional discomfort.

Benefits

- For participants, the benefits include the opportunity to reflect on your life experiences and how these experiences influence your academic success in college.
- As a participant, you may benefit from knowing your experience could inform
future practice that could lead to strengthening of programming designed for first-year students.

**Confidentiality**

To maintain confidentiality, your names will not be used in any publication or presentation related to this research. Instead, pseudonyms will be used. In addition, the name and location of the college will not be identified. All audiotapes and written data will be stored in a secured area to which only the researcher and the supervising faculty member have access. Participation is voluntary and you may opt out at any time. Additionally, you may choose to not answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

**Contact Information**

If you have questions about this study, please contact me at hcraider@kent.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints about the research, you may call the IRB at 330-672-2704.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information. You will receive a copy of this form.

________________________________________  ____________

Signature
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, FIRST INTERVIEW
Appendix C

Interview Questions, First Interview

Interviewee: ___________________________ Time and Date of Interview: ____________
Location: ____________________________

Prior to participating in an interview, participants must sign the Consent form.
Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain that the entire discussion will be
recorded and transcribed. The researcher will again remind participants of the purpose of
the study, and will then, commence with the interview questions.

The question that drives this study is: how do these students succeed despite the
challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures?

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself in general (where were you born, where did you grow up,
etc.)

2. Tell me about your family (do you have siblings, what did/do you parents do for a
   living, what was your family environment like).

3. Tell me about your life growing up (tell me about your experiences as a child, talk
to me about your experiences at school, with friends, etc.)

4. Tell me about how your childhood and family life has impacted who you are today,
5. if at all.

6. Tell me about your experience after high school (talk about your thoughts about college, working, etc.)

*Appropriate follow-up questions will be asked and is dependent upon the responses of the participants. These questions will most likely vary between participants, as each will present their own unique narratives.
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, SECOND INTERVIEW
Appendix D

Interview Questions, Second Interview

Interviewee: ___________________________ Time and Date of Interview: _____________
Location: ___________________________

Prior to participating in an interview, participants must sign the Consent form.
Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain that the entire discussion will be
recorded and transcribed. The researcher will again remind participants of the purpose of
the study, and will then, commence with the interview questions.

The question that drives this study is: how do these students succeed despite the
challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures?

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your decision to go to college (encouragement from family, friends,
   mentors to attend?)

2. Talk to me about your decision to attend a community college (affordability,
   convenience, etc.).

3. Tell me about your experiences at the community college (with instructors, with
   friends, in relation to your personal life).

4. Talk about the services you utilize at the college (tutoring, academic counseling,
etc.).

5. Talk about your expectations of attending college (what is your purpose of attending).

6. Describe your understanding of what it means to be successful at the community college (what does college success mean to you?).

*Appropriate follow-up questions will be asked and is dependent upon the responses of the participants. These questions will most likely vary between participants, as they are each presenting their own unique narratives.
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, THIRD INTERVIEW
Appendix E

Interview Questions, Third Interview

Interviewee: _______________________ Time and Date of Interview: ____________
Location: _______________________

Prior to participating in an interview, participants must sign the Consent form.

Before the interview starts, the researcher will explain that the entire discussion will be recorded and transcribed. The researcher will again remind participants of the purpose of the study, and will then, commence with the interview questions.

The question that drives this study is: how do these students succeed despite the challenges experienced in their past and present and in light of their goals for their futures?

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe to me your thoughts about having goals (what are goals, why do you think we should/should not have them).
2. Tell me about your goals for your future (career, family, etc.)
3. Talk to me about how the idea of these goals impacts your choices today.
4. Tell me about the goals you think the college has for you (what are the expectations put on you at the college by teachers, by administration, by peers, etc.).
5. Tell me about how you think others view your ability to reach these goals (and how
does this impact you).

*Appropriate follow-up questions will be asked and is dependent upon the responses of the participants. These questions will most likely vary between participants, as they are each presenting their own unique narratives.