Assets, Strengths and Educational Pathways of First-generation Doctoral Students

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This dissertation titled

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Abstract
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The research on first-generation undergraduate student access and success is voluminous; however, the research on first-generation doctoral students’ experiences is limited. In an effort to contribute to the overall first-generation college student body of knowledge, this study focused on first-generation doctoral students from the United States and their experiences and educational pathways to their doctoral programs. This study addresses two research questions. What are personal and educational pathways first-generation doctoral students from the United States travel as they move toward graduate school? How do first-generation doctoral students from the United States experience graduate school?

The theoretical framework informing this research is capital theory. The researcher defined four forms of capital: cultural, economic, social and psychological. A discussion about the connection of these four forms of capital can be found in the final chapter. The researcher used a basic interpretive qualitative design for the study, interviewed 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States, and analyzed the collected data using content analysis.

Against the statistical odds, the 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States who participated in this study found success. They developed their identities, nurtured supportive networks, exercised independence, and found
empowerment. Through their developing identities, the participants accumulated psychological capital. As their supportive networks grew, the participants saw an increase in social capital and the bearing it could have on their success. As their independence expanded so did their economic capital. Because of their changing worldviews, a sense of belonging, and their internal motivation, these students experienced empowerment. This empowerment brought increased cultural capital. Because of accumulating capital in all forms, these 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States found success.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The Experience of One First-generation Doctoral Student

I grew up in northwestern Iowa. Agriculture is the primary employment enterprise in this region of the country and my hometown was no different. Most people in the area farmed or worked to support the agricultural industry. Both of my parents grew up on farms and contributed to farm life as kids; doing chores, helping with planting and harvest, etc. My father was involved with Future Farmers of America (FFA) and my grandparents expected him to take over the family farm. He chose to go into law enforcement instead. Although she grew up on a farm, my mother considered teaching and went to a four-year institution in the state of Iowa seeking a teaching degree. After one year, she returned home and married my father. While supporting his law enforcement dreams, she found work at a local communication company and worked for this same company for nearly forty years until her retirement. Because my father never went to college and my mother did not complete a degree, I am a first-generation college student.

I am not sure how academics became a priority for me, but I suspect my love for reading had something to do with it. Although children’s books lined our bookshelves in the living room, I do not remember my parents reading to me. I remember my father reading the local newspaper daily, but I do not remember my mother reading at all. In fact, to this day, my mother still does not read. Somehow, I learned to love books. I remember pulling books off the shelf, flipping the pages and absorbing as much of the content as I could. I remember the beginning of each school year, receiving our assigned
textbooks, taking the book home that first night, and pouring of the first few pages eager to learn what secrets the book held. I loved going to the library and finding the perfect book to read. This process evolved when going to the local bookstore. I remember wanting to find the perfect book, taking in all the options, reading the backs and inside covers of many books and eventually selecting a book. After purchasing, I flipped the pages between my thumb and hand, carefully cracking the spine of book as if it was some sort of ritual. It was not enough for me to read the chapters; I would devour all the pages from start to finish, even the acknowledgements page or any appendices. I did not want to miss any content. I remember the sense of accomplishment I would feel when the book was complete and the process of selecting a new one would begin again. While reading, I would often read aloud for emphasis or better understanding. I would read with purpose, with deliberateness, with curiosity.

Like with reading, I do not remember my parents emphasizing the importance of good grades. I may have never let them because I expected that of myself. I gravitated to the most challenging science and math classes offered, socialized with smart kids, competed on the high school debate team, and developed close relationships with some teachers who encouraged me to work hard. Because I sought these teachers’ respect, I did what they told me to do. My debate coach encouraged me to apply for college and ultimately I decided to attend University of Iowa with a major of biology. To pay for college, I earned a small debate scholarship and applied for financial aid.

Navigating higher education was challenging for me. I struggled in my coursework and changed my major several times. I never really consulted with anyone. I
just kept seeking direction based on the courses I enjoyed most. I had received
encouragement early on from my rhetoric instructor about pursuing a degree in English,
so remembering this advice I landed in the English department.

In addition, the financial burden to attend college was huge and I did not
understand how financial aid awards were determined, so I completed the FAFSA for my
first year, but did not complete it in any of the subsequent years. As a result, my second
year of college was particularly challenging for my family financially. My mother
transferred her employment to a city four hours from my hometown so my family
relocated. It took months for my father to find employment. All this led me to apply to be
a resident assistant (RA). At first, selected as an alternate, I remained uncertain about
whether I would be able to return to Iowa City for the following year. Late that summer, I
received a call offering me an RA position. With a wave a relief, I accepted the position. I
served as an RA for three years. The compensation was quite generous. I received free
room and board, plus a stipend that covered most in-state tuition costs. What a relief!

It took me five years to graduate and I ended up with a Bachelor of Arts in
English. Upon graduation, I still had no idea what I wanted to do. With the
couragement of my supervisor/hall director, I applied for graduate school and hall
director positions. I ended up in Dayton as a full-time hall director and started my
master’s program in Student Personnel Services. After three years, I completed my
master’s degree and turned to work. Sixteen years later, I decided it was time to return to
school and work on a Ph.D. Here I am. I share this story because I faced many
challenges, both in my undergraduate and graduate school experiences, as a first-
generation college student. These experiences have shaped my interest in the experiences of other first-generation college students. My own personal experiences leave me wondering about others’ experiences and have set the stage for the following research study.

**Purpose of the Study**

“It is the student’s success that matters to families—and to the nation” (Adelman, 2006, p. xvi). The primary purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. Although much research exists on first-generation undergraduate students and the many factors contributing to their success, a void exists in the research literature on first-generation doctoral students. The literature on first-generation students, primarily undergraduate students, suggests there are particular challenges for this population. Those who become doctoral students represent individuals who have succeeded in this context. Their stories, thus, are of interest because they might shed light on instances of positive deviance—that is exceptional cases of success. In addition, exploring whether or not challenges continue for first-generation students engaged in doctoral studies can shed light on ways in which these students may be supported in this process. According to the current research, factors contributing to the success of first-generation students include appropriate academic preparation, adequate financial means, and social preparedness. However, data on other factors affecting first-generation students are limited. I explored what other factors may be shaping their graduate school experiences. I used a qualitative methodology for this research.
Research Questions

The research on first-generation undergraduate student access and success is voluminous; however, the research on first-generation doctoral students’ experiences is limited. In an effort to contribute to the overall first-generation college student body of knowledge, this study focused on first-generation doctoral students from the United States and their experiences and educational pathways to their doctoral programs. More specifically, I sought to understand the relationships, cultural values, and experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. In addition, I sought to understand better the assets and strengths they possessed or skills they developed. In this study, I addressed two research questions.

Question 1: What are personal and educational pathways first-generation doctoral students from the United States travel as they move toward graduate school? In addressing this question, I examined relationships with family members, teachers, and other significant people during the formative years and impacts these relationships had on the research participants’ graduate school experiences. I examined learned behaviors, cultural characteristics, activities, and values influencing the participants’ graduate school experiences.

Question 2: How do first-generation doctoral students from the United States experience graduate school? In addressing this question, I paid particular attention to the cultural and personal assets these students brought to their studies and relationships with peers, faculty, and other mentors.
For the purposes of this research study, a doctoral student is defined as any currently enrolled student in an approved doctoral program at Ohio University. According to the Ohio University Online Graduate Catalog, a doctoral student is pursuing “a minimum of 90 graduate (semester) hours beyond the bachelor’s degree” (Ohio University Graduate College 2013-15, 2014). First-generation college students are “defined as students whose parents had no more than a high-school education” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p 275). According to this definition, first-generation students include students whose parents may have some college experience, but did not attain a degree. These two definitions of terms will guide my research and the prospective research participants.

**Context and Significance of the Study**

First-generation college students face substantial challenges when enrolling in postsecondary education. As described by Weiston-Serdan (2009):

Education has the power to shape and change members of a society. It can give or limit access to money and power. Education dictates what types of jobs one can get and how much money one can make. Education determines the overall success of a society both politically and economically. Education in this country is at the present moment, doing exactly what it is has been manufactured to do: reinforce the existing capitalistic hierarchy. (pp. 400-401)

First-generation college students are often face different challenges and the road to success looks quite different from their continuing-generation counterparts.
Researchers have conducted hundreds of studies describing the experiences of first-generation *undergraduate* students in higher education; however, little research exists on first-generation doctoral students. In fact, very little research exists about the *graduate* student experience in general (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004). Because of this limited research, I identify more thoroughly in Chapter Two, the current state of graduate education and the recent findings about first-generation college students. For this study, I focused my discussion on the intersection of first-generation college students who are now doctoral students. I began with the most recent findings about first-generation college students.

First-generation college students represent a demographic that has turned the traditional thinking about college attendance on its ear. First-generation college students recognize that higher education will bring higher paying jobs, (Bui, 2005; Gardner & Holley, 2011; U.S. Department of Education Spellings Commission Report, 2006; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio 2003) but are reluctant to take on too much debt (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Heller, 2002; Nomi, 2005; Somers, Woodhouse & Coffér, 2004). They enroll at far lower rates than their continuing-generation peers (Adelman, 2006; Bui, 2005; Gardner & Holley, 2011) and those who do enroll may seek institutions close to home in order to maintain familial connections and commitments (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002; Kniffin, 2007; Orbe, 2006), save money by living at home, and work more than 20 hours per week (Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, many first-generation college students find themselves ill-prepared academically for the college curriculum (Adleman, 2006; Gardner & Holley, 2011) and get lost in the transition between two educational
systems, K-12 and higher education (Adleman, 2006; McGuinness, 2001; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, n.d). All of these dynamics influence the rate of successful degree completion for first-generation college students.

To complicate matters further for first-generation college students, little research exists about behaviors, cultural characteristics, activities and values that have influenced the success of other first-generation college students. The current body of research speaks to strategies contributing to academic and financial preparations; however, for first-generation college students and their families, this information often comes too late. For many K-12 school districts, conversations about college occur during the high school years. Yet, academically, students are making decisions about critical coursework as early as middle school. Research shows High Math completion rates in secondary school serve as a predictor for baccalaureate completion (Adleman, 1999, 2006). In other words, emphasizing math earlier is critical in preparation for math in middle school, high school, and beyond. As for financing college, for many the sole discussion parents participate in are instructional seminars about the Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA). Completion of this form generally occurs when potential students are applying for college. Discussions at this point may be too late and some families may be unable to secure sufficient funds for college. Despite the lack of timely information about college, both academic and financial, some first-generation students excel.

The success of these first-generation students is curious. Because the odds seem stacked against them and current research contains little about the behaviors, cultural characteristics, activities and values influencing college attendance, I want to study these
phenomena. I want to gain a better understanding of the success stories of successful first-generation college students. What do they possess that others do not? Statistics show middle school students are interested in higher education. “Eighty-eight percent of 8th graders expect to go to college” (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003, p. 6). Harnessing this enthusiasm and understanding dynamics contributing to successful college going experiences could be “win-win” for both higher education and first-generation college students.

In respect to graduate education, little research exists on those graduate students who are first-generation (Gardner & Holley, 2011). According to Pascarella et al. (2004), “Four to five years after graduation, first-generation college students appear less likely than students whose parents have college degrees to be enrolled in a graduate or first professional program” (p. 250). According to Kniffin (2007), “A disproportionately few first-generation graduates earn the Ph.D” (p. 59).

Prospective graduate students show a reluctance to enroll in higher education as a result of slowing employment opportunities in the tenure-track ranks (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000) and the rates of doctoral degree completion for current doctoral students hovers around 50% (Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006). Graduate programs are attracting more non-traditional and first-generation students and these students seek services with their specific needs in mind (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Kniffin, 2007; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006; Polson, 2003); however, faculty members do not commonly recognize these needs and perceive these students to be less committed to higher
education (Brus, 2006, p. 36; Polson, 2003). As a result, faculty members do not reach out to these graduate students. This leaves graduate students feeling isolated, which ultimately results in them leaving higher education (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

**Theoretical Frameworks: Social Capital, Cultural Capital, and Psychological Capital**

Capital, and its accumulation, influences first-generation college student success. Many studies use Bourdieu’s theory about capital and suggest that first-generation college students lack social and cultural capital, placing them at a disadvantage compared to their continuing-generation peers. Yet many first-generation college students succeed. Is this success for these students attributable to possessing something else, such as internal drive? A drive Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) describe as psychological capital (p. 3). Informed by both principles, I bridged Bourdieu’s seminal work on capital, which focuses on environmental capital (economic, social, and cultural) with that of Luthans et al.’s concept of psychological capital, which consists of self efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency (p. 3).

When embarking on the college journey, students use their accumulated capital to assist them with their navigation through the transition to and success at college. More specifically, college students use their economic capital—money—to pay for their college education. Once the degree is complete, the college education, a form of cultural capital, helps the student gain access to the employment world. Employment, then in turn, directly contributes by way of their income to their economic capital. The easiest way to acquire more economic capital is to invest your currently accumulated capital into
more capital generating activities—a college degree. In other words, one’s economic capital is directly proportional to the ability to acquire more economic capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), one can secure more economic capital—money—when cultural and social capital converts into economic capital. Thus, the amount of cultural and social capital one accumulates directly contributes to their economic capital.

Developed by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, Mark Granovetter and Robert Putnam, social capital theory informs this research study. “Social capital is the sum of resources that can be mobilized through membership in social networks of actors and organizations” (Pasco, 2003, p. 12). Social capital matters to college students because “like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in the absence would not be possible” (Coleman, 1988b, p. S98). Continuing-generation college students have access to membership in groups where members have college degrees, speak certain ways, and understand the processes necessary for college admission, enrollment and degree completion. First-generation college students do not have the same access to membership in these groups. At the heart of this research is this concept of social capital and the disadvantage its absence can place on first-generation doctoral students.

Considering all forms of capital, researchers often portray first-generation college students as having something missing from their “college-going toolbox” when compared to their continuing-generation peers. This can be described as “deficit thinking.” According to Weiston-Serdan (2009), “When students come to an educational institution with a ‘deficit’, that deficit will affect that student and their performance in that
institution. Because the effect is usually a negative one, the effect typically reinforces the prevailing idea of capital and provides less opportunity for that student” (p. 409). For successful first-generation doctoral students, exploring what other attributes or skills these first-generation doctoral students possess may help explain their higher education success. Gardner and Holley (2011) suggest that first-generation college students possess a resiliency where these students “rely heavily upon self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control” (p. 78). Instead of the deficit thinking model—describing what elements are missing from first-generation college students’ college-going toolbox, I explored the attributes and skills—the psychological capital—that these students possessed that may be enhancing the graduate school experiences.

**Methodological Approach: Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research**

I approached this study of first-generation doctoral students from the United States using a basic interpretive qualitative research strategy. Through this approach, I found patterns and themes that helped describe a certain phenomenon experienced by first generation doctoral students. Basic interpretive qualitative research is an inductive strategy of qualitative inquiry and, according to Patton (2002), “qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic.” (p. 55). In keeping with its principles, this inductive strategy “begins with specific observations and build toward general patterns” (p. 56). In other words, with basic interpretive qualitative research, “categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist in the phenomenon being investigated” (Patton, 2002, p. 56). Using semi-structured interviews, I collected recorded
data and descriptive notes and then transcribe interviews. From the completed transcripts, I reviewed, coded, and analyzed data using content analysis, which examines data and seeks patterns in the research participants’ experiences. As Patton (2002) states, “Content analysis involves identifying coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data. This essentially means analyzing the content of interviews and observations to determine what is significant” (p. 463). This inductive analysis includes, as Patton (2002) writes, “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 453).

I immersed myself in the data and recognized patterns, from these patterns, findings surfaced. Like Patton (2002) suggests, I sought “to understand the multiple interrelationships among dimensions that emerge from the data without making prior assumptions or specifying hypotheses about the linear or correlative relationships” (p. 56). These patterns will not replace the rich, thick descriptions of the research participants, but will be used “to help make sense of and present the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 457). More specifically, I sought to understand the relationships, cultural values, and experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States and to understand better assets/strengths they possessed or skills they developed, which contributed to their graduate education success.

Limitations of the Study

The potential limitations to this study fall into several different categories, limitations with the study’s design and process, limitations of the researcher’s skill, and methodological limitations. Although these are potential limitations, I believe my
personal familiarity with the topic offer a source of enrichment and understanding rather than a limitation.

The study is set in a specific location with its unique characteristics attributable to that particular region. As a result, one cannot generalize the findings of this study to a larger population. In addition, the number of those participating in the study is too small to allow for generalizing to other first-generation doctoral students. In other words, the findings of this study outline the experiences of the 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States enrolled at a four-year in an approved doctoral program at Ohio University.

**Delimitations of the Study**

As first-generation doctoral students from the United States apply, enroll, and attend institutions of higher education, they experience a variety of factors contributing to their success. In order to understand the depth of these experiences, I sought research participants from a variety of disciplines who are currently enrolled doctoral students from the United States attending a large, public, four-year, primarily residential, research institution in rural Ohio.

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter One introduces the research topic and outlines the current conditions of first-generation doctoral students. Chapter Two consists of a thorough literature review of the research topic. Because of the limited research about first generation doctoral students, the literature introduced in Chapter Two outlines two dimensions impacting this research topic, the current thinking about first-generation students and the current
understanding of graduate education. Chapter Three outlines the methodological approaches taken and data analysis strategies used for this research project. Chapter Four presents the findings of the individual cases and Chapter Five describes cross-case findings. Finally, Chapter Six offers recommendations, implications, and suggestions for future study. Appendices and References follow.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

According to the National Education Association (n.d.), “All Americans have a basic right to access to quality public education from preschool through graduate school…All qualified students must have access to postsecondary programs without regard to age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, military registration status, or ability to pay.” Statements like these demonstrate policymakers’ commitment to the idea of higher education access; however, first-generation college students continue to face substantial challenges when enrolling in postsecondary education. These challenges carry significant consequence, as described by Weiston-Serdan (2009):

> Education has the power to shape and change members of a society. It can give or limit access to money and power. Education dictates what types of jobs one can get and how much money one can make. Education determines the overall success of a society both politically and economically. Education in this country is at the present moment, doing exactly what it is has been manufactured to do: reinforce the existing capitalistic hierarchy. (pp. 400-401)

For first-generation college students, access to higher education is only one part of the equation. First-generation college students often face different challenges and the road to success looks quite different from their legacy counterparts.

Going to college is daunting for many students. For traditional-aged students, older adolescents and young adults are not only facing academic challenges, but are also confronting major decisions about who they are (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Chickering, 1993). During the formative years, families, schools, friends, and experiences help shape
who these young men and women are. Now, for the first time, they may confront whether they have been, up to this point in time, fits with who they want to be in the future.

In other words, “College is a pivotal point of development, and successful negotiation of identity tensions is represented as a key factor in academic success” (Orbe, 2008, p. 81).

In order to understand these tensions it is important to recognize that there are “important sociocultural differences between families with and without degrees” (Kniffin, 2007, p. 53). For first-generation students, the challenge is huge. According to Orbe (2006), first-generation college students are negotiating the tension between two selves—the home self and the college self—and it is critical that these students successfully reconcile these two selves in order to find collegiate success (p. 93). Negotiating this struggle may put undue stress on many first-generation college students.

It is important to note that many first-generation college students not only face the challenge of being the first in their families to go to college. In addition, many first-generation college students are from underrepresented populations as well. Therefore, first-generation college students and students from underrepresented populations may face similar experiences on the college campus (Kniffin, 2007, p. 49).

Lara (1992) describes her transition to college, saying, “On the one hand, my experiences in college changed me in ways not fully understood by my family; on the other, many people on campus were unable to acknowledge my cultural, linguistic, and racial reality” (p. 65). This journey to blend two selves requires a coming together or reconciliation of sorts. This reconciliation includes arduous climbs, including rigorous academic work and heart stopping descents contemplating whether the path chosen is the
right one. In addition, this journey continues over one’s entire lifespan. First-generation college students need to prepare themselves for the hard work that accompanies such a journey and they must understand that much of the journey is a solitary one. It is no wonder that some first-generation students do not finish.

The journey does not need to include replacing one’s previous world entirely with the new world components. Instead, successful first-generation college students blend parts from both worlds. In fact, the notion that first-generation college students need to disconnect entirely from their previous selves in order to find their new selves is short sighted, and fails to recognize the significance of each individual’s unique experience (Rendon, 1992, p. 63). The fact that some first-generation college students successfully traverse this road, and others do not, fascinates me. What do the successful travelers possess that helps lead to their success in academia?

Researchers have conducted hundreds of studies describing the experiences of first-generation undergraduate students in higher education; however, little research exists on first-generation doctoral students. In fact, very little research exists about the graduate student experience, in general (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004). Because of the limited research conducted on graduate student experiences, I identify the current conditions and trends in today’s graduate education and enumerate the recent findings about first-generation college students. Since first-generation doctoral students reside in both camps (they are both graduate students AND first-generation college students), we operate from the understanding that first-generation doctoral students face similar challenges experienced by first-generation college students.
I will focus my discussion on the intersection of first-generation college students who are now doctoral students (see Figure 1 below).

![Venn diagram showing the intersection of experiences of doctoral students and experiences of first-generation students.]

**Figure 1. Research participants for this study.**

I begin with the current literature about first-generation college students, followed by the current literature on graduate education. The literature about first-generation college students informs the understanding of student pathways before graduate school, which aligns with the first research question. The literature about graduate education affects the understanding of how students experience graduate school, as both master’s degree and doctoral degree students, which coincides with the second research question.
What We Know about the First-generation Student Experience

First-generation college students are a demographic that has changed thinking. First-generation college students recognize that higher education will bring higher paying jobs (Bui, 2005; Gardner & Holley, 2011; U.S. Department of Education Spellings Commission Report, 2006; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio 2003), but are reluctant to take on too much debt (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Heller, 2002; Nomi, 2005; Somers, Woodhouse & Coffer, 2004). They enroll at far lower rates than their continuing-generation peers (Adelman, 2006; Bui, 2005; Gardner & Holley, 2011) and those who do enroll may seek institutions close to home in order to maintain familial connections/commitments (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002; Kniffin, 2007; Orbe, 2006), save money by living at home, and work more than 20 hours per week (Pascarelli, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In addition, many first-generation college students find themselves not academically prepared for the college curriculum (Adleman, 2006; Gardner & Holley, 2011) and get lost in the transition between two educational systems, K-12 and higher education (Adleman, 2006; McGuinness, 2001; The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, n.d). Furthermore, many first-generation college students come from under-represented populations (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004; Horn, Nunez & Bobbitt, 2000) and their unique experiences and expectations make college-going more challenging. All of these dynamics influence the rate of successful degree completion for first-generation college students. Below I explore the research literature of these dynamics more fully. First, I will explore the literature about why students enroll in higher education, then I will share current statistical data about enrollment and completion rates for first-
generation college students. Next, I will outline what the literature describes as common characteristics of first-generation college students, followed by the transitional challenges facing first-generation college students.

**Why first-generation college students seek higher education.**

Acquiring a degree is an economically sound strategy. The student stands to earn more money and the state where the student lives stands to benefit from a more actively engaged community member. According to Gardner and Holley (2011), first-generation doctoral students expect that their degree completion will result in high-paying, professional careers, which “would bring financial stability to their lives” (p. 87). Many of these students observed their families struggling financially and they did not want to face those same challenges. State legislators and institutions of higher education are interested in attracting more students to higher education in an effort to bolster their local economy, and secondarily, attract underrepresented populations to their higher educational campuses. For example, in Texas there is “a growing recognition by state policymakers and educators that expanding postsecondary opportunity to students who have previously lacked college access—namely the state’s large and increasing low-income, minority, and first-generation populations—is critical to the future social and economic well-being” (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006, p. 5). Because of these higher education aspirations, the result for those who attain college degrees equals higher incomes.

Few argue with the reality that higher education sets the stage for increased wages and improved skill development. According to Horn (1997),
The size of the blue-collar job sector has declined markedly over the last two decades. At the same time, there has been a parallel decline in entry-level wages, and the wage drop for high school graduates entering the labor force has been more than three times that of college graduates (in constant dollars). (p. 1)

In fact, “The median earnings of a U.S. worker with only a high school diploma are 37 percent less than those of a worker with a bachelor’s degree” (U.S. Department of Education Spellings Commission Report, 2006).

Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) outline specific statistics regarding earning potential for those with and without higher education.

Students and their parents understand that a college education greatly improves an individual’s opportunities for economic security in today’s marketplace. Data from the U.S. Census illustrate the significant economic returns of enhanced education. In 2000, the median annual earnings for workers aged 25 and over with a high school diploma was $24,267, compared with $30,774 for workers with an associate’s degree and $40,314 for those with a bachelor’s degree. (p. 6)

A bachelor’s degree increases an employee’s earning potential by nearly 66%. While an associate’s degree increases the earning potential by of an employee by nearly 27%. This earning disparity demonstrates the figures at the beginning of a career. At retirement age, the earnings trajectory between those with a higher education degree and those without may be even more significant.

Not only does higher education influence wages, today’s industries require more highly skilled employees:
In the past, students who either dropped out of high school or entered the labor market immediately after high school graduation may have relied on getting relatively well paying entry level manufacturing jobs. However, now that the economy demands a more technologically sophisticated labor force, these youth may have limited opportunities for economic advancement unless they continue their education beyond high school. (Horn, 1997)

The employers who are seeking more highly skilled workers look to higher education for this skill development.

“Access to higher education has often been linked to economic competitiveness and advancement. American colleges and universities have served as drivers of local and regional economic development throughout the course of history” (Nofisinger & Newbald, 2007, p. 12). If business and industry expect higher education to contribute to economic development and prepare more highly skilled employees to be more competitive, then the phenomenon of first-generation college students’ success needs more attention. First-generation college students are enrolling in lower numbers than their continuing-generation peers. By choosing not to go to college, many first-generation college students set a course early to earn substantially less. They do not possess the skill set for the entry-level positions, which leads them to not advancing into higher paid positions in the organization, resulting in retirement, if they stay on the same track, with less financial capital than those who attend college. Higher education plays significantly into this dynamic. If prospective first-generation college students chose higher education, they would find themselves on a different arc.
There is little financial doubt why first-generation college students enroll in higher education. They seek the earning potential achieved by college graduates. However, the statistics for success are disappointing. According to Adelman (2006), “The probability of completing a bachelor’s degree is reduced by roughly 21 percent for first-generation students” (p. 23). First-generation college student’s desire to earn more does not necessarily translate into enrollment, and successful degree completion. Many first-generation college students make different financially decisions that may ultimately affect their success rates. First-generation college students have a tendency to be loan averse, which results in first-generation college students making different decisions about college (Kniffin, 2007). Many opt to attend an institution close to home, so they can live at home. In addition, many will hold down jobs while taking classes. This leaves them less time to spend as college students and engaging less with others on the college campuses.

The Spellings Commission “believes the nation must be committed to building and sustaining a higher education system that is accessible to all qualified students in all life stages” (U.S. Department of Education Spellings Commission Report, 2006). Yet, access, combined with the desire of earning more money and achieve advanced skill development, may not translate into successful degree completion by first-generation college students.

Higher wages and increased skills required by employers are both compelling reasons for first-generation college students to seek academic degrees. In addition, community members with higher degrees tend to be more engaged in their communities.
They have higher rates of volunteerism and voting records. They are concerned with what is happening in their communities (Putnam, 2000, p. 130).

For many institutions, increasing diversity of the student body has been a priority. One population heavily recruited in an effort to achieve increased diversity is first-generation college students (Horn, Nunez, & Bobbitt, 2000, p. 7). Many first-generation college students are from underrepresented populations and/or low income families (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004; Horn, Nunez & Bobbitt, 2000). Underrepresented populations expect role models and services to assist as they navigate higher education (Ellis, 2001; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004). Because many of these underrepresented populations are also first-generation, higher education needs to get serious about the personnel and services offered. If higher education intends to attract these students, institutions need to hire faculty and staff with different life experiences (Bhat, Pillay, & Hudson, 2012; Ellis, 2001), offer financial assistance (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004, p. 232-233), and actively provide different professional opportunities (Bhat, Pillay, & Hudson, 2012; Ellis, 2001) to students. Higher education institutions must increase the faculty, staff and services available to these students (Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004, p. 243).

**First-generation college student success.**

The U.S. Department of Education Spellings Commission (2006) found “higher education is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers” (p. 1). First-generation college students face all three of these challenges. In fact, the first-generation
college student enrollment statistics paint a startling picture. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “only 56% of potential first-generation college students enroll in college by October following high school graduation; in contrast, the figure is 85% for those whose parents have a bachelor’s degree” (Bui, 2005, p. 203). The gap between first-generation and continuing-generation college students is large and shows no signs of diminishing.

To address the access challenges for first-generation college students, researchers and practitioners need to recognize that first-generation students may experience college completely differently from their continuing-generation peers. The assumptions made by faculty and staff about first-generation college students often miss the mark and services offered fall short. According to Kniffin (2007), first-generation college students face many variables affecting their degree completion rates. First-generation students lack family support for the college search and application process, are less likely to attend selective colleges, feel that they need to work harder than their peers, difficulty choosing majors, feel like they do not “belong” on campus, are more likely to have breaks in their pursuit of college degrees, and are less likely to graduate independent of their ethnic background, gender, and family income (p. 49).

**Enrollment rates of first-generation college students.**

Enrollment is the final step of a several step process. According to Horn (1997), college enrollment includes “aspirations for a bachelor’s degree (step 1), academic preparation for college (step 2), taking entrance exams (step 3), applying to college (step
4), and enrolling in college (step 5)” (p. 5). First-generation college students are lost at all steps and ultimately enroll at a much lower rate than their continuing-generation college student counterparts do (Adelman, 2006; Horn, 1997). Only 56% of college eligible first-generation college students enroll and their college experiences contrast starkly to that of the continuing-generation college students (Bui, 2005, p. 203). According to Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004):

> Across both the second and third years of postsecondary education, first-generation students completed significantly fewer credit hours and worked significantly more hours per week than their peers whose parents had a high level of postsecondary education. They were also significantly less likely to live on campus while they attended college than other students. Greater work responsibilities and living off campus probably contributed substantially to the tendency for first-generation college students to also have significantly lower levels of extracurricular involvement, athletic participation, and volunteer work than other students in the second year of college, and significantly lower levels of non-course related interactions with peers in the third year of college. (p. 265)

**Demographic and enrollment characteristics of first-generation college students.**

The demographics of first-generation college students are quite different compared to their continuing-generation peers. “First-generation students are more likely to be female, older, African American or Hispanic, have dependent children, and come from lower-income families than students whose parents have college degrees” (Engle,
Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006, p. 14). See researcher created table below, Table 1, a comparison between demographic characteristics of first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students in the state of Texas.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Marker</th>
<th>First-generation college students</th>
<th>Continuing-generation college students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority backgrounds</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-income families</td>
<td>Mean income $45,000</td>
<td>Mean income $83,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents born outside of the United States</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-native English speakers</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have children</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parent</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially independent</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Average age 28</td>
<td>Average age 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned a GED</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, first-generation college students tend to make different enrollment decisions as well. According to Engle, Bermeo and O’Brien (2006), first-generation college students attend college closer to home, live off-campus, hold down full-time employment, and enroll part-time (p. 16). See researcher created table below, Table 2, for a comparison between enrollment characteristics of first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students in the state of Texas.
Table 2

Comparison between first-generation college student and continuing-generation enrollment characteristics (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006, p. 16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment characteristic</th>
<th>First-generation college students</th>
<th>Continuing-generation college students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delay entry</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend college closer to home</td>
<td>Average distance 80 miles</td>
<td>Average distance 163 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Live off-campus</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need remediation</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend part-time</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work full-time</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not receive financial assistance from family</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences between the characteristics of first-generation college students compared to those of continuing-generation college students could significantly affect degree completion for these first-generation college students.

**First-generation college students experience higher education differently.**

The college experience for first-generation college students is different from continuing-generation students. For example, recent retention efforts emphasize the importance of college students working fewer than 20 hours per week, living on-campus and engaging in on-campus activities. However, first-generation college students are doing the opposite. They work 20 hours or more per week, live off campus, and are less involved in campus activities. The result—first-generation students do not complete higher education at the same rate as their continuing-generation peers. Higher education plays a pivotal role in this disparity. If higher education faculty and staff better understood the dynamics affecting first-generation college students’ pressures, then higher education administrators could position themselves as advocates for first-generation completion. The result of such advocacy could assist our communities, as
well. After all, college graduates tend to be more involved in their communities, vote more regularly, and contribute more to the local economy. Playing such an influential role places higher education in an extremely powerful position (Putnam, 2000, p. 35).

Pulled in so many different directions, first-generation college students spend less time engaging with other students or faculty. Their continuing-generation counterparts, however, “can immerse themselves in their studies and related campus activities” (Kniffin, 2007, p. 58). Their external commitments create challenge for first-generation college students (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002; Orbe, 2006). Because they work and live off-campus, these first-generation college students are less visible to faculty as compared to their continuing-generation peers and the result is that faculty members perceive these students to be less committed to their academics (Kniffin, 2007). In other words, these students do not fit into the expected cultural norms while enrolled in higher education. In addition, they no longer fit in at home either. Additionally, these students “often enter higher education consumed with self-doubt” (Rendon, 1992, p. 61) about their abilities. Coupling this self-doubt with their faculty members’ perceptions of their commitment, these students have significant hurdles to overcoming when considering higher education as a viable choice.

First-generation college students are inadequately informed and academically unprepared.

Like preceding generations, today’s parents want more for their children and understand that “a college education is positively correlated with earned income” (Bui, 2005, p. 203). In addition, research suggests that early exposure to the benefits of higher
education will influence the decision to attend postsecondary institutions. Unfortunately, many secondary schools initiate conversations about college going in high school. Some studies suggest higher education recruitment in high school is too late. “Because parents of first-generation students do not have any college experience, their children need intervention earlier than high school to develop aspirations for higher education” (Bui, 2005, p. 204).

Early introduction to the benefits of degree acquisition is only part of the problem. Families of first-generation college students often underestimate the cost of postsecondary work. As a result, many first-generation college students experience a significant financial strain when going to college. As an alternative to this financial stress, many first-generation college students who come from low-income families seek additional assistance, yet these options are limited. The recent trend of replacing grant-based assistance with loan-based assistance coupled with first-generation college students and their parents’ real aversion to debt further distances prospective first-generation students from college. The idea of leaving college with a significant amount of debt is unacceptably frightening and this shift in funding options contributes significantly to access difficulty for first-generation students (Heller, 2002; Kniffin, 2007; Nomi, 2005; Somers, Woodhouse & Coffer, 2004).

Inadequate academic preparation for first-generation college students in the K-12 years contributes to the problem. Not only do many first-generation college students come from low-income families, schools dominated by a significant number of low-income families offer fewer academic options for students in preparation for higher
education. Many of these first-generation college students are ill equipped and lack confidence because they feel academically underprepared. Adleman (2006) states:

Students from higher SES backgrounds attend high schools that serve similar students, schools in which parental expectations and involvement are high, and schools in which curriculum offerings and teacher quality follow SES demands and can afford to do so because the tax base is higher. These students tend to enter college and earn degrees at higher rates than students from "lesser" backgrounds and from schools that accompany those backgrounds. (p. 29)

**The transition between K-12 and higher education.**

“Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p.250). In addition, according to Weiston-Serdan (2009), “The system as a whole is directly opposed to the interests of those who are considered capital-less” (p. 408). To complicate matters further, K-12 and higher education are two discrete systems managed by 50 different states. “Principles embodied in the U.S. Constitution make matters of education—both K-12 and postsecondary—an explicit state assignment” (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, n.d.). Yet this “assignment” exists as two stand-alone systems within each state with limited interaction or collaboration. Little communication between the two systems occurs until a high school student is college-bound. For continuing-generation college students, this process works. The student consults with adults in his or her life with college experience when navigating the higher
education application, selection, and enrollment processes. However, first-generation college students lack exposure to, experience with and support for higher education. For these less experienced and under-supported students, K-12 pathways connected to postsecondary processes could improve enrollment numbers not to mention graduation rates.

