LOW-INCOME, HIGH ABILITY SCHOLARS:
AN IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION OF THEIR COLLEGE TRANSITION AND
PERSISTENCE EXPERIENCES

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the dynamics that enable low-income students access to higher education is only the first step in appreciating the factors that assist in their persistence, retention, and graduation from college. There appears to be a gap in the literature, however, regarding the experiences of high ability students from low-income families who are successful in enrolling in and graduating from college.

This qualitative phenomenological study with 15 second-year students at a large, urban, Midwestern university explores the transition and persistence experiences of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds with high academic ability. They have been given a full scholarship to the university because of their financial need and ability, but questions remain as to what their experiences will be like.

Results suggest that parental support and early encouragement of degree aspirations is very important for these students; they surround themselves with other high ability peers who become their supports and resources, both personally and academically; and employment is a substantial part of their identity in college. Their academic preparation and ability function as “passports” to other resources, including extracurricular activities, engaging coursework, and a high achieving peer group, which may have compensated for the lack of support they received at home.
The research with these scholars and the early systematic assessment of this financial aid and scholarship program has revealed the dynamics at play when enrolling high ability, low-income students. It is necessary to examine issues of access for underrepresented populations of students, like those from low-income families, in order to formulate the policies and practices that will ensure their equal opportunity to success in higher education.
DEDICATION

To my family and soon-to-be family,
I couldn’t have accomplished this without your love and support.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It was probably atypical that I did not visit the Ohio State campus during the Ph.D. student “visit” days, but rather completed my faculty interview over the phone. I was nervous to say the least, not being able to see these faculty members, who may or may not have been evaluating me favorably while they sat in Ohio, I in Virginia. I thought the interview went well enough, but as soon as one of the faculty members (I believe it was Susan Jones) said, “if you could see our faces, you’d see that we’re all smiling”, I was relieved. That phone conversation and a later visit to campus where I met those smiling faces in person convinced me that The Ohio State University was where I needed to be to complete my doctoral studies.

I am appreciative of Susan’s guidance and advice during my first year in the program. She challenged me as an advisor and a teacher, and was always willing to listen as I figured out where exactly my research interests abided. When Susan left for the University of Maryland, Ada Demb was more than willing to take me on, although I know she had more than enough to keep her busy. She is a tireless supporter of her students, and I have thoroughly enjoyed our relationship as it has developed. She has challenged me and has been my cheerleader, and I think we both learned a lot during this process. I thank her for keeping me on track and for her patience as I finished from
“afar”. She encouraged me to apply for the ASHE/Lumina Fellowship, and I am very grateful for her help in securing that award.

It was in Helen Marks’ class my first year that I stumbled upon this research topic. I am very glad to have found research that I am passionate about; I think it is a direct reflection of Helen’s passion for her students, teaching, and research. I always enjoyed the student-centered classes I took with Len Baird, who further encouraged my interests in student retention and persistence, and I always will remember our “tour” of campus in our environments class for the many things I learned that I did not know. He is a wealth of knowledge and an expert in his field, and I have always learned something from him, whether it was sitting in class or a discussion in his office.

Our original cohort of 8, Amy, Anna, Anne, Brian, Larry, Renee, and Steve, were a wonderful group of people to begin the program with. We certainly found ways to enjoy ourselves, from Leadership Lab to core classes, keeping each other laughing and pushing each other when we were less than motivated. They are impressive scholars, and I hope our paths cross many times in our careers and personal journeys.

Mom, Dad, Brad, and Robb have done their best to keep me smiling when I felt like giving up throughout this endeavor, and I thank them for all of their unconditional love and support. I couldn’t have done it without them, and as much as they tell me how proud they are of me, I am even more proud to call them my family.
VITA

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.........................................................................................................................................ii  
Dedication.......................................................................................................................................iv  
Acknowledgements.....................................................................................................................v  
Vita..................................................................................................................................................vii  
List of Tables..................................................................................................................................xi  
Chapters:  

1. Introduction................................................................................................................................. 1  
   Relevance of Research.............................................................................................................. 2  
   Economic Affirmative Action................................................................................................. 4  
   Purpose of Study..................................................................................................................... 6  
   Research Questions.................................................................................................................. 6  
   Significance of Study............................................................................................................... 7  
   Author’s Relationship to Research Questions....................................................................... 8  
   Introduction to Context of Study............................................................................................ 9  
   Terminology............................................................................................................................. 11  

2. Review of the Literature........................................................................................................... 13  
   Low-Income/First-Generation Students.................................................................................. 13  
   Family Background............................................................................................................... 15  
   Capital..................................................................................................................................... 20  
   Academic Preparation............................................................................................................ 24  
   Role of Self-Efficacy.............................................................................................................. 27  
   Finances as Barriers to College Attendance......................................................................... 30  
   Retention and Persistence of Low-Income Students.............................................................. 37  
   High-Achieving Students....................................................................................................... 49  
   High-Achieving Low-Income Students.................................................................................. 50  
   Summary.................................................................................................................................. 54  

viii
3. Research Design and Methodology ................................................. 59

Purpose of Study and Research Questions ........................................ 59
Research Elements ........................................................................... 60
  Epistemology ................................................................................. 60
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................. 62
Methodology ..................................................................................... 67
  Sampling Strategies and Participant Selection ............................. 67
  Site Description ........................................................................... 70
  Introduction to Participants .......................................................... 71
Data Collection .................................................................................. 75
  Description of Interviews .............................................................. 78
Data Analysis ................................................................................... 81
  Interpretation and Presentation ..................................................... 85
Trustworthiness ............................................................................... 87
Ethical Considerations .................................................................... 89
Summary ......................................................................................... 91

