Exploring the Pathways to the Professoriate Taken by First Generation College Students

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This dissertation titled
Exploring the Pathways to the Professoriate Taken by First Generation College Students

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Abstract

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Exploring the Pathways to the Professoriate Taken by First Generation College Students

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Higher education in the United States has a history dating back to the founding of Harvard College in 1636, and was originally reserved for the scions of the colonial aristocracy. Over time, public demand, industry need, and key pieces of federal legislation have unlocked the doors to higher education, which today serves a much broader audience. Still, educational access is not equipollent among the various segments of modern, American society. Students who are ethnic minorities, come from low-income families, and whose parents have not earned a college degree (first generation students) are less likely to matriculate and earn a Baccalaureate degree than Caucasian students, more affluent students, and those whose parents who hold an undergraduate degree. This disparity is even more pronounced in graduate education and leads to an inevitable underrepresentation of first generation students in the professoriate, where a master’s degree or a doctorate is almost universally required. Truly, the route from first generation student to college professor is a challenging one, but some first generation students manage to transcend their backgrounds, earn terminal degrees, and take their places in the academy. These scholars are first generation academics. This research explored the supports and obstacles encountered by first generation college students who elect to pursue careers in the professoriate. Through elicited texts, personal interviews, and the analytical methods of grounded theory I was able to identify a Theory of the
Development of First Generation Academics, which enumerates characteristics that are probable among first generation college students who blaze pathways to the professoriate.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Peter C. Mather

Associate Professor of Counseling and Higher Education
Dedication

This work is dedicated to First Generation college students across the nation, who are even now discovering the transformative power of higher education and working to make it a reality for themselves.
Acknowledgments

I am indebted to many people for their support and assistance in the completion of this project. First and foremost, I owe a world of gratitude to the First Generation academics who shared their lives and experiences with me. Your stories still inspire me tremendously. Thank you for your time and candor.

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To my family and friends, I apologize for being absent for the last four years. I appreciate your understanding, support, and encouragement. Now that I am finished, you may resume calling whenever you would like, but still not before 9:00 on Saturday mornings, please.

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of Study</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations/Scope of Study</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitations</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Access in American Higher Education</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income Level</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation Status</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Status</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Traditional Professoriate</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Selection</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness and Credibility</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Synopses</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Garcia Summary</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Family Relationships</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to College</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting Resilience</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing Higher Education</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Hudspeth Summary</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Family Relationships</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to College</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting Resilience</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing Higher Education</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a Home at College</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning to a Life in the Academy</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering Class</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Butler Summary</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Family Relationships</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to College</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting Resilience</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing Higher Education</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a Home at College</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning to a Life in the Academy</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering Class</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Broderick Summary</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Family Relationships</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to College</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing Higher Education</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting Resilience</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a Home at College</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitioning to a Life in the Academy</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering Class</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ware Summary</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Family Relationships</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to College</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibiting Resilience</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implications for Further Research ................................................................. 243
Potential Twists ............................................................................................... 243
Further Exploration of a Theme ................................................................. 244
Corrective Ideas ............................................................................................... 245
References ........................................................................................................ 246
Appendix A: IRB Approval .............................................................................. 256
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter ................................................. 257
Appendix C: Essay Instructions ........................................................................ 259
Appendix D: Ohio University Consent Form .................................................. 261
Appendix E: Interview Protocols ................................................................. 264
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Participant Summary</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Participant Summary</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

This research examines the journey First Generation college students take as they leave home, work toward successively higher degrees and, ultimately, join the academy as professors in American institutions of higher education. By all accounts, this is an unlikely journey. Certain challenges, including a higher likelihood of being raised in financially challenging situations not faced by their peers whose parents earned a college degree, are characteristic of the First Generation (FG) student experience. As Bui (2002) noted, “In comparison to students whose parents had some college experience but no degrees and students whose parents had at least a bachelor’s degree, first-generation students were more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic background” (p.3). Billson and Terry (1982) recognized this as well. They wrote:

Family income is highly correlated with occupation, which is in large part determined by education. This relationship has not been lost on thousands of students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds who have entered college in growing proportions since the 1920’s [sic]. (p. 57)

Similarly, Engle (2007) and Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1995) noted that FG students are less likely to be male, Caucasian, affluent, matriculate as full-time students at four-year colleges immediately after high school, live on campus, need to work while in school, continue their educations uninterrupted, be well-prepared for the academic demands of the academy (particularly in reading, math, and critical thinking), or have high degree aspirations.
Because of the numerous barriers FG students encounter on their path to a degree, they are more likely to leave college before graduating. Billson and Terry (1982) wrote, “Student persistence has long been associated with parental educational levels…We have found at least twenty separate references to original research conducted during the past 40 years which strongly documents this association” (p. 58). Ishitani’s (2005) research also demonstrates higher attrition rates for first generation students compared to students who were not FG (continuing generation). He indicated that such students were considerably more likely to leave college than students whose parents graduated college (p. 17).

In her introduction to This Fine Place so Far From Home, Carolyn Law (1995) wrote:

Children whose parents work too hard or have little time or skills to read to them…who do not have library cards, these are the ones at risk, the ones most likely to fail the traditional academic setting…whose children are also most often children of the working-class. (pp. 2-3)

Historically, these working-class and FG students did not go to college. The vast expansion of higher education brought on by the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, the original Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill) of 1944, and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (and amendments), however, threw the doors of higher education open to hundreds of thousands of students who, prior to these transformative pieces of legislation, would have been unlikely candidates for higher education. Each of these federal acts specifically or effectively addressed these students who came not from the well educated,
middle and upper classes, but from the less educated working-class. The first Morrill Act expressly called for education of the “industrial classes” while the G.I. Bill and original Higher Education Act directed educational benefits to students who until then had not benefitted from higher education on a large scale. These students were bright and capable, but as John Fogerty wrote in 1969, “It ain’t me. I ain’t no millionaire’s son…I ain’t no fortunate one.” These were not the sons and daughters of America’s elite.

In order to provide the support that many marginalized students require to succeed in higher education, it is important that those in a position to facilitate change—particularly politicians, institutional leaders, and faculty—understand the challenges working-class students face due to the lack of the type of cultural capital valued in higher education. Marshall (2003) wrote, “Middle-class parents endow their children with…various linguistic and cultural competences. Schools require these competences (whose content is controlled by the rich) for educational success, yet fail to teach them” (p. 134).

Higher education’s leaders—both at the institutional and governmental levels—need to fully realize the intricate bonds between capital and education. In essence, the cards are stacked against first generation, working-class, and other marginalized students. They do not have the cultural capital necessary to succeed in higher education and those who control the keys to the palace are not accustomed to sharing this information. The college degree, though, is instrumental in breaking the cycle of underemployment and poverty that is common to many marginalized students. If these students can somehow learn the rules of the game, they can attain success and pass along this valuable

I’ve used education as the dividing line between working-class and middle class. Any economist or sociologist would tell you that’s just part of the story. Along with education, factors such as income, job status, and amount of authority and control one has at work are generally described in sociological literature as the major determinants of class. (p. 3)

Higher education not only separates the working-class from the upper classes, but also binds FG and working-class students. FG students are defined by their parents’ educational attainments. Working-class students, while not nearly so narrowly cast, are working-class in part because their parents have not earned the post-secondary degrees that would endow them with the type of cultural capital needed to maneuver in the middle-class.

On a practical level, it is not difficult to conceptualize the interplay between education, income, employment, and status in the workplace. Of this connection, Scott and Leonhardt (2005) wrote:

One way to think of a person’s position in society is to imagine a hand of cards. Everyone is dealt four cards, one from each suit: education, income, occupation, and wealth. Face cards in a few categories may land a player in the upper middle class. At first, a person is his parents’ class. Later, he may pick up a new hand of his own; it is likely to resemble his parents, but not always. (p. 9)
Middle and upper-middle class people begin the game with stronger face cards. Through education and hard work, working-class people can acquire more powerful face cards, but doing so involves a struggle that places them at a disadvantage relative to peers (competitors) who were born with these strong cards.

Regarding the effects of his own metamorphosis from working-class, Brooklyn kid to college-educated journalist, Lubrano (2004) emphasized, “I am two people. I now live a middle class life, working in a white-collar newspaperman’s job, but I was born blue collar. I’ve never quite reconciled the dichotomy,” (p.1). Based on dozens of interviews, Lubrano discussed the experiences of the “straddlers” (working-class people who earned a degree and transcended their blue-collar roots). One straddler, now a psychologist in Minnesota, offered her observations on the differences between the working-class (non-degreed) and the middle class (degreed). She wrote:

Working-class people mistrust eggheads, relying more on intuition, common sense and luck. The middle class is more analytical, depending on cultivated, logical thinking…Working-class people are overawed by doctors and lawyers. The middle class knows how to talk to such folks…The middle class is burdened with the pressure of out achieving high-achieving parents. Many working-class families are happy if their kids get and keep a job. (p. 21)

As this straddler intimated, the chasm between working-class and middle class is vast. However, this gulf is infrequently discussed in polite, American society. Keller (2005) wrote in the introduction to *Class Matters* that class is a “complicated subject” that “most Americans prefer not to talk about,” (p. XII). In this country, people routinely
and enthusiastically argue politics, religion, race, education, economics, and sexual orientation, but they do not discuss class. Since this topic is seemingly verboten, we do not recognize the divisive influence of class. After all, Americans are, from birth, steeped in the belief that class is irrelevant. We envy the good fortune of the rich guy on the hill even as we dream of living in his house one day. We believe “one day” is possible if we work hard enough. As Scott and Leonhardt (2005) wrote, “Faith in mobility…has been consciously woven into the national self-image….The idea of fixed class positions…rub many the wrong way” (pp. 25-26).

This ideal is valuable, but it does not tell the full story. Some people are bestowed privilege as a birthright, having never earned it, while others labor in obscurity despite great talents. As Ryan and Sackrey (1984) indicated, “The reality and frequency and range of significant upward mobility, while it varies slightly among capital nations, stays within tight range. It is fair to say that ‘few are called and even fewer are chosen’” (p. 114).

Still, the “American Dream” motivates us to seek our fortunes. It fuels our drive to build a better mousetrap, make our mark on the world, and give our kids more than we had. People want to move from the tenement to the mansion on the hill. As a nation, we are eager to get ahead and are confident in our ability to do so. Collectively, we swing for the proverbial fences, without considering that grand slams are rare. Few people make the strides Andrew Carnegie made. Those who go from poverty to immense wealth are the much-ballyhooed exceptions. Most people make a more modest move from, say, the projects to a working-class neighborhood or from a working-class neighborhood to the
suburbs. It depends on where one begins the journey, on the breaks one receives, and on the choices one makes along the way.

Many who manage to significantly improve their station in life have bet on education. Higher education enables personal success and advancement and may have positive effects on families, communities, and American society. For all of its benefits, though, education has the ability to cleave us from our roots. Koonings (1984) wrote:

It seems... that I have alienated myself from my beginnings by moving into a culture which [sic] offers me few, if any, binding, sustaining points of contact. I do not work as hard as my father did, though I make at least five times as much money as he ever did. But I must admit that there are times when I think that my education and movement from the working-class has cost me the relationships and cultural ties that define most of humanity. (p. 307)

Similarly, Martin (1995) noted, “My conflict over upward mobility intensified as I worked on my dissertation; it was the final step separating me from my former world” (p. 84). Lubrano (2004) poignantly wrote, “When my father (a bricklayer) was done with Columbia, he moved on to another job site. When I (a student) was done with Columbia, I was someone else” (p. 50).

The present study, however, is not concerned with working-class or FG students, per se, but with faculty members who, as undergraduates, were themselves FG. It is important that we learn more about the experiences of these scholars who came to the academy from such unlikely circumstances. This study examines the pathways faculty members traveled from being FG undergraduates to being members of the academy (FG
academics). After all, the academy is often an alien environment to FG students and their families. Leslie (1995) wrote:

I’m not sure my father ever understood what I do. When I applied for graduate school, the entire concept was foreign to him. We argued over... what use more college would be if I couldn’t even get a job with an undergraduate degree. (p. 70)

Likewise, Cole (1984) wrote, “They were vaguely proud that I went to college, but could not comprehend why. When I decided to go to graduate school, in another state, they were agreeable, but uncomprehending. Here I was again, doing something weird” (p. 70). The decision to continue education is often baffling to the families of FG students as are the life choices education affords. Lubrano (2004) wrote of a struggle with his family when, after graduate school, he accepted a job hundreds of miles away in Ohio. His father asked, “Why can’t you get a good job that pays something, like in advertising in the city, and write on the side?” Lubrano responded that he wanted to write about “Real life. Real people.” To this, his father proclaimed, “No, you’re happy with your family…That’s what makes you happy.” Lubrano declared this “A key blue-collar rule” (p. 107).

This melding of blue-collar, working-class culture with white-collar, middle-class culture is, in essence, biculturalism. Abalos (1986) wrote of the Hispanic community, “Our phrase bilingual/bicultural must be taken seriously. It already implies and demands a synthesis, a coming together of two cultures and languages out of which emerges a third reality that was not there before” (p. 94). This describes Lubrano’s Limbo quite accurately as he and many of his straddlers lived a bicultural existence in higher
Numerous theorists have detailed the unique experiences of distinct cultural groups and explored how members of these groups assimilate into majority society while simultaneously maintaining—or failing to maintain—the unique characteristics of their kith and kin. Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper (2003) succinctly summarized the work of these theorists and reported that Cross (pp. 41-45), Gay (p.45), and Jackson (pp. 45-46) each developed ethnic identity theories for African American students. Similarly, they noted that LaFramboise, Trimble, and Mohatt (pp. 50-51), Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, and Robbins (p. 51), and Horse (pp. 51-52) did the same for Native American students. Also, Keefe and Padilla (pp. 54-55), Torres (pp. 55-57), and Ferdman and Gallegos (p. 57) developed such theories for Latinos/Latinas while Kim (pp. 60-61), Ibraim, Ohnishi, and Sandhu (p. 61), and Maekawa, Kodama, McEwan, Liang, and Less (p. 62) did so for Asian Americans. These theories can be instructive.

The notion of capital will also inform the subject. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1979) offered numerous definitions for capital, several of them telling. One definition states that capital is “Any form of material wealth used or available for use in the production of more wealth” (p. 199). This definition of capital is concerned strictly with the financial resources to do business. Another definition proffers a more expansive—and, for present purposes, more relevant—definition. According The American Heritage Dictionary, capital can also be defined simply as “Any asset or advantage” (p. 200). Bourdieu (1986) addressed asset and
advantage when he wrote that capital is “What makes the games of society—not least, the economic game—something other than simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle” (p. 241). Society is surely more than just a game of chance, but what makes this so? Advantage. Bourdieu added, “It is in fact impossible to account for the structures and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital [advantage] in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory” (p. 242). Beyond economic capital, Bourdieu divided his discussion into cultural capital and social capital. He used education to address cultural capital:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me…as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (p. 243)

This indicates that children from higher socioeconomic classes possess more of the cultural capital valued by the educational system than their less affluent peers.

Cultural capital is not bestowed upon birth as easily as a wealthy family member might establish a trust fund or bequeath an estate, however. Bourdieu wrote, “This embodied capital, external wealth converted into an integral part of a person…cannot be transmitted instantaneously” (pp. 244-245). Transmission of cultural capital represents a long-term investment made by family and members of a person’s cultural group. Of the benefit of cultural capital, Bourdieu noted, “To possess machines, he only needs
economic capital; to appropriate them and use them in accordance with their specific purpose he must have access to embodied cultural capital” (p. 247). This appropriation is at the heart of cultural capital. Even a modest family may, with great effort acquire the financial resources to send a son or daughter to college, but does that family possess the collective resources to support that son or daughter once at university? Can they provide other advantages to ensure success? No, but this is precisely what FG academics face. And to what results? Even people of modest means will have some degree of advantage within their natural realm, but once they move out of their realm, gradations of advantage reveal themselves and differences in capital can become disadvantages.

Cultural capital is not the only form of advantage/disadvantage, however. Bourdieu (1986) also wrote of social capital, which he described as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources (sic) which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital. (pp. 248-249)

Everyone possesses some measure of social capital. Large families, labor unions, “the neighborhood,” the Country Club, and the “good old boy” network all provide capital within a specific sphere of influence. Doubt this? Imagine the success a Country Club preppy might have negotiating a tough, working-class neighborhood. Conversely, take a working-class kid and drop her off at “The Club.” As Joe Raposo and Jon Stone wrote for Sesame Street in 1970, “One of these things is not like the others. One of these
things just doesn't belong.” Yet this is exactly what FG and working-class students experience upon admission to the academy and what many FG academics feel within their own departments. This arrival is accompanied by a loss of any social capital they have previously known. The matriculation of a FG or working-class student is paramount to being dropped off at “The Club.” The difference in advantage may have a notable constraining effect on the academic careers of people who experience it.

**Purpose of the Study**

In undertaking this study, I was interested in exploring the individual stories and shared experiences of FG students as they blaze their unique pathways to the professoriate. Literature on working-class academics reveals consistent themes. These include: acknowledging personal difference from both colleagues/classmates and family/friends; being an avid, if indiscriminant, reader as a youth; confronting parental concerns about higher education, particularly graduate school; feeling like an imposter; experiencing loss and separation from one’s former life; grasping the importance of class and the privilege afforded to the middle and upper classes. As previously stated, though, literature specifically addressing the experiences of FG academics is notably absent. In this study, I analyzed the experiences of eight FG academics and identified the common themes and faint threads that shaped their journeys and, ultimately, their decisions to pursue careers in academe.

I employed grounded theory methodology because I wanted to develop a model that would help educational policy makers better understand the phenomenon and because I wanted to enable potential scholars to more successfully navigate these
pathways to the academy. Bountiful scholarship illustrates that FG students encounter impediments in higher education that their peers from more affluent families—families who are familiar with the structures and rhythms of higher education—do not experience. Specific reasons notwithstanding, this can result in a pervasive sense of difference. Heather Hicks (1995) wrote that she “led a very peripheral existence at Dartmouth because I did not have the social skills fostered by the middle class. This marked my difference more than material items” (p. 155). To counter an enveloping sense of dissimilarity and inadequacy, it is important that FG academics recognize that they are not the first to blaze this arduous path. As Cal State Fresno President John Welty (2007) explained in his letter introducing that institution’s First Generation Story Project:

The purpose of the First Generation Stories Project is to make our first-generation faculty and staff visible to students and to let them know that many of their professors, counselors and others have faced obstacles and challenges similar to the ones they are experiencing. Understanding that they are following in the steps of others may sustain them through the obstacles they face. (President’s Message, ¶ 3)

FG academics can also serve as guides to aspiring academics. Oldfield (2007) wrote, “I think more and more about how much easier college would have been had I known at the start what most of my privileged cohorts took for granted” (p. 3). The following sub-questions aided in the process of discovery:

1. What initially inspires FG college students’ decisions to go beyond the Bachelor’s degree to pursue a terminal degree?
2. What obstacles do FG academics encounter along their educational journey that impede their progress and test their determination?

3. What experiences support their academic success and bolster their resolve to seek a career in the professoriate?

4. How have their choices impacted their relationships with the people back home?

**Significance of Study**

Despite the growing volume of research relating to numerous facets of FG student status, both before arriving at college and through undergraduate degree attainment, there is scant literature addressing FG students who go on to become members of the academy (FG academics). Most existing research related to members of the academy addresses race or gender issues. As Thomas H. Benton wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 9, 2007), “It’s easy to find books on race and gender in academic life, but only a handful focus on social class. I know of four” (p. 70, ¶ 2). The four works Benton cites are specifically concerned with working-class students who go on to enter the academy as professors (working-class academics). Fortunately, the publications Benton cites—*Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working-class* (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984), *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (Tokarcezyk & Fay, 1993), *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics From the Working-class* (Dews & Law, 1995), and *Teaching Working-class* (Linkon, 1995)—and Lubrano’s *Limbo: Blue Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*—all recognize the inextricable link between working-class and FG status, because the literature
expressly addressing FG academics is nonexistent. For the purpose of this study, then, I will rely on the only works available—those addressing working-class academics—to contextualize the experiences of FG academics.

Wright (2010b) indicated that FG students are at increased risk of attrition and noted, “Estimates of how many of those (working-class and FG) college graduates attend graduate school range between two and five percent” (p. 4). Likewise, Nuñez (1998) indicated, “First generation students who had earned bachelor’s degrees were less likely than their counterparts whose parents had more than a high school education to be enrolled in graduate school” (p. 20). Clearly, not holding a graduate degree will, in all but the rarest of cases, preclude one from membership in the academy. Thus, it follows that having few FG students in graduate school will result in few FG students with careers in the professoriate.

Though rare, FG membership in the academy is important. These scholars offer unique and valuable perspectives, just as working-class, feminist, or queer scholars do. Beyond exposing continuing generation (CG) students to people from less educationally advantaged backgrounds, FG academics serve as prototypes for undergraduate students who are FG, contribute to the campus dialogue, elevate awareness through routine interactions with students and colleagues, and contribute to the further educational development of their home communities. By helping to expand consciousness of the FG student experience, FG academics can promote the merit of programs benefitting FG students—undergraduate and graduate—and contribute to the diversity of perspectives that comprise a vibrant and inclusive university. Additionally, as Barbara Bradbury
(2008) wrote, “By gaining an increased understanding of the students’ experiences on campus and identifying the factors affecting students’ persistence, administrators and faculty members can develop initiatives that lead to meaningful and constructive change” (p. 24).

This study is personally significant to me as well. For the last twelve years I have worked with U.S. Department of Education Students Support Services (TRIO) grants serving first generation, limited income, and disabled students. My professional allegiance is to educational access, particularly for the FG and low-income students of the College Adjustment Program (CAP) — the Student Support Services project I managed at Ohio University. CAP serves over 190 FG and low-income students each academic year (CAP database). Despite known barriers, CAP students experience noteworthy successes. Each quarter, approximately 40% of CAP students earn GPAs of 3.00 or higher, with many CAP students being named to the Dean’s List (CAP database). Plus, CAP students achieve retention and graduation rates on par with students who are not from at-risk populations. For their dedication and persistence in the face of steep odds, I am unabashedly fond of CAP students. By extension, I am generally partial to FG and low-income students, even if they are not CAP participants. I revel in witnessing the transformation from tentative, inexperienced freshmen to confident, accomplished seniors and graduates.

This research is also inspired by a FG faculty and staff web page I created similar to the First Generation Story Project at Cal State Fresno. The Ohio University First Generation Faculty and Staff web page highlights the educational journeys of the faculty
and administrative staff who operate the institution. I am inspired by the stories of OU’s FG academics and hope that others in the Ohio University community are, too. As Cal State Fresno President Welty suggested in his introductions to that institution’s First Generation Story Project web page, if students can see that their professors and administrators have been where they are now, maybe they’ll be inspired to persist to graduation and even consider graduate school. These involvements shape my view of the journey FG students make from their place of birth to their ultimate destination, wherever that might be.

**Methods**

I employed grounded theory methodology in an exploration of what motivates FG students to venture into uncharted waters, enables their success, and motivates them to join a profession that their families and communities cannot fathom. Elicited texts and semi-structured interviews were used to obtain rich descriptions of the experiences of professors who were FG students before they became FG academics; allowed for a detailed awareness of the supports for and impediments to career aspirations in higher education; imparted a deeper understanding of the experiences of FG academics; and, ultimately, facilitated the development of a theory to assist other FG students along their own pathways to the professoriate. Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist approach to grounded theory, which “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with other sources of data” (p.130), provided a platform for making sense of the experiences of participants and combining those experiences with my own experiences working with FG, low
income undergraduates. Charmaz supported this when she wrote, “Constructivists attempt to become aware of their presuppositions and to grapple with how they affect research…Constructivism fosters researchers’ reflexivity about their own interpretations as well as those of their research participants” (p. 131).

The elicited tests consisted of individual essays addressing each participant’s personal route from FG undergraduate to FG academic. These preceded interviews and informed the interview protocol, which varied among participants, as I tailored questions to further probe participants’ self-identified salient issues. Interview protocols are included in Appendix E. Additionally, reviewing participants’ personal narratives allowed for a degree of triangulation as I was able to identify congruence of themes through comparison of these elicited texts to interview transcripts.

Limitations/Scope of Study

This study, like other qualitative studies is affected by small geographic area, number of participants, and the life experiences the researcher. The results are not intended to be generalizable, but may be used to contextualize the experiences of other FG academics. I choose not to see these facets of the study strictly as limitations, but as enrichments.

Delimitations

1. Adjunct faculty member were not considered for this study because their experiences might vary considerably from the experiences of tenured or long-term permanent faculty.
2. Retired professors, although sufficiently experienced, were not considered for participation. Rather, professors who were earlier in their careers were selected for participation because of the acuity of their memory and because of a stronger alignment with current realities.

Definition of Terms

Continuing Generation: Refers to students whose mother and/or father earned an undergraduate degree. Continuing generation students are not FG.

First Generation (FG): For the purpose of this study, FG was defined according to the guidelines used by the U.S. Department of Education TRIO programs, which stipulate that an undergraduate is FG if neither parent earned a bachelor’s degree. This is a more restrictive definition than others, which would not consider a student FG if either parent earned an associate’s or, more conservative still, attended any form of post-secondary education.

First Generation Academic: Refers to any faculty member who, as an undergraduate, was a FG student according to the definition used in this study.

Working-class: Definitions of working-class vary widely, and though not critical to this study, a few are worth noting. Julie Charlip (1995) cited Black Panther attorney Flo Kennedy, who said, “If you have to work for a living, no matter how much money you make you are working-class” (p.39). Charlip also offered another definition. She cited an unidentified sociology professor who stated:

If you earn thirty thousand dollars a year working in an assembly plant, come home from work, open a beer and watch a game you are working-class; if you
earn twenty thousand dollars a year as a school teacher, come home from work to
a glass of white wine and PBS, you are middle class. (p. 26)

For the purposes of this study, Peckham (1995) offered perhaps the most useful
definition when he wrote, “By working-class students, I mean students whose parents
have not received educations” (p.264). Though on first glance this last definition may
appear facile, it speaks truth to the experiences of the essayists in the four books Thomas
Benton referred to in his article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education.*
Chapter 2

This chapter provides both background to help the reader understand the historical challenge of higher education access and a critical review of modern literature to enlighten discussion of the difficulties marginalized students face in higher education. In the absence of research specific to the experiences of FG students pursuing careers in academia, I have incorporated elements of the vast body of research into the circumstances known to thwart FG and other marginalized students’ pursuit of higher education. This chapter will reveal the importance of developing a theory to explain the arduous journey FG students make on their way to membership in the academy. Per Charmaz (2006), following collection and analysis of data I introduced further research that situated the emergent theory in the context of relevant scholarship. This is accomplished in Chapter 5.

Creswell (2007) posits that the literature review in qualitative research should “provide the rational for the problem and position one’s study within the ongoing literature about the topic” (p.102). Specifically addressing grounded theory Creswell wrote, “I would expect to learn how we need a theory that explains the process because existing theories are inadequate, nonexistent for the population, or need to be modified” (p. 103). Charmaz (2006) advocates for an approach wherein the literature review occurs after data analysis and the researcher more actively interprets existing research relative to the current analysis. She wrote, “The intended purpose of delaying the literature review is to avoid importing preconceived ideas and imposing them on your work” (p. 165). Further, Charmaz noted that the literature review “should contain much more than
summaries. Instead, show why you are in favor of certain arguments, what evidence do
you accept and reject, and how have you arrived at considered decisions” (p. 163).

**Progressive Access in American Higher Education**

It is important to understand the magnitude of the challenges faced by FG
students and how those challenges are situated within a larger framework of educational
access. Most basically, FG students matriculate and graduate at rates far below their peers
who come from families with even one parent holding a college degree. Chen (2005)
reported that 43% of FG students who enrolled in higher education dropped out
compared to only 20% of CG students. Conversely, she discovered that of students who
graduated high school in 1992 and enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program by 2000, only
24% of FG students graduated, compared to 68% of CG students. This is important
because according to educational attainment data from the 2000 U.S. Census, only
17.74% of adults age eighteen and over—and only 18.98% of adults age 25 and over—
hold baccalaureate degrees. Hence, with approximately 19% of adults age 25 and over
holding a college degree, approximately 81% do not. Irrespective of educational
attainments of the parents of these 81% of American adults, the children of these people
will, if they matriculate, be FG college students. If the University of Texas system motto
is correct and “The cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy,” it is imperative
that drastic measures are implemented to better ensure education of the American
populace to meet the ever-changing needs of the nation.

This prospect is not novel, however. Since Harvard’s founding in 1636, Congress
has consistently enacted federal legislation that has altered the historical mission of
American higher education, which began with education for the aristocracy. Initially, according to Ryan and Sackrey (1984), Harvard and the other colonial colleges “were intended for the tutelage of elite young men, preparing them to ‘take over’ from their fathers the control of the elite social institutions of the nation” (p. 24). They added that the curriculum “was largely regimented training in the classical disciplines: language, mathematics, literature, history, and some science” (pp. 24-25). According to Brubacher and Rudy (1976):

The desire of important religious dominations…for a literate, college-trained clergy was probably the most important single factor in explaining the founding of the colonial colleges. The Christian tradition was the foundation stone of the whole intellectual structure which [sic] was brought to the New World. It is equally important, however, to keep in mind that the early colleges were not set up solely to train ministers; their charters make it amply clear that…it was intended that they also educate professional men in fields other than the ministry. (p. 6)

These “professional men” certainly did not comprise a broad representation of colonial society. Harvard, like all colonial and early American colleges, was for the scions of the landed elite. Of course, colonial aristocrats were, as contemporary aristocrats are, in the minority. Emma Lazarus (1883) wrote in The New Colossus that American immigrants were “Huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Indeed, America is a nation of immigrants who have long viewed this as a land of opportunity, a place where streets are paved in gold for those who are willing to work
diligently enough to create their fortune. Education has been viewed as central to this unfettered sense of possibility. This dates back to the earliest expansion beyond the original colonies. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 indicated, “Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (Article 3). Thus, the history of higher education in the United States—a nation of, by, and for the people—may be viewed in terms of educational access for the people.

Increased educational access for larger numbers of citizens is central to the American ideal of opportunity. In terms of higher education, this undoubtedly involves innumerable actions by individuals, states, and the federal government. Though important, these discrete actions are beyond the scope of this chapter. Volumes have been written on such. I am interested in changes that affected students across the nation and, in fact, changed both higher education and the nation itself. These actions recognized a national need or problem, addressed that need or problem, and, in doing so, changed the course of the nation. I will address educational access through what are arguably the three most important pieces of federal legislation and will discuss the importance of these three acts to FG students and FG academics.

Brubacher and Rudy (1976) wrote, “In the early years of the nation the policy of giving federal assistance to higher education…gained favor.” They added, “Since land was the principal form of wealth then available to the government, the first federal donations for colleges were land grants to the new western states” (p. 227). From the earliest days of the nation, then, federal policy has promoted higher education.
Subsequent federal acts exposed an ever-increasing numbers of Americans to the opportunity afforded by higher education. But when President Lincoln signed the first of two Morrill Acts, the U.S. government significantly increased its role in promoting the development of—and greater involvement of the federal government and the American people in—higher education.

The Morrill Act of 1862, which was signed by the president only months after the Civil War began, established land grant colleges, in part, to broaden the reach of higher education by promoting the “Liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the various pursuits and professions of life” (7 USC § 301). The act provided land grants to promote the founding of state colleges. In enacting this legislation, the government forever changed American higher education by providing widespread, federal support for the establishment of state institutions, encouraging a shift away from the classical canon, and promoting enrollment of students beyond the moneyed elite. (The Morrill Act also helped the federal government defray war debt, but that is another issue altogether.)

The Morrill Acts shifted the focus of higher education away from small, private schools teaching the classical canon to the socially elite. The Act of 1862 created larger, public institutions teaching a more expansive curriculum to a more diverse—though still not inclusive—student body and the Act of 1890, which passed Congress passed six years before Plessy v. Ferguson (163 U.S. 537) established “separate but equal” as precedent, further equalized higher education. The Act of 1890 stipulated, “No money shall be paid out under this act to any State or Territory for the support and maintenance of a college where a distinction of race or color is made in the admission of students” (26 Stat. 417, 7
U.S.C. § 322). Truly, the Morrill Acts increased higher education’s numbers on multiple counts—the number of colleges enrolling students, the number of students matriculating, and the number of disciplines taught. But with the Morrill Acts, the federal government was just beginning the wholesale modification of higher education.

In the midst of World War II, the landscape was altered once again. The federal government recognized the need to educate American servicemen returning from their posts around the globe. America—emerging from the great depression and staggering under massive wartime debt—needed to prepare its citizens to create a brighter future. Once again, the government turned to higher education to affect change. This time, the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (Pub. L. 78-346, 58 Stat. 284m, the original G.I. Bill of Rights) expanded access by encouraging the millions of G.I.’s returning from service in World War II to enroll in some form of higher education. As a result of the act, over 2.3 million veterans enrolled in college. Of the effects of the G.I. Bill, Brubacher and Rudy (1976) wrote, “Not only did large numbers take advantage of this bill but [sic] a significant portion of them came from family backgrounds which had never thought of college careers before” (p. 258). But attend college they did, and with degrees in hand these veterans were better prepared to support families and rebuild American society.

Though the G.I. Bill included three main objectives—healthcare, home and business loans, and education—it is perhaps best remembered for the educational support it provided to returning G.I.s. These servicemen swelled the ranks of colleges and universities and forever transformed the face of American higher education. Not only did they earn undergraduate degrees, but, in many cases, they earned graduate degrees too.
These young men filled the rolls of academic departments upon their return just as they mustered units during the war. They took the determination they had learned fighting the Axis powers and applied it to their lives in peacetime. They had given years of their lives in service to their country; many actually gave their lives. Once home, they were eager to get on with the life they had delayed during the war. They did this for themselves, for their families, and for their comrades they left behind on the green fields of France or in the pearly waters of the Pacific. Returned servicemen used their determination and ingenuity to build skyscrapers, create highways systems, and earn college degrees. Ryan and Sackrey (1984) wrote of the measured opening of the doors to the academy prior to the original G.I. Bill, “This gradual evolution away from the practice of harboring traditional students and traditional education became a revolution in the 1940s, both in the democratization and the professionalization of universities, a result primarily of the massive intervention of the federal government into higher education” (p. 25).

The G.I. Bill addressed the needs of post-war America, but it was not a panacea. Despite the opportunity afforded by the G.I. Bill, education was still not equally accessible to all Americans. Women were still sparsely represented in higher education and the full rights of citizenship were not open to minorities until the mid-1960s. In 1896, Plessy v. Ferguson (163 U.S. 537) had established “separate but equal” as legal precedent. This had the effect of relegating Black Americans to second-class citizenship. The so-called Jim Crow laws prevented Black Americans from exercising their constitutionally prescribed rights. Though Brown v. Topeka Board of Education (347 U.S. 483) declared “separate but equal” unconstitutional in 1954, the bigotry and hatred
engendered in the Jim Crow laws were still a fact of life, particularly in the South. As a result of the Civil Right Movement, millions of disenfranchised Americans were afforded the liberties set forth by the founding fathers nearly 200 hundred years prior when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 (Civil Rights Act).

The Civil Rights Act (Pub. L. 88-352) stated that in America no person “shall, on the ground of race, color, or national origin, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (1964). The Civil Rights Act added the authority of the federal government to citizens’ fight for justice. Quite simply, it guaranteed compliance by staking federal dollars to adherence to the provisions of the Civil Rights Act. The President realized that guaranteeing rights was insufficient, though. There existed a history of neglect, if not outright malice, that needed to be addressed and, if possible, corrected. Thus, soon after enacting the Civil Rights Act, President Johnson launched his War on Poverty. The president, a native Texan, understood the essence of the University of Texas motto. He recognized that the way to prosperity for all Americans, and thus prosperity for the entire nation, was through education.

Educational access was addressed in the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Higher Ed Act), which further opened the doors of higher education to students who had previously been denied access because of they could not afford it. The Higher Ed Act (Pub L. 89-329) declared that access to higher education should not be limited by ability to pay. It established Pell grants, work-study programs, Stafford loans, and various scholarships to help people of sufficient intellect, but with limited means, afford a college
education. While the Civil Rights Act guaranteed physical access to college, the Higher Ed Act helped under-resourced Americans overcome other obstacles hindering matriculation.

The Higher Ed Act also created programs to help less affluent students gain access to and progress through what was viewed as an educational pipeline. Though we now speak of a less linear “pathway” the original vision holds true. Ideally, students enter the educational system in kindergarten or first grade and exit fully educated and productive after some amount of postsecondary education. Three federal programs—known collectively as the TRIO programs—aiderd this goal by providing services to help traditionally underrepresented students succeed in the educational system. Educational Talent Search helped identify and develop academic potential as early as middle school. Upward Bound helped students prepare for and gain admission to undergraduate education. Student Support Services helped undergraduate students attain academic success and complete the undergraduate degree. All three programs have a long record of assisting students who have historically been disadvantaged and are less likely to continue their educational journey.

There is a vast body of research demonstrating the efficacy of the TRIO programs. Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, and Goodwin (1998) addressed the effectiveness of Student Support Services programs specifically. More generally, though, vast research focuses on the numerous factors that obstruct or support students’ educational endeavors. Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1995) noted, “Obtaining a college degree... has long been a part of the American Dream...Colleges and universities... have
been a major policy instrument in promoting upward mobility and educational, social, and economic equity for traditionally disadvantaged groups” (p. 5). Their research supports the federal government’s original observations that poor, minority, and FG students do not attend college and graduate at nearly the rate of their peers with greater access to resources. Other research speaks directly to these factors as well.