Slowly policymakers are realizing the need for this interconnected relationship. “States are increasingly shaping public agendas defined in terms of improving the performance of the education system as a whole—e.g. P-16 initiatives” (McGuinness, 2001). In other words, “states need to engage deliberately in defining the purposes they seek to fulfill through their higher education institutions” (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, n.d.). With these comprehensive educational initiatives, first-generation college students stand to gain considerably. However, “postsecondary institutions have got to be active players and reinforcers at the secondary school level” (Adleman, 2006, p. 108), resulting in an integrated P-16 system with increased enrollment, improved persistence, and, ultimately, increased graduation rates.

Strengthening curriculum in all secondary schools, holding school districts accountable for this stronger curriculum, and aligning the pathways between secondary and postsecondary institutions would offer promising opportunities for all students regardless of economic status. The conversation about access for first-generation college students must include academic preparation, course offerings, funding options, and socioeconomic status (SES).
Pathways for first-generation college students are different.

First-generation college students take different paths to degree completion. First-generation college students are more apt to attend less selective colleges and more often attend community colleges (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Kniffin, 2007); however, much of the research regarding first-generation college students does not include community colleges. To gain a better understanding about the experience of first-generation college students, the research must extend beyond four-year institutions. The factors affecting first-generation college students’ postsecondary enrollment decisions include affordability and the desire to keep the costs down, proximity to home, familial demands, and expectations for expedited graduation or certification in order to get into the labor market and earn an income. As Venezia, Kirst and Antonio (2003) outline:

Community colleges are unique in mission and function: they are open access and welcome all who can benefit from the instruction they provide. Because community colleges serve as the point of entry for almost half of U.S. undergraduates, particularly for economically disadvantaged students, they play an important role in the high-school-to-college transition. In the context of K-16 research, community colleges are crucial, as they link to both high schools and four-year institutions. Yet two-year institutions are not studied much by researchers, and are often not major players when states develop education reforms. (p. 26)

Unfamiliar with the whole college going experience, many first-generation college students find that the local community college feels more comfortable to them
than the four-year school that is further away. To truly understand the dynamics affecting higher education, K-12, postsecondary four-year institutions, and community colleges must all be involved in the dialogue and research, see Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Critical stakeholders in first-generation college student research.

First-generation college students straddle two worlds.

Upon admission and later enrollment, first-generation students face a real struggle between the world of their upbringing and the academic world. They search for a place to belong. Many first-generation students feel like they do not fit into the academic world. This lack of fitting in leads to feelings of not belonging. They do not feel like they speak the language or understand the culture. Yet, they do not fit in the world of their upbringing. This lack of fitting in can lead to feelings of guilt for leaving others behind, accusations of being “uppity”, and an inability to connect with experiences of those who
are at home. These first-generation students are often referred to as “straddlers” with feelings of being between two worlds or in limbo (Lubrano, 2004).

Straddlers feel pulled from both worlds, but do not fit in either place. Sometimes first-generation college students describe feeling as if they are imposters. This imposter syndrome leaves first-generation students feeling guilty about leaving others behind, uneasy from feelings of not belonging, and concern that someone will challenge their enrollment and tell them they should not be there. First-generation college students often experience this cultural struggle. I will describe this phenomenon in depth in the section entitled Cultural capital/biculturalism. First, I will turn to the current state of graduate education in higher education.

Summary of first-generation college students’ experiences.

Prospective first-generation college students experience a curiosity about higher education; however, the support and guidance they receive from family, friends and/or high school faculty and staff is not enough to ease fears about going to college. First-generation college students experience financial anxiety, and, as a result, often choose schools close to home because it is more affordable. These students may choose to live at home as a cost-saving method. In an effort to make college education more affordable, these first-generation college students may be exchanging affordability for long-term academic competitiveness, particularly if they are considering graduate school. For many first-generation college students they have little understanding that choice of one’s undergraduate school can have unintended consequences on admission to graduate school.
First-generation college students often experience someone planting the idea of higher education into their heads. It may have been a teacher, a coach, or another member of the community. I am curious about who planted this seed and how. What did they say or do encouraging these first-generation college students to pursue higher education?

**Current State of Graduate Education**

In the current graduate education literature, little research exists on the experiences of first-generation doctoral students (Gardner & Holley, 2011). In order to better understanding the experiences of first-generation doctoral students and address the second research question, I present what we do know. According to Pascarella et al. (2004), “Four to five years after graduation, first-generation college students appear less likely than students whose parents have college degrees to be enrolled in a graduate or first professional program” (p. 250). According to Kniffin (2007), “a disproportionately few first-generation graduates earn the Ph.D” (p. 59). In addition, Kniffin (2007) outlines the following characteristics about first-generation doctoral students:

First-generation college graduates who earn the PhD are more likely to have debt of $30,000 or more, are less likely to have been funded through researcher grants or fellowships, and are more likely to require longer tenures as doctoral students...First-generation college graduates who earn the PhD are approximately three times more likely to have attended community college than graduates whose parents each earned bachelor’s degrees. First-generation college graduates who earn the PhD are more likely to have earned their undergraduate degree at a comprehensive or regional institution than graduates whose parent each earned
bachelor’s degrees, and they are much less likely to have attended a liberal arts college. (p. 59)

In addition to the above mentioned characteristics, prospective graduate students are reluctant to continue their educations as a result of slowing employment opportunities in the tenure-track ranks (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000) and the rates of doctoral degree completion for current doctoral students hovers around 50% (Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006). Graduate programs are attracting more non-traditional and first-generation students and these students seek services with their specific needs in mind (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Kniffin, 2007; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006; Polson, 2003); however, faculty members are not recognizing these needs and perceive these students to be less committed to higher education (Brus, 2006, p. 36; Polson, 2003). As a result, faculty members do not reach out to the graduate students. This leaves graduate students feeling isolated, which ultimately results in them leaving higher education (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Next, I explore each of these dynamics more thoroughly.

Employment shifts in higher education effects graduate student enrollment.

Graduate students are discouraged from pursuing employment within higher education because of the declining number of full-time, tenure-track faculty positions. Higher education has faced many years of budget reductions leading to a downsizing of faculty and staff on college campuses. The effect of this downsizing has resulted in many universities resorting to creative staffing measures to address the increasing demands from its students. One common measure is “increased reliance on part-time labor”
For faculty, this model includes an increased hiring of adjunct faculty versus tenure-track faculty. These adjunct faculty positions are often part-time and not benefits eligible. These part-time positions are a substantial cost savings for the universities; however, over the long term these lost positions may discourage prospective, talented academicians/researchers from pursuing employment in higher education.

In addition, over time, a reliance on part-time faculty positions diminishes the perceived need for new full-time, tenure-track faculty positions. This slowdown in tenure-track faculty positions then leads to a decline in graduate school applications. Because future hiring possibilities look bleak, prospective graduate students are opting for private industry rather than an uncertain employment future in higher education. If the job market does not appear to have positions, students are less attracted to the field. Because of this trend, many are concerned about the prospect of replacing the current faculty. Two important questions persist. Will there be enough talented faculty members to work in higher education in the future? Will higher education be able to attract the best and the brightest?

**Doctoral completion rates are low.**

In recent years, prospective graduate students have been enticed by other employment opportunities instead of pursuing a doctoral degree. Sometimes these attractive alternative offers come while attending graduate school. The current attrition rates of doctoral students stands at approximately 50 percent (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006) and, according to Kniffin (2007) few first-generation college students
“complete professional or graduate degree programs” (p. 50). Why do one half of all doctoral students not complete their degrees? In part, the high attrition rate may be attributed to “a significant percentage of doctoral students identify as first-generation” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 77) and these students are at-risk in completing their degrees successfully. Although little research exists on first-generation doctoral students, like first-generation undergraduate students, it is likely that first-generation graduate students are more likely to fall into categories that “characterize them as an at-risk population in higher education” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 77). The high attrition rate for some doctoral students may be due, in part, to their first-generation status. See Table 1. Variables affecting first-generation college students’ success above. (p. 33).

Getting at the source of doctoral student attrition is critical to higher education. Doctoral education is enormously costly to the institution and takes up to seven years to complete. There is an enormous amount of time and energy (human and financial resources) invested in these students. A fifty percent completion rate may not be worth the energy expended. By not addressing the high attrition rate of doctoral students, higher education is not using resources wisely and may be finding itself without a pool of qualified applicants to replace retiring faculty.

**Non-traditional graduate students need different services.**

In addition to the concern about the competition for the best and brightest, the current graduate student demographics are changing. Recent trends illustrate an increased enrollment and attendance of non-traditional graduate students. These non-traditional graduate students face many family responsibilities resulting in reduced availability to
faculty. This reduced availability leads professors to question the level of commitment of its graduate students. Faculty, then, do not pass along professional opportunities to students they perceive to be uncommitted, so the graduate students are not exposed to the same experiences they once were afforded (Brus, 2006, p. 36; Polson, 2003).

According to Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemä-Topf, Ross, and Turrentine, (2006), attrition for doctoral students is quite high and “hovers at 50%” (p. 13). This statistic begs the following question. Why do so many doctoral students not complete their degrees? According to Lovitts and Nelson (2000), many graduate students are not “well informed about the nature of graduate study or what will be expected of them” (p. 2). In addition, graduate students want to feel like they are a part of the campus community and feel like they belong. However, because of the perceived lack of availability of these students, faculty members label them as uncommitted and do not pass along the information. Complicating matter further, many graduate students have additional life responsibilities. These responsibilities demand their immediate attention, so these graduate students seek support services to balance everything. If these needs are not met, the result is these graduate students begin to feel isolated and then leave (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004). These scenarios are remarkably similar to the experiences of first-generation, college students.

**Graduate students want services offered with their needs in mind.**

Graduate students want to feel like they matter to their institutions of higher education (Polson, 2003, p. 63-64). One indication of their mattering is for institutions of higher education to offer support services to these students. In fact, research has found
that graduate students need and want support services designed with their needs in mind (Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006; Polson, 2003). Some of these needs include balancing multiple roles as graduate students; planning for future careers; overcoming feelings of isolation from others like them; and lack of understanding about resources that can assist (Brus, 2006; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006; Polson, 2003). In most cases, when faced with these challenges, graduate students must fend for themselves.

In many cases, support services simply do not exist for graduate students. Support offices at institutions of higher education attempt to assist graduate students with the issues they are facing; however, they often do not have an understanding of the needs of graduate students and these efforts fall short. For example, a doctoral student planning to enter the academy as a full-time, tenure-track faculty member may need assistance in developing a curriculum vita. Many career services operations have an understanding of what needs to be included in a résumé, but not vitae. As a result, graduate students turn to their academic programs for support and find them lacking as well. Graduate students face different challenges from undergraduate students; however, the services with an explicit mission to assist graduate student needs often do not exist. In efforts to address this, support service operations attempt to modify what they currently offer for undergraduate students to fit graduate students. These adaptations often fall short. “Many institutions expend major resources to recruit new graduate students with limited emphasis devoted to assisting the students as they transition through the demands of graduate study” (Polson, 2003, p. 62). Why is this lack of assistance the case?
Graduate students arrive for their doctoral program with expectations regarding integration into their discipline and the role the faculty will play in assisting them with achieving their goal. However, some programs fall short of these expectations. According to Lovitts and Nelson (2000), doctoral students “lack of integration into the departmental community contributes most heavily” (online) to their departure. In addition, doctoral students emphasize the importance of their relationship with their faculty advisor. “Given that many departers are succeeding academically, some decisions to depart are probably calls for help from students suffering from self-doubt” (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000).

When reviewing the current trends in higher education and services offered, demographics should be considered when addressing doctoral student success. According to Kniffin (2007), “First-generation college students are ‘under-represented minorities’ among doctoral recipients” (p. 50). This population gets little attention and few services offered. This is surprising. In today’s higher educational institutions, most colleges and universities outline their commitment to diversity in their mission and/or vision statements. Many institutions even have staff dedicated to outreach efforts to under-served populations. However, first-generation doctoral students often remain unidentified as a diverse population that requires additional services or programs. Challenges facing first-generation college students persist and few initiatives exist to remedy this dynamic.

Addressing the current trend of doctoral students’ completion/graduation rates may require higher education to re-define diversity and include non-traditional and first-generation students in their definitions. Such a move may require, not only services
designed with the express intent to assist graduate students, but maybe some of the underserved populations as well. Interestingly enough, this shift in recognizing first-generation status is occurring in other areas where higher education interfaces. “The National Cancer Institute and other parts of the National Institutes of Health...have added first-generation college graduates to the groups of individuals eligible for ‘minority’ grant and fellowship programs” (Kniffin, 2007, p. 67). A monumental shift in its understanding of graduate students may be occurring in higher education.

**Summary of current state of graduate education.**

Like undergraduate, first-generation college students, Mullen, Goyette, and Soares (2003) found “that parents’ education has the strongest influence on graduate enrollment...a student whose parent has more than a college degree has the greatest probability of attending graduate college” (p. 160). Because first-generation doctoral students do not have family members who have blazed the trail for them, these students face many challenges and may require additional services to assist with their success. However, because of the limited published research about graduate students in particular, I will be drawing on research about first-generation undergraduate students and correlating this research to first-generation doctoral students. I now turn to the concept of capital and how its accumulation impacts first-generation college student success.

**Capital and How It Impacts First-generation College Student Success**

When embarking on the college journey, students use capital to assist with their navigation through the transition to and success at college. Using Bourdieu’s (1986) framework,
Capital is accumulated labor...Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241-244)

Said differently, “Capital is inextricably linked with economic capital...Parents who are upper and middle class are more likely to have an education, understand the importance of obtaining education and as a result be more involved in their students’ education” (Weistion-Serdan, 2009, p. 399). In other words, “Economic capital is that which can be immediately and directly converted into money, financial resources and assets” (Pasco, 2003, p. 12).

Why does economic capital matter to college students? College students use their economic capital—money—to pay for their college education. Once the degree is complete, the college education helps the student gain access to the employment world. This employment, then in turn, directly contributes by way of their income to their economic capital. The easiest way to acquire more economic capital is to invest your currently accumulated capital into more capital generating activities, like earning a college degree. Said differently, you have to have money to make more money. In other words, having economic capital is directly proportional to the ability to acquire more
economic capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), one can secure more economic capital—money—when cultural and social capital converts into economic capital. Thus, the amount of cultural and social capital one accumulates directly contributes to their economic capital.

Like Bourdieu, Weiston-Serdan (2009) defines capital as “accumulation of culture, social relationships, money, labor, access, and most importantly, power” (p. 397). The accumulation of capital—whether economic, cultural, or social capital—benefits college students. There is, however, a disparity between the first-generation college students’ accumulation of capital versus that of continuing-generation college students’ accumulation of capital.

The capital that first-generation college students have access to is different from that accessed by continuing-generation college students (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 79). The capital first-generation college students acquire pre-college is based on an “unequal distribution of capital” (Weiston-Serdon, 2009, p. 396). In other words, those with more power and influence develop relationships with others who have equal power and influence; those with less power and influence often develop relationships with those with similar power and influence levels. This unequal distribution of capital places one group of students at an advantage to another group. The continuing-generation college students are in the advantaged position.

Although all college students possess all three forms of capital described by Bourdieu—economic, social, cultural psychological capital—first-generation college students develop social networks, cultural values, and skill sets based on the community
in which they belong and often do not have access to the capital acquired by others. These first-generation college students belong to a certain culture with all its unique set of attributes; attributes perpetuated based on the existing class system (Lubrano, 2004; Weiston-Serdan, 2009). In other words, as Weiston-Serdan (2009) states, the accumulation of capital based on our existing class structure “puts some at an advantage over others and… isolates some or elevates some over others” (p. 397). Said differently, higher education perpetuates the existing paradigm, a paradigm that benefits the dominant culture, a culture from which most first-generation college students are not a part (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 398).

For the purposes of this study, I explore more thoroughly the current literature on both social and cultural capital. In addition, I explore the concept of resiliency. Although not listed by Bourdieu as a type of capital, many first-generation college students describe additional attributes contributing to their successful degree completion. I refer to these attributes as psychological capital. These three forms of capital—social capital, cultural capital, and psychological capital—are critical to this particular study and I describe the current thinking on each in the following sections.

**Social capital defined.**

“Social capital is the sum of resources that can be mobilized through membership in social networks of actors and organizations” (Pasco, 2003, p. 12). Social capital matters to college student because “Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in the absence would not be possible” (Coleman, 1988b, p. S98). Continuing-generation college students have
access to membership in groups where members have college degrees, speak certain ways, understand the processes necessary for college admission, enrollment and degree completion. First-generation college students do not have the same access to membership in these types of groups.

When students do not come from families or homes where this concerted cultivation takes place, both they and their parents are considered deficient, and that student has a harder time navigating the system. Working class families, though not for lack of care and concern or hope for success, may not participate in these kinds of activities (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 399).

Because no one in the family has had the college going experience, the social capital they have acquired from their group membership is different from and perceived as less valuable to that of continuing-generation college students. “Capital takes time to accumulate and its potential capacity to produce ‘profits’ is governed by conditions within a person’s particular social world that accounts for its unequal distribution” (Pasco, 2003, p. 12)

Often first-generation college students do not have anyone to assist with the process of applying for, enrolling in and succeeding at college. “As the first in their families to go to college, most first-generation students did not receive help from parents or other family members in the admissions process because of a lack of ‘college knowledge’ — that is, how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college” (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006, p. 6). This key element of social capital is missing. In fact, the whole admission process may be so daunting that talented, prospective, first-generation college
students may forego the entire college application process for immediate employment in the workforce because no one is assisting along the way.

For those first-generation college students who apply, are admitted, and enroll in higher education, the difficulty has only just begun. “As the first in their families to go to college, these students describe experiencing academic, social, financial, and family issues that made the initial transition to college difficult for them” (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006, p. 6). In fact,

As explicated by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), students not only bring certain levels of cultural and social capital to college, the college experience itself provides a vehicle for acquiring additional cultural/social capital. Since first-generation students are likely to enter college with a lower stock of cultural/social capital than their peers, one might anticipate that their levels of academic, and perhaps even social, engagement during college will function in ways that may help them make up for this deficit. That is, levels of academic and social engagement will act in a compensatory manner, with stronger incremental impacts on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes for first-generation students than for their classmates whose parents have more experience with postsecondary education. (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 252)

In other words, according to Weiston-Serdan (2009):

Parents are a form of capital for some students. If their parents have access, then they in turn have access; if their parents have money they not only reap the benefits of that money but of the time and resources that that money provides. If
their parents have education, they see examples of what education gives access to and are, additionally, exposed to that education through concerted cultivation, another form of capital that creates advantage of one over the other. (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 399)

Said differently, first-generation students go to college with less accumulated capital than continuing-generation students. They had less access during their educational process and fewer resources.

The touchstone of social capital is the principle of generalized reciprocity—I’ll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor (Putnam, 2000, p. 134).

In addition, accumulating social capital or making connections opens doors of opportunity. Through networking, access to new and different experiences may present itself. For first-generation college students, the connections or networks they have may inhibit their success versus facilitate them (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 80). Ultimately, “Differences in academic engagement and persistence in college may be explained by differences in the quality and quantity of social networks that students are able to access” (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008, p. 26).

The social relationships we develop serve as a huge asset. They directly translate into social capital. According to Putnam (2000), “Social capital refers to the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). Although first-generation college students accumulate
social capital, their social networks may not reap the same benefits as that of their continuing-generation peers. This leaves many first-generation college students feeling as if they do not belong at college or like they are imposters. According to Gardner and Holley (2011), “This phenomenon or syndrome can be debilitating” (p. 87).

Not only does social capital accumulation contribute to the success of college students, but so does cultural capital.

**Cultural capital defined.**

According to Weiston-Serdan (2009), “Cultural capital is the ‘accumulation’ of education, the social form of a group, material items that exhibit or represent this wealth and educational credentials, labels or titles that further exhibit this wealth” (p. 397). Pasco (2003) outlines the elements of cultural capital. He says, “

Cultural capital includes disposition and habits acquired in the socialization process and can exist in three forms (a) the embodied state, which includes a person’s skills and knowledge assimilated over a lifetime, (b) the objectified state, which includes goods that are physically transmissible to others such as books, instruments, and machines, (c) the institutionalized state, which includes such things as academic achievements, professional certificates, and credentials granted to the individual by authorized agencies (p. 12).

Put another way, cultural capital is the “degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the ‘dominant’ culture of a society” (Bills, 2000, p. 90).

Most first-generation college students do not come from the dominant culture of society, which places them in a disadvantaged position. “First-generation college students
not only face barriers to their academic and social integration, they also confront obstacles with respect to their cultural adaptation due to discontinuities between (i.e. norms, values, expectations) of their families and communities and the culture that exists on college campuses” (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 18). This discontinuity “puts some at an advantage over others and that the institution of education only recognizes the accepted form of cultural capital, which consequently, isolates some or elevates some over others” (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 397). In other words, “Cultural capital goes hand in hand with social capital and produces an elite class of ‘the haves’” (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 398). First-generation college students are not part of “the haves.”

How does cultural capital affect first-generation college students? First-generation college students often face the challenge of negotiating two very different worlds, two cultures—the place of their upbringing and the place of their future (Gardner & Holley, 2011; London, 1992; Lubrano, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Rodriguez, 1983). They often feel like they do not fit in either place. This cultural disconnect occurs at the intersection between these two worlds where first-generation college students often experience both simultaneously and are expected to easily slip between the two. This dual or biculturalism places first-generation college students at risk. Higher education runs the risk of losing these prospective first-generation college students anywhere during the admission, enrollment, and degree completion stages. Why is this?

The cultural capital they possess and continue to accumulate is different from that of their continuing-generation peers.”
Students who are first-generation college students tend to carry different values, vocabulary, and knowledge than others. These differences lead to daily dilemmas where first-generation students regularly report feeling that they are ‘imposters’ when they are on campus and strangers when they are at home” (Kniffin, 2007, p. 53).

These feelings lead first-generation students doubting their ability to succeed in higher education. According to Lubrano (2004), “From the moment we’re born, our families tell us how to be. You adopt the attitudes held by the people around you, and you learn your place in life. Class is a ‘cultural network of shared values, meaning, and interactions’” (p. 4-5). These first-generation college students learn the culture of their home and this culture remains disconnected from the culture of higher education.

This disconnect between cultures may be the result of a difference of values based on class. Many first-generation college students come from low socioeconomic families and Lubrano (2004) describes first-generation college students as “born to blue-collar families and then, like me, moved into the strange new territory of the middle class. They are the first in their families to have graduated from college. As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living a kind of American limbo” (p. 2). In fact, Lubrano (2004) offers the following values comparisons between first-generation college students, who he describes as coming from the working class, and their continuing-generation peers, who he describes as coming from the middle class. I formatted the comparisons into a table. See Table 3 below.
Table 3

Value differences between classes (Lubrano, 2004, p. 21-22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working class values</th>
<th>Middle class values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rely on intuition, common sense and luck</td>
<td>Rely on analytical, cultivated, logical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show emotion, louder, flashier, tougher</td>
<td>Are restrained and quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In awe of doctors and lawyers</td>
<td>Can talk with doctors and lawyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy their kids get a job</td>
<td>Pressure to outachieve high achieving parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowl</td>
<td>Play racquetball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express a my-country-right-or-wrong patriotic attitude</td>
<td>Questions the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Says “I am what I am”</td>
<td>Says “I have to do this”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs bite, maim, and wither</td>
<td>Work indoors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X-mas card</td>
<td>X-mas newsletters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not only do first-generation college students feel this cultural dissonance, they also begin to feel distanced from those at home leading to increased feeling of isolation and disconnectedness (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 18; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Kniffin, 2007; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Lubrano, 2004; Orbe, 2006; Rodriguez, 1983). First-generation college students may experience an overwhelming sense of “living in two worlds” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 84), “being in two worlds at once and belonging to neither” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 194). This disconnectedness or lack of belonging can lead the first-generation college student to feel like they have “one foot in both worlds, while also feeling detached from both” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 88). Some even describe feeling like an “imposter” (Kniffin, 2007; Orbe, 2006) or “pretenders on campus” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 90).

“‘Imposter Syndrome’ refers to individuals’ feelings of not being as capable or adequate as others perceive or evaluate them to be” (Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuik, 1994, p. 183). According to Orbe (2006), “The ever-present ‘imposter complex’…feels as if they are unqualified and simply posing as a member of the
academic community; at any time, they will be ‘found out’ and exposed for who they really are” (p. 89). These students do not feel like they belong (Kniffin, 2007, p. 49-50). Lubrano (2004) interviewed one straddler who “lived in absolute fear that Columbia would tell me that it was all a mistake and that the admission would be rescinded. Even when I was getting good grades, I thought my A’s were not the same as other people’s” (p. 89). With this doubt and fear facing first-generation college students, they need a supportive environment to navigate college successfully. The supportive environment must include adults from both worlds, the familiar, old world—home—and the unfamiliar, new world—college, so students do not feel like they have to choose one or the other, but can integrate both cultures into who they are. In addition, first-generation college students need services to help reconcile the dissonance between these two cultures.

This act of straddling two worlds—one of the past and one of the future—can leave first-generation college students feeling uncertain about what the future holds. In fact, according to Rodriguez (1983), “A primary reason for my success in the classroom was that I couldn’t forget that schooling was changing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before becoming a student” (p. 45). The concept of living in a constant state of limbo is the perfect image. The image of having a foot in each camp yet never truly being in either illustrates the ongoing struggle faced by many first-generation college students (Lubrano, 2004). First-generation college students face “a challenge in terms of belonging” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 87).
“Most full-time first-generation college students are the beneficiaries of what sociologists call structural mobility” (London, 1992, p. 5). These students are leaving the place of their upbringing and exploring a new place, the place of their future. This mobility “requires a ‘leaving off’ and a ‘taking on,’ the shedding of one social identity and the acquisition of another” (London, 1992, p. 8). The decision to “leave off” elements of self “risks disapproval of the family and friends who see college attendance itself and the resulting taking on of new values and modes of behavior as a form of disloyalty” (Zwerling, 1992, p. 48). To complicate matters further, first-generation college students are called disloyal in one breathe and expected to represent their families well in the next. According to Cushman (2006), these students are “shape shifters” (p. 94) and feel like they play the role of ambassador. This can create enormous stress for the student where they feel the weight of their entire family rests on them (Cushman, 2006, p 102-105).

In other words, first-generation college students are “straddlers” (Lubrano, 2004) and “must move between environments, home and the classroom, which are at cultural extremes, opposed” (Rodriquez, 1983). According to Lubrano, “straddlers…were born to blue-collar families and then…moved into the strange new territory of the middle class. They are the first in their families to have graduated from college. As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living a kind of American limbo” (p. 2).

**What first-generation college students “take on” when going to college.**

According to Engle, Bermeo, and O’Brien (2006), both secondary and post-secondary institutions need to do more to assist first-generation college students in their
success in higher education (p. 31). High schools can help better prepare these students academically, in addition to having conversations earlier and often with all involved (students, parents, etc.). Colleges and universities can offer more support services once first-generation college students arrive to campus. One Department of Education program assisting first-generation students is the McNair scholars program. The McNair program “is designed to provide effective preparation for the entrance into graduate school leading to a doctorate by FGLI (first-generation, low-income) students and/or under-represented minority groups” (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002, p. 394).

The McNair program emphasizes the students’ academic preparation for graduate school through strategic mentorship with faculty and involvement with academic research at the undergraduate level (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002, p. 394; Parker, 2003, p. 48). However, limited research has been conducted on the success of such programs. One study conducted by Ishiyama & Hopkins (2002) found “programs such as the McNair scholars program with its emphasis on the promotion of student-faculty and student-student interaction via the conduct of collaborative research, represent the ideal fusion of social and academic integrative goals” (p. 403). According to Parker (2003), the McNair program is achieving what it has set out to do: “the number of doctoral degrees earned by U.S. racial/ethnic minority groups increased by 86 percent between 1990 and 2000” (p. 48).

Aside from the McNair program, most institutions of higher education leave the success of graduate education to the discipline level. “Unlike undergraduate education, graduate education falls largely to the purview of academic departments” (Nesheim,
Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006, p. 13). In most instances, if graduate students have concerns about their academic program, they must report these concerns to their program. This places the student in an uneasy position. To make complaints to faculty within the program that have the power to decide your fate can make the student very vulnerable. According to Nesheim et al. (2006), “Advisors hold a great deal of power and are capable of making or breaking not only a graduate career but future careers as well” (p. 13). Most graduate students are not willing to take this risk.

**What first-generation college students “leave off” when going to college.**

Many obstacles face first-generation college students during college, which is a significant developmental period. Students find themselves in a state of limbo between the world they used to know—the life of home and family—and the one they are entering—the life of higher education. Making this transition includes hurdling many obstacles, including:

First-generation college students are often from the working class families who have been acculturated differently from middle class students, often receive less or different immediate familial support—both financial and emotional—from their extended family than their continuing-generation counterparts receive, are more susceptible to withdrawing temporarily or permanently from college, possess an increased likelihood of working while taking classes, often experience an increased time to graduation, and demonstrate lower levels of involvement in the college community (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002; Kniffin, 2007; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).
Many first-generation college students come from working class families that have saved little money to assist their college-going student, possess a different work ethic, and raise their children with a different set of values. According to Lubrano (2004), a first-generation college student, a straddler, is navigating a new set of experiences and values that are unfamiliar to those raised in a blue-collar family. “The core value of the working class is being part of a like-minded group—a family, a union, or a community, which engenders a strong sense of loyalty. The core value of the middle class is achievement by the individual” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 20). For first-generation college students, these two core values are in conflict. The blue-collar value focuses on being a part of the larger community versus the white-collar value of individual achievement. This struggle of values is significant and at the very core of the first-generation college student’s transformation. The first-generation college student realizes that finding academic success will require their adoption of the individual achievement value although they may feel like it does not fit or feel right.

“Cultural membership helps define who we are in the eyes of others as well as ourselves” (London, 1992, p. 6). For first-generation college students, the college-going experience causes these students to take on new behaviors that create a cultural shift or separation. This shift requires most first-generation students to renegotiate who they are. This renegotiation must occur with everyone from their former world including themselves (London, 1992; Rendon, 1992, p. 55).

First-generation college students not only experience a difference in core values, they also see the world through different lenses. First-generation college students bring
different cultural capital to college than continuing-generation students. First-generation college students are reluctant to speak in the classroom; their families have not encouraged the free exchange of ideas. Instead, their families have encouraged loyalty and compliance. Continuing-generation students, on the other hand, have been empowered to share their intellect, even challenge those in authority. If one is prepared and encouraged to challenge anyone’s ideas as opposed to living with the expectation of compliance and hard work, it is no wonder that one’s world view and way of interacting will be significantly different. Being empowered to think and express one’s self shapes one’s cultural capital which informs how you experience everything (Lubrano, 2004, p. 92-93).

**Familial support differs.**

First-generation college students find their families offering the support as they can; however, in many cases, many first-generation college students walk the path to college alone. Their families are proud of their accomplishments, but most do not know how to assist or what to offer. One straddler explains.

He knew he was trailblazing. He had no mentors, no one to ask whether he should be studying electrical or chemical engineering. Like a lot of blue-collar kids in the white-collar world, he found no one to bounce ideas off of and answer his questions. So he stumbled ahead on his own. (Lubrano, 2004, p. 117)

In addition to this sense of isolation, these first-generation college students often feel the responsibility to achieve on behalf of their entire families, “loading their shoulders with the weight of generations of dreams” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 104).
Many first-generation college students carry the weight of their entire family’s reputation to college with them (Bryan and Simmons, 2009, p. 400; Cushman, 2006, p. 102-105; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006, p. 22; Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 88; Orbe, 2008, p. 90-91). The extended family pressures the first-generation college student to succeed by emphasizing that this young person’s success “will bring honor to the family” (Bryan & Simmons, 2009, p. 393) and expects them to “play the role of ambassador” (Cushman, 2006, p. 102-105) or “emissary” (London, 1989). This is a significant amount of pressure to lie at the feet of a first-generation college student. Facing this new and unfamiliar experience, the first-generation college student can be influenced by the familiar and according to London (1989), the familial “voices can sound stronger than one’s own and can easily drown it out” (p. 157). Being influenced by these “voices” may not assist the student with success in college, but encourage them to return home without achieving the sought-after degree.

Programs that assist students with the academic transition can contribute significantly to the success of first-generation college students. Such programs can include purposeful first-year experiences, structured living and learning communities, faculty mentorship, and undergraduate research opportunities (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). In addition, college selection may be particularly important for first-generation college students. Support programs or services for first-generation college students may be more available at public institutions due to the sheer number of similar students facing the same challenge versus a private college, where the
first-generation student may be the only one experiencing this dynamic (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

**Psychological capital.**

When describing capital, researchers often describe first-generation college students as having something missing from their college going toolbox when compared to their continuing-generation peers. This is can be described as “deficit thinking”.

According to Weistin-Serdan (2009), “When students come to an educational institution with a ‘deficit’, that deficit will affect that student and their performance in that institution. Because the effect is usually a negative one, the effect typically reinforces the prevailing idea of capital and provides less opportunity for that student” (p. 409). For successful first-generation doctoral students, exploring what others attributes or skills these first-generation doctoral students possess may help explain their higher education success. Gardner and Holley (2011) suggest that first-generation college students possess a resiliency where these students “rely heavily upon self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control” (p. 78). These attributes are the components of psychological capital. Luthans et al. (2007) defines psychological capital as:

An individual's positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when
beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success. (p. 3).

Instead of using the deficit thinking model—describing what elements are missing from first-generation doctoral students’ college-going toolbox, I will explore with the concept of psychological capital with the research participants. I will ask what evidence of self-efficacy, optimism hope and resiliency these students’ possess that may be contributing to their success. In other words,

The richness that each student brings onto school campuses and into classrooms must be acknowledged and respected. Parents, family members and community members of all students have to be looked upon and treated as if they are essential to the survival and success of the student. Rather than isolating those who don’t fit the image of dominant culture, every social resource must be seen as a viable and thriving part of a student’s social network. (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 411)

Summary of capital and first-generation college students.

The notion that education will lift you up is a misperception (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 401). Instead, “Those who go into the system with capital leave the system with even more accumulated capital. The system places emphasis on dominant culture and does not allow for alternatives or even acknowledge other types of social and cultural capital” (Weiston-Serdan, 2009, p. 400). In other words, accumulated capital keeps the dominant culture dominant. Gardner and Holley (2011) suggest “the education system frequently operates in a manner that offers seemingly legitimate rewards to students who possess particular skills, language, and dispositions, while penalizing those students who
do not possess these skills and attributes” (p. 80). The dominant culture has designed processes to keep the existing paradigm firmly in place.