4. Data Analysis ............................................................................... 93

Introduction ....................................................................................... 93
Description of Themes .................................................................... 95
College was an Automatic ............................................................... 96
Role of Parents and Family ............................................................... 97
Importance of Peers ......................................................................... 107
Influence of Money ........................................................................... 115
Academic Performance ................................................................... 136
  Comparison with High School ....................................................... 143
  Interaction with Faculty ................................................................. 153
  Aspirations After College ............................................................. 157
Engagement ....................................................................................... 158
  Sense of Belonging/Identity ............................................................ 160
Summary ........................................................................................... 165

5. Summary and Conclusions ......................................................... 168

Findings in Relation to Research Questions ..................................... 168
Relating Findings to the Literature .................................................. 174
Scholars Accumulated Capital through Academic Talent and
  Experiences at State ................................................................. 177
Sense of Belonging as a Member of Two Underrepresented Groups .... 181
Understanding Student Scholars through their Individual Journeys .... 183
Recommendations for Practice ....................................................... 186
  University and Scholars Program Outreach ................................ 186
  Retention of Low-Income High Ability Students .......................... 187
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>County Descriptions</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Scholars’ Employment</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Scholars’ Grade Point Averages</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Education is supposed to be “The Great Equalizer” (Aronson, 2001) for its power and potential to ensure social mobility among all classes. The reality however, is that it commonly reproduces the systems of poverty and wealth in American society. People born into wealth remain wealthy and powerful while those at the bottom are given little to no chance of hope for success based on their disadvantages. Inequalities in schooling at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels continue to exist, demonstrating that those children from advantaged families are given the best opportunities to succeed, while those from the disadvantaged are screened for failure based on their social class (Aronson, 2001). Schools are a “key site for the transmission and acquisition of culture” (class notes, 1/27/05). Culture is often “taught”, but it is also “caught” (p. 1725), and “no two individuals ‘catch’ it in exactly the same way” (Wolcott, 1994).

Colleges and universities have become the “modern gatekeepers” in American society, “deciding who gets ahead and who does not” (Kahlenberg, p. 123). Over the past 20 years or more, many institutions of higher education have continued to reinforce the unequal systems of wealth and poverty that exist in American society by admitting many more students from the higher classes than those from the lower classes (Kahlenberg, 1996). Level of educational attainment “exerts a powerful effect on whether one has a job, the character of the job, and the level of earnings” (Smith,
Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). Many students who are otherwise academically prepared and qualified are not given the opportunity to enroll in higher education, partly because they do not have the financial means. They may also be at a disadvantage because they may not receive the necessary guidance from family or friends to navigate the admissions process. If they do enroll in higher education, they may not find the necessary support and resources once they arrive and may end up dropping out.

**Relevance of Research**

Issues related to college access among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds have become important to higher education research because college attendance gaps between the poor and wealthy have become more pronounced in the last few decades. In the 1999-2000 academic year, 31 percent of low-income students, compared to 54 percent of middle-income and 79 percent of high-income students, were enrolled in college or had attended college (Census Bureau, 2001). The Census Bureau in 2001 reported, “opportunity for postsecondary education advances incrementally as income rises, with over 20 percentage points separating each income level.” Only 78 percent of students from low-income families who rank as top achievers on tests of college readiness actually attend college (Tyson, 2003). In contrast, nearly the same percentage of students from high-income families who rank at the bottom of the tests attend college (Tyson, 2003). Among the lowest income group, it is estimated that 7 percent earn their bachelor’s degree by age 24; for middle-income students, it rises to 24 percent, and 52 percent for those from the highest income levels (Mortenson, 2001).

Sociologists have noted, beginning with Blau and Duncan’s (1967) groundbreaking study of the American occupational structure, that educational attainment
is a “critical factor in determining occupational status and income” (Smith et al., 1995).
Smith et al. (1995) write that “increasingly, the ticket to a decent job in the American
economy is inscribed “college graduate”, as is evidenced by the substantially higher
employment rates of those with four or more years of college. College graduates also
experience lower rates of unemployment than high school graduates (Bureau of Labor
Statistics, 2004); individuals with a bachelor’s degree are estimated to earn almost twice
as much over their lifetime than those who finish high school only (Census Bureau,
2002); and college graduates enjoy healthier lifestyles than those with less than a
bachelor’s degree with lower rates of smoking, higher rates of exercise, and longer life
expectancies on average (Mortenson, 1999). Significant benefits accrue to those
attending and completing college, which makes it important that low-income students
have access and support to attend and persist through college.

Low-income students are often characterized in the higher education literature as
“at-risk”. A majority are the first in their families to attend college, and face many
unique challenges and barriers as they approach decisions related to college enrollment
and as they transition into higher education. They may not have not been provided the
same type of “road map” or encouragement from parents, siblings, and friends to attend
college as have their middle- and upper-income peers. They also may lack the different
forms of capital (economic, cultural, social) that their middle- and upper-income peers
possess that puts them at a disadvantage when applying to college and transitioning to the
world of higher education. Whether it is in formal or informal educational settings,
culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, and like knowledge, is socially
constructed (Wolcott, 1994).
Economic Affirmative Action

Institutions of higher education are taking notice of the inequities evident in college enrollment by socioeconomic status and are implementing policies and programs to help low-income students gain access. As Anthony Marx, president of Amherst College, explained, “If economic mobility continues to shut down, not only will we be losing the talent and leadership we need, but we will face a risk of a society of alienation and unhappiness. Even the most privileged among us will suffer the consequences of people not believing in the American dream” (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). Colleges that have implemented admissions policies that take economic circumstances into account include the Universities of California, Florida, and Washington, and more recently, Harvard University, the Universities of Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, Michigan, and Yale University. Though all programs differ in their specific details, many no longer ask students from families making less than a certain income level to take out loans, and instead give them scholarships and grants to cover their tuition (Leonhardt, 2004). In Harvard’s case, the university has earmarked $2 million in new financial aid to cover this expanded aid, and the formula implemented was expected to benefit more than 1000 families (of the 6600 undergraduates) (“Harvard Announces New Initiative”, 2004).