**Family Income Level**

Mortenson (2000) demonstrated the link between income level and educational attainment. Graphs from his 2000 presentation to the Committee on Student Financial Assistance illustrate that high school completion, chance of participation in college, and college completion all increase with income (pp. 1-20). Mortenson’s research illustrates that students from families in the top income quartile go farther along the educational pathway than do students from families in lower quartiles, particularly the lowest quartile. Moreover, Mortenson demonstrated a correspondent elevation in college prep curriculum and ACT composite scores among students from the top income quartile. Similarly, Heller (2002) noted that 77% of the lowest achieving students from the top income quartile attended college while only 78% of the highest achieving students from the lowest income quartile enrolled. In contrast, 97% of the best students from the top income quartile attended college (p. 18).

Green (2006) wrote, “Most underserved students attend community colleges….these students do not share the same level of success as their white and higher-income counterparts” (p.22). Additionally, Green noted that underserved students are less likely to complete a college preparatory curriculum, have lower achievement test
scores, more frequently delay college attendance, are more likely to need remedial courses, are required to remain in college longer, and more commonly attend college part-time or sporadically.

In their paper *Toward Resiliency: At-Risk Students Who Make It to College*, Horn and Chen (1998) determined that educationally at-risk students were most commonly products of the lowest socioeconomic quartile, came from a single-parent family, had an older sibling who dropped out of high school, changed schools two or more times in grades 1-8, and had a C average or lower in grades 6-8 (p. 3). Again, socioeconomic status is established as a vital component in educational access and achievement.

**First Generation Status**

First Generation student status plays a role in students’ educational journey, too. Even if a less affluent student overcomes the numerous obstacles in his/her path and matriculates at a four-year institution, it is improbable that s/he will encounter an unobstructed corridor to degree completion. FG students face deficiencies beyond those endemic to their families’ socioeconomic status. Thayer (2000) indicated that FG students:

- Have limited access to information about the college experience…are likely to lack knowledge of time management, college finances, and budget management, and the bureaucratic operations of higher education…are less likely to perceive support from their families for attending college…have been found to less likely to encounter a welcoming environment in campus. (p. 4)
Other researchers have detailed obstacles unique to FG students, too. Snell (2008) wrote, “Many of these students work too hard in their lives outside of school” (p. 1). Cofer, Somers, and Woodhouse (2004) indicated that for FG students, “going to college constituted a major disjunction in their life course…they were breaking, not continuing a family tradition… many of the students seemed to be deferring involvement in campus life until they were sure that they could compete academically” (p. 418). Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1995) found that FG students:

- Completed fewer first-year credit hours, took fewer humanities courses and fine arts courses, studied fewer hours and worked more hours per week, were less likely to participate in honors programs, were less likely to perceive that faculty were concerned about students and teaching, and made smaller first-year gains on a standardized measure of reading comprehension. (p. 251)

Thayer (2000) wrote, “First generation students may find themselves ‘on the margin of two cultures’ and must often negotiate relationships at college and at home to manage the tensions between the two” (p. 4).

**Class Status**

FG college students commonly hail from working-class families and encounter class-related struggles they were not anticipating. Lubrano (2004) illustrated this and other differences when he wrote:

Class is map, script, and guide. It tells us how to how to talk, how to dress, how to hold ourselves, how to eat, and how to socialize. It affects whom we marry; where we live; the friends we choose; the jobs we have; the vacations we take; the books
we read; the movies we see; the restaurants we pick; how we decide to buy houses, carpets, furniture, and cars; where our kids are educated.

(p. 5)

Pike and Kuh (2005) wrote that FG students “were less engaged overall and less likely to successfully integrate diverse college experiences; they perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and educational development” (p.289). Of FG students, Billson and Terry (1982) wrote, “Their lack of social integration and lower academic integration combine to create a weak pull toward college and a strong push away from it toward work situations” (p. 74).

There are numerous factors that collectively conspire against degree completion for FG students. Kenneth Oldfield (2007) wrote, “First-generation college students from poor and working-class backgrounds must realize that their new surroundings will require more from them than just getting good marks” (p.3). Then he enumerated “Six lessons that I wish I had known before going to college” (pp. 4-8) and captured the essence of these six lessons when he wrote:

Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily. Cultural capital is what I did not have. My parents and grand parents never finished high school. They all worked blue-collar jobs…I still marvel at how little I understood about the higher social-class sensibilities of university life when I started college. (p. 2)
Making the transition to the perceived “good life” afforded by middle class status is the ideal. It is what many parents want this for their kids. This transition is neither easy nor guaranteed, though. Education certainly helps, but significant, upward movement in social class is rare. In the introduction to their 1984 book, *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working-class*, Ryan and Sackrey noted, “The myth about upward mobility has, among all its effects, one of central importance to us: it quite simply denies the relevance of class as an arbiter of life’s chances” (p. 2).

Indeed, class matters in American society, and higher education is no exception. Increasingly, as colleges compete for students, they will need to recruit and retain students from traditionally underrepresented groups to fill their freshman classes and meet their budgets. Of course, these students include minorities, low income, and FG students. However, these students have been shown to matriculate less often and leave college more often than affluent students to whom college is de rigueur. Wright (2010a) spoke to this in a presentation to the American Educational Research Association when she noted that working-class and FG students lack “specific types of ‘college knowledge’ required to succeed” (p. 4) and thus are less likely to attend college and more likely to drop out if they do attend.

Lubrano, the working-class kid who to made it to the middle class via an Ivy league education, noted other dissimilarities among classes when he wrote, “There’s a greater depth of acquiescence among working-class people, who tend to feel more powerless; You can’t fight city hall. The middle class says you can” (pp. 21-22). Perhaps the middle class knows from experience that you can fight city hall. Perhaps they actually
know how because their parents or their neighbors modeled this behavior. Lubrano and other stragglers suggest that this is the case and that, conversely, the working class has not been raised with this supremely buoyant attitude and the skills set to accompany it. Higher education is not exempt. Wright’s “college knowledge” is passed from parent to child in a thousand mundane comments from birth to matriculation and is a type of cultural capital.

**The Traditional Professoriate**

FG academics are not privy to “college knowledge” and they quickly recognize this and various other differences upon entering the academy. They do not do not share the same pedigree as many of their classmates, most of their professors and, later, their colleagues. The words of FG academics paint an unambiguous picture of their feelings regarding their relationship to the academy and its more privileged members. These words implicitly and explicitly detail the backgrounds of the people who most commonly ascend to membership in the academy. Stephen Garger (1995) stated it plainly when he wrote, “Most of the people I work with at college came from professional families” (p. 52). Jones (1984) was clear about his feelings toward colleagues when he wrote, “I get along well with my professional colleagues, but they're not the people I want to be with otherwise. They're certainly not the type of people I want to live around” (p. 239). Overall (1995) also wrote of her discomfort with professional colleagues. She indicated, “In my university department, the persons with whom I seem to have the most in common and who have consistently acted as my allies over the past decade are the secretaries with whom I share a similar class background” (p. 213). Green (1984) noted,
“These folks have come from academic or professional upper-middle class backgrounds. Who they know is awesome; This makes me feel left out…Their command of language and their scholarship is beyond my skill level; for this I envy them” (p. 156). Adamson (1984) wrote of his entry into graduate school “My class background was brought to me quite clearly in this period: My fellow graduate students seemed to have an inexhaustible source of funds” (p. 189).

Not all FG academics accepted these differences with such equanimity, however. Ryan and Sackrey (1984) noted of some FG academics, “Lurking somewhere in their mind is hot anger at all the bluebloods who started and stayed at the top” (p. 259). Similarly, O’Malley (1984) wrote, “The academy is an integral part of a system of oppression, snobbery, gentility, and invitation to interlopers to leave their true identities at the gates and assume the alien postures and personal styles of the professional archetype” (pp. 281-282). Wright (2010b) concurred with this sentiment when she wrote:

The language, and scholarship of critical theorists, pedagogues, and researchers are often criticized as deliberately elitist and unnecessarily opaque and inaccessible to everyone except those with the best educations and broadly developed vocabularies—in short, those in the middle and upper classes, with privileged academic backgrounds who are well-versed in academic discourse” (p. 3).

Wilson (1984) wrote, as an undergraduate “I had begun to realize—through my high-class, crazy boyfriend—that most people at the college came from a middle class suburban world with its own trappings, values, and customs—most of which I did not
find congenial even though I was supposed to be aspiring to them (by virtue of betting on education)” (p. 211). Green (1984) added, “I must admit that earlier in my career and sometimes even now I feel a mixture of envy, fear, and anger about my well-heeled colleagues in the white tower” (p. 155). Too, Frost (1984) wrote, “Those who came from upper-class families were usually better prepared cognitively and affectively to do battle on the intellectual field…For those of who looked at the economy “from the bottom up” it was difficult and frustrating experience” (p.256).

Considering the backgrounds of the people with whom FG academics are competing for spots in graduate programs and positions on faculty, it is essential that we are better able to more completely understand the obstacles that obstruct the pathways to the professoriate for FG college students, as well as how FG academics triumph over those obstacles. Luthar and Cichetti (2000) defined resilience as “a dynamic process wherein individuals display positive adaptation despite experience of significant adversity or trauma” (p. 858). Certainly, many FG academics experience significant adversity on their pathway to the professoriate. What enables their success in the face of such adversity? What contributes to their resilience? Developing a theory to explain the journey of the FG academic is important because it will identify characteristics of the resilient FG scholar and help demonstrate to potential FG academics that, in fact, they do not necessarily have to blaze an entirely new path. Such a theory will also help educators, administrators, and change agents better support potential FG academics on their pathways to the professoriate.
Accepting Creswell’s (2007) and Charmaz’s (2006) counsel, I have, in this chapter, charted a significant shift in the historical mission of American higher education, introduced scholarship addressing how FG status and other factors curtail students’ ability to complete a Bachelor’s degree, and described the association between these factors and entry into the professoriate. In doing so, I have demonstrated how the establishment of a theory to conceptualize the supports and obstacles along the pathways to the professoriate—and how understanding FG academics triumph over impediments—will help educators and administrators champion future FG students. Further, I have demonstrated how such a theory may encourage aspiring FG academics as they traverse their own pathways to the professoriate.
Chapter 3

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the pathways FG students take in pursuing higher education—both as a means of personal enrichment and as a career path—despite the challenge this pursuit presents to the conventions of their families and home communities. I sought to understand the common characteristics to FG students who successfully navigate the pathways to the academy. This journey may, in many cases, will have required FG academics to forge their own paths. Through personal narratives and interviews I examined the issues that influenced FG college students’ decisions to go beyond the bachelor’s degree to pursue a terminal degree; the obstacles FG academics encountered along their educational journey that impeded their progress and tested their determination; the supports that bolstered their resolve and allowed them to continue their education; their motivation for joining the academy; and how their educational and life choices have altered their relationships with the people back home. I sought guidance from the following sub-questions:

1. What initially inspires FG college students’ decisions to go beyond the Bachelor’s degree in pursuit of a terminal degree?
2. What obstacles do FG academics encounter along their educational journey that impede their progress and test their determination?
3. What experiences support their academic success and bolster their resolve to seek a career in the professoriate?
4. How have their choices impacted their relationships with the people back home?
It hoped that this research would transcend a mere exploration of the phenomenon of FG students who ascend to membership in the academy. Rather, I sought to contribute to a more substantive understanding of the requisite components of FG student success in their pursuit of terminal degrees and careers in academe. For this reason, I employed grounded theory methodology. Patton (2002) wrote:

> How you study the world determines what you learn about the world. Grounded theory depends on methods that take the researcher into and close to the real world so that the results and findings are grounded in the empirical world. (p. 125)

Creswell (2007) specified that in grounded theory “Participants in the study would all have experienced the process, and the development of the theory might help explain practice or provide a framework for further research” (p. 63). Charmaz (2006) wrote, “Grounded theory methodology consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). I adopted Charmaz’s approach to grounded theory.

Charmaz studied under two of the pioneers of grounded theory methodology. In *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, she explained how grounded theory methodology emerged from the work Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (her teachers/mentors) undertook with patients dying in hospitals. She wrote (2006) that they:

> Gave their data explicit analytical treatment and produced theoretical analyses…explored analytic ideas in long conversations and exchanged
preliminary notes analyzing observations in the field. As they constructed their analyses of dying, they developed systematic methodological strategies that social scientists could adopt for studying many topics. (p.4)

As Charmaz (2006) indicated, Glaser and Strauss “proposed that systematic qualitative analysis had its own logic and could generate theory” (p. 5). She enumerated the key tenets of Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory methodology, which included:

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis.
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses
- Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis
- Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps
- Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness
- Conducting the literature review after developing an independent analysis.

(PP. 5-6)

Charmaz (2006) wrote, “Consistent with their (Glaser’s and Strauss’s) reasoning, a completed grounded theory met the following criteria: a close fit with the data, usefulness, conceptual density, durability over time, modifiability, and explanatory
power” (p. 6), but quickly added that numerous scholars—herself included—have shifted grounded theory away from the early, positivist version set down by Glaser and Strauss toward a more constructivist adaptation. She outlined how grounded theory originally melded the strictures of research under the positivist philosophy (a la Glaser’s training at Columbia) with a more pragmatic approach as commonly seen in sociological and anthropological field research (a la Strauss’s education at the University of Chicago).

Over time, though, Glaser’s and Strauss’s conceptualization and practice of grounded theory diverged. Glaser, Charmaz (2006) wrote, “remained consistent with his earlier exegesis of the method and thus defined grounded theory as a method of discovery, treated categories as emergent from data, relied on direct and, often, narrow empiricism, and analyzed a basic social process” (p.8). Strauss, on the other hand, “moved the method toward verification” (p. 8). She suggested that the work of Strauss and Julius Corbin, another Strauss collaborator, shifted the methodology to be even more empirical. Ultimately, Charmaz understood that the original design of grounded theory was more flexible than the originators sanctioned. Charmaz wrote:

In their original statement of the method, Glaser and Strauss (1967) invited their readers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way. I accept their invitation and return to past grounded theory emphases on examining processes, making the study of action central, and creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data. (p. 9)

Sample Selection

I recruited eight faculty members for this study. Merriam and Associates (2002) detail two grounded theory studies, each involving ten participants. I opted for slightly fewer participants since this study involved not only in-depth interviews, but also the examination of personal narratives. I expected this dual form of data collection to lead me to thematic saturation more quickly than if I were relying solely on interviews. I believe this decision was vindicated. Charmaz (2006) advised, “Plan to gather sufficient data to fit your task and to give you as full picture of the topic as possible within the parameters of this task” (p. 18). Though I maintained flexibility relative to the number of research participants I would involve in this study, I did not, in the end, need to increase the number beyond eight. The data collection method I employed allowed me to reach data saturation with eight participants.

All participants were FG academics, as previously defined, and were equally divided according to gender, but were not well represented culturally. Only one participant was of non-Caucasian heritage. This is discussed further in chapter five. Beyond these criteria, I employed a two-pronged effort to identify and recruit participants. First, I contacted colleagues at numerous institutions throughout the region and asked them if they are willing to put me in contact with their colleagues who might satisfy my definition of a FG academic. I was fortunate to enlist four participants through mutual acquaintance. Second, I contacted the faculty senate chairs (or equivalent) at numerous institutions and enlisted their cooperation in identifying their colleagues who might serve as participants. Though I did not previously know these faculty leaders, they
were uniformly helpful and I was able to enlist another four participants through contacts I made at various colleges and universities. The participant recruitment letter is included in Appendix B.

Patton (1990) wrote, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). All participants were, forthcoming regarding their journeys in higher education; several were loquacious and clearly enjoyed speaking about pathways they traveled. Additionally, several participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to tell their stories and indicated their interest in this line of inquiry. Although some participants were less talkative than others, none were reluctant participants. Reluctant participants could have used the essay as an excuse to opt out of a study in which they did not truly want to participate. Charmaz (2006) wrote, “Gathering rich data will give you solid material for building a significant analysis. Rich data are detailed, focused, and full. They reveal participants’ views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (p. 14). Allowing an early and graceful exit to FG academics that are not keen on participating left me with a more eager and engaged sample and facilitated gathering richer data.

Despite working at a research-intensive university, I focused this study on faculty from a wide variety of institutions. This will aided in assembling a fuller data set. Dick Brandt (1984), himself a working-class academic, opined that FG academics are less commonly found at more prestigious research institutions. He wrote:
My entry into academia was a long and circuitous one…I suspect that this kind of indirect route to academia is more common among working-class people than middle class people. I have a feeling that this roundaboutness is why you find more academics from working-class backgrounds in less prestigious schools. (p. 72)

**Data Collection**

Intensive interviews, in conjunction with elicited texts (personal narratives), afforded me the most comprehensive understanding of the route participants traveled on their way to career in academia. In order to better understand the pathways FG academics traveled—and to assist in developing an appropriate interview protocol—I first engaged participants in an activity that is central to academic discourse and to the careers of many professors: writing. I asked all participants to write about their experiences from the point as undergraduates when they first began to seriously consider the possibility of pursuing graduate education, through their decision to commit to graduate school, to conferral of a doctoral degree, and on to the point when they secured a tenure-track position (or other similarly long-term, secure position, if at a community college) in higher education and became FG academics. Charmaz (2006) wrote:

> Elicited texts involve research participants in writing the data…These texts, like published autobiographies, may elicit thoughts, feeling, and concerns of the thinking, acting subject as well as give researchers ideas about the structures and cultural values influencing that person. (p. 86)
I expected this to be, simultaneously, a comfortable and potentially challenging exercise. The act of writing may well be comfortable for professors, who are accustomed to writing for publication, though the intensely personal nature of the narratives, I anticipated, may have challenged some participants.

Regarding data obtained from personal narratives, Merriam (1998) wrote:

The data found in documents can be used in the same manner as data from interviews or observations. The data can furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypotheses, advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, track change and development, and so on. (p. 126)

Similarly, Sellitz, Jahoda, Deutsch, and Cook (1959) wrote:

The rationale for the use of personal documents is similar to that for the use of observational techniques. What the latter may achieve for overt behavior, the former can do for inner experiences: to reveal to the social scientist life as it is lived without the interference of research. (p. 325)

By utilizing personal narratives in addition to interviews I was able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the educational experiences of FG academics and of their decision to seek a career in academia. I was also able to conduct a degree of triangulation by comparing data garnered from the narratives with data from analysis of interview transcripts. Together, personal narratives and qualitative interviews allowed me to develop theory to accurately account for the complex journey made by FG students who have worked their way into academe.
The same basic instructions—addressing length of narrative, points at which to begin and end the narratives, and researcher objectives—were provided to each participant as were minimal prompts for the writing of the narratives. A sample of the instructions and prompts are provided in Appendix C. These prompts, taken from existing literature, included acknowledging difference from classmates/colleagues; acknowledging difference from family and friends; explaining your grad school/career decisions to family and friends; feeling a sense of loss upon assuming your place in academe; realizing importance of class; and recognizing upper-class privilege. Participants were also asked to write freely. I informed them of my confidence that they would identify the salient points of their stories. Considering the magnitude of their experiences, I hoped that participants would reveal the richest aspects of their experiences so further exploration. Charmaz (2006) analogized:

Used well, grounded theory quickens the speed of gaining a clear focus on what is happening in your data without sacrificing the detail of the enacted scenes. Like a camera with many lenses, first you view a broad sweep of the landscape. Subsequently, you change your lens several times to bring scenes closer and closer into view. (p. 14)

Collecting and analyzing personal narratives provided that first “broad sweep of the landscape” and, in fact, resulted in the self-identification by the participants of what they perceived to be the most salient points of their educational and occupational journeys. This allowed me to gain active engagement early in the research process.
In most cases, I conducted interviews within one month of receiving each participant’s personal narrative. Interview protocols were shaped by the personal narratives and constituted what Patton (2002) referred to as an interview guide, which “lists the questions or issues to be explored in the course of an interview” (p. 343). Patton indicated:

The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. Thus, the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area. (p. 343)

Patton (2002) described more and less restrictive interview styles—the standardized interview and the informal, conversational interview, respectively—while Charmaz (2006) advised, “Trim your list of questions to as few as possible” (p. 29). I opted for a moderately organized interview guide because it provided sufficient structure without excessively restricting my ability to follow promising threads when face-to-face with participants. As Patton wrote, “Interview guides can be developed in more or less detail, depending on the extent to which the interviewer is able to specify important issues in advance” (p. 344). This approach was particularly appropriate given that the personal essays allowed for pre-identification of central issues. Thus I followed Charmaz’s direction and kept the interviews “informal and conversational” (p. 29).

**Data Analysis**

Per grounded theory methodology, data analysis was an ongoing process. Charmaz (2006) encapsulated the process when she wrote:
As grounded theorists, we study our early data and begin to separate, sort, and 
synthesize these data through qualitative coding…By making and coding 
numerous comparisons, our analytic grasp of the data begins to take 
form…Through studying data, comparing them, and writing memos, we define 
ideas that best fit and interpret the data as tentative analytical categories…As we 
proceed, our categories not only coalesce as we interpret the collected data but 
also the categories become more theoretical because we engage in successive 
levels of analysis. (p. 3)

Analysis involved consistent engagement with and reflection on the data and 
began with coding both personal narratives and interviews. Utilizing grounded theory 
methodology allowed me to develop a theory to more accurately describe the pathways to 
the professoriate taken by FG college students.

Data analysis began upon receiving each participant’s written narrative when I 
conducted line-by-line coding. Charmaz (2006) recommended this method of coding 
because it can “prompt you to remain open to the data and to see nuances in it” and 
because it “helps you refocus later interviews” (p.50). After coding each narrative I 
composed potential interview questions based on the overarching research question, the 
six sub-questions guiding this study, and issues rendered germane by their inclusion in 
the narratives.

I hired a transcriber to assist with this labor-intensive process of converting audio 
files to electronic texts. After receiving transcripts of each interview I carried out line-by-
line coding. Following initial, line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts I engaged in
focused coding, which Charmaz (2006) indicated, “Means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). She added, “The strength of grounded theory coding derives from this concentrated, active involvement in the process…Coding is an emergent process…A telling code that you constructed to fit one incident or statement might illuminate another” (p.59).

Next, I engaged in theoretical coding, which Charmaz (2006) described as “A sophisticated level of coding that follows the codes you have selected in during focused coding” (p. 63). She added, “Theoretical codes are integrative; they lend form to the focused codes you have collected. These codes may help you tell an analytical story that has coherence…Theoretical codes may hone your work with a sharp analytical edge” (p.63).

Data analysis was not reserved to the final phase of the research process. Rather, began upon receiving the first participant essay and involved steadfastly recording insights gained throughout the process of reviewing essays, conducting individual interviews, and coding those interview transcripts. Charmaz (2006) called this memo-writing and indicated, “Memo-writing is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers. When you write memos, you stop and analyze your ideas about codes in—any and every—way that occurs to you in the moment” (p. 72). She advised:
Writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction in your ideas…In short, memo-writing provides a space to become actively engaged in your materials, to develop your ideas, and to fine-tune your subsequent data gathering. (p. 72)

Indeed, consistent analysis throughout the data-gathering phase of research is key to Charmaz’s (2006) conception of grounded theory research. She wrote of one of her memos:

The memo…outlines ideas and initiates discussion between them. I tried to jot down quickly everything that came to mind about the category, codes, and data. Ideas for the category came to me when I was coding date… so I stopped to rite them. As I was scribbling, the links between suffering and moral status became clearer. (p. 75)

I arranged findings, a la case study research, participant by participant and also conducted a cross-case analysis. In functioned As Patton (2002) indicated, this method of organization served to, “open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed and concrete descriptions of people and places—‘thick descriptions’” (p. 438). This idea of opening a world to the reader is central to Charmaz’s (2006) interpretation of success in grounded theory, as well. She wrote “We need to consider our audiences, be they teachers or colleagues. They will judge the usefulness of our methods by the quantity of our final product” (p. 182). Thick descriptions enable the reader to sense the true depths of the hurdles FG academics surmount to secure a place in academe. Along with steadfast
analysis and quality presentation of both data and interpretation, thick descriptions lend credibility to the theory created through the research process, as readers can clearly see that the theory is grounded in the data.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

The definitions of validity and reliability commonly employed in quantitative research come from the positivist tradition and do not translate well to qualitative research. In fact, these definitions are problematic in constructivist, qualitative research. Most basically, validity in quantitative research studies addresses whether or not researchers have measured what was intended.

As Firestone (1987) indicated, “The quantitative study must convince the reader procedures have been followed faithfully….The qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (p. 19). However, it is not as simple as documenting that research procedures have been properly constructed and rigorously observed. The qualitative researcher must demonstrate that s/he has operated in a manner sufficiently rigorous to ensure that analysis of the data is reflective of each participant’s true experience. The qualitative researcher must represent the data accurately. In doing so, s/he creates trustworthiness.

Merriam and Associates (2002) called qualitative researchers “the primary instruments for data collection and analysis” (p. 25). The concept of trustworthiness is better suited to qualitative research than is validity because it accounts for the researcher as the primary instrument. Merriam (1998) offers several techniques for improving the trustworthiness of qualitative data and analysis. These include triangulation, member
checks, long-term observation, peer examination of findings, and collaborative research (pp. 204-205). In this study I ensured trustworthiness primarily through triangulation and member checks. This required an ongoing attentiveness on my part to data that did not fit prevailing themes. Charmaz (2006) wrote, “Qualitative researchers often use negative cases to find new variables or to provide alternative explanations from their developing theory” (p. 101).

As referenced in Chapter 1, I identified congruence (or divergence) of themes through comparison of the elicited texts (personal narratives) to interview transcripts. I also remained vigilant to the possibility of similarities or dissimilarities within personal narratives and interview transcripts and across cases. This allowed me to better understand and interpret each participant’s experience as they worked toward membership in the academy.

I also employed member checking to assure trustworthiness. This entailed confirming my interpretation of each participant’s personal narrative with him/her during the interview portion of data collection. Thus the participants verified trustworthiness by substantiating or contesting my initial interpretations and analyses.

Regarding reliability, quantitative research is primarily concerned with replicability of findings. Merriam (1998) indicated:

Reliability in research design is based on the assumption that there is a single reality and that studying it repeatedly will yield the same results….Qualitative research, however, is not conducted so that the laws of human behavior can be
isolated. Rather, researchers seek to describe and explain the world as those in the world experience it. (p. 205)

Here, too, the challenge in qualitative research rests in accounting for humans as instruments of data collection and analysis. Regarding the challenges of employing traditional reliability standards in qualitative research, Merriam (1998) wrote, “achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible…replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results. That fact, however, does not discredit the results of the original study” (p. 206). Rather than relying on the traditional standard of reliability, then, qualitative researchers seek credibility. Credibility focuses on the skill of the researcher (the primary instrument) and recognizes, according to Merriam, that “the human instrument can become more reliable through training and practice” (p. 206). Charmaz (2006) suggested that the following criteria are important in increasing credibility in qualitative studies:

- Research has achieved intimate familiarity with the topic
- Data are sufficient to merit claims
- Comparisons between categories have been systematic
- Categories cover a wide range of empirical observations
- Strong links exist between the data and your arguments and analyses
- Sufficient evidence exists for readers to assess—and agree with—your claims (pp. 182-183)

Additionally, I believe it is crucial that qualitative research entice the reader to engage dialogically with the data and findings. This may involve not only providing
sufficient evidence for readers to assess—and agree with—my claims as indicated in the aforementioned criteria from Charmaz (2006), but also providing a space for disagreement. I abided by these criteria throughout the present study just as I adhered to the prescribed practices of grounded theory methodology. Patton (2002) wrote, “Grounded theory has opened the door to qualitative inquiry in many traditional academic social science and education departments…in part, I believe, because of its overt emphasis on the importance of and specific procedures for generating theory” (p. 127). Generating a theory to explain how FG students navigate the pathways into the academy is the principal objective of the present study.
Chapter 4

Each of the eight participants in this study is currently a college professor who, as an undergraduate, was a FG college student. Each professor graciously agreed to write an essay about his or her experiences along their unique pathway to the professoriate and to sit for an interview addressing the same. The following synopses of each participant’s experiences is garnered from both essay and interview and filtered through the lived experiences of this researcher, which includes significant work with FG undergraduates in U.S. Department of Education Student Support Services (TRIO) programs. After the participant summaries I present my analysis of the concordance and dissonance of the participants’ experiences.

In order to maintain the anonymity of participants in this regional study, their current institutional affiliations are presented as the generic XYZ College or XYZ University. School locations are described as being in “one of the Great Lakes states” or in “one of the states along the Ohio River.” The names of the schools participants attended are similarly masked unless the identification of the school speaks directly and substantively to the magnitude of the participant’s journey in higher education. For example, Harvard University is identified as Dr. Broderick's alma mater because it is a clear indication of the physical and emotional distance that this woman, who once considered herself a “dumb hillbilly,” has traveled. All participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Summary information about participants is presented in Table 4.1.
### Table 1

#### Participant Summary

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<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Institutional Type</th>
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Participant Synopses

Dr. Garcia Summary

Dr. Garcia is an early 50-something Latino man from a large, urban area on the eastern seaboard. He was raised in a poor, working-class family with strong union ties. He is now living in one of the states surrounding the Great Lakes where he is a full professor at a large, public, research-intensive university. All of his degrees were conferred from large, public, research-intensive universities and his undergraduate and doctoral degrees are from the same institution.

Navigating Family Relationships

Dr. Garcia was the first high school graduate in his family. Both parents and two older sisters dropped out of school in the 10th grade, though he has a younger brother who persisted and earned a bachelor's degree. He stated that his parents supported the idea of education, but had nothing specific to offer due to their poor educational experience and because, as a poor, interracial couple they were kept on the periphery of the educational system. He noted that dropping out of high school was typical for kids in his neighborhood.

Dr. Garcia performed well in school until middle school, when his grades declined. This led to troubles at home. He relates that his father was disappointed because he expected him to earn a college scholarship through his father’s workplace. However, his failing grades were compromising this opportunity. According to Dr. Garcia, the employer’s scholarship was the only way his father knew he would be able to contribute to his college education—a source of importance and pride for his father. The conflict
around Dr. Garcia’s academic performance continued, so at age sixteen he moved in with his older sister and began working while attending high school.

Dr. Garcia noted, “I come from the type of family where machismo is huge,” and he is ardently self-reliant. So from this point forward he operated, in many ways, as a full-fledged adult. He was in command of his own destiny. This is not to say that he discontinued contact with his family—only that they no longer factored as heavily into his decisions. In fact, he maintained meaningful connections with his parents, even if his relationship with his father experienced strain.

Dr. Garcia grew to value his independence and took pride in his own self-efficacy. For example, he was responsible for funding his own college education and midway through his freshman year, he had to leave school because he did not have sufficient financial aid to cover the final academic term. Rather than bemoan his situation to family and friends, though, Dr. Garcia returned home and went to work to earn the money needed to return to college. His parents were not in a position to offer financial assistance and his father was a skilled laborer who worked very hard in challenging circumstances to provide for his family, so lamenting his misfortune might not have been well received.

Dr. Garcia returned to school after only one term away and then proceeded uninterrupted to graduation. In fact, he was one of the top graduates in his program because he worked diligently in and out of the classroom. He was actively involved in numerous campus organizations and as a senior was awarded an Outstanding Student Leader award from his college.
This pattern of active involvement is something of a trademark for Dr. Garcia. He noted that after graduation, while working at a college and studying for his master’s degree, he maintained several other jobs in addition to his primary position in residence life. For instance, in addition to his official duties he worked in the language lab and as a security guard on campus. He acknowledged that this frenetic work ethic is a result of his childhood, when his father regularly held multiple jobs because, as he stated, he never knew when one job might disappear.

My father never just had one job, so you always have multiple streams of income. That was the other thing he’s always pushed…So, you know, I have all these different kinda streams of income. That is so my father. That’s so my father. Dr. Garcia ’s father—a pipefitter, now deceased—was proud of his son, who works with his mind instead of his hands. Although Dr. Garcia insisted:

My father didn’t ever tell me he was proud of me—even. But whenever I went home, everyone else would tell me that he would tell—like they’d know everything I’d done. When I left, I think I had, I don’t know, a 3.94, something insane, and they would know all my grades. They were like, “Yeah, we heard you got all A’s and one A-.” They were like, “Yeah, your father can’t stop talking about you.” The only thing he would say [to me] is like, “Your football team sucks.”

Dr. Garcia believed that his father was supporting him in the only way he knew how. Earlier in their relationship he had hoped to support him through a workplace scholarship. Now that Dr. Garcia had made good on their collective dream for him, his
father supported him surreptitiously by telling his friends about Dr. Garcia’s successes and by joking with him according to the mores of their macho culture. He could not overtly profess his pride, but he could joke with his son about his soft hands and the school’s lackluster gridiron squad. “He never expressed [his pride] directly or indirectly to me—at all.”

Dr. Garcia’s relationship with his mother was notably different. She would be the one who would tell me that she was proud of me when I graduated. She, my father, my younger sister, my older sister and her husband, five came out to see me graduate. I come from a family of smokers…. But the story was—and my mother was the type of person who could not go an hour without a cigarette kind of thing. And when I graduated... my sister said, “You won’t believe it. Mom stayed the entire time and would not leave.”

Dr. Garcia wrote in his essay that his mother’s pride in his accomplishments spurred him on when, shortly after her death, he was struggling with his decision to continue in graduate school or drop out. He related that his great aunt shared his mom’s pride in his accomplishments and her dream of him as a college professor. He stated, “I had this realization that this was important to a lot of people, especially my mother’s aunt who pulled me aside, that this was something that everyone was kind of celebrating and investing in different ways.”

Yet, as Dr. Garcia wrote, none of his family really understands the work he does. They do not see the rigor of academic work compared with the struggles they experience
daily and they are envious of the good pay. He is conflicted when he considers the two distinctly different worlds he straddles. He related,

I’m the first one to say, ‘I worked my ass off to get where I am.’ But I have siblings who have worked just as hard, even harder, and have struggled tremendously. So, for me it is kind of . . . it’s sometimes uncomfortable to have conversations because our lives have changed so dramatically different.

**Getting to College**

Dr. Garcia’s relationship with his father deteriorated along with his middle school grades. Eventually, as life at home declined further, Dr. Garcia moved into his sister’s house and, later, to the house of a friend whose parents possessed knowledge of the college application process. Their influence was beneficial to him, but his poor standardized test scores led to only one college acceptance. He justified this acceptance by noting the “party school” image of his alma mater and concluding that the school needed his money. Because of his family’s low income, he received a good financial aid package, but was not able to visit the school prior to the beginning of the freshman year.

Getting to college was only part of the battle, though. Staying there was a challenge, too, and getting back after stopping out was harder still. Regarding his return home when his finances proved insufficient at the start of his college career, Dr. Garcia noted,

No one at home expected me to go back, because I was a success because I went to college. And that’s the biggest thing, at least my experience as a first-
generation college student: the goal, at least in my family, was if you went to college, that was the success, not graduating.

Yet Dr. Garcia kept his plans to himself and surprised even his college buddies when he returned. He had learned how to persist and had gained staying power. Financial issues would never again sideline his education.

**Exhibiting Resilience**

Clearly, Dr. Garcia has experienced varied struggles as he travelled his pathway to the professoriate. Finances, relationships, loss, and class issues all factor into his personal narrative. To his credit, Dr. Garcia turned these liabilities into assets. He moved out of his parents’ home at age sixteen and began working while attending school and improving his grades. This afforded him independence and an appreciation of—and distaste for—manual labor and poor wages that strengthened his resolve to attend college. Then, when a guidance counselor at his high school stated that he was “not college material,” Dr. Garcia redoubled his determination to go to college. Displaying a fierce determination, he raised his grades and made plans.

Dr. Garcia chose his undergraduate institution sight unseen and viewed the campus for the first time when his father and brother dropped off him off at his residence hall. He described the experience—in which his father unloaded his belongings and immediately began the trip home—as daunting. The campus of his alma mater, he explained, was rural and he was accustomed to life in a large urban area. Additionally, since his work schedule prevented him from attending orientation earlier in the summer like most students, he had to attend immediately before classes began. He noted feeling
unworthy and not smart enough, like an “imposter,” but he resolved to make the most out of his college experience. “I was the one who would see something in the paper and just make sure I would go check out a speaker or a band or, you know, whatever it would be.”

He endured a brief stop-out in his freshman year and proceeded to create an idyllic college experience for himself, which was centered on “a core principal: whatever it takes, you get it done.” So he excelled in the classroom and out. He was active on campus and developed close friendships.

I will tell you that in my circle of friends at [college name], I developed a family. I would not go home except for, you know, winter break and then summer break, so gosh, how many houses did I go to for spring break or over the weekend with friends and some of my residents when I was an RA? And I also, you know, pledged a fraternity, and those, my brothers, are still guys now who are my closest friends.

Dr. Garcia struggled, but he always found a way to continue applying himself and, in fact, prioritizing his education. No struggle was as consequential, however, as the one Dr. Garcia faced early in his doctoral program. Immediately prior to finals in his first academic term as a Ph.D. student, his mother passed away. A quick trip home to assume the responsibilities of oldest son lasted over a month. Dr. Garcia was seriously deliberating whether or not to continue his studies. He related how his graduate mentor assisted him in this trying time:

Dr. Willows helped me through socially. My mother passed away suddenly in the middle of it, and I wasn’t going to come back, and he was the only one who knew
how to deal with that in a very kind of productive way but nurturing way. Everyone else was just awkward, and death does that to people. But he mentored me on how to succeed in the academy.

Dr. Garcia once again, and with appropriate and timely assistance, transformed a personal challenge into a positive outcome.