In higher education, students arrive on campus with some amount of accumulated capital; however, few first-generation college students are part of the dominant culture, so they arrive with less capital than those from the dominant culture. Capital exchanges hands as needed along the college trek and because the first-generation college students possess less capital, he/she needs to spend wisely. Unfortunately, the odds are against the first-generation college student. Having said all this and knowing the odds are against the first-generation college student, one question remains. What do successful first-generation doctoral students possess that has contributed to their academic success?

Conclusion

First-generation college students do not have the social or cultural capital that continuing-generation college students have. Because they did not go to college, the parents of first-generation college students do not know how to assist with completing the application process, submitting the financial aid forms, or selecting a degree program (Ishiyama & Hopkins, 2002; Kniffin, 2007)). However, do successful first-generation college students possess something other than social and/or cultural capital that contributes to their success? Do these students demonstrate a “psychological capital”—“self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p. 78) different from their continuing-generation counterparts that contributes to their success?
According to Lubrano (2004), straddlers bring courage that can assist in particularly trying times (p. 24). Perhaps someone identified their gift and pointed them to college, or maybe something appealed to them beyond their everyday lives, but first-generation college students willingly embark on a difficult journey to educate themselves differently than their families. This requires a certain level of confidence and comfort with risk taking. As Lubrano (2004) states, “Straddlers lurch awkwardly out of sheltered enclaves into unknown realms. On their sometimes troubled way, they become educated...some values change, while some remain constant...these people are hybrids. That duality is their strength and their struggle, and will comfort and vex them throughout their days” (p. 29). Courage and self-confidence to take the risk and navigating the unknown are skills not everyone possesses.

Successful first-generation students have all these attributes—courage, self-confidence, the ability to take risks, the curiosity—plus the drive to accomplish what no one in their families has accomplished before, a college degree. In addition, these first-generation students need a flexibility and resiliency to float between two cultures; two cultures that will inevitably be a part of their lives forever. “Limbo folk can consider themselves fortunate if they can be upwardly mobile but still rooted in the blue-collar world. Peaceful reconciliation comes to us when we can finally meld the two people we are” (Lubrano, 2004, p. 227).

All the literature contained in this chapter about first-generation college students’ college-going experiences, the current state of graduate education, and the elements of capital—social, cultural, and psychological—informed my approach to this study. The
current literature about first-generation college students offered insight into personal and educational pathways of first-generation doctoral students, addressing the first research question. The literature about graduate education informed how first-generation doctoral students experience graduate school, addressing the second research question. The capital theory literature framed the theoretical lens shaping this study. Framed in this way, I explored what factors contributed to the graduate school success of first-generation doctoral students. In the following chapter, I outline my methodological approach and specific research questions.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. Although much research existed regarding first-generation students and the many factors contributing to their success, a void existed in the research on first-generation doctoral student success. According to the research, factors contributing to the success of first-generation students included appropriate academic preparation, adequate financial means, and social preparedness. However, data on other factors affecting first-generation student success were limited. Although, academic preparation and financial considerations were influential criteria on the first-generation students’ success, I explored what other factors influenced their graduate school experiences. In this study, I addressed two research questions.

Question 1: What were personal and educational pathways first-generation doctoral students from the United States traveled as they moved toward graduate school? In addressing this question, I examined relationships with family members, teachers, and other significant people during the formative years and any impact these relationships had on the research participants’ graduate school experiences. I examined learned behaviors, cultural characteristics, activities, and values influencing the participants’ graduate school experiences.

Question 2: How did first-generation doctoral students from the United States experience graduate school? In addressing this question, I paid particular attention to the cultural and personal assets these students brought to their studies and relationships with peers, faculty, and other mentors.
In an effort to contribute to the overall first-generation student body of knowledge, this study focused on first-generation doctoral students from the United States. I explored experiences from childhood to the time of the interview.

The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to scholarship on first-generation doctoral students from the United States. I selected qualitative inquiry in order to understand better the experience of first-generation doctoral students from the United States and I explored their experiences “in the real world, studying it as it unfolds” (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Using a qualitative research approach allowed me to investigate my research questions more thoroughly while focusing on “nuance, setting, interdependencies, complexities, idiosyncrasies, and context” (Patton, 2002, p. 60). According to Patton, quantitative research “oversimplifies the complexities of real-world programs and participants’ experiences; misses major factors of importance that are not easily quantified” (p. 59). In an effort to capture more completely the experiences of these students and to analyze those experiences more fully, I conducted basic interpretive qualitative research with attention to the lived experience, used in phenomenological studies; to cultural context, used in ethnography; and to symbolic meaning, used in symbolic interactionism.

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative inquiry “…takes place in a natural setting, relies on the researcher…, employs multiple methods of data-collection, is inductive, is based on the participants’ meanings, is emergent, often involves the use of a theoretical lens, is interpretive, and is holistic” (p. 201). Listed below in Table 4 are nine key qualitative inquiry characteristics. The table includes descriptions of each of the nine
characteristics and how, in practice, I achieved each of these elements of qualitative inquiry, see Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Characteristics of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009, p. 201)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Qualitative Research</th>
<th>Description of characteristics</th>
<th>In practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural setting</td>
<td>Researchers try to see the experience as it is occurring. Researchers try “getting close to the people and situations being studied to personally understand the realities and minutiae of daily life” (Patton, 2002, p. 48)</td>
<td>I conducted interviews in the participants’ natural setting, at a convenient location on the campus of the chosen university.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher as key instrument</td>
<td>“Researchers are the ones who actually gather the information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). The researcher needs to demonstrate “empathic neutrality...a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment, and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding” (Patton, 2002, p. 50).</td>
<td>I personally conducted the interviews with the all research participants and established empathic neutrality while conducting these interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple sources of data</td>
<td>“Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, ..., rather than rely on an single data source” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175).</td>
<td>I conducted interviews with no fewer than 10 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductive data analysis</td>
<td>“Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175).</td>
<td>I reviewed descriptive notes, and transcripts to identify initial themes, and understand how these themes created patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ meanings</td>
<td>“...the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175).</td>
<td>I personally conducted all interviews and captured their words and experiences through note taking, transcribing the audiotapes verbatim, identifying themes, member checking for content accuracy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent design</th>
<th>“…the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175-6).</th>
<th>I re-evaluated the interview questions/guide following each interview and modified as necessary to get at the research questions.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical lens</td>
<td>“Qualitative researchers often use lens to view their studies, such as the concept of culture…or gendered, racial, or class differences…” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176).</td>
<td>I considered the effect of social, cultural, and psychological capital on the participants’ experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td>“…researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176).</td>
<td>I reviewed descriptive notes and transcripts to identify initial themes, and understand how these themes created patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic account</td>
<td>“Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176).</td>
<td>I review descriptive notes and transcripts to identify initial themes, and understand how these themes created patterns.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methodological Approach: Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research

My philosophical worldview shaped the qualitative strategy of inquiry I used for this study. According to Creswell (2009), those researchers who “seek to understand the world in which they live and work” (p. 8) are considered social constructivists. In keeping with the social constructivists and their desire to seek understanding, I used basic interpretive qualitative research as my methodological strategy. In this section, I describe basic interpretive qualitative research.

Basic interpretive qualitative research is an inductive strategy of qualitative inquiry and, according to Patton (2002), “qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic” (p. 55). Patton (2002) suggests the strategy “allows the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the
cases under study without presupposing what the importance dimensions will be” (p. 56). According to Merriam (1998), researchers using basic interpretive qualitative research “simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (p. 11). In fact, Merriam states that these research studies “are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education” (p. 11). In this research study, I paid attention to the lived experience—used in phenomenological studies, to cultural context—used in ethnography, and to symbolic meaning—used in symbolic interactionism.

Merriam (1998) stated, when using basic interpretive qualitative strategy, “data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. Findings are a mix of description and analysis” (p. 11). To achieve this end, I conducted 11 semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews from a purposeful sample of research participants from a variety of disciplines who are currently enrolled doctoral students from the United States attending a large, public, four-year, primarily residential, research institution in rural Ohio. All interviews were digitally recorded, and descriptive notes accompanied the transcripts. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher or a professional agency. These data, the transcripts and descriptive notes, were analyzed using content analysis. Specifically, I sought to understand the experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States, and their relationships, cultural values, and educational pathways contributing to their graduate education experiences.
Research Sample/Research Participants

For this study, I gathered rich data through textual analysis of a questionnaire sent to first-generation doctoral students from the United States and intensive interviewing with a select group of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. I conducted interviews using a basic interpretive qualitative research approach. This qualitative approach examined “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2002, p. 38).

As first-generation doctoral students from the United States applied, enrolled, and attended institutions of higher education, they experienced a variety of factors contributing to their success. In order to understand the depth of these experiences, I sought research participants from a variety of disciplines who were enrolled doctoral students from the United States attending a large, public, four-year, primarily residential, research institution in rural Ohio. See Figure 3 below illustrating my approach.

Figure 3. Diagram outlining my research approach.
I distributed via email to all graduate program chairs/directors/coordinators at a large, public, four-year, primarily residential, research institution in rural Ohio a call seeking research participants who meet the definition of this study: any interested first-generation doctoral students. I contacted all those students referred to me and ascertained whether they met the requirements for this study. I planned to conduct face-to-face interviews with no fewer than 10, first-generation doctoral students. In keeping with basic interpretive qualitative research, as the interviews progressed, I evaluated, in consultation with my committee chairperson, the need for more interviews in order to achieve data saturation. I used criterion sampling, defined as, “All participants must meet one or more criteria as predetermined by the researcher” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 191). These three strategies offered enough flexibility during data collection to ensure saturation while accounting for research participants having the same key criterion being first-generation doctoral students.

The research site was a four-year, public, primarily residential, Research University with comprehensive doctoral programs within the state of Ohio. The university offers many competitive doctoral programs, was nestled in the foothills of Appalachia, and attracted a large number of first-generation students. Because of the large number of first-generation students, this university offered a number of services to assist first-generation student success. In addition, the site selection was due to my personal familiarity with the academic programs and students at the university. I worked for the university for nearly twenty years in several departments and I was a doctoral student.
Overview of Information Needed

The specific information I needed to answer my research questions included contextual information, perceptual information, demographic information, and theoretical information. Contextual information “describes the culture and environment of the setting” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 70).

The second kind of information was perceptual information and “refers to participants’ perceptions related to the particular subject of your inquiry” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 70). Gathered during interviews, I sought perceptual information when questioning the first-generation doctoral students about their experiences. These experiences included any relevant experience during their formative years through their current experiences in graduate school. It was important for me as the researcher to remember that these data are perceptions. As Bloomberg and Volpe suggest, this type of information “tell the story of what participants believe to be true” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 71), and as a result, will require analysis.

The third type of information collected was demographic information and “describes who the participants in your study are” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 70). I collected information about the participants’ history—where they were from, background, education—and personal information—age, gender, ethnicity. I included a matrix or table of these data.

Finally, I collected theoretical information. “Theoretical information includes information searched and collected from the various literature sources to assess what is
already known, regarding your topic of inquiry” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 71). See Table 5 for more information on the data collected and method used.

Table 5

Data collected and methods used (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 72)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of information</th>
<th>What the Researcher requires?</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Identify the organizational commitment to graduate educational success and under-represented populations (first-generation)</td>
<td>Document review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic</td>
<td>Describe characteristics of research participants (age, gender, ethnicity, education, etc.)</td>
<td>Brief survey post-interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual-Research question #1</td>
<td>Collect data about the following research question: What are personal and educational pathways first-generation doctoral students from the United States travel as they move toward graduate school?</td>
<td>Interview which will be audio taped for transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptual-Research question #2</td>
<td>Collect data about the following research question: How do first-generation doctoral students from the United States experience graduate school?</td>
<td>Interview which will be audio taped for transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td>Understand basic interpretive qualitative research.</td>
<td>Literature review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Design Overview

The following section will offer a description of the intended research design in overview. However, as Patton (2002) states, “Naturalistic inquiry designs cannot usually be completely specified in advance of the fieldwork” (p. 44). In other words, the research design outlined preliminary intentions, but remained flexible to change based on any discoveries during the inquiry process. Further, Patton suggests that the divide between
data collection and analysis remains far from discrete (p. 436). Data collection and analysis happened simultaneously.

The researcher needs to collect data, review data, code data, analyze data, looking for gaps and connections. The findings using content analysis come from this immersion in the data. From this immersion in the data comes in-depth descriptions of the studied participants and the described phenomenon. “Classic qualitative studies share the capacity to open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed descriptions of people and places” (Patton, 2002, p. 438). Meaning starts to evolve as the researcher finds connections in the experiences of the interviewees. My own experiences as a first-generation doctoral student offered valuable insight when seeking to understand the experiences of other first-generation doctoral students.

In keeping with a basic interpretive qualitative approach, I collected data through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. I recorded all interviews and took descriptive notes. Upon interview completion, I transcribed the digital recordings in preparation for analysis. For a complete research participant profile table, see Appendix B.

During the analysis phase, I reviewed the interview transcripts and descriptive notes for initial themes and patterns, then reviewed all transcripts several times trying to sort and connect themes and patterns. Chapter 4 summarizes individual cases. According to Patton (2002), “the first task is to do a careful job independently writing up separate cases…the initial focus is on full understanding of individual cases before those unique cases are combined or aggregated thematically” (p. 57). Chapter 5 offers cross-case analyses. “The cross-case analysis can begin in search of patterns or themes that cut
across individual experiences” (Patton, 2002, p. 57). Finally, Chapter 6 includes a discussion of findings by research question. For a visual representation of the process, see the Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4. Flow chart of proposed data collection and analysis.**
Data Collection Methods from a Basic Interpretive Qualitative Approach

According to Creswell (2009), “Qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites…that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (p. 178). In addition, “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” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). Strength in qualitative research is the flexibility it offers the researcher. “Qualitative research permits you to follow leads that emerge.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14).

During the data collection phase, basic interpretive qualitative research allowed me the opportunity to pivot quickly based on the information I heard and nimbly change course as needed. In other words, “an open ended interview, by way of contrast, permits the respondent to describe what is meaningful and salient without feeling pigeon-holed into standardized categories” (Patton, 2002, p. 56).

Data collection via interviews.

The primary data collection method of this study was interviews. Interviews offered the opportunity to collect qualitative data strategically in a natural setting. A setting which is relevant to the research being studied where the “researcher does not attempt to manipulate the setting” (Patton, 2002, p. 39). According to Creswell (2009), “interviews involve unstructured and open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (p. 181). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) described the interview method in the following way, an interview
Fosters interactivity with participants; Elicits in-depth, context rich personal accounts, perceptions, and perspectives; Data are collected in their natural setting; Interviews can be unstructured, structured, or semistructured; Explains and describes complex interactions and processes; Facilitates discovery of nuances in culture; Notes or verbatim transcriptions are used to document the interview (p. 195).

Creswell (2009) identified advantages and disadvantages to using interviewing, see Table 6 below.

Table 6

Advantages/disadvantages to interviews (Creswell, 2009, p. 179)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Useful when participants cannot be directly observed</td>
<td>Provides indirect information filtered through the views of interviewees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants can provide historical information</td>
<td>Provides information in a designated place rather than the natural setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows the researcher control over the line of questioning</td>
<td>Researcher’s presence may bias responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not all people are equally articulate and perceptive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recording and safe-guarding data during interviews.

I took “descriptive notes (portraits of the participants, a reconstruction of dialogue, a description of the physical setting, accounts of particular events or activities)” (Creswell, 2009, p. 181) of each interview and made “reflective notes (the researcher’s personal thoughts)” (Creswell, 2009, p. 182) following each interview. In addition, I collected demographic information (gender, race, ethnicity, program of study, etc.) from each research participant and about the interview setting (time, place, etc.) as well. I used
"an interview protocol for asking questions and recording answers" (Creswell, 2009, p. 183) of each interview. The interview protocol is in Appendix A. In addition, I audio taped and transcribed verbatim each interview.

**Data Analysis: Content Analysis**

"The steps and processes of content analysis cannot be reduced to a formula or even a standard series of steps" (Patton, 2002, p. 57). Content analysis refers to making sense of a significant amount of data collect in interviews or during observations. According to Patton (2002), "content analysis attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings…The core meanings found through content analysis are often called patterns or themes" (p. 453). I was open to patterns or themes that surfaced because of the research participants’ uses of words and clauses. In addition, I identified themes and patterns as well. Either way, respondent or researcher identified, is consider a component part of qualitative inquiry and inductive analysis (Patton, 2002, p. 454).

As suggested by Patton (2002), I began identifying themes and patterns by first reading transcripts and the respective descriptive notes and making preliminary notes about what I see (p. 463). “This first reading through the data is aimed at developing the coding categories or classification system” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Coding offers a framework through which to build the analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45). The coding process classified significant ideas and concepts that interview participants identified as contributors to their success as first-generation doctoral students.

“Analysis builds a foundation for the interpretive phase when meanings are extracted from the data, comparisons are made, creative frameworks for interpretation are..."
constructed, conclusions are drawn, significance is determined…” (Patton, 2002, p. 465).

With this goal guiding my data analysis, first I read through the data with the intention of finding meaning and preliminary themes in outline form. The second reading clarified the themes allowing me to sort (cut and paste, electronically) respondents’ comments into themes on the third reading. I continued reading and rereading the transcripts until findings emerged. In keeping with Patton’s suggestion, I present my findings in individual cases in Chapter 4. Then Chapter 5 consists of cross-case analyses. And finally, Chapter 6 discusses the specific research question findings.

**Coding challenges.**

Coding presents its own set of challenges. The most significant challenge is “guarding against forcing our preconceptions on the data we code” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 66). Because the researcher intentionally immerses oneself in the data, it is easy to see how a researcher could draw false conclusions without fully understanding the experiences. As mentioned previously, to address this challenge, I intended to re-examine coding thoroughly and used member checking with all research participants to ensure that the conclusions I reach accurately reflected their experiences as first-generation doctoral students. In addition, as a first-generation doctoral student, I needed to guard against assuming all other first-generation doctoral students had my experiences. Constantly revisiting the data and member checking helped alleviate this challenge as well.
Data Analysis and Synthesis from a Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research Approach

The process of data analysis involves making sense out of test and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data..., representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009, p. 183).

In qualitative inquiry, Patton (2002) emphasizes five strategies for the analysis phase of the research. These strategies are unique case orientation, inductive analysis and creative synthesis, holistic perspectives, context sensitivity, and voice, perspective and reflexivity (pp. 55-66). I used these five strategies for the analysis phase. Below, I outline the specifics of all five.

**Unique case orientation.**

The key components of unique case orientation include “small, purposeful samples, …depth, richness, and detail, …in-depth, face-to-face interviews, …meaning and contribution of qualitative research” (Patton, 2002, p. 55).

**Inductive analysis and creative synthesis.**

The opened interview method supports this inductive approach. Each case must be first analyzed fully by itself, before being cross analyzed “or aggregated thematically. This helps ensure that emergent categories and discovered patterns are grounded in specific cases and their contexts” (Patton, 2002, p. 57). In summary, “Inductive analysis
is built on a solid foundation of specific, concrete, and detailed observations, quotations, documents, and cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 58).

**Holistic perspectives.**

Another critical dimension to qualitative research is the concept of maintaining a holistic perspective. According to Patton (2002), “researchers…strive to understand a phenomenon, or a program as a whole” and “the whole is understood as a complex system that is greater than the sum of its parts” (p.59). In other words, each interview is a “window into the whole” (Patton, 2002, p. 60).

**Context sensitivity.**

Qualitative research recognizes that context is critical to understanding the questions being studied. According to Patton (2002), “Naturalistic inquiry preserves natural context” (p. 62) and identifies it “as critical to its understanding” (p. 63).

**Voice, perspective and reflexivity.**

In qualitative research, voice, perspective, and reflexivity are critical. In quantitative research, the variables influencing the research subject are controlled. The researcher is usually not a variable affecting the research. However, in qualitative research, “The perspective that the researcher brings to a qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). In addition, the researcher’s “Self-awareness…can be an asset in both fieldwork and analysis”(p. 64). This self-awareness is reflexivity. “

Being reflexive involves self-questioning and self-understanding…ongoing examination of what I know and how I know it…attentive to and conscious of the
cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one’s own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those whom one reports (Patton, 2002, p. 64-5).

I am a first-generation doctoral student. Raised in a two-parent household, with both my parents working outside the home, I was in charge after school until my parents got home. I learned the importance of independence and sound decision-making. My parents expected me to be responsible, share in the chores, and work hard. We lived in the country and I spent most of my spare time reading books, working with horses, and, when I could drive, working a part-time job. My love of reading prepared me well for school and teachers encouraged me. I developed an internal drive for good grades and self-sustainability. My parents never said they expected these things, I just understood their importance. When going to college, I observed the financial strain my parents were under and found employment, both as an undergraduate and graduate student. I worked as a resident assistant and hall director, which paid for most of my education. As a result, I graduated with very little debt. These experiences shaped who I am.

My personal and professional experiences affect how I view the world. In addition, these experiences influence how I interact with others, hear what they have to say, and interpret information. Throughout this study, I needed to ask myself if my personal and/or professional experiences unduly influenced my interpretations of the data collected. I explored the experiences of other first-generation doctoral students, but keep in mind my own perceptions may be shaping what I saw, heard, and understood.
Recognizing that my perspective shaped the collection and analysis of data to some extent, but I checked biases and remained true to the message conveyed by the participants. During the data collection phase, I was open and honest with all research participants about the fact that I am a first-generation doctoral student. In the analysis phase, I used “rich description, thoughtful sequencing, appropriate use of quotes, and contextual clarity so that the reader joins the inquirer in the search for meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 65). I offered “critical and creative analyses, descriptions and interpretation, or direct quotation and synopsis” (Patton, 2002, p. 65) and I employed member checking to ascertain that any conclusions drawn reflected accurately the experiences of the research participants. As Patton (2002) states, “No rules or formula can tell a qualitative analyst what balance is right or which voice to use, only that finding both balance and voice is part of the work and challenge of qualitative inquiry” (p. 65).

**Ethical Considerations**

As a researcher, I was committed to using the following strategies in the ethical design of my research, which protected my research participants from harm: Informed consent and confidentiality. In keeping with Creswell’s (2009) recommendation regarding confidentiality and ‘masking’ identities, I used pseudonyms for all research participants (p. 178).

**Issues of Trustworthiness**

Developing trust is essential to the interview process and to drawing connections between categories. If the interviewer does not develop this trust from the outset, the interview may be doomed before it really gets started. Trust assists the researcher in
getting at the meaning the interviewee has attributed to their experiences. Types of interviewing present another set of challenges. Whether face-to-face interviews or over the phone, participants may filter information based on social desirability. In other words, the participants may answer questions the way they think the researcher wants them to answer. In addition, the participants’ lens of perception may differ from that of other participants or from the researcher hence influencing the data. The researcher may not understand what the participant truly means causing the data to be presented inaccurately. Phone interviews create a different challenge. Without being in the participant’s presence, the researcher is unable to observe and question non-verbal communication. This eliminates the ability to elicit the unspoken as well as the spoken. Unless faced with unforeseen challenges, I conducted all interviews face-to-face.

Another concern rests with the interview setting. The setting can influence the participants’ reflections. For example, the interview location may be too unlike their postsecondary experiences or too public and inhibit the participants from fully divulging their perceptions. On the other hand, the setting may provide too much similarity to a specific experience and not allow the participant to move beyond that certain event and be broader in scope. The researcher needs to be mindful of all of these dynamics and allow for how the data are affected (Creswell, 2009, p. 179).

**Credibility/Validity.**

As Creswell (2009) mentions, “…inquirers explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status, that may shape their interpretations formed during a study” (p.
Being a first-generation doctoral student, I need to recognize that my own experience, both personal and professional, could be shaping my interpretation and analysis of the data. Creswell (2009) states, “Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” (p. 190). To help ensure the validity of my study, I used triangulation to verify my analysis. To triangulate, I listened to the digital recordings of the research participants’ interviews, reviewed observation notes taken during the interviews, and analyzed transcripts to “test for consistency” (Patton, 2002, p. 248). Triangulation is “examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). In addition, I included discrepancies or negative instances found in my study (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). In order to add to the validity of my study, I used member checking “to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through…specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191). Periodically, during the interviews, I reflected back what I heard to the research participants in order to seek affirmation and/or clarification. This allowed the research participants to confirm my understanding or correct my misunderstanding. These confirmations or corrections were included in my descriptive notes and reflected in the digital recordings and the transcripts. In addition, I used “rich, thick description to convey the findings…transporting readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191-2).
Dependability/Reliability.

According to Creswell (2009), “qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent” (p. 190). Creswell (2009) suggests the following procedures to ensure reliability:

Check transcripts to make sure that they do not contain obvious mistakes made during transcription. Make sure that there is not a drift in the definition in codes, a shifting in the meaning of the codes during the process of coding…constantly comparing data with the codes…and their definitions (Creswell, 2009, p. 190).

In order to ensure reliability, I reviewed the transcripts for mistakes and the established code definitions, and then I compared the data with the codes.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Three outlined the purpose of my study—to understand the experiences of and the factors contributing to the success of first-generation doctoral students from the United States, outlined the research questions used to explore this phenomenon, and identified the specific methodological strategy used in this study, basic interpretive qualitative research. The theoretical framework underpinning this research was—capital and how its accumulation influenced first-generation college student success, particularly social capital, cultural capital, and psychological capital.

Additionally, in this chapter, I described how I collected data—conducted interviews, with whom—11 first-generation doctoral students, from where—a large, public, four-year, primarily residential, research institution in rural Ohio. I outlined how I collected my data using interviews. I listed the steps I used for the analytic phase of the
research. I concluded by addressing reflexivity, credibility, reliability, validity, and ethics.
Chapter Four: Findings, Individual Cases

In keeping with the suggestion outlined by Patton (2002) to understand fully the individual cases (p. 57) this chapter outlines the findings of the individual cases of eleven research participants: Catherine, Caroline, Jeff, Alison, Cynthia, Todd, Jennifer, Anne, Thomas, Dave, and Laura. These individual cases are presented with descriptive themes, representing my understanding of the most salient aspects of their journeys. For a complete a research participant profile table, see Appendix B.

Catherine

At the time of the interview, Catherine was a White, 45 year-old woman who completed her first year of coursework in her doctoral program. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Catherine on September 18, 2014 (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview). Her academic discipline was Higher Education. She was married with children and she enrolled part-time for her doctoral work. During her undergraduate and master’s programs, Catherine enrolled full-time in courses. Catherine faced many challenges common to first-generation students. Catherine described her struggle with her self-doubt in pursuing a doctorate and her persistent negative self-talk. In addition to her lack of confidence, Catherine faced financial challenges and isolation. Even through the challenges, Catherine recognized the importance of earning this degree and accomplishing this important career goal. Catherine acknowledged that she needed this degree to secure the position she coveted.

During her undergraduate program, Catherine did not identify as a first-generation college student. In fact, she really did not hear that term used until later. Later in her
career, many that Catherine worked with would identify themselves as first-generation. They would use that specific descriptor to identify themselves.

In fact at [my previous institution], we have a thing with the student support services, and those of us that are working in Student Affairs, we talk about, we give like one bit of information about ourselves...and quite a few people had their doctorate and they’d been working there for years and they talk about how they were a first-generation student and I always talk about how or in the past I did, like, my mom got married when she was sixteen, my dad was twenty-four. They, neither one of them graduated from high school, they went on later to get their GED, but I graduated from my undergrad, my master’s and so, like, it’s one of those things like where I want to take them and say, it’s okay if your parents didn’t, you can.

Catherine hid her first-generation identity during undergraduate and master’s program. Now as a doctoral student, Catherine is more comfortable with the descriptor.

One of my faculty talked about being a first-generation in one of our classes, so for me, undergrad and masters, first generation wasn’t something to be proud of. Like it was something to hide the fact that your parents didn’t go, too. You know, it was like “why didn’t your parents go to college?” I mean that really was the fact. Whereas so now, it’s more of... “yeah, I’m a first-generation student. I did it, you can do it too” type of thing. So, I think I talk about it more than I had. Way more.
Being surrounded by others who disclosed their first-generation status has prompted Catherine to make an extra effort with the first-generation students she advised and encouraged them to get their degree.

**Changing academic goals.**

Catherine’s initial academic goals shifted once she went to observe art’s education in action, at a local high school. Catherine realized that career choice was not for her. After art education, Catherine considered studying counseling but realized this, too, was not the right fit. Elementary school counseling was too difficult; Catherine could not shut off what she had heard during the school day and felt like she really was not helping. “I think the key, you can help kids like adjust to it or try to figure out how to deal with it, but when I went home, I would still be thinking about that...”. After changing direction again, Catherine thought that at least when working with college students, you provided resources that they could use to change their situations.

I just knew that I couldn’t do it. And so working with college students, most of the time you can give them, help them with the skills, or show them the resources that if they’re in bad situations, you can help them. But, elementary, like, mom and dad are still mom and dad and if they spend all their money, so I was in Dubuque, and at the time, gambling boats were new and so like mom would get the paycheck and go to the gambling boat and spend all the money.

After Catherine completed her master’s program, she realized she had grown tired of going to school. She was not eager to return to the classroom as a doctoral student, but eventually she enrolled in a doctoral level class.
Financing higher education.

All through higher education, Catherine focused a lot of her energy on how she would pay for college. Work was a constant for her. During her undergraduate days, Catherine worked in residence life as a resident assistant, worked in a work study position, and held down several part-time jobs.

Still had work-study and like there was, I think it was either my soph or would have been my junior or senior year. I was student teaching, RA, and had two part-time jobs. I really don’t know, like I don’t know what I learned. But so the yeah. I guess you would say I had a really strong work ethic or a, just a determination that I would get through.

During her master’s program, Catherine continued to work in residence life as she pursued her master’s degree full-time. As a doctoral student, initially Catherine enrolled as a full-time student, but then shifted to a part-time student once she secured a full-time position at the university. Throughout her entire higher education experience, Catherine focused on finances, had a good work ethic and was determined to get through college on her own.

Feelings of isolation, the importance of connections, and fighting self-doubt.

While in her undergraduate program, Catherine connected with students in residence life and her other places of employment. While in her master’s program, Catherine faced a difficult employment situation and, with the support of her cohort, she was able to work through that negative experience and graduate with her master’s degree.
Catherine was looking for this same experience in her doctoral program, but was disappointed to learn that there was no cohort in the traditional program. Unlike the executive PhD program, which admits a group of students that complete all their coursework together, the traditional PhD program allows admitted students to select their own courses depending on their individualized schedules. As a result, those students in the traditional program may or may not be in courses with peers who are at the same point in their academic coursework.

I was super excited about like being a part of a group. There was like one other student that came in with me. And, I was like, like floundering, like trying to find, I was taking some classes with the cohort, some not and so finding that identity.

As a result, Catherine set out to establish her own “cohort” and surrounded herself with others who experienced similar things so that she could bounce ideas/problems off them. The disappointment about having no cohort made Catherine wonder where she belonged. She was older than most of her classmates and was challenged to fit in.

I think by the time you’re at the doctoral level, I don’t think anyone thinks about the, like getting connected to the campus, and feeling, you know and I thought about that. Because I know when I was at [my previous institution], we would have new master’s students and new doctoral students, and I never thought about like are they connecting with the campus? Are they feeling at home? Like I never thought about that.

Catherine felt isolated and her self-confidence was shaken as a result of not having a cohort to share the experiences with. Feelings of isolation persisted.
Catherine was also unprepared for the feelings of disconnectedness. For her doctoral program, Catherine enrolled in an unfamiliar academic environment and did not anticipate the importance of knowing your faculty. Catherine enrolled in a couple of doctoral level courses at her previous institution and did not recognize how much she undervalued the importance of “knowing” her previous institution and the people in it. In fact, others called Catherine’s decision to go back to school brave, but she did not realize the challenge of going to a new place and knowing very few people.

When I left [my previous institution] the Associate Provost even said at my going away thing, she was like “you’re so brave.” And I was like “Brave?” … And then I got here and I was like, last year a couple times, I heard her voice saying “you’re so brave” and I was like “Oh my god, this is what she meant”.

In addition, Catherine described her self-doubt as difficult to manage. Catherine approached her first doctoral class with caution and a lack of confidence. As a self-fulfilling prophecy, she even misinterpreted a grade on a paper that reinforced her own self-image that she was not good enough to be in a doctoral level course. She described needing to overcome the lack of confidence and negative self-talk. She took a second class and did well, but still was not sure that she belonged and worried that her children needed her. She recognized that she needed the faculty to believe in her, then she would believe in herself. “I’ve learned that if I have that relationship with the faculty and if they believe in me then I am more likely to believe in myself”. Self-confidence issues resurfaced again when she moved to a new institution for her doctoral program and did not have any familiar connections. Facing continued feelings of isolation and self-doubt
in her program, Catherine recognized her need to connect with her faculty in order to feel confident enough to succeed.

**The evolution of family relationships.**

To do doctoral work, Catherine suggested that you need the support of your family and you need to be personally committed or have a strong resolve to persevere.

I mean if you are doing your doctoral program you have to be committed; you have to be passionate about an area, and I’m like, I don’t know if I’m, I think it took me that long to think about, like, what are you passionate about that you can put that much time, energy, and everything into...It can ruin, it can ruin relationships, it can ruin jobs, it can, you know, and so for me, it was like, I needed it to be committed.

Catherine recognized that she needed the support of her family, however, few went to college. Her older brother went to college, but returned home after one term because of financial and social challenges. “He went to community college and had to come back home before the first, end of the first semester because he had ran out of money”. Catherine’s younger brother showed no interest in college. Catherine’s extended family looked down on the college educated. “I can remember one uncle in particular would call you like an educated idiot if you went to college”. In contrast, Catherine’s parents encouraged her. They did not want her to get stuck. They emphasized getting a good job with benefits and the importance of getting an education. Although her parents were supportive they did not know how to help. Catherine received support and encouragement from her boyfriend’s mother and her teachers.
I will say to this day, the reason I attended college was because the boyfriend that I was dating at the time, his mom sat me down, filled out the FAFSA for me, took me to the college visit. And I had really, a couple really close teachers in, in high school. And my mom and dad both, like they valued education. And my mom always said, you know like, make sure you get an education; no one will take it away from you.

Immediate family support came easily, they wanted Catherine to succeed. “I think one thing that I have been, that surprised me, maybe, is the amount of support my family has given me”. Catherine’s daughters have been supportive. “They will say things like, ‘have you been doing your readings, Mom?…’ I think the girls, especially, they want me to succeed”. When Catherine started college, she was not sure it was for her and still has questions about her doctoral program, but Catherine’s daughter does not understand NOT going to college.

Like her, how she was raised, it would be fascinating to study how children who grow up in residence halls the idea of not going to college, like never enters her mind. And to me, like, it was always this like I don’t know if I can, type of thing. As a parent, Catherine is curious about her daughter’s reaction to a relative that did not go to college. Catherine’s daughter assumed everyone went to college.

**Success strategies.**

Catherine recognized that she needed to listen to the advice she gave her daughters and the students with whom she worked. She suggested that she should not get distracted by other interests. Catherine identified perseverance as the most important
success strategy for first-generation college students. In addition, she realized the need to ask for help. Catherine’s supportive family (her parents, children and partner) reinforced her drive to succeed.