By using strategies to remove the price barriers associated with attending higher education and providing institutional support to students from low-income families, colleges and universities are hoping that students from low-income backgrounds will be equally prepared for success and graduation as their peers from higher income levels. A question remains, however, to what extent are attrition rates of low-income students and
between students from different income groups caused by factors other than the direct costs of college?

An example of a permanent low-income targeted financial aid and scholarship program exists at Berea College, a small liberal arts institution in Kentucky. Berea awards all enrolled students, regardless of income level, a four-year, full tuition scholarship worth up to $21,000 annually. Eighty percent of all students live on campus and are required to work at least 10 hours a week, and every student is given a laptop computer upon matriculation. Sixty-eight percent of freshmen are from families where neither parent has earned a college degree (Berea College website, “Facts at a Glance”, http://www.berea.edu/ira/factsataglance.asp). Variation does exist among family income, however the poorest students are extremely poor and the “wealthiest” are considered lower middle-class (Stinebricker & Stinebricker, 2002).

Even though the direct costs of schooling are approximately zero at Berea, roughly half of its students do not graduate, and students from lower-income families tend to receive significantly lower college grades than other students (even after controlling for college entrance exams) (Stinebricker & Stinebricker, 2002). A strong positive relationship remains between family income and length of time a student remains at Berea and family environment has a strong effect on college outcomes. Students from the lower-income families at Berea tend to come from families who did not provide as much encouragement to attend college; their academic preparation in high school is not as strong as their middle- to upper-class peers; and they may lack the “cultural capital” needed to negotiate institutions of higher education.
Purpose of Study

Research regarding the experiences of low-income college students often highlights the fact that these students are “at-risk” because of the obstacles and challenges they face as they transition to higher education. There appears to be a gap in the literature, however, regarding the experiences of students who are high ability and from low-income families who are successful in enrolling in and graduating from college. At this point, we do not have a research base for understanding the factors that result in their success.

It may be naïve to believe that these students’ high ability status will trump the fact that they are from an economically disadvantaged background, but it is an important piece that has been overlooked in many research studies. How do the strategies they use to be successful academically transfer to other areas of their life, such as their social and cultural transitions to college? Much of the literature on this topic is quantitative in nature, which uncovers important trends and statistics. By conducting an exploratory, qualitative analysis of this population, this project will dig deeper into the issues surrounding the students’ transitions and persistence in college.

Research Questions

After reviewing the literature and designing this study, these are the questions that will be explored. What are the factors that support high ability students from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds as they enter postsecondary education? How can colleges retain low-income students and assist them to successfully persist to graduation? How does the structure of a financial aid and scholarship program affect the students’
retention and successful persistence? When the students face challenges, what resources do they utilize (college peers, family, friends from home)?

**Significance of Study**

I have a unique opportunity to research and examine the early effects of a financial aid and scholarship program on the persistence and retention of high ability, low-income college students at a large, urban, Midwestern university (called “State University” or “SU” for the purposes of this research). This is a qualitative, exploratory study with a small sample of students in a particular program, not generalizable to the larger group. Until the late 1980s, this university utilized an open admissions policy. Admission to the university became increasingly selective beginning approximately in 1987, and as a result, administrators worried that the economic diversity of the campus would decrease. Therefore, a scholarship program was created in 2005 to ensure that low-income, academically qualified students were well-represented in the student body. One student from each county in the state where the university is located is selected for a full-tuition scholarship each year, based on their family’s income and their academic qualifications. The first cohort of 108 scholars enrolled at the university in the fall of 2005. In order to remain eligible for the scholarship while they are enrolled, students in the program must achieve a 3.2 grade point average by the end of their sophomore year.

One of the important purposes of this scholarship program is to ensure that the campus does not become economically homogeneous. The Director of Student Financial Aid at this university indicated her hope that this scholarship program is eventually open to all students who qualify (academically and by financial need), regardless of whether
they are from in- or out-of-state. At this point, it is only open to students from the state in which the university is located.

I hope that the research with these students and the early systematic assessment of this scholarship program reveals the dynamics at play when enrolling high ability, low-income students. It is necessary to examine issues of access for underrepresented populations of students, like those from low-income families, in order to formulate the policies and practices that will ensure their equal opportunity to success in higher education.

**Author’s Relationship to Research Questions and Population**

In the spring of the second year of my doctoral program, I took a course entitled “The Social and Political Contexts of Education”. It was in this class that my research interests began to form around issues of access for low-income students. I began learning about institutions that had implemented “class-based” or “economic affirmative action” programs, and chose to complete my final project in the course on the implications and issues surrounding these programs. Around the same time, the university in this study was in the process of planning for and implementing its own financial aid and scholarship program for low-income, high ability students. I began talking with administrators across campus in the offices of Financial Aid, Admissions, and First-Year Experience to learn more about what the program would entail. I was fortunate that I already knew many of these staff members from completing a graduate assistantship in the Office of Student Financial Aid and as an intern in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and First-Year Experience. Subsequently, I was asked by the Director of Student Financial Aid to join a
“research team” with a faculty member and another graduate student to assess the program during its first year.

In many ways I do not resemble the students involved in this program. I would consider myself academically motivated and have always received high grades in school, at all levels. Moreover, I never questioned the inevitability that I would attend and graduate from college or that my family would have the ability to pay for it. I am not a first-generation college student, and in fact represent the third generation in my family to attend college. I even attended the same college as my maternal grandfather. Like many middle- and upper-income students, the financial ability to attend college wherever I wanted (a small, private, liberal arts institution) was something I took for granted. Thus, I will be crossing an important and sensitive culture divide as I seek to explore the experiences of students for whom financial support has always been somewhat of an uncertainty. In order to gain an understanding of the factors affecting these students, I found it necessary to seek research from a wide range of fields. Chapter two will guide the reader through the most important findings from this exploration.