**Financing Higher Education**

As Dr. Garcia came from a family of severely limited financial means—his father never knew when a planned job might not materialize—funding his college education presented a significant strain. He simply could not expect help from his family. Once again, he was left to his own devices. Fortunately, he received financial aid from federal, state, and local sources. This aid, while generally sufficient, became a problem for him in his freshman year when, despite very good grades and financial aid—and because he did not understand how the financial aid system worked—he had to stop out of school. He had to stop out for a term. He stated:

I’m convinced if I would have had more resources, information, I could have gone to Financial Aid, I could’ve worked something out and stayed…. I didn’t know that you go and ask people for loans, or I didn’t know you could go and do something else.

Though funding never again caused Dr. Garcia to interrupt a degree once started, it did nearly delay the start of his doctoral work. As he prepared to begin working on his Ph.D., he learned that he had been admitted provisionally, without funding. This made attendance at this school—the only one to which he had applied—unfeasible. He needed
a teaching assistantship and the tuition remuneration that accompanied it to continue his education. This was especially true, as he has resigned his job in anticipation of returning to graduate school.

Fortunately, Dr. Garcia was—on short notice and late in the admission season—admitted with a teaching assistantship at his undergraduate alma mater. This appointment was particularly felicitous as the classroom time confirmed what he had learned while teaching a First Year Experience course at his previous institution—he loved teaching. Of teaching experience he recalled:

But one of the things that happened was, during that second job, I got to teach like an FYE, you know, a first-year experience thing?... And I remember being in the classroom and actually having classroom experiences on the other side and thinking like, okay, this is where it’s at, like, you have a captive audience, you know, you can do so much more, and just being in the classroom. So that’s what really propelled me to say, “Okay, I’ll do this PhD. “

With doctoral funding in secured, Dr. Garcia once again went back to school.

Finding a Home at College

Dr. Garcia somehow knew he was at the right undergraduate institution right away. He noted:

From the very first moment I saw it, it was magical. Now when they left me, you know, you have different feelings because it is very isolating. I came and did orientation right before school started. I was the only person on the entire fourth floor…because everyone else did orientation during the summer.
Dr. Garcia held a work-study position on campus and was determined to work twice as hard as other students and to have a full college experience. He got involved in numerous campus organizations, sampled all the college had to offer, and maintained a great GPA. Of the launch of his academic career he stated:

I think I was almost…I don’t want to say ‘scared straight,’ but it was almost to the point where I was so anxious about it, it helped give me a lot of motivation from day one, just to make sure everything was lined up…. I just dove in. I did also see it as an opportunity, and it was an opportunity that a lot of people didn’t have, so I saw it for what it was; it was a great experience…I tried not to let the feeling of overwhelmingness have a negative slant on it.

Since Dr. Garcia had moved out from his parents’ house when he was sixteen, he noted that upon arriving at college, he “was a pretty independent person in terms of living on my own and making sure everything got done…I am my father’s son, so part of it was just turning inward and doing what needed to be done.” Even though he often felt like an imposter, he worked diligently, stayed involved, and excelled on all fronts. As a senior, he was selected as outstanding graduate and received a leadership award. He was one of the top students in his program.

**Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree**

Oddly, though he was a top student, Dr. Garcia reported that none of his professors ever discussed graduate school with him. When asked to talk about this he explained, “It’s probably one of the reasons why I take my mentoring responsibilities so seriously now. I think it’s inexcusable…it’s unexplainable…I mean, I graduated the top
student in our school…I don’t get it.” He added, “I never worked on a research project with a faculty member, I never did an independent study with a faculty member, and a faculty member never approached me about interest and stuff. I didn’t have any of that.” However, Dr. Garcia suggested:

I think maybe it was part of my own responsibility that I didn’t present myself as this person who was grad-school material or had an interest in grad school, because honestly I didn’t at that point, you know?... And it wasn’t seemingly an option for me because I went to school to make money, so I was trying to get a job, you know?

Eventually, after returning home with a newly inked diploma but without job prospects, Dr. Garcia secured a position at a community college near his childhood home. He was enamored not only of the college environment, but also of the perquisites of the position.

I will tell you what motivated me to get back into higher ed. is that it came with a free apartment and free food and free parking and I got free laundry tokens…and telephone was paid for. I mean, that was the biggest (motivation) because I was able to get out of my sister’s crowded house at that point—she has four kids and a husband.

While working in residence life, Dr. Garcia’s supervisor encouraged him to enroll in a master’s degree program, which he did, though he insists he did not give much thought to what he was doing or why he was doing it.
Other people were doing it, too, so it was almost like I would be out of the norm…I almost did it uncritically, like I didn’t even reflect, I didn’t question it. I was like, okay, that makes sense to me. I like this and I could—see, I don’t think I ever could picture myself being a professor, but being a director of student activities or being a res life (director).

After two years at this first position, and with his master’s degree in hand, Dr. Garcia became the assistant director of residence life at a school in New England. While at this school he was once again encouraged to further his education. He stated, “And again, part of the norm in higher ed. is that everyone should have higher and higher ed. kinda thing.”

Dr. Garcia prepared independently for the GRE, but lacking college knowledge, he did not understand the importance of standardized test scores in graduate school admissions decisions. He knew only that standardized tests were not his forte. Nonetheless, with his average scores (“I was so excited that I had gotten average.”) he applied to a top doctoral program in his undergraduate discipline. He also resigned from his job in anticipation of acceptance.

As previously described, he was accepted conditionally, without funding. This was a major setback for Dr. Garcia, who needed the money an assistantship would provide. As he recalled, he was, “Devastated. Devastated. Devastated. I have a visual of me sitting down on stairs in [state name]…just…devastated.” Without this crucial resource, he could not enroll in any doctoral program. Frantically, he applied to the doctoral program at his undergraduate alma mater and, much to his relief, was accepted
with a teaching assistantship. He recalled the conversation with his officials at his alma mater:

‘Yes, you’ll be accepted, yes, we’d love for you (to come), and we have a teaching assistantship.’ That’s why I love that school so much. So I applied to one school and then my alma mater, and then I was like, signed, sealed, delivered, when do I need to be there?

_Transitioning to a Life in the Academy_

Dr. Garcia did not equivocate when he stated that upon entering his master’s program, he was thinking about being an “academic on the student affairs side of things, not academic as in professorial.” Nonetheless, he excelled, graduated, and, with master’s degree in hand, accepted a position at another school in coastal New England.

More pivotal to his professional development, he offered, was teaching the freshman seminar class at his second institution. It was there that he gained a love for teaching college students and first began to envision himself as a professor. Still, he insisted that his sights were not on the Ivory Tower. “But be clear: It wasn’t a professor at a Research I [university] it was a community college, it was like a teacher and not a professor.” Dr. Garcia was expanding his perception of what he might be able to do, albeit gradually.

In his doctoral program, the long-held feeling of being an imposter persisted. He viewed classmates as more worldly, felt overwhelmed, and thought of quitting. Initially, he even struggled with the academic load, which was an uncommon experience for Dr. Garcia. Despite exemplary performance in his undergraduate and master’s course work,
he was not prepared for the critical structures and sophisticated dialogue he encountered in his doctoral classes. As a result, he felt even more out of place. Describing one incident early in his doctoral program he wrote:

I literally was weeping… We had this professor… four hours, Thursday night… and he would use words that I could not spell to look up… He would use “genre” and “epistemology.” I didn’t know how to look up “genre.” I literally thought it began with a “J.”

Fortunately, he received support from classmates, four of whom compacted to finish together. This timely support proved critical to his adjustment and, ultimately, to his success in his doctoral program.

After his mother’s death, and buoyed by the words of his great aunt, Dr. Garcia returned to his doctoral studies feeling renewed and possessing a new goal: completion, not perfection. “I think with my mother’s passing, it really did create a shift in priorities, like what is really important? Is it really important you get an ‘A’ in every class?”

Whereas prior to his mother’s passing he felt that perfection was necessary to measure up, he was now determined to simply complete the degree as expeditiously as possible. He also sought and found valuable support outside his academic discipline. He stated:

When I came back, one of the first things I did was become graduate advisor for our fraternity, so I already had built-in ten men who really looked at me as a big brother kinda thing. I got involved in church, so I was a deacon in church; I sang with GVF, Gospel Voices of Faith; I was the chaplain, so I was involved in the spiritual community as well. People didn’t understand why I wanted to do all
those things. I was involved in so many things on campus, and people were like, ‘Undergrads do that; grads don’t do that.’ But that was my support; that was my way to remain sane.

Despite—or, more likely, because of—this active involvement outside his academic department, Dr. Garcia continued to excel and, upon conferral of his doctorate, was considered a top prospect. He participated in many on-campus interviews, received numerous offers, and, in the end, made a controversial decision. Dr. Garcia, as a newly minted Ph.D., chose to teach at a less prestigious school because it served a large population of FG students. Again, faculty did not understand. Dr. Garcia wrote in his pre-interview essay:

When I announced my decision, several faculty members reacted in disbelief. I was even called into the Director of the School’s office and asked to defend my decision—something that didn’t make sense to others. From their perspective (and the perspective of the school which sees placement of recent graduates as huge indication of its prestige), I was selling myself short by accepting a position at a regional campus.

**Considering Class**

Dr. Garcia stuck with his decision and served four years at this first institution before moving to another FG-serving school, where he is now a full professor with a prolific publication record. As he discovered in graduate school, he still enjoys teaching most. In fact, Dr. Garcia reports declining any offer—at his institution or at other more prestigious institutions—that would take him out of the classroom.
I tell folks, “Anything that takes me out of the classroom works against the reason why I’m at this school. So you want me to go on research leave, you want me to be an administrator…..” Have I ever had a magical moment outside of a classroom? I don’t think I have.

As Dr. Garcia wrote, “It’s hard for me to separate class and race/ethnicity out of this first-generation experience because they’re so interwoven.” These issues are also central to his perception of himself as a scholar, though he would not use that word. Perhaps it is too much of the system. In his essay he wrote:

I focused my research and teaching activities on issues that were central to my lived experiences—culture, class, race among others—despite warnings from others that these things were “non-academic.” Over time, I found that the more I resisted being socialized in what the academy valued and remained true to myself, the more academic success I had.

He noted that his professional success has led to distance from his birth family and childhood friends.

I’m really hypersensitive to the fact that many of my family members and this one close friend in particular are really struggling financially, and I’m not, and I think that, yeah, it just creates a really uncomfortable . . . I just hope that they don’t think that I think I’m better or I think I’m . . . I don’t know. It creates some tension…It’s a weird dynamic. And it’s totally class-based because I still see myself of a certain class psychologically, but I’m not. I’m middle class, if not
middle, upper-middle class; but I know they see me as very different, as removed from their realities.

Dr. Garcia noted a perceptible distance from many of his colleagues, too, as they do not understand the challenges that he faced in his early life and in working for his position in the academy. He stated:

I have no friends in my department. I have some colleagues who are supportive, I have some colleagues I like, but they’ve never been to my house, they don’t know my kids’ birthdays, they don’t know my birthday, and that’s how I kinda measure those things.

He still works extremely hard and, as throughout his adult life, maintains more than one source of income. He consults and authors text books in case this job falls through as his father’s skilled labor jobs often fell through, though he admitted the absurdity of this since he is a tenured professor on a union campus. “When it comes to money, I am so overly conscious. I think about money every single day, and I have no reason to. But I think part of it is this whole notion like, ‘What happens…?’” This is what Lubrano (2004) refers to as the “straddler” phenomenon. Dr. Garcia does not feel completely at ease in academia—his colleagues there are from a different class—nor does he feel completely at ease with the life of his youth—he has transcended working class status and has joined, however unintentionally or reluctantly, the middle class.

Presently, Dr. Garcia has a daughter in college and is amazed at how much different the experience is for her—how many advantages she has. He related that he sometimes still feels like an imposter and continues to attribute his success to hard work
rather than to his abilities. ("When it comes to what I’ve been able to achieve, it’s much more hard work than it is intelligence.") Also, despite an enviable publication record, he still feels less intelligent than colleagues. He noted, “In terms of my peers, I still feel stupid when I sit in faculty meetings and talk with people. Sometimes I think they do it purposely, but…I don’t know, it’s an odd dynamic.” He marvels at how the investment in higher education paid off for him and seeks to demonstrate the value of higher education to others as he continues to teach at an institution with a large FG population, where he frequently mentors FG and under-resourced students.

**Dr. Bridges Summary**

Dr. Bridges is a first generation, forty-something Caucasian male living in one of the states bordering the Ohio River. He is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at a small, private, liberal arts college serving a large proportion of first generation students. His undergraduate degree was conferred from a regional state university in the South; his master’s degree from a top Ivy League institution; and his doctorate from a west-coast consortium.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. Bridges described beginning college as the bright child of college dropouts. His father “had barely a year of basically lackluster, ‘I’m just here because the Vietnam War is going on,’ kind of educational experience.” His mother “had a slightly more serious two years, but that still didn’t translate into any kind of degree program.” Ultimately, she dropped out to marry his father.
Dr. Bridges indicated that although they were not college graduates themselves, his college education was important to both parents. In fact, he described his college education as something of a foregone conclusion in his family. His parents knew that they wanted a different life for their son than they had been able to manage for themselves. Plus, they had regular exposure to people from the middle and upper-middles classes, people who held college degrees, so the value of the college degree was incontestable for them.

Dr. Bridges explained that although his parents were accustomed to interacting with people who possessed greater fiscal or social capital, they did not themselves possess the capital required to be fully vested in the middle-class. As a result, Dr. Bridges arrived at college as an outsider. He noted, “They [his parents] didn’t know any college professors, and I had only just begun to know such people.”

His parents’ income, while good—Dr. Bridges describes a childhood without privation—was not sufficient to fund his college education. He dreamed of studying at a school in New England, but this was not in the cards.

Partly I didn’t go that route because the financial aid they offered wasn’t equal to the percentage of aid offered at the state, because the costs were just much more lower, period, and partly because my father didn’t complete the financial aid paperwork for my choice.

Fortunately, a great aunt offered assistance at a critical time. For various reasons, she did not see education as a suitable career for such a bright young man and offered to pay for his undergraduate education in the major of his choice—religious studies.
That great aunt never had children and had actually been a public school teacher all her life...without her money and her generosity and her interest...and it was totally unsolicited. We’d always written letters and things, and I let her know what was going on in my life, but I wasn’t asking for money, and I didn’t even think that she would do that...and she really surprised me. She sent me a plane ticket to go visit her, and I took that trip, and when I came back from that trip, I basically had a check in my hand, and it felt like a windfall.

With his newfound liberty from a discipline-specific scholarship, Dr. Bridges thrived in his new major. The generosity of his great aunt was not without its own challenges, however. He noted:

It also created some tension with my family, my parents, because they were suspicious of my great aunt’s involvement and wondered if I was—I guess at some level I was selling out. So it was a bit of a crisis of conscious on a couple of levels there.... Why didn’t I ask them for help?

Still, his parents were supportive and Dr. Bridges progressed as anticipated toward graduation. In fact, he excelled to such an extent that he was accepted into a master’s degree program at Harvard University.

Though he felt something of an imposter in the socially and academically elite environs of Cambridge, Massachusetts, this feeling was not his only challenge. Dr. Bridges also had a hard time explaining his academic pursuits to his family and friends. He reported that he could not—and still cannot—fully share this part of his identity with his loved ones back home in North Carolina. He stated:
I’m the only person in my family with this type of credential or educational status, and that creates deference, but it also creates distance. The rest of my family are involved in what they think of as the real world in a much more day-to-day kind of way than I am, and here I am in this oasis…. I think that how much of that is a function of my personality and how much of that is a function of my life experience I’m not sure how to apportion those. I always felt a little strange and different anyway, but certainly this [higher education] has accentuated that.

**Getting to College**

Though Dr. Bridges’ parents did contribute to his education in a large way financially, they did contribute in a substantive way to getting him to college. He stated clearly:

My parents, particularly my mother, did a really nice job of not in any way stunting or denying those [intellectual] impulses, but facilitating them. They sent me to special programs in the summer offered by the public schools. In one case I studied at a large university in our region for a month for the summer. I went to a Governor’s School program offered by our state. So they made these opportunities available, but it was always really clear that “You know, these things cost money” and “You know, you need to not waste these opportunities” and “We hope this will turn into something someday.” You know, they were investments, I think.
**Exhibiting Resilience**

Family concerns over choice of major and, more importantly, funding his college education notwithstanding, Dr. Bridges excelled in the classroom. He did admit, however, that some academic adjustment was needed early in his undergraduate career.

I quickly figured out that there were students who knew how to study and I wasn’t one of those students because I had never had to do that [in high school]... I suppose, in retrospect, it turns out that some of the people who had the best study habits in my cohort were the sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers and people like that.

Dr. Bridges was fortunate that both academic and social adjustments occurred without extreme difficulty, though he proffered, “I guess that sense of a gap might have manifested itself more in terms of social cues and familiarity with certain kinds of environments than, say, intellectual habits or study skills or something like that.” He was concerned about, “How do you act when you are invited to a professor’s home for dinner?”

**Financing Higher Education**

One of Dr. Bridges’ most perplexing dilemmas came as he began his college education and was severely conflicted about his choice of major. He was drawn to philosophy and religious studies, but felt the need to pursue a more practical field. Plus, his scholarship was contingent on him majoring in education.
Dr. Bridges initially accepted the education scholarship since he needed the money to fund his attendance. He soon realized, though, that he was not drawn to—and could not endure—the education classes.

I think that what was going on there was finding the courage to say no to a more vocational kind of track for my higher ed. When I entered college, I felt very strongly that I needed to do something that would translate into a job, and I really wanted in college and after college to be financially independent of my parents. Ultimately, he was not finding the scholarly challenge he needed.

My sense was that intellectual rigor was detached from practical training or vocational education, and even though I had placed my egg in the career-oriented basket when I first came in, I wasn’t able to sustain that energy, and it just didn’t feel like the right use of the time that I had…. I simply came to the conclusion…that the smartest people on campus weren’t taking those [education] courses; that the really interesting, bright people who were going to challenge me were in other departments—the physics department, the anthropology department, you know, philosophy, this kind of stuff.

Thus, Dr. Bridges changed majors and, in doing so, forfeited his scholarship. According to him, “I had to give that [scholarship] up in order to, as I said, follow my bliss.” This was a bold move for a student whose family could not afford to provide substantive financial assistance.

After this, funding his college education and graduate degrees was not a major theme for Dr. Bridges, though he saw educational differences associated with his
socioeconomic status. The differences he noted were primarily related to his discipline in graduate school—Asian Religions. He stated:

The difference between me and a lot of my colleagues was that they had already a lot of those [world travel] experiences—through family vacations or through summers between college. They’d hitchhiked across Thailand…. Aside from a venture in Europe when I was in college, which was funded by the same great aunt… I hadn’t had those kind of experiences, and I’d certainly never been to Asia…. I was studying this material—studying language, history, culture—and I was doing well in these classes, but at some level, I was surrounded by people who could say, because of their experiences and partly their privilege, “Oh yes, I remember when I was in Shanghai once I saw an example of this,” and I’m thinking, I saw a movie about Shanghai once, you know, but I’ve never been there.

Dr. Bridges added, “It wasn’t until relatively late in my graduate school work that I got to spend substantial time in Asia, and so that felt like a kind of developmental delay due to my background.”

**Finding a Home at College**

Despite feeling like an imposter when first arriving in the Ivy League, Dr. Bridges suggested that his entry into higher education was like coming home, though to no home he had ever known before. He noted:

It was as if I had landed on another planet, and really intuitively responded to the natives of that planet, and suddenly had a decision to either catch the rocket back
for Earth or somehow stay here in this world; and if I went back to Earth, I knew what was there for me and I could do that, or I could face this unknown, and it was very exciting to go with the unknown, so I did. But it meant the people back on Earth were naturally skeptical or curious about where this was all going to end. He quipped, “I think, like a lot of bright kids, at least in the South, there was an early sense that I probably had been adopted, you know, from some other place.”

**Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree**

Dr. Bridges graduated from his undergraduate institution with a sterling academic record and, thanks again to his great aunt, with a study abroad experience in Europe under his belt. He also graduated with definite plans in motion: He was getting married and preparing to enroll at Harvard. When asked about his parents’ reaction to yet more education he responded:

I think that [Harvard] smoothed any real resistance there might have been. I don’t think there would have been any resistance…it was part of the pattern: “Clearly you do well at this kind of thing; clearly other people think that you do well, and you have an opportunity; go do it. All education is good education.”

**Transitioning to a Life in the Academy**

Dr. Bridges was fortunate to have an outstanding faculty mentor as an undergraduate.

It was at his house that I was nervous about spilling something on the carpet initially. I still remember the terror of that. But he became so helpful and . . . I
guess the message that he consistently sent was “Because you haven’t done it
doesn’t mean you can’t.”

Of this undergraduate mentor, Dr. Bridges stated:

He helped me think beyond what sounded cool, you know, to take this term:
“Well, you know, next year, if you want to be able to do this kind of thing, you
might want to take this class because it’ll help you with that.” Or, particularly as I
became a third- and fourth-year student, “The people at Princeton are going to be
looking for this” or “The people at Harvard are going to be looking for this.” Of
course that never crossed my mind. I barely understood what graduate school was,
and applying to graduate school was, as it is for so many of my students now, a
very psychologically exhausting process and full of self-doubt.

Of Harvard, where he earned his master’s degree, Dr. Bridges noted:

Faculty are not known for their accessibility, and so I ended up connecting more
with junior faculty there than some of the big shots. But I also remember figuring
out in my last year of my master’s…that actually those people [senior faculty]
were accessible. I just needed to knock on the door.

Having experienced the closeness of his undergraduate mentor and the apparent
remoteness of the faculty in his masters program, Dr. Bridges deliberately sought an
experience more like the former. Thus he went on to study for his doctorate at the
Graduate Theological Union in the San Francisco Bay area. He felt more of a connection
to his doctoral professors there. He described his Ph.D. program:
The hub of the program is the student-mentor relationship, and then between the two of them, they create connections with whatever departments—at Berkeley or across the Bay or wherever—that will feed into that program. So it was almost a kind of self-designed thing. I knew I couldn’t make that happen unless I had a really good, supportive mentor, and so that was probably...the top consideration. Because actually I could’ve stayed at Harvard, but I chose not to because I had never really experienced that as the norm at Harvard; it seemed like the exception. Of course, he had his wife for support (“I couldn’t have done any of this without that relationship.”), but the close mentorship of professors was crucial. “I deliberately moved to where I thought, you know, the nurture would be.”

After conferral of his doctorate, Dr. Bridges sought to work in an environment where he could serve people like him. He found this at XYZ College where he seems to value his role as a faculty mentor.

I think teaching students from predominantly working class and other disadvantaged kinds of backgrounds at this institution has given me in some sense more sympathy for myself and more perspective because I can see their self-doubt and mine sort of mirroring each other, and I can understand more now where that might be coming from, and on some level what an impediment or what an unnecessary orientation it can be.

**Considering Class**

Dr. Bridges mentioned that even though his entry into academia was personally exciting, “For me it was charged with some class issues as well...because finding my
tribe invariably meant mixing with people who came from more affluent backgrounds than I did.”

These class issues were less pronounced at his undergraduate institution, where he was surrounded by people from similar backgrounds, than they would have been at the elite college in New England that he initially yearned to attend. Class differences were certainly more evident at Harvard. There, the challenges of his past emerged. He noted:

By making that choice to go to that [regional, public] undergraduate institution, I cast my lot with more working-class people. And so, consequently, when I was a graduate student at much more elite kinds of institutions, that was the first time I really began to rub shoulders with people for whom wealth was inherited or privilege was assumed… It made me nervous… I felt like I could learn a lot from these people, we had some shared intellectual tastes, but what they did in their inner life was still pretty far from my own experience. You know, these people didn’t have TVs in their houses, and that was new. The TV was always going in my parents’ house…They listened to NPR; I didn’t know what NPR was.

Dr. Bridges felt like an imposter, though he was careful to specify:

I didn’t have that word in my vocabulary the way that I use it [now] until I was a doctoral student. It was when one of my committee members used the phrase. He had come from a working-class background, and one day he said, “You know, it’s just that imposter syndrome. Yeah, sometimes I have a hard time with that,” and I sort of cautiously said, “What do you mean?” and he named exactly what I had been thinking about for a long time: that sense of “When are they going to find
out that I don’t fit here?”…. That was a very useful moment for me when that person uttered that phrase, and it’s become part of my vocabulary since.

Initially, Dr. Bridges did not see how he could compete against people with such great social and fiscal capital. Soon, his grades proved that he could compete, at least academically. He also felt strange and different from his professors and his classmates, particularly as a younger student. He noted:

I think where I felt the greater need for adjustment relative to some of my peers was in . . . we might think of it as the sort of social aspects of college: How do you act when you are invited to a professor’s home for dinner? What do you do in that environment? I remember being terrified as an 18- or 19-year-old being invited to a professor’s home that I would spill something on the carpet or that I’d use the wrong fork or something along those lines, and it took quite a while for me to get past that.

He added:

I carried a bit of a chip on my shoulder even into, I think, most of my work for my master’s degree, constantly asking myself if I was really supposed to be where I was supposed to be. By that point I didn’t have any real qualms about my intellectual qualifications, but it was more a sense of cultural fit: Did I really belong here?

**Dr. McBeatty Summary**

Dr. McBeatty is a 40-something, Caucasian, female from an affluent family in the Rocky Mountain west. She earned her undergraduate degree at a small, private, church-
affiliated school in the Pacific Northwest and both her master’s degree and doctorate from the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. She is now an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at a small, private, liberal arts college serving a large proportion of first generation students in one of the states bordering the Ohio River.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. McBeatty’s parents each attended some college, but dropped out because it was either not for them—as was the case with her father—or to marry and raise a family—as was the case with her mother. However, other members of her extended family hold undergraduate, professional, and advanced degrees, so college was not as foreign to her as it was to many FG students and to the other participants in this study.

Dr. McBeatty attended undergrad at her older brother’s alma mater. She had visited him at school in Seattle—a thousand miles away from home—and liked the exuberance of the city. Her mother thought it would be a good place for her, too. Dr. McBeatty seemed to agree without question and values the education she received. She was eager to escape small-town Montana.

Dr. McBeatty was encouraged by her mother to pursue teaching—a degree with tangible benefits. When asked about her mother’s influence, she stated:

Her generation—she was born in 1929—[teaching] was something women were always allowed to do, so to speak…. Plus, her mother had been a teacher, and so it was just one of those tangible kinds of things that she liked.

Dr. McBeatty allowed that, “I think it’s probably kind of gender-coded.”
In any case, Dr. McBeatty preferred communications, so she satisfied all parties by completing a communication studies major, literature minor, and received her teaching credentials in four years. She later described herself as a coalition builder within her academic department. This appears to be a long-held gift. Dr. McBeatty related that aside from her mother’s encouragement to pursue an education degree, her parents did not exert any pressure related to academic pursuits and allowed her to travel her own path.

After college, Dr. McBeatty taught high school speech and drama at a parochial high school in California before getting married. She had considered eventually attending graduate school, but her husband encouraged her to begin sooner rather than later. His support would prove to be one of the constants throughout her graduate school career. She was clear that her mother was another steadfast supporter, but clarified:

I wouldn’t have probably burdened her with my feelings of being too young to be teaching these college students who are paying $30,000 or whatever, or I wouldn’t have told her that I didn’t feel like I measured up to those who already had master’s degrees, but she was just sort of a general support.

Dr. McBeatty noted that her education has created some deference and distance from people back home. Of her mother she stated:

She would just introduce me as her daughter who teaches…I just thought it was interesting that she chose to say “teacher,” and I wondered if it was that maybe at some level she thought if she said “professor,” people might be a little intimidated and watch their P’s and Q’s or something.
Regarding her mother’s pride, she added:

I’ve noticed that there have been a few public relations brochures and so forth that I’ve wound up appearing on, and she proudly displays those on her coffee table. And then since my book came out, she’s all about introducing me as her daughter who wrote such-and-such, you know.

Regarding friends from her high school days, Dr. McBeatty observed:

I do sense some kind of distance between myself and people I run into at, oh, like all school reunions and so forth, and I suppose that I have assumed that it had something to do with their awareness that I got a PhD and teach college and so forth…. We don’t share a lot of experiences anymore.”

**Getting to College**

As she hailed from an affluent family and was a bright student, Dr. McBeatty never needed to ponder how she would get to school. One of her older brothers had gone to school in the Pacific Northwest and she liked what she saw on her visits, so with her mother’s encouragement, she enrolled at the same institution.

**Exhibiting Resilience**

Upon committing to the idea of graduate school, Dr. McBeatty applied to the communications program at the University of Southern California’s (USC’s) Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, where she was initially rejected. This prompted her to call and determine why she had not been admitted. She spoke to the program chair—an eminent figure in Communications—and, ultimately, was rewarded for her audacity. She was eventually admitted with an assistantship. When asked about
this audacious move, she stated, “I can’t believe I did that.” Describing this display of grit, she added:

Well . . . I suspect that my husband probably encouraged me to, but…. apparently that works for me because I had been turned down left and right for my book manuscript—anyway, I guess it’s a non sequitur—but I finally made one last phone call on that, and it may have influenced my getting a contract finally.

Initially, Dr. McBeatty reported, she felt intimidated as a teaching assistant at USC and underprepared as a student. She was one of the few who entered with only a bachelor’s degree and felt the she had little to add to conversations. Her undergraduate education, which she indicated was a good one, had not prepared her for the critical dialogue she encountered in her doctoral program. She stated:

When I started grad school it was so hard and I really did feel inadequate in some respects…. You know, I was very well aware that people had master’s degrees. I knew also that some of them knew each other because, for instance, they had been in the debate community…. Some of them, kind of a subset of our big cohort, knew each other or knew faculty at USC. But then, on the other hand, another voice said, “Well, you know, there’s Nora. She only has her bachelor’s. But she has her bachelor’s from USC.” And yeah, I remember thinking, when I would try to comment in class, especially during that first year, that it was a really dumb or obvious thing I was saying or pointing out.

Demonstrating great determination, though, Dr. McBeatty marched forward toward her doctorate.
Financing Higher Education

Dr. McBeatty was raised without the financial hardships of many FG students. Her family owned a large, prosperous ranch in Montana, and she did not need to work as an undergraduate. Upon arrival at college, then, she had not experienced the financial hardships that every other participant in this study had known in their youths. Therefore, she was—and remains—somewhat disconnected from the experiences of other FG, low-income students.

Dr. McBeatty and her husband, a graduate student, were financially independent for the most part as she began teaching at a parochial high school soon after graduation. She admitted, though, that her parents would sometimes assist with plane tickets home and other big-ticket items. Regarding the financing of her graduate school career:

I think, for example, another thing that could have been an obstacle in Southern California would have been money, if we had been constantly worrying about how to finance our education. But between, you know, sorta taking turns working, and my parents’ help sometimes, we didn’t have that concern.

Finding a Home at College

Dr. McBeatty appears to have taken to city and college life rather quickly. She mentioned:

I had traveled a lot…with my parents to my father’s annual conventions for an organization that he served on the board of. I guess that’s the only source I can think of for my interest in big cities, but I just—I knew I wanted to get out of my
small town….I think I did imagine sort of starting over, you know, being able to
create an identity from the ground up in a bigger city.

She stated, “I made this cohort of friends right away, and several of us just stayed
friends all through the years.” Similarly in graduate school, she found a group of friends
who supported each other through the trials of graduate school.

**Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree**

When discussing the decision to continue her education, Dr. McBeatty noted:

I think I knew that probably by my junior year I knew I was going to become a
teacher, and I knew that it would be likely that I’d earn at least a master’s, you
know, an MAT, in the next few years. But it was just sort of a nebulous notion of
graduate school and that I did want to go. So that was, you know, mid-career in
my undergraduate program. But then, you know, like I said, it really firmed up
when I was 23…and I started preparing to take the GRE.

As Dr. McBeatty’s narrative goes, she had moved with her husband to
Washington, D.C., where he had been awarded a one-year internship. While there she
took a course at George Mason.

And it was really enjoyable, and I felt like I was able to do the work without any
trouble, and [name of professor at George Mason] was really sort of a positive
force, so that just confirmed my notion that I should do that.

Regarding her parents’ reaction to additional school she stated:

I don’t think it surprised them. Or if they were surprised, I didn’t know. Yeah.

And I don’t think they were concerned, you know, for instance, that when I
married my husband, he was just about to begin grad school. Maybe they were.
Maybe they thought it would be better if he was just making some money or
something… I think being female probably made it easier for my folks to just be
able to embrace my going on to grad school. Yeah, I don’t know that they would
have been disappointed if I was male and I had chosen to do the same thing… I
think if I had said I wanted to take a gap year and go around Europe, they would
have had a problem with that.

Generally, Dr. McBeatty added, “I never had the sense they disapproved of any of
my professional choices.” Also, other educational trailblazers in her family might have
smoothed her transition to graduate school. When she ventured off to college in
Washington State, one of her older brothers had already earned a college degree and
other cousins and in-laws had been conferred undergraduate, graduate, and professional
degrees. Thus explaining the value of additional education did not present a challenge for
her.

**Transitioning to a Life in the Academy**

Though working at a school with a large FG population, Dr. McBeatty initially
thought FG status had not been a factor in her experiences. She seems to have relished
being from “away” and having studied at a prestigious institution. Now, she looks for and
revels in shared experiences with students. She relates well to farm kids and to others
from rural backgrounds. She appreciates the attention paid to this population of students
and identifies with some FG struggles, but not all.
When discussing her pathway to the professoriate, Dr. McBeatty stated, “I think I assumed I would be a professor….And I had taught, and so I knew I could be good at that.” Still, one of her challenges on the way to a career in the academy was:

Not being naturally inclined or whatever, or conditioned, toward…a deep critical stance and not really enjoying, for instance, playing the devil’s advocate. But I don’t know . . . I don’t really feel like it created an obstacle, exactly, except maybe in my own mind.

Today, though, Dr. McBeatty is a well-respected coalition-builder in her department. She recently finished a six-year term as department chair that included an additional year at the behest of her colleagues. For the past year she has been writing a manuscript while on sabbatical. She returns to the classroom this fall and admitted, “It looks a little daunting to be teaching three and three when I haven’t been doing that for years because I was department chair, but yeah, I still do enjoy it. And I imagine I’ll come back very refreshed.”

**Considering Class**

Though Dr. McBeatty came from a socioeconomically affluent family, they were, in many ways, working-class in their bearing. For instance, she noted that she could not comfortably discuss her academic pursuits around the dinner table. Her family was not accustomed to this type of discourse. They did not understand what she was doing and were concerned—as many families are—with more practical matters. She noted, “I don’t know if they—they certainly talked to us and listened to us, but maybe just didn’t ask us to do critical thinking about why did we think such-and-such.”
When considering the educational and class backgrounds of her USC classmates, Dr. McBeatty stated:

I probably assumed that most of them had developed that [critical vocabulary and debating skills] in their master’s programs. But there also seemed to be sort of a real enjoyment in the back and forth over ideas, you know, and sort of scuffling with each other over, you know, Foucault or whatever.

This type of intellectual engagement was not what Dr. McBeatty was accustomed to in her birth family. Now, though, she and her husband are purposefully raising their two daughters with far greater exposure to critical dialogues and worldviews. She noted:

We were just telling our eight-year-old sometime in the last two or three weeks at the dinner table . . . I don’t remember now exactly what the topic was, but somehow my husband wound up talking about Nero; it was apropos of something…. and we got to laughing, and he said, “Well, you know, let it never be said that our girls don’t have two parents with liberal arts background.” So I think that would be one thing I’d say to them: “Remember when you were little and we used to sit around talking about Abraham Lincoln or let’s see . . . why Trafalgar Square that we got to see when we went to London is called Trafalgar Square,” you know, that sort of thing.

**Dr. Ruff Summary**

Dr. Ruff is a 40-something, Caucasian female from a poor Appalachian family. She began her undergraduate degree while serving in the military and finished, after being honorably discharged, when her husband was stationed in Hawaii. Her
undergraduate degree is from a public, state institution; her master’s degree is from a medium-sized, private, not-for-profit institution with campuses across North America; and her doctorate is from a large, public, research-intensive university. She is now an Associate Professor of Education at a small, private, liberal arts college in one of the Great Lakes states.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. Ruff grew up in a farming and mining family in Appalachia. Her dad was a high school dropout and her mom earned a GED. None of her siblings hold any type of post-secondary degree. Of her experience as a youth in Appalachia, she stated:

Well, we had traveled, my mom’s family had moved on out to California, and we would go out there once in a while, so I did see a little bit of the world going out West, and I knew that there was something beyond just, you know, [county name]….I knew that there was something else out there and that I wanted to be a part of it, but I didn’t know how I was going to get there, you know.

For Dr. Ruff, joining the military was her escape from life on the farm. She enlisted and met her husband while in the service. She began thinking about a teaching career when they were stationed in Germany and she was working on base with the children of military parents. While at that posting, a supervisor mentioned, “You might think about becoming a teacher at some point.”

This was not the first time Dr. Ruff had heard a comment such as this. She recalled her father saying to her as a child, “Cathy Sue, you should be a schoolteacher.”
She added, “My cousins will say now that they thought I had tendencies toward that.” However, she was not yet ready to take the next step and enroll in college.

Dr. Ruff eventually began attending community colleges on successive postings until, while stationed in Hawaii with her husband, she left the military so that she could complete a bachelor’s degree in education. After earning her bachelor’s degree, her husband was transferred to Virginia where she taught for a year before he was transferred to Georgia. Her second job in Georgia was in an elementary school where she ultimately stayed for 7 years. While in Georgia, she developed a close group of friends and colleagues. Also while in Georgia, she earned her master’s degree.

She was comfortable and seems to have come into her own as a professional there. Then, in a surprise move, her husband decided to retire from the military and move the family back to Appalachia. She recalled:

It was kinda like, here we go again, because I was used to kind of leaving, you know. But I had been able to stay there the longest and actually . . . had wonderful ties, even, you know, when he would leave; there was no one there but my son and I, you know, no family. And I didn’t want to come back... And I remember telling my husband “Let’s just do one more year,” and he’s like, “No, you keep saying that. I’m retiring. We’re out of here.” So . . . yeah, that was hard because it was finally somewhere I’d been for a while.