I don’t want to disappoint my parents, so, I mean I know that’s what it was for my undergrad. Like I had to graduate because I didn’t want to disappoint them. Masters, it was more like, I want, I had to get it to get the job. And then doctoral now that, yeah probably, not wanting to disappoint people. So, like I don’t want to disappoint my girls because I moved them here. So, I can’t fail at it. You know, and I don’t want to disappointment my partner…

Catherine advised that other first generation doctoral students need to know who they are. “On some level, being first-generation doesn’t matter at all; on other levels, it does matter. So, trying to balance those is important”. In addition, she emphasized the importance of knowing that people care about you and your success. “I guess with first-generation, knowing that there are people that care about you, and care about your success”. In addition, Catherine encouraged surrounding yourself with others who you can call upon for help. “I think whether you are in grad school or doctoral level, it’s ok, especially, I think, at the doctoral level, it’s ok to ask for help. Or say, you know, where are all these other doc students?”.

Summary.

In summary, Catherine emphasized how isolating her doctoral program was without a cohort. She expected a different experience shared with other doctoral students and as a result, had to create her own cohort in order to feel like she belonged in the
program and connected to the faculty. In addition, Catherine needed to manage her own self-doubt and persevere in order to avoid derailing her plans.

**Caroline**

Caroline was a married, 46 year-old woman in her first year of her doctoral program. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Caroline on November 11, 2014 (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Caroline’s discipline was Communication Studies. Caroline always knew that she wanted to go back to school after completing her undergraduate degree in journalism from [her undergraduate institution], but the journey getting to graduate school was long. Finally, time and cost constraints evaporated, coupled with Caroline’s decision of what to study and she jumped in. Within a year, Caroline moved to [here], found part-time work, enrolled in the online master’s program, secured a full-time position at the university, successfully completed comprehensive exams, got married, applied, and after admission, enrolled in her Ph.D. program.

**Finding her discipline.**

Caroline knew that she would get a graduate degree at some point. “I had thought at some point in my life I would probably go back to graduate school and the question became what did I want to do?”. She just needed to search for what she wanted to do. “I thought about a variety of different things”. Her career was filling the need to learn new things so there was no urgency to get back into the classroom.

There’s a lot of research based in what I was doing, so to a certain extent I felt like that curiosity and that interest was being fulfilled. It was less structured
maybe than I would wanted, but I felt like I was kind of getting that, that part of me fed through the work that I was doing.

As time passed, Caroline had the desire to study something practical. “I felt like I really wanted to make a career change and so I started thinking more in terms of what’s a practical graduate degree that I could do”. During a period of soul searching, Caroline realized her interest in southern Ohio.

I wanted a significant change in my life anyway. And there’s a lot that I miss about southern Ohio, so the idea of coming to a town in southern Ohio that’s a little more progressive than the town I grew up in was really appealing to me. Caroline found that after she married some of her concerns about cost disappeared because of the university’s policy on partner benefits; however, she was still unsure what discipline she wanted to pursue. “With domestic partner benefits here at OU, like it became, I could go back to school and continue working even if I wasn’t working at the university. It became really realistic”.

Caroline had identified strongly with her Appalachian upbringing while at [her undergraduate institution], and was bothered that others could live in southeastern Ohio and not appreciate, and would even sometimes demean, the Appalachian influence on the students from southeastern Ohio. This passion helped Caroline find the program in which she wanted to enroll. Caroline described how her partner really did not recognize the Appalachian culture at [her current institution]. This stunned her.

And I think before she met me, she didn’t have a strong sense that there is an Appalachian culture. Just because she didn’t, I think you can be here and not
really recognize that and not really be exposed to it. Which was a little shocking to me. But, so we would have these conversations, and then she started noticing things and she would come home and tell me stories about students who really felt isolated here. Like students who were from 20 miles away, who came to campus and really felt isolated, felt like they weren’t taken seriously by their professors because of their accents or because what they said, what home town they had or that sort of thing. And it pissed me off.

Caroline contended that her undergraduate institution…, had an appreciation for the students it attracts and it really helped her find a connection to her Appalachian upbringing whereas many students at [her current institution] did not have the same experience. “My undergraduate experience was very identity affirming for me. Whereas, she [her wife] was telling me these stories of these students for whom, like her, it’s not an identity confirming experience for them”.

Shocked that people discredited the Appalachian experience, upon watching the social dynamics of a water pollution problem in Charleston, West Virginia in 2013, Caroline awoke. She realized that she wanted to work to empower people who are not part of the mainstream culture.

Maybe that’s something I can do, figure out a way to make a career of trying to bridge that gap and educate people, not just about Appalachians, but any indigenous culture that is a little bit different than the larger culture. Just, you know, nobody in this day and age wants to think of themselves as a colonialist.
Upon self-reflection, Caroline realized that she was empowered when she went to college, but not all students experience that and she realized she wanted to help others with their awakening.

**Seeking others to share in the experience.**

The doctoral program that Caroline wanted to enroll in required a master’s degree, so Caroline enrolled in an online master’s program. The experience was not what she was looking for, she wanted more interaction with classmates, but this decision would move her closer to getting into a doctoral program, so she enrolled and completed her master’s degree in one year.

There was a master’s program that was, it ended up being all online, which was not ideal for me. It’s not the situation that I really wanted, but I could finish it in a year and then try to move directly into the doctoral program. So… I did the master’s.

Being an online program, Caroline knew she needed more interaction with other students, so she ‘built’ her own cohort. She discovered that a man she worked with was in her program.

Another guy who works in my office was in the program, too… and our desks touch. It actually ended up being like… we both looked at it differently and it was just a completely different experience for each of us. But it gave me an opportunity to kind of talk to somebody, like face to face.

In addition, although she does not typically like group projects, Caroline looked forward to the group work as a way of connecting with some of her peers.
They assign a lot of group work, which typically I hate it, but it was an excuse to actually meet people outside of online discussion boards. So that actually ended up being, I thought it was going to be the worst experience, and it ended up being a pretty good experience, just to kind of actually make connections.

With her master’s completed. Caroline was looking forward a more typical academic experience in her doctoral program. “I was really excited about being in a program where I’m actually sitting in a class every week with somebody and having conversations”. However, when Caroline first started the Ph.D. program, she was immediately concerned about fitting in and her confidence was shaken.

I walk in this class and like everybody’s 25 or 26 and it, and I knew that, like I knew that is what it was going to be, but then it’s a little bit overwhelming of, you know, like I feel my life experience makes me a better student. Like I feel like I’m prepared to be here even if I didn’t just come from some, like really strong master’s program at some great whatever, but then you’re like faced with these, you know, 25 year-olds who haven’t been out of school for, like have never been out of school.

Academically, Caroline was a good student, but she was rattled. Her peers had studied this discipline and the way they spoke intimidated her. Caroline needed time to adjust to a new environment and bolster her self-confidence. Soon she realized she had something to offer.

Within a week or two, like. I felt like I was holding my own in discussions and I did, like kind of that confidence about, like I’ve kind of lived in the world and this
isn’t just theoretical to me. I see how these things apply in the world. I think that, just being able to acknowledge that again was really important to me to say, I can contribute something to this because I’m smart.

Caroline struggled to fit in with her cohort. She was older, a part-time student, and held down a full-time job. The other students socialized and served as instructors together. They were different from her and it was isolating. Caroline recognized that this feeling of isolation and not fitting in was likely to be a part of her entire Ph.D. experience because her circumstances were different.

The importance of family support and finding independence.

Caroline surrounded herself with supportive people as she considered pursuing a doctorate. Along with her wife, Caroline had several mentors who wondered why it had taken her so long to get back in the classroom as a student. Caroline’s former boss said when Caroline asked for a reference, “I wondered how long it would take you to go back to school”. In addition, a former managing editor expressed a similar response. “I am a little surprised it took you this long, but we always figured you would end up, one of these days”.

In Caroline’s large extended family, she and her sister were the only two to complete their bachelor’s degrees. Caroline wondered with all of her family, who lived in the same area, what was different for her and her sister.

My mom is from Canada, from the west coast of Canada and she and my dad met, my dad was in the Air Force and so, she moved like 3,000 miles from her family when she married my dad. And we would go there a lot when we were growing
up, we would spend a lot of summers there. So, I think, we had an exposure to a different world that my other cousins didn’t have.

In addition, Caroline’s dad had the opportunity to go to college, but quit after a short time and joined the military.

My dad was, of the nine kids, my dad also was a basketball player and he got a scholarship to play basketball, so he played here [her current institution] for a while and he played at [another institution] for a while. He ended up quitting and joining the Air Force.

Although her father did not complete college, he demonstrated an appreciation for education, and always encouraged his daughters to attend college.

We were raised like you are gonna go to college, you’re gonna get a bachelor’s degree. It was just an understood… it was understood from the time that we were kids that eventually you will go to college and you will get a bachelor’s degree, In fact, everything pointed Caroline to the college path.

Everything directed us to, when we’re in high school, like, you need to start looking at colleges, you need to do this, you need to make sure you’re taking the, talk to your counselor and make sure you’re taking the coursework that’s going to get you into college…

Caroline’s journey to graduate school geminated for many years; however, once Caroline married and the opportunity presented itself again, with the help of educational benefits, Caroline seized the chance.
Like immediately we started talking about what’s next. And so, at that point I knew I was going to go back to graduate school it was decided this is what we’re going to do plus, you know, it would make me more marketable if we do leave here.

Caroline’s supportive family continued to surprise her.

Everybody’s been very supportive. You know, my dad, yeah, it’s funny you know because like my dad had an opportunity to go to college and kind of gave it up, but he’s, he’s very invested in this. And so, you know, when I said I was going back to school, he’s like “well that’s good” and so, you know, my sister’s kids who are 14 and 11 now. He gives them twenty bucks if they get straight A’s on their report card. So, my nephew’s like, well [Caroline] got straight A’s on her report card and so he’s like “here’s twenty bucks”.

In addition, Caroline’s dad mentioned her academic pursuits to people he worked with. His pride beamed. Caroline recognized that many first-generation students get negative reactions from their families. That was not true for Caroline’s family.

I know for some people who come from a situation where education isn’t necessarily highly prized, like there can be some resentment and resistance, you think you’re going to be above your raising. I don’t get that from my family.

Support to pursue her education was not the only thing offered by her family. Caroline recognized that her family taught her independence early. Caroline reflected on her own independence when she was an undergraduate student and described it as scary and empowering.
My parents certainly weren’t kind of calling the university to be taking care of things for me. And so, like, you know, to a certain extent, it was, it was scary, you know, looking back and I think like to be 18 and 19 and 20 and kind of wholly responsible for making sure you get your education and making sure like kind of all the paperwork is taken care of, and that sort of thing. But on the other hand, too, I think it was empowering in that, you know, you just learn in that situation.

Caroline described her own role and the expectations at the time. “It was like any time I wanted to do anything that was different from like things that my family had done, or whatever, it was like ‘Okay, but, you know, work it out, figure it out’… culturally, like you’re 18, you’re an adult. Like, figure it out”. Caroline recognized the gift of independence her parents gave her. “It is different because we did, in the summer, we left in the morning and my, our parents didn’t see us until it was dark. We were at the river and we were playing with snakes. We were, you know, doing things like, now if people saw our kids doing them they would be like ‘What are you doing?’”.

Choosing the right undergraduate experience where you fit in.

Thankful for attending [her undergraduate institution], Caroline reflected positively about her undergraduate experience and postulated that [her undergraduate institution] helped shape her because the faculty and staff understood their students’ needs.

But I look back and I think thank god I went to [my undergraduate institution] because everybody was first-generation, everybody was Appalachian. Like, you know, all the people on my floor, like their dads worked in the coal mines and
their moms were nurses or like, you know, actually probably not even nurses, it was more like nurses’ aids or some, or things that didn’t require a bachelor’s degree, and so, and my dad worked on the railroad and my mom worked in a toy store and like everybody had kind of came from a similar experience. So, it wasn’t, like I never felt intimidated there. I never felt like I am totally out of my element.

Caroline’s decision to attend [her undergraduate institution] came at the end of her senior year after seriously contemplating attending [another institution] in New York State. Caroline struggled with the cost and the distance away from her family. Although, her family was supportive of her attending [another institution], Caroline could not bring herself to go.

My mom was like, if this is what you want to do, like we’ll figure out a way to do it. Like we’ll get it paid for. And, like, it was overwhelming, but also, like I felt so guilty about it. And I was like I can’t. Like I can’t do this to my family. But, then there was also this other thing and, you know, like at the time I put it all off on that. Like, I just couldn’t cost my family that much because it made me feel better about myself. But, also, there was a, a sense of I can’t move, you know, that far from my family and never see my family.

Although Caroline believed cost was her primary concern at the time, she realized later that the distance would have been far too much and enrolling closer to home would be a better option. [Her undergraduate institution] was the right fit.
Although Caroline did not identify as first generation student in her undergraduate days, she realized that the faculty recognized the unique characteristics of the student body and empowered them. “Like the professors, if they weren’t from West Virginia, they knew, you know, by the time you’re there for a year, you know your students are all first-gen, Appalachian. Like you know what needs they’re going to have”.

Caroline identified strengths necessary for her success. “I never dreamed I would have such strong time management skills”. In addition, Caroline realized that education had opened up opportunities that she never imagined. “I always thought I was open to possibilities, but I feel like now, I realize kind of how limited my ideas were in the past about what the possibilities were”. Caroline expressed an excitement about the future with her partner and what they might explore. “We talk about like what it would look like and so, we’re like, let’s just like live everywhere, like let’s, you know, you can like take a teaching job somewhere, I can find like some kind of social thing going that I can get involved with”. Caroline thrived on the opportunities.

I loved working in newspapers and like when it became clear that, that was probably not what I was going to be able to do for the rest of my life, it was a little bit heartbreaking. And so then, there was this transitional period of about six years of doing, kind of like mind numbing work, that didn’t feed me in any way and so it has, I do feel like I’m alive again in a lot of ways because I am, like, I am engaging in conversations that I could, didn’t have for those six years.
**Summary.**

Caroline emphasized her journey to finding the right discipline and her desire for a cohort with which to share the graduate student experience. In addition, Caroline acknowledged the significant support she received from her extended family including the continued emphasis on education. Caroline developed an early sense of independence. This responsibility launched Caroline into problem solving mode and encouraged her to figure out her own life. As a doctoral student, Caroline identified with being first-generation and recognized that many more resources were in place for today’s first generation students than there were when she was first in college. Caroline recognized that she needed [her undergraduate institution] and the opportunities it afforded her. She made connections with faculty and built confidence. If Caroline were to offer advice to other first generation students, she suggested finding others like you who can act as your comfortable base, be a part of a community where you do not feel alone, identify broadly, explore all parts of yourself, take advantage of resources and keep yourself open to difference.

**Jeff**

Jeff was a single, White, 25 year-old man in the third year of his Ph. D. program. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Jeff on November 13, 2014 (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). His academic discipline was Communication Studies, Relating and Organizing. As many rural, first-generation students do, Jeff faced many challenges. Although his family did not have the financial resources to pay for
college, Jeff had the aptitude for higher education, “I think it was just assumed that of course Jeff’s going to go into college because he’s got the brain for it”.

His initial academic plan/career path was derailed because of a challenging math course. Jeff describes it as an “existential crisis of sorts”. When faced with this crisis, Jeff sought the guidance of a mentor, his forensics coach. This positive interaction propelled him down a different academic career path. Jeff originally majored in chemistry, but changed to communication. As a member of the forensics team, Jeff had a built in connection with a faculty member, his coach. This resulted in Jeff seeking advice at this pivotal moment.

Jeff appeared to be very pragmatic in his approach to his education. In his words, “If I want to do something, what are the steps I need to take to get there? So when I decided on this career change, I was like, well, getting a master’s and probably a PhD is just the necessary steps to get the end result that I want.”

Many of Jeff’s early higher education decisions were driven by money and enjoyment. Jeff’s original major/career choice was informed by finances, “There were two factors that played into that. One was what was going to make me a lot of money? And the second was, what was I going to not hate doing?”. This decision was influenced by his family’s economic situation; he described them living paycheck to paycheck and his parents filed for bankruptcy during his middle school years. He shared that he did not want to ever be in that situation. “My parents actually had to declare bankruptcy, so that was a big—it wasn’t a big deal to me, because I don’t think I really understood what that meant, but I know they were really ashamed of that”.
Informed by his family’s financial struggle, Jeff discovered early the importance of taking advantage of any financial opportunity that presents itself. At the very moment he was contemplating quitting the debate team, Jeff was presented with an opportunity he could not refuse.

I despised it my first semester of college, so I was going to quit after the winter break, and then I was – actually it’s a really funny story and I’m surprised I forgot it. I went into the team room to clean out my mailbox right before I went home for winter break, and my coach walked in, and she was like, “I was looking for you. I have some extra money for a scholarship. How would you like $1,000.00 next semester?” I was like, “that sounds wonderful. Where do I sign?”

Jeff demonstrated his independence early. While in high school, Jeff identified a career path, pharmacy, and starting working at a local pharmacy to get experience. This work ethic continued in college. “I worked all the time”, he describes. He knew that the financial burden of college, would be his to bear. “I ended up acquiring a car loan for my automobile that I had to keep paying every month, so I needed to work part time while I was in college in order to help for pay for that”.

While working in college, Jeff observed that many of his peers did not share in his financial constraints.

But I noticed in college that that ended up being really difficult, because I had some friends who were in very different situations where their parents were paying their tuition every semester, and not even – some of them not even taking loans to do it. It was like they stockpiled money. It blew my mind that anybody’s
parents could set aside – at that time was probably $50,000.00 – to send their kids to school.

In addition, Jeff began to notice a disparity between those who worked and those who did not. Those students who did not work had time to do other things,

My friends weren’t working. They had more time for extracurricular activities. They could study more because they didn’t have all these extra responsibilities. I remember a few points throughout my college career that really bothered me, because I was like, I could be doing so much better in all my classes if I had more time, if I didn’t have to pay for all of these things.

Jeff grappled with this in his master’s program as well. Jeff was the only student in his master’s program who worked part-time as well as holding a graduate appointment.

**Distancing from family.**

In addition to the difference from his peers, Jeff grew distanced from his family. Working led to maturity, but the maturity created strain when Jeff returned home.

The flipside of that is that I think it made me really independent really quickly. So I think I matured to a certain extent more so than a lot of my peers did, which made it difficult for me to go back home, because there’s always this sense that your parents, when you go to college they don’t necessarily see you grow the way you do.

Working was not the only distancing agent Jeff faced. As Jeff became more successful academically, this success created more distance with his family. As a member of the debate team, Jeff got to know some of his faculty members very well. The comfort he felt
with faculty members allowed him to ask for and receive substantial academic feedback/advice from these faculty members. This feedback helped Jeff flourish, his speaking and writing skills developed, which further widened the gap between his family and him.

So it was interesting because I think another thing that made that relationship with my parents so different when I went to college is that really quickly I started outpacing them in terms of speaking and writing abilities… A while ago my mom said something about how she can’t understand some of my Facebook posts anymore.

**Success strategies.**

As he progressed through higher education, Jeff began to recognize a couple of important elements of success: making interpersonal connections and maximizing one’s strengths.

I realized there’s an art to getting people to do the things you want them to do. I made sure I was connecting with the people I needed to connect with, and getting the grades I needed to get, doing the extra work I needed to do to make sure if I ever ended up on somebody’s list for anything, that I was close to the top. The financial challenges his parents faced taught Jeff the importance of being in charge of your own destiny. He did not want to face the same financial stressors his parents faced.
My upbringing has made me very paranoid about securing a job, especially because it’s been difficult for my parents, for a variety of different reasons, to hold onto careers. So I’m kind of like, I don’t want to be in that position.

As a result, Jeff has used his strong writing and speaking skills to his advantage.

Not only did Jeff want a career that would sustain him financially, he has a straightforward drive to achieve this goal. During his master’s program, Jeff recognized that to achieve his goal he would need to complete a Ph.D. and he set his mind to doing it.

I noticed that the folks who teach the fun classes are the ones who have Ph.Ds. That’s when I think subconsciously I realized the master’s wasn’t it. I wasn’t done then. I had always just viewed those two years as a transition. I’ll put my head down, do the work I need to do, because I’ve got more after this. This is just a middle step. I don’t know how many people think like that, but the master’s was always a transition stage for me. I’m like, I’m just here to do what I need to do.

Jeff’s attributes leading to his success included his confidence, competiveness, intellect, and perseverance. In his program, he said, “I have an easier time with this than other people do”. In addition, he recognizes the importance of his peer group and their positively competitive nature has motivated him.

The group of doc students that came in with me, I couldn’t have asked for a better group of folks to be learning with. I think in particular there are three other students. Four of us, we feed off of each other in really constructive and
productive ways. We’re encouraging each other to do better, to do more, and we celebrate when something good happens for each other.

In addition, Jeff demonstrated a practical understanding of his discipline and challenged himself to learn as much as he could. “I’m always surprised when we get doctoral students who don’t know something about our national organization. I also have just always made sure I positioned myself within that organization to know about it”. Also, Jeff knows the importance of work hard and perseverance. “There’s no point in complaining about it or making it a big deal, because it’s just something that we work through”.

Higher education has been eye opening for Jeff and is different from what Jeff was taught at home. His worldview has changed. “I’ve certainly become more liberal…The more that you learn about the world, the more you are able to see how it works, and particularly how it works to help some people over others”. In comparison, Jeff reflects on how those from home think, “I think periodically I’ve started to see more and more that the world according to this group of people doesn’t fit with how I see it”. Jeff was not really aware of his first generation status, although he recognized that these two things are connected. “I’ve become more aware of my changing class status…and how my family is still working largely within this working class framework, and I seem to have – as I tell my friends, I’ve developed a taste for the middle class”. Like most first-generation students, Jeff straddled two worlds.

I cultivated these interests, these preferences, and these tastes for things that I would have never had growing up back where I did. Then I go home and all of the
sudden all these things I subconsciously identify with are thrown into stark contrast with everything I grew up with, and I forget those things until I’m back there.

Jeff’s strategy for his success was the importance of forging connections with others/social capital. He acknowledged that his parents’ social connections “are largely useless to me.” In addition, he acknowledged,

A lot of times it’s not so much what you know, but who you know. So without sacrificing my education, I’ve had to be really intentional about forging those connections, because it’s kind of like, I need to have both. I need to have people who will get me in the door, and I need the smarts once I get in there.

Jeff clarifies, “I certainly did work hard for them, but part of that hard work was I made sure that I was in positions where people would think of me when an opportunity came up”.

Summary.

Although Jeff did not describe himself as first-generation, he recognized that his educational pathway was different from many of his peers. He described carrying the burden of financing his own way through college resulting in his need to work a lot. In addition, Jeff demonstrates a pragmatic approach to his education. He identified a goal, then put his head down, and worked toward accomplishing that goal. Jeff faced the ongoing challenge of straddling two different worlds, the one of his past and the one of his future, and that the resulting outcome is his changing worldview. More important, perhaps, than all these things, Jeff recognized the importance of making connections.
This recognition allowed Jeff to build his social capital and position him for opportunities that many of his peers were not afforded. In fact, Jeff advised any first generation students on the importance of making “connections with influential people”.

Alison

Alison was a 30 year-old, single, White woman in the dissertation writing stage of her doctoral program, a Ph.D. in Mass Communication. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Alison on November 18, 2014 (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Alison never doubted that she would go to college. In fact, she followed in her three older brothers’ footsteps. Initially, Alison attended a local community college for two years where she completed her associate’s degree, then transferred to a four-year college to complete her bachelor’s degree. Following the completion of her undergraduate degree, Alison served as an Americorp volunteer for three months, and then worked as a journalist for two years. Alison always expected to go to college, she knew what she wanted to study, and set her own course. Upon transferring to a four-year college, Alison researched and sought out a faith-based community that more adequately aligned with her changing world view. Alison worked constantly and focused a lot of effort on financing her higher education.

College expected, clear career choices from the outset.

Alison’s journey to college was expected. “I mean when I was growing up there, nobody talked as if there was an option not to go to college. It was expected that you were going to college”. Alison believed two factors contributed to her parents’ expectations that she and her brothers go to college. Alison’s father cared for a younger
sibling after the premature death of his parents. Alison postulated that this extra responsibility emphasized to her father the importance of getting a college degree.

Alison’s mother worked in the elementary school. Being around education, Alison theorized that her mother recognized the value of education. Because of her parents’ expectations, Alison assumed that college was part of her plan.

Alison studied journalism as an undergraduate student. Her discipline choice was clear from the beginning and her extra-curricular involvement in high school supported this career choice. “I had been on the high school yearbook the whole time. I was the sports reporter for our town newspaper for a while. So, yeah, it was pretty obvious that that was what I was gonna do in college”. In addition, Alison enjoyed the courses that offered practical experience and learned quickly that she enjoyed working with non-profit organizations.

I really learned that I enjoy working with nonprofit organizations, ‘cause as part of our classes we ran several PR campaigns. I think this is again where I really started to appreciate the experiential learning or where you can apply the skills in real life, because we ran PR campaigns for Habitat for Humanity and the local animal shelter. So we did all kinds of things. We did multiple fundraisers. We started a student club for them. We worked on their website. We made brochures.

As an undergraduate student, Alison did not identify herself as first-generation. With three older brothers who all went to college, Alison felt familiar with the college going experience. “I don’t really think that I noticed too much about it, to be honest, because my brothers all went to college and I was the youngest”.
Upon graduating with a bachelor’s degree, Alison served as an AmeriCorps volunteer for 3 months. Then, Alison worked in the newspaper business for two years. Alison believed that real-world experience would prepare her better for graduate school. Soon Alison recognized that the field was suffering a decline and saw this as her opportunity.

The newspaper industry was going downhill. We were having to take furlough days and, honestly, I wasn’t sure how long the newspaper was gonna last…I decided to go to graduate school ‘cause I probably always maybe wanted to be a teacher, and I always just figured I would go to graduate school eventually.

Once Alison enrolled in a master’s program, she taught a class. Although nervous about what this would entail, Alison proceeded with gusto and found that she really enjoyed teaching. “When I got into my master’s we actually were very involved in the undergraduate curriculum. So even though I’d never taught before, I was teaching my own class like within a few weeks of being there”. Alison’s advisor saw something in her and tried to allay her fears. “I remember telling him right before I started teaching that I wasn’t sure about the teaching thing ‘cause I had never taught before, but he for some reason said that he thought I would make a good professor”.

Because of this experience, Alison seriously started considering the professorate and realized that she would eventually need to get a Ph.D. to become a faculty member. I was teaching, supervising a student group. I was on committees. So I really – from there it was pretty obvious that I wanted to be a professor, and obviously if
you want to be a professor you need to get your doctorate. So it just seemed like a natural progression.

Alison enjoyed the methodological approach of the curriculum at her master’s institution. The faculty embraced a hands-on applicability to the learning and this appealed to Alison.

I definitely would say that some of the exercises that took place that I talked about, like the cross border exercise, and some of the other things I was involved in at Ball State definitely made me want to teach those real world application type classes.

**Faith exploration and expanded worldview.**

Alison grew up in a small, homogeneous rural community. When she transferred to a four-year school after completing her associate’s degree, Alison wanted to expand her worldview.

So definitely when I got to college it definitely made me want to explore more. I very much like a college atmosphere because there’s so much diversity. There are so many activities from other cultures. So I think, if anything, it kind of made me a bit tired of the rural life a little bit, because it didn’t seem like there was much exposure to the rest of the world.

College was a different world and Alison needed to figure out how to traverse it. Growing up, Alison led a faith-centered life. She wanted to explore different options when she went to college. “There were certain things that changed, like my religion definitely changed. My parents are pretty strict Catholics, but when I was at college I
wanted something that I would consider more open-minded. So definitely religion changed”. This change caused some conflict at home.

I think my mom’s gotten over it. I think that my dad still doesn’t approve, to be honest…He’s known for years that I don’t go to Catholic Church anymore. I don’t know. It’s something I feel like they should have gotten over by now.

Alison’s faith was not the only thing to change; her political perspective changed as well. “I would say I’m much more liberal than my family. So yes, there are things like politics and religion that we definitely disagree on”.

Seeking a place to fit in, Alison tested out all different kinds of faith. “I know one thing that I did when I started college was I attended almost every type of religious ceremony in the town”. Her experiences varied.

I remember going to Presbyterian ones and Methodist ones, and those were the ones that I liked a lot. They seemed like the most open, I guess, and friendly to outsiders. I noticed homeless people openly came in, and I can imagine thinking that maybe that wouldn’t be accepted in some of the churches I had gone to.

Alison researched all options to find a place where she felt comfortable and fit in. This search for a church which like minded ideas required similar skills to what her chosen career required. “Doing research, looking for all sides of the story”. Alison sought a place that appreciated diversity and open-mindedness.

**Skills developed.**

To start her higher education experience, Alison chose to go to a local community college. This choice allowed Alison to work and save money. “I went to the community
college first, because it was close by and I needed to save money. Basically I was being a full-time student, but I was also working almost full-time at Wal-Mart, like 35 hours a week”. After two years and completing her associate’s degree, Alison transferred. Interested in studying abroad, but not able to afford it, Alison enrolled in an internship program. “I really couldn’t afford to study abroad, so I actually did the Disney World Internship Program for a semester, but it’s not as great as it sounds… I’d say probably 85 percent of people end up working fast food”. This semester-long experience instilled in Alison a drive to complete her bachelor’s degree.

I’d say definitely the rest of my time at [my undergraduate institution] was definitely more focused… a little bit of living in the real world, even though Disney World isn’t really the real world, but still, a little bit of experience of working a full-time dead-end job. That’s what it is like essentially.

Alison returned with the focus to complete her undergraduate degree program and move toward the work world. Work shaped Alison into a responsible student.

The skills Alison used in her position as a reporter helped prepare her for a master’s program. “I really didn’t think it was that hard to transition from being a full-time reporter to being a graduate student, because there were still a lot of skills that were translatable like research and writing and editing”. However, the transition from a master’s program to a doctoral program, demanded more from Alison. Alison stated that her master’s “program was much more focused on media skills, and (her doctoral) program is much more focused on writing and research and academic skills”. In addition, Alison served as an instructor during her master’s program. These transitioned nicely.
I notice some things that people have problems with who are coming in or becoming like an instructor of record, but I didn’t have any problem with that because I had been an instructor of record for two years at [her graduate institution].

As a master’s student, Alison quickly learned the importance of self-reliance and initiative. Her master’s thesis advisor suffered health complications and Alison needed to do much of her thesis writing on her own.

My advisor actually had a stroke and was not really present for most of the time I was writing my thesis. So, that was an experience, made me realize that even if you don’t know how to do something, you kind of have to do it anyway. I basically wrote my entire thesis on my own without any guidance.

This experience informed her dissertation committee selection process.

In selecting committee members for her dissertation committee, Alison recognized that she needed an advisor who would be available to help guide her. In addition, Alison needed committee members that worked well together.

I definitely knew the person that I chose as my advisor…by appearances he may seem like maybe a very strict person, but for me I knew that’s exactly the type of person that you needed, because I needed somebody who was gonna keep me on track.

In fact, Alison mentioned, “For our program the place where people I guess fall off the map the most is between finishing their comps and then defending their dissertation proposal”. Her advisor required that Alison write a portion of her proposal before she sat
for her comprehensive exams. “My advisor made sure that myself, and any other advisees, he had us writing our proposal before we took our comps, because he wanted to make sure that we kept on track with that”. As for other committee members, Alison pulled from her rural roots and considered faculty who appreciated a hands-on approach and worked well with others.

I feel like there’s a lot of hands-on approach, when you grow up in a rural environment. So I know for me it was a lot of just being practical and talking to people and asking them. I think it was also about relationships, because I knew well enough from growing up that people that work together have to get along together. So I made sure that all of my committee members got along with one another.

As a graduate student, Alison discovered that she enjoyed teaching, advising, and mentoring students and realized that students appreciated her advice. “I’ve learned a lot of my students think I give halfway decent advice. I think I’ve developed some skills, I guess, in maybe even mentoring or advising”. In addition, Alison grew more comfortable speaking in front of a group and developed a knack for using humor to in the classroom. “I’ve learned to go up there and talk in front of crowds. I’ve definitely learned that humor is a great thing in the classroom”. Her choice to be in the professorate seemed well suited to her skills. Alison even identified a specific faculty member whom she admires and hopes to model after his teaching style.
His name was Terry and he was my supervisor for my GA. He’s the one who taught me how to teach the class and I had several classes with him. He is really the type of teacher I would definitely want to emulate one day.

Alison emphasized, “I definitely learned early on that being able to write a paper is important. In fact, my brothers used to pay me money to write their extra credit papers in college”. In addition, Alison offered the following advice for first-generation college students.

I would definitely advise them to take advantage of the opportunities in college, because there are opportunities for real world experience. They can volunteer. They can get jobs. They can get internships. A lot of that is really important to being able to find a job. I would also advise not to attend graduate school unless you have a real reason for it… Definitely, if you’re doing the doctorate program, have a plan early and stay organized because things move fast.

Summary.

Alison matured while in college and attributed this maturation to her openness to new cultures and experiences. Alison recognized that finances were often her focus and she did work a lot, but that left her more determined to succeed. Alison worked hard to achieve her goals. She witnessed her father having extra responsibility to other family members and her mother’s commitment to education and believed this influenced how she was raised and her parents’ emphasis on education. Although she identified with being a first-generation college student, Alison could not identify any challenges that were specifically attributable to being a first-generation student. Alison left her rural
upbringing inexperienced. College brought the experiences she looked for and connected her to an ever expanding world.

What I said about diversity, about not experiencing it, definitely made me want to see more of the world. I feel like it made me work harder because maybe I kind of felt like I was behind in seeing other cultures, meeting different people, things like that.

**Cynthia**

Cynthia was a 26 year-old, married, White woman in her first term as a doctoral student. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Cynthia on November 20, 2014 (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). Cynthia was in a Higher Education doctoral program as a part-time student. Cynthia never considered anything other than going to college. Her biggest concern centered on financing the experience. In addition, Cynthia quickly learned the importance of making connections and having a goal in mind. Focused on both of these strategies, Cynthia succeeded in navigating higher education.

**Higher education, the next logical step.**

Cynthia never really gave her next step a thought.

I knew I wanted to do either law or communications…And I knew to get to where I wanted to go eventually I would need a college degree. I didn’t really give it too much thought because it was just the next logical step.

In fact, most students in Cynthia’s small high school went on to college. It was the norm.
Several high school faculty members took an interest in Cynthia’s future plans. Cynthia benefited from the resources offered by her guidance counselor and an English teacher, who, as a master’s student, offered her experiences as well.

Our guidance counselor was very involved in the process. And I had a really great English teacher that I liked a lot. I took a few electives with her in high school and she was going through her master’s at the time. And so it was nice to hear her experience with school and what she had liked about it.

The English teacher shared the challenges of balancing full-time work and taking coursework. Armed with this information, Cynthia was determined to enroll as a full-time student. “She talked more about it as she was going back to school, and the challenge of going back to school and working full-time… I knew that dedicating full time to school was definitely something that would make that easier”.

Cynthia involved herself in many leadership activities in high school that helped chart her course to college. Cynthia served as her class’ president of student government and participated in Buckeye Girls State. Both activities helped shape her future college pursuits. Cynthia considered pre-law or communication.

My junior year of high school I did the Buckeye Girls State Program...I really enjoyed just getting to work with people from across the state and also meet different young women from across the state – all very driven and career-oriented...And in high school I was our class president and so I got to do a lot of public speaking.
Financing her way through school.

Cynthia’s parents embraced her college going ambitions, but struggled to assist her with the unfamiliar terrain. Cynthia received help from her high school guidance counselor when filling out necessary forms the first time, but subsequent forms perplexed her parents.