**Introduction to Context of Study**

I was formally introduced to the Scholars program in the spring of 2005, when they and their families visited campus for a congratulatory luncheon while they were still seniors in high school. I had been asked to attend to assist with the program and sit with a few families at lunch to answer any questions they had. The students and their families started arriving early that afternoon, the women dressed in skirts and dresses, some of the men wearing ties, button-down shirts, and nice shoes. Some extended family members accompanied them as well, siblings, grandparents and significant others. I sat at a table
with two male students, one who had brought his mother, the other his parents and two siblings. I don’t remember much of our conversation, I asked if they knew what they wanted to study, they asked a few questions of their own. I do remember, however, the father of one of the students repeating how they were just “rednecks”, from a small town in the state, joking as he said it, but repeating it just the same. I also remember going outside with the students after lunch so they could have their picture taken with the president of the university so it could be sent to their local newspapers. It was a blustery spring day, and the president was good-natured in her interactions with the students as she posed and smiled and congratulated them. They seemed anxious yet excited about the journey they were about to embark on.

Later that afternoon, I sat in on a session for students to ask questions of a panel and receive information. I noticed automatically that when they were asked to form small groups to discuss one topic or another that they seemed to immediately form connections with each other, even though I had to assume they did not know each other previously, as they were from different counties across the state. They talked and joked easily with each other, and the panel leaders had to ask more than a few times for their attention when it was time to return to the larger group.

It was an exciting day for the first cohort of Scholars at State University (SU), and I only wish I could have listened in on their conversations as they drove home. They were about to embark on a journey, one that was historical because they were the first Scholar cohort at SU. It would also be a continuation of a journey that began long before they received their Scholar award letters, one that held many opportunities for them, some they could probably never imagine. I left that day feeling excited because I knew I
would take part in this journey with them, if only through the descriptions of their experiences. I did not know with what depth and richness the storied they shared would hold, but I was anxious to begin the process.

**Terminology**

*Cultural Capital*: Forms of knowledge; skill; education; any advantages a person has which gives them a higher status in society, including high expectations. Parents often provide cultural capital to their children, for example, the attitudes and knowledge that can make the educational system a comfortable, familiar place that eases success (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Economic or Class-Based Affirmative Action*: Considering and paying special attention to socioeconomic status and background of applicants for admission to higher education (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Roach, 2003).

*First-Generation College Student*: Student from a family where neither parent has more than a high-school education (Billson & Terry, 1982).

*Habitus*: An individual’s view of the world or disposition, their place in it and the orientation towards using resources (capital); an individual comes to determine what is possible or not for their life and develops aspirations and practices accordingly, internalization takes place during early childhood and is a primarily unconscious process (Dumais, 2002).

*High-Income Student*: Student from a family who earns $75,000 or more annually

*Low-Income Student (this study)*: Student from a family who earns no more than $40,000 annually.

*Pell Grant*: Created in Higher Education Act of 1965, it is a federal grant given to college students based on family income eligibility, ranging from $400 to $4,050 (Mumper, 2003; Field, 2005).

*Persistence*: Pertains to the choices students make throughout their educational career which may be related to whether or not they depart from the institution. In this study, the choices the scholars make during their first and between their first and second years are critical to remaining at the institution.

*Retention*: Related to an institution’s efforts keep students enrolled; students may be viewed as passive under this term, “something is done to them, and that "something" assumes a deficit model…under the rhetoric of “persistence” (above) they are actors shaping their fate, with a model of success in mind” (Adelman, 2006).
Social Capital: Resources based on group membership, relationships, networks of influence and support; “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986).

Transition: After leaving high school and enrolling in college, it is a time of separation from family and home and incorporation into the new community of college. It may be called the second stage of a students’ college career, “a period of passage between the old (home, high school) and the new (campus life), before the full adoption of new norms and patterns of behavior and after the onset of separation from old ones” (Tinto, 1993).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Low-Income/First-Generation Students

Students from low-income, disadvantaged families are often the first in their family to attend college, and are identified as “first-generation college students” (Terenzini, P.T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P.M., Pascarella, E.T., & Nora, A., 1996; Choy, 2001; Bui, 2002). During the 1995-1996 academic year, 34 percent of students entering 4-year colleges and universities and 53 percent of students at 2-year colleges were first-generation students (Choy, 2001). Among the 1.3 million students who took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 2002, 28 percent of these students were classified as first-generation (Ishitani, 2003). The number of first-generation students has increased over the last few years, and one study (Mortenson, 1999) estimated that the chance of attending college among children of parents with only a high school degree has improved by 4.8 percent between the period 1987 to 1996.

Research knowledge about first generation college students tends to fall into three categories: student expectations and their planning and preparation for college; their transition experiences between high school and college; and the impact of college experiences on their persistence and degree attainment (Terenzini et al., 1996).
There are a multiplicity of characteristics that set students from low socioeconomic statuses apart from their higher-income peers. They typically have lower educational aspirations for higher education, persist at lower rates once enrolled in college, and complete college at lower rates compared to their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Astin, 1993; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; McDonough, 1997; MacLeod, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987, 1993).

First-generation college students have unique personal and educational backgrounds which contribute to their experiences and academic performance in college (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). In addition to financial barriers, they also may have no one in their family or among their friends whom can offer counsel regarding the college experience (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001). As a result, their expectations may be low in regards to college attendance. Typically, they do not have the same sources of support as second generation students do throughout their education (Billson & Terry, 1982; Terenzini et al., 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991), and therefore may need to rely more heavily on their own self-motivation to achieve academically.

First-generation students often differ from their continuing generation peers in that they have lower expectations and goals for the highest degree they plan to obtain (Pascarella, E.T., Pierson, C.T., Wolniak, G.C., & Terenzini, P.T., 2004). This may be a direct function of the differences between the two groups in the cultural capital they bring with them to college. Students who have highly educated parents may be more aware of the labor-market opportunities and importance that advanced degrees confer for their occupational lives than their first-generation peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). Some
activities and experiences are strongly related to the chances of a student persisting and earning a bachelor’s degree.