Leaving her friends and job in Georgia—the school board had offered her a significant promotion and a raise if she would stay—presented a challenge for Dr. Ruff. Her frustration was compounded when she had trouble finding work in Appalachia. She
applied at school districts throughout the region, but did not receive any interviews, much less offers. She recalled:

You know, I was disappointed and I was shocked. I put in my application…and I couldn’t even get an interview. And I had my master’s degree, I had been the County Teacher of the Year in Georgia, and I had several teaching honors…and I felt like they weren’t even looking at it. And I can remember calling [county name] one time and speaking with them, and the woman who works at the board, the secretary, said to me, “Well, you know, we hire our own,” and I said to her, “For one thing, I am from here.”

However trying, this time of adversity precipitated a serendipitous chain of events. When Dr. Ruff could not secure a job teaching in secondary school, she applied as an adjunct professor at the institution where she currently holds tenure. Then, upon learning that a full-time position was anticipated—but that a doctorate would be required—she enrolled in a Ph.D. program at a large, public institution in the region. After earning her doctorate in four years—and amid great personal turmoil—she was granted tenure and continues to garner teaching awards and challenge her students. Of teaching at the college level she noted:

I liked that I was actually able to teach about teaching, you know, and use my background. I enjoyed that….I found that classroom management and everything, to an extent, was almost the same way. Sometimes I’d have to give them the teacher look.

She added:
Even at the college level…there are still their little aha moments… I had one in here today. I had to catch her [student] when she picked up some grading that I had out there. I said, “Natalie, I want to see you,” and she’s like, “Oh no,” you know. And then I’m like, “Your math journal was the very best that I saw,” and then I’m like, “and your science journal was the very worst.”

Regarding her family, Dr. Ruff stated, “They’re very proud of me. I know that they’ll say, you know, ‘Cathy is a professor at [XYZ] College.’” They equate her doctorate with superior intelligence, though she laughs at this idea because she often cannot contribute to their current events conversations. She claims that she is too busy in academe to keep up.

Regarding her family’s understanding of her pathway to the professoriate, she stated, “I don’t think any of them, because none of them had gone on, realized what all this involved and how long it would take or anything. I don’t think they had any understanding of any of that.” Though her birth family was not aware of the extent of her efforts, Dr. Ruff was fortunate to have a supportive spouse.

My husband was . . . he was wonderful through it. You know, we had a young child, and when I went back, Joey was in school by then. When I first started taking classes, I was working through the day and, you know, trying to take some courses at night, and he would be home with Joey and help with that. He was very supportive. I do think, now that . . . I think he maybe felt, when I went on for my PhD, maybe a little threatened. Still very happy for me, still very supportive, but I
think a little threatened about, you know . . . even with our marriage maybe, that, you know, it would change how I viewed him a little bit or something.

*Getting to College*

Dr. Ruff mentioned that despite her father’s encouragement that, “Cathy Sue, you should be a schoolteacher,” she did not lend this idea much credence until after several years in the military. After high school, she was merely trying to put some distance between her and her hometown. Then, she noted, as the latchkey coordinator on base:

I was doing the planning, and I was doing...kind of educational themes and then I was centering things around them, and I can remember my employer saying, “Cathy, you’re great at this, but, you know, these kids, they’re here, they’ve just finished school, and they want to play.

Fortunately, this is the same employer who suggested that she might be a good teacher. She recalled:

I thought, “Oh, I do kind of like this, so maybe that’s something I want to think about.” So, when we got to our next duty station, which lots of times we wouldn’t stay that long, I started thinking that I could take some general courses. Then, when we got stationed in Hawaii, it was a long enough period that I thought, “I can actually start something and finish it. “

Of her first forays into higher education she recollected:

I actually was realizing . . . and I hate to say this, but thinking, “Cathy, you’re not really stupid. You know, you’re a fairly intelligent person. You can do well in
school.” And I think that was the first time I really realized that, because I didn’t think of myself as that way when I was in high school at all.

Regarding her family’s reaction to her first setting out on her pathway to the professoriate, Dr. Ruff mentioned:

When I finally made that decision that I was going to go back to school and earn a degree in teaching, I think my father was very pleased with that because I think he had kind of always seen me as doing that. But…I don’t think they had any understanding of what it was going to take, what I needed to do. I mean, it’s just “Oh, Cathy is going back to school.”

**Exhibiting Resilience**

Dr. Ruff’s hardiness manifests itself in several ways. First, her family’s history of subsistence living shaped the person she is and has made her sympathetic to the challenges marginalized students face. Though her father seemed to notice an ill-defined spark in her, even her guidance counselors wrote her off as not being college material.

Second, Dr. Ruff, as any person in a military family, persevered as she and her family moved from post to post throughout her husband’s military career. Then, upon his retirement and through the move back to the hometown she had fled so many years before, she struggled to secure employment—despite her education—because she had been away for so long that she was considered an outsider. She allowed, “I was disappointed that they weren’t looking at what was best for their children in the schools.”

Then, after settling back in Appalachia, finally securing a job, and beginning her doctorate, several tragedies struck Dr. Ruff in quick succession.
My husband died, you know, and my sister after that, and dad. So it’s been a lot of that. But I still went on and finished, you know. I had meant to finish in my two and a half years, and it took me about four….My sister and brother-in-law were killed in a car accident the week before I was supposed to present my dissertation….And then my husband, he passed away after a year into my …a year into my doctoral studies….I mean, it was a hard time, it was a real hard time. She persisted through this time of enormous pain and claimed, “I came back to work here about three weeks after he [her husband] died, and I think I got right back on that dissertation, and that did help me.” She added, “I knew this was all part of what I needed, and I was able to think enough to think that, you know, ‘What am I going to do if I don’t have it?’”

*Financing Higher Education*

As Dr. Ruff was born into poor family, she did not benefit from any financial support for her education. “It was never really a possibility, you know, because of our financial status and everything at the time, and so I didn’t give it any thought.” Her high school guidance counselor did not contribute, either. She stated:

And the other interesting thing, when I think about, is we had, I guess, a high school counselor, but I don’t remember them ever, you know, speaking to us in general about college or that there were grants or anything. It seems stupid now that I didn’t realize that there were, you know, grants. You know, I certainly would have been eligible for some of those, but I just thought “Dad doesn’t have the money to send me; I’m not going.”
Thus Dr. Ruff’s college career was delayed and when she finally began, finances were less of a concern. By that time she was eligible for GI Bill benefits. Also, for much of the time she was in school, there were two incomes in the family.

**Finding a Home at College**

Dr. Ruff does not believe that family history needs to limit us. She also contends that developing a vision of oneself in a different setting than that in which one has grown up is of key importance. Formulating a concept of oneself as a college student is particularly important to children of the working poor. Getting caught in the job trap is a challenge, too, as many young people are attracted by the allure of seemingly well-paying jobs right out of high school, but do not consider that those jobs might disappear unexpectedly or that they offer limited potential for advancement.

After graduating high school and enlisting in the military, it took several years, and some direct encouragement from a supervisor, before Dr. Ruff could envision herself succeeding in college. Regarding the start of her college career she stated:

I think once I started at [undergraduate institution] I was really able to know this is what I can do, and I quit working and I was able to go full-time and devote more time to just the learning of it. Then I felt more at home in college, you know, college per se and actually for learning purposes rather than just, you know, I need to get this in before we leave here and go off somewhere else.

Fortunately for Dr. Ruff, after overcoming the initial barriers to her matriculation—both fiscal and personal—she adjusted to the scholarly work of a college student. Then, after an emergent period in which she earned her degree, taught for several
years, and a won a teaching award, she viewed a master’s degree as the logical next step.

This easy transition to graduate work stands in sharp contrast to the struggles she encountered in preparing to embark on her undergraduate career. Of beginning her graduate work she recalled:

I was teaching, and so I was taking courses related to what I was doing and they were applicable, you know, and I could have discussions, discourse about what was taking place in my own classroom with the courses that I was taking, or I could go back to my classroom and apply something I’d learned…And I was with other teachers, you know. They were my colleagues and people that I worked with and people in my profession, so I admired them for what they were doing, and I think they had an admiration for me.

Then, upon returning to Appalachia, Dr. Ruff overcame feelings of being unqualified and she applied for an adjunct teaching position at XYZ College. This is particularly interesting, because Dr. Ruff mentions that she had never thought of teaching there. Yet she applied and was hired, only to learn that, ultimately, she would need a doctorate to be eligible for an anticipated tenure-track position. Clearly, her academic and professional confidence had grown mightily, because she did not hesitate in preparing to commence doctoral work.

Now, as a faculty member at an expensive, private college near the hardscrabble farm where she grew up, Dr. Ruff is comfortable in her position, though not fully at ease. She joked that in the perception of a poor young kid from the region, “[XYZ] College
was . . . yeah, the la-de-da.” She is wary of the effect of such affluence on the Appalachian students who attend XYZ College. She commented:

Some of the students, they’re—I’ve had a few that their mothers work here and so they get tuition remission—and you can tell they’re a little uncomfortable when you get to know that. And I try to give case studies and work with them about “Why do we discount kids just because of where they come from or who their parents are or something?” And we have a lot of discussions about that, and I think when I do that, I try to let them know—or I tell them my own story, you know, about how I think a lot of my teachers just kind of discounted me as, you know, becoming anything . . . doing anything different.

Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree

Asked about her birth family’s reaction to her decision to go beyond a bachelor’s degree and seek, ultimately, a doctorate, Dr. Ruff was clear:

I don’t know as they even thought that there was another level after that, or realized that or thought that it would help me that much. I mean, they were never against education, but I don’t think there was an understanding of what it meant. So, again, I don’t think it was any big issue or anything that they said when I told them that I was taking courses towards my graduate [degree].

She added, “I don’t think they see a big difference between what I did initially, you know. I think that was enough of a difference.”
Transitioning to a Life in the Academy

Upon securing an adjunct position at XYZ College, Dr. Ruff immersed herself in the academic work of the university. In her case, this entailed not only her teaching responsibilities, but also her obligations as a doctoral student. Her dedication resulted in conferral of her Ph.D. in four years and, along the way, receiving the XYZ College Innovative Teaching Award.

Today, Dr. Ruff strives to portray education as the vehicle for reaching your dreams. She sometimes feels like a straddler between the world of her youth and her current world and occasionally fears not fitting into either community.

She clearly sees both the potential of higher education—she need only look in the mirror to witness this—and the dilemmas. Of the latter she stated:

You know, in higher education, we can tend to all kind of . . . we’re all kind of preaching about, you know, what’s good for everyone in society and all our little thoughts and here’s what needs to be taken care of because I’m the doctor, you know. I’m going to tell you what…

She lamented, “We’ve gotten very polarized over stupid things,” and she worries that this is to the detriment of the students. Including her, if this statement is an indication that Dr. Ruff views herself as a part of the academy.

Considering Class

Nevertheless, Dr. Ruff notes a long awareness of class. She likes her current colleagues and considers them kind, but is aware that many come from middle and upper class backgrounds. She thinks that some are naïve about the realities of existence for poor
people, particularly those who live in Appalachia, where her current college is located. When with her colleagues, she does not speak about her childhood unless she hears a derisive remark. Then she might alert the guilty party that she is from a farm not too far from campus. She described, “No, it can feel like…there’s different worlds. There’s my world here, and then there’s my other world in [city name] with some people, and then there’s my world out with my family who’s still on the old farm, you know.”

**Dr. Hudspeth Summary**

Dr. Hudspeth is a late 50-something, Caucasian female from a working-class, immigrant family. She grew up in the central Midwest and earned all of her degrees from the public, flagship university—a large, research-intensive institution—in her home state. She is now a professor of English at a two-year technical college in one of the states bordering the Ohio River.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. Hudspeth was raised in a family that was first generation both educationally and nationally. Her grandparents were immigrants and her parents were the first of the line to be born in the United States. Her father was drafted into the military at age 18 without earning a high school degree, though he later earned his GED. Her mother was not educationally inclined and married her father soon after high school.

Dr. Hudspeth remembered being interested in education and learning from an early age.

I just always played school. Other kids would play house or they would be on the monkey bars or whatever. I would play school. If I had to play with dolls or if I
had to play with real kids, I just played school. And even when I grew up, past the playing school—I was a real nerd—I would do research and write reports . . . for myself.

Dr. Hudspeth recalled that her parents, even though they did not hold college degrees, expected them to continue their educations beyond secondary school. “That they just happened to think that education was the way to do better….I don’t know that it was ever really said; it was always just understood.” Regarding her decision to become an educator, she noted:

I just thought, “yes, there are always going to be teachers, and sometimes you get summers off.” I didn’t have a lot of summers off, because I went to school a lot of times, but I thought, “if I’m going to get married, have children, that’s one that the hours are good.”

Thus Dr. Hudspeth attended her home state’s flagship university and studied English, with the intention of becoming an English teacher. Regarding what she told her family about her educational experiences, she related that as a middle and high school student:

I would talk about school all the time. I don’t know if I did that so much when I was in college, because I wasn’t sure that they could relate to that. Now, my dad probably would have been interested in some of it, but being an English major wasn’t really something that—they weren’t big readers or anything like that.

Dr. Hudspeth earned her undergraduate degree in four years, despite a hectic work schedule. When asked about her tremendous work ethic—she worked essentially full-
time after her freshman year and, in fact, throughout both of her graduate programs—she stated:

This is just what you do. I don’t know where I picked it up. I mean, nobody said, “You need to do this.” I was just probably one of those people who always tried to do the right thing….To be the good child.

Dr. Hudspeth mentioned that she did not attend the commencement ceremonies for her undergraduate or master’s degrees, though she did participate in the doctoral hooding ceremony. When asked about this she indicated that she appreciated the smaller, more intimate scope of the doctoral ceremony. The undergraduate and master’s ceremonies were, by contrast, too generic and impersonal. Of her family’s thoughts on the graduation ceremony she stated, “They didn’t say anything about it….But I finally went [to the doctoral ceremony], and I think they were excited about that because my name was called that time. She admitted that her Dad was proud to have a doctor in the family and noted that her family viewed education as the key to a better life.

After graduation, Dr. Hudspeth got married and began substitute teaching in the region. She held one “nightmare” position for a short time before ultimately securing a position that she held for ten years. Recalling her pathway through the educational system, she stated, “I mean, my parents were supportive, but . . . I think it was just me.” Regarding her parent’s pride in her accomplishments she admitted, “I know that a lot of times I would catch my parents, if I were around them, mentioning to other people: ‘Oh, that’s Cathy. She’s got three degrees from [university name]’…. Yes, yeah, they were proud.”
Dr. Hudspeth does not believe that holding a doctorate has changed your relationship with family and friends. Of this she stated:

No, not with family and friends, I would say…. And when I meet new people, they don’t know it. What’s more likely to intimidate them is if my husband says, “She’s an English teacher.”…. Then they think they have to watch everything they say.

**Getting to College**

In the eyes of their parents, attending college was something of a foregone conclusion for Dr. Hudspeth and her brother. She remembered being suited for this course even as a child:

I would just go to the library and just look at books, and I’d see a book and I’d go, “Oh, that’s pretty cool,” and I’d look through that book, and that would lead me to some other book on that subject or….Encyclopedias back then, you know, when there were real encyclopedias, I loved looking at encyclopedias.

She continued, “I didn’t hang out with kids a lot, I didn’t play with other kids a lot. It wasn’t that I didn’t like them; I just didn’t like getting outside and getting sweaty was part of it.” Apparently, this did not go unnoticed by her peers. “My brother-in-law, my husband’s brother, who is about the same age I am but he was a year behind me, he always said, ‘You were the person who carried all the books.’”

Despite her natural interest in and propensity for learning, Dr. Hudspeth possessed little college knowledge. She took the ACT only once and applied to only two schools. This may have been as much a practicality as anything, however. Her state’s
flagship university was very close to her home and she knew that she would be admitted. Plus, by attending this school she could live at home, save money and have a car.

As expected, Dr. Hudspeth performed well in school, though she did have to make adjustments. She noted being initially frustrated and experiencing study shock, as she had not needed to study diligently in high school. She recalled:

I think I always knew how to learn, but I’d never had to really put it into place, because school was really pretty easy for me. And I had to learn how to study, because I didn’t really have to study in [high] school.

Being a teacher had always been her goal and, ultimately, Dr. Hudspeth chose her content area according to the college professors she liked. Though she had a strong background in German, she disliked her freshman German professor and was fond of her freshman English professor, so English was chosen over German. She reported that although she was one of the top students in her high school, she had received no assistance from guidance counselors even in regard to college admission, much less in terms of major—or specialization—selection. She lamented not knowing that she could have easily picked up a German minor if she had known how the system worked.

**Exhibiting Resilience**

True to her strong sense of self-determinism, Dr. Hudspeth does not necessarily recognize the challenges she encountered on her pathway to the professoriate and does not easily recall any significant hurdles along her way to her current position. She paid for graduate work as she went along, her family helped with childcare, and the class work
was not particularly demanding for her once she made the initial adjustment to the demands of college.

For Dr. Hudspeth, resilience might be defined more broadly by her ability to maintain proficiency in multiple demanding tasks—any one of which could be considered a full-time responsibility—simultaneously. After her first year as an undergraduate, she worked nearly full-time in various jobs. In her estimation, this positively affected her academic performance, as it required her to manage her time proficiently.

Both as a master’s and doctoral student, Dr. Hudspeth was usually teaching full-time in addition to being a full-time student, mother, and wife. She recalled:

The hardest part of doctoral work? Just scheduling everything with having a child and working and . . . just not being so tired when I’d try to do the work….I’ve been tired my whole life ….I would be tired between leaving school and going to school, going to classes, because I would leave school at three o’clock, and classes would start at four o’clock and not end till ten; there were usually two [classes] in there. Once I got there, I was fine; but it was that in-between time, some of the down time, I thought, why am I doing this?

Other than her ability to manage numerous important tasks efficiently over long periods of time, Dr. Hudspeth alluded to one possible area of challenge when she said:

I had no real advisor. You could stop in and say, “Can somebody help me here?” but I really don’t think I ever did….I taught myself [how to study] in college… That was the biggest challenge just because I didn’t really know how to study…. 
and a lot of them are smarter than you are, and you have to figure out how to work with that. It took me a good year to do that…. And I don’t even know who I would’ve asked, if there were a person.

Additionally, she demonstrated considerable resilience when searching for jobs after she received her doctorate. She noted:

I suppose the most challenging has been after I received it. As long as we were in [home state] I had that job, and I could’ve probably gone on full-time at the community college there if I wanted to, but at that time I wasn’t interested.

She admitted that, in fact, she encountered sustained challenge in securing work when her family moved from the central Midwest and expressed her belief that for her, the doctorate was commonly a hindrance to being hired into K-12 systems.

**Financing Higher Education**

Dr. Hudspeth was raised in a family that had little money. For a while, they lived in the same house as her grandparents in a downstairs apartment. Though her parents had little education of their own, her education was important to them and she was a good student and avid reader. Regarding the impact of her family’s socioeconomic status on her educational and life choices, she stated:

Well, my parents didn’t have a lot of money, and I just felt like I needed to go to the closest place, and that was 14, 15 miles down the road, and at that time it was only $9 an hour. I briefly considered XYZ City University, but that’s a private college. I applied for a scholarship through my dad’s company. Another girl in my class, who was lower ranked in my class than I was, got the scholarship
because her dad made a little less money, and they had three children instead of two... I couldn’t afford to go there on my own. And I never knew how much money my parents made, but I know it wasn’t a lot.

Aside from these considerations, finances were not a factor Dr. Hudspeth appeared to consider prominent in her story. She admitted that she knew that she would never make much money as a teacher, and was more concerned about being content with her career choice. Plus, she noted that her husband has always made more money than she has.

**Finding a Home at College**

As a student Dr. Hudspeth was never integrated into the life of campus. She did not live on campus, join student organizations, or participate in many of the other activities that are rights of passage for many American college students. She noted:

I didn’t even go to any football games or basketball games or anything like that when I was an undergraduate. I dated my husband those whole four years. He was a year ahead of me in high school, but I didn’t start dating him till I graduated.

Dr. Hudspeth does not appear concerned that her experience was diminished for not having the typical undergraduate experience. Perhaps her work ethic impacted her in that she did not appreciate the copious amounts of free time that many college students enjoy. She stated:

I worked part-time—not the first year, but I did after that—and actually, I found I did better when I worked, because I was better at organizing my time, and I wouldn’t think, oh, I have all this free time.
Dr. Hudspeth was not a hermit, though. She was dating the man who she would eventually marry and she established friendships with a few classmates.

There were two other girls and I who were English majors. One had moved to my high school when she was a senior, and I knew her but I wasn’t really friends with her. So she and I became friends, and then this other girl ended up in a lot of classes. We were the three C’s: Carla, Cynthia, and Cathy.

When asked if she ever felt like an imposter in higher education as numerous other FG, working-class scholars have, Dr. Hudspeth stated:

I don’t think I ever felt that way. Probably because everybody else [at her alma mater] was probably first generation, I would think. And [school name] is not a school where you get a lot of high-dollar-income people, you know?... I just figured I could probably do the work as well as anybody else.

Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree

While Dr. Hudspeth was in her second teaching position, she began working toward her master’s degree because she perceived the M.Ed. as an expectation of job. She attended full-time and worked full-time as a teacher. She did not attend commencement for this degree, either. Of her graduate education she mentioned, “I saw that as a possible means of advancement, and I liked going to school….And, as it turned out, graduate school is much better than undergraduate.”

After completion of her M.Ed., Dr. Hudspeth and her husband adopted a child. Unfortunately, in her school system, adoptive mothers were not eligible for maternity leave. New motherhood notwithstanding, she was eligible for leave to pursue continuing
education. So Dr. Hudspeth enrolled in doctoral course work. Her husband encouraged her to enroll full-time so that they could get football tickets. She did; they did; and a wrinkle appeared. The university said that to be enrolled in doctoral classes full-time, she must be admitted to the doctoral program. Though she did not originally plan to actually pursue a doctorate, she decided to take the leap. After all, she liked going to school. Dr. Hudspeth proudly proclaimed that she enrolled in her doctoral program for football tickets.

Dr. Hudspeth recalled only briefly questioning her adequacy in her doctoral program. She wrote that she was raised with a firm belief in herself and affirmed that her family did not question her educational choices. She stated that her sense was that they were not surprised by her decision to pursue a doctorate. She related that her spouse was encouraging, too. “Well, I was married then, and so my husband just figured it was something—if that made me happy to go to school, that was okay... And he was always supportive.”

Dr. Hudspeth considered the big challenge of her doctoral work was wrangling her committee members. She noted, “The hardest part was just always getting the committee members together at the same time based on their schedules, when could they meet”. Fortunately, she finally had a good advisor who understood that she was a mother and that, as she approached her dissertation defense, she was also nearing her due date with her second child. Of this woman, Dr. Hudspeth wrote in her essay:

In the assignment of the advisor, I was extremely lucky. She was one of the few women in the department and she knew what it was like to work full time, be a
wife and mother, and go to school full time. She knew that I likely wanted to continue teaching in the K-12 public schools and she knew that I detested the “publish or perish” mentality of full universities.

Dr. Hudspeth was quick to mention that her parents continued to be a source of support throughout her doctoral process. Though they could not contribute to her work in substantive ways, they could help logistically. She stated, “I had a small child. That’s where my parents came in real handy: baby-sitting.”

**Transitioning to a Life in the Academy**

Just as she resisted assimilation into what may be considered a typical undergraduate experience, Dr. Hudspeth has similarly resisted taking her place in the academy. She insists that her doctorate has not really changed her is quick to point out that she doesn’t feel smarter than anyone else. She admitted though, “And I’m pretty good at Jeopardy.”

Dr. Hudspeth has chosen to work at community colleges or technical schools where the publishing mandate does not exist. She is purely a practitioner and simply is not interested in research. She plainly stated:

Well, I suppose the differences would be that four-year schools generally expect you to do research and publish, that kind of thing, and I was never interested in that, even though I used to write reports for no reason. I just didn’t see the value. I’ve been always more interested in the actual process of teaching and trying to make students learn better, finding different ways to teach.
Despite her rejection of the publish-or-perish mandate of the academy, Dr. Hudspeth does now consider herself a college teacher. After many years running various gifted programs in high schools, she was hired by XYZ Technical College in 2005. Though her current school is too liberal for her liking, she is now a full professor working with high-school students seeking the post-secondary education option. She enjoys this work and has even let her K-12 teaching credential expire.

**Considering Class**

Dr. Hudspeth has a solid grounding in working-class ideals, whether in terms of work ethic or views of higher education. For instance, she liked graduate school more than her undergraduate education, “Because you don’t have to take geology and all those things….I guess mostly [I liked classes] that pertained to what I was going to do, to what I would actually be teaching.” This no nonsense approach to higher education is much more typical of working-class families who have traditionally viewed a college degree as the ticket to a good job than it is to middle and upper-class families who better understand that a college degree enhances the quality of life. Particularly as an undergraduate, she was single-minded in her quest to become a teacher, and classes that she deemed extraneous to her career goals were not well received.

Dr. Hudspeth allowed, “I think it’s [a liberal arts education] of personal value, but I don’t know that it’s much value in going out there in the real world getting a job.” She related a mantra of the two-year colleges she has long served when she continued:

But for a practical matter, a two-year college makes a lot of sense to a lot of people…. Because they can go two years and be immediately employed—or
maybe not in today’s world, but almost immediately employed…. And a lot of
two-year graduates end up with higher-paying jobs than liberal arts students from
regular colleges.

Dr. Hudspeth does not believe that every student needs a four-year degree. She
stated, “It really bothers me that schools like where my son goes, [school name], and
where I taught, in [school name], that is their entire focus: that everybody has to go to
college.”

**Dr. Butler Summary**

Dr. Butler is an early fifty-something Caucasian male from a poor, working-class
family in one of the states bordering the Ohio River. He earned his undergraduate degree
from a small, private liberal arts college near his hometown and both his master’s and
doctorate from a prestigious, private, research-intensive university on the eastern
seaboard. He is now a professor of Statistics, department chair, and assistant provost at
the flagship institution in his home state.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. Butler begins by identifying “zero generation” forebears as heroes of the story
of FG students, since their labor in the coal mines and farm fields prepared the ground for
later productivity. He notes that he was born to poor parents, both of who lost parents
early in life and that his own father was raised in an orphanage. His parents met in coal
country, but they got out of the mining camps after several years and settled in a rural
region best known for tobacco farming.
Neither of his parents had had a positive educational experience, nor did his older brother. Dr. Butler was determined to chart a different course. After all, his parents had sacrificed so much for their children. This did not mean, however, that Dr. Butler was deliberating college from an early age or that his parents held this dream for him. This is far from the case. He recalled:

I remember when I was close to graduating…there was a very interesting car at the time called… a Datsun Z, I think it was called. They were these little sports-car sort of things….And I remember my dad saying that he would consider signing for one of the Datsun’s provided after I got out of high school, I didn’t waste my time on college, and I went ahead and got serious and got a job.

Clearly, Dr. Butler did not make good on his father’s offer. Instead, he attended a small, private, liberal arts college in his hometown. His entrance into academia began a shift away from his birth family. As he delved further into studies as a double major in mathematics and religious studies, he identified less and less with the fundamental religious tenets of his parents. Being the good son, though, he was determined not to hurt their feelings and was relieved when his parents were not offended by his senior thesis, though it used a conservative, Christian text—one that his father owned—to deconstruct fundamentalism. He recalled:

But when my dad actually started reading some of my papers, and asked to look at those, you know, I was a little uncomfortable, because I didn’t want to… I just didn’t want to put him in a situation where he would feel like that I was in any sense tearing down anything that he had sort of so carefully built up….But when
he read the first couple, and there were no large explosions, or the black-lung check wasn’t withdrawn or anything like that….I felt... I felt reinforced….Maybe validated.

Dr. Butler noted that, generally:

My parents weren’t that sort of involved in our education….We didn’t talk a lot about it, but there was never any sort of “So what did you do this last semester?” You know, there were never any of those kinds of discussions at Thanksgiving, usually didn’t have anything to do with [academic]work.

He added, “But who knows? That could have very well just been, ‘Hey, this kid’s making good progress.’ It’s always good to make good progress, right?”

Although Dr. Butler speaks of his siblings fondly, he described some longstanding, interpersonal friction related to his integration into the academy. He spoke of one contentious incident with his brother:

I remember once, you know, when he [older brother] was getting close to retirement… I asked him if he ever had to deal with any industrial cases, because at the time I was learning about pretty big problems with drugs in places, even places like Toyota here in Central Kentucky, and how state police would put people in undercover. And he misheard me and thought I said, “Have you ever dealt with any interesting cases?” And why that really stuck with me was because of how quickly he bristled, you know, in response to that... I clearly had tapped what I think was in general this sort of “Let’s just not talk about what we do.”
**Getting to College**

Dr. Butler denied ever being a good high school student, but noted that he enjoyed learning. He highlighted several adults who played key roles in his life. Two cross-country coaches, in particular, helped him develop an identity as a runner. This led to nebulous thoughts of running at the college level. Then, Dr. Butler wrote in his essay, one high school geometry teacher called him the best geometry student he had ever seen. This prompted him to think about the possibility of succeeding academically in college. Suddenly, he had a vision of himself as a college student.

Nearing graduation, the Navy was a prime option for Dr. Butler. However, a student teacher from the elite private college that would one day be his alma mater, encouraged him to consider attending XYZ College instead. This proposition was laughable to Dr. Butler, who had seen the condescension of the affluent XYZ College students when his father was a maintenance worker there. Fortunately, he met an older runner who, he later learned, was a XYZ College professor. This runner talked to him and encouraged him to run cross-country for XYZ. Soon, he was trying not to drown in the social scene. Dr. Butler related:

There was certainly never any plan to go to XYZ College. I didn’t feel I could get in [the state’s flagship institution] at the time, so I applied to Murray and I applied to Cumberland, and there was another one there that I’m forgetting. Maybe I applied to Eastern since that was sort of becoming the family tradition.


Exhibiting Resilience

Dr. Butler I recognizes, “I think I’ve always been a late bloomer.” Being able to own this moniker, yet flourish in academe, is a testament to his ability and work ethic.

For starters, Dr. Butler was a late bloomer when it came to his decision to attend college. In fact, he wrote in his essay that as late as his senior year of high school he was planning to enlist in the Navy and had signed a “nonbinding commitment to the Navy’s Advanced Training Program.” Other forces intervened, though, and in the fall after high school graduation he found himself on the campus of the highly endowed, private college in his hometown.

Also, according to Dr. Butler, he did not come out of high school well prepared insofar as the expectations of the collegiate classroom. This meant that he had to recover from a less than stellar start to his undergraduate career.

There was a certain amount of academic maturity that took place after that first year, and even that sort of overstates it. I kind of figured out how to do what I needed to do. So I don’t think there was so much a lack of knowledge that first year; it’s just not even understanding sort of what was required of me, and then just trying to keep up with everything that I was trying to keep up with. It was very, very different, kind of a big step from…high school, you know, where I’ve said to other people even recently, “I can’t remember really doing homework.”

He added:
Freshman year was difficult. You know, I look back and laugh, because I ended up being a math major and of course did my master’s and PhD in math, but my first two low grades were in calculus and then one in physics. And this was not for lack of working; it was just really not understanding the material and not sort of figuring out even what the professors wanted, which is such a big part of this kind of thing.

After he adjusted, Dr. Butler was an excellent student. This adjustment period was common to Dr. Butler and related even to the beginning of his graduate career:

It always seems like there’s a transition to make, but I did not enter those [graduate] classes, you know, thinking that I could wrestle them to the ground immediately; there always seem to be a need for that warm-up period.

Yet he persisted through this “warm-up period” as an undergraduate student and in graduate school, though academics were not the only adjustment required. Overcoming social or class stigma is a hallmark of Dr. Butler’s resilience, as well. Dr. Butler hailed from a poor, working-class background and for a while his father was on the facilities staff of the elite college where Dr. Butler would eventually earn his bachelor’s degree. Additionally, he had attended high school within three miles of this college, so he knew its reputation—and the reputations of its affluent student body—well. He had heard from his father that the facilities crews were known dismissively as the “Grey Army” for the grey uniforms they wore as they anonymously went about their work. Though he dealt with it productively, this attitude constituted a hurdle for Dr. Butler to overcome on his pathway to the professoriate. He stated:
It certainly created a perspective for me that I have trouble breaking free of… there is a certain sense of… alienation is too strong of a word, but a certain sense that I still don’t fully identify with the families that are there.

**Financing Higher Education**

Attending XYZ College presented many struggles to Dr. Butler and his family. Aside from the rigorous academics and the brutal, class-based undercurrents, cost was a major reason he did not consider attending school there. XYZ College was expensive. This is not less true today. In a serendipitous twist, though, his father began receiving Black Lung benefits [a lung disease common to people who have worked in coal mines] at approximately the time he was deciding where to attend college. Despite his previous offer of assistance purchasing a new car if Dr. Butler would forego college, his father literally and physically sacrificed to help him get there. Dr. Butler explained:

Which when you hear people from the mountains talk about how difficult it is, you can believe it is really, incredibly difficult to actually, you know, even get an application in for black-lung benefits…. But he managed to make it all work out.

He continued:

In those days, the way the black-lung benefits were set up, there were benefits that came directly to the recipient and spouse, but there were also benefits that went to children. What was interesting is the benefits didn’t have to be shared with children; they weren’t checks written to the children, they were so-called child benefits. I found it pretty interesting that right away he decided to share those
with the children….For me it was just very fortunate, perfect timing….It was a sizeable amount that certainly helped pay for the tuition.

Dr. Butler noted of this settlement, “Of course, there was never an opportunity for me to study abroad or anything.” Also, since XYZ College tuition was so expensive, he lived at home. He could not afford the additional cost of room and board.

I lived in the basement of their [parents’] house, with a separate entrance and whatnot; and as I told folks, you know, back in the day, I would go for days and we wouldn’t see each other. The reason that was done at the time was entirely fiscal….There was never really an option of living on campus. Where would the additional money have come from?

**Finding a Home at College**

The transition from rural life to XYZ College was challenging for Dr. Butler. He lacked the funding to enjoy many of the amenities his classmates took for granted; the college knowledge they seemed to grasp inherently; and the social capital they possessed as a birthright. He was keenly aware of the difference and struggled to adapt.

Still, Dr. Butler persisted and overcame Cs in his first year to earn As for the remainder of his time at XYZ College. He acknowledged that he was transformed (“That’s really, you know, I think, a tremendous transformation.”) by his XYZ College education. He gained an entirely new perspective to inform his nascent worldview as he emerged from the sheltered fundamentalism of his youth. He recounted:

I can still remember when I first encountered—this might have been my sophomore year, and I’ll never forget this—the Gilgamesh Epic, and I understood
for the first time that there were these flood stories that, you know, had existed in many cultures, and that didn’t really shake me; I just felt that it enlightened me…. and also kinda fit, you know, if you’d ever had trouble buying a flood story. And I thought, *oh, so it was in this culture as well*, and then I started to piece together…. So we’ve got a student in college with a background that has been fairly confining from one point of view. So I was seeing the world as a much bigger place … I think I ended up just developing a view of the world that was far less local.

Apparently, he even began to speak differently, as neighbors, with whom he had grown up, joked that they could not understand him any longer. He stated:

Of course, I wasn’t aware that I was speaking any differently at all….I would say that people sort of on the other side of that equation, at XYZ College, still maybe had trouble understanding what I was saying from another perspective.

By his sophomore year Dr. Butler had adapted and found his stride in the classroom and as a cross-country runner at XYZ College. After being conferred his undergraduate degree and entering graduate school at an elite eastern institution, Dr. Butler again needed time to adjust to the new environment and expectations.

After I got to graduate school, it was a cycle that was created by encountering people from large state universities who had really fantastic educations; and part of the understanding there, or the epiphany, was that, you know, people from these large state universities got fantastic educations if they were competitive people and they took advantage of what was available to them….They had not had sort of this liberal arts exposure that I’d had, so one might argue that their
tethers were shorter in one sense, but they had had probably, you know, five more math courses in areas than I had had because of, you know, the smorgasbord that they were able to choose from.

Of his transition from undergraduate to graduate education, Dr. Butler misspoke, albeit prophetically. He noted, “It was daunting. I mean, what was probably more daunting for me at that time was just, you know, I hadn’t fully made the transition to apartment living and all when I was in high school.” Of course, he would not have lived in an apartment in high school. Clearly he intended to say “college.” That he said “high school” instead speaks to the way the foundation of his life remained unchanged despite the enormity of the intellectual growth occurring he experienced throughout his undergraduate years. These foundations were forever altered when he went away to earn his master’s and doctoral degrees.

**Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree**

As was the case when he was transitioning from high school to college, Dr. Butler did not consider graduate school until late in his senior year. He did not recall any discussions with professors regarding graduate school, but admitted that he did not initiate these discussions, either. He stated, “There may have been some more active advising. I’m sure my instructors would have advised me if I had maybe made myself available for that advice.” When considering a graduate school major, Dr. Butler chose mathematics over religion for purely practical reasons. He joked about telling an undergraduate mentor that with a graduate degree in religious studies he would have a better boss, but with a graduate degree in mathematics he would have a job.
Ultimately, he recalled, graduate school “was sort of a self-motivated, largely self-funded kind of enterprise, and so I worked kind of as an independent contractor, in a way.” Of applying to prestigious graduate schools he added, “It was daunting.” Of course, the unstated conclusion to this thought was that it was not only the reputations of the elite colleges and universities to which he was applying that gave him pause, but also the prospect of living independently and shedding the last vestiges of the life he had always known.