I mean filling out the FAFSA for the first time and the second time, and navigating that. The high school helped a little bit with that the first time, but then the second time my dad and I had to do it. And I remember like the deadline of getting in to get that priority – that was really difficult.

Cynthia described her family as low to middle income. “Both of my parents worked for our church. My mom worked in payroll and my dad was a stage manager. I would say low-income – low, middle-income based on their jobs”. In order to afford some things, her parents always expected Cynthia and her siblings to work. Cynthia held her first job at age fifteen. “My first job I was a lifeguard at 15. And so I’ve been working since then. And I think that really shaped my work ethic. And I knew I had to work for things that I wanted”. This work ethic carried over to her college experience. Cynthia sought any opportunity that would advance her career and personal goals and address her financial needs.

I took advantage of a lot of opportunities. That was one of the main reasons why I became an RA – because I knew I couldn’t afford to pay for housing the next year. And so I tried to look at opportunities that were both beneficial for me individually and also financially ‘cause that was a big concern.
Challenged to leave her undergraduate institution with as little debt as possible and that her parents did not have the understanding of higher education to help, Cynthia sought the guidance of others. Cynthia connected with her academic advisor when challenged in one of her courses and needed advice on how to proceed.

I thought I had failed an exam and I called my mom. And I was like, “What do I do?” And she didn’t know what to do ‘cause she’d never had that experience before…My instructor was really helpful. And so she helped me drop the class and all that kind of stuff. And so I think that’s when I first realized like my parents couldn’t help me as much as they wanted to ‘cause they hadn’t had that experience and they didn’t know how to navigate that.

In addition, Cynthia received a grant that required quarterly meetings with a financial aid officer. These regularly scheduled meetings allowed Cynthia to stay on course with her finances and plan for future terms.

Because I had a grant, I had a one-on-one every quarter with a financial aid advisor. And so she helped me navigate that really well so that I could get my overage checks to pay for my books. Because there were five students at the university that had this grant, so we were able to work directly with her.

Moving away from home and making important connections.

When Cynthia moved away from home to go to college, she rarely returned to her hometown because more opportunities existed at college. “I actually only went back home the summer after my freshman year and then I didn’t go back home after that. I stayed and worked in the Dayton area just because there was more opportunity through
that”. In addition, Cynthia felt like an outsider when she returned. Unlike many she had graduated with, Cynthia’s ambitions lay beyond her hometown.

And I was one of the few that didn’t want to move back to my hometown. And so it was hard connecting with people that did want to come back and like take their parents’ job at Crown. And they wanted to stay in the community. And I knew that I didn’t want to do that. So that definitely. I felt more like an outsider because I didn’t want to stay.

In fact, after graduating, Cynthia communicated with only a few people from her hometown. She moved on. “I only kept in touch with a few friends from high school throughout college and they also didn’t want to move back home. And so I would say we were definitely the outsiders of the group”. Upon enrolling in college, Cynthia exited and never looked back. This pivot positioned Cynthia for her next adventure, making significant connections at college.

Cynthia recognized the importance of making connections. Cynthia connected with professionals at her undergraduate institution early. She involved herself in hall council, which ultimately led to securing a resident assistant position. This position helped her financially and positioned her for other positions at the institution.

I felt like I maintained a good relationship in the building, but people definitely knew me as someone that followed the rules. And because of that I think I got some opportunities – because it did make me good at my job and I stuck with policy. And so I actually got to know one of the associate vice presidents for Student Affairs. And she became my mentor.
Demands of graduate work.

The woman who became her mentor introduced Cynthia to functional areas in student affairs beyond residence life.

The whole idea of working where you live permanently kind of bothered me a little bit. And so I liked the perspective that Kathy showed...I’m a futuristic, big picture thinker and so I really like the large impact and the big picture perspective instead of kind of the day-to-day managing of a community aspect.

Excited by this potential career choice, Cynthia researched graduate programs and ended up in a master’s program in college student personnel.

Cynthia enrolled in a master’s program with 20 other students. These twenty students grew close but had some challenges.

Getting to know those 20 individuals on a really personal basis and seeing what they wanted to do in Student Affairs I think made a really big impact on me because everyone in my program was a big fish in a small pond. And then it was kind of reverse when we all got here ‘cause we were all really good at what we did. And so kind of finding your way and navigating how you fit into that group – and your voice was still heard – was really interesting. We had some definitely awkward, uncomfortable class times in the beginning as people were trying to make their point and overstep their bounds.

Challenged by fitting in and finding a voice, Cynthia’s aspirations for a doctorate never faded. After completing her master’s degree, Cynthia’s workplace hired her full-time, but
the desire for a doctorate returned two years later, and Cynthia applied and, once admitted, enrolled in a doctoral program.

Cynthia described the doctoral program differently from the master’s program. Challenged with a small cohort of very experienced peers, Cynthia was feeling isolated and doubted her decision to enroll.

Ooh. I’m this White girl who’s done orientation. Like I know I’m good at my job, but I haven’t had those type of life experiences. And so, I definitely second guessed it a time or two. If this was worth it, if this was the time to do it now, that type of thing.

Soon, Cynthia found others in similar positions and built her own cohort for support. “Getting to know some of the other people that are further along has really helped”.

Adapting to the changes the doctoral program brought challenged Cynthia. Seeing the time required, Cynthia realized she needed to follow her own advice.

‘Go see the GA. Go talk to the instructor.’ And now, I have to follow that advice. So, I meet with the GA for the statistics class. And, just the learning curve. And then also, the time involved. I don’t think I was prepared.

Cynthia’s support network continued their unconditional support. Cynthia’s supervisor demonstrated how to juggle many of life’s responsibilities.

She’s been a really great supervisor. She’s definitely pushed me to do a lot of things that I probably wouldn’t have done and has provided good opportunity for me to be able to contribute ideas and to grow. She’s also a really good example of the work life balance as well – having three kids and a working husband.
Balancing full-time employment and part-time student demands required that Cynthia be more purposeful. She recognized that she needed to prioritize and complete tasks of utmost importance and let other things go.

I feel that I’ve become more intentional with what I do because I have less time to accomplish things. I want to make sure that what I am doing, I am doing it correctly and it’s having the impact that I want it to…And then also I would say I’m more reflective.

Summary.

Cynthia aspired to lead. “I really like to be in charge. I feel that I’m good at delegating and I’m good at motivating others. And so that’s something that I would like to use on a daily basis in my future role”. Cynthia graduated from her undergraduate program debt free, worked hard at meeting the right people, and taking advantage of opportunities that would benefit her best. Cynthia advised first generation students to ask for help, identify end goals, make significant connections, and embrace your first generation student status. “I would say to not forget that identity because it is something that makes you unique and contributes to your perspective on learning and how you relay information”.

Todd

Todd was a 26 year-old, White man in the third year of his doctoral program. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Todd on November 21, 2014 (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Todd was in the Hearing Science doctoral program. Todd demonstrated a drive for academic success early on and never identified
himself as a first generation college student. Todd never considered not going to college, the only decision was where he wanted to go. “I guess I never really thought about not going to college. I had an older sister… and I’ve always done well in school, and it was just the next step. It wasn’t should I go, can I go?”.

Todd enrolled in a small institution not far from home on a football scholarship and intended to go to medical school.

Actually I was good at sports in high school, so I ended up getting a football scholarship for undergrad. I guess that’s part of the motivating factor, but that’s when I ended up going to [my undergraduate institution] on a football scholarship, and I don’t know if I would have gone there without the football scholarship.

Although initially he wanted to go to medical school, as college graduation approached, Todd’s plans changed. With a limited understanding of the different career options, Todd explored different fields. “I didn’t really know much about graduate school versus medical school, or college. It was all one big future thing”. Todd finally discovered hearing science.

**Exploring different educational journeys.**

Todd initially dreamed about going to medical school, but the further he progressed in his program, his plans changed.

I’d always thought I wanted to go to medical school, that was the plan. I was pre-med biology. The further I progressed in that, I realized, I don’t know if this is
what I really want to do…So instead of applying to medical school my senior year, I got into a biomedical science master’s program at [another institution].

This program segued into medical school, but after a semester, Todd realized “school was not what I wanted to do. I had a semester of grad school, and was like, I don’t want to keep doing what I’m doing, but I know I want to keep going. I’m not done with school yet. I know I want to keep going”. Uncertain about what he wanted to study, Todd pursued his interest in speech and communication. He researched the field, was admitted to a master’s program, and enrolled in pre-requisite classes. Because Todd was new to the discipline, he would have to complete pre-requisites before taking any graduate level courses. “The plan was to – I was a graduate student, but taking undergraduate classes as a post-bacc, they called it, because I didn’t have the prereqs to get into the program. I was going to do a year of prereqs”.

As he got further into the pre-requisites, Todd continued to worry that his choice was not quite right. He started to consider hearing science/audiology.

So I was in those classes for about a year, and it was the same thing that the more I got into speech, the more I was like, I don’t know if this is what I want to do either. But speech and hearing are really highly related, and we had a couple hearing science audiology classes.

Todd sought a program that would blend his many varied interests.

Music is my passion, I would say, music, and physics, and communication, and psychology. It clicked one day. It’s everything that I love, hearing, that’s a
conglomerate of all the things that I like. So then I really was like, yeah, that’s what I want to do. I want to go into hearing, audiology, something.

As he researched programs, Todd found that he would have to change institutions.

But [another institution] doesn’t have an audiology graduate program. They only have speech pathology. So I started looking around to different programs nearby, and I saw [his current institution] had an audiology program. I was like, oh, that’s cool. They have clinical audiology, and they also have PhD and hearing science. I saw that and that’s perfect.

Todd applied, was admitted, and enrolled in [his current institution’s] hearing science doctoral program.

Todd described the distinction between his program, hearing science, and the audiology program. Audiology program emphasized the practical and clinical side of hearing versus hearing science emphasized research.

Clinical students will have some more specialized clinical things, and I had to take a statistics regiment…I’m research. We do language, cognitive hearing science. This is my area. We study how much your working memory plays a role in a noisy listening environment.

After a long period of exploration, Todd finally discovered his path.

**Fitting in—family, football, faculty—Todd’s support network.**

Todd’s parents offered consistent educational encouragement from an early age. “My parents, they always sort of pushed me – I guess they knew my capability, because I just always have done well in school, and they just always made sure I was doing well”.
In addition, a teacher/coach realized his talent and assisted Todd with his college admission process.

A few of my teachers at school like my chemistry teacher, he was also a football coach, and was my chemistry teacher, and he kind of knew that I loved chemistry in high school. I think he realized not a lot of football players really like chemistry and the hard sciences. We kind of sort of had a special bond, I guess. We talked a lot about what I was going to major in, because I thought chemistry, biology, something like that. He was helpful when it came to that. It was kind of the same with him. It wasn’t a question of are you going to go, it’s what are you going to do when you go?

Although the majority of his classmates did not go to college, Todd’s guidance counselors pushed higher education.

I think maybe because a lot of people didn’t go, or it hinging on whether they were or not, our counselors still really tried to push it, because I think they knew, “If I don’t try anything, they’re definitely not going to go”.

With so many encouraging college, Todd enrolled for undergrad as a pre-med biology major.

Although nervous at first, Todd flourished at his undergraduate institution. I was a little nervous about it, but it was more like, you’ve got this great opportunity to go do this thing that not many people get to do, and it might be hard sometimes, but look at the big picture.
He arrived a month before classes started and immediately started meeting new people. Being a part of the football team allowed Todd to have built-in-family. “We’d go there and meet the team. There’s probably 100 guys on the team, but we’re together 8 hours a day, 10 hours a day at least, and basically form this huge family for a month”.

In contrast to the rich collegiality he experienced with the football team as an undergraduate, Todd was the only doctoral student in his program. As a graduate student, he relied on his advisor for personal and academic support. Todd described his advisor as his “academic father… He’s been really, really great. I actually thought about that because academically, everything, yeah, for sure, but he and I outside of academics, just personality-wise, I couldn’t imagine finding someone better”.

As he progressed academically, Todd found that his family and hometown friends struggled to understand his career choice.

People just don’t really understand what I do, or what the point of all this is.

You’ve been in school for 10 or 12 years. Why? They don’t really get it. I guess I’ve kind of come to the point where I don’t even bother trying to explain things, because it’s not going to make any sense to them.

Although they did not alienate him, Todd avoided the topic.

**Changing world views.**

College was liberating for Todd. He allowed himself to open up to new ideas and ways of thinking.

I think I became a lot more liberal just in a general sense. I would say both of my parents are pretty conservative, not just politically, but just in general, and I think
once I got out of the house and started seeing other things, and different lifestyles, it wasn’t that I – I don’t know if accepting is the right word. I wasn’t really exposed to things like that when I was younger, and then once I got out and saw different things, and the way people lived, and stuff that normally would have been considered bad, or wrong, I was like, why would that be bad? It’s perfectly fine. It’s okay with me.

Todd met new people and recognized that would not have been the case if he had attended college where many of his classmates had.

I probably wouldn’t have met that many people, but [my undergraduate institution], I was the only person from my class who went there, so I didn’t know any, I knew a couple guys I competed against like in football and track… I realized, wow, I never would have met these people or learned all these things had I not been here.

Todd knew himself well. He wanted new experiences and embraced the opportunity.

I think a lot of my friends probably wouldn’t have liked that. I think they like their comfort zone. I think I’ve got to get out of that… I’ve got to do new things, see things, and get out of this, what I’ve done my whole life.

Exposed to many new things during his undergraduate program, Todd questioned his mother’s religious convictions. While growing up, Todd regularly attended church with his mother. “I would say one big thing I realized about myself in undergrad was about religion. My mother is very religious, and she basically required me to go to
church, the Baptist church, three times a week”. Being away from home, Todd allowed himself to wonder about his faith.

I kind of always questioned a lot of things, and it never made sense with me, then once I got away and went to college, I didn’t have to go to church anymore, and I was like, ah, this is so much better.

Todd never considered his true feeling about faith until he went away to school.

One day I just kind of realized, I think my whole upbringing I was taught to not question religion, because that was bad, then I realized I had been doing it my whole life, but I just didn’t admit that to myself. Once I had that realization, I was like, I’m not religious at all. I was just afraid to admit that…It was a pretty big point, moment in my life, to finally realize and accept it.

Todd’s awakening occurred before an organic chemistry test. Previously Todd prayed before an exam. On that day, he did not pray.

Normally I would say a little prayer…and I was like, Oh man, I didn’t say a prayer, but I don’t believe in prayer. Then I also had the realization, ‘You’re the one who sat and studied, and you’re the one who learned the material. You’re the one who put the work in. You’re fine.’

Concerned how his epiphany might affect their relationship, Todd and his mother arrived at a mutual understanding about their differences. Although when home, Todd attended church with his mother on occasion, his perspective remained intact. Although Todd did not challenge religion while at home, college offered the right environment for Todd to
consider his own beliefs and afforded Todd the opportunity to align himself with his own belief structure.

**Demonstrating perseverance—just get it done.**

Throughout Todd’s educational pathway, he demonstrated significant perseverance. Where others may have given up, Todd searched for the right field. He demonstrated confidence that he could merge all his interests into his educational pursuits. His perseverance appeared again during the first year of his doctoral program. Expected to complete a major project, Todd faced many delays in the lab. While others finished their work, Todd patiently waited to use the equipment. Finally, Todd’s time arrived. “My experiment was pretty involved. It took about five or six hours usually, and they were pretty tough memory, cognitive tasks, listening with different kinds of background noises, and different things. It was a pretty tough task”. Then, suddenly, Todd faced a new challenge. According to his advisor, the funding was about to expire, so Todd had to ramp up his project more quickly than anticipated. Todd’s continuation in the program demanded on this project’s completion. Todd approached this challenge with a unparalleled drive and focus.

Yeah, it was basically like, you have a month and a half. I kind of had that, oh my God, maybe I already screwed up. Maybe I already blew it. For that moment I was like, all right, see what you’re made of. Put your head to the grindstone. Every day, 10, 12 hours, recruiting people, subjects. I was like calling people, like, when can you come in? If you can come in at midnight, I will be here at midnight. It was a long month and half, but I got it done.
Todd persevered. He attributed this success in part to his upbringing.

Whatever you’ve got to do, you’ve got to do it. Something needs to be done, and it’s your job to do it. Part of my upbringing is the same thing. You’ve got a job to do, and it’s not going to get done if we don’t do it. So we have to do it.

Todd’s advisor likened it to “baptism by fire. They throw you in, and you sink or swim”.

Without much concern, Todd described himself unique. “I’m sort of just this – anomaly is not the right word either, but I’m kind of the outsider”. Todd remained undaunted by being the only one in his program and expressed enthusiasm in the autonomy offered him to develop his own program. In fact, Todd preferred to work alone. “I guess I like doing things sort of by myself, and relying on myself to do it, which makes it tough, but also I realize once I get it, I don’t have to rely on anyone else”, although he took classes with speech pathology and audiology students.

Summary.

As a student athlete, Todd learned the importance of balancing priorities and focusing on what’s important right now. As a doctoral student, Todd used this same skill and recognized his ability to buckle down when needed.

I think one thing is that when it comes time to do something, a project, a paper, a test, when it really gets down to it, then I know when I’ve got to switch it on. It’s game time, I’ve got to do it now.

Knowing that he wanted to go to graduate school, Todd allowed himself to explore many options and discovered the academic discipline that fits with his interests. Todd approached higher education with a love of learning and with an open mind. Todd
suggested that other first generation doctoral students consider higher education a marathon.

I didn’t realize how much of a marathon it is. There’s not much instant gratification, I would say, especially in my PhD research world. Yeah, it’s a marathon for sure. It’s not that I didn’t know that, but – I guess I didn’t know it, but I didn’t – it wasn’t that I thought, oh, I’ll get in there, get done. I never really understood how, or realized how long, and arduous, and how much effort it takes.

In addition, in order to be successful academically, Todd emphasized the importance of prioritizing. “You really have to prioritize, as much as you don’t want to, as hard as it. Sometimes you’ve just got to lock yourself in the room and study”.

Jennifer

Jennifer was a 24 year-old, White woman in the second year of her blended master’s/Ph.D. program, studying communication science and disorders. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Jennifer on December 1, 2014 (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Throughout higher education, Jennifer focused on how to finance college. She experienced extreme support from her entire community, the church, her parents and extended family, high school teachers and counselors, and friends. However, as the years progressed, Jennifer felt more and more distanced from her community. Jennifer experienced isolation from her peers during her undergraduate days because of commuting to college. Jennifer continued to experience isolation during graduate school because she was the only one studying in a combination master’s/Ph.D. program. “That’s been the hardest part, not having a place to really fit, because I’m the
only person who’s doing this program”. Familiar with being the outsider, Jennifer built her own support network during her graduate work that consisted of other doctoral students and faculty members. Still she did not quite fit in.

Jennifer’s family expected her to go to college. Although, unsure of what to study, Jennifer knew college was her future.

I came from a household where it was kind of always expected that we would go to college. My parents always said they wanted better for us and just to go to college, so I don’t feel like I actually made a decision...I just always planned on going to college. I didn’t know exactly what I was going to study.

Jennifer’s high school guidance counselor saw Jennifer’s intellect and encouraged her in the college enrollment process. In addition, other members of her church suggested that Jennifer would do well in college.

Our family is very involved in church and we had a program...that was a lot of reading and studying...I remember I was very good at that. I think that’s one of those things where people say, “Look how good you are at this. You’re really smart. You’re gonna go to college and you’re gonna do great things”.

The search for the right undergraduate program began early. Jennifer started college as a journalism major, but quickly realized the fit was not right. “Within the first couple of weeks of school, I didn’t like it and I wanted to do something that was more involved with helping people. So I just kind of looked into other programs and finally found speech/language pathology”.

A few faculty members noticed Jennifer and asked her to assist them with their research. Her interest piqued, she agreed. After working with Jennifer, these same faculty members encouraged Jennifer to consider Ph.D. work, but she remained unsure. “I got interested in research and I worked with a couple of mentors at [her undergraduate institution] and they had mentioned a couple of times that maybe I should get my Ph.D., but I didn’t really consider it too much”. Jennifer knew the field required at least a master’s degree, so started applying for master’s programs. After applying to one school, the admission officer asked if she would like to consider a blended master’s/Ph.D. program, something she called “a really good opportunity”.

**Finance focused.**

Coming from a family with little means, Jennifer started working at age 16 and continued through her undergraduate program.

As soon as I turned 16 I got a job at Dairy Queen and I worked all through college. That was also one of those things that whenever you turn 16 you get a job, you bring in your own money, pay your own bills and things like that. My parents were very focused on that.

This mindset continued through college. In order to save money, Jennifer decided to live at home. “I lived at home all through college because [her undergraduate institution] was an hour away from me so we decided it would just be cheaper for me to drive every day”.

As another means of financing college, Jennifer took advantage of a creative method to make money. Jennifer and her brother flipped a house. They, with some help from her parents, renovated the house and the profits paid for her living expenses the last
two years of her undergraduate program. In addition, Jennifer qualified for scholarships. The scholarships paid for her tuition and books. “I had scholarships so I wasn’t paying for any college. I never paid for – I have not paid tuition and I’ve never paid for books or anything like that”.

**Changing relationship with parents.**

Because Jennifer lived at home during her undergraduate program, her parents knew about Jennifer’s day-to-day experiences. As a graduate student, Jennifer moved away and grew more independent with each passing year. Because her parents had not gone to college, they remained unfamiliar with academia and Jennifer navigated college on her own. This independence created some strain with her family.

I feel like I’ve matured a lot. I make a lot of independent decisions and I don’t rely on my parents. Sometimes I think that’s hard for them because they kind of want me to rely on them more than I do…I don’t really need them to give me advice on a lot of things now also. I know my mom has mentioned that that’s been a big change for them, that they don’t have to take care of me especially going from my undergrad to grad school, because undergrad I lived at home so they always knew what was going on a little bit.

Even during her undergraduate program, Jennifer recognized that her parents could not always offer her the help she needed.

Actually I feel like that’s been one of my biggest challenges because my parents, they didn’t go to college so they didn’t know what I was doing and whenever I
had trouble with the bursar’s office or scheduling classes, I couldn’t ask them how to do things, so they weren’t really able to help me much in my undergrad. In addition to not being able to help, Jennifer’s parents struggled with understanding her career choice. “My mom’s like, “What kind of job are you going to get?” They don’t understand what the end result is from this program. It’s hard”.

Jennifer worried that she intimidated her parents. In fact, Jennifer described an awkward dynamic between her and her mother. “Sometimes my parents don’t understand the words I use. My mom has even told me before, ‘You shouldn’t talk like that when you come home’”. Jennifer felt hurt and confused by this reaction.

It’s kind of contradictory to send you to school to get an education and to be very intelligent and I come home and you tell me you don’t want me to be like that. So that kind of hurts my feelings.

Jennifer recognized the ongoing unease and worried about going home. “It’s just it’s been really strange, especially as I go further and further. I can see that it’s harder for me to be home and it’s harder for me to talk to them sometimes”.

**Feeling isolated, trying to fit in, connecting with others in her discipline.**

Although Jennifer found tension with her family, she connected with faculty at her undergraduate institution. They saw something in her and offered her an opportunity to assist with research. Speaking of an interaction with one of her faculty members, Jennifer said:

One day she sent me an email and said I want to talk to you, just come to my office, I have a question to ask you. So I went to her office and she said, “I think
that you are very smart and very motivated. I can tell that I can depend on you.

Would you want to be involved in this research study with me? I think that you
would be really good at it and I want to offer this opportunity to you first.”

This pivotal opportunity opened the door of further academic study to Jennifer.

This faculty member continued to be Jennifer’s champion throughout her
undergraduate program. The door opened even wider when Jennifer presented at a
conference. The conference opened Jennifer’s eyes to what the field offered and she
considered doctoral work.

I was around people and they were all presenting research and I was really
interested in it and I saw how many different opportunities there were just to,
behind being a speech/language pathologist, but also being a researcher and how
many people you could reach and help. I thought that was really, really exciting
and I think that was definitely the point where I wanted to get my Ph.D. the most.

In addition, during her graduate school admission process, her faculty connections served
her well.

When I got this opportunity to do both at the same time my mentors at [her
undergraduate institution] and everyone was just really excited and they thought
this is a great opportunity. You can do this. They really kind of pushed me into
that direction.

As for her relationships with her peers at her undergraduate institution, Jennifer
discovered that she was different. Jennifer relied on herself while many of her peers had
family members to help.
I did have to do so much on my own. A lot of my friends in undergrad had their parents to come to campus and help them out with stuff and I was very aware of that. I was different in that regard. My parents were very standoffish.

In addition, Jennifer’s decision to live at home created another divide between her and her peers.

I’m actually not surprised with how things are in grad school because I was kind of like that in undergrad too. I commuted. So I was different and didn’t have that college experience. I wasn’t on campus with all the girls.

With responsibilities at home, Jennifer straddled two different worlds.

So I feel like socially my situation has always been harder because I always feel like I need to go back home because I’ve got to go to work. My mom’s having dinner. So I mean it’s not like I would just stay at school and hang out with other people.

Jennifer sought faculty support at her graduate institution; however, she found herself in a strange situation. Being in the combined master’s/Ph.D. program and being the only student enrolled in this program, Jennifer found herself on the outside of both the master’s cohort and the doctoral cohort, although the doctoral students opened up to her eventually.

My friends are in the Ph.D. program so it’s really – like we can really talk about everything. It’s so nice to be able to understand exactly what they’re saying and they understand what I’m saying and they can offer genuine advice. It’s a whole different kind of conversation. I feel like I really fit in there.
Jennifer found support amongst the faculty members in her graduate degree, but they sometimes forgot her unique situation with the blended master’s/Ph.D. program. Regardless, the faculty encouraged Jennifer to participate in research and she presented the research at conferences. These conferences continued to offer Jennifer a road map of where she would like to go professionally. “I feel like that’s still a really specific event that just continues to make me think about what I want from my life”.

As a graduate student, Jennifer found the coursework easy, but the social dynamic challenged her. “Academics has been the easiest part of things for me. I feel like classes are very easy. I never struggle with the class or anything like that. I feel like the hardest thing has been socially for me”. She described herself as “her worst critic,” but learned to ask for help from others. Jennifer’s confidence developed during her graduate work and she managed her time well. She identified that her biggest area of growth was assertiveness. Jennifer advised other first-generation students to no worry what others think. “I wish I would have known not to worry so much about what other people think because I feel like I was doing a lot more for my parents than I was doing for me in the beginning”.

**Summary.**

Jennifer described her future career as including research.

I feel like I’m really good at it. It pushes me mentally. I think it’s very interesting. I like thinking of new things and finding out the answers, so I think it’s definitely important whatever job I end up with in the end. I definitely want research to be a big part of it.
Jennifer acknowledged that her family’s emphasis on books very early on established a firm foundation for her learning.

My parents don’t make a lot of money, so going to the library was our big thing…My parents always read to us before bedtime and I think now as a speech/language pathologist I realize how important reading is to your children and I think that definitely built a solid foundation for academics.

With this foundation, Jennifer recognized that fitting in challenged her college experience. She felt like an outsider and she tended to be a perfectionist.

I think I’m very hard on myself. I think that’s from my family too, because I always knew they wanted me to be really good at what I did and I’ve always been hard on myself in high school and grad school and college in general. I’ve always been my worst critic.

Although finance focused throughout higher education and worried about the changed relationship with her parents, Jennifer persevered and dedicated herself to a bright future that included research and teaching.

Anne

Anne was a 27 year-old, single, White woman in her sixth year as a chemistry doctoral student. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Anne on December 5, 2014 (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Although never pressured to attend a certain college or study a particular subject, Anne’s parents expected her to go to college.
Anne never considered herself as a first-generation college student. “My parents – they had some sort of higher education after high school. It never really occurred to me that I was first generation”. Anne’s father held an associate’s degree when she applied and enrolled in her undergraduate program. After Anne finished her undergraduate degree, her father completed his bachelor’s degree. In addition, Anne’s older sisters attended college, so she understood what was in store following high school graduation.

Anne worked while in high school and continued working in college. “I worked at Blossom Music Center as an usher… And then, I worked at a grocery store, in the deli. So it was sort of always expected that you would have a job and help pay for college”. Her parents expected her to contribute to her education, so Anne remained focused on how to pay for college and graduated without student loans.

When I went to college in 2005, prices were much steeper and they paid for my first two years of college and I paid for the second two years of college, but they didn’t want me to take out student loans. They said they would always help me as long as I worked. I always had a job throughout undergrad.

As a doctoral student, Anne held a teaching assistant (T.A.) assignment.

**Fitting in.**

Anne attributed her academic focus to her strict upbringing. Her undergraduate institution had a party school reputation, but Anne resisted any temptation. I was raised sort of in a strict catholic family. So when I came to OU – it’s known as a party school and I was never like that growing up. I didn’t drink until I was 21. And I think that helped a lot because this is a hard school to succeed at if you
like to party, if you like to go out all the time because there’s really not much to do here. And having that sort of stricter upbringing I was able to sort of be able to just go to classes and study and not feel like I was pressured into drinking and that sort of thing.

Coupled with her upbringing, Anne attributed her college success to having a solid foundation of friends during her undergraduate program. Anne began her undergraduate program with a large cohort, but by graduation, the cohort shrunk and she recognized the importance of this small, close-knit group.

We came in with over 100-200 forensic chemistry majors and by our sophomore and junior year we were whittled down to less than 100 and then my senior year I think I graduated with 13 other people. So we became so close, we took all the same classes, we pulled all-nighters together, we did everything together basically.

In addition, Anne really connected with her roommates.

Initially assigned to a single, Anne sought a alternative room assignment because her roommates liked to party. “I ended up moving because they liked to drink, they liked to stay up late, and you can’t really be a science major and do that and be successful”. Anne found a new space and moved across campus; during this move, she met her future roommates. Through this challenging situation, Anne discovered the importance of finding a place to fit in. “I realize that you cannot do any of this on your own. You need people to bounce ideas off of to help you”.
Anne sought this same relationship from her doctoral cohort and described how they relied on one another.

But you also form sort of a camaraderie with the people that came in in your year. So I came in with, let’s see, I think five other organic students. And we talk about it all the time, we want to walk together, we want to finish together.

Anne described an unique characteristic of her discipline. “It’s a man’s field”. Accustomed to this, since she was the only female doctoral student, Anne was not intimidated “I’ve never felt like intimidated, like someone was trying to intimidate me not to do something”. In fact, Anne appreciated her male peers’ approach. “They’re very just straight forward and I really have come to appreciate that… they don’t sensor themselves around me which I wouldn’t want them to do anyway. But they, I’ve never felt like I didn’t fit in with them”.

**Undergraduate research, declining economy, internships.**

Anne did not plan to go to graduate school immediately follow her undergraduate program, but the economy tanked and employment prospects were slim. “I was not intending to go to grad school right away but I couldn’t find a job and I found out that the department needed grad students so I applied late and got in”. In fact, Anne moved home after graduation and began her job search. Mid-summer, a chance encounter with a friend changed Anne’s course. She applied for graduate school.

I actually ran into one of my friends that I graduated with. He was in [town]. I was back here visiting a friend and I was like, “Wait, what are you doing here?” And he was like, “I’m applying late to the grad program.” So I’m like, “Wait a
second, okay – who did you contact about this?” He gave me…an organic professor. So I contacted him and he said let me check and see what’s going on. And he emailed me a few days later, “Yes, apply.”

Although it never occurred to her that she was first-generation, Anne wondered if being first-generation contributed to lack of understanding the importance of undergraduate research. “This was one thing that maybe since I was the first person in my family to get a science degree I didn’t do undergrad research until my last semester of my last year. It wasn’t something I realized”. In fact, Anne learned about the undergraduate research opportunity from a peer not her advisor and this frustrated Anne.

Asked about any regrets, Anne wished she had understood the importance of undergraduate research earlier.

The only thing that I really regret is the undergraduate research. I didn’t know that was something that I was supposed to be doing and I think it would have benefited me greatly if I had been doing it my entire undergrad… I think I would have thought about grad school more and maybe gone to a different university instead of just using this as a last resort.

As a doctoral student, Anne explored many different learning option. For example, she completed a one-year internship experience with a pharmaceutical company. “I am technically in my sixth year but I took one year off last year to do an internship at GlaxoSmithKline so it’s sort of like my fifth year”. Although removed from her program’s demands, the internship experience taught Anne many valuable skills and
offered perspective about chemistry from the industry side. “I didn’t not like it, it’s just incredibly fast paced and stressful and I think I would be happier in a lower stressed job”.

Although Anne’s internship solidified her preferred career option following the completion of her Ph.D., Anne’s confidence soared while she worked for the private company. She realized her own ability as a chemist. She observed that private company supplied their chemists with the right supplies to conduct research.

And it’s frustrating to be working with chemicals that are 20 years old and knowing a reaction should work and not having it work and then I did my internship and chemistry works, it does work when you have the right supplies.

And so that gave me a lot of confidence in myself.

Armed with new skills, yet undeterred, Anne remained resolved to pursue a career as a professor. “I would like to teach. I would like a more administrative position – not research but helping with like department stuff and that kind of thing”.

However, Anne’s experience with internships did not start in college. It began during high school. Anne participated in an internship program her senior year. Anne interned with two different organizations, a pathologist and the local police station.

In high school, we did like internship programs. One of them, for one quarter, I interned with a pathologist. Because I knew my undergrad degree is in forensic chemistry and so there weren’t many forensic chemists who shadow in [my hometown]. So I interned with a pathologist and they gave great advice. They were all super welcoming and helpful. And then, the next quarter I interned at a
police station. So it’s more like the law side of chemistry. So I did ‘ride-alongs’ and I did not like them.

Anne demonstrated an interest in chemistry early. She sought out opportunities in the chemistry field to advance her understanding and only wished she had learned sooner of the importance of research as an undergraduate student.

Summary.

Anne’s parents expected her college attendance. In fact, Anne knew that her middle sister’s lack of college completion frustrated her parents, so Anne never questioned that expectation. “It was always expected that that was sort of what you had to do in our generation to get a good job is to go to college”. Expecting to find employment easily, Anne stumbled into her doctoral program.

I was applying like crazy every day. I wasn’t hearing back, they wanted more experience, a lot of senior level chemists were wanted so PhD with 15 years’ of experience. And I was always under the impression that if you graduate with a degree in a science you will find a job.

Discouraged with the lack of employment opportunities, Anne applied to graduate school. Ironically, the same day Anne received her admission letter to her doctoral program, a temporary employment agency called with a job offer.

I got my acceptance letter to grad school as I heard from the company that they said that they wanted to hire me. So I decided to go to grad school just because it wasn’t a science job, I would be supervising people that were doing factory kind of stuff.
Anne acknowledged the difficulty of her doctoral program and she relied significantly on her cohort for support. Her family offered support, but Anne described that they did not always understand.

People ask what I’m doing and I know they’re being polite and sometimes they do want to know, but if they don’t have any chemistry background, I can’t explain it to them. I can tell them and I can see a glaze over their face.

Informed by her experience, Anne offered the following suggestions for other first-generation students: Find a group you can rely on, make connections, and ask for help.

**Thomas**

Thomas was a 52 year-old, married, Caribbean-American man studying in his first semester of the Higher Education doctoral program. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Thomas on April 28, 2015 (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Thomas was the only child in a family of four children encouraged to pursue college. Thomas faced many financial challenges on his journey. Thomas grew up poor and neither of his two brothers initially finished high school. Thomas was different from his siblings though. “Some of the people teased me, but in a loving way. You know, ‘Hey, Professor.’ I wore glasses, I was the nerdy one compared to my two brothers. Both of them had dreads, dreadlocks”.