When first-generation students take more credits in their early collegiate experience, attain higher grades in their first year, and withdraw from or repeat fewer courses, they perhaps mitigate some of the disadvantaging first-generation factors (Adelman, 1999; McCormick, 1999; Chen, 2005). Research about their pre-college characteristics shows that many first-generation students have lower high school grade point averages and standardized test scores (Riehl, 1994) when they enter college. They may also have lower critical thinking abilities, less support from their families to attend college, and have spent less time socializing with their peers and talking with their teachers in high school (Terenzini et al, 1996). They tend to be less confident about their academic abilities entering college (Riehl, 1994), and receive less support and encouragement from their families to make the decision to attend college (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001).

**Family Background**

Differences between first-generation students and their continuing generation peers often become evident at a young age and are shaped by a variety of different factors and experiences, including their family background (college attendance by parents; parental interaction styles and expectations), the structure of their schooling, and their academic preparation throughout their schooling (Astin, 1993).

The parenting styles of low- and middle-income families may differ by class in the ways parents define their roles in their child's lives as well as how they perceive the nature of childhood (Lareau, 2002). Middle-class parents tend to conform to the cultural
logic of childrearing called "concerted cultivation", in which their children are enrolled in numerous organized activities. These activities dominate family life and create enormous labor, particularly for mothers (Lareau, 2002). Parents view these activities as transmitting important life skills to their children. Child-rearing strategies of working-class and poor parents, on the other hand, may emphasize the "accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau, 2002). These parents believe that as long as they provide love, food, & safety, their children will grow and thrive and they do not worry or focus on developing their children's special talents. As a result, these working-class and poor children participate in few organized activities and have more free time, but seem to develop deeper, richer ties within their extended families. Childrearing strategies have potentially serious implications for students and family interaction with social institutions, especially schools. The pattern of concerted cultivation may encourage an emerging sense of entitlement in children, while the pattern of accomplishment of natural growth may encourage an emerging sense of restraint (Lareau, 2002). When children reach high school and college age and family members interact with representatives of formal institutions such as high schools and colleges, middle-class parents and their children are able to negotiate more valuable outcomes than their working-class and poor counterparts (Lareau, 2002).

Students who have high educational aspirations when they enter college are more likely to finish their degree (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). If students begin to aspire to a 4-year degree by the time they enter 8th grade, this enables them and their families to get ready for the college application and enrollment process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).
Socioeconomic status can affect college degree aspirations, and in an analysis of middle school students, eighth graders from low-socioeconomic backgrounds reported lower educational expectations than their higher-income peers (Terenzini et al., 2001). Eighth graders in the lowest socioeconomic quartile are also 1.5 to 6 times more likely to aspire educationally to something less than a college education (Terenzini et al., 2001).

Cabrera, Burkum, and La Nasa (2003) found significant differences in aspirations for a 4-year degree among high school sophomores who entered postsecondary education during the 1982-1983 academic year. As student socioeconomic status increased, so did their chance to develop college degree aspirations by their senior year in high school. Students from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds were 44 percent less likely to aspire to a four-year degree than the students from the higher socioeconomic backgrounds in their sophomore year of high school (Cabrera et al., 2003).

Encouragement to attend college varies by socioeconomic status and generally, the highest-socioeconomic status students receive more encouragement than their low-socioeconomic peers (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2003). Parental encouragement, especially, while in high school, is key for subsequent college enrollment (Cabrera et al., 2003) and parental involvement in school activities often predicts whether or a student will enroll at a 4-year college or university following graduation (Perna, 2000).

There are various types of encouragement a student may receive as they make decisions regarding college attendance, including motivational support, saving for college, and being involved in school activities (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). The factors related to securing high school academic qualifications, applying for college, and the successful adjustment to college can be traced to the extent to which a student receives
encouragement from their parents, high school personnel, and high school friends (Cabrera et al., 2003; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Hossler, Schmitt, & Vesper, 1999). In Cabrera et al.’s (2003) study, 93 percent of the highest-socioeconomic status students reported that their parents encouraged them to pursue a college degree, while only 69 percent of the lowest-socioeconomic students were similarly encouraged by their parents. King (1996) found that high school seniors who were unsure of their parent’s approval of their postsecondary plans were less likely to aspire to a 4-year institution than their peers from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds. Saving money for college also provides the student a clear indication that their parents supported their desire to attend college, which is also correlated with socioeconomic status. Miller (1997) found that less than 33 percent of low-income parents saved enough money to cover more than 10 percent of their children’s education costs.

Seventy-seven percent of the high socioeconomic students reported receiving encouragement from high school staff, while 61 percent of the lowest income students reported encouragement. Less than 50 percent of the lowest-income students were encouraged by their high school friends to attend college, while over three-fourths of the highest-income students were encouraged by their friends (Cabrera et al., 2003).

“Anticipatory socialization” is a concept originally developed for use in relation to occupational preparation (Pavalko, 1971) and the formation of political views (Sheinkopf, 1973), which can also be useful in understanding college-going, “getting ready” (Attinasi, 1989) behavior. Anticipatory socialization “refers to a premature taking on or identification with the behavior and attitudes of an aspired to group which may serve the twin functions of aiding [an individual’s] rise into [the aspired to] group and of
easing his adjustment after he has become part of it” (Attinasi, 1989; Merton & Kitt, 1950). Parsons (1951) argued that many high achievers are identified as early as elementary school and directed towards a college preparatory curriculum, therefore reinforcing college-going expectations in these students. Students may also engage themselves, through rehearsal, in forms of behavior that they associate with college as they “get ready” for college attendance (Attinasi, 1989). They might take special courses (Advanced Placement, dual-enrollment) that are viewed by their teachers as trial college experiments and take on additional assignments that have been identified as similar to college assignments (Attinasi, 1989). More concrete, direct anticipatory socialization activities involve student participation in on-campus activities before they have applied and enrolled, including living in residence halls during a camp or conference; going to social or academic events on campus; and attending classroom lectures (Attinasi, 1989).