Dr. Butler ended up at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he felt even greater class anxiety than he had initially at his undergraduate institution. He noted:

Really the big part of the transition to Chapel Hill was….tiny town, completely everything is about the university, incredibly huge campus compared to XYZ College’s campus, so just adjusting to that, and being surrounded by people who became good friends but were very competitive and very well qualified to be there….there certainly was not that sense of kind of nurturing that you might have at a smaller college. So that transition was difficult for those reasons, I think. He mentioned that while his XYZ College classmates were tolerant, his UNC classmates were disdainful. Ambition and competition were normative at UNC and he had a slow start. Despite his contention that “I felt pretty dumb that first year, I have to tell you,” Dr. Butler found his stride and began to attract, “non-negative attention.” Then he transferred to nearby Duke University—which then had strong ties to his undergraduate alma mater—where he truly found his place.
Dr. Butler is quick to clarify that the move to Duke was not precipitated by poor performance. After his initial warm-up period he had found his stride at UNC-Chapel Hill and, as he said, had begun to attract some, “non-negative attention” before his transfer to Duke. Rather, he stated:

I think one of the nice things really about transferring to Duke….was that I bought myself a little bit of time. And, you know, others would say, “Well, no, wait, you lost time because you transferred.” But really I think that that ended up buying me some time. There were a couple of courses that I had done well in on paper at Chapel Hill that I had the opportunity to take again because they wanted to do it their own way at Duke. And in their minds, it didn’t have anything to do with my record or anything, but I was almost wiping my brow and saying, “Phew, so I get a chance to do this again. Maybe this time, before the exams come around, I’ll actually learn it.”

Transitioning to a Life in the Academy

When asked about his plans for a career in the academy, Dr. Butler unequivocally stated, “I never, ever actually envisioned, probably not even as I got into early graduate school, that I would end up in the academy, so to say.” In fact, this career almost did not happen at all.

Dr. Butler’s father passed away from cancer while he was studying at Duke. Before his death, Dr. Butler returned home to be with his dad. At the time he felt burned out on academia and considered not returning. In fact, he decided not to return and got a job in a factory in Louisville, Kentucky. He noted that while he identified with and liked
the people with whom he worked, he found the actual work stultifying. He mentioned, “They were just earning the paycheck and just trying to get from paycheck to paycheck. But, you know, it was, in a way, a wonderful catalyst back to graduate school, because it certainly helped me go back motivated.”

Fortuitously, a Duke professor unexpectedly telephoned Dr. Butler at his work place and provided the additional motivation required to entice Dr. Butler to come back and finish studies under his tutelage. Dr. Butler noted:

But it wasn’t clear [that I would return] until…this call came from the person who became my advisor, but it was certainly not anything that was expected. I hadn’t dropped any hints, I hadn’t gone to any of my friends saying, “See what Burdick [doctoral mentor] is thinking.” There hadn’t been any of those kinds of contacts at all…. But it could have easily gone another way, I think.

Reinvigorated, Dr. Butler returned to Duke and finished his dissertation in three semesters. Then he followed his long-time girlfriend back home, where she was starting medical school. He found a visiting position in the statistics department at XYZ University and declined a dream job at his undergraduate alma mater because he wanted to conduct research and teach. Though the relationship did not work out, the visiting professorship did. Dr. Butler found a home at XYZ University. He has thrived there and is now a full professor, department chair, and assistant provost.

When asked about his thoughts on being a scholar, Dr. Butler stated:

I’m not so sure I’ve ever fully felt like a scholar. I’ve felt like that I have, you know, I’ve been a very competent sort of person. Um, I don’t know, maybe I’m
just uncomfortable with that term….I certainly felt like, you know, I had skills, and there were things that I could do, and that maybe I had just done something that wasn’t ever done before, and that was a good thing. But “scholar” still seems to me to be a title I’m not sure I really know if I’ve ever really lived up to.

Regarding his arrival at XYZ University, Dr. Butler stated:

Certainly after I got here I had a number of really good colleagues who took an interest in me. And that’s something that even at very different levels as I go through, I’ve been really fortunate to have some good friends who have encouraged me from within the academy. The transition here was a very inauspicious transition. The advisor I mentioned before knew the person who was the acting chair at that time. He described him—I can still remember the term he used—described him as a congenial sort. I didn’t realize until I got here that he was kind of a nationally and internationally known person on linear models. But that connection, that personal connection, hooked me up with a visiting position.

He continued:

When you walk into something like this, in the academy, it seems that who you know is absolutely everything. And I was probably here as an assistant professor two or three years before I even realized that having advisors who were sitting on journal editorial boards, or whose students were on journal editorial boards, or whose friends from graduate school were on editorial boards was just absolutely critical—for getting funded, for getting published—and so I really felt like I hit sort of the larger academy without a network at all. So if you can picture the guy
on Sprint or whatever it is saying, “Can you hear me now?” I’d say that no one could hear me now.

In the previous citation, Dr. Butler described a lack of social capital that is valued in the academy. While he has clearly gained the necessary capital over his years at his current institution, he still harbors a sense of alienation from it all. He admitted:

I still feel that way. I am functioning now, as you know, as an assistant provost at the university, but I still feel that way in many ways….And I guess since I’ve never really been... that good at promoting my product—I tend to be more just, “Okay, this is what I can do”—that I continue to feel, though, like an imposter, there’s no question about that.

**Considering Class**

Dr. Butler has been aware of class for most of his life. Though in his childhood he was surrounded primarily by people of similar backgrounds, he heard from his father the struggles—and perils—of physical labor and of the class-imbued title “Grey Army.” Once he was himself a student at XYZ College, he grappled directly with feelings of alienation. These feelings were compounded at UNC and at Duke where, he taught the sons and daughters of America’s privileged class. He recalled being dismayed to see such disdain for underprivileged people.

Dr. Butler related that even as a member of the academy, he has experienced discrimination related to his poor, rural upbringing. He lives in central Kentucky with his wife, also a college professor, and admits being ill at ease with the trappings of his upper middle-class existence. Though accomplished, he occasionally feels inferior to well-
heeled colleagues, who he sometimes finds rude and inconsiderate. He suspects this feeling will remain with him and speculates that the bar is higher [or perceived higher] in the academy for FG students. Of this, he noted:

And certainly this is something that affected me long after I came here, and would feel just a certain kinship with the people who actually do, you know, the other sort of work on campus. I guess I had more of a feeling of what they might think about and look like and talk about when they actually go home in the evenings. But I do think at XYZ … those people who actually did the work on campus were just pretty much invisible. A lot of the students had come from such privileged backgrounds that these were just people there to serve their needs.

As a professor, Dr. Butler tries to help students from small, sheltered environments use their educations to not only become employable—as so many of them and their parents desire—but to:

Try to get kids to study abroad and take the sort of classes that will give them a larger picture of the world, and I think it’s for the exact same reason: to kinda help them understand that, you know, say, for the kids here, that there’s life that’s a little bit different beyond maybe some of the small communities they come from.

Dr. Butler also discussed personal issues related to the fact that he was born and raised in the working class, but is now—like it or not—well ensconced in the middle class. He stated:
I remember I used to get from my family these questions. They were never questions that were intended to be abusive, but “So what do you do?” “Well, I teach.” This was early on in the appointment. “How many classes do you teach?” “Two.” And you can see the addition that’s about to start here…. And so how many hours do they meet a week?” “Three.” And so, you know, you’ve got someone who’s doing maybe hard labor, pulling an extra shift, you know, working 50 hours, and they see that you work six hours a week.

However, Dr. Butler does not deny that the physical rigor of the work he now does, compared to the work his family has previously known, is quite different. He stated:

But fairly said—and I have always been very much a defender of this—at the same time, we’re not doing hard physical labor the way we’ve seen other people do hard physical labor and put in nine or 10 hours and still come in and work in a garden or something. From a physical point of view, that’s a tough life.

He finished this thought by intimating the perspective of a working class person, “And you’re making, you know, twice what I ever made at the top of my life in the workforce, and somehow that just does not seem right.”

Regarding class issues at the large, public institution he has served throughout his career, Dr. Butler articulated clear class prejudices. When speaking of the departmental chairperson who was in place upon his arrival he stated, “This person is so understated, still speaks with a Kentucky accent; he’s very understated, is a very humble guy. It probably took me six or seven years at least to realize how incredibly well known he
was.” He added that this understatement and down-home disposition came at a price, however.

So he was dispatched by a small group of people….“We can’t have him be chair. He grew up in Kentucky, after all. What could he possibly know?” It took me awhile to realize that there was so much more to this than that. And part of it, you know, has to do with the identity of the field and kind of the cultural diversity of the field, and different groups kind of, you know, looking to assert themselves as being the primary players in the field, and so there actually seems to [be] kind of ethnic kinds of, you know, competitions, in a way, within the field.

In reference to this incident, Dr. Butler admitted:

I remember that really sobered me….Because I’m looking at this person as, you know, what a really good example not only of what it means to be an academic—with his national reputation and international reputation—but what it would mean to Kentucky students to see this person leading this department. This is someone who, you know, still a great day for him is taking the boat out on a lake in Western Kentucky... and wetting a line.

Now, with years of informed perspective on which to draw, Dr. Butler recognizes that there were other factors at play.

Even among those who aren’t entitled, there’s a pecking order, and it seemed like that maybe being from Kentucky puts you pretty low down on that pecking order; maybe being from the South, you were down there as well….Large state university, you know, you were probably down there still.
Dr. Butler has worked, and occasionally battled, with these same professors throughout his career. He mentioned that one of them has an office just a few doors down the hall and, in fact, has passed by only minutes before our interview began. He now considers that, “I don’t really know if it had anything to do with particularly who I was or where I was from, but really who I wasn’t, I think,” as class issues so often amount to parsing people according to their “otherness” rather than evaluating them on their merits alone.

**Dr. Broderick Summary**

Dr. Broderick is a late 50-something, Caucasian female who was born into a poor coal mining family in Appalachia. Her parents moved from the Appalachian coal camps to a city in western Ohio when she was a child and she refers to herself as an urban Appalachian. She earned her undergraduate degree from a large, public institution in western Ohio and her master’s degree and doctorate from a top Ivy League university. After struggling to find her place in academia, she is now a full professor and department chair at a small, private, liberal arts college serving a large proportion of first generation students in one of the states bordering the Ohio River.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. Broderick was raised in such a challenging environment that she viewed classroom teachers as rich; she wanted to be one, of course. She was also clear from an early age that she wanted to be her own boss. Her parents left coal country when she was young and settled in Dayton, Ohio, where her parents stressed education as the only way out. They wanted better for their kids than they had for themselves.
Dr. Broderick was the second youngest of seven children. She noted that the age separation between her and her next oldest sibling was considerable and that she was only really close with one brother who was three years her junior. She described him as “a Renaissance man. He was just brilliant.” She suggested that their parents were, by that time, only marginally involved in their upbringing and added that she always looked out for him. She recalled one of their conversations.

I said, “You know, we both grew up like this, and yet I’m so angry, and you’re not. You’re so different, and you don’t remember how hard it was.” And he said to me, “Well, I had a parent and you didn’t.”

The inference, of course, was that Dr. Broderick was a surrogate parent to her younger brother. She continued:

I was so directed at “I have to get out of here,” because I think he was right: that for me it was so much worse than for him, for a variety of reasons. So I always planned escapes for us, like we would practice songs so that when the talent agent came to town, we’d be ready and we would escape, you know, because you can get discovered just sitting on a stool in a drug store, right?

Dr. Broderick admitted that she formulated these plans because, “I was in pain in that situation….Yeah. It was about ‘I have to get myself out of pain.’” She dreamt of a better life for herself and her younger brother. This pain notwithstanding, she stated of her mother and father, “Their whole vision was on ‘How do we help them have a better life?’ In spite of being crazy and alcoholic—I mean, you know, there was that, too.”
Ultimately, her parents’ suspicions proved true: Education was the way to a better life for Dr. Broderick. She related her own experience as an adult:

I started exploring my heritage, and I went to East Kentucky, to where I’m from, and went to Alice Lloyd College. They had archives there, and I heard my uncles talk about coal mining. My father by then had died of blank lung, and I started to look at “Who am I, and what is this perception that I have of myself as a dumb hillbilly, never being good enough, never being smart enough, being so taught to be modest that I can never stand to have anything good said about me or to say anything good about myself for fear that God will send a lightning bolt and I’ll be dead?”

She told of her mother’s acknowledgement that she could have a positive influence on her people.

There’s a book—*I’m from Caney Creek*… which is where Alice Lloyd [College] is….You know, it was started by Alice Lloyd, who came down from Boston, and my mother had been given a book called *Boston’s Gift to Caney Creek*. And when I went to Harvard, my mom said, “And now you will be Caney Creek’s gift to Boston.”

Dr. Broderick, ultimately earned both her master’s and doctoral degrees from Harvard University and stated:

When I graduated the first time—I got my master’s—she just cried. I mean, she couldn’t stand it. Because in spite of how difficult our life was, my mother always
knew that education was a way out, and so for both my parents, all of the kids being educated was really important….I’m the only one who graduated.

She added:

My broader family is very proud, very, very, very proud to have this….It’s a mark of our success. It’s a shared success. I’ve not had any pressure or foolishness around “This makes you different.” Then again, my mother hugged me, which she almost never did, when I got my degree, my doctorate, and she stood back from me and said, “Now remember, [participant’s name], this doesn’t change a thing. Don’t get above your raisin.”

Dr. Broderick clearly stated the vital role her son played in her successes, particularly in her educational victories. “My son was huge in that. He entered high school at the same time that I entered Harvard, and so we went to school together. My son, we always say we grew up together.”

*Getting to College*

Though Dr. Broderick got off to an inauspicious start educationally, she graduated from college in seven years while holding three jobs. Her focus was on earning her teaching credential so that she could go to work and both make a better life for her and do a better job than the teachers who had instructed her. After conferral of her undergraduate degree, Dr. Broderick thought she had essentially forsaken higher education. She stated, “I wanted to be a teacher, I was a teacher. Bingo, I’m done.”
Financing Higher Education

Dr. Broderick was born into a large family of severely limited means, so even though her parents espoused education as the way to a better life, they were unable to contribute to her educational pursuits. Financing her education, then, was a continual struggle for Dr. Broderick. As an undergraduate, she worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. She recalled the challenge:

Yeah, that was a hard thing for me, because one of my jobs was bussing tables in the cafeteria/social hangout, and, um, the sin of pride, I guess. But it was hard for me to do that around my classmates, who were clearly so much more affluent….so there was this whole thing of like a sense of anger and indignation that I was in the classes with these people and I was doing all this work, and at the same time….accepting that that was the way it was and thinking if I were smarter I could get better grades.

She continued, “I began teaching after four years. In those days, there was a teacher shortage, and so you could teach if you had 60 credit hours, so three of those years, I didn’t have to work three jobs anymore.”

Dr. Broderick’s financial struggles continued in graduate school at Harvard, where she lived next door to Max Kennedy. She admitted, “By then, I was a little less angry about that stuff, but I was going deeper and deeper and deeper into debt.”

Exhibiting Resilience

Dr. Broderick claimed forthrightly, “I think resiliency is a strength I have.” Indeed, this statement appears accurate. Dr. Broderick grew up in what was by her own
admission a “crazy and alcoholic” family. She saw education as the way out of the grim existence she knew, but viewed education through a decidedly limited frame.

I wanted a piece of paper that would let me get a job and let me get out of that mess I was in. And I wanted to change the experience; I didn’t want to be the teachers that I had.

Dr. Broderick indicated that she was not close to her family except for the younger brother with whom she had plotted an escape from their shared tribulations. She recalled of his death as a young adult:

When he died, I actually thought that I could never—I always thought he was the one who was giving me the strength and courage and helping me to overcome all this stuff—and so when he died, I really had a fear that I was gonna lose it all.

Educationally, Dr. Broderick persevered and completed her undergraduate degree in seven years by working multiple jobs, often simultaneously. After graduation, she taught in public schools for many years, but grew weary of the lock-step pedagogy, incompetent administrators, and high turnover of qualified teachers. Her answer was to start a school of her own.

Dr. Broderick knew as a young girl that she wanted to be her own boss or, more specifically, to not have others being the boss of her. Starting her own school was the solution to that problem as well as to the plethora of issues she had identified in public education, but it was a constant strain. When asked about the courage it took to start her own school, she noted:
Well, you know, I’m grateful for my ignorance, you know. I didn’t know that I could raise my child alone, but I could, so I did. I didn’t know that I couldn’t start a school, so I did. I didn’t know that I couldn’t go to college, so I did.

For eight years Dr. Broderick reveled in the community of teachers, students, and parents she had formed and nurtured. Her unabashed love of her school is evident. She declared, “It was amazing. But, you know, I couldn’t sustain it.” After years of struggling to make ends meet personally and professionally:

I was very worried about my health, and I was worried about my son, and I had worked so hard and it had been so difficult that I had just worn myself down. And my concern,…as I recall it, was, “What am I going to do for the next year? How am I going to put food in my kid’s mouth? How am I going to make sure that he gets what he needs?” I mean, I even thought about things like “I could join the Army?”…All I thought about was how do I go from this very hard life that we have here, where he’s having a great time and I’m doing the work that I really care about, and I know that both these things need to happen again, but for next year, all I want is for us not to starve. Because I had no support system, nothing really to fall back on.

Dr. Broderick found her next step, though it was not an easy one to take. Through connections she had made with the parents of children at her school, she found herself venturing back to school. After earning her bachelor’s degree she had sworn off further education unless it tangibly contributed to making her a better practitioner. To survive, though, she was willing to venture back into mainstream education. She knew that, at
least for a year, she and her son could survive on aid and loans. This year would afford
her the time she needed to devise a more tenable plan.

With the help of friends and colleagues, then, Dr. Broderick entered graduate
school…at Harvard College. She noted of her move to Cambridge, Massachusetts, “I was
going deeper and deeper and deeper into debt. I was determined that my son would have
a good high school experience, and I was just borrowing and working. I had a lot of jobs
there.”

Dr. Broderick’s happy surprise was that Harvard was a good fit for her. Both she
and her son received solid educations while in Boston—she earned two degrees from
Harvard while he earned a high school diploma from Cambridge Rindge and Latin.

The faculty ranks were not nearly such a good fit for Dr. Broderick, however, and
she had two wholly unsatisfactory experiences before renouncing academia as a career
choice. She claimed:

I’m not a good fit for the academy…I hate the notion of being called senior
faculty because I’m a full professor, and my colleagues here are associate
professors and so they’re somehow lower than me…it was very hard for me to be
in places where that hierarchy was so rigid and so enforced, and where at
the….whims of people above me, things could change and I would have no voice
in it.

Providentially, Dr. Broderick endured and was willing to give higher education
one final shot, because in her current institution she has discovered what might be her
educational soul mate.
Finding a Home at College

Dr. Broderick had no real home at her undergraduate institution. She was too concerned about surviving until graduation to immerse herself in the college experience. She found her academic home in graduate school. She reminisced about her first visit to Harvard:

So just by accident—if there are such things—[I was] sitting at that table with a student I didn’t know, and the place [Harvard library] is so small that you have to share tables, she asked me what I was doing and she said, “Oh, I have this class that you would love.” She checked with Eleanor [professor] to see if I could come to the class. We went to the class, she took me to the library, I got the reading, did the reading. I thought, “Oh my gosh, I understand what this woman is talking about.” And the students in the class, a lot of them were mid-career math and science people….And oh, they just were going crazy in this class because she was having them put a mirror on the wall and say, “Where should we put it so this person can see this person?” And the math/science people were like, “You know there’s a formula for that.”….And she said, “No, we’re not gonna . . .” So it was how I taught, it was how . . . I understood it, and I couldn’t understand these people who couldn’t understand what she was doing ….So I said, “Okay, I’ve got to come here.” I talked with her, I talked with the head of student teaching, or whatever it was there, who was very taken with the idea that I had started a school, you know…. And they both said, “You have to come, you have to apply.” So she did.
Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree

Upon conferral of her undergraduate degree, Dr. Broderick taught in public schools for seven years before deciding to start her own school. Finally, she would be her own boss and get to run the show.

Fortunately, while running her school she was invited to teach a local community college class for working teachers and realized that she loved teaching teachers. She had no desire to leave her school, but was forced to when stress exacted a severe toll over eight challenging years. Though she had to close her school, she didn’t want to return to public schools, so she reluctantly considered graduate school for the first time. Some college professors she knew encouraged her along these lines and urged her to consider applying to Harvard. She recalled:

I’m not academic now, and I was not an academic then, so I didn’t understand the academic consequences of the work I was doing…But [one of my student’s parents who was a college professor] said that if she got an application from me she would go singing and dancing down the hall… because of the experience I would bring into the program….I’d never thought of that, you know?... I’m just a dumb hillbilly, what do I know, right?... So she sent me to see the counselor at the college who counseled students on graduate schools, and he talked with me about what I was doing. He said, “Okay, there’s only five schools you should apply to, and that’s the top five.” And I thought…I was thinking maybe Wright State or Ohio State or something…And Harvard is and was the number one school, and [the professor/parent] told me, “Harvard is the place that you belong. It’ll give
you the capital you need. It’s another piece of paper, and even if you only get a master’s degree”—which, of course, I didn’t think I would ever do—“it will give you a piece of paper that will be a license for you to do more things and for you to talk about this kinda crazy way you have of teaching.”

Though doubting that she would ever attend arguably the most prestigious university in America, she visited, was captivated by one particular professor, and applied for admission. To her shock, she was accepted. To her greater shock, she found an academic home there. But she was still not thinking about actually earning a degree. She was plotting how to survive the next year. She thought, “If I go there, I will get enough grant support and I’ll get Pell money and other money so that I can live a decent life for a year, until I figure out what I’m going to do.”

However, Harvard waived many of the master’s degree requirements in lieu of her extensive experience. This amazed her as did the fact that she realized that she could do the work. She also discovered that she loved research. To be clear, though, she did not love all research. She declared:

I thought research was statistics, and I have no interest in that…. I actually wrote in my application that I wasn’t interested in research, and [professor/parent] said, “No. No, no, no. You do have interest in research. There are things you want to understand.” “Oh, that’s what—? Okay. You know, there are things I want to understand.”

She continued:
The moment that I understood—it was probably not a moment, but over time—
“this time” I remember saying to myself consciously, “this time,” this education is about me; it’s about what I want to know, what I want to understand, what I want to do with my life. I’m not going to throw away what I did at the school; the school is going to lead me somewhere else. I thought that was just over, you know. So I began to really read a lot and do a lot of research in Appalachia and in Cincinnati around urban Appalachians, which is what I was, to try to understand what it means to be that and to try to be successful. And I started thinking about “where are the footholds?” You know, I managed to climb out. Where are the footholds, and how do I help other people find those footholds so that they will be able to be climbers, too, but climb to where they want to go, not to where someone else wants them to go; climb to where they want to go or maneuver to where they want to go. And so that was really life-altering right there.

Dr. Broderick worked throughout her time at Harvard:
…doing all kinds of research. That was very much what our independent studies were about. I did research on how teachers think about things, and their systems of making decisions, just all kinds of research, all of it qualitative, and my qualifying paper and my dissertation were both grounded theory. I just loved it. And then after that, while my son was in college, I continued to teach research for four years, and I loved it.

Once she became acclimated to her new environs and accepted the fact that she could be successful in this elite environment, Dr. Broderick began to understand that, “a
degree from Harvard, it opens a lot of doors.” She also saw that these open doors could help her be even more effective in her work.

**Transitioning to a Life in the Academy**

Dr. Broderick earned her Ph.D. in four years and was soon hired as department chair at a small, private school. She hated what she deemed the unconscionable practices of her dean and did not hesitate to share her thoughts with him. She recalled:

I get this e-mail from the dean saying that he’s decided that my budget is going to be cut, and I said, “But I raised that money for this purpose,” and he said, “That doesn’t matter…and I said, “Well, I can’t have that. I won’t do that. I won’t face my students knowing that I raised that money by charging them a fee, and now that fee is going to disappear into the general budget. We have traditions here of what we do with that money.” And he said, “Too bad.” And I said, “Okay, I’m going to resign as chair and I’m going to resign as student-teaching placement person because I can’t be a party to this and I have to make it clear that this is wrong.”

Dr. Broderick followed through on her threat and resigned at the end of the year, though she did force the dean’s hand. “I fought with him and made them give me a contract, even though I already had another job.” She worked for several years as president of Foxfire.

Eventually, Dr. Broderick gave employment in higher education another shot only to have her initial impression confirmed: she still hated it. She noted of her second negative experience working in higher education:
They had kids student teaching who hadn’t taken any of the prerequisites. If you signed up for student teaching, you could just go do it. So the dean says to me, “Don’t tell anybody about that.” I said, “No, I’m telling people about this because we’ve got to fix it.” … I meant, in our department, when we have the NCATE meeting, I’m going to say, “These are the problems that we have, because we’ve got to fix these problems.” ….So she got all mad at me. I did it, of course, and everybody was up in arms, and she got mad at me and told me that she thought I might want to resign. And I said, “I’m not resigning. If you want me to be gone because I’m doing this, then you need to fire me because I’m not resigning” . So she did ….I have a history of doing that.

Once again Dr. Broderick swore higher education off as too political, dysfunctional, and petty. Instead, she began writing for education journals and teaching on an Indian Reservation. She claims that this job taught her more than she learned at Harvard. After two years she founded a non-profit organization that developed historically accurate and culturally appropriate teaching materials. All the while, drew on her experience as a qualitative researcher to help Native peoples to tell their stories sensitively and appropriately.

One day she received call from her current institution, XYZ College. They asked her to apply for department chair. She had little interest in the position and declined the offer. In due course, though, she agreed to a one-year appointment, just not as department chair. To her shock, she did not encounter the same unprofessional antics she had
previously witnessed and after completing the original contract, agreed to serve as departmental chair. “I came here; within a month, I knew I never wanted to leave.”

Dr. Broderick is fond of both her colleagues and students and is enthralled by this small college that is built on progressive principles. She has found a proper fit. Dr. Broderick unabashedly displays her joy in working at XYZ College. She explained:

I love this place. We don’t argue much in our department, but when we argue with other departments, I always know that whoever is sitting across the table from me cares about the kids; it’s not about their—well, there’s some ego, of course—I mean, I have some myself. But it’s always about “We love these kids. How do we help these kids?” And sometimes we don’t agree on how to help them, but we always agree that that’s our vision.

She added, “I’m allowed to say things here like, ‘I believe that we are preparing our students to change the world,’ and nobody snickers, you know? I’m allowed to publicly say that we’re preparing our students to teach for justice.”

**Considering Class**

Dr. Broderick stated quite clearly, “I’ve always, my whole life, since I was a young girl, been angry about class differences….” Having been raised in a poor family and in an environment she described as painful, she sought a way out for herself, her younger brother, and as it turns out, others in similar situations.

Dr. Broderick bristles against privilege and entitlement. As a child she “saw people who I would now know are lower-working-class people as being what I think were middle-class people.” When she ventured off to college at a regional state institution
and experienced true affluence, she was confronted with a particularly disconcerting reality. She stated:

So that really created for me a real dilemma and kind of a moral thing of trying to figure out “Who am I that I am both angry at these people and feel subordinate or less than these people because of my social status?”

Dr. Broderick now understands that:

A lot of the anger that I carried around came from the content that I was taught, the way I was taught, the reading books—I have one of them right up there—that whole Dick and Jane, Ted and Sally, and looking at their perfect house and looking at my house and thinking about the difference, and looking at father walking home with his briefcase and sitting in the big red leather chair and reading the newspaper, and my father couldn’t read, and all that kinda stuff. So I was always—I mean, truly since I was in first grade, I was extremely aware of those differences, and I thought that the kids—there was public housing not far from me, and my goal in life was to be rich enough to live in the public housing.

Though Dr. Broderick’s father’s family eventually worked its way into the middle class, the lessons of a deprived childhood remain engrained in her. She sees a clear connection between educators and the social inequalities that have been a part of her lived experience. She stated of her educational and career track, “I was a radical—am, I guess—kind of a radical educator who saw the job as a teacher as entwined with social justice kinda stuff, so that was what I was trying to prepare myself to do.”

Dr. Broderick noted that even when she was starting her own school,
I thought, “you know, I know what my purpose is, I know what my mission is, I know why I’m doing this work.” And I was so stupid: I thought you could just start a school, you know. So I just said, “I want to do this right. This is my calling.” And I felt like, you know that John Belushi movie, *The Blues Brothers*, where he says, “I’m on a mission from God”? …Well, it wasn’t about capital G God, but I felt like this is what I supposed to do, and I was so driven by that. And I saw in the school I was teaching, I couldn’t choose six teachers for my son to go through that I would be willing to have him with. And I thought, “Okay, you can go do it differently.” So I did.

She elaborated:

What I was interested in—I wouldn’t have used this language at the time—was creating a microcosm of . . . of . . . I wanted diversity. I wanted rich diversity in this school. And, again, because I was not smart—thank goodness—I had this plan. I knew not everybody could—it goes to the fairness issue. Not everybody who wanted to could afford to send their kid there, I knew that. And so I didn’t want to work only with kids whose parents could afford it…So we had this unusual scholarship policy, which was: Parents would say, “I would like to send my kid here,” and I would say, “How much can you pay?” And they would tell me, and I would say, “Okay.”…It was a very small community. We had kids who didn’t pay anything, and we had kids who paid full price, and nobody knew except me.
After spending years fleeing her past, in graduate school Dr. Broderick discovered a desire to reclaim her heritage. She sought to dismantle the negative stereotypes associated with Appalachia, stereotypes that contribute to the continued marginalization of Appalachian people. She views her Harvard degrees as a mechanism for smashing some of the walls that restrict people, especially the poor, disenfranchised people of Appalachia. She noted:

I joked about that a lot—being a hillbilly at Harvard—as I started to kind of come out about . . . because I had worked so hard my whole life to deny where I was from and who I was. I got rid of my accent, most of it. I did everything I could to pass, and I could pass. And then suddenly I wanted to reclaim . . . I wanted to reclaim Appalachia, and I also wanted to reclaim social class, and I tried to do everything I could to defy the stereotype.

Dr. Broderick now teaches at a small private school on the edge of Appalachia and though she is enthralled with her institution, still bristles under the structures inherent in academia. She stated:

I hate that because I have tenure I get treated differently or because I’m faculty I’m treated differently than staff. I hate that stuff. And here it’s not really like that. I mean, I don’t think most people on campus even know whether I’m a full professor or what, you know.

Regarding the state of higher education today, Dr. Broderick expressed some misgivings.
And I think that it’s becoming far more elite, and it makes me really worry. Because I do believe, I do believe that education is the deal. I mean, I’m obviously entrenched in it, right? But it gives us options, and when you take away the possibility of that, then you’re taking away options, and we’re all losing when one kid—I mean, see, this is how hokey I am, and I’m allowed to say this kinda stuff here at XYZ College—but when we lose the promise of one child or one person, then we all suffer for that. I really believe that.

**Dr. Ware Summary**

Dr. Ware is an early fifty-something Caucasian male from New England. He grew up in what he described as the welfare-class and attended a regional state college close to his home. He earned both his master’s degree and doctorate at the same public flagship institution in the desert southwest. He is now a professor of English at a large, public, research-intensive institution in one of the Great Lakes states.

**Navigating Family Relationships**

Dr. Ware noted, “My mother, for some reason, even though she dropped out of tenth grade herself, saw some promise, evidently, and always said I would win a college scholarship sometime.” However, that this would happen—that he would one day even attend college—was far from certain.

Dr. Ware encountered consistent struggles with the educational administration in middle and secondary schools. He stated, “I was in a higher tracking in sixth through eighth grade, but after my eighth grade, when a lot of things started falling apart family-wise, I lost interest in that kind of strokes for performance.” Then, “At the end of eighth
grade, my English teacher told the high school that I wouldn’t be serious enough for college tracking, and then that just stuck with me throughout, yeah.”

Through his own hard work and with the assistance of several sympathetic high school teachers, Dr. Ware did make it to college, though the obstacles he encountered were ever-present. For instance, he mentioned that upon his entry into college, his family and friends began to treat him differently. “They didn’t want to hear it, and…started calling me a snob just for having chosen college over welfare. So, no, there was absolutely no communication at all.” Going off to college, though it was less than ten miles from his family home, was extremely divisive. He noted, “My mother’s side of the family definitely saw it as an affront,” and added, “That remains till today.” Even Dr. Ware’s mother, though she had indicated to him as a young boy that one day he would go off to college, was unsupportive of his choice. He noted of her earlier encouragements:

She had no experience or real interest; it just was sort of an idea, you know, that oh, I would go to college, and then I did, and that was sort of the end of it. She had no interest. To this day, she has no idea even what that means and what I do and never has asked me a question about it in my entire life.

Regarding this spurning by his family, Dr. Ware admitted:

Well, it took me a couple decades to even think that it should be hurtful, because it was pretty standard, you know, that there was never any interest among my parents about who we kids might be, you know, and what we might be doing.
Dr. Ware experienced this relational pattern again when he was in graduate school. Though married, his wife, while not actively unsupportive, did not express interest in what he was studying. He noted:

We never really talked about it, and she was a full-time special-ed teacher working part-time on her master’s, so she graduated with her master’s at the same time I graduated with my PhD. So she was supportive in the general sense, you know, that I was doing what I wanted to do. She mostly didn’t have any interest in what it was I was doing, but she wasn’t against it.

*Getting to College*

Discussing how he got to college, Dr. Ware confessed:

I had no idea what that process was, really. I just knew you had to take a test called the SAT. I had no idea what it was, and nobody told me anything about it, so I just showed up and took it…. And I didn’t really even pay attention to my scores, which were not very good.

Fortunately, Dr. Ware was not attempting to gain admission to a highly selective institution, so he was accepted despite lackluster scores. Thanks to the tutelage of key high school teachers, he was prepared for the curriculum.

*Exhibiting Resilience*

Dr. Ware has exhibited enduring tenacity by persisting on his pathway to the professoriate while confronting challenging personal situations. His childhood was, perhaps, his first obstacle. He stated, “I grew up in the welfare class, and it was unfathomable for most of my family that they might even rise to the working class….”
That was already success, you know, beyond anyone’s dreams at that point.” When push came to shove, then, and he was actively seeking a different life, his family was not supportive of his choice to attend college.

Dr. Ware also demonstrated a keen will and strong academic self-motivation in high school when guidance staff and many teachers wrote him off as not serious enough to be college material. In reality, he was a voracious reader in possession of a curious mind, but was not interested in the rote lessons they were offering. He stated:

Mainly I told them very early on that, first, I refused to do my work until I was put into the college prep courses. And then they said, “Well, you need to prove yourself before we do that,” so that was a catch-22 all the way through.

With the benefits of hindsight, he now recognizes that several teachers understood his predicament and, though they could not get Dr. Ware into the college prep classes, independently provided him with material suitable for maintaining his interest. He stated, “I more or less had my own kind of private education in high school, you know, that teachers arranged for me behind the scenes,” and added:

I told my teachers that I believed that the main purpose of education in this country was brainwashing to become part of a cog in the machine and that I refused to participate in that and so I wouldn’t do my homework and wouldn’t follow the standard curriculum. But they gave me reading to do on my own. So, while the rest of the class was reading Julius Caesar or something, I was reading Sartre, Camus, Kafka, and work like that. So, when I got to college, the actual material I was dealing with wasn’t at all a challenge.
Of the near complete lack of emotional support he received throughout his educational career, Dr. Ware stated, “I was pretty much on my own.” Indeed, other than an interested professor in his undergraduate program—a Joyce scholar with whom he did many independent studies—this appears to have been the case. He reported that even in his graduate program, the Marxist scholar under whom he had hoped to study was, by the time of Dr. Ware’s arrival, weary of the discipline and refused to render assistance.

**Financing Higher Education**

Dr. Ware was from a welfare class family and could not count on his parents for any type of financial assistance. However, his family’s extremely low income did make him eligible for abundant financial aid from federal, state, and local sources. He noted that when he entered college:

There were still a lot of basic educational opportunity grants available and low-income loans with deferred payments and so on, so it wasn’t an immediate burden, no. There were payments I had to make later down the line, but that was available at the time…I had no money from my family at all, so that, you know, was a necessity.

One piece of Dr. Ware’s financial aid package was federal work-study, so he held various work-study jobs on campus. “And I was a musician. I performed in clubs in colleges and so on, especially in the summer, so that’s kind of how I got through.”

Dr. Ware was not accustomed to having discretionary money to spend; this was a norm to which he had long since adjusted. Regardless of the trials resulting from his perpetual struggle to make ends meet, he earned his undergraduate degree and began to
contemplate graduate school. One of his undergraduate professors had suggested that he consider applying to graduate school at Harvard and he considered this, “’till I saw how much it cost to go there, and then I knew that was going to be impossible under any circumstances.” Perhaps, some barriers were insurmountable.

**Finding a Home at College**

Dr. Ware recalled that the transition to college “was pretty natural. The only difference was I now was in an environment that invited my performance, so I was starting on new ground…I was, you know, able to be a new person, so I just performed.” Aside from a brief struggle resulting from continuing his high school study habits (“I literally did no homework throughout high school.”) he found a natural fit in college and noted, “It was what I had wanted in high school, you know, but which I gave myself.”

Dr. Ware lived at home his first semester of college, but encountered resistance there. Once he discovered the dynamic of campus:

I moved into the dorms even though it was only nine miles from my house…
Academically it helped because I didn’t have to spend time commuting…And being able to just walk to the library, walk to classes in the morning and so on, that made a big difference.