In high school, influenced by an economics teacher, guidance counselors and his mother, Thomas considered college. Thomas’s mother did not complete high school and encouraged him to finish K-12. “My mother didn’t finish high school, but she would always say I have to finish high school in order to make something of myself”. As high
school graduation loomed, Thomas’s community started questioning him about college. Not sure how to proceed, his economics teacher helped Thomas with the college application process. “He actually talked to me about the application. He brought me materials…he helped me with the application process. He said apply to three”.

**Financial and fitting in concerns, making connections.**

Thomas accepted admission to [his undergraduate institution] for his undergraduate program. Finances and proximity to family drove Thomas’s decision. I ended up going to [my undergraduate institution]. Simple reason, [another institution] didn’t give good scholarships to freshmen. It was a private school, and I couldn’t afford it. [A third institution] he thought was – for someone coming from the Virgin Islands, a small community island, everyone knew everyone, going to [the third institution] in that rural area… really, I think if you went to [my undergraduate institution], you're closer to family. I had family in New York, family in Baltimore, DC. And he just said it would be a better experience. Worried about money, Thomas delayed his entry for one year. Thomas wanted to become acclimated to the environment and save some money before he started college. Unfortunately, Thomas could not find work so moved back to home. I tried to work in New York…because I wanted to be again stateside in anticipation of what it would be like. Getting acclimated, getting adjusted. So school started in August. I went up in September, looked for a job. Didn’t find a job. Went back to St. Thomas in November right before Thanksgiving, and started working at a bank.
Once in school, Thomas tried to fit in, but he was different from at home.

At school I think probably the representation of what people saw was a different person. A person who was trying to be acclimated to what it was like to be black or a person of color. Maybe they were saying that. Maybe they said African-American, but I never felt I was an African-American because I was from the Caribbean.

He experienced stark difference from his US Virgin Islands experience. “Our governor was black, the senators and congress people were black. Doctors, attorneys, educators. They all looked like me...there were more people that looked like me than not”.

During college, Thomas realized that he was unique. “People knew I was from the island and there was a benefit to being from the island because, you know, that guy, he is interesting”. Thomas faced racism as well. “He’s got an accent, he probably took a boat to get here, they probably live in grass huts, wear grass skirts”. As a result, Thomas learned to adapt to this new environment. “So you had to try and fit in somehow...you were the different person, so everyone knew you, was kind of popular, was kind of cool. The girls loved the accent. We had some of that going on”.

Thomas changed how he spoke and dressed. “I modified the way I spoke. But they could still tell because the accent was strong. I modified the way I carried myself, because most of those people had money. I didn’t”. Unprepared for the financial demands of out-of-state tuition, Thomas struggled in the first couple few years at school.

I struggled in the first and second year because, you know, I wanted to go to college, but my mother didn’t have money to go to college. And I figured
financially it would help. But what I didn’t know then that I know now is that I was out-of-state, so the fees were twice as high.

To help save money, Thomas discovered thrift stores and could affordably dress differently. He did not stand out from his peers. “I learned to go to thrift stores in New York and Baltimore. I got some of the coolest stuff, man. Paisley ties, long winter coats…And like I was saying, that adaptation technique made it look like I was okay”.

To help finance college, Thomas made ever expanding connections that grew into job opportunities. At first, Thomas worked as a conference staff member who cleaned and set up conference rooms. “I would sweep the room up, set it up the way they said to set it up. And then when they were done, I would go and put things back”. Thomas worked several places on campus.

And it was like sink or swim…And work did it. I mean, at one time I probably held, at one time I was an RA, I worked in the library in the reference section stacking shelves, I worked in UMBC police department. I worked in the police department as an escort.

Not only did Thomas work, Thomas was involved on campus. He held a paid post on student government, the commissioner for women and minority affairs. As both a master’s and doctoral student, Thomas took advantage of the educational benefit offered by his employing institution. This benefit waived tuition.

Equally important, Thomas recognized the significance of making connections during his undergraduate days. “It took me five years to finish school, but I got to know the right people… I got to know a woman who worked in financial aid that made sure
that I got some scholarship money”. The financial aid office advised Thomas of the difference in cost between in-state tuition and out-of-state tuition and assisted him with apply for in-state residency. This connection saved Thomas significantly. “The next thing I know they were paying me to go to school. Because I no longer had to pay out-of-state tuition, I got some additional scholarships, so my overage check started working for me”.

Thomas realized the importance of networking. His network included staff from all across campus. Being nice to others cost Thomas nothing, but benefited him immensely.

You’ve got to network, network, network. One thing I learned to do was network. Survival skills. You learn the names and you talk to the housekeeping staff. Because they will get you toilet paper I don’t have to go to the store and buy, they get me other things... Get you garbage bags so you didn’t have to go, real simple things like that. People give you a roll of garbage bags, you don’t ever go buy garbage bags, because they cost money. You don’t ever have to go buy toilet paper, because it costs money. Thomas advised any student to consider the importance of networking. He acknowledged how that helped him through his undergraduate program.

**Purposeful education in preparation for next opportunity.**

In order to excel in his chosen field Thomas knew he would need both master’s and doctoral degrees. “I knew that the way things were going, I would need a master’s degree in order to stay in the profession and be promoted, elevated. So that was the impetus for coming here”.
Thomas’s mentor suggested that he consider relocation and work on a master’s degree. Thomas secured employment and moved. Worried about how others perceived his professional progression, Thomas took a full-time job as a hall director. It seemed like I was going backwards. Instead of going from a resident director or area coordinator to assistant director, I went from assistant director to hall director to resident director when I came here…But it was really all in the plan, to step back from a more administrative level position with those responsibilities.

After one year, Thomas enrolled in courses “One per quarter. Yeah, I don’t think I ever did any more than that”. In a few short years, Thomas completed his master’s degree.

After working in the field for approximately twenty years, Thomas realized that some did not take him seriously and in order to be respected he would need his Ph.D. “I felt like I was sitting at the table and sometimes I was being heard, but sometimes I knew that I wasn’t being heard”. In addition, Thomas worked directly for the president of the institution and recognized that if a leadership shift occurred, the new leadership might make changes. Thomas needed to be prepared.

I know that your job or your assignment is serving quote, unquote, ‘at the pleasure of’…So part of this is just trying to be forward-thinking, proactive, and to make sure that I have some credentials for my next career move, whether it be one that I’m asked to take or one that I have to take.

The doctoral program challenged Thomas. The volume of reading and writing required Thomas to reconsider priorities. What came naturally, as an administrator, required work as an academician. Surrounded by supportive friends and family, Thomas
had to shift his thinking. “And one of the hardest adjustments for me was almost like
you’re going up a hill or down a hill on a bike. And you’re got to shift gear to slow down
or to speed up. Either one”. Thomas found himself torn between activities he had grown
accustomed to and the looming project for class.

Because all of the things that I used to do, I can’t do anymore. And I’m learning
those lessons still. If my friends say hey, let’s go to the basketball game, OU
basketball game. I’m like okay, cool. And I’m going there and I’m spending two
to three hours sitting down and then talking stuff afterwards. And then it’s like the
work’s not getting done. So I’m still trying to make the transition to know enough
to tell myself, look, man, you have to do this differently. You can’t keep doing it
the same way.

Thomas recognized that he needed to say no to things that he previously participated in.

**Summary.**

Thomas’s educational journey illustrated his deep concern for being prepared for
the next step on his career path. Both graduate degrees came at a reflective time for
Thomas. If he intended on staying in the higher education, he needed the next degree.
During the transition into his doctoral program, Thomas realized over time many things
did not change.

It’s like a cycle…I could see now the more things change, the more they stay the
same. Especially taking a history class and just seeing perspectives on different
things and seeing access and doing access for low income students and some of
the things we are talking about and how that stuff continues to present itself.
Thomas suggested that any first-generation doctoral student needed to get to know the right people, read continuously and ask many questions. Thomas’s community supported him and encouraged him whenever he came home from school. “They wished nothing but the best for me. Nobody tried to get me in trouble. You know, because the influences were there. Some of my friends were selling the drugs, too. And I could have easily done that”.

Dave

Dave was a 43 year-old, White, single man from the Midwest enrolled in a higher education doctoral program. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Dave on August 10, 2015 (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview). From the moment he entered college, he knew that he wanted to teach at a college or university and this required a Ph.D. “I think the big picture was when I started college as an undergrad and began to understand what academia was about I wanted a Ph.D.” His route to the doctoral program included self-discovery and a recognition of the importance of fitting in. Always mindful of finances, Dave earned a bachelor’s degree and two master’s degrees without debt. He planned the same for his doctoral program.

None of his family really encouraged Dave to go to college. His family had a long tradition as farmers and the expectation existed that he would follow the example of his father. “I’ve not really thought about who encouraged me, because nobody here actually graduated from college. My, both sides of my grandparents were farmers” Dave wondered if he disappointed his father. “Because that’s really what most, at that time, farmers wanted, was their sons were going to take over their farms”
Although his father never expressed any disappointment, Dave felt some guilt, but knew he needed to make the decision for himself. “There was guilt on my behalf, because I thought I am disappointing him, but I also knew that I wasn’t going to live for somebody else” Dave credited his family for his independence and acknowledged that they provided him with the tools to be successful.

I just think my parents raised us right. When I think about the students, I went to school with and how we were expected to act and behave, and do your homework, and earn excuses. It’s that farmer mentality. Like no one’s going to do it for you, so you’ve got to take care of yourself.

Dave learned the importance of self-reliance from his family and this theme continued throughout his college-going career. “I like to take care of myself, it’s very hard for me to let anybody else do stuff for me... I would gladly help somebody, but it’s very awkward for me to say could you help me do something”.

**Fitting in and feeling connected.**

Dave struggled with fitting in during high school. He was a country kid and felt divided from the town kids. Dave’s hometown had 1,400 people, very small, and I did not fit in. We lived on a farm out in the country, and that was still the time of the division between the country kids and the city kids... They all had their summer together and did things together, and all the kids that lived on the farms baled hay and...

Not really engaged with many high school activities, Dave busied himself with chores and the marching band. Involvement in town would have burdened his family. “I
didn’t take part in sports…Honestly, when you took part in extracurricular that meant you had to somehow get to town, and as a farm kid my parents were doing stuff on the farm so we just didn’t”.

Dave started college the summer following his high school graduation. Anxious to leave his small town, he could not wait to get started. “I started the summer after I graduated high school, because I couldn’t wait. I was so excited to get out” Motivated to start school, Dave described wanting something different for himself. “I wanted something different that I knew it was up to me to make sure it worked out. I wasn’t expecting anything from anybody else so I was going to make this work” Dave saw college as his exit strategy. “At the time I was like this is my chance out, I’ve got to get a job, where am I going to go, my work’s got to get me that job”.

Soon after he started college, Dave learned that faculty received long-term appointments after tenure. “I want to teach, and I always thought a university was a safe job. You would get a teaching position, you would do research and it’s a job for life”. Dave believed earning a Ph.D. represented reaching the pinnacle. “That was going to be the symbol of you’ve made it and you’re smart, and I’m sure there was something about proving myself to the kids that always didn’t approve of me”. Dave approached his plan methodically.

I knew at a certain point I was going to have to get that degree to be able to teach…I planned out work for so many years, that means you’re qualified for the accreditation exam, and once I had that that’s one more credential that I can use to
apply for teaching positions, and then I would need a degree. So lining things up to get me to that spot.

Uncertain about living on campus, Dave decided to live at home. Dave commuted during his entire undergraduate program, excluding one summer when employed for an internship. His decision to commute was rooted in the fact that Dave wanted to take care of himself and that many of the town kids lived in the residence halls. “I don’t know that I would have wanted to live on campus, because it goes back to that taking care of myself. The kids…that lived in the dorms, I just didn’t click with”. Dave felt that he did not fit in with them. Dave found friends he connected with, who shared a similar upbringing.

The friends that I made – because the undergrad experience was excellent, I still kept in touch with a lot of those people I went to school with. But they were a lot like me, they were from the country. I laugh because one of my dearest friends from then, her name was Skeeter Dee, she was named after her grandfather Skeeter, and so we had that connection, like you’re a country girl. A lot of the kids that came from towns or cities they were just different than us.

Following his undergraduate program, Dave applied to a graduate program eight hours from his home. Once admitted and excited by the opportunity, Dave resigned from his position of two years and planned to move south. Before leaving, he worried about how to pay for out-of-state tuition, but brushed the nagging thoughts away. Once he journeyed to the graduate institution, Dave realized that he had made a mistake and called
his parents, who were in route, and told them to turn around and go home. Dave felt like he did not fit in.

I couldn’t find a place to live, and I finally found a place, an apartment and there were bullet holes in the door…I went to the convocation for incoming grad students and it was like the convo basically, and I was this little kid from [my hometown] still in my mind like, what I am doing here? My family is eight hours away and what do I do if something happens? So suddenly I was, I was panicked quite frankly and my parents were already on their way with my stuff. I called them and I said I can’t do this, just go back home.

When he returned home, he contacted his previous employer about returning to work. After a couple weeks, they hired him back, however, Dave suffered from persistent thought of regret and confusion. Dave’s plans were derailed and he needed to regroup. Never losing sight of graduate work, Dave continued to work and eventually made his way to a large city and completed two master’s degrees. With the first master’s degree program, Dave challenged himself. He realized he had changed significantly since his initial foray into graduate school that ended so abruptly. He wanted a different experience where he learned from the previous one.

My undergrad experience was very similar to who I was and where I’d grown up…I wanted something – I wanted to experience the urban experience, and so I went to Roosevelt, which is very much – I was a minority and the campus is right downtown, so it was not [my undergraduate institution], it wasn’t [the place of my undergraduate program]. It was very much a different experience. So I went into
that also realizing that the first attempt at grad school had failed and that was not going to happen again. So I went into this one much smarter, learning from the previous one.

Dave took advantage of opportunities when all the dynamics felt right. He took charge of his destiny and struck out on his own path, unphased that the path was different from his family’s path. He recognized that he needed independence and self-reliance. When he left home, Dave never intended to return.

**Gifts from grandparents and an internship bring opportunities.**

As a graduation gift from his grandmother, Dave travelled to New York City with his grandmother and some of her friends. This trip opened Dave’s eyes to a world beyond the Midwest. He realized quickly that he wanted to be anywhere other than a town of 1,400 people.

But it was perfect, because I got to see a completely different world, and I know that ever since then I’ve been, I cannot stay in a town that’s got 1400 people. There’s nothing here for me, and that’s something I thought about all the time. Thank goodness that she did that for me.

In addition, Dave inherited a small sum of money from his maternal grandfather. Dave’s grandfather intended that Dave use this money for college. “My grandfather made some smart investments and when he passed away he had left money for the four grandkids to go to college”. Being frugal, Dave spent the money on tuition, but did not want to waste it on housing and food, when he could live at home. “I knew that was my pot of money that was going to get me through school. So it didn’t make sense to spend
that on living on campus, and having a meal plan”. As a result, Dave commuted throughout his entire undergraduate program. With this inheritance coupled with a talent scholarship, Dave left his undergraduate program debt free.

At the end of his sophomore year, Dave became aware of an internship opportunity for the summer. He jumped at the chance and relocated temporarily. This internship exposed Dave to the city and began the process of expanding Dave’s view of the world. Some put up mild resistance to this internship opportunity.

I can still remember the neighbors coming over to my parent’s house when I was getting ready to leave and, like, why are you doing this. There’s crime in Indianapolis, and there were racial comments made about who… Then when I came back they were like, you survived and you didn’t get murdered. It was just, and I was like that’s not how it was at all, and so I felt even more separated from those people.

After he completed the internship, Dave returned home. However, the company offered Dave a position and he continued working for them for his remaining two years of college.

**Summary.**

Thrilled to be moving on, Dave started college a few weeks after graduation. It was not a good experience, I didn’t enjoy grade school, junior high school, I couldn’t wait to leave. Also, I knew that I did not want to follow in my father’s footsteps and be a farmer. So I was anxious to start school, so I graduated in May and started summer school in June.
Dave was concerned about finances for college and fitting in. As a result, Dave decided to commute. He commuted all four years. Aided by his grandfather’s savvy investments, Dave graduated from his undergraduate program debt free. This experience reinforced to Dave the importance of depending on himself. He grew ever more self-reliant.

Dave acknowledged that during undergraduate school, he changed, but so did his parents. “Certainly I was growing and changing. But I think my parents were as well, because they hadn’t experienced this before. So me going off and doing these things and coming back and talking about them changed their understanding”. Dave wondered if his father understood what college was for him. In addition, he thought his mother showed a curiosity about his experiences, which made him wonder if she aspired to something other than being a farmer’s wife.

My mom I think was curious, fascinated; so she worked at Columbia Records in [my hometown] after high school, and then when she got married she quit and became a farm wife. So she had a taste of what the working world was like outside of the farm, and so I think she was really curious.

Laura

Laura was a 45 year-old, married, African-American woman in the second year of her doctoral program, Higher Education. All quotes in this section were from a personal interview with Laura on August 12, 2015 (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). During her doctoral work, Laura enrolled part-time while she worked full-time. During her undergraduate days, Laura never identified herself as a first-generation college student. “I knew that some of the other students had family members who had gone to college, had
parents who had, who went to college and I didn't have that. But...I didn't really think about it”. With an appreciation for education and the aptitude to excel, Laura focused on securing funding for college, finding a healthy support network for her academic aspirations, and letting go of some of her personal idiosyncrasies.

**Importance of education and financing her way.**

Neither of Laura’s parents went to college, but they held a high regard for higher education and expected Laura to go to college. “Neither of my parents went to college, but they were determined that their daughters were going to go to college. And I don't really think we had an option”. During the application phase, the application fees contributed to Laura’s decisions about where to apply.

The year that I applied, my dad was laid off work so the $25 application fee to [her undergraduate institution] was attractive. I was going to do more applications later, but I got my acceptance letter a week after I submitted and I didn't apply anywhere else.

Her parents encouraged Laura to go to college. In addition, two high school teachers and a guidance counselor influenced her higher education decision making. I was always told, "You're smart, you're smart, you're smart. You can do this." There was an English teacher my freshman year who was also very influential...and also, a history teacher. And I had him for Civics...And then I had him for Psychology my senior year. And he was also very influential, even the years I didn't have him as a teacher.
Laura’s high school guidance counselor made her aware of different opportunities available to her and ultimately informed her of the Teacher Education Loan Program. I relied on the counselor to point me in the right direction. He also told me about the – since I wanted to be an education major – and that may have been part of the reason that I decided to be an education major. Because he called me in and so is like, "So, what major are you thinking about? There's this thing called the Teacher Education Loan Program if you wanna be a teacher. They pay full tuition. You pay it back by working for four years in the state of Ohio.

Laura received this scholarship and another scholarship, as well. However, the second scholarship required a rigorous GPA and Laura lost this scholarship after her first year. Laura maintained the teacher education scholarship for the remainder of her undergraduate program. In addition, Laura worked on campus as a student employee, became a resident assistant (R.A.), and worked in the admission office as a student counselor. “I worked in Printing Resources, actually. And then my junior year, I became an RA and I was also a LINKS counselor. So that helped with the living expenses”.

Financing any additional education continued to be a concern for Laura. For both her master’s and doctoral degrees, Laura’s employer offered educational benefits. The educational benefits fully waived tuition, so Laura’s concerns about financing her graduate degrees evaporated.

**Fitting in, making connections and finding a support network.**

Initially Laura felt disconnected from her undergraduate institution. She returned home each weekend to see a boyfriend and her grades suffered.
When I came, it was – I think it was somewhat expected that I would come home every weekend. And that was expected so I didn't get in trouble or so I didn't do the things that I wasn't supposed to do...In the beginning, I was dating someone, so that – so that was somewhat of an influence.

Once Laura broke up with her boyfriend and stopped going home every weekend, her grades improved; however, she faced challenges between the college environment and home.

It was the whole, “You think you're better than we are now that you're in college.” So it was one of those disappointing things. And so where I thought – where I had imagined they would be happy and proud and supportive, there wasn't always that. If I disagreed with something, it was...“Well, you don't agree with this because you think you're smarter than everybody else.”

As a result, Laura needed to find a support network at college. She joined a student organization and the advisor offered her the support and encouragement she sought. In addition, she earned a small stipend, which further encouraged her continued involvement. “We started a program called Society for Teachers of Tomorrow and we went to high schools and recruited students. So that involvement gave me something additional to classes to work toward. And we also got a small stipend”. The connection with the advisor opened the door to meeting others on campus that helped Laura.

As Laura connected with more people on campus, her world expanded. She became an R.A., she worked with students in the admissions office and she reached out to
faculty in her discipline. As an R.A., Laura became involved in something bigger than herself:

Becoming an RA helped me recognize and realize who I was as a person, what I believed, and that what I believed was not necessarily what I had been taught my entire life. And so that helped – that helped me grow and expand my vision.

In addition, Laura learned more about the challenges of education in Appalachia. “Going into the different schools and seeing the different side…and noticing some of the disparities that were there”. All these connections helped Laura successfully complete her undergraduate degree.

After the completion of her undergraduate degree, Laura taught middle and high school students for six years, but felt like something was missing. She missed the interaction with college students, so after much consternation, she returned for her master’s degree. Still concerned with money, Laura completed her master’s program while she worked full-time. A few faculty members expressed displeasure with her decision to enroll part-time and they questioned her dedication. Laura found faculty members who supported her decision to enroll as a part-time student. In addition, Laura had two young children and sought a role model to manage all these roles. A new faculty member arrived and Laura described her, “She was amazing and very supportive. And so with her, I saw someone who was around my age who already had the Ph.D., also had a daughter about my daughter’s age. So she was also very influential”. With the support and encouragement of similar situated women, Laura completed her master’s degree.
Soon after completing her master’s degree, Laura considered a doctoral program, but struggled with whether the timing was right. One of her mentors recognized that Laura juggled many responsibilities and encouraged her to pursue her education on her own terms. Her advisor said, “Don't be on anyone else's timeline. Be on your own timeline. Women typically have more responsibilities in life than men do…so don't allow someone else to tell you how long it should take you to finish”. Concerned with the timing and cost implications, Laura took a position with a community college and put her educational aspirations on hold.

After several years of work at the community college and having earned tenure, Laura remained unfulfilled and decided to apply for a doctoral program. With the full support of her family, friends and mentors, Laura embarked on this new journey. Laura recognized the importance of a support network for a doctoral program and being one of few enrolled in the traditional doctoral program, Laura established her own cohort. She discovered two colleagues, which she called on for support. Although at different points in their degree programs, these colleagues offered exactly what Laura needed to be successful.

**Success strategies.**

To achieve this success, Laura recognized that she needed to make some personal changes. “I've had to let go of the perfection”. In addition, Laura realized early on in her doctoral program that she needed to become comfortable with asking for help.
A strength that I've developed is learning when to say I need help because I've not been good at that, ever. Because, and no one ever told me this, but I felt, deep within my soul, for some reason, that asking for help was a sign of weakness. Although many things changed during her doctoral program, Laura knew that with her determination and the support of her family she would complete a doctoral program.

I've also learned that I can do pretty much whatever I set my mind to… I've learned ultra time management… I think most importantly, I've learned to savor those moments with family and to make sure that I have those moments with family. Because if I don't have them, then I get grumpy.

Laura described the most challenging part of the doctoral program as the pressure she placed on herself. Laura strived for perfection and soon after she started the doctoral program, Laura realized she needed make some personal adjustments. “What's been somewhat of a challenge is sticking to the schedule and coming to the realization that everything may not always be perfect when I turn it in, and that's okay”. In addition, Laura felt guilt about the household demands left for her husband. “I feel guilty that I've put – I've put more – that he's more of the person taking care of the household. He's not complained, so I guess he's okay with it”. In fact, Laura described her husband, Wayne, as one who kept asking when she was going to work on her doctorate. “Wayne was another one of those, like, ‘When are you gonna do this? I said I was gonna marry a doctor’”. 
Summary.

Laura remembered as a young child that her parents never talked about “if” she would go to college, but instead they talked about “when” she would go.

I think from the time I was little, it was just like, “Well, when you're in college or when you're in college”. It was – it was conversations like that. “Well, when you're in college” and grades, well like, “Oh, these grades will get you a scholarship for college”.

Surrounded by other college bound students, Laura heard her teachers talk about their role in preparing them for college and they demanded quality work. “The environment was very supportive. And in all of our English classes, it – no late work was ever accepted. It was like, "We are preparing you for college." The level of work did prepare me for the college writing”.

As an adult with her own children, Laura lived in her childhood community and saw a difference from what she remembered. School levies failed and many in the community did not expect their children to go to college. Laura wondered if her parents sheltered her from this perspective.

I think back to a couple years ago when these same people living in the community – when there was a levy to improve the schools and part of that was, "To prepare the students for the next level – to prepare students for college." It was like, "Well…my kids are not gonna go to college. Nobody here goes to college." So it was a different – hearing that as an adult, it was different than the
messages that I heard as a child. And I think maybe part of that was I was – I was
shielded from that.

Chapter Summary

As Patton (2002) suggests, “the first task is to do a careful job independently
writing up separate cases” (p. 57). In keeping with this strategy, this chapter summarized
the individual stories of each of the eleven research participants. From these individual
cases, several themes emerged. These themes offer the structure for Chapter five. In
Chapter five each of the themes will be explored and across-case analysis offered.
Chapter Five: Findings, Cross-case Analysis

Eleven first-generation doctoral students reflected on their educational pathways and described in detail their graduate school experiences during semi-structured interviews. Four consistent themes surfaced during the intensive review and content analysis of the eleven research participants’ interview transcripts. The four themes that surfaced during the interviews, and their respective parts, led to their overall success of these eleven doctoral students.

Central to success for these research participants were the following themes: identity, supportive networks, independence, and empowerment. These components were not mutually exclusive. They built on one another and were reinforcing to one another. All the research participants in this study developed these four components and their specific development occurred uniquely for each of the eleven. The process was not linear, but was interrelated.

The success model illustrated below shows four equal quadrants, however, each participant’s circle of success is unique and cannot be replicated in any predictable pattern since it represents each student’s individualized pathways and graduate school experiences. Ultimately, the four linked components occurred for all eleven students and worked in tandem toward the research participants overall success in higher education. Figure 5 illustrates the four components of these eleven first-generation doctoral students’ successes. This chapter explores these four themes thoroughly in a cross-case analysis. The findings as they relate to the specific research questions are addressed in Chapter 6. For this chapter, I will begin with the first theme, identity.
Figure 5. *Four components leading to first-generation doctoral student success.*

**Identity**

Eleven first-generation doctoral students wrestled with their identities when going to college. Understanding who they were, growing to appreciation this identity, and developing a positive sense of self strengthened these first-generation doctoral students’ personal resolve and contributed to their success. Coming to terms with their identities meant exploring unknown elements of themselves and embracing these discoveries. The identity component included several key elements: First-generation, two different worlds,
and multiple dimensions of self. I will describe each element in turn below. Figure 6 represents the theme of identity in two forms. The small image in the upper left hand corner shows the identity component and its position on the success model. The success model is illustrated in its entirety in Figure 5 above. The second image illustrates the theme of identity and its key elements in Venn diagram form. I will present each theme similarly. Each theme’s position in the success model will be in the upper left hand corner of each figure followed by a Venn diagram of the theme and its key elements. This will allow the reader to see the connection to the success model and understand each theme’s key elements more thoroughly.

Figure 6. *Identity component of success and its defining elements.*
First-generation.

Nine out of eleven research participants did not identify themselves as first-generation students when first going to college. Two did and attributed this label to their identity from the outset of their college experiences. The two who attributed this label from the beginning of their college careers were traditional-aged students who went directly from their undergraduate programs into graduate school. The nine others attributed this label at various moments in their higher education experiences. The term ‘first-generation’ is used frequently on college campuses today. Students who completed their undergraduate degrees relatively recently may have heard this term used to describe them. Those who completed their undergraduate degree some time ago may not have heard the term used to describe their experiences. Regardless, these eleven first-generation doctoral students shared a similar phenomenon. They recognized that most other students who they interacted with had parents who graduated from college. These students lacked this frame of reference.

During their interviews, Alison, Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Dave, Jeff, Laura, Todd, and Thomas acknowledged that they did not attribute the label “first-generation” to themselves when they first went to college. Todd said, “I guess I didn’t really think of myself like a first-generation” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Dave knew he was the first to go to college, but did not call himself ‘first-generation’. “I knew other students’ parents had been to college, but at the time it didn’t matter, it didn’t mean anything” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview). Neither Laura nor Thomas considered themselves first-generation students as undergraduate students. Laura stated, “I knew that
some of the other students had family members who had gone to college – had parents who had – who went to college and I didn't have that. But I didn't really – I didn't really think about it” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Thomas remembered, “I wasn't aware of that, but I knew that I was the only person in my family to go to college” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Anne only recently recognized her status as first-generation, “Until you had said it I honestly had never really thought about that I was a first-generation” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Alison’s older brothers attended college, so she had some familiarity with college going. “I don’t really think that I noticed too much about it, to be honest, because my brothers all went to college and I was the youngest…I remember everyone going to college” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Caroline realized her first-generation status long after going through her undergraduate program. “It wasn’t distinctive there. And I don’t know really how much I thought about the idea of, of being, of anybody being a first-generation student, and like the challenges that presents until I was much, much older” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). However, all of these students acknowledged that their experiences were different from many of their peers.

Todd, Dave, and Jeff acknowledged that there was something different about them, but did not attribute it to being the first in their families to go to college. Todd recognized that few from his community attended college and the rate of completion was low for those who did. Dave observed that his undergraduate institution catered to a different student than many institutions, “it was a lot of farm kids right off the farm” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview). Jeff never heard the label “first-generation” while in
his undergraduate program. He just knew that he was one of few students paying for college. Jeff suggested that other dynamics were present more in his psyche than his first-generation status. “I think I’ve become more aware of my changing class status than I have to what it means for me to be a first-generation student” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Jeff and Catherine both learned of the term ‘first-generation’ after working at a university. “I had never heard that term at all until maybe I was working” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview). Jeff did not attribute some of his challenges in college to being the first in his family to go to college, he just thought he was different and never considered why until his teaching assistantship. “The University had made some change I think where we started to get those designations, and I was like, what does it mean to be a first-generation college student?...Oh, that’s interesting… because it was me” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). Dave acknowledged that he is a first-generation college student, but has grown increasingly annoyed with some of his colleagues who use their first-generation status as a way to explain all of their experiences. Dave recognized that being first-generation may explain some dynamics, but that might be only part of the explanation. “For me it hasn’t been something that has really impacted the way I’ve thought about going to school, and I think for them perhaps it has…But I just don’t need to hear about it all the time” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview).

Cynthia and Jennifer did identify themselves as first-generation students when first going to college. Of the other nine research participants, all recognized their first-generation status while in college, some during their undergraduate programs and for
others during their graduate programs. As first-generation students, the research participants discussed feelings of isolation, strong identification with the first-generation student experience, the desire to assist other first-generation students with finding resources, and the commitment of their undergraduate institution to first-generation success.

Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Dave, Jennifer, and Thomas spoke to the feeling of isolation they felt as first-generation college students. Caroline wanted to attend college at a small, private college in upstate New York, but worried about being that far away and settled for an institution closer to home. “I just couldn’t cost my family that much because it made me feel better about myself. But, also, there was a, a sense of I can’t move, you know, that far from my family and never see my family” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Jennifer observed that many of her peers’ parents were involved more in their college experiences and she wished for that. “I had to do so much on my own. A lot of my friends in undergrad had their parents to come to campus and help them out with stuff and I was very aware of that. I was different” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Being so far from home, Thomas needed to rely on himself. “I was by myself. There was no one. I remember those times of being by myself. And I think it’s a part of an adaptation. It’s because I couldn’t go home certain times in the jobs that I worked” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Cynthia described her anxiety when she and her father were responsible for completing the FAFSA her second year and the deadline for completion loomed. At another time, Cynthia looked for consolation from her mother after she thought she failed a test, but her mother did not know how to help. Cynthia felt
alone. Beyond the isolation, though, many of the research participants described a budding sense of pride at being able to navigate higher education without the help of family members.

Alison, Cynthia, and Catherine described how being first-generation influenced their college-going experiences and, as doctoral students, they celebrated being first-generation. Alison stated, “I think it is important, but I think it’s important because I feel like it was always a part of my identity” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Cynthia described being first-generation as unique and something to embrace. “I would say to not forget that identity because it is something that makes you unique and contributes to your perspective on learning and how you relay information – just because of the different experiences that you’ve had” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview).

As a working professional and doctoral student, Catherine acknowledged that she considered her first-generation status often and wondered if working at an institution with a strong commitment to the success of first-generation students influenced that focus. Catherine mentioned that was not the case at her undergraduate and master’s degree institutions. “For me, undergrad and masters, first-generation wasn’t something to be proud of. Like, it was something to hide, the fact that your parents didn’t go” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview).

In their professional roles, Catherine, Cynthia, and Laura emphasized their ongoing commitment to assist other first-generation students as they pursue higher education. They acknowledged that drawing on their own experiences as first-generation student informed their interactions with the students they worked with. Catherine and
Cynthia advised first-generation students and saw value in knowing which were first-generation. Cynthia stated, “I’m using it a lot more to connect with students. Now we can identify students...And so just being able to like, ‘I understand what you’re going through. If you need any help navigating it, let me know’” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). Although she did not recognize it at the time, Laura realized that her experience as a first-generation student included opportunities that many of her peers did not experience. This recognition influenced her career choice and desire to assist others. “The parts where it is important is because I wanna make sure that there's a – that first-generation students don't get lost in that…I think that's where – that's where being the first-generation student is important” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview).

Both Caroline and Jennifer acknowledged that their undergraduate institutions were deeply committed to assisting first-generation students although they did not recognize it at the time. Caroline and Jennifer’s positive experiences suggested that their undergraduate institution, which happened to be the same institution, stitched the commitment of first-generation student success seamlessly into their institutional mission. Jennifer remembered a shout out during the commencement ceremony at her undergraduate institution. “When we graduated from my undergrad, they asked everyone who was a first-generation college student to stand up and be recognized” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Caroline described her undergraduate institution as being mostly first-generation students and the faculty and staff being mindful of that dynamic. “I look back and I think thank god I went to [my undergraduate institution] because everybody was first-generation, everybody was Appalachian…like everybody had kind
of came from a similar experience” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). The research participants described higher education as a place where they learned about themselves. They understood that they were different, but they accepted this reality and set out to achieve their goals despite the challenges of straddling two different worlds, the world of their past and the world of their future.

**Two different worlds.**

Nine out of eleven the research participants told of their challenges straddling two different worlds. Anne, Alison, Cynthia, Dave, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, Todd, and Thomas, described people from home not understanding their educational/career aspirations and higher education, in general. This lack of understanding led to a growing distance between the students and their families. In addition, the students began to feel more and more isolated.