The extent and nature of anticipatory socialization activities students experience can influence not only their decision to go to college, but once there, the decision to stay (Attinasi, 1989). A student’s willingness to remain in college and “stick it out” (Attinasi, p. 270) may reflect their early and thorough socializing to attend college by family, teachers, and friends. The level of anticipatory socialization for college, in the form of defining and modeling experiences, has a positive impact on the student educational goals, including the decision to go to college (Haller & Woelfe, 1972).

Significant others also have an important influence for students on college access, performance, and attrition. Student perceptions of their parents' higher educational expectations reinforces commitment to obtain a four-year degree; and students who perceived his or her mother to have high educational aspirations had a
larger probability of finishing college than those who perceived their mother’s expectations to be lower (Velez, 1985).

Capital

The existence of powerful forms of social inequality includes differences in parental educational and occupational experiences, income, and other family and life experiences that are often transmitted generationally (Lareau, 2003). Individual experiences while growing up shapes the amount and forms of resources, or capital, people inherit and rely on as they negotiate different institutional arrangements, or fields in the social world (Lareau, 2003). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be raised by parents who are less likely to be involved in their school activities (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001) and their parents are less knowledgeable about how to get ready for and pay for college (Flint, 1992, 1993). As a result, low-income students often accumulate less of the social capital that is often necessary for navigating the world of higher education than their upper income peers. The ways in which children interact with their elementary and secondary schools and subsequently in college can be influenced by their family background and reflects the amount of capital they possess and gain in their early schooling years.

Bourdieu’s work is helpful in understanding the context for examining the impact of social class position on opportunities for and experiences with education. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) uses the terms cultural capital and habitus to explain how individual agency combines with socially structured opportunities and aspirations to reproduce existing social structures. Cultural capital refers to specialized or insider knowledge that is not taught in schools, such as knowledge of high culture and educational credentials
Social capital can be comprised of contacts and memberships in networks that can be used for personal or professional gain (Horvat, 2000). Social classes possess certain cultural and social capital, in which preferences, behaviors, attitudes, and insider knowledge, things that are not taught in school, are passed along in the home (Walpole, 2003). Bourdieu argues that individuals of different social locations are socialized differently as they grow up and this socialization process provides children and adults with a sense of what is comfortable or what is natural—a person’s habitus (Lareau, 2003). Habitus is also described (Walpole, 2003) as people from the same social class who often have common perceptions of goals and strategies for attaining social profits they desire. Habitus may have a dynamic component in that students can adopt new elements to their habitus, possibly in the college environment (Walpole, 2003). Bourdieu (Lareau, 2003, pp. 276-277) suggests,

That differences in habitus give individuals varying cultural skills, social connections, educational practices, and other cultural resources, which then can be translated into different forms of value (i.e., capital) as individuals move out into the world. It is possible to adopt new habits later in life, but these late-acquired dispositions lack the comfortable (natural) feel associated with those learned in childhood.

Students from low-income families may be at a disadvantage for college attendance from an early age because they are raised in homes where parents may not pass along the same advantages as ones from upper- and middle-class families (Walpole, 2003). Often, when students enter higher education, they are automatically at a disadvantage because the standards of the academy match more with the standards of the cultural and social capital training children receive in middle- to upper-class homes. Parental expectations and definitions of success vary with social status and mediate
student aspirations. Low-income parents are more likely to view a high school diploma as the norm for their child while parents with higher-incomes consider the bachelor or advanced degree the norm and standard to which their children should aspire (Walpole, 2003).

In examining experiences of 8th grade students, girls and higher socioeconomic students may be more likely to participate in cultural activities as they grow up (Dumais, 2002). Cultural capital, in this study, seemed to have a significant, positive effect on the grades of female students, both with and without controlling for habitus. Low socioeconomic students in the study participated in onetime activities more frequently than in lessons and the socioeconomic status gap was greater than the gender gap for cultural activity participation. High socioeconomic status boys and girls were twice as likely to visit art museums as their low socioeconomic status peers. Parents hold the key to their child's participation in these activities because they pay for lessons and/or provide transportation. Parents need to take initiative for things that happen outside of their children’s school and make a commitment to them, which is much more likely to happen in high socioeconomic status families that have the economic, social, and cultural resources at their disposal. Thus, socioeconomic status is linked through parental behavior to the cultivation of social and cultural capital.

There are other studies, however, that suggest that cultural capital is a less significant factor in determining student academic success. In Dumais’s (2002) study, only twenty percent of low-income boys and 36 percent of low-income girls had upper-white-collar aspirations. Dumais concluded that inherent ability (measured by cognitive tests in mathematics, reading, science, and history) had a stronger impact on students’
grades than the role of cultural capital. The students’ habitus and socioeconomic background followed in importance after ability. Additionally, regardless of gender, high expectations led to higher grades because student expectations were developed from experiences in the past and what they believed was likely to happen for people from his or her background. Therefore, differences may be the result more of student habitus and background that leads students to expect an upper-white-collar career that affects their educational success than participation in cultural activities. In the case of social class, Dumais believes that it merely perpetuates the existing stratification structure (Dumais, 2002).

Colleges and universities are institutions in which students obtain academic credentials, or academic capital, and they may also obtain other cultural, social, or economic capital, which is important for its conversion potential (Walpole, 2003). A low-income student can learn to make different choices that could facilitate social mobility on a college campus (Horvat, 2000). Walpole (2003), in a study that used longitudinal data from the national study of college students involved in the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), investigated activities indicative of cultural, social, economic, or academic capital accumulation during college (i.e., contact with faculty, time spent working, studying, volunteering, or in study groups and athletics; college grade point average). The sample size was over 10,000 students from 209 four-year institutions across the United States.