Living in the dorms added an expense, however, and Dr. Ware was already operating on a tight budget. Fortunately for him, there was ample financial aid available at the time and he was already skilled at living inexpensively. Plus, he was eager to immerse himself in this new world. After all, he had no incentive to linger in the world of his youth.
Dr. Ware was not particularly bothered by encounters with more affluent peers and stated, “Well, again, that was something which by this point I was accustomed to because we never had money.” He added, “The saving grace of the era was it was the tail end of the hippie generation, and so I was able to skate through in raggy clothes, you know, as a style choice rather than an economic necessity.”

Dr. Ware actively participated in the full life of the college including study abroad and spring break, although both were accomplished on a shoestring budget. He noted of his experience in England:

I had worked two jobs that summer beforehand in order to buy my plane ticket, but the actual tuition was the same as my school tuition, and so my loans and grants covered that, so I only had to come up—I thought I only had to come up with the plane ticket. It turned out I had to fend for myself on weekends for food. I didn’t know that, so I lost a lot of weight that year.

Regarding spring break, he recalled, “When everyone else flew to Miami for spring break, or Daytona or somewhere, I hitchhiked there with $10, and all I ate was peanut butter sandwiches.”

Academically, Dr. Ware’s undergraduate experience was primarily centered around one professor. He stated:

I was lucky enough to have one of my professors, for whatever reason, take a real interest in me. He became my mentor throughout the four years I was there, and I did a number of independent studies with him, and he would invite me to dinner
at his family’s house occasionally. He was the first person who started talking to me openly about the lack that my parents represented for me.

**Continuing Beyond the Undergraduate Degree**

While having a an undergraduate mentor was an overwhelmingly positive experience for Dr. Ware, he admitted:

It was also the weakness when it came to things like GREs, because I did so many independent studies with him, primarily in a very small range, literary range, which for me was wonderful, but for GREs was not, because they wanted a broader kind of spectrum in the education.

In fact, Dr. Ware did not score particularly well on his graduate school admissions exams, but this did not hamper his plans to move out to the desert southwest. He recalled:

“I was living in Portland, Maine, and had just seen a movie about some hippie commune…with a bunch of people having this communal garden, and I thought, ‘Oh, that sounds cool. I think I’ll go to [state name].’” So he moved over 2000 miles with only vague notions of graduate school and place. He recalled, “I had just moved to [state name] with no idea that I might not be accepted…. when I had my interview with the grad director, he pointed out how naïve that was.”

Dr. Ware’s graduate school interview did not go well and the program director intended to deny him admission. He remembered, “People who had read my application essay had to intervene in order to get me accepted because the grad director was against my admission, but the committee was impressed with my essay, and so they vetoed his
decision.” As it turns out, this was some of the last substantive support he was to receive in graduate school. He mentioned:

There was a professor in the department who had focused on Marxist literature, and when I got there, all the other grad students were saying, “Oh, you’ve got to study with this guy.” But by the time I got there, he was tired of that and refused to do it with me, so I ended up doing it on my own.

Personally, too, Dr. Ware was charting his own course. He continued:

At that point it was really much more my own self-direction. I was married. I got married the summer between undergraduate and master’s, but my wife at the time had no particular interest in what I was doing either, which had been my life pattern up till then, so again that didn’t strike me as unusual.

He added, “I had some friends but…I stuck to myself because my peers weren’t that serious about what they were doing and I was.”

Dr. Ware was independent academically, as well. Not only did the Marxist scholar in his graduate program refuse to work with him, but also his undergraduate mentor had not prepared him for the rigors of graduate school. He noted:

His approach was primarily close reading of the text and a kind of hermeneutical approach… So when I was asked to do much more macrocosmic analysis, I didn’t even know such a thing existed, so I was caught off guard my first semester in my master’s program—well, it was the second semester, actually. The first one was Teacher Prep and Bibliography and Methods or something like that. But once I had my first semester of literary classes, I was thrown for a loop.
He added:

It took pretty much the two years of my MA program to work that out, so I would say it was not till my PhD work, the beginning of my PhD work, when I really became a so-called scholar. I am still not interested in being a scholar in the traditional sense.

**Transitioning to a Life in the Academy**

Dr. Ware eagerly adapted to the idea of a scholarly life, possibly because it was so much more open and afforded so much more opportunity than the life he knew previously. He reported that early in his undergraduate career:

I was astounded that such a thing existed as an English major, first of all, because I had never heard of such a thing…It never occurred to me to wonder where my high school English teachers might have gotten their education and so on…It just was something I had never heard of.

He continued:

And I had always read unendingly and realized, “Wow, I can read books and talk about them for a living. That’s what I do anyway when I’m not playing music.”

But also because I was always very philosophically inclined and so I could think about and engage with big ideas for a living.

As it turns out, though, higher education is not all that Dr. Ware had originally hoped it to be. He stated, “I took it at face value that higher education was committed to noble goals. I’m far less convinced of that now.”
It is fair to say that Dr. Ware is wary of higher education as an institution, though he appreciates the opportunities his position in the academy affords him. He lamented, “Academia is not always engaged in the pursuit of truth.” Nevertheless, the truth is what he seeks in the classroom. He is interested in:

The excitement of learning, of piecing the world together and sharing that excitement with my students, and then seeing them get excited as well. So it’s that enthusiasm when people are just—their heads are exploding, you know, and saying wow, you know.

Dr. Ware’s work outside the classroom is less exciting and even distressing to him. He noted that he does not function comfortably or particularly well in certain settings.

I think to a certain degree my class upbringing did [impede progress in the academy] because I’ve never been comfortable with certain kinds of social activities. Department gatherings, for instance, you know, which always strike me as student council meetings or something. So, even to this day, I still feel out of place in class terms. Even though I’m presumably making a similar salary to my colleagues, they came from a very different class background and always had different options available to them than I have had. And just their kind of social finesse, sociability, something I also have had very little interest in, perhaps by necessity but also by philosophy.
He continued:

I think that makes me less likely to be called upon for certain kinds of positions within the department and so on because I don’t play the game the way people might expect me to, and might rightly expect me to, you know, for whatever the particular game is. I’m still uncomfortable around administrators, primarily in class terms. Anybody wearing a suit and tie makes me nervous, you know, just sort of viscerally. You know, it’s not my world, that’s not what I grew up with, and it makes no sense to me other than as something alien to me.

Dr. Ware noted his suspicion that his lack of social capital has negatively impacted his career, “At tenure time and stuff like that, you know, in ways where I might not appear as sociable; you know, I’m not a member of the team necessarily in the way people would want.” In fact, Dr. Ware was denied tenure at a state flagship university before coming to his current position.

**Considering Class**

Dr. Ware had long been acutely aware of issues related to class and social justice. He experienced the effects of low socioeconomic status as a child and all along his pathway to the professoriate. As an undergraduate he became intrigued by Marxist ideology. He mentioned, “My junior year when I went to England…. that’s where I came across more openly Marxist people and where I realized that described my ideas as well; I just had never had it formulated in that way for me.”

Indeed, Dr. Ware’s scholarly work, friendships, and identity are all intricately woven around issues of race, class and social justice. He related:
While my closest friends are academics, they also are far from typical academics. And we actually often talk about doing team teaching because we attract the same kinds of students, who are very serious, committed, but often at odds with the status quo and disheartened with what they see in academia…. One of them comes from a fairly elite South American background, but his father was of Lebanese origin, so even within the kind of upper-middle-class South American structure, his father was odd man out. His mother was more part of the traditional elite, South American elite. But his commitments are to the same kinds of social change I’ve always been interested in. My other close friend is from Africa, grew up in a relatively, in African terms, privileged background, but he was one of the leaders of the revolutionary movement in his country, and remains so in certain ways, now an advisor to revolutionary movements in Africa and so on. So no, they both have different class backgrounds but similar notions of social justice.

Dr. Ware allowed that:

I still have a very kind of personal sense of mission of knowledge and action; and if that can be done in an academic setting, then great, but I’m not that interested in being an academic per se. It’s always made certain things possible that seemed really important to me.

**Cross-Case Analysis**

After coding both personal narratives and interviews for all eight participants, I engaged in focused coding, which Charmaz (2006) indicated “means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused
coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). She added, “The strength of grounded theory coding derives from this concentrated, active involvement in the process…A telling code that you constructed to fit one incident or statement might illuminate another” (p.59). Indeed, consistent memo writing, refinement of codes, and deep engagement with the narratives and experiences of the eight participants in this study enabled me to extract common themes into a compelling cross-case analysis and construct a theory describing the experiences of FG academics.

The cross-case analysis is organized exactingly according to emergent themes and loosely around the questions that guided this study. These questions are:

1. What initially inspires FG college students’ decisions to go beyond the bachelor’s degree to pursue a terminal degree?
2. What obstacles do FG academics encounter along their educational journey that impede their progress and test their determination?
3. What experiences support their academic success and bolster their resolve to seek a career in the professoriate?
4. How have their choices impacted their relationships with the people back home?

The themes that surfaced most consistently and distinctly throughout narratives are Experiencing Family Influence on the Educational Journey, Facing Funding Challenges, Adjusting to Academic Demands, Considering More Higher Education and Distance From Family, Discovering Personal Resilience and Faculty Support, and Encountering
Class Beyond the Classroom. It is interesting—and telling—to note that although essay instructions specifically asked participants to describe their experiences in higher education from the point as undergraduates when they first started considering graduate school, through entry into graduate school and conferral of the doctorate, and then on to joining the academy and serving as a professor, all participants began their stories in their high school days or before. I had asked the participants to write freely and had articulated my belief that, “You will identify the salient points of your story.” All participants stated unequivocally in their writings that their lives before they arrived at college were significant to their personal narratives.

**Experiencing Family Influence on the Educational Journey**

Participants’ stories of their educational journeys uniformly began in childhood or adolescence and included their families and the support they offered or withheld. The parameters of family support are not precisely demarcated, though. Perhaps more than any other theme in the data, family support was highly variable. For example, Dr. McBeatty’s family offered their wholehearted support all along, while Dr. Ware’s family shunned him as he began his college career. Most participants’ stories fall within this broad spectrum of experience.

Dr. Broderick, for instance, noted of her parents, “Their whole vision was on ‘How do we help them have a better life?’ In spite of being crazy and alcoholic—I mean, you know, there was that, too.” As an adult Dr. Broderick can intellectualize their support, but as a young woman she sought only to escape from the emotional pain she
experienced in her childhood. She noted, “It was about ‘I have to get myself out of pain.’”

Professor Garcia, too, struggled with his family as an adolescent. He noted that he moved out of his parents’ house when he was sixteen and that he essentially assumed the responsibilities of adulthood at that point. His troubles at home were partially related to his education. When his grades began to drop in 7th, 8th, and 9th grades, and then when he scored poorly on the PSAT, his father was frustrated. Dr. Garcia recalled in his essay,

He was so disappointed that it resulted in a huge fight. I later found out that he was counting on the hope that I would win a college scholarship that was offered through his employer; my low PSAT scores disqualified me. For him, it was the nail in the coffin for his dream that I would be able to go college – the scholarship was the only thing that he knew he could help provide me with.

Dr. Garcia has since achieved phenomenal success in the academy. Still, his father struggled to express his pride to him. He noted, “I came from the type of family where machismo is huge…So my father didn’t ever tell me he was proud of me—ever. But…everyone else would tell me that he would tell—like they’d know everything I’d done.” In contrast “my mom was very, very, very, very, very proud.”

Dr. Butler’s father actively enticed him to enter directly into the workforce and avoid college, which he considered unnecessary and, possibly, frivolous. According to Dr. Butler, “The expectation was that we would finish high school.” He added:

I remember my dad saying that he would consider signing for one of the Datsun’s (sports car of the era) provided after I got out of high school, I didn’t waste my
time on college, and I went ahead and got serious and got a job. So, you know, there was still kind of this culture that what a person really did would be to finish and go and work, and that was the important thing, and anything else might just be sort of delaying getting your hands dirty.

Interestingly, after this initial attempt to get his son to forego college, Dr. Butler’s father was quietly supportive of his efforts and even helped his son fund his undergraduate education by signing over a portion of his Black Lung benefits directly to him. Further still, he observed essentially without concern as his son earned a double major in mathematics and religious studies, though the prevailing religious studies scholarship was patently incongruent with the fundamental Christian beliefs he observed.

Conversely, Dr. Ware’s mother’s support was initially affirmative. “My mother, for some reason, even though she dropped out of tenth grade herself, saw some promise, evidently, and always said I would win a college scholarship…and then I did, and that was sort of the end of it.” When Dr. Ware matriculated at a college near his home, his mother’s support—and the dynamics in his family—changed drastically. “They didn’t want to hear it, and friends and family immediately started calling me a snob just for having chosen college over welfare.” He noted that to this day, his mother has not expressed any interest in his education or career and “never has asked me a question about it in my entire life.”

Most other participants experienced at least implied—if uninformed—support for their college educations. Dr. Ruff related that her father told her as a child, “Cathy Sue, you should be a schoolteacher,” though as a poor farmer and mine worker in Appalachia,
he had no idea what this involved. She allowed that even though, “I never saw myself as going to college when I was in school and at home,” her relatives, “will say now that they thought I had tendencies toward that.” Dr. Ruff recognizes that her relatives are “very proud of me. I know that they’ll say, you know, “Cathy is a professor at XYZ College.”

Dr. Bridges received more active support for his education. Though his parents did not necessarily understand his academic precociousness (“I think, like a lot of bright kids, at least in the South, there was an early sense that I probably had been adopted, you know, from some other place.”), they encouraged him from an early age.

My parents, particularly my mother, did a really nice job of not in any way stunting or denying those impulses, but facilitating them. They sent me to special programs in the summer offered by the public schools…but it was always really clear that “You know, these things cost money” and “You know, you need to not waste these opportunities” and “We hope this will turn into something someday.” You know, they were investments, I think.

Generally, Dr. Bridges described his parents’ involvement in his college education as deferential and compared it to, “The way that they dealt with doctors and when they had a will drawn up. I mean, these are the experts, they know the biz, you know? We’re just beneficiaries of their expertise.”

Dr. Hudspeth indicated that although her immigrant family—her parents were the first generation born in the United States—did not have a lot of money, as a child they would always find a way to support her educationally. “They just happened to think that education was the way to do better.” She admitted, “I never knew how much money my
parents made, but I know it wasn’t a lot. But I also knew if it was for education, if I had wanted to go somewhere, they probably would’ve made it happen.”

Dr. McBeatty, too, experienced steadfast support from her family. They approved of her educational pursuits and never questioned her decision to go away to college or to continue her education beyond the bachelor’s degree. Other than Dr. Bridges, who had a great aunt and other distant relatives who had earned college degrees, she was the only participant in this study whose family had any experience in—or even exposure to—higher education. Although neither of Dr. McBeatty’s parents held a college degree, she had aunts, uncles, and cousins who held undergraduate, graduate, and professional credentials. Notably, Dr. McBeatty was also the only participant to be raised in a middle or upper-middle class environment.

**Facing Funding Challenges**

Quite unlike the other participants in this study, Dr. McBeatty did not struggle financially as a college student. She was born into a prosperous, western, ranching family and her parents could afford to pay for her to attend a private, Lutheran college several states away from home. She did not need to work as an undergraduate and thus had a vastly different undergraduate experience than other participants.

Though, Dr. Bridge’s parents could not offer much in the way of financial support, his great aunt filled this void. The support of this aunt allowed him to pursue the major of his choice—religious studies—rather than a more practical education like teaching, as he originally intended because he had been awarded a scholarship for education majors. He noted, “That great aunt never had children and had actually been a
public school teacher all her life, and so it was a little bit ironic that she ‘rescued’ someone of two generations on from that kind of career path.” With her financial assistance, Dr. Bridges excelled as an undergraduate, studied abroad in Europe, and prepared for the next step on his pathway to the professoriate: entry into a master’s program at Harvard University.

Dr. Garcia did not receive financial assistance from his immediate family either, nor did he have a distantly related benefactor. Instead, he relied on grants, loans, and student employment to make it through to graduation. This was not always a certainty, though. He exhausted his financial aid package in the middle of his freshman year and was forced to stop out. He stated, “You know, now we talk about people who don’t ‘drop out’ they ‘stop out’ kinda thing. I didn’t know that, so it was ‘dropping out,’ from my mindset.” Of this he stated, “I don’t think I was a failure, because in my mind I knew I was coming back.”

Dr. Garcia did come back—to the surprise of his family and classmates—and never again had to leave school for financial reasons. He served as a Resident Assistant in the dorms for the remainder of his undergraduate career and worked with the Financial Aid office to gain an exemption from the mandatory meal plan. This, along with other work-study jobs, allowed him to meet his financial obligations and stay in school. To be sure, he was not living a fiscally carefree existence, but he was in school and he excelled.

Dr. Broderick, “had no support system, nothing really to fall back on,” so she, too, worked multiple jobs throughout her college career. Though a necessity, it delayed her graduation and created bitterness toward her more affluent classmates who did not need
to work so much. She persisted because she was highly motivated. As she stated, “I wanted a piece of paper that would let me get a job and let me get out of that mess I was in. And I wanted to change the experience.” Of the seven years she spent earning her degree she noted:

I got sick, and so I was out for one semester, but other than that, I was continuously enrolled. I began teaching after four years. In those days, there was a teacher shortage, and so you could teach if you had 60 credit hours, so three of those years, I didn’t have to work three jobs anymore, I just taught.

Similarly, Dr. Ware was on his own. Having been castigated by his family for choosing college over welfare, he moved out of his childhood home and into the dorms after one semester, despite the added expense. He noted that at the time, “there were still a lot of basic educational opportunity grants available and low-income loans with deferred payments and so on, so it wasn’t an immediate burden,” and confirmed, “I had no money from my family at all, so that (financial aid), you know, was a necessity.”

Though emotionally supported by her family, Dr. Hudspeth was essentially on her own financially. She stated, “Well, my parents didn’t have a lot of money, and I just felt like I needed to go to the closest place, and that was 14, 15 miles down the road, and at that time it was only $9 an hour.” She lived at home and, for most of her undergraduate career, worked. “I worked part-time—not the first year, but I did after that—and actually, I found I did better when I worked, because I was better at organizing my time…”

Dr. Butler lived in his parents’ home throughout his undergraduate career, too. He noted, “I lived in the basement of their house, with a separate entrance and whatnot.” He
stated clearly:

The reason that was done at the time was entirely fiscal, so all I really had to pay for was tuition and books and extras. That way I didn’t have to pay for room and board…and so I was able to save that. So it was never really—I shouldn’t have said, “save it.” There was never really an option of living on campus. Where would the additional money have come from?

Surely, most participants toiled valiantly outside the classroom in order to earn their first college degree. However, Dr. Ruff may have traveled the most indirect pathway to an undergraduate degree. From her childhood in Appalachia, she sensed that there was more to life, but possessed no specific ideas beyond this indeterminate notion. She could not yet fathom college. She stated:

I knew that there was something else out there and that I wanted to be a part of it, but I didn’t know how I was going to get there, you know. I didn’t know how I was going to accomplish that. So the military was, to me, the way to get out of there. I didn’t give a thought to college.

After high school, Dr. Ruff escaped Appalachia through military enlistment and after several years in service to her country—and with the subtle encouragement of a supervisor—she decided to study for a degree in education. At this point in her life, financing her education was not a stated concern. She had educational benefits through the military and was married, so affording college was not as significant as it surely would have been if she had attempted to pursue college immediately out of high school.

All participants noted that they worked while in graduate school, but discussions
of the financial hardships of higher education were, with the exception of Drs. Garcia and Broderick, limited to their undergraduate careers. Though the implication was that these were not bountiful times, most participants did not speak directly to such struggles in graduate school. However, Dr. Garcia detailed being provisionally admitted to a top graduate program in his discipline. Since provisional admission did not carry with it the necessary benefits of tuition remuneration and stipend, he was forced to decline this acceptance in favor of another offer that included a better aid package.

Dr. Broderick noted that after conferral of her undergraduate degree in education, she launched her teaching career. She joked, “I taught nine years in public school, and I had eight principals. I like to think personally I had a lot to do with that.” After nine challenging years of constant administrative turnover and observing uninspired teachers, she had experienced too much to remain the public school system. Dr. Broderick audaciously started her own school, which she joyfully ran for eight years before the physical demands and financial hardships of keeping this enterprise afloat exacted their own tolls on her health and she was forced close the doors.

At this point Dr. Broderick was unsure what to do next, but she received encouragement and support from friends and colleagues who sent her to visit Harvard. There, to her surprise, she found an educational and philosophical home—if not a comfortable financial one. She was not seriously considering that she would earn a degree from the nation’s oldest university, though. As Dr. Broderick recalled, “I thought, ‘if I go there, I will get enough grant support and I’ll get Pell money and other money so that I can live a decent life for a year, until I figure out what I’m going to do.’” However,
after her visit she knew, “Okay, I’ve got to come here.” Financially, though, this was an extreme struggle. According to Dr. Broderick:

I was going deeper and deeper and deeper into debt…I was just borrowing and working. I had a lot of jobs there. The ed. review was one of them, and then I was a TA, and then I ran this little program. So I worked a lot. Well, that was three jobs again.

Yet Dr. Broderick persevered, as must anyone who strives to earn a doctoral degree.

**Adjusting to Academic Demands**

Each participant spoke directly of their adjustment to the academic demands of higher education. The narratives they shared painted a clear picture of their internal trials and their hardiness in pursuit of educational and career goals.

The academic adjustment required of participants spanned both undergraduate and graduate school and was generally short-lived as all were dedicated students. Considering their academic achievement statistically bolsters this claim. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), only 63,712 of the population over age 24 (from a total U.S. population over 300 million) hold a doctoral degree. That the participants in this study needed time to adjust academically speaks to the rigor of the degree, to the journeys they have made, and to the magnitude of their accomplishment.

Dr. Ruff’s entry into college required a fundamental re-examination of who she was as a student. She recalled:

My husband was getting some veteran’s benefits and taking classes, and I just kinda thought, you know, I would take some classes with that. I actually did very
well—so I guess I’ve got to backtrack a little bit—and I actually was realizing…and I hate to say this, but thinking, “Cathy, you’re not really stupid. You know, you’re a fairly intelligent person. You can do well in school.” And I think that was the first time I really realized that, because I didn’t think of myself as that way when I was in high school at all.

She did not report similar self-doubt after this realization.

Dr. Hudspeth’s adjustment came early in her college career and, like Dr. Ruff, she encountered no academic challenges after that point that she could not manage easily. She stated, “I had to learn how to study, because I didn’t really have to study in (high) school.”

Dr. Bridges’ adjustment came early in his undergraduate career, too. He recalled, I quickly figured out that there were students who knew how to study and I wasn’t one of those students…and in college, initially, it was very clear that wasn’t going to work, and it took me a little while to figure that out. I suppose, in retrospect, it turns out that some of the people who had the best study habits in my cohort were the sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers and people like that so I guess you could make a connection there.

After Dr. Bridges got up to speed with the requirements of college-level work, he never again struggled academically.

Dr. Butler experienced successive waves of adjustment challenges, first as an undergraduate and then again as a graduate student. He agreed that he needs a warm-up period in order to get his stride. He recalled of the launch of his undergraduate career:
Freshman year was difficult. You know, I look back and laugh, because I ended up being a math major and of course did my master’s and Ph.D. in math, but my first two low grades were in calculus and then one in physics. And this was not for lack of working; it was just really not understanding the material and not sort of figuring out even what the professors wanted, which is such a big part of this kind of thing…I’d have to say it was probably very, very good that I did not get any family pressure for those C’s that year.

Then as a new graduate student at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Dr. Butler required some time to find his stride. He related:

It’s sort of like starting all over again, in a way, because you might have managed to fight your way up to a couple of awards as an undergraduate, but everything is kinda reset now, and a lot of competitive people... I remember at UNC Chapel Hill, the graduate students would get ranked, and so I think my biggest challenge, you know, aside from personal issues, really was just trying to get to where I needed to be. I always felt like if you gave me a little bit of time, I could get there...And really, right at the end at Chapel Hill, I had managed to catch up enough that they were . . . You wouldn’t want to over-interpret when I say they were interested in me staying; maybe it’s best to say they were not interested in me leaving.

He joked that by the end of his year at Chapel Hill—and immediately prior to his transfer to Duke University—he had begun to attract some “non-negative attention.”

Dr. Ware experienced his greatest academic challenge when he entered graduate
school. He reported that he had worked primarily under a James Joyce scholar as an undergraduate and that he considered himself well prepared for graduate study. Of entering his master’s program, he recalled:

I thought I had Joyce down, and Joyce, you know, is rumored to be the most difficult you would come across, so I figured I had it made, you know. So it was a shock, yeah…it took pretty much the two years of my MA program to work that out, so I would say it was not till my Ph.D. work, the beginning of my Ph.D. work, when I really became a so-called scholar.

Although Dr. McBeatty adjusted easily to the demands of her undergraduate course work she, too, needed to labor diligently to meet the demands of graduate study. She wrote in her essay:

In my graduate seminars, I felt I was playing catch-up. I’d had a good, solid liberal arts education at (school name) and my communication major had been reasonably demanding. But I found that, among the 25 or so graduate students, I was one of only three or four who had entered with only the BA. I was very much aware of this. The papers we had to write in response to our readings and distribute to everyone in class were mild torture – I didn’t feel I had anything insightful to say. Sometimes, I hardly understood the readings (e.g. Derrida and Habermas!) Some of my difficulty was that I hadn’t developed the kind of critical thinking and analysis skills that most of my classmates had.
Similarly, Dr. Garcia did not report inordinate academic struggle in either his undergraduate or master’s programs, but openly discussed the challenges he faced as a doctoral student. He told this story to highlight the profound nature of his struggle:

We’d always have that one person who would say things like, “Oh, okay, when you talk about epistemology, are you including ontology as a related paradigm, or are you talking about a paradigm shift?” and I would look there and…you know, so everyone else seemingly gets it. And I was sitting there clueless…but my big breaking point was “genre.” He (professor) would use “genre” and “epistemology.” I didn’t know how to look up “genre.” I literally thought it began with a “J.”

Luckily for Dr. Garcia, he found support in his graduate cohort and more broadly in the greater local community and began thrive. It was a challenging time for him, though.

Dr. Broderick’s academic challenges, more so than any other participants’, were financially related. She struggled as an undergraduate because she had to work so much that her course work suffered. She recalled the bitterness this created for her.

That was a hard thing for me, because one of my jobs was bussing tables in the cafeteria/social hangout…But it was hard for me to do that around my classmates, who were clearly so much more affluent, and I was angry about—I’ve always, my whole life, since I was a young girl, been angry about class differences anyway…I was in the classes with these people and I was doing all this work, and at the same time thinking…accepting that that was the way it was and thinking if I were smarter I could get better grades. Since that time, I’ve looked back on that,
and of course what I know is I was working three jobs and going to school full-time.

Dr. Broderick eventually came to terms with the financial inequities she experienced and, though she does not accept them as just, reported that she is no longer so incensed by them. After all, while earning her graduate degrees at Harvard, she was surrounded by phenomenal affluence—she lived next door to Max Kennedy at one point—even as she held down three or more positions just to make ends meet for her son and her.

**Considering More Higher Education and Distance From Family**

If the pathways to an undergraduate education were unfamiliar to most participants and their families, the pathways leading onward to a graduate degree were absolutely alien. Only Dr. McBeatty—whose aunts, uncles, and cousins held advanced degrees—possessed any specific knowledge or understanding of what a graduate degree might entail.

Dr. Ruff suggested that her husband was always supportive of her educational pursuits (“He was wonderful through it.”) and her birth family was, too, though they might still not understand her personal and educational journey. She stated, “I don’t think they see a big difference between what I did initially (earning an undergraduate degree), you know. I think *that* was enough of a difference.” She added, “I don’t think any of them, because none of them had gone on, realized what all this involved and how long it would take or anything. I don’t think they had any understanding of any of that.” This sentiment emerged across most narratives and points to the simple fact that the
participants constructed for themselves a world that was distinctive; which their parents and families could not fully understand or appreciate.

Dr. Bridges referred to his parents’ typical deference to educated professionals in such situations and stated that they never questioned his decision to continue beyond the undergraduate degree. He also admitted that his next stop after conferral of his undergraduate degree—Harvard—might have assuaged any concerns his parents harbored.

I think that smoothed any real resistance there might have been. I don’t think there would have been any resistance. I think, again, it was part of the pattern: Clearly you do well at this kind of thing; clearly other people think that you do well and you have an opportunity; go do it. All education is good education.

Dr. Butler, too, had a similar sense of his parents’ perceptions of his educational journey. They may not have understood his undergraduate majors, and they certainly were not versed in the statistical processes he would master in graduate school, but he imagined them saying, “Hey, this kid’s making good progress. It’s always good to make good progress, right?”

Dr. Butler’s progress involved enrollment in graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he studied for a year before transferring to Duke University, from which he earned his doctorate. He reported little in the way of psychological or emotional distance from his family other than one incident with his older brother—a state trooper—that took him by surprise. He recalled the conversation:

I asked him if he ever had to deal with any industrial cases, because at the time I
was learning about pretty big problems with drugs in (work) places…and he misheard me and thought I said, “Have you ever dealt with any interesting cases?” And why that really stuck with me was because of how quickly he bristled, you know, in response to that… what it implied to me is that he thought that I viewed what he did with disdain, which could be nothing further from the truth.

Like Dr. Butler, Dr. Garcia was an outstanding undergraduate student, but was not advised toward graduate school by faculty members in his department. In our interview, he struggled to comprehend this oversight.

I never worked with—gosh, this would be laughable now, I mean, laughable then: I never worked on a research project with a faculty member; I never did an independent study with a faculty member; and a faculty member never approached me about interest and stuff. I didn’t have any of that…I mean, I graduated the top student in our school.

He added:

*I know* that my obstacles and challenges along the way have made me who I am, without question. It’s not even a conscious decision, but I know that I’m the type of mentor that I am today because I was relatively unmentored. I love working with students who don’t know how good they are, because they remind me a lot of myself.

Rather than going immediately to graduate school, then, Dr. Garcia returned home to live with his sister—whom he had lived with as a teenager after leaving his parents’ home—for a time before going to work on the Residence Life staff of a small college in
his home state. While working at this college, he was urged by a supervisor to enroll in a master’s degree program, which he did. Thus he resumed his educational journey. When asked about his parent’s views on the continuation of his education he stated bluntly:

They would never say anything to me directly…Because we had a strained relationship, they would never broach that, because basically I would tell them that I’m paying for my bills, it’s my life, and… not that you don’t have any right to ask, but basically, you have no right to ask.

After completing his master’s degree, Dr. Garcia was again working in Residence Life at another college when a colleague encouraged him to take the next step in his education. He recalled:

I was like, okay, that makes sense to me. I like this and I could—see, I don’t think I ever could picture myself being a professor, but being a director of student activities or being a res life . . . And other people were doing it, too, so it was almost like I would be out of the norm, like, you know, everyone else is kinda taking some classes….And again, part of the norm in higher ed. is that everyone should have higher and higher ed. kinda thing.

Then, as a part of his job, Dr. Garcia was able to teach a freshman seminar class. Of this experience he stated:

I remember being in the classroom and actually having classroom experiences on the other side and thinking like, “Okay, this is where it’s at, like, you have a captive audience, you know, you can do so much more, and just being in the classroom.” So that’s what really propelled me to say, “Okay, I’ll do this PhD.”
Once he enrolled in his doctoral program and began instructing introductory courses in his discipline, Dr. Garcia’s love of teaching was confirmed and he began to form a vision of himself as a professor. Still, he is clear, “It wasn’t a professor at a Research I; it was a community college, it was like a teacher and not a professor.”

Like Dr. Garcia, Dr. Hudspeth did not have any undergraduate mentorship, but she graduated without difficulty and entered into the field as a secondary school teacher. She recalled, “I just always played school. Other kids would play house or they would be on the monkey bars or whatever. I would play school.” She pursued her master’s degree because she sensed that it was an expectation of the position. Certainly, the Ph.D. is not an expectation of an elementary or secondary school teacher, but she needed football tickets, so this is the path she chose. She recalled the unique circumstances, which, after the adoption of her daughter lead to her enrollment in a doctoral program.

I decided I wanted to take a year off to spend more time with her. However, there was no provision for leave for that purpose; leave was granted only for health purposes or for continuing education. So, I said I would go back to school…my husband said, “Since you are going to take classes, you might as well take a full load so we can get football tickets.” At that time (school name) was a football powerhouse and tickets were hard to come by. So basically, I pursued the degree so we could have season tickets.

Dr. Hudspeth noted that her family never questioned her decision and that they were fully supportive. She recalled that her parents would babysit when needed, that distant relative came to town for commencement, and that her father, in particular, was
proud to have a doctor in the family.

Unlike most participants in this study, Dr. Ware was fortunate to have an influential undergraduate mentor. He undertook numerous independent studies with this professor and recalled benefiting greatly from their relationship. He even considered the professor’s suggestion that he apply to graduate school at Harvard, but dismissed this idea as impractical when he discovered how much Harvard costs. “I knew that was going to be impossible under any circumstances.” Instead, after earning his undergraduate degree, Dr. Ware moved to the desert southwest on a whim (“I was living in Portland, Maine, and had just seen a movie about some hippie commune.”) and naively applied for graduate school at a flagship institution.

I had just moved to (state name) with no idea that I might not be accepted, so I already lived there nine months before the semester began. And when I had my interview with the grad director, he pointed out how naïve that was, as well as naïve with such bad GREs scores.

Dr. Ware’s decision to study for a doctorate had little effect on his estrangement from the folks back home in New England. He indicated that they already treated him as something of a pariah for choosing college over welfare in the first place; that they neither understood much of nor cared anything about his graduate education. The fact that he was moving even farther away—physically and conceptually—from the world they inhabited was not even a consideration. As Dr. Ruff had suggested of her family, “I think *that* (the bachelor’s degree) was enough of a difference.” Dr. Ware’s decisions were already incomprehensible to his family. He clarified, “For me, working-class was always
some kind of utopian stage above my own condition. I grew up in the welfare class, and it was unfathomable for most of my family that they might even rise to the working-class.”

Yet he was on a pathway toward the middle class.

As previously mentioned, Dr. Broderick’s family supported the notion of higher education for their children, even if they did not understand the structures of the academy. When she shuttered her school and went off to Harvard, she recalled, her mother told her, “And now you will be Caney Creek’s gift to Boston,” in reference to how Alice Lloyd brought education to Appalachia. Then, Dr. Broderick recalled, her mother admonished her:

“Now remember, Bobby Ann, this doesn’t change a thing. Don’t get above your raisin’.” So I was always . . . you know . . . that’s been a mark of how we lived: you just went to school; you’re not any better than anybody else, and the knowledge that you have will help you do this, but you still don’t know how to milk a cow, you know.

Dr. Broderick recalled that after her doctoral commencement ceremony at Harvard, her mother cried and gave her a rare hug.

**Discovering Personal Resilience and Faculty Support**

Beyond the academic adjustment required to earn a Ph.D., most participants spoke directly or indirectly of the personal resilience needed for the task. In some cases, this related to the academic demands of the degree. Commonly, though, participants spoke of the personal fortitude needed to surmount the non-academic obstacles that haunted their pathways to the professoriate. Certainly, anyone who earns a Ph.D. must exhibit a high
degree of dedication. However, some participants in this study encountered extreme challenges. For these participants, the presence or absence of faculty support was particularly notable.

Dr. McBeatty noted excellent relationships with her relatives, unwavering encouragement from her husband, supportive relationships with graduate classmates, and congenial—though not especially close—relationships with graduate faculty members. Despite feeling a bit overwhelmed upon entering graduate school (“I remember thinking, when I would try to comment in class, especially during that first year, that it was a really dumb or obvious thing I was saying or pointing out.”), she graduated according to schedule and secured a position in the academy after a prolonged search.

Dr. Bridges, too, experienced generally good support throughout his college career. He had strong family support and a solid relationship with an undergraduate advisor:

Who was unlike me in almost every way, except that he was a white man. Behind that… He was Jewish, he was gay, he was from California, he had gone through Ivy League institutions all the way through, and was an accomplished classical pianist on the side and also liked to sing in the local operatic men’s chorus. His walls were decorated with art from all over the world that he’d personally gathered on his journeys. Yeah, very different.

This advisor guided him toward graduate school at Harvard and, “became so helpful and…I guess the message that he consistently sent was ‘Because you haven’t done it doesn’t mean you can’t.’”
Though he did not have a strong relationship with an advisor in his master’s program (“I also remember figuring out in my last year of my master’s…that actually those people were accessible; I just needed to knock on the door.”), Dr. Bridges was fortunate to have a supportive spouse and several good friends on whom he could rely.

Having experienced both strong and weak relationships with academic advisors, Dr. Bridges knew that he wanted a strong relationship with his doctoral advisor. He related that considering the rigors of the consortium he attended:

I knew I couldn’t make that happen unless I had a really good, supportive mentor and so that was probably, along with financial scholarship considerations—they were also very generous to me—was probably the top consideration. Because actually I could’ve stayed at Harvard, but I chose not to because I had never really experienced that as the norm at Harvard; it seemed like the exception.

Dr. Bridges added, “I deliberately moved to where I thought, you know, the nurture would be.”

Dr. Hudspeth, worked throughout her undergraduate career and taught school full-time as both a master’s and doctoral student. As a new doctoral student she was mother to a newly adopted girl and she gave birth to another child just weeks after her final defense. She counts herself fortunate to have had strong support from her family and from a doctoral advisor whom she described as “wonderful. She understood working mother, working professional, working grad student.”

Dr. Hudspeth took the demands of being mom, teacher, and student in stride. She noted, “I’ve been tired my whole life.” When describing the personal challenge, she
spoke at length of the difficulty she encountered securing a job in the public school system with a Ph.D. She stated,

I suppose the most challenging has been after I received it… moving with my husband’s job and then trying to find another job… I wanted back in public schools—high school, middle school, whatever—and it took me—it was the third year after we lived here before (city name) hired me.