The research participants described the difficulty they had talking with their families about what they are studying and what they intended to do for work. Proud of their students, many of the parents did not know how to help their students. Laura described the expectation that she return home each weekend in order to stay out of trouble. “I think it was somewhat expected that I would come home every weekend. And that was expected so I didn't get in trouble or so I didn't do the things that I wasn't supposed to do” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Soon Laura stayed at school for the weekends. This decision proved to help her academically. “Spring quarter is when I didn't go home a lot. I stopped going home every weekend. That's when my grades improved” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview).
Thomas found returning home easy. He fit back in easily; fitting in at college was the challenge. “It’s easy to come home…it everyone accepts you for who you are. At school I think probably the representation of what people saw was a different person… Going home I spoke with my accent and didn’t have to change anything” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Jeff described the strain his college attendance had on his relationship with his parents, “Another thing that made that relationship with my parents so different when I went to college is that really quickly I started outpacing them in terms of speaking and writing abilities” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Cynthia found herself in the role of teacher because of her parents’ lack of familiarity with college, “Like my dad came to visit recently. And like showing him around campus, and explaining who does what and who’s responsible, and how I impact this, and that type of stuff” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). These participants described how their families lacked the understanding of college and how they often found themselves acting as an ambassador between the two different worlds. The lack of understanding sometimes created a divide between the student and their families, which led to the student interacting with their families differently. In some cases, this divide made the students seek out others that understood their experiences for any necessary support. They started to rely more on their peers than their families. This perpetuated the growing divide.

Alison, Anne, Catherine, Cynthia, Dave, Jeff, Jennifer, and Todd mentioned the challenge of explaining their courses of study. In some cases, their families and friends did not understand their field of study; in others cases, the length of time required to
complete the program of study baffled their families. Todd shared, “It’s kind of like people just don’t really understand what I do, or what the point of all this is. You’ve been in school for 10 or 12 years. Why? They don’t really get it” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Todd stopped trying to explain his career path. “I’ve kind of come to the point where I don’t even bother trying to explain things, because it’s not going to make any sense to them” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview).

Jennifer experienced a similar situation. “They don’t understand what the end result is from this program. It’s hard” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer lamented about her parents’ lack of interest in her program, but their on-going interest in her brother’s academic program, “My brother will be like this is what we learned in school and they’ll talk about how that really applies to real life… They’re like he has a concrete degree. When he finishes he’ll be an engineer” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer acknowledged that his degree is more clear-cut, but the disappointment remained, “When you finish we don’t know what you’re doing” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer continued, “They don’t understand that vocabulary, they don’t understand what I’m even talking about. I feel like they probably think I’m just speaking gibberish” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Jeff described a similar dynamic with his mother. “My mom said something about how she can’t understand some of my Facebook posts anymore…She’s like, ‘You’re one of the smartest people I know, and I can’t understand some of the things you post on Facebook anymore’” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). This recognition created distance and caused ongoing strain on these familial relationships. Anne grew tired of
trying to explain her discipline to others. “People ask what I’m doing…, but if they don’t have any chemistry background, I can’t explain it to them. I can tell them and I can see a glaze over their face so I try to dumb it down” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview).

Anne resented when she would try to explain her studies and then people tuned her out. “I can tell they’re like, ‘Oh god, why would you ever want to do that.’ So I’m a little sick of hearing that” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview).

Demonstrating a lack of familiarity with her field, Alison described, with frustration, her family’s reaction to her studies. “When I’m talking to my aunts and uncles, a lot of them are farmers, and when I’m talking about my dissertation research I know they’re looking at me like they think I’m insane” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Alison acknowledged that they came from a different world. “For people who work with their hands all their life, just the concept that people could spend so much time on a computer, to the point that they don’t do anything else is completely ridiculous to them” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Dave described his father’s reaction when Dave turned the opportunity to farm. Dave’s father did not understand his choice. “That’s really what farmers wanted; was their sons were going to take over their farms…he never said he was disappointed and he never act like he was, but I knew it was a different path that he didn’t understand” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview).

Cynthia found herself serving as a translator between college and her parents. “I remember I had to write it down on a postcard for my mom. And so that way when people asked at work, she could be like, ‘Okay. This is actually what she wants to do’” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). Cynthia served as intermediary between her
parents’ world and hers whenever they visited. Catherine faced confused family members wondering by she needed more education after her undergraduate commencement. They thought she should be turning her attention to work. The gap of understanding widened between their families and the first-generation doctoral students in this research study. This gap was difficult to navigate. Some of the participants began to treat their families differently.

Alison, Catherine, Dave, Jeff, Jennifer, and Laura described how they interacted differently with their families. These interactions caused tension. Jennifer described a time when her mother asked her not to use big words and Jennifer remained frustrated with this request. “She told me…‘You shouldn’t talk like that when you come home.’ It’s kind of contradictory to send you to school to get an education and…I come home and you tell me you don’t want me to be like that” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). With sadness, Jennifer acknowledged that it grew more difficult to return home. “It’s been really strange, especially as I go further and further. I can see that it’s harder for me to be home and it’s harder for me to talk to them sometimes” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Laura experienced something similar. She described one heartbreaking interaction with a family member. “It was the whole, ‘You think you’re better than we are now that you’re in college.’ It was one of those disappointing things…where I had imagined they would be happy and proud and supportive” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Jeff recognized the tension with his parents and experienced difficulty reconciling this. “It was harder for them…it was an awkward tension for us. There are a lot of things that
made me this way, but then I come back and it’s almost like you expect me to not be that way” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). Alison’s decision to attend a different church service than the family created familial strain. “I think that my dad still doesn’t approve, to be honest” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Even though her father disapproved, Alison chose to attend the church service she preferred.

During his undergraduate program, Dave accepted an internship opportunity in the city. His family and friends expressed concern about the crime rates and the racial make-up of the city. Dave felt even more alienated from his home because of these comments. “Then when I came back they were like you survived and you didn’t get murdered – it was just – and I was like that’s not how it was at all, and so I felt even more separated from those people” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview). Catherine remembered how her family described the college bound. “I would actually even say my extended family looked down upon people that went to college. I can remember one uncle in particular would call you like an educated idiot if you went to college” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview). These types of interactions created more distance between the college-going student and their families. Todd felt relief when attending a social function back home and encountered others with a higher education familiarity. “Everyone there was like, yeah, you guys get it. You understand all of this. I understand what you’re saying. Outside of here at OU, it’s not really a conversation that I have very often” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Todd prepared himself for no one understanding his field and rejoiced when finding others like him. Straddling two worlds challenged these first-generation doctoral students, but they moved on undeterred.
Some of the research participants faced additional identity challenges beyond balancing two different worlds and coming to terms with being first-generation. Many of the research participants faced race, gender, class, cultural, and regional differences as well.

**Multiple dimensions of self.**

Anne, Caroline, Jeff, Laura, and Thomas identified with multiple dimensions of self that influenced their higher education success. They integrated many elements into who they were. Race, gender, class, cultural, and regional differences affected their college-going experiences. Some of these experiences paralleled their first-generation student identity awakening. While others faced more pressing identity defining moments.

Laura quickly recognized herself as a first-generation college student when she entered college as an undergraduate, but as a graduate student, Laura worried more about being an African American woman, balancing the demands of parenting than those of a first-generation college student. “I’ve been told by my role models who are African American women that I really need to choose career or I really need to choose family and I can’t really have both” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Laura’s pivotal moment occurred when she observed her supervisor who balanced both. “What I saw with my supervisor was she was able to do both… So that was – that was also a – that was a defining – a defining moment, being able to see some people who were able to do both” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview).

Anne never considered that her first-generation status influenced her experiences in college. “I honestly had never really thought about that I was a first-generation” (Anne,
December 5, 2014, Interview). Anne acknowledged that her gender did. She recognized that her discipline was predominately male. “Another sort of hard thing is it’s a man’s field, I’m in a man’s field and I’ve never felt like intimidated, like someone was trying to intimidate me not to do something” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Anne found challenge navigating the gender divide sometimes. “You don’t have the same interests as men do a lot and when you go to conferences and you go out to dinner, you have to think like a man to make small talk and it’s sort of weird” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Anne recognized that she adapted to this internal dynamic and figured out how to work within it.

Jeff noticed from early on in his undergraduate program through graduate school his own class status evolution more than his first-generation status. This dynamic was especially noticeable when he went home. “I go home, and it’s increasingly more shocking every visit…how my family is still working largely within this working class framework, and I seem to have, as I tell my friends, I’ve developed a taste for the middle class” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). Jeff acknowledged that these changes resulted from his decision to go to college. “I cultivated these interests, these preferences, and these tastes for things that I would have never had growing up back where I did” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Caroline connected well with her undergraduate institution and its commitment to Appalachian students. “That’s where I feel like I kind of confirmed my identity as an Appalachian. I learned a lot about Appalachian history and culture and things like that I was experiencing… my undergraduate experience was very identity affirming for me.”
(Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Caroline acknowledged that her Appalachian
identity and first-generation status may have been interwoven, but she strongly identified
with the Appalachian roots. In fact, Caroline altered her career path because of her
personal experience as an undergraduate and her connection to the region. Moved by the
stories of regional students feeling isolated, Caroline sought a degree where she intended
to champion for these students. "Students who were from 20 miles away, who came to
campus and felt isolated, felt they weren’t taken seriously by their professors because of
their accents or because what they said, what hometown they had… It pissed me off”
(Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview).

These participants acknowledged that other parts of their identities informed their
college experiences more than their first-generation status. They suggested that perhaps
their first-generation status layered on top of their race, gender, class, cultural, and
regional identities may have intensified the challenges they faced in their successes.
These students first needed to discover themselves and gain the confidence in who they
wanted to become. They discovered that they were first-generation college students in
combination with their race, gender, class, cultural and regional differences. They faced
their educational process in isolation. They learned that they had to rely on themselves to
do the heavy lifting, fitting in and making right connections. These students developed
strong senses of self. With self-confidence, they struck out on their academic paths. For
ultimate success, however, these students needed more than just self-confidence. They
needed supportive networks. I will now describe the second component of the success
model, supportive networks.
Supportive Networks

In total, all eleven of the research participants emphasized the significance of supportive networks and recognized the value in expanding their social networks. Jennifer described her experience during her undergraduate program. “I’ve always been kind of the outsider” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). She observed a difference in her the relationships with her doctoral program colleagues and saw the value of fitting in. “It’s so nice to be able to understand exactly what they’re saying and they understand what I’m saying and they can offer genuine advice. It’s a whole different kind of conversation. I feel like I really fit in there” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Laura mentioned that as her social networks expanded, she recognized that she was “a part of something bigger” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview) and she liked the impact she had on others. “It was also recognizing my leadership skills and recognizing that I was a leader and that – it wasn't about power, but it was about influence that I had on helping students who had been in my situation” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Laura recognized the value of interpersonal relationships and acknowledged their power.

Laura and Jeff talked about the importance of making the right connections. Laura said, “Find that person on the campus or those two people – find the people that you connect with. Find your resources. Because it wasn't until I found the resources that I learned – I learned how to be successful” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Similarly, Jeff stated, “The number one strategy that I’ve always used and still use, is to forge connections with people that are going to help me get what I want to get” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). The research participants stated that their successes were
due in part to the relationships they made while in college. The participants acknowledged that the encouragement and support they felt from their families of origin and high school faculty and administrators helped launch them.

Alison, Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, Todd, and Thomas explicitly stated that others expected them to go to college. Dave implied that others expected him to go to college. All of these students were successful in high school. Their families and teachers expected them to go on to college. Figure 7 illustrates the support networks theme in the success model as well as the key elements defining support networks.

Figure 7. Supportive networks component of success and its defining elements.
Family of origin/High school faculty and administrators/Community.

Anne, Dave, Jennifer, Laura, Todd, and Thomas spoke specifically of their parents’ expectations about college. Todd described how his parents always encouraged him to excel as a student. “My parents, they always sort of pushed me – I guess they knew my capability, because I just always have done well in school, and they just always made sure I was doing well” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Jennifer’s story mirrored Todd’s story. “I came from a household where it was kind of always expected that we would go to college. My parents always said they wanted better for us and just to go to college” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer’s parents recognized the value of the college degree. “Neither of them have a college degree and they said – they always say you can’t do anything without that piece of paper in your hand” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Laura’s parents insisted that their daughters go to college. “Neither of my parents went to college, but they were determined that their daughters were going to go to college. And I don't really think we had an option” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Laura remembered that conversations assumed her college attendance. “It was just like, ‘Well, when you're in college,…it was conversations like that. "Well, when you’re in college – " and grades, well like, "Oh, these grades will get you a scholarship for college’” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). The family focused on the expectation of her college attendance. Laura even felt pressured by her mother, because her mother did not have the opportunity to go.
Thomas’s mother influenced his decision to go to college. His mother wanted better for Thomas. “My mom too was a big influence. And it’s not because, my mother didn’t finish high school, but she would always say I have to finish high school in order to make something of myself” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). At first, Thomas’ mother insisted that he just complete high school, but as soon as high school commencement neared, his mother started suggesting college. Thomas felt the pressure. “She said you’ve got to get your high school diploma. As I got closer to finishing high school, you could hear, ‘So, are you going to go to college?’ And I remember thinking, jeez” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Dave’s grandfather made financial investments on his grandchildren’s behalf. Dave knew his grandfather intended for the investments to pay for college. In addition, Dave’s parents taught him the value of looking after one’s self. Dave knew college was a method to do that.

Anne’s parents insisted that she pursue college. “It sort of was always a foregone conclusion that I and my sisters would attend college…I was never pressured to go to a certain college or do a certain thing but I was expected to go to college” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Anne described talking about what she wanted to study and where she wanted to go, but never if she was going.

Jeff took college preparatory classes in high school, was successful, and others just assumed he would go. “I don’t really remember having a conversation with my family about like, I’m going to do this. I think it was just assumed that of course Jeff’s going to go into college because he’s got the brain for it” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). Caroline’s family, too, expected her to go to college. “We were raised like
you are gonna go to college, you’re gonna get a bachelor’s degree. It was just an understood, you know. It wasn’t optional” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview)

Everything pointed to the college path. “Everything directed us to, when we’re in high school, like, you need to start looking at colleges…talk to you counselor and make sure you’re taking the coursework that’s going to get you into college” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Catherine remembered how much her parents valued education and encouraged Catherine. “My mom and dad both, like they valued education. And my mom always said, you know like, make sure you get an education, no one will take it away from you” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview).

These six participants emphasized their parents’ expectation of college attendance. To all of them, an option never existed. Everyone assumed these students would go to college. The only questions centered on what they would study and where they would go.

Catherine, Cynthia, Jennifer, Laura, Thomas, and Todd described the influences of their high school teachers. Todd’s chemistry teacher witnessed Todd’s interest in the sciences and encouraged him to pursue a degree in the hard sciences. “We talked a lot about what I was going to major in because I thought chemistry, biology…It wasn’t a question of are you going to go, it’s what are you going to do when you go?” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Catherine, Cynthia, and Thomas described influential teachers who took them under their wings, offered advice, and assisted them with the application processes. Thomas stated, “He actually talked to me about the application. He brought me materials, like view books… And he said, you know, I’ve got some stuff to
show you. And he helped me with the application process” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview).

Jennifer and Laura acknowledged the significance of their high school guidance counselors who helped launch them on the college pathway. Jennifer’s guidance counselor helped influence Jennifer’s career path. Jennifer’s counselor even wondered if Jennifer would change her mind about her major once she started coursework. “She’s like you’re going to change your mind when you go to college and you’re around that crowd. She’s like, ‘You’re going to change your mind’” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer earned good grades and the counselor recognized Jennifer’s ability and encouraged her to consider other options as well.

Laura’s guidance counselor explained different college-going options and insisted that she apply for college. “I had an amazing counselor at high school...He would call me into his office and talk to me about different opportunities for higher education, different colleges...I was always told, ‘You're smart, you're smart, you're smart. You can do this’” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Laura remembered her high school teachers would not accept late work. In addition, “We heard everywhere, ‘We're preparing you for college. We're preparing you for college’” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Not only did their family expect them to go to college, their teachers and guidance counselors expected these students to go to college. They earned good grades. They proved themselves academically.

Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Jennifer, Laura, and Thomas mentioned the importance of their extended community support. Jennifer spoke of the ongoing support
she received from her church and how that support offered her an extra boost. Laura mentioned the importance of a dear advisor’s encouragement and the value of her husband’s support. Thomas’ community rallied around him and tried to keep him out of trouble knowing that he was going on to college. Anne’s mother demonstrated her ongoing support by sending weekly encouragement in the mail. The continued support from their family of origin, their high school faculty and administrative staff, and the extended community offered much needed encouragement to the research participants. These interactions during their educational pathways helped establish a much needed support network that encouraged these students to consider college. Once in college the research participants recognized that their successes resulted from the connections they made while in college. The participants mentioned the support of their current families, university faculty and staff, cohort members, and peers. I will direct the discussion to this group next.

**Current family/University faculty and staff/Cohort/Peers.**

Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Dave, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, Todd, and Thomas (ten out of eleven of the research participants) spoke to the importance of making connections. According to Thomas, “You’ve got to network. You’ve got to network, network, network. One thing I learned to do was network. Survival skills…You talk to everyone. You shake their hand. You look them in the eye, and you give a firm handshake” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Anne, Cynthia, Jeff, Jennifer, and Thomas described significant relationships from their undergraduate experiences, while Alison, Jennifer, Laura, and Todd shared experiences from graduate school.
As an undergraduate student, Thomas learned quickly the importance of the relationships you build while at college.

Get to know people. And let them get to know you…this includes the help. From the people at the top to the people at the bottom. The help. The help is going to be so influential. The help helped me. (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview)

Cynthia acknowledged that her work ethic as a resident assistant impressed others and opened other opportunities to her.

I maintained a good relationship in the building, but people definitely knew me as someone that followed the rules. And because of that I got some opportunities…I actually got to know one of the associate vice presidents for Student Affairs. (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview).

In addition, Cynthia’s financial aid officer offered regular meetings to help Cynthia with her college transition. “Because I had a grant, I had a one-on-one every quarter with a financial aid advisor. So she helped me navigate that really well so that I could get my overage checks to pay for my books and things” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). Jeff recognized that his relationships with his forensics coaches offered him a unique opportunity to get feedback on his academic work. “We get that one on one interaction with teachers that I think a lot of students don’t normally get…and in particular the coaching we got was hands-on practice with improving our writing and our speaking” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Jennifer and Anne realized the importance of research during their undergraduate programs. Jennifer flourished once offered the opportunity to assist. Jennifer described
how her career path changed because of undergraduate research. “One of my professors asked me to work on a research project with her and I think I just did it because I thought it would be interesting…I saw how it could help people in a bigger way” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Anne learned a valuable lesson. She did not do enough research to prepare her for a job search in her discipline. Anne encouraged students to better understand what their discipline requires and participate in research as an undergraduate. “I didn’t do undergrad research until my last semester of my last year. It wasn’t something I realized I had to do and it was partially my fault and a little bit my adviser for not telling me” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). This research void left Anne unprepared for a job search in chemistry, so she returned to graduate school to get the necessary research experience.

Anne, Cynthia, and Jennifer all mentioned their participation in discipline specific conferences as undergraduate students offered them insight and built networks for the future. Anne saw value in “making those connections…going to conferences, meeting other chemists in the field” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Cynthia attended a conference, which helped refine her career choices. Jennifer presented her research findings at a conference, which opened her eyes to all the discipline offered professionally. “I was able to present our research there…It’s a national conference that I think was just like a really big changing point for me…I think that was definitely the point where I wanted to get my Ph.D. the most” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Alison also recognized the importance of making connections and used this knowledge when constructing her dissertation committee. “I knew well enough from
growing up that people that work together have to get along together. So I made sure that all of my committee members got along with one another” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Todd described the importance of making a positive connection with one’s graduate advisor. “He’s been really, really great. I actually thought about that because academically, everything, yeah, for sure, but he and I outside of academics, just personality-wise, I couldn’t imagine finding someone better” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Laura looked for other women balancing academics and a family and marveled at one faculty member’s modeling.

Jennifer acknowledged the importance of a positive relationship with one’s faculty members; however, Jennifer’s unique situation of simultaneously earning a master’s and doctorate perplexed many of her faculty members. “It’s not even just with the students. It’s also with professors. Sometimes they don’t know what classes I’ve taken… So their expectations are much higher of me because I’m in the Ph.D. program as well” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Cynthia appreciated the support offered by her supervisor when considering doctoral work. Caroline valued the encouragement offered by her previous employers and the endless support offered by her wife and parents. Catherine needed the commitment from her entire family to start her doctoral work. These doctoral students understood the value of having supportive family members, university faculty members, and administrative staff. They recognized that their success rode of the shoulders of all who held them up in the process. With both identity and supportive networks components of
Independence

All eleven of the research participants recognized the importance of their developing independence. Being unfamiliar with higher education, they quickly learned that they would need to be their own champions and rose to the challenge. The students discovered their independence through the recognition of their academic aptitude/ability, good decision making and demonstrating their financial capability. Jennifer described it this way. “I recognize how much I’ve had to do on my own a lot more now. I didn’t really see it in undergrad…But now that I’m in grad school working on my Ph.D. my parents mention it a lot more” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Caroline wondered if being independent was part of her cultural upbringing and the expectation, which ultimately led her to being responsible, making good choices, and excelling. “It’s representative culturally…It was like any time I wanted to do anything that was different from things that my family had done, or whatever, it was like ‘Okay, but, you know, work it out, figure it out’” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview).

The independence component part of the success model for these students included three elements: Academic aptitude/ability, decision-making, and financial capability. I will describe each separately below. Figure 8 below illustrates the independence theme in the success model as well as the elements defining it.
Figure 8. Independence component of success and its defining elements.

Academic aptitude/Ability.

All the research participants demonstrated academic ability and they all stated that there was an expectation from their families and teachers that they would go to college. Todd described his parents’ expectation. “I never really thought about not going to college. I’ve always done well in school, and it was just the next step. It wasn’t should I go, can I go... It was never something I considered not doing” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Alison, too, expected to go to college. “I mean when I was growing up there, nobody talked as if there was an option not to go to college. It was expected that
you were going to college” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Jeff stated, “It was also very interesting because I knew my family didn’t have the means to help me go to college, but I had the aptitude for it” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Caroline described her parents’ expectation of college attendance. “I always did well in school. We were expected to do well in school…it was understood from the time that we were kids that eventually you will go to college and you will get a bachelor’s degree” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). These 11 students, all enrolled in doctoral work, demonstrated the academic ability early and expected to go to college. The first generation, doctoral students in this study knew they possessed an academic ability. This may be rooted in the fact that their parents expected them to do well in school, so they did, and this in turn, opened doors to higher education.

Catherine, Caroline, Jeff, Jennifer, and Todd struggled to find the right academic discipline, although none of them questioned their decision to go to college. On their journeys each participants evaluated many things, but ultimately they knew they would go to college. Todd considered medical school, but after his undergraduate program, he was not convinced so enrolled in a biomedical science program.

The further I progressed in that, I realized, I don’t know if this is what I really want to do or not. So instead of applying to medical school my senior year, I got into a biomedical science master’s program. (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview)

Todd learned quickly that was not for him so explored other options. “I did a semester of that and I quickly realized medical school was not what I wanted to do…I don’t want to
keep doing what I’m doing, but I know I want to keep going” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Todd continued his exploration and discovered speech pathology, but that too did not fit. After additional consideration, Todd discovered hearing science. The discipline blended many of his interests. “I’d always loved music. Music is my passion, I would say, music, and physics, and communication, and psychology. It clicked one day. It’s everything that I love, hearing that’s a conglomerate of all the things that I like” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview).

Jennifer enrolled as a journalism major, but quickly learned her interests were elsewhere. “I just really didn’t like it and I wanted to do something that was more involved with helping people. I just kind of looked into other programs and finally found speech/language pathology” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer’s mentor encouraged her to participate in undergraduate research. This research opened other options to Jennifer. “And then as I started I got interested in research and I worked with a couple of mentors and they had mentioned a couple of times that maybe I should get my Ph.D.” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Jeff learned his dreams of being a pharmacist meant passing a particular math course. Two years had passed since his last math course and he realized he needed to consider another option. “I remember one day it was the first semester of my junior year. I kind of had – I won’t call it a breakdown, but an existential crisis of sorts” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). Jeff recognized that he had a gift with communication and pivoted after consulting with a mentor. Catherine began her college career intent on being an art teacher. Catherine changed her mind and reconsidered her options after
observing on-site. “I went to a huge high school and did a classroom observing and realized I did not want to do high school art” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview). All of these research participants struggled to find their paths. They never underestimated their academic ability, but expressed uncertainty about what disciplines to pursue. The many career choices required their personal exploration.

Some of the research participants always knew they would go to graduate school. Alison remembered, “I had always thought I would go to graduate school, but it was definitely while I was working as a reporter that it was obvious I needed to go” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Alison recognized the shifting dynamics in journalism and knew she needed to explore something else. Caroline expressed a similar sentiment, although she was uncertain about which discipline she would study. “It was something from the time I graduated from, I finished my bachelor’s degree, I had thought at some point in my life I would probably go back to graduate school... The question became what did I want to do” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview).

Five out of the eleven research participants recognized that their chosen profession required or encouraged additional education. Thomas acknowledged his capability in his career, but recognized that having a Ph.D. offered him some credibility with peers and the leadership. “Interactions were with PhD level and executive-level folks and...you have to have that PhD. I felt like I was sitting at the table and sometimes I was being heard, but sometimes I knew that I wasn’t being heard” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Additionally, Thomas knew that earning a Ph.D. was strategic. Thomas
noted that any shifting in staff would affect his role and he needed to be prepared for what that shifting might bring.

Jeff realized quickly that to teach the classes he wanted to teach, he needed a Ph.D. He approached it pragmatically and identified the necessary steps. Jeff set out to achieve this goal with a plan in place. “Pretty early on I realized that just getting a master’s degree wouldn’t enable me to do what I wanted to do… I’ll put my head down, do the work I need to do, because I’ve got more after this” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Three students discovered an unfriendly job market. Trained as journalists, two of the eleven research participants decided to retrain for a different career when they realized the changing future of journalism. Although both acknowledged that graduate school was always in their sights, the shifting job market further emphasized the need to retrain more quickly. Caroline remembered, “I loved working in newspapers and like when it became clear that, that was probably not what I was going to be able to do for the rest of my life, it was a little bit heartbreaking” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). One participant struck out in the job search after completing her undergraduate degree when she realized employers sought scientists that were more experienced. Anne remarked, “I was applying like crazy every day. I wasn’t hearing back, they wanted more experience, a lot of senior level chemists were wanted so PhD with 15 years’ of experience” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview).

For various reasons, these 11 students started doctoral programs. All 11 found success as students in their undergraduate programs and had support from their families
of origin, current families, faculty, and peers to continue their academic pursuits. These students knew they had the ability to pursue higher education and jumped into their programs ready to learn. Equipped with the academic aptitude, these first-generation doctoral students learned that they would have to make their own decisions. These research participants acknowledged that it was difficult at times, but they achieved a level of maturity and independence because they made their own path.

**Decision-making.**

Seven of the eleven research participants mentioned their need to make their own decisions. Their inability to rely on their parents for direct assistance resulted in growing confidence and independence. Jennifer described her decision-making. “I make a lot of independent decisions and I don’t rely on my parents… I don’t really need them to give me advice on a lot of things now” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Jennifer acknowledged that her parents struggled with not feeling needed, although they remained proud that Jennifer made her own decisions. “I think they get upset because they can’t help me with stuff… I think they feel bad sometimes… then they feel like we should be able to do this for you, but we don’t understand enough to help you” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Jeff found independence quickly. He made decisions about his major, coursework, and finances. He acknowledged that he matured quickly, but this maturity came with a price. His parents demonstrated reluctance to his blossoming independence. “It made me really independent really quickly. I matured to a certain extent more so than
a lot of my peers did, which made it difficult for me to go back home, because…they
don’t necessarily see you grow” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Some of the students acknowledged that they would do things differently,
knowing what they know now. Jennifer described herself as easily persuaded into things
just to please others. Jennifer regretted this past tendency and encouraged others to worry
less about what others wanted or thought. She realized the importance of deciding her
priorities for herself. “I wish I would have known not to worry so much about what other
people think because I feel like I was doing a lot more for my parents than I was doing
for me in the beginning” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Inspired by his dream of following his own path, Dave made his own decisions
and expected little from others. “I think because I wanted something different that I knew
it was up to me to make sure it worked out. I wasn’t expecting anything from anybody
else so I was going to make this work” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview). Dave
acknowledged that accepting an internship during his undergraduate program required
that he live on his own and make his own decisions. From this experience, Dave gained
confidence and maturity.

Anne developed a strong sense of independence and confidence through her
graduate program and internship. Anne described herself as self-reliant and self-
confident. “I have worked really hard to be independent…I like to know how to fix my
car, I like to know how to cook all my own meals. I want to be able to be self-reliant”
(Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview).
As a part of their maturing process, many of these research participants learned to ask for help and declined additional commitments that only distracted them from their ultimate goal. Anne, Catherine, Cynthia, Dave, Jennifer, and Laura described their reluctance to ask for help during their undergraduate programs but ultimately learned to rely on others, particularly faculty and peers in their doctoral programs. Laura described her perspective as an undergraduate student, “I felt, deep within my soul, for some reason, that asking for help was a sign of weakness” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Thomas learned that he needed to be selfish and say ‘No’ when asked to do something distracted him from his studies. “Learning to say ‘no’… I was always like sure, I can help you. Sure, I can do this, sure, I can do that. And now it’s like uh-uhn, I can’t. I’m sorry” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). These students decided to be intentional with what they committed themselves, too, which demonstrated good decision making, maturity, and independence. Independence grew for all of these first-generation doctoral students because of being financially responsible for their education.

Financial capability.

Throughout the interviews, all the research participants spoke emphatically to the importance of financing their higher education. The tenor of the conversation about finances varied by participant, however, everyone showed concern about paying for college. This demonstrated a wisdom that comes with striking out on your own; having concern about one’s success and the maturity in the knowledge that one is responsible for one’s own fate.
The research participants used a combination of all of the following methods to finance college their undergraduate programs: student financial aid, work-study, on-campus and off-campus employment, and academic and athletic scholarships. The participants used educational benefits, domestic partner benefits, teaching assistantship, and research assistantships, as well as financial aid as doctoral students. Seven participants worked in between degrees to gain practical experience and help pay for their continued education, while four participants enrolled immediately following their undergraduate degrees. These four research participants, Anne, Jeff, Jennifer, and Todd, held teaching or research assistantships. Of these four, Anne, Jennifer and Todd started their doctoral work without master’s degrees. Their doctoral programs only required a bachelor’s degree to apply.

Thomas needed to consider the out-of-state fees. Jeff’s family faced bankruptcy and he acknowledged that his parents lived paycheck to paycheck. Cynthia studied hard and was motivated to graduate from her undergraduate program debt-free, which resulted in scholarships. In addition, Cynthia made connections, which landed her on-campus positions paying for her housing. Caroline wanted to go out-of-state for her undergraduate program, but could not ask her family to help her pay for a costly private school, so choose to go to a local college.

These participants demonstrated a willingness to do whatever it took to pay for college. They studied hard and received scholarships to help pay for college. They accepted less than glamorous work to help pay the bills. They flipped houses to pay for college. These students were not the norm. These participants’ decision-making led to
successful college financing which eased their minds and allowed them to focus on their coursework. These students took action. They developed creative strategies and learned new skills in order to pay for college. These students showed an unwillingness to put their families at risk and took on the financing responsibility themselves.

Cynthia, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, Todd and Thomas all talked of receiving scholarships to help pay for college. These scholarships included academic, athletic, and needs-based scholarships. Alison, Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Dave, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, and Thomas worked in various capacities to pay for college. Some positions helped shape career aspirations, others simply paid for college. Jennifer worked fast food and then flipped a house. Anne worked in the dining halls and in an academic department. Jeff worked in a pharmacy. Catherine, Cynthia, Laura, and Thomas worked as residence assistants during their undergraduate programs.

Caroline and Dave spoke of the importance of educational benefits to pay for their academic pursuits as doctoral students. All of these students demonstrated an internal motivation to do what was necessary to pay for college and a maturity in recognizing the right time and place for their academic aspirations. These students are equipped with a unique set of attributes for first-generation college students, not to mention the fact that all these research participants recognized the importance of hard work and setting goals. Their academic ability coupled with good decision-making and financial capability resulted in a maturity, which led to independence. The development of independence, along with their strong sense of self and the supportive networks are three components of the success model described during interviews by the 11 first-generation doctoral
students in this study. Let me now turn to the fourth component of the success model, empowerment.

**Empowerment**

These 11 first generation, doctoral students experienced a blossoming self-awareness, possessed supportive networks who told them they could achieve anything, demonstrated independence through mature problem solving and good decision-making. These students experienced empowerment. The empowerment component part that assisted these students in their successes included three elements: Changing worldview, belonging and perseverance/drive/motivation. I will describe each separately below. Figure 9 illustrates the empowerment theme in the success model as well as the elements defining it.
Changing worldview.

Alison, Cynthia, Dave, Jeff, Laura, Thomas, and Todd recognized that going to college opened their eyes to new perspectives about the world around them. Alison felt inexperienced with other cultures and wanted to meet new people. Cynthia described her reluctance to return home after the summer between her first and second years of college. She found more opportunities at school and jumped at the chance. Todd acknowledged his apprehension about going away to college, but realized the opportunities before him and sought out new people and experiences. Dave explored New York with his
grandmother after high school graduation and witnessed what the world was like outside of a town of 1,400. Laura experienced alienation from her family of origin after starting college and chose to limit her return visits.

Seven of the eleven research participants discovered liberation while at college. Exposed to new and different experiences, these participants started to consider their childhood perceptions about the world and reconciled the incongruence. These decisions affected their relationships with the families of origin, but the respondents developed into empowered, educated students.

Todd acknowledged that his views became more progressive because of going to college.

Once I got out of the house and started seeing other things, and different lifestyles…the way people lived, and stuff that normally would have been considered bad, or wrong, I was like, why would that be bad? It’s perfectly fine. (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview)

Todd developed a more liberal way thinking contrary to his parents’ perspective. Todd challenged his faith, required to attend regular church services as a child, he stopped going to church. Todd acknowledged his own belief structure and realized that religion offered him little. “I was like, I’m not religious at all. I was just afraid to admit that. But now that I’m out, I understand that about myself, and I accept it. It was a pretty big point, moment in my life” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Todd and his parents never discussed his changing view.
Jeff described his evolving worldview. “The more that you learn about the world, you are able to see how it works, how it works to help some people…the world according to this group of people doesn’t fit with how I see it” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). Jeff’s faith played into this evolution. Jeff remembered legislation under debate in [another state] banning same sex marriage during his undergraduate program. He recognized his parents’ view, but challenged it. “I knew that my family was going to vote for the ban, and...I just remember thinking about it, and was like, what difference does it make at the end of the day. So I voted against it” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Alison wrestled with her faith, too, while in her undergraduate program. “There were certain things that changed, like my religion definitely changed. My parents are pretty strict Catholics, but when I was at college I wanted something that I would consider more open-minded. So definitely religion changed” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Alison described herself as much more liberal than the rest of her family of origin.

In addition to exploring their religious beliefs, many of the respondents enthusiastically described all the different cultures exposed to by going to college. The world became much bigger and more diverse. Todd embraced the experience fully. “I just met so many people from everywhere, and I realized, wow, I never would have met these people or learned all these things had I not been here” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Dave admitted that for his graduate degree he wanted to experience a new environment, one that reflected who he was becoming. “My undergrad experience was
very similar to who I was and where I’d grown up…I wanted to experience the urban experience…I was a minority and the campus is right downtown” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview).