From the data she analyzed, Walpole found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds worked more, studied less, were less involved, and reported
lower grade point averages than their higher socioeconomic peers. She indicated from these results that it is apparent that the social status origins of college students continues to affect their college experiences and outcomes. From a “Bourdieudian” perspective, she also found support for the notion that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds possess different cultural capital and habiti than all students or high socioeconomic students, and attending college does not mean that a student has risen economically or socially to a level similar to their peers. Low socioeconomic student ability to convert their college education into social and economic profits may be greater than their peers who did not attend college, but it is lower than their high socioeconomic peers. She hypothesizes that this may be due to different habiti which lead them to use different conversion strategies, such as working full-time instead of attending graduate school (Walpole, 2003).

**Academic Preparation**

High school academic preparation seems to be related to low-income and first-generation student persistence in postsecondary education (Warburton, E.C., Bugarin, R., & Nunez, A.M., 2001). It appears that the more rigorous the high school curriculum, the higher their likelihood of graduating from college. Warburton et al. (2001) found that 87 percent of the students in their study who took rigorous academic coursework in high school stayed on the persistence track, compared to 62 percent of students who did not take such coursework. However, even among students who took a rigorous high school curriculum, first-generation students were almost twice as likely as students whose parents had completed college to leave the persistence track through a stopout or
downward transfer, (14 percent versus 8 percent) (Warburton et al., 2001). Family background and lack of capital resources may hinder their chances of success in college.

High school curriculum and bachelor’s degree attainment appear to correlate more closely than test scores or class rank/grade point average and bachelor’s degree attainment (Adelman, 1999; 2006). Additionally, of all the pre-college curricula that a student takes prior to entering higher education, the highest level of math they complete may be the strongest continuing influence on bachelor’s degree completion (Adelman, 1999). Completing a math course beyond the level of Algebra 2, such as trigonometry or pre-calculus, more than doubles the chances that a student will complete their bachelor’s degree (Adelman, 1999). However, students from the lowest socioeconomic status are less likely to attend high schools that offer any math above Algebra 2 than students in the upper economic quintiles (Adelman, 2006). In “The Toolbox Revisited” (2006), Adelman reiterates the importance of both the academic intensity of a student’s high school curriculum and their highest level of math taken to their success in college. The high school curriculum, he states, is something that “still counts more than anything else in his or her precollegiate history in providing momentum toward completing a bachelor’s degree” (Adelman, 2006).

In addition to having this strong curriculum foundation, students who receive good grades in high school have a high predicted probability of finishing college (Velez, 1985) and students who have formed college plans in their senior year of high school have a larger predicted probability of finishing college than students with no college plans (Velez, 1985).
Few low-income students may be academically well-prepared for college (measured as high school grade point averages of B+ to A) at the time of their high school graduation, and only half of those students may enroll in a four-year college or university (Cabrera, LaNasa, & Burkum, 2001). In contrast, among students from high-income families, nearly 60 percent were academically well-prepared for higher education, and three quarters of these students entered a four-year college or university (Cabrera et al., 2001). Among well-prepared low-income students who enrolled in higher education, 42 percent failed to earn their bachelor’s degree from any institution; among well-prepared students from high-income families, the percentage who fail to finish decreases to 19 percent (Cabrera et al., 2001). Compared with students whose parents were college graduates, first-generation students may be less likely to have taken calculus in high school, and they are also less likely to take college entrance examinations (SAT/ACT)—when they did, they tended to have lower scores than their peers (Warburton et al., 2001). A lower proportion of first-generation students take any Advanced Placement (AP) tests than their continuing generation peers as well (Warburton et al., 2001).

Some research of degree completion, however, does not portray low-income, high ability students as at risk during their baccalaureate years if they possess certain characteristics, such as adequate academic preparation (Adelman, 1999). Students from the lowest two socioeconomic quartiles who are also academically prepared (in the highest academic resources quintile) earn bachelor’s degrees at a higher rate than a majority of their peers from the top socioeconomic quartile (pp. 24-25). In Adelman’s (1999) analysis of college completion, he concluded that “academic variables are much more potent predictors of college completion” than social background variables (p. 82).
Thus, although we must acknowledge that socioeconomic status has a continuing influence in life-course events, Adelman’s analysis indicates how much education can mitigate those effects (Adelman, 1999). He suggests that academic preparation, continuous college enrollment, and early academic performance are the factors that affect degree completion for these students (Adelman, 1999).

Adelman’s (1999) findings are supported by earlier studies which found strong correlations between high school grade point average and institution-reported ACT/SAT scores and retention in college (Astin, Korn, & Green, 1987). College graduation rates of students with the highest ACT/SAT scores were six times higher than those of students with the lowest test scores (Astin et al., 1987), and some more recent retention studies show that student self-reported high school grade point average and SAT/ACT score account for 29 percent of the variance in their retention (Tross, Harper, Osher, & Kneidinger, 2000).

First-generation status is associated with lower bachelor’s degree completion rates, even after controlling for a variety of factors, including students’ demographic backgrounds, academic preparation, enrollment characteristics, postsecondary coursetaking, and academic performance (Warburton et al., 2001; Chen, 2005). Overall, first-generation students in Warburton et al.’s (2001) study were less likely than students whose parents had completed college to stay on the persistence track (58 percent versus 77 percent).

Role of Self-Efficacy in College Retention and Completion

A student’s level of self-efficacy beliefs may be used to predict their academic performance and persistence. As part of his social learning theory, Bandura (1997, as
cited in Tong & Song, 2004) defined self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances”. Central to this theory is the hypothesis that self-efficacy beliefs help determine what activities people pursue, the effort they expend pursuing those activities, and how long they will persist when they face obstacles (Gore, 2006). Self-efficacy is influenced by information derived from four sources: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and the control of negative emotions (Devonport & Lane, 2006).