Dr. Ruff, too, experienced challenge finding a job despite holding an advanced degree. When she moved back to Appalachia after many years away, she was viewed as an outsider. Despite possessing the proper teaching credentials and having earned several commendations, the local school systems would hardly give her notice. She recalled:

I couldn’t even get an interview. And I had my master’s degree. I had been the County Teacher of the Year in Georgia, and I had several teaching honors…I felt like they weren’t even looking at it. And I can remember calling…one time and speaking with them, and the woman who works at the board, the secretary, said to me, ‘Well, you know, we hire our own.’ and I said to her, ‘For one thing, I am from here.’

Her inability to get a job in the public school led Dr. Ruff to seek employment as an adjunct professor at a small, private college, where she soon learned of an anticipated tenure-track position. She also learned that she would need a doctorate to be eligible for this position. This his did not phase her. Dr. Ruff had gained academic confidence in her years away from Appalachia. She promptly took the GRE, wrote her application essay, and enrolled in a doctoral program at a nearby state university.
However, while serving as an adjunct professor and studying for her doctorate, Dr. Ruff experienced tremendous personal loss. In quick succession she lost her sister and brother-in-law, her husband, and then her father, who had once told her, “Cathy Sue, you should be a schoolteacher.” She recalled of this terrible time:

It was hard to find anyone that could really empathize or understand, so I think . . . I don’t know as though there was a really strong support…I mean, people were good to me, they were kind, you know. But there was no one I felt that could understand.

When asked if she thought of giving up on the graduate studies she indicated, “Well, what else was I going to do? You know, you can choose to kinda die along with them or . . . you know, I had a son, I have a granddaughter, you know.” So she summoned her strength, completed the doctorate, won the faculty position, and earned tenure.

Dr. Butler experienced loss as a doctoral student, too. He recalled in his essay, I got a call that father had discovered lumps under both of his arms. These events would change everything. Within a few month I was standing at the hospital when a cancer surgeon, who knew I was in graduate school, asked Dad about what it would be like to have a son called “Dr. Butler.” Dad couldn’t talk because of a tracheotomy, but he cried. Just big tears. No convulsing or other animation. He just laid there and cried those tears. First time I saw him cry and I knew then he would not see me graduate…The next semester I turned down a fellowship and returned home to be with my Dad. I got to spend several months with him before
he died. Burned out, sad, and cynical, I had no interest in returning to graduate school.

This very nearly spelled the end of Dr. Butler’s academic pathway. Rather than returning to graduate school, he found a job working in a factory.

I worked in…a high-volume, low-brow kind of place. So it was a re-encounter with real life….It could have been a pretty depressing time because I didn’t know—you know, there wasn’t ever any guarantee or even any really big likelihood that I would go back to graduate school, so it was a disconcerting time….it wasn’t clear until, as I said in the essay, this call came from the person who became my advisor, but it was certainly not anything that was expected. But it could have easily gone another way, I think.

After receiving this unsolicited call from a graduate faculty member—who somehow tracked him down at his workplace—Dr. Butler returned to school. He added, “I finished my dissertation in a record three semester because I was motivated in a way I never had been before.”

Similarly, Dr. Garcia found new motivation when he lost his mother at the beginning of his doctoral studies. Distraught, he returned home to fulfill his obligation as the eldest son. The planned week slipped into several weeks and Dr. Garcia seriously considered not returning to school. Two interactions provided newfound motivation. First, Dr. Garcia wrote in his essay, his mom’s aunt, “pulled me aside and told me how disappointed my mother would be with my decision. ‘She was so proud of you and all of your accomplishments, and always dreamed that you would be a college professor.’” He
added, “I remember how empowered I felt by my great aunt’s words and my mother’s encouraging spirit. At that point, I committed to returning to school immediately, making up missed work, and doing whatever it took to earn my Ph.D.”

Then, upon his return to school, Dr. Garcia’s graduate mentor helped him channel this motivation. He noted of this professor:

Dr. Willow helped me through socially. My mother passed away suddenly in the middle of it (finals), and I wasn’t going to come back, and he was the only one who knew how to deal with that in a very kind of productive way but nurturing way. Everyone else was just awkward and death does that to people. But he mentored me on how to succeed in the academy.

Dr. Ware did not experience physical loss during graduate school as Drs. Butler, Ruff, and Garcia did. Rather, his resilience was demonstrated in an almost complete lack of support for or interest in what he was attempting. Whereas the previous three professors had some degree of support from family, classmates, or faculty, Dr. Ware was isolated. By the time he got to graduate school in the southwest he was accustomed to a lack of support from his birth family and was seemingly not phased by a similar indifference from his wife. He stated:

I got married the summer between undergraduate and master’s, but my wife at the time had no particular interest in what I was doing either, which had been my life pattern up till then, so again that didn’t strike me as unusual.

However, he had hoped to study with a faculty member who shared a similar academic interest. He wrote in his essay:
There was a professor in the department who had focused on Marxist literature, and when I got there, all the other grad students were saying, “Oh, you’ve got to study with this guy.” But by the time I got there, he was tired of that and refused to do it with me, so I ended up doing it on my own.

Dr. Ware experienced little support even among his classmates. Yet he persisted along his pathway to the professoriate despite wholesale lack of support during his graduate programs and, ultimately, through denial of tenure at his first institution. Of this experience, he wrote in his essay:

These years were pure hell when it came to my relations with my colleagues… Beyond mere academic field politics, though, my experience was complicated by my sense of never really fitting in and being accepted in the academy because of my welfare background. My colleagues, most of whom had studied at elite schools, were clearly from a different class than I, and while there were never direct statements that proved how I was positioned as different from the rest, I nevertheless got this message loud and clear through differences in social activities and family backgrounds.

Like Dr. Ware, much of the personal challenge through which Dr. Broderick persisted involved poverty and class. She, too, was extremely poor as a child and recalled, “I thought that the kids—there was public housing not far from me, and my goal in life was to be rich enough to live in the public housing.” In her essay she wrote more to this point:
I never wanted to be anything but a classroom teacher. Well, that isn’t quite true. I wanted to be rich and in my world the only “rich” people I saw—and especially the only rich women I saw—were teachers. I also was a rebellious and angry child who wanted not so much to be the boss of others, but I was by the second grade tired of others being the boss of me. And I definitely wanted in charge of my own life. Again, the only women I saw who had power and authority were teachers.

This theme resonates through Dr. Broderick’s essay and interview. Despite the significant challenges of her youth, though, she displayed unabated fearlessness and an undiminished unwillingness to be denied. She stated her belief that, “We have to quit telling kids what they can’t do, because they believe us,” and related her own experience,” and added:

I’m grateful for my ignorance, you know. I didn’t know that I could raise my child alone, but I could, so I did. I didn’t know that I couldn’t start a school, so I did. I didn’t know that I couldn’t go to college, so I did.

Dr. Broderick also did not know that she could not earn two graduate degrees from Harvard, so she did. She did not know that she couldn’t teach qualitative research methods, so she did. She didn’t know that she could not approach a distinguished Harvard professor and state, “There’s just nothing here for me. This doesn’t meet my needs,” so she did. And the Distinguished Harvard professor replied, “Well, then how do we make it meet your needs?”

With this professor’s support, Dr. Broderick developed independent studies to meet her learning objectives and thus continued joyfully on her pathway to the professoriate.
**Encountering Class Beyond the Classroom**

Of the participants in this study, Drs. Ware and Broderick were the most overtly interested in, attuned to, and, passionate about issues of class. Dr. Broderick noted, “I’ve always, my whole life, since I was a young girl, been angry about class differences anyway, and so there was this whole thing of like a sense of anger and indignation.” She discussed the origins of her anger:

A lot of the anger that I carried around came from the content that I was taught, the way I was taught, the reading books—I have one of them right up there. That whole Dick and Jane, Ted and Sally, and looking at their perfect house and looking at my house and thinking about the difference, and looking at father walking home with his briefcase and sitting in the big red leather chair and reading the newspaper, and my father couldn’t read, and all that kinda stuff. So I was always—I mean, truly since I was in first grade, I was extremely aware of those differences.

Though Dr. Broderick admitted that her anger over class issues has subsided, she is still keenly aware of and resistant to imposed class structures and inequities. She spoke of her struggles among the faculty ranks—she quit or was fired from two colleges, and twice renounced higher education as a viable employment option, before finding an academic match at her current institution:

I’m not a good fit for the academy. I hate, I hate the notion of being called senior faculty because I’m a full professor, and my colleagues here are associate professors and so they’re somehow lower than me. I hate that because I have
tenure I get treated differently or because I’m faculty I’m treated differently than staff. I hate that stuff.

Dr. Ware did not write or speak of an early awareness of class issues, but class has been a primary consideration for him since he discovered Marxism while studying in England as an undergraduate. He noted, “that’s where I came across more openly Marxist people and where I realized that described my ideas as well; I just had never had it formulated in that way for me.” In England, he discovered a worldview that corresponded with ideas he had formulated independently.

Dr. Ware described the low socioeconomic status of his birth family and joked about his meager financial resources as a college student:

We didn’t go on any kinds of family trips or anything like that. So again, that was something I was already accustomed to. The saving grace of the era was it was the tail end of the hippie generation, and so I was able to skate through in raggy clothes, you know, as a style choice rather than an economic necessity.

He more seriously describes persistent deficits related to his welfare-class existence as a child:

Not only did I grow up in an economically different kind of environment, but sports were not an outlet for kids on welfare, so even sports was a class differentiator, and so I never became versed in sports and still feel at a loss when that becomes a subject of conversation.

Of the legitimate occupational and personal effect of this he stated:

I do think that has an impact, you know, at tenure time and stuff like that, you
know, in ways where I might not appear as sociable…I’m not a member of the
team necessarily in the way people would want.

Other participants recognized class difference, though not as acutely as Drs. Broderick and Ware. For other participants, class difference was commonly manifest by a
general sense of self-doubt and lack of assimilation corresponding to their upbringing.
Several participants acknowledged or offered the term “imposter.” For instance, when I asked Dr. Bridges about the concept, he stated:

I didn’t have that word in my vocabulary the way that I (now) use it until I was a
doctoral student. It was when one of my committee members used the phrase. He
had come from a working-class background, and one day he said, “You know, it’s
just that imposter syndrome. Yeah, sometimes I have a hard time with that,” and I
sort of cautiously said, “What do you mean?” and he named exactly what I had
been thinking about for a long time: that sense of “When are they going to find
out that I don’t fit here?”

When asked to talk more about this, Dr. Butler stated:

I still feel that way. I am functioning now, as you know, as an assistant provost at
the university, but I still feel that way in many ways… I worked my way through
all the ranks, you know, to full professor, and there were not, I think, ever any
hand-outs along the way, but I would still say that I feel like an imposter, at least
compared to a lot of my colleagues.

Academic achievement and rank notwithstanding, Associate Provost and Professor Butler
on occasion feels uncomfortable with his position in the academy.
Dr. Garcia, another full professor who has declined numerous opportunities to break into the administrative ranks, identified similarly. He wrote in his essay:

One word captures how I felt during my undergraduate years: IMPOSTER. I constantly felt that I wasn’t smart enough to be (in) college and that everyone else had more impressive qualifications (e.g., intelligence, academic preparation, monetary resources, family support, etc.) than I. Despite all of my hard work, I felt unworthy. I constantly met other students who had loads of college prep courses, bragged about their high SAT/ACT scores, and received weekly checks from family members. I worked as a work-study student to earn enough to survive on; the rest was saved to purchase a round-trip Greyhound ticket so that I could get home for Thanksgiving/Christmas break.

Despite enviable success in the academy, Dr. Garcia retains this sense of difference. As a result, he prefers to work with students—for whom he can serve as a mentor—over faculty mentors—who he often considers to have ulterior motives. He maintains a strict distance from colleagues. He noted:

I have no friends in my department. I have some colleagues who are supportive, I have some colleagues I like, but they’ve never been to my house, they don’t know my kids’ birthdays, they don’t know my birthday, and that’s how I kinda measure those things.

Dr. Garcia acknowledged interpersonal tension related to his own family, as well.

I still see myself of a certain class psychologically, but I’m not. I’m middle class, if not middle, upper-middle class; but I know they see me as very different, as
removed from their realities. And I am, but I’m not. I don’t know. It’s a very odd
dynamic.

Dr. Ruff did not identify with the term imposter, but acknowledged class issues
along her pathway to the professoriate. She is tenured at an expensive, private college
near where she grew up, but admitted that she did not originally feel comfortable in
college. In fact, as a teenager she did not consider herself college material and enlisted in
the military after high school. She noted of her current existence so geographically close
to where she was raised:

It can feel like—I mean, at Easter, you know, there’s different worlds: There’s my
world here, and then there’s my other world in (town name) with some people,
and then there’s my world out with my family who’s still on the old farm, you
know. Yeah, it’s a different world to go out to, you know.

That Dr. Ruff persisted and has found this other world is a tribute to her
educational journey. She recalled that as a child, “I knew that there was something else
out there and that I wanted to be a part of it, but I didn’t know how I was going to get
there.”

Dr. Hudspeth, though born into a working-class family, seemed unaware of class
issues—or did not acknowledge such issues, at least. To be sure, she understood that her
family did not have much money, but this did not hinder her educational journey. She
very practically chose to attend her state’s flagship institution for all three of her degrees
and stated that she never felt out of her element, “Probably because everybody else was
probably first generation, I would think.”
Dr. McBeatty, the sole participant from an upper-income family, did not experience any of the financial struggles that the other participants described. She mentioned an adjustment period in graduate school—as other participants had as undergraduates or in graduate school or—but otherwise focused on solid preparation for classes and pursuing her goals. In general, neither she nor Dr. Hudspeth was particularly attuned to class issues.

Critical Similarities and Key Anomalies

Several unique behavioral and experiential patterns occurred across cases. Though these do not necessarily involve each participant, they are meaningful and warrant brief treatment.

Confronting Dire Circumstances

The two participants who revealed the greatest and most consistent class concerns—Drs. Broderick and Ware—came from the most dire family and economic circumstances. Both grew up extremely poor and related strained or severed relationships with family members. Dr. Ware’s family distanced themselves from him when he chose college over welfare. He noted, “I was raised primarily in my mother’s environment, which was in the welfare environment going back to the 30s, when welfare was instituted, so it was multi-generational welfare.” By this point, he was accustomed to parental inattention, though. Of his parents’ indifference he stated:

It took me a couple decades to even think that it should be hurtful, because it was pretty standard, you know, that there was never any interest among my parents about who we kids might be, you know, and what we might be doing.
Dr. Broderick grew up so poor that she aspired to the wealth of public school teachers and dreamed of living in housing as nice as the low-income, government housing near her family’s home. Like Dr. Ware, she knew family dysfunction, but she had a brother—three years her junior—with whom she was close. Her desire to protect him bolstered her resolve to carry on. She recalled a conversation they had prior to his death ten years ago:

I said, “You know, we both grew up like this, and yet I’m so angry, and you’re not. You’re so different, and you don’t remember how hard it was.” And he said to me, “Well, I had a parent and you didn’t.”

**Knowing Privilege and Affluence**

Dr. McBeatty, the only participant to hail from an affluent family, is also the person who described the smoothest, least obstructed pathway to the professoriate. Funding her college education was not a concern for her. She followed her older brother to college out-of-state and wrote of her entitlement in her essay: “I was only too willing to accept my all-expense-paid college experience.”

After earning her bachelor’s degree and teaching for a few years, she was originally wait-listed at the University of Southern California, but was admitted with a teaching assistantship a mere two weeks after calling the head of the department and discussing her application with him. Conversely, Dr. Garcia, who was provisionally admitted—without a teaching assistant and obligatory stipend—to a top program in his discipline, did not gain an assistantship, despite also calling the department head. Generally, Dr. McBeatty did not experience the persistent struggles or self-doubts of
other participants. Her course appears the least affected by her FG status and, potentially, most affected by her parents’ socioeconomic status.

**Finding Valuable Support and Encouragement**

With the exception of Dr. Ruff, each of the participants in this study benefitted from the guidance of a trusted advisor or mentor. Drs. Bridges and Ware were both fortunate to have undergraduate advisors with whom they worked extensively. Dr. Ware recalled:

> I was lucky enough to have one of my professors, for whatever reason, take a real interest in me. He became my mentor throughout the four years I was there, and I did a number of independent studies with him, and he would invite me to dinner at his family’s house occasionally.

Unfortunately for Dr. Ware, he would not experience this type of attention again in his career as a student.

Dr. Bridges, though, was privileged to have an engaged undergraduate mentor and a strong doctoral mentor, too. The latter was by design. Having completed his master’s degree without such a noteworthy mentor, he sought this relationship in his doctoral program. He stated:

> It was decisive for how I chose my doctoral program: I knew that I had to have that kind of relationship with a mentor, or it wasn’t going to work; and I did get that, and so that was very good.

He added:

> Those people became sort of . . . not surrogate—surrogate is the wrong word.
because that implies replacement—but an adjunct or an auxiliary kind of parental role. And I think that I probably looked for that in everybody I worked with.

Again, except for Dr. Ruff, all other participants experienced some degree of faculty support at the doctoral level. In some instances this was as simple as encouragement for their studies; a flaming of their educational passions, if you will. For Drs. Butler and Garcia, though, mentors were instrumental in the completion of their doctoral degrees. Each of these professors lost a parent while studying for their Ph.D., and each left school temporarily as a result. Dr. Garcia related that his mentor taught him how to deal effectively with this loss and, “how to succeed in the academy.”

Dr. Butler declined a fellowship to return home to be with his ailing father. After his father’s death, when he failed to return to school, the professor who would become his mentor reached out to him unsolicited. He recalled:

It wasn’t clear until…the call came from the person who became my advisor, but it was certainly not anything that was expected. I hadn’t dropped any hints. I hadn’t gone to any of my friends saying, “See what (professor’s name) is thinking.” There hadn’t been any of those kinds of contacts at all. I still don’t know how that all turned out and even how he found my number, because he called me at work.

Regardless of how that one Duke professor tracked him down, the effect was huge to Dr. Butler, who returned to school immediately and completed his dissertation quickly.

Support does not need to be so dramatic to be meaningful, nor does it necessarily need to come from faculty members. Two participants—Drs. Garcia and Ruff, received
critical encouragement from people outside the faculty ranks. Dr. Ruff’s encouragement came from a work supervisor who stated, “You might think about becoming a teacher at some point.” This simple comment, in response to the work she was doing with children on a military base, resonated with her. She thought, “And it was like, yeah, maybe. I mean, my dad had mentioned to me as a young girl that I should be, but it was never really a possibility.”

Dr. Garcia, despite being told by a high school guidance counselor that he was not college material (as was Dr. Ware) was twice encouraged for graduate degrees while working in residence life. The supervisor in his first professional position after conferral of his bachelor’s degree encouraged him to study for a master’s degree and then a colleague in his second job, after he earned the master’s degree, suggested that he might want to continue on for a doctorate. He recalled, “One of the things that he said that other people hadn’t said is like, ‘You know you’re not going to be a hall director for the rest of your life.’” Though Dr. Garcia was not yet envisioning himself as a faculty member at a research university, he heeded this colleague’s advice.

Creating a New World

Incidentally, as these professors were following their unique pathways to the professoriate—pathways that were leading them to distinct, new lives—they did not attempt to bring their families along. In most cases they did not leave their families behind emotionally, but educationally they ventured toward a new future without their families, as if they knew instinctively or had learned over time that their educations had rendered them irreconcilably different from the people who raised them. Personal
relationships with their parents notwithstanding, the participants seemed to understand that their educations had altered the orbit of their lives.

Dr. Butler lived at home as an undergraduate. When asked about conversations he had with his parents regarding what he was learning in school he indicated:

We didn’t talk about it within the family very much. It wasn’t something that, for all practical purposes, was ever kinda shared and discussed. It was, you know, a kid was in college, it was a college that was sort of pretty different than any of the experiences the family had had before.

Similarly, Dr. Hudspeth noted:

I always talked about school a lot, like when I was in middle school, high school, all that, because teachers would say, “Oh, she never talks,” and my parents would say, “Well, she does when she gets home...She talks constantly.” And I would talk about school all the time. I don’t know if I did that so much when I was in college, because I wasn’t sure that they could relate to that.

Dr. Bridges experiences might explain why the FG academics in this study traveled their pathways to the professoriate unaccompanied by their parents. He recalled:

I remember a couple years ago I gave a lecture at a university near my parents’ home....They sat through the whole thing, and they didn’t ask me any questions or anything like that, and we did the whole Q&A, and it was done. At the end of it I said, “Well, Dad, what did you think?” He sort of hesitated, I could tell he was weighing his words, and he said, “I didn’t really understand anything you said, but it seemed interesting.”
Dr. Bridges, in his evocative style, also provided a glimpse of the beginning of how his entry into higher education affected his family.

It was as if I had landed on another planet, and really intuitively responded to the natives of that planet, and suddenly had a decision to either catch the rocket back for Earth or somehow stay here in this world; and if I went back to Earth, I knew what was there for me and I could do that, or I could face this unknown, and it was very exciting to go with the unknown, so I did. But it meant the people back on Earth were naturally skeptical or curious about where this was all going to end.

Of course, it did not end. Dr. Broderick adopted the alien culture as his own and, in doing so, permanently altered his relationships with the folks back home. Many of the participants seem to have made the same choice.

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

My objective in undertaking this research was to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the journeys FG students make in venturing away from the familiar socio-cultural terrain of their youth into an uncharted existence; one of which there is no certainty because they are creating the route as they proceed forward. Beyond a mere examination of the thematic commonalities of experience, I wondered if there might be essential similarities underlying participants’ experiences and, in fact, dispositions that may animate the experiences of FG academics as they forged their unique pathways to the professoriate. I was curious to analyze the data and to tease out common threads across the narratives—assembled through elicited essays and personal interviews—of the eight professors who graciously agreed to share their stories.
Of course, analysis of the data is filtered through the lens of my personal experience. I am an academic administrator, a FG graduate student, and an academic advisor with an extensive history of advocacy for, and encouragement of, FG students. Charmaz (2006, p. 130) validated this position when she wrote, “theory depends on the researchers view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it.” She added (pp. 130-131):

Differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions. A constructivist approach means being alert to conditions under which such differences and distinctions arise and are maintained. Having the material to anchor the experience takes rich data and entails having sufficient knowledge so one can see differences and distinctions.

Years of involvement with FG students have endowed me with a unique understanding of their issues and instilled in me attentiveness to the often-subtle nature of their experiences and strengths.

The experiences and strengths of these eight FG academics are their own and are not intended to be generalizable to the experiences and strengths of other FG academics as they blaze (or blazed) their unique pathways to the professoriate. Rather, the experiences and strengths of these participants may be viewed as cues to consider when working with FG students on their own journeys. How might the themes revealed in this study animate the journey of other FG students who are considering graduate school? How might the underlying similarities that emerged from the data inform—and facilitate—the journeys future FG students will make to their positions in the academy?
These questions encapsulate my vision of—and hopes for—this research. While I do not consider myself an activist researcher, I do not view myself as a pure researcher, either. From the onset, I hoped that what I discovered through this process—the theory I developed—might be of use to education practitioners or to FG students themselves. That, of course, will be primarily left to the discretion of those in the higher education community who are interested in such matters.

As indicated in the previous section, shared themes across narratives included Experiencing Family Influence on the Educational Journey, Funding Higher Education, Adjusting Academically, Continuing in Higher Education and Distance From Family, Discovering Personal Resilience and Faculty Support, and Considering Class. Individually, participants’ experiences supported these themes. Beyond these broad themes, however, participants, in sharing their narratives, collectively revealed several fine truths of their experience. These truths were not obvious when considering narratives individually. Stacked together, though, they are evident. This Theory of the Development of First Generation Academics emerged after carefully and intensively reviewing the specifics of each participants’ experience and then stepping back to consider the results in unison. It states that First Generation students who persist and become FG academics experience a fundamental sense of difference from their peers, professors, and colleagues in higher education and, in fact, from the people back home, but are not thwarted by this difference, in part because they are psychologically resilient. It also states that FG academics have the emotional support of at least one supervisor or professor for their journey in higher education.
Emotional Support

Though the presence of emotional support may appear patent—everyone needs the occasional boost, right?—this support must be qualified. As a group, most participants except for Dr. Ware spoke of the support of their family, but they also noted that this support was general and uninformed. Participants’ families and friends, even if commonly supportive, were blindly so. They simply did not know how to effectively advise or prop up their loved ones other than to let their foray into higher education play out, knowing that they usually had nothing to offer other than their well-wishes. This was not their world. They were strangers in a strange land and could not offer effective guidance or counsel.

However, participants revealed emotional support beyond their families. Each participant identified at least one person whose words or actions provided needed emotional sustenance as they traveled their pathways to the professoriate. It is important to emphasize that the nature of this support was, indeed, emotional and personal. Dr. Bridges’ great aunt stepped in at a critical point in his undergraduate career and offered desperately needed financial support. This is not the type of support participants discreetly indicated was so vital to their journey. Instead, they implied, in words unstated, that the intimate, emotional affirmations from non-family members were those that were most pivotal to their journey.

For Dr. Ruff, this happened before she entered college when a supervisor’s offhand comment (“You might think about becoming a teacher at some point.”) spurred her toward matriculation. For Drs. Bridges and Ware and other FG academics it was the
close relationships they formed with their undergraduate advisors, people who for whatever reason took sincere interest in their development and success. Dr. Bridges said of the relationship with his undergraduate mentor, “I mean, it’s about a loving concern for another human being and the ability to help send that human being on a direction that’s best for him or her, not necessarily the one that you carved out or envisioned.” For Dr. Butler it was a graduate professor who tracked him down when he disappeared following the death of his father, offered his tutelage, and convinced time to return to finish his doctorate.

Each participant had someone outside his or her family who offered emotional encouragement at a critical time. Whether that person was supervisor or a professor seems less important than the sentiment and timing of their message. The result was certainly the same: participants began or continued along their pathways to the professoriate.

**Recognition of Fundamental Differences**

Participants identified a fundamental sense of difference at various points along their educational journeys. For most, this sense began well before they first entered—or even considered—the academy. Dr. Bridges noted, “The fact that my father, especially, was nothing like me...had always made me sort of feel a little bit alien.” Dr. Ware, mentioned, “I wasn’t at all the typical welfare kid, you know, aspiring to the working class; I always had a very different sense of what life was about and what I was doing in it.” For Dr. Ware, in fact, this difference resulted in an estrangement from the folks back home when he chose college over welfare. He was openly derided for this choice. Most
instances were less dramatic. One professor recalled preferring to play teacher over playing outside with other kids; another recalled being particularly eager to shed her small-town skin; and another recalled being mocked by friends he had grown up with when, as a college freshman, they determined that he was suddenly hard to understand. Numerous participants noted the degree to which they read as children or as teens. Regardless of the specifics surrounding the sense of difference between participants and their families/friends, the difference was at various times obvious and, on occasion, uncomfortable. All participants noted that the difference between them and the people they left behind increased with the level of their education and their integration into the academy.

Participants also indicated that the difference they noticed from the folks back home was only one part of the equation. Throughout their journeys, they noticed consistent difference from their peers, professors, and colleagues. Many participants noted feeling like an imposter and wondering when people would learn that they did not belong. Some participants felt less prepared for college and less worthy to be there. Most participants struggled to adjust to the demands of undergraduate or graduate work. They feared that they might not prove capable and that they would not succeed.

Participants indicated that they were different in terms of class, as well. With one exception, all participants came form working-class backgrounds (or lower) and had little familiarity with or exposure to the affluence they would encounter in the academy. When they came to college, they brought their down-home selves into an uptown world. This was uncomfortable for most participants. Dr. Broderick recalled that she was angry about
the economic disparity she witnessed as an undergraduate. How was it fair, she wondered, that she was required to work so hard for her physical and educational survival when others skated by with relative ease? Dr. Garcia recalled working many hours just to save enough to buy a bus ticket home at the holiday break. He also recounted needing to drop out during his freshman year when his financial aid ran short. He didn’t count himself out, though family and college friends did. Dr. Bridges felt uncertain and scared as an undergraduate when he was invited to his advisor’s home. He recalled, “I was nervous about spilling something on the carpet initially. I still remember the terror of that.” Fortunately for Dr. Bridges, this advisor would become a trusted confidant and would guide him throughout his undergraduate career.

Even once they earned their doctorates and became professors, most participants noted that they still feel different from their colleagues in the academy and that these differences put a strain on or prevent professional relationships. One participant recalled the distance he feels from colleagues who clearly hail from far more affluent backgrounds than he, even though they now earn similar salaries and may even occupy the same socioeconomic rung. Another participant noted difference—and challenges in the promotion and tenure process—based on cultural affiliation. One participant stated flatly that she is not a good fit for the academy, though she has now found an academic home. Another participant noted ideological difference from colleagues who are more considerably more politically liberal than she. Yet another participant denied that he has any friends in his academic department. Several participants—despite unqualified success in academe—report that they still feel like an imposter on occasion.
Psychological Resilience

While anyone who earns a doctorate must demonstrate an uncommon degree of resilience, the fortitude exhibited by the FG academics in this study was exceptional. Parental statements of desire for them to attend college notwithstanding, matriculation was not a forgone conclusion for most participants. Merely getting to college was a significant task. Summonsing the courage to leave safe harbor was remarkable. Adjusting once they arrived on the shores of academia was another matter. Participants did not understand the mores of the academic community nor were they privy to the lexicon. They had entered a new world and had to learn the basics of survival as they mastered the curriculum of their disciplines.

This learning process—their integration into the academy—did not occur in a vacuum, though. As they were adjusting, they were simultaneously navigating new relationships with the folks back home, who were probably equally unsure of this new world and, possibly, fearful that their loved ones might not return to them. Then, too, life intervened, as it is wont to do. Three participants experienced the loss of close family members while studying for their doctorates; one of these participants lost four family members in three separate incidents. Several participants were married while in school and at least half had children.

Participants, most of who came from families in which money was scarce, had to fund their educations, as well. This was a significant struggle for most and a monumental challenge for some. Many worked numerous jobs through undergraduate and graduate school. They scrimped and saved and fought to make ends meet. They did not have
anyone other than themselves to rely on in these lean years, yet they had to persist. They were in too far to bail out. Persisting, though, required extreme resolve and hardiness.

**In Context**

The recurrent themes and underlying threads, revealed and made vital when considered across experiences and narratives, along with the resulting theory, are the findings of my study. Chapter Five will examine the theory of FG students’ ascension to positions in the academy in light of previous literature related to key theoretical points. Chapter Five will also include a discussion of limitations of this theory as well as implications for its use.
Chapter 5

Purpose of Research

Research on how FG students get to college and succeed once matriculated is vast. There is also considerable research into the experiences in academe of women, cultural minorities, and other minority groups. Research examining people of working-class backgrounds who pursue careers in the academy is scant. Research about FG academics is nonexistent. With this research, I sought to fill this gap. Through careful analysis of elicited texts and personal interviews, I developed a theory to explore the pathways to the professoriate taken by FG college students. This theory is represented by the characteristics that were commonly seen in FG students as they made their unique journeys. This theory is important because FG scholars offer unique and valuable perspectives, just as scholars from other cultural or identity groups do. The Theory of the Development of First Generation Academics can serve as a guide for FG students and educational leaders.

Scope of Study and Data Gathering

I collected data from eight FG academics for this study. Before data collection began, I gathered consent forms from all participants, who were college professors and FG college students. The standard consent is included in Appendix D. All participants held Ph.D.s in their respective discipline and, at the time of their interviews, were working as professors at institutions of higher education in one of the Great Lakes states or in one of the states along the Ohio River. Five participants were full professors and three were associate professors. All participants were tenured except for one professor.
who taught at a technical college, which does not grant tenure. Institutional type varied widely. Participants taught at technical colleges, private colleges, state research universities, and state flagship universities.

Each participant wrote an essay describing his or her particular pathway to the professoriate. I provided brief instructions for the essays, but encouraged participants to write freely. I also expressed my belief that they would identify the salient points of their stories. After receiving each essay, I coded it and developed interview protocol based on content of the essay, the over-arching research question, and the six sub-questions identified in chapter three. I then interviewed participants either in their offices or in a mutually agreed upon location. Interview length ranged from 40 minutes to 101 minutes, though the average time per interview was 68 minutes. After conducting and having each interview transcribed, I coded each transcript and began analysis according to the stipulations of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

**Constructivist Grounded Theory**

The goal of this study was to explore the pathways to the professoriate taken by FG college students. My interest in this line of inquiry developed out of my career working with FG undergraduates. I wondered what prompted some FG students to go on to graduate school and what motivated a select few to seek careers in the academy. In reality, though, I was less interested in why students chose this path than I was in understanding the unique experiences that shaped them along the way. I was excited to be able to advance this line of inquiry; such literature did not previously exist.
In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. Grounded theory provided a vehicle for me to effectively derive meaning from the experiences of the eight college professors who graciously opened their lives to me. By coding participants’ personal essays and interview transcripts, I was able to identify common themes and subtle undercurrents that comprised their journeys. Grounded theory methodology allowed me to immerse myself in the experiences of each participant and to combine those experiences with each other and with the insights I have gained working with FG, low-income undergraduates. Charmaz (2006) summarized the process I elected to follow:

As grounded theorists, we study our early data and begin to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding…By making and coding numerous comparisons, our analytic grasp of the data begins to take form…Through studying data, comparing them, and writing memos, we define ideas that best fit and interpret the data as tentative analytical categories…As we proceed, our categories not only coalesce as we interpret the collected data but also the categories become more theoretical because we engage in successive levels of analysis. (p. 3)

Charmaz added, “Constructivism fosters researchers’ reflexivity about their own interpretations as well as those of their research participants” (p. 131).

Deep engagement with the data allowed me create a portrait of each participant individually and of the participants’ collective experiences. Immersion in the data also enabled me to create a theory that describes and draws insights into the experiences of first generation academics. Again, I held closely to the constructivist approach set forth
by Charmaz (2006). She wrote, “Consistent with their [Glaser’s and Strauss’s] reasoning, a completed grounded theory met the following criteria: a close fit with the data, usefulness, conceptual density, durability over time, modifiability, and explanatory power” (p. 6).

**Research Questions**

The over-arching question of this research addressed the journeys FG students make on their way to the professoriate. Officially, I sought to develop a theory to explain characteristics that are commonly seen in FG students as they blaze their unique pathways to the academy. Unofficially, and most simplistically from the onset, I wanted to explore the unique experiences of these under-represented and unlikely players in modern higher education. How did they earn membership in the academy against what I anticipated to be steep odds?

I chose the words “pathways to the professoriate” carefully. For years, the U.S. Department of Education TRIO community—this researcher included—referred to an “educational pipeline,” as if students entered at one point and were delivered fully educated and eager to contribute at a predetermined endpoint. For many students, particularly FG students, this is not the realistic. Countless variables might intervene in any individual experience and divert a student from his or her educational goals. A pathway, then, is a more accurate metaphor for the individual experience in higher education. An individual may step onto or off of a pathway at various points. Students may slow down or even halt temporarily along the way. The term “pathway” accounts for the innumerable circumstances that may transpire in peoples’ lives to facilitate or obstruct
the educational journey. Use of the plural ("pathways") indicates that there is no single route. The options are a variable as the human condition and life circumstances.

Beyond the overarching research question, I used several sub-questions to guide the development of interview protocol and, in fact, this study. After reviewing literature on working-class academics I originally wrote the following six sub-questions:

1. What initially inspires FG college students’ decisions to go beyond the Bachelor’s degree to pursue a terminal degree?
2. What obstacles do FG academics encounter along their educational journey that impede their progress and test their determination?
3. How do their reactions to these obstacles change their perception of higher education as a societal good and as a career path?
4. What experiences support their academic success and bolster their resolve to seek a career in the professoriate?
5. How do their perceptions of supports and obstacles encountered along their educational journey influence their careers decisions?
6. How have their choices impacted their relationships with the people back home?

After collecting participant essays, conducting personal interviews, and carefully analyzing both, it became clear that two of the original sub-questions were less important than originally anticipated. Questions #3 and #5 were largely irrelevant. Regarding question #3 (How do their reactions to these obstacles change their perception of higher education as a societal good and as a career path?): Not a single participant suggested that
they hold any doubt of the societal good of higher education. Surely, as insiders they can see cracks in the façade; several did wonder and worry about the politics and priorities of the educational system. However, none of the participants of this study even hinted that higher education is not important and, in fact, vital to our nation’s future.

Most participants indicated that once they initiated doctoral study, a career in the academy was their assumed objective. Only three participants spoke of any variation from this line of thought. If participants did consider an alternative, they ultimately decided that the academy was where they belonged. Incidentally, two of the three participants who did not originally envision a career in the academy trained to be public school teachers. Both worked in public education as planned until they experienced difficulty finding jobs in the public schools. At this point in their careers, each turned to the academy. Despite the challenges inherent in modern higher education, neither suggested a desire to go back to the public schools. In fact, one of these participants noted that she has let her teaching credential expire.

Regarding question #5 (How do their perceptions of supports and obstacles encountered along their educational journey influence their careers decisions?): Participants did not indicate that supports for or obstacles impeding their educational pathways influenced their career decisions except, as above, when the obstacles two participants encountered shunted them into the professoriate.

**Contributions to the Field**

As identified in Chapter 1, there is no literature specifically addressing FG academics. Most literature addressing FG status considers the numerous facets of the
student experience pre-matriculation through undergraduate degree conferral. Most research related to members of the academy addresses race or gender issues, with only a small body of literature examining social class. Fortunately, the works addressing social class demonstrate the inextricable link between working-class status and FG status, so before data gathering began I was able to contextualize the experiences of FG academics through the experiences of working-class students.