Cynthia experienced an awakening when she lived on an accessible floor in her residence hall which housing several students with disabilities. With limited exposure to people with disabilities, Cynthia reconsidered her perspective. She acknowledged her difficulty in navigating unfamiliar terrain. “We didn’t have anything like that back at home…that was kind of awkward personally to navigate ‘cause I feel like I had some bias there ‘cause I had never interacted with those type of people before” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview).

These experiences described by the participants illustrate their changing worldviews, views different from that of their families of origins. Whether changing from the faith of their families of origin (five out of eleven), their class status (three out of eleven), or their political views (five out of eleven), these students challenged the beliefs of their upbringing, which resulted in an awakening, an empowerment. This empowerment, and the mindset that comes with it, helped these students in their success. Another key element of empowerment is having a sense of belonging. This is where I turn the discussion next.

**Belonging.**

Alison, Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Dave, Jennifer, Laura, Todd, and Thomas (ten out of eleven of the research participants) spoke to the challenges and importance of connections. Jennifer and Todd struggled with being the only ones in their
programs and this created feelings of isolation for them at times. Todd described his undergraduate experience as one, where as a member of the football team who arrived to campus early, he quickly developed a large extended family, “There’s probably 100 guys on the team, but we’re together 8 hours a day, 10 hours a day at least, and basically form this huge family for a month” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Contrast that with his experience as a doctoral student where Todd felt isolated from other graduate students, “I’m the only one…I’m sort of just this – anomaly is not the right word either, but I’m kind of the outsider… if I was doing the clinical route, everything is laid out for you” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview).

Jennifer experienced a similar challenge during her doctoral program, “That’s been the hardest part, not having a place to really fit, because I’m the only person who’s doing this program… That’s been the hardest thing for me, I guess, is not being a part of a big group” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Being in a unique situation where she earned her master’s and doctorate simultaneously, Jennifer felt like an outsider with other master’s degree seeking students. “I feel like I’m kind of the outsider in the classes because they’re in classes together with all the people they’re in clinic with and then I’m just kind of the one that’s in class with them” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview).

Dave felt isolated during high school and expected college to be an opportunity to escape to something better,

I did not fit in. We lived on a farm out in the country, and that was still the time of the division between the country kids and the city kids…it was not a good experience…I couldn’t wait to leave. (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview)
Cynthia’s experience mirrored that of Dave’s. “We were definitely the outsiders of the group because we didn’t come back every weekend and work in the parents’ jobs, or work at the family business there or anything like that” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview).

Caroline described challenges in developing collegial relationships because of her responsibilities as a full-time employee while balancing a doctoral program. “It is more difficult to engage in the social aspect of it…It’s taking a little bit longer to create relationships just because like I can’t go out drinking…because I have to be a work at 8 o’clock tomorrow” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Catherine lamented over the disconnectedness she felt to the campus when she first began her doctoral work. Catherine moved to a new location for her doctoral program and had to educate herself and her family about the community and the university. “I think by the time you’re at the doctoral level, I don’t think anyone thinks about the, like getting connected to the campus” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview).

In addition, several of the participants identified several dynamics where they felt different from the others in college. These research participants recognized that they stood apart from many of their peers. Whether their race, gender, age, life’s experience, religion, place of upbringing, how one spoke, or how one dressed contributed to the isolation, the first-generation doctoral students sought a place to belong. Thomas stated “I just learned to adapt, I just learned to adjust. I think probably then is when I started to realize how to become or how to adapt to different places” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Overcoming the difference required that these students find the courage to be
different and comfortable with who they were. In addition, they found others like themselves.

Anne, Caroline, Cynthia, Dave, Jennifer, and Thomas acknowledged the importance of feeling like you belonged to a larger whole. Jennifer commuted as an undergraduate student, which left her feeling disconnected from others. “I lived an hour away so I would just go to class and come home. I wouldn’t hang out so I didn’t form really tight bonds with the people even with anyone in that class” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). Dave applied to a master’s program after completing his undergraduate degree. Dave made the move south after being accepted, but he felt uneasy about his decision. “I got down there and I went to the orientation and I was like, I don’t belong here” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview). Dave changed his mind about graduate school. “My parents were already on their way with my stuff. I called them and I said I can’t do this, just go back home” (Dave, August 10, 2015, Interview).

Thomas faced ignorance from peers and adapted in an effort to fit in. “I modified the way I spoke. But they could still tell because the accent was strong. I modified the way I carried myself, because most of those people had money. I didn’t” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview). Thomas changed how he dressed to give the appearance of affluence. “That adaptation technique made it look like I was okay” (Thomas, April 28, 2015, Interview).

Anne acknowledged that she was different from most in her academic discipline being a woman in a field of predominately men. Anne reported not feeling this difference from colleagues. “I don’t want to say they don’t treat me like a woman. But they don’t
sensor themselves around me which I wouldn’t want them to do anyway. But they – I’ve never felt like I didn’t fit in with them” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Anne realized this could be something she encounters in the future. Cynthia felt intimidated by classmates due to their extensive experience. “The other two, as they were introducing themselves, seemed to be very accomplished. And so I wasn’t very sure if I could fit into that type of environment” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). Cynthia described herself as less experienced and worried what she could contribute. “Ooh. I’m this white girl who’s done orientation. Like I know I’m good at my job, but I haven’t had those type of life experiences. And so I definitely second guessed it a time or two” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview).

Caroline experienced unease about her age when admitted to a doctoral program. “I walk in this class and like everybody’s 25 or 26 and it, and I knew that, like I knew that is what it was going to be, but then it’s a little bit overwhelming” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Caroline faced a new field of study making her feel underprepared for the first few classes. “People are like, you know, talking about, like talking really authoritatively about things that I don’t know, and so, the first couple of weeks it was really exciting, but it was really a little bit intimidating, too” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview). Caroline worked full-time while in her doctoral program and her peers were all full-time students. “They are all full-time students who are also teaching and I am not teaching… and like I’m completely out of those conversations” (Caroline, November 11, 2014, Interview).
Anne, Caroline, Catherine, Cynthia, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, and Todd spoke of the importance of having relationships with others experiencing the same rigorous demands. Anne, Cynthia, and Jeff recognized the importance of peer relationships. They described how they relied on their peers for success. Anne stated, “I realize that you cannot do any of this on your own. You need people to bounce ideas off of to help… It’s always nice to be able to vent to someone who knows what you’re talking about” (Anne, December 5, 2014, Interview). Cynthia recognized the importance of peers when returning to the student world after taking a break between her master’s and doctoral programs. “It’s been nice to hear their experience and nice to know that everyone struggled with statistics. So, I’m not alone in that boat” (Cynthia, November 20, 2014, Interview). Jeff acknowledged as peers, his group helped each other improve. “I have a fantastic cohort of peers… We’re encouraging each other do to better, to do more, and we celebrate when something good happens for each other. It was like surrounding yourself with people you want to be like” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview).

Caroline, Catherine, Jennifer, Laura, and Todd recognized the importance of peer support and found they needed to develop their own ‘cohort’ because they were one of few or the only one in their program. Catherine said, “I came thinking there were going to be a lot of people that were going to be full-time doctoral students… I was super excited about like being a part of a group. And there was like one other student” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview). In her unique situation balancing a master’s and doctoral program at the same time, Jennifer learned to rely heavily on her doctoral colleagues for support. “I think I’ve gotten closer to the Ph.D. students, I think, just because I needed
some sort of relationship with people” (Jennifer, December 1, 2014, Interview). When asked about building her own ‘cohort’, Laura shared, “What's been easy has been building the relationships – building that group of people who are supportive, who know the network… That's been beneficial, to just have people who are going through the same experience, to talk about it” (Laura, August 12, 2015, Interview). Alison sought belonging in a faith-based community and “attended almost every type of religious ceremony in town” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). For all of these research participants, they understood the importance of belonging and worked hard to become a part of the community. A changed world view and a sense of belonging helped these students, but so did perseverance. The first-generation doctoral students recognized the importance of personal drive and internal motivation. These elements moved them to action, empowered them to act. This action moved them to success.

Perseverance/Drive/Motivation.

Seven of the eleven doctoral students (Alison, Caroline, Catherine, Dave, Jennifer, Laura, and Todd) mentioned specifically the importance of hard work and dedication to their end goal. These students described the motivation required for the long, grueling doctoral process. Todd described the doctoral program as a difficult race with little instant gratification. “Yeah, it's a marathon for sure. It's not that I didn't know that, but… I never really understood how, or realized how long, and arduous, and how much effort it takes” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview).

Todd learned quickly to embark on the doctoral journey required a certain drive and will. Todd discovered the limited amount of time he had to complete his data
collection process and found the internal motivation to accomplish it. “I just had that sense of, you have to do it, no matter what you’ve got to do to get it done… My professor, he called it baptism by fire. They throw you in, and you sink or swim” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview). Todd described the focus he needed to be successful as a student. “When it really gets down to it, then I know when I’ve got to switch it on. It’s game time, I’ve got to do it now… everything else gets shut off. I’ve got to do this” (Todd, November 21, 2014, Interview) Todd acknowledged there were times when he would have preferred to socialize, but remained focused on the higher priority.

Alison faced a unique set of circumstances as a master’s student; her advisor suffered a stroke and was unavailable as she wrote her thesis. Alison learned the importance of hard work and self-reliance. “Even if you don’t know how to do something, you kind of have to do it anyway. I basically wrote my entire thesis on my own without any guidance” (Alison, November 18, 2014, Interview). Jeff recognized as an undergraduate and master’s student, the need to work hard and use his social connections advantageously. “I certainly did work hard for them, but part of that hard work was I made sure that I was in positions where people would think of me when an opportunity came up” (Jeff, November 13, 2014, Interview). These useful lessons continued to be valuable to Alison and Jeff and contributed to their success in their respective doctoral programs.

As for other research participants, the difficulty of the work, the need to stay focused, and their internal motivation challenged them. Cynthia, Jennifer, and Laura kept their ultimate goals in mind as motivation. Catherine summed it up perfectly.
“Perseverance. Honestly. Perseverance. Yeah I just have, like if I say I’m going to do it, I’ll do it. So not giving up” (Catherine, September 18, 2014, Interview). These research participants discovered the importance of their own perseverance. Their perseverance contributed to their success.

These eleven doctoral students recognized who they were and found support networks for their academic pursuits. Coupling the internal confidence gained from truly knowing one’s identity with supportive networks, then adding the skills and attributes found through maturity and independence led them to self-empowerment. They internally identified themselves as students, garnered support, and demonstrated a drive, independence, and empowerment that ultimately led to their success as students.

Although none of these elements happened in isolation or in a predictable pattern, all four of them (identity, supportive networks, independence, and empowerment) happened for all 11 of the research participants. Each student experienced the process differently and all of them acquired all four components, which ultimately led to their success as students.

**Chapter Summary**

Let me summarize the findings from the cross-case analysis. The four components identity, supportive networks, independence and empowerment, which surfaced after significant review and content analysis of interview transcripts, worked in concert and created a perfect environment for success. The students recognized the importance of their developing identities and embraced this development. Additionally, the students recognized the importance of supportive networks and worked diligently at nurturing
these valuable relationships. Further, they developed a sense of maturity and independence that gave them the confidence and resolve to achieve. This expanding confidence and resolve budded into empowerment, where the students set goals and created plans to achieve those goals. The four components created a perfect, synergistic platform for their continued success. Without one component or another, they could have faltered, but the four components developing simultaneously nurtured a fertile learning environment, which led to their success as college students.
Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. The purpose of the study was to contribute to the overall understanding of first-generation students. The current literature describes the experiences of first-generation, undergraduate students. Few studies focus on graduate students, let alone doctoral students. Because of this limited number of studies and in an effort to add to a more complete overall picture of first-generation students, I chose to examine the experiences of doctoral students and illuminate their trajectory to success.

I used a basic interpretive qualitative approach for this study. I contacted graduate faculty and/or program directors for all research-based doctoral programs at a large, public, four-year, primarily residential, research institution in rural Ohio. Fourteen potential research participants contacted me with a willingness to participate in the study. From the 14 identified participants, I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews; because of extenuating circumstances, one prospective participant did not attend the scheduled interview. Of the 13 interviews, two respondents did not meet the criteria; they were first in their families to get doctoral degrees, but not the first in the families to go to college. Eleven of the interview participants met the research criteria. The findings are the result of the data collected during these eleven interviews.

Following the interviews, I transcribed the interviews. Upon the completion of transcriptions, I looked for patterns and themes in the interview transcripts. After several transcript reviews, I identified patterns. With these emerging patterns, I used content analysis to understand better the experiences of these 11 first-generation doctoral students.
from the United States. Four major themes surfaced. The themes that surfaced are identity, supportive networks, independence, and empowerment. After significant analysis, I found that these four components contributed to the success of these 11 research participants.

**Research Questions**

In an effort to contribute to the overall first-generation college student body of knowledge and because very little research exists about the *graduate* student experience, in general (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004), this study focused on first-generation doctoral students from the United States and their experiences and educational pathways to their doctoral programs. I sought to understand the relationships, cultural values, and experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. In addition, I sought to understand better the assets and strengths they possessed or skills they developed. In this study, I addressed two research questions.

**Question 1:** What are personal and educational pathways first-generation doctoral students from the United States travel as they move toward graduate school? In addressing this question, I will examine relationships with family members, teachers, and other significant people during the formative years and any impact these relationships may have had on the research participants’ graduate school experiences. I will examine learned behaviors, cultural characteristics, activities, and values influencing the participants’ graduate school experiences.

**Question 2:** How do first-generation doctoral students from the United States experience graduate school? In addressing this question, I will pay particular attention to
the cultural and personal assets these students bring to their studies and relationships with peers, faculty, and other mentors.

Next, I will address the findings of the two research questions of the study. The section entitled “First-generation college students’ pathways” addresses findings as they relate to the research participants personal and educational pathways, the first research question. This section focuses primarily on the first-generation doctoral students’ formative and undergraduate years. The section entitled “Experiencing graduate education” addresses findings for how the research participants experienced graduate school addressing the second research question. This section describes the first-generation doctoral students in this study and their perceptions about graduate school. Following these two sections are findings related to capital theory, the theoretical framework outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.

**Research question one findings: Personal and educational pathways, the formative and undergraduate years.**

The first-generation doctoral students from the United States who participated in this study described their recognition that they were somehow different from their continuing-generation peers. These students worked hard and did not have someone at home to teach them the ropes. They navigated college alone. They changed their majors, explored careers option, made connections, found mentors, conducted research and chose graduate school without family members guiding the course. They set their sights on a college education early and planned to achieve success. Along the way the 11 first-generation doctoral students in this study faced their developing identities, found
supportive networks, explored independence and acted with empowerment. The first hurdle to their success was embracing their emerging identities and accepting who they were becoming.

During late adolescence and early adulthood, students are confronting major decisions about who they are (Baxter Magolda, 2000; Chickering, 1993). The research participants confirmed this finding. All eleven of the first-generation doctoral students who participated in this study wrestled with their identities. These students achieved academic excellence in high school and had the full support of many high school faculty and administrators, however, as Rendon (1992) suggested, first-generation students “often enter higher education consumed with self-doubt” (p. 61), the students in this study were no different. The interview participants described their unfamiliarity with higher education and their uncertainty about where to ask questions, what majors and careers to consider, how to complete certain paperwork, and where to turn with challenges. They learned new things about themselves and integrated these experiences into their personas. Like Orbe (2008) suggested, college is a pivotal developmental time for finding one’s identity and success comes from making this transition successfully (p. 81). The research participants in this study found the identities, which set them on their course for success.

In addition, contributing to their overall identity development was the need to traverse two worlds—the former world of their upbringing and the new world of higher education. Reconciliation between the home self and the college self is necessary for success as a student (Orbe, 2008, p. 93). All eleven first-generation doctoral students
described the challenge of navigating both worlds. They acknowledged that as their worlds expanded at college, they experienced a shrinking of their worlds at home. This evolution brought tension and strain to some of their relationships. As Lubrano (2004) called them “straddlers. They were born to blue-collar families... They were the first in their families to graduate from college. As such, they straddle two worlds, many of them not feeling at home in either, living in a kind of American limbo” (p. 2). The research participants demonstrated courage with this ongoing development of self and offered them the confidence to continue with their educational pursuits.

Along with embracing their developing identities, the literature suggests that first-generation students need the support of their families of origin and are far more likely to succeed if they have this support (Rendon, 1992, p. 63). One research participant put it well. She described one contributing factor to her success as the value of “knowing that there are people that care about you, and care about your success.” All eleven of the first-generation doctoral students participating in this study emphasized the importance of their families’ support, both their families of origin and their current families. In addition, the support offered by high school faculty and administrators along with university faculty and staff contributed to the success of these research participants.

The first-generation students in this study learned the importance of their independence quickly. They relied on their own abilities because they had nowhere to turn. Particularly salient was their unanimous concern about financing college. According to several researchers, first-generation students are apprehensive about how to pay for college and are reluctant to take on debt (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Heller, 2002; Nomi,
The research participants in this study echoed these findings. Overall, the students worked on-campus and off-campus, earned scholarships, applied for and received loans and grants, and used educational benefits to pay for college.

First-generation students often face financial strain, work more and choose to live at home in order to save money (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006; Pascarelli, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). The research participants acknowledged this phenomenon. They worked a variety of jobs, some in their disciplines, others not, in an effort to offset the cost of college. Three of the research participants chose to live at home to forgo some college expenses and at least one participant opted to enroll in an institution closer to home instead of attending an expensive private college several states away. All the research participants described their financial challenges paying for college, but they remained undeterred in their pursuit of education.

As a result of the confidence earned from their independent decision making and the constant support offered by their families, faculty, and friends added to their strong sense of identity, the first-generation doctoral students in this study felt empowered. Although they felt pulled between the world of their upbringing and the world of their future (Lubrano, 2004), the research participants remained fixated on their goals and acted toward that end. They persevered. They opened themselves to new experiences and their worldviews expanded. Although all eleven acknowledged their struggle with fitting in, they inserted themselves and began to feel as if they belonged.
What are personal and educational pathways first-generation doctoral students from the United States travel as they move toward graduate school? The participants of this study faced many challenges. The students lacked family support during the college application process, they enrolled in less selective colleges, they worked, they struggled to find a major, and they felt isolated from their peers. Through it all, they developed a sense of self, cultivated support networks, exercised independence in making academic choices, and experienced empowerment. They found success. Now let us examine the finding related to graduate education.

**Research question two findings: Experiencing graduate education, the graduate school years.**

Pascarella et al. (2004) stated “first-generation students appear less likely than those students whose parents have college degrees to be enrolled in a graduate or first professional program” (p. 250). The 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States I interviewed for this study beat the odds. They applied, and when admitted, enrolled in doctoral programs. All of these students arrived at a rural Ohio institution in pursuit of their Ph.D.s. Their motivations varied, but they all possessed the drive for academic success.

The 11 research participants of this study emphasized that their discipline required or highly recommended a doctorate in order to advance professional or achieve particular career aspirations. For example, in order to teach at a university, Dave and Jeff acknowledged that they needed a Ph.D. Jennifer and Todd recognized that to conduct and publish research in their respective fields, they needed a Ph.D. Although the literature
speaks to a slow-down in graduate applications and low completion rates (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Malone, Nelson, & Nelson, 2004; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006), these students pursued a doctoral degrees out of necessity.

Doctoral completion rates suffer as a result of doctoral students not receiving services to assist with their specific needs (Brus, 2006; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006; Polson, 2003). During the interviews, the research participants expressed dismay at the isolation experienced during their doctoral programs. Jennifer and Todd enrolled thinking there would be other students in their programs, only to learn that they were the only ones in their programs. Catherine and Laura expected cohort members to share in the experience, only to learn they had to construct their own cohort. They found others facing similar dynamics and intentional sought each other out for advice. In other words, instead of the university purposefully creating a sense of community for these doctoral students, these students have had to fend for themselves.

How do first-generation doctoral students from the United States experience graduate school? During their graduate programs, the research participants of this study all described the importance of fitting in (belonging) and support networks. They emphasized how isolated they felt and their desire to find others with similar experiences. They described how quickly they needed to mature, problem solve, and make decisions. They faced identity defining moments where they questioned their faith, political views, class status, and worldviews. They shared personal moments when they doubted their abilities, but remembered all the people from home pushing them on. These recollections offered inspiration and motivation to continue with their education. These students
embarked on remarkable personal and professional journeys. Each journey different, yet they all contained the same four elements that led to their success. These research participants possessed a sense of self, supportive networks, independence and empowerment that brought academic success to them, an academic success that lays the groundwork for continued success.

Discussion

**Capital and how it influences first-generation college student success.**

Researchers often use Bourdieu’s capital theory and suggest that first-generation students lack the social and cultural capital required for college-going success. For this study, I focused on attributes and skills these students possessed that enhanced their graduate school experiences, not just what was absent. I analyzed data informed by Bourdieu’s (1986) capital theory and Luthan et al. (2007) definition of psychological capital. Initially, I intended to view the data through the lenses of social, cultural and psychological capitals. However, through the interviews I discovered the importance of economic capital for the eleven first-generation doctoral students in this study. It permeated all 11 of the interviews. As a result, I will address four forms of capital.

According to Weiston-Serdan (2009), the accumulation of capital based on our existing class structure “puts some at an advantage over others and... isolates some or elevates some over others” (p. 397). Most institutions perpetuate the existing paradigm, a paradigm that benefits the dominant culture. Higher education is no different. First-generation students do not possess as much capital as their continuing-generation counterparts. This recognition bared itself out during interviews with the eleven research
participants of this study. In the following sections, I return to the four forms of capital and describe my findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States. I will examine social, cultural, and psychological capitals, as I intended, followed by economic capital.

**Social capital.**

According to Putnam (2000), “Social capital refers to the connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). The 11 first-generation doctoral students in this study understood the importance of making connections and nurturing those relationships helped bring them success. Nevertheless, the process of making connections and developing supportive networks was challenging for the students in this study. They all spoke of wanting to fit in, yet they felt isolated. They worked hard to overcome the isolation.

When going to college, first-generation students face all the same challenges that continuing-generation students face. In addition, according to Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, (2004) first—generation students also face “cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (p.250). First-generation students are trying to figure out how to fit in and find a sense of belonging. The research participants set belonging as a goal, and although they all discovered this sense of belonging eventually, the road was not without heartache and frustration.

First-generation students arrive at college with the understanding of their upbringing and the social capital built from the relationships connected to that upbringing. Although their families are proud and hugely supportive, what they can offer
their students is limited. Alison, Anne, Catherine, Caroline, Cynthia, Dave, Jeff, Jennifer, Laura, Thomas, and Todd all remarked about how their families expected them to go to college, but could not offer guidance in the process because of their lack of experience. The research participants learned quickly. They realized they would need to strike out on their own and make connections cultivating relationships that would help them succeed. By developing their own supportive networks, these first-generation doctoral students build on social capital.

Cultural capital.

According to Bills (2000), cultural capital is the “degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the ‘dominant’ culture” (p. 90). The 11 participants in this research study acknowledged their own self-doubt about their success and concerns about fitting in to higher education. However, they quickly identified the importance of cultural capital within higher education and they worked diligently to acquire the capital necessary to find success.

Lubrano (2004) describes how first-generation students may experience “being in two worlds at once and belonging to neither” (p. 194). Straddling the cultural divide between two worlds created difficulty for the research participants. As many researchers suggest, the research participants in this study found a dissonance between the place of their upbringing and the college environment (Gardner & Holley, 2011; London, 1992; Lubrano, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Rodriguez, 1983). This divide created tension, strife and, in some cases, a real aversion to returning home. The research participants acknowledged this challenge and, over time, were able to integrate
both elements of themselves into their identities. This integration allowed the doctoral students to navigate between the two worlds more fluidly and find success. Lubrano (2004) states the importance of finding the ability to integrate these two parts of their identities,

We Straddlers know there are costs and consequences for all the wishes and dreams. They are inevitable. Limbo folks can consider themselves fortunate if they can be upwardly mobile but still rooted in the blue-collar world. Peaceful reconciliation comes to us when we can finally meld the two people we are (p. 227).

As the research participants understood more about higher education, they acquired more cultural capital. They were able to navigate in the culture of higher education. This cultural capital acquisition left the first-generation doctoral students empowered. The more positive feedback the students received from their mentors and peers, the more validated they felt. This validation perpetuated their internal drive and ongoing perseverance. Additionally, the first-generation doctoral students in this study acknowledged and accepted their changing worldviews. The world looked different after attending college and they felt as if they belonged to the larger community of scholars. They viewed politics, religion, and class differently. The evolution of all of these things empowered them. They acquired a familiarity with the ‘dominant’ culture and felt more comfortable interacting within it.
Psychological capital.

Gardner and Holley (2011) suggest that first-generation college students possess a resiliency where these students “rely heavily upon self-motivation, self-efficacy, and an internalized locus of control” (p. 78). The first-generation doctoral students in this study possessed a drive, a determination, an internal motivation. They stayed focused on their end goal, or if derailed, readjusted as necessary. They worked hard and maintained hope. They achieved success.

The participants accumulated increasing amounts of psychological capital, which boost their self-confidence. Luthans et al. (2007) defines psychological capital as:

An individual’s positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success. (p. 3).

To illustrate this expanding psychological capital, let me offer a few of the research participants’ stories. Todd and Jennifer described their budding confidence in their roles as researchers. Todd faced a looming deadline and, through his determination, collected data by working tirelessly for a month. As the research project progressed, he gained confidence in his ability to complete the data collection. Similarly, Jennifer described her research as mentally challenging, but she enjoyed the challenge, which renewed her
confidence in her ability and helped affirm her ambition to be a researcher. Cynthia set clear, achievable goals to help her set the course. Alison practiced self-discipline and drive when left to complete her theses due to her advisor’s illness. These are all elements of psychological capital.

The research participants in this study recognized their abilities. They worked hard, made connections, and never gave up. These first-generation doctoral students were optimistic and demonstrated hope about their futures. They gained confidence and skills by doing the required work, and readjusted, demonstrating resiliency, when barriers presented themselves. The first-generation doctoral students from the United States who participated in this study accumulated more and more psychological capital, which brought them more confidence in their abilities. This confidence, in turn, brought success.

Having outlined the findings as they relate to social, cultural, and psychological capital, I now turn my attention to economic capital.

*Economic capital.*

As the interviews progressed, the participants of this research emphasized the significance that financing their college educations had on their entire college-going experiences. For example, Jeff witnessed his parents living paycheck to paycheck and he knew they could not assist him with paying for college, so he committed himself to working. Strapped with out-of-state tuition costs, Thomas accepted several on-campus positions to pay his tuition. Knowing that in-state tuition was less, he sought help from university administrators in changing his residency status and cut the overall cost of college attendance. Enchanted by a private, out-state school, Caroline declined to out-of-
state offer and attended in-state University to save money. The students in this study acknowledged that financing their higher education was never far from their minds. As a result, I will address economic capital in my findings.

The accumulation of economic capital converts into more capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Pasco, 2003; Weiston-Serdan, 2009). However, first-generation students arrive to college with less economic capital than their continuing-generation peers do. First-generation students are always trying to near this gap. The research participants in this study bear this out. Concerned with how to pay for college, all eleven participants tackled their financial obligations creatively. The students earned scholarships, received grants and loans, and worked odd jobs. They utilized domestic partner benefits, employee tuition waivers, and worked as research/teaching assistants.

It was shortsighted to think economic capital was irrelevant in this study. “Economic capital is that which can be immediately and directly converted into money, financial resources and assets” (Pasco, 2003, p. 12). First-generation students seek money to pay for college going expenses and is a significant concern for first-generation students.

**Capital, in summary.**

The 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States who participated in this study accumulated capital. The capital they accumulated came in the forms of social, cultural, economic, and psychological capital. The students in this study grew their psychological capital by developing and embracing their identities. Identifying and nurturing supportive networks resulted in expanded social capital. By discovering and
exercising independence, the research participants increased their economic capital, and by demonstrating empowerment through action, they accumulated more cultural capital. By increasing their overall capital, the students experienced more success. With each small success, the cycle continued. The accumulation of more capital brought success, which brought more capital, which brought more success. Figure 10 illustrates the four key components of success identified by the eleven research participants of this study and includes the accumulated capital earned with each component.

Figure 10. Four components and accumulated capital leading to first-generation doctoral student success.
Implications for Research

This research study found that these 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States were successful because they developed their identities, expanded their support networks, exercised independence, and demonstrated empowerment through action. These research participants accumulated psychological, social, economic, and cultural capital that positively influenced their success. There were some gaps in this study however, and researchers should consider the following. The future study of first-generation doctoral students should include interviewing research participants from more diverse disciplines. This research included participants heavily concentrated in the colleges of education and communication. Only one participant was from arts and sciences and two were from health sciences. In addition, all 11 of the research participants in this study were enrolled in Ph.D. programs. Future research students in other doctoral programs (e.g. Au.D., D.P.T., Ed.D., M.D. programs, etc.) may offer additional or different results.

A national study might offer additional and/or different insights into the experiences of first-generation doctoral students from the United States. In addition, comparing these findings to the findings of other similarly sized institutions in other parts of the country or comparing data collected at a flagship or private institution may elicit different findings. This study focused on first-generation doctoral students from the United States. Additional studies should include the experiences of first-generation doctoral students from outside the United States. Additional study into the perceptions
held by graduate faculty of first-generation doctoral students may offer additional information to the current understanding of first-generation doctoral students.

**Implications for Practice**

This study found that first-generation doctoral students need services that address their particular needs. First-generation doctoral students face isolation and struggle to belong to the university community. Higher education practitioners making efforts to assist with belonging may go a long way to increase the success rates of first-generation doctoral students. For example, establishing specific employment services for doctoral students or creating an office to assist doctoral students with postdoctoral opportunities could benefit first-generation doctoral students. For example, developing curriculum vitae for the first time can be daunting and consultation with an expert could ease anxiety. Offering professional development with the needs of first-generation doctoral students in mind may ease some transitional challenges.

Graduate schools or programs may want to consider establishing a mentorship program where an entering first-generation doctoral student pairs with another first-generation student further along in their studies. This pairing could assist the incoming doctoral student with navigating the uniqueness of the institution as well as the overcoming transitional challenges faced when entering graduate education.

In addition, graduate schools or programs may want to consider pairing a first-generation doctoral student with a first-generation faculty member. This could offer a unique support opportunity for faculty members. Any opportunity for a first-generation
doctoral student to accumulate more social, cultural, economic, or psychological capital may result in an increased likelihood for degree completion.

**Conclusion**

Adleman (2006) stated, “The probability of completing a bachelor's degree is reduced by roughly 21 percent for first-generation students” (p. 23). However, these 11 first-generation doctoral students from the United States succeeded. They beat the statistical odds and graduated with an undergraduate degree. Enrolled in doctoral programs, these 11 doctoral students found their success. By developing these four elements, the research participants developed the ability to navigate social, cultural, economic, and psychological capitals. Through their developing identities, the participants accumulated psychological capital. As their supportive networks grew, the participants saw an increase in social capital and the bearing it could have on their success as students. As their independence expanded so did their economic capital. Because of their changing worldviews, a sense of belonging, and their internal motivation, these students experienced empowerment. This empowerment brought increased cultural capital. Using unique attributes and not allowing their first-generation status to be an impediment, these first-generation doctoral students demonstrated the ability to navigate all four components of the success model, to accumulate all four types of capital, and to become successful students.

**Personal Reflection**

As a first-generation doctoral student, many of the stories told by my research participants resonated with me. College opened up many opportunities for me,
opportunities that I never imagined. I have grown personally and professionally. Now as I watch my three daughters, who are all considering or in college, they demonstrate little doubt about their futures. They are confident in their abilities as students. They have an understanding of college that I never had. They know college is the next step for them. I did not have that confidence. Somewhere, I found self-confidence, discovered who I was, cultivated a support network, developed independence and feel compelled to engage with my community. Like the students in my study, I accumulated capital, which contributed to my success as a student. I hope for the many first-generation doctoral students, who follow, they will find their successes, too.
References


Washington, DC.


National Study of Student Learning (NSSL).


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

(Charmaz, 2006, p. 30)

Initial Questions

1. Tell me about your decision to attend college.

2. Describe any people that influenced this decision. Describe any activities that influenced this decision. Were there classes or other experiences that influenced this decision? If so, what were they?

3. Describe your relationship with your family (friends, community, etc.) as you were growing up. Describe your relationship with your family (friends, community, etc.) as you were in college. How do you think your upbringing, family, community, etc. shaped your experience in college? Did anything change while you were in college? If so, how did you negotiate them with your family, friends, etc.?

4. As you look back on your experiences as an undergraduate, are there any events that stand out in our mind or are particularly important in shaping your identity? Could you describe them? How did these events change or support your plans, professionally and personally?

5. What, if anything, did you know about being first generation while you were an undergraduate?

Intermediate Questions

1. Can you point to a specific time when you made a decision about graduate school?
2. As you reflect on your experiences as a graduate student so far, are there any events that stand out in your mind or are particularly important in shaping who you are today? Could you describe them? Describe how these events have changed or supported your professional or personal plans.

3. How are you feeling about your graduate school experience? What are the best things about it? What are the challenges?

4. Who has been the most helpful to you during your graduate school experiences? How has he/she been helpful?

5. Describe your peer relationships within your academic experience.

6. Describe your relationship with faculty while in graduate school. Describe any differences from that of your peers, from that of continuing-generation college students.

7. Describe your academic experience in graduate school. Describe any financial opportunities afforded to you (grants, scholarships, etc.). Describe any professional opportunities offered to you (mentorship, practical experiences, etc).

Ending Questions

1. How have you grown as a person since your undergraduate days? Tell me about your strengths that you discovered or developed.

2. How have you grown as a person as a graduate student? Tell me about your strengths that you discovered or developed.
3. How important is your identity as a first-generation college student? Describe any challenges you have faced as a first-generation college student in either your undergraduate or graduate experiences.

4. What do you think are the most important strategies that help you succeed as a first-generation college student? How did you discover them? Did anyone assist you with that discovery?

5. Could you describe the most important lessons you learned being a first-generation college student?
## Appendix B: Research Participant Profile Table

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age at Interview</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Marital Status at Interview</th>
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<th>Academic Discipline/Program</th>
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<td>White</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Todd</td>
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<td>Ph.D. in Hearing Science</td>
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</table>
Appendix C: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Assets, Strengths and Educational Pathways of First-generation Doctoral Students

Researchers: Becky A. Bushey-Miller

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able 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 done because little research has been conducted on the success strategies of rural, first-generation doctoral students.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer several questions during an interview describing your experiences as a student. These experiences may or may not include experiences from primary, secondary, post-secondary and graduate school.

Your participation in the study will last approximately one to one and one-half hours.

Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated.

Benefits

This study is important to society because it may offer information regarding the experiences of rural, first-generation doctoral students.

You may not benefit, personally by participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential by removing any identifiable information. All handwritten notes and data collected during the interview will be secured in a locked cabinet. Transcriptions will be on password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. Summarized data included in the final manuscript will include pseudonyms for all research participants.
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; and
* 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

Becky Bushey-Miller  
bb313107@ohio.edu  
740.797.8649

or

Dr. Peter Mather  
matherp@ohio.edu  
740.593.4454

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Chris Hayhow, 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: [08/07/14]
A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2: research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: Assets, Strengths and Educational Pathways of Rural, First-Generation Doctoral Students

Primary Investigator: Becky Bushey-Miller

Co-Investigator(s): 

Advisor: Peter Mathes

Department: Counseling and Higher Education

Date: Aug. 8, 2014

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 (as an amendment) prior to implementation.