This research has allowed me to contribute directly to the field by closing the literature gap related to the status of FG students beyond conferral of the undergraduate degree. This research revealed consistent themes throughout the educational journeys—pre-matriculation to doctorate and on through joining the academy as professors—of FG academics. As discussed extensively in Chapter 4, these themes are: Experiencing Family Influence on the Educational Journey, Facing Funding Challenges, Adjusting to Academic Demands, Considering More Higher Education and Distance From Family, Discovering Personal Resilience and Faculty Support, and Encountering Class Beyond the Classroom. Echoes among these themes comprise the theory that stems from this research.

**Elements of Theory**

Woven intricately into each narrative and spanning all narratives and experiences are three consistent threads, or undercurrents, that together comprise this Theory of the Development of First Generation Academics. Though not specifically addressed by participants, each demonstrated psychological hardiness (undeniable mental/emotional resolve in the face of considerable challenge), experienced a poignant sense of otherness
(a visceral sense of difference), and received vital emotional support from outside the family (whether from faculty or supervisors). Of these three elements, psychological hardiness and otherness are not explicit. Fortunately, each has been painstakingly scrutinized in the research. Though thorough coverage of either of these topics is well beyond the scope of this project, I’ll offer here a glimpse of the research surrounding these theoretical elements.

**Otherness**

One undeniable undercurrent that emerged when considering participant narratives en masse was the profound sense of difference each felt from those around them. Whether at home before college, in college, in graduate school, or as professors, participants each related the feeling that they were outside their element at various points along their journeys. To be sure, this feeling was not stated directly, but was hidden in their narratives and was unspoken amid their stories. Onbelet (2000) addressed this point:

> Narrative, the telling of stories…helps me imagine the other in a way that theory cannot. Theory helps to explain something but uses an intellectual language that remains distant from me. Narrative, however, uses a language that seems more intimate and draws me nearer to the dialogue. The telling of stories creates in me a space for imagination, recognition (of both self and other), and empathy. It also seems to be the preferred medium of expression of those who have been marginalized, or those seeking to give form and meaning to the events of their life. (¶ 6)
Admittedly, the academic and philosophical discourse on otherness is immense and ancient. A thorough treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this study. Participants spoke clearly of their inherent otherness without stating directly, “I was different” or “I am different.” What could dialectics possibly contribute to their meaning?

The written essays and spoken words of the participants of this study routinely pointed to their awareness of otherness. Participants unvaryingly referred to themselves in binary terms. Hispanic/Caucasian, city/country, thick accent/lack of accent, non-traditional student/traditional student, student worker/money from daddy, same clothes day after day/full closets and seasonal wardrobes, residence halls/living at home, parent/not parent, and family support/no family support are but a sampling of the binary relationships participants described. These dichotomies were implied in their narratives. In describing family SES status, participants quietly implied “I am different. I am other.” In describing parental educational attainment, participants softly suggested “I am other.” In describing their feelings of belonging in the academy and in dozens of different ways, participants whispered, “I am other.” Their statements were more discrete than John Fogerty, who in 1969 screamed his otherness: “It ain’t me. I ain’t no millionaire’s son…I ain’t no fortunate one.”

Even if they were to make a direct statement of their otherness, though, the words of FG academics are not likely to carry like those of a rock-n-roll star with a record contract. FG academics may be unlikely to make a direct statement anyway. Not all will be like Dr. Broderick who, while at Harvard, proudly owned her otherness when she reclaimed her Appalachian heritage and accent. Not all FG academics will understand
their otherness, but they will see others whose pathways are more supported and less obstructed and will feel the difference. They will be aware of the disparity, and it may disquiet them. Yet they will persist through their otherness, unless they do not. By recognizing the disparate feelings of otherness suffusing the experiences of FG students, those in the academy—whether they are themselves FG academics or not—might at least lower some of the hurdles blocking the pathways to the professoriate taken by FG college students.

Psychological Hardiness

The FG academics in this study were remarkable in their ability to maintain dedication to their goals in the face of consistent—and frequently intense—personal challenges. When they disproved the predictions of high school staff that they were not college material by earning doctorates and being granted full professorships, they demonstrated pluck. When they continued their doctoral studies after losing close family members, they displayed perseverance. When they toiled through academic challenge and raised the bar higher for themselves, they showed dedication. When they persisted in the face of cultural bias, they demonstrated grace and an unwillingness to yield to such base pressure. Throughout their individual journeys, the eight participants of this study demonstrated firm, steady resolve. In his article Grit: It’s What Separates the Best from the Merely Good, Packard (2007) called the difficult to pinpoint determination, “backbone, chutzpah, fortitude, guts, stick-to-itiveness,” and indicated that these are “all words that describe what separates brilliant slackers from the simply talented who excel through a passionate yet steady approach” (p. 10).
Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) indicated:

Our hypothesis that grit is essential to high achievement evolved during interviews with professionals in investment banking, painting, journalism, academia, medicine, and law. Asked what quality distinguishes star performers in their respective fields, these individuals cited grit or a close synonym as often as talent. (p. 1088)

In fact, one participant in this study categorically denied that his achievements were due to talent. Though not denying his intelligence, he attributed his considerable success to the fact that he has always worked extremely hard. Duckworth et al. (2007) continued:

Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievements as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas boredom or disappointment signals to others that it is time to change trajectory or cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (pp. 1087-1088)

In earning their doctorates and aspiring to careers in the academy, the participants in this study met these standards precisely. They worked diligently over many years to earn their doctorates (one participant took seven years to earn her bachelor’s degree) and still more years to progress through the promotion and tenure process before being granted tenure, and, as is the case for the majority of these FG academics, yet more years before investiture as full professors. These participants trudged onward through financial hardship, separation from family, and loss of loved ones. The weathered the storms of
academic rigor and self-doubt. They bridged the chasm that developed between them and their families, or they merely watched it grow. They endured through all of these struggles and countless more. By Duckworth’s definition or any other, they demonstrated true grit.

Grit and the closely related construct hardiness are both widely studied, but grit is more nebulous than hardiness. Maybe grit is like obscenity, of which Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said, “I know it when I see it.” Yes, grit is hard to pin down, but when confronted with it, we know what we are observing. Of hardiness, Funk (1992) wrote “There is debate as to whether hardiness is one or several characteristics” (p. 335).

For the last 30 years, Salvatore Maddi and various collaborators have explored psychological hardiness and its effect on performance. Maddi (2002) discussed three aspects of hardiness. He wrote:

Measured by a number of existing scales, the attitudes that emerged as stress buffers seemed to be well conceptualized as commitment, control, and challenge. What we called commit was a predisposition to be involved with people, things, and contexts rather than be detached, isolated, and alienated. Control involved struggling to have an influence on outcomes going on around oneself, rather than sinking into passivity and powerlessness. Challenge signified wanting to learn continually from one’s experience, whether positive or negative, rather than playing it safe by avoiding uncertainties and potential threats. (p. 174)

Despite feeling marginalized, the following was true for the participants in this study: In various situations and in their own unique ways, they were involved, not
isolated; active participants, not ineffectual; and bold, not timorous. Their grit/hardiness propelled them beyond their difference and otherness to success in the academy.

**Implications for Policy/Practice**

This research could benefit multiple constituencies. To FG students—whether undergraduate, graduate, or pre-matriculated—this research might provide inspiration by illustrating that they are not the first to undertake this arduous trek. To politicians, institutional leaders, and faculty, this research might shine a light on the challenges facing FG students in higher education and showcase the importance of support for this population of scholars or potential scholars. To the broader higher education community, this research might inspire campus dialogue, elevate awareness, and contribute to the establishment or bolstering of programs serving first generation students.

**Implications for Further Research**

Several key prospects for future research emerged along with themes in the research data. Most of these are merely twists on or greater exploration of certain elements of the current study. One design concern prompted corrective ideas.

**Potential Twists**

Despite attempting to secure a more culturally-diverse pool of participants, I was unable to do so. This was partially a function of casting a broad—and blind—net. By soliciting participants through faculty senate chairs (or equivalent) without stipulating a preference for a diversity of participants, I may have hampered my ability to recruit non-Caucasian people. Including a preference for a diverse pool of participants in the initial contact to faculty senate chairs might aid in diversifying the participant pool. Replicating
this study at an institution with a high percentage of ethnic minority faculty members might prove even more beneficial. One could then compare the results of this new study with current results to gain a fuller vision of the experiences of FG academics.

One could also replicate this study with FG academics who were raised middle-class or higher. The one participant in this study who was raised in an affluent family described a much different experience long her pathway to the professoriate than her less-advantaged counterparts, most of who were severely under-resourced. The data from such a study could be telling.

**Further Exploration of a Theme**

After analyzing data and identifying themes, I contextualized the Theory of the Development of FG Academics against current literature. In doing so, I discovered the vast body of literature on psychological hardiness and grit. Of particular interest to me was Duckworth’s 22-question Grit Survey. This instrument measures one’s likelihood to persist over time and through hardships. It quantifies tenacity and, I believe, could add an interesting and potentially valuable dimension to this research.

One could gauge the grit of a group of FG master’s or doctoral students and consider this data in light of their progress toward careers in the academy. Alternately, one could examine the graduation rate of a group of FG college freshman in light of their grit scores. Then again, one might compare the grit scores of a group of college professors from affluent backgrounds with the scores of professors from working-class backgrounds. Analyzing the lived experiences of academics relative to their grit scores seems immensely interesting and potentially fruitful.
Corrective Ideas

The two-tier data gathering process I incorporated (essay followed by interview) was valuable in that it allowed me to become familiar with the participants—most of who were absolute strangers to me—before I sat down to interview them. The essays also enabled me to dig deeper into their stories as I constructed interview protocol based in part on the points they deemed salient. While I did not expect participants to be deceptive, memory is complicated and subjective, so the essays also allowed me to discretely verify data.

The essays did, however, present a prohibitive barrier to four potential participants. These four professors could not afford the time needed to pen an essay. In lieu of the essay, one might consider asking participants to answer a four to six relevant questions. This might offer some of the valuable insight that the essays afforded without being prohibitively time-consuming.
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Appendix A: IRB Approval

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Exploring the Pathways to the Professoriate Taken by First Generation College Students

Primary Investigator: James Gregory Lester
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Peter Mather
(If applicable)
Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

01/25/11 Approval Date
01/31/12 Expiration Date

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

Monday, December 27, 2010

Re: First Generation Research

Dear XXX,

I am a Ph.D. candidate in Higher Education Administration at Ohio University and am writing in hopes of enlisting your support for and participation in my doctoral research.

For the past ten years I have worked with first generation (FG), low income, and disabled students through a U.S. Department of Education TRIO grant. My work with this population of students—first at Louisiana State University and now at Ohio University—has spurred my interest in research related to the challenges FG students experience in higher education.

For my dissertation research I have chosen to explore a particular group of first generation college students; those who go on to become college and university faculty. In particular, I am interested in examining the journey FG college students take as they decide to earn a doctorate, pursue that degree, and then join the ranks of professors. By all accounts, this is an unlikely journey.

Participation will involve writing an essay addressing your personal route from FG undergraduate to FG academic and sitting for a 60-minute interview. I will provide guidelines for the personal essay and intend to conduct in-person interviews within one month of receiving your essay. I would like to have interviews completed by the beginning of March 2011.

There is scant literature specifically addressing FG students who go on to become members of the academy. FG membership in the academy is important, though. FG scholars offer a unique and valuable perspective, serve as prototypes for undergraduate students who are FG, contribute to the campus dialogue, elevate awareness through routine interactions with students and colleagues, and contribute to the further educational development of their home communities. By helping to expand awareness of the FG student experience, FG academics can promote the merit of programs benefitting FG students—undergraduate and graduate—and contribute to the diversity of perspectives that comprise a vibrant and inclusive university.

I would be pleased to enlist you as a participant and would be equally glad to speak with any of your colleagues who are FG academics. I will follow up with you soon to discuss my proposal.

Sincerely,
Greg Lester
Doctoral Candidate
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio
740.590.8682
Appendix C: Essay Instructions

Date

Dear Dr. XXX,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my doctoral research project. As promised, I am sending along an Ohio University Consent Form and instructions for the personal essay portion of my doctoral research.

Please complete the consent form and return it to me in the enclosed envelope. There is no need to wait until you have completed your essay to send the consent form. You can send the consent form at your earliest convenience and then email your essay to me when complete. If possible, I would like to have the essay by (date).

Regarding the essay, please include the following biographical information: name, undergraduate and graduate institution(s) attended, institutions at which you have been employed, current institution and position/rank.

Length of essay can vary according to the demands of your story, though four to ten double-spaced pages could be a basic guideline. Ultimately, this is about your experiences in higher education from the point as an undergraduate when you started considering graduate school, though the conferral of your doctorate, and on to joining the academy as a professor. What prompted you to consider graduate school and a career in the professoriate? What supports did you experience along the way? What hurdles did you have to surmount? What were your experiences? How have your choices affected you?

I realize this is vague, but I do not want to provide instructions so specific as to be limiting. Please reflect on your experiences and write from the heart. You will identify the salient points of your story.

Having said that, the following list offers common themes I have identified in the literature about working-class academics. (The literature specifically addressing FG academics is notably lacking.)

- Acknowledging difference from classmates/colleagues
- Acknowledging difference from family and friends
- Explaining your grad school/career decisions to family and friends
- Feeling a sense of loss upon assuming your place in academe
- Realizing importance of class
- Recognizing upper-class privilege
Feel free to address any of these themes that you find personally relevant or to address none of them. Again, I am most interested in your honest reflections on and candid writing about your experiences. You will identify the central points of your story.

I look forward to reading your essay.

Gratefully,

Greg Lester
Appendix D: Ohio University Consent Form

Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Exploring the Pathways to the Professoriate Taken by First Generation College Students

Researcher: James “Greg” Lester

You are being asked to participate in research. In order to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being conducted because, despite the growing volume of research relating to myriad facets of First Generation (FG) student status—both pre-matriculation and through undergraduate degree attainment—there is scant literature addressing FG students who go on to become members of the academy (FG academics). By all accounts, this is an unlikely journey. However, FG membership in the academy is important. FG academics offer a unique and valuable perspective, just as working-class, feminist, or queer scholars do. Beyond exposing continuing generation (CG) students to people from less educationally advantaged backgrounds, FG academics like you serve as role models for undergraduate students who are FG, contribute to the campus dialogue, elevate awareness through routine interactions with students and colleagues, and contribute to the further educational development of their home communities.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to write a personal narrative describing your journey from FG college student to professor (FG academic) AND submit to a one-hour interview.

You should not participate in this study if you are uncomfortable or unwilling to candidly recount your pathway to your current position in academia.
Your participation in the study will last approximately three months (the time estimate from consent, through writing of your personal narrative, to conducting the one-on-one interview).

Risks and Discomforts

Risks or discomforts that you might experience are disquiet related to recall of challenging moments on your pathway to the professoriate, if any.

Benefits

This study is important to science/society because, by helping to expand consciousness of the FG student experience, FG academics can promote the merit of programs benefitting FG students—undergraduate and graduate—and contribute to the diversity of perspectives that comprise a vibrant and inclusive university.

You may not benefit personally by participating in this study other than by allowing your story to inspire others.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential by substituting identifiers in place of your name and by disguising your institutional affiliation.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:

* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;

Contact Information

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact:

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If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740) 593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
• you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
• you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
• you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
• you are 18 years of age or older
• your participation in this research is completely voluntary
• you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Printed Name __________________________________________

Version Date: 12/31/2010
Appendix E: Interview Protocols

Questions for Dr. Garcia

1. Your entry into the academy seems like a drop-and-go experience. What were your thoughts/feelings about being thrust into a totally unfamiliar situation?
2. Did you feel isolated? If so, how did you cope?
3. How did you construct your vision of a "full college experience?"
4. Could you talk to your family/friends @ your college experiences? If so, what did you tell them?
5. You mention $$ struggles several times. What was your internal self-talk related to this? What did you tell yourself @ your $$ struggles?
6. Aside from a ride home, did you ever call on your family for assistance?
7. If not family, to whom did you turn for assistance as an undergrad?
8. What were your biggest supports along your pathway to a career in academe?
9. You wrote that when you returned home because of $$, your family was proud of what you had accomplished even tough you had not yet earned a degree. What did they say to you @ your college experiences? What stories did they tell you’re their friends and colleagues?
10. Did your dad ever try to bring you into his trade? Did/does your family ever suggest that you might move closer to home?
11. You were a top undergrad, but profs never broached the idea of grad school with you. What are your thoughts on this?
12. Had you ever thought @ grad school?
13. Upon securing your first position in HEd, did you feel any ease in the academy? Were you thinking @ a career in academe at that point?
14. Your supervisors TWICE encouraged your academic pursuits? Did you receive encouragement from profs? If not, can you speculate why?
15. What did your family think @ MORE school?
16. You write about feeling like an imposter, but when applying to doctoral programs you applied to top programs and—its appears by the fact that you quit your job before admission—were somewhat confident that you would be admitted. Will you talk @ this a little more?
17. You wrote that doctoral classmates shared fears and offered encouragement. Did you share a similar background with any of them?
18. How did the supports and obstacles you encountered along the way influence your careers decisions?
19. You note that after your mother passed, you were doing it for yourself and your family. Who/what was motivating you prior to this?
20. You wrote that in your doctoral program you relied on members of the non-academic, local community more than members of the university-community. Did you share a more similar background with local community members than w/ members of the university community?
21. Generally, how would you describe your relationships with your doctoral profs?
22. Did the challenges you encountered along the way affect your perception of HEd as an institution? As a mechanism for social/cultural change?
23. Did the supports and obstacles you encountered along the way influence your careers decision?
24. What is the composition of your core group of friends today? Are they academics?
25. Do you have much contact with friends from the old neighborhood? If so, what do you talk about?
26. Your choices suggest that you are an academic on your own terms. What’s behind this?
27. What do you make of the teasing your dad gave you @ your soft hand and your work?
28. Would your family or non-academic friends visit you on campus?
29. You attribute your success to hard work rather than your own abilities. Are you selling yourself short?
Questions for Dr. Bridges

1. You wrote that you arrived at college with an uninformed perspective. Did you perceive that your undergrad classmates adjusted to college life more readily than you?
2. Did you feel then that your lack of a broader worldview relative to your classmates was a disadvantage?
3. Were your parents involved in selecting your original major?
   a. If so, how?
   b. If not, why not?
4. How financially terrifying was it to decline the scholarship? What were your internal dialogues around this issue?
5. What are your observations/thoughts @ classmates w/o financial concerns?
6. Did you experience some of this once your great-aunt stepped in?
7. Was there any debate within your family @ changing your major to religious studies (w/ classics and Anth mns)?
8. When did you first consider the prospect of grad school?
9. From your BA/BS, did you go directly into PhD program?
10. Did your parent’s question the value of a degree beyond the BA/BS? Of a Ph.D. versus and J.D. or M.D.?
11. Your parents may have deferred to your academic advisors, but did they express any concern @ your choice of discipline?
12. Has your relationship w/ family and friends changed b/c of your education? If so, how?
13. Did your family ever expect that you would return to your hometown after college?
14. Has the physical distance affected your relationships with folks back home?
15. What were the most helpful encouragements/supports you experienced as an undergrad? As a grad?
16. Aside from financial concerns, what were the biggest obstacles you faced on your pathway to the professoriate?
17. How comfortable were you approaching undergrad profs? Grad profs? Did you count them as a source of support?
18. What were your perceptions of your Harvard classmates? Are those perceptions much different that the perceptions you held of your undergrad classmates?
19. To your knowledge, did any of your classmates hold similar concerns about coming into such an exotic discipline from an ordinary background?
20. Who did you turn to for support when you doubted yourself in grad school?
21. Does your family understand what you went through to get to your current position? Do they understand why you chose this course?
22. What prompted you to consider a career in the academy? Did the support you received (or the challenges you faced) factor into your decision?
23. How do you explain your career/discipline to your family/friends back home?
24. Regarding feeling like an imposter: How do you combat concerns about being found out? Do you know of colleagues who share similar concerns?

25. What are the greatest similarities you see between yourself and BC students?

26. Your position in academia offers many benefits. Can you talk @ these in context of the work your family does?

27. What differences did (do) you notice from classmates (colleagues) whose parent's earned their livings from the deliberations of their minds rather than by the sweat of their brows?
Questions for Dr. McBeatty

1. My interpretation of your transition to undergrad is that you were eager to experience what a much larger city had to offer? Were you eager to escape the confines of rural Montana?
2. Did your brother have pressure to select a mj for its job prospects?
3. Do you have much contact with HS friends who have not had the same educational opportunities or who have made different choices than you?
   a. If so, what is your relationship like with them? What do you talk about?
   b. If not, can you posit a reason?
4. Knowing what you know now, what do you say to your students who are struggling to stay in school? How do you explain the options afforded by HEd?
5. When did you first consider the prospect of grad school? What prompted this?
6. What might your life look like without the unwavering support of your husband? Is he FG?
7. The tenacity you exhibited in calling UCLA after initially being wait-listed is notable. Many students would have just waited. What prompted you to call?
8. How comfortable were you approaching undergrad profs? Grad profs? Did you count them as a source of support?
9. Other than your husband, who/what were your primary supports in grad school?
10. You indicated that your parents were proud of your sister-in-law’s PhD. What do they say about educational attainments and career? What stories do they tell their friends?
11. Does your family understand what you went through to get to your current position? Do they understand why you chose this course?
12. Did your family ever suggest that coming back home to live/work might be a good option?
13. Why did you choose to pursue a career as a professor? When did you first consider this path?
14. In academe, have you ever felt advantaged or disadvantaged by your gender?
15. You wrote that you felt under-prepared when you entered grad school. What were your internal dialogues/scripts? What did you say to yourself?
16. Did you share your doubts with family back home in Montana? Why/Why not?
17. You wrote that you did not arrive @ grad school with a critical vocabulary. Did you recognize then that classmates might have been raised with this skill?
18. What were the biggest obstacles you encountered along your educational journey? How did you surmount these?
19. Did the challenges you encountered affect your perception of HEd as an institution? As a mechanism for social/cultural change?
20. You noted that your classmates at USC were supportive? Do you recall any notable, negative interactions w/ faculty or classmates?
21. You struggled to find work a position in the academy. Did your classmates struggle similarly?
22. Do you think your expectations differed from those of classmates who might have possessed a more complete roadmap?
23. Have you ever questioned your choice of career?
Questions for Dr. Ruff

1. Once you had been in the military a while and decided through some of your experiences that teaching was for you, you started taking classes at community colleges where you were stationed. When did a college degree become a dream?
2. Before Augsburg, had you ever imagined something like this?
3. What did your family say at you pursuing a B.Ed.?
   A. Husband?
   B. Parents?
   C. Siblings?
4. Could you talk to your family/friends at your college experiences? If so, what did you tell them?
5. What was it like to receive your first teaching job?
6. What inspires you as a teacher?
7. Regarding challenges of leaving Georgia to move home: It seems that you came into your own as a professional at the school in Georgia. What were your internal dialogues at leaving?
8. How discouraging was it to not be able to find a teaching post right away?
9. Did you ever consider that the work to earn the degrees was for naught back home?
10. Will you talk more at your concerns at applying to your current institution?
11. Having grown up in the area, did you have a pre-existing concept of your current institution?
12. What was your biggest initial fear at entering the college classroom...at the front of the class?
13. In your essay, you wrote that once you learned that a Ph.D. was required, you applied right away. Were you ever concerned that you were not prepared for doctoral work? What did you say to yourself?
14. What were your biggest challenges during your doctoral studies?
15. What were your biggest supports during your doctoral studies?
16. Did your family say anything at still more school?
17. What does your family think at a "job for life?"
18. What do/did your parents tell others at your degrees? About your current position?
19. Do they have any idea what your job entails?
20. Is there any deference to you w/i the family? Joking at high-falutin’ degrees?
21. I agree that educ does not equal intelligence. To your knowledge, have any of your relatives have—prompted by your educ/career successes—considered betting on college?
22. What motivated you to move beyond the circumstances of your youth?
23. Did you ever dream you would be where you are now?
24. What were your fondest dreams as a child?
25. Was there any fear of the wider world?
26. How did you expand your vision further than "good paying job" when your siblings and cousins could not?
27. What were your feelings upon entering academe as a tenure-track professor? What were your internal scripts?
28. You wrote of a divide that academe/educ has created b/t you and your family. Is this growing, shrinking, or static?
29. Other FG academics have spoken @ feeling like an imposter in school (particularly doctoral work) and in the academy. Have you ever experiences this feeling?
30. Where do you feel you belong most?
31. Do you feel that you need to speak for ALL low SES, rural, Appalachian people?
32. What is the most satisfying experience for you as a prof?
33. Given that the rich are likely to succeed regardless of situation, are you more enthused when an under-resourced student makes it?
34. Do you think you will ever attain cohesion of your two worlds?
35. What are your thoughts about higher education as a societal good?
36. Your position in academia offers many benefits. Can you talk @ these in context of the work your family does?
Questions for Dr. Hudspeth

1. You felt that your alma mater was the only option. Why?
2. If $$ were no object, what would have been your dream school?
3. Aside from parties, did you eschew the “standard” undergraduate experience?
4. Were there any activities with which you were involved?
5. Who were your peers in college?
6. Could you talk to your family/friends @ your college experiences? If so, what did you tell them?
7. Did you feel then that you lacked of a broader worldview relative to your classmates? Was this a disadvantage?
8. You played school as a kid. Where did this come from?
9. Were you ever encouraged to pursue teaching because of its practicality?
10. You seemed to be aware of $$ limitations. Was teaching a safe bet?
11. Did you have a trusted advisor or mentor as an undergrad?
12. Did anyone at the college ever discuss grad school with you?
13. You wrote that adjustment to college was a challenge. How did you learn to learn?
14. You wrote @ wanting to take “classes that mattered?” How did you identify those that mattered or didn't matter?
15. You suggested that your alma mater had many FG students? Did you feel that you were more surrounded by people from similar backgrounds as opposed to people from more affluent backgrounds?
16. Do you find it odd—now that you work in HEd—that you were a good student w/o any scholarships?
17. Graduation was not a big deal to you, but it is a big deal to many people. Did your parent's encourage you to participate?
18. You worked and attended school full-time throughout BOTH grad degrees. This suggests a strong work ethic. Did your parents/GPs model this?
19. You wrote that you didn’t see differences b/t yourself and others, but admit that maybe it was something you did not worry about. What did you worry @ throughout college?
20. What were your biggest supports in undergrad? Grad school?
21. You seemed undaunted by the prospect of doctoral work? Is this an accurate reading of your narrative?
22. You had something of a typical doctoral student experience in that you taught, though the circumstances were different. Did teaching at the CC inform your classroom experiences, or was it informed by your doctoral classes?
23. What were your first thoughts @ working at a CC?
24. What made your doctoral advisor such a good ally?
25. What was your self-talk regarding your ability upon entering PhD program?
26. Other FG academics have spoken @ feeling like an imposter in school (particularly doctoral work) and in the academy. Have you ever experiences this feeling?
27. What were the conversations you had with Mom and Dad (and Husband) regarding MORE school?
28. If classes were easy, what was the biggest struggle of doctoral work?
29. What were your parents' thoughts @ the doctoral graduation ceremony?
30. You got back to normal l almost immediately after commencement. The Ph.D. hadn't changed who you were, apparently. Over time, has it made you a different person?
31. Has your level of education changed your relationship with family/friends?
32. Did your family ever expect that you would live nearby after college?
33. How does family express their pride in you?
34. What is favorite part of being an educator?
   A. What keeps it fresh?
   B. What is the biggest drain on your energy?
35. You taught elem/sec school for a few years after you began adjuncting, and then you began teaching at your current school (a CC) when your family moved. Why the CC? Why not a secondary school in the area? Why not a 4-year school?
36. Your position in academia offers many benefits. Can you talk @ these in context of the work your family does?
37. Other than politically, does your background differ from those of your colleagues? Did they come from similar circumstances as you?
38. What are your thoughts about higher education as a societal good?
39. What has been the most challenging part of the road less traveled…of being a Ph.D.?
Questions for Dr. Butler

1. You wrote, “Eventually there was a hard won black lung check to help pay for college tuition.” So your father sacrificed literally and physically?
2. Could you talk to your family/friends @ your college experiences? If so, what did you tell them?
3. You credit your parents, alongside your profs, in validating your emerging scholarship. How important was their approval as you charted a new course?
4. Your education has taken you into a different world from that of your birth. Before taking your place in the academy, did you ever dream such a life for yourself?
5. What was your vision of what your life might be?
6. You wrote of the importance of being willing to adapt. What key adaptations have you made as you evolved from a Boyle County boy to being a prof and assistant provost at a major university?
7. You wrote of your Dad being employed by the Centre College facilities department and of the term “gray army” that Centre students used to describe the facilities crew. Did this alienate you from what would become your alma mater?
8. I've heard it said that being able to learn from others' mistakes is a sign of wisdom. You wrote of wanting a different outcome than your brother had experienced. What were the differences between you and others in your family or peer group?
9. It seems that you were an empathetic kid. You clearly did not want to burden your family with additional hardship. Do you feel that you were the family's delegate to go on and do something bigger with your life?
10. When did you begin to feel competent academically?
11. Did your status as an athlete help bridge the separation you felt from your fellow Colonels?
12. You wrote of revealing your true self to only a few students (including teammates). How did you manage to conceal your true self? Did you live on campus as an undergrad?
13. What did your teammates know that others didn't?
14. Why not show them the real you? What were your internal dialogues around the true (name) vs. the person your Centre classmates knew?
15. You wrote of Centre, “It was there that I first started to think about the transformation I was undergoing, not just in my head but as a person.” Will you talk more @ this transformation?
16. Did you previously suspect that you were longing for a moral and intellectual transformation? Did you feel stifled or that something was missing?
17. Gaining an identity as a runner was clearly pivotal for you. It allowed you to first envision yourself in college. Similarly, developing an identity as a "good geometry student" seems to have prompted you to consider yourself as a college student. When did you first envision yourself as a scholar?
18. One pattern in your education seems to be that you needed an adjustment period. Can you talk more about what helped you excel after average beginnings?
19. You wrote that you did not consider grad school until senior year (of college)? What prompted this consideration?
20. When did you first consider a career in the academy?
21. Your undergrad thesis was commented on positively by your advisor, but he never broached the idea of grad school with you. What are your thoughts on this? Did you seek profs' counsel later?
22. What were your biggest supports along your pathway to a career in academe?
23. Aside from the death of your father, what were your biggest challenges during your doctoral studies?
24. Considering Centre was a big leap perceptually. What was it like to consider UNC? Duke?
25. What did your family think of MORE school?
26. You wrote of the vast divide between yourself and the scions of the elite you encountered at UNC and Duke. In fact, you noted that one of your friends dubbed you the “angry proletariat.” What led your friend to bestow this moniker?
27. Other FG academics have spoken of feeling like an imposter in school (particularly doctoral work) and in the academy. Have you ever experienced this feeling?
28. You noted, as other FG academic have, that H.Ed. created a divide b/t them and their family. Will you talk of this a little more?
29. Did the supports and obstacles you encountered along the way influence your careers decision?
30. You turned down a fellowship to be with your Dad before his passing. Was there any internal deliberation or conflict over this?
31. While working in industry (in a factory?) after your dad's passing, you felt at home with the people, but not with the work. Could you relate to the people as well as you might have been able to before H.Ed.?
32. Was the work more mundane because of your exposure to academic work?
33. What is the essence of the satisfaction you feel with academic work?
34. When you arrived at UK, you worked under something of a legend, it seems. Then he was dispatched and disparaged by the faculty. How did it feel to witness this?
35. Did you struggle to advance through P&T? Please talk of this.
36. You wrote that you often feel that rude, pretentious people are smarter? What are your internal dialogues when encountering such people?
37. You wrote of a meager childhood, certainly more meager than your adult life. What do you carry from your childhood that most profoundly influences you today?
38. After all your years in HEd, what is your perception it as a societal good?
39. What would you say to your dad now of the life that you have made—based on the foundation he and your mom laid for you?
Questions for Dr. Broderick

1. You wrote about working 3 part-time jobs to pay your way through school. Did you encounter classmates who did not have to work so hard? What was that like?
2. You completed your undergrad degree in 7 years. Were you continuously enrolled? If not, why?
3. You indicate that you are not the smartest in your family, but college is not solely @ intelligence. What is the difference b/t you and your siblings/family?
4. Upon earning a Bachelors degree, you had a complete lack of interest in further degrees. What was going through your mind?
5. Yet you viewed further education as necessary to becoming a better teacher?
6. What were your primary motivations for starting your own school?
7. This seems like an audacious move. Is this sort of pluck common to you?
8. What type of students did you target?
9. What sustained you through the years and years of toiling in your own school?
10. Were you concerned @ setting yourself apart from your family/community?
11. You were invited to teach a class at a local college and loved it. Please discuss your feelings when you first learned that you enjoyed teaching teachers?
12. Eventually, the demands of running your own school began to affect your health. What were your thoughts/concerns when you learned that you could not keep up the hectic pace that your school demanded?
13. This was the first point @ which you entertained thoughts of grad school?
14. Why not return to the more stable environment of public educ?
15. You not only considered grad school, but you considered Harvard?
16. What were your perceptions of Harvard before visiting there? After?
17. What were your thoughts @ YOU attending Harvard?
18. Did your thoughts @ your place @ Harvard change over time?
19. How surprised (and pleased) were you to find kindred spirits in Cambridge?
20. From your essay, it seems that you developed/possessed a fierce independence early in life. Where did this come from?
21. What was your internal self-talk @ your ability to succeed at the doctoral level?
22. Other FG academics have spoken @ feeling like an imposter in doctoral work and, more generally, in the academy. Have you ever experienced this feeling?
23. Did you ever dream that Harvard would waive your Master's degree in lieu of experience?
24. What were your biggest supports during your doctoral studies?
25. What were your biggest challenges during your doctoral studies?
26. You had been a front-line, in-the-trenches practitioner for so long. What was it like to take on the role of a researcher?
27. Did this prompt a shift in self-perception?
28. Qualitative research has parallels in the narrative tradition of Appalachian (and Native American) story telling. Is this a draw for you?
29. Did your family (other than your son) attend doctoral commencement? What did they think @ the spectacle?
30. Some FG academic note that H.Ed. creates a divide b/t them and their family. Have you noticed this?
31. How does your fierce independence and desire to be the boss of you fit with life in the academy?
32. You undertook successive large projects. Were you ever worried @ failure?
33. You had "given up on college teaching." What prompted you to consider talked to the folks @ your current institution?
34. What is your favorite part @ leading your department?
35. Do you have any regrets @ leaving your non-profit?
36. Can you talk @ your son's experiences in H.Ed. relative to yours. Some FG academics have noted that their children followed a MUCH easier path than they did?
37. What are your thoughts about higher education as a societal good?
Questions for Dr. Ware

1. You wrote that you weren’t allowed into the college prep classes in HS, but when in your HS career did you decide that you actually wanted to attend college?
2. What was the adjustment to college-level course work like for you?
3. Did you feel alien on the Bridgewater campus or was there a proliferation of students who shared a similar background?
4. What was your college experience like? You lived at home, right? Did you work while in school? On campus?
5. Could you talk to your family/friends @ your college experiences? If so, what did you tell them?
6. You mention financial struggles several times. Did you notice classmates who did not struggle so much? What was your internal self-talk @ this? What did you tell yourself @ your financial struggles?
7. Did you ever call on your family for assistance?
8. If not family, to whom did you turn for assistance as an undergrad?
9. What were your biggest supports along your pathway to a career in academe? In your master’s program? Doctoral?
10. How comfortable were you approaching undergrad profs? Grad profs? Did you count them as a source of support?
11. You wrote that in your freshman year @ Bridgewater you knew that you wanted to become an English prof. Will you talk @ this a little more?
12. Who were your peers in college? In grad school?
13. And then you went to grad school. Why UNM/ABQ? Were you nervous @ being do far separated from New England?
14. Did you even consider your profs suggestion that you apply to Harvard? Why not?
15. You wrote that as a beginning grad student you were still naïve regarding the structures and processes of HEd. Ca you talk @ when you first started to understand the various mechanisms/schemas at play?
16. What was your internal self-talk @ your ability to succeed at the doctoral level?
17. When did you begin to feel competent academically?
18. What obstacles did you encounter along your educational journey that most severely impeded your progress and tested your determination?
19. How did the supports and obstacles you encountered along the way influence your careers decisions?
20. College has the potential of transforming people. Was this the case with you? IF so, will you talk @ this transformation?
21. Were/are your parents proud of your accomplishments? What did they say to you @ your college experiences? What stories did they tell you’re their friends and colleagues?
22. After undergrad, what did your family think @ MORE school?
23. Did/does your family ever suggest that you might stay/move closer to home?
24. Have you ever felt at ease in the academy or is being an outsider now accepted as an inevitable reality?
25. Were you concerned @ distancing yourself from your family/community?
26. Do you have much contact with friends from the old neighborhood? If so, what do you talk about?
27. Would your family or non-academic friends visit you on campus?
28. How have their choices impacted their relationships with the family and friends back home?
29. Some working-class academics have spoken and written about feeling like an imposter in HEd. Does this feeling resonate with you?
30. Did you serve as a TA in grad school? If so, how did it feel to be teaching men and women of more privileges backgrounds? How does it feel now?
31. In ABQ, did you find support in the non-university community?
32. Generally, how would you describe your relationships with your doctoral profs?
33. From your essay it is clear that the knowledge you gained—and the challenges you encountered—along the way effected your perception of HEd as an institution and as a mechanism for social/cultural change. Will you talk more about this?
34. What is the composition of your core group of friends today? Are they academics?
35. Your education has taken you into a different world from that of your birth. Before taking your place in the academy, did you ever dream such a life for yourself?
36. Your position in academia offers many benefits. Can you talk @ these in context of the work your family does?
37. Knowing what you know now, would you make the same choices again?