Self-efficacy can be described in domain-specific or general terms. General self-efficacy “aims at a broad and stable sense of personal competence to deal effectively with a variety of stressful situations (Scherer et al., 1982; Schwarzer, 1994 as cited in Tong & Song, 2004). Specific to academia, academic self-efficacy can be defined as “individuals’ confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designated level (Schunk, 1991 as cited in Gore, 2006).

Applied to college students, a sense of self-efficacy can be very important to their ability to handle stressful and challenging situations, whether academically or socially. There may be a relationship between students’ self-efficacy beliefs for academic tasks and milestones and their academic performance, and their beliefs may even predict their overall persistence and consequential success in college (Gore, 2006). Past research has found support of relationships between academic self-efficacy beliefs and college performance, college persistence, and students’ range of career options (Brown, Lent, & Larkin, 1989; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1986, 1987; Siegel, Galassi, and Ware, 1985 in Gore, 2006). These studies also suggested how self-efficacy beliefs could account for the
variance in college outcomes (i.e., performance and persistence) beyond that accounted for by more traditional predictors such as standardized achievement and/or aptitude measures (Gore, 2006).

Measured at the beginning of a first years students’ first semester in college, another study (Gore, 2006) found that students’ academic self-efficacy beliefs were relatively weak predictors of their academic performance beyond what their standardized test scores had predicted. Measured at the end of the first year students’ semester, however, their self-efficacy beliefs significantly predicted their academic performance, measured as their grade point average (Gore, 2006). This difference in results between the students’ beginning and end of semester is consistent, the researchers say (Gore, 2006) with the tenants of social cognitive theory and previous research. Bandura (1986 in Gore, 2006) hypothesized that self-efficacy beliefs develop as a result of personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, persuasion, and the interpretation of physiological states. Students may gain higher self-efficacy beliefs once they’ve experience success in college, and as they acquire more college experience, their levels of self-efficacy will most likely change as well (Gore, 2006).

Low-income students may in general have lower self-efficacy beliefs, which can possibly be attributed to inadequate social support, limited sources of support, and low perceived support (Tong & Song, 2004). This lack of support can occur at home by their family or in their campus environment, and student levels of self-efficacy may decrease in the college environment because they are unable to receive timely and necessary psychological support when they are confronting stress (Tong & Song, 2004). For low-income students in particular, financial issues may be a primary and salient issue and
challenge that causes stress and anxiety, which they may or may not be able to
appropriately deal with due to their lack of financial resources (Tong & Song, 2004). In a
study of Latino low-income students (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, in press in Phinney,
Dennis, & Gutierrez, 2005), motivation to attend college contributed to college
commitment, confidence, and self-efficacy.

The first semester of college is a critical time for promoting the self-efficacy
beliefs of students in general, and low-income students in particular (Gore, 2006).
Programs such as the First-Year Experience (FYE) are designed to focus on promoting
both academic and social skill development which can promote self-efficacy beliefs in
students (Gore, 2006). Campus support programs that target low-income students’ sense
of self-efficacy are beneficial because “increased competence and confidence in handling
stress and challenges [would] improve[s] students’ well-being” (Tong & Song, 2004).

Finances as Barriers to Low-Income Student College Attendance

An obvious barrier to college attendance for low-income students is the fact that
financial constraints often restrict their choices and decisions regarding college
enrollment. The combination of decreases in funding at the state and federal levels,
increases in tuition, and changes in student financial aid policies have contributed to even
more limited access for low-income students in recent years.

Financial trends in higher education over the last 30 years have made public
higher education much less accessible for students from low-income, disadvantaged
backgrounds. Funding at the federal and state levels has been cut dramatically, and as a
result, colleges have raised tuition prices in order to make up for the funding cuts. At
public 4-year institutions, there were relatively large tuition increases in the early 1980s
and again in the 1990s, however, the rate of increase has been higher in the early 2000s than in previous decades (Trends, 2005). The increases in tuition and fees at public 4-year colleges for 2005-2006 were smaller than the previous two years, and 7.1 percent higher than for 2004-2005 (Trends, 2005).

Financial aid available to students has started to level off. In 2003-2004, the average aid per student increased by only 3 percent, which is the smallest increase in the past decade (Farrell, 2005). In addition, “grants shrunk as a proportion of total aid, and students were forced to rely more heavily on private loans to finance their education” (Farrell, 2005). Public institutions have also become more selective in their admissions policies, thereby making it more competitive to gain admission. If trends in decreased funding, tuition increases, financial aid, and selective admissions continue, public higher education will reinforce and widen the economic segregation that is occurring on many campuses.

The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) determined in 2004 that 40 percent of freshmen at 42 selective 4-year state-funded universities came from families with incomes of more than $100,000 a year, which is up from 32 percent in 1999. In contrast, of the 6.5 million students enrolled in 2-year colleges, 65 percent of them come from families with incomes of $20,000 or less and 8.6 percent from families that make $100,000 or more (Education Commission of the States, 2004 in Boswell, 2004).

In the 1960s, many policies and laws were implemented in higher education in order to increase access for minorities and underrepresented groups. The federal government, states, and public colleges sought partnerships to promote equal opportunity, each contributing a piece to the increased access puzzle. The states provided subsidies to
public higher education in order to keep tuition low; the federal government created the Higher Education Act of 1965, which had as its centerpiece the Pell Grant and the Guaranteed Student Loan; and public colleges created admissions policies which advanced the cause of equal opportunity (Mumper, 2003).

In the 1960s, continuing into the 1970s, and accelerating in the 1980s, public 4-year institutions began to raise tuition and fees as a result of decreased state support for higher education (Mumper, 2003). Tuition increases have a disproportionate impact on low-income students, as the net price of higher education increases, participation rates for low-income students declines (Kane, 1995). Colleges and universities also started shifting from need-based to merit-based scholarships, and merit-based aid tends to favor students from families in the $50,000+ income bracket (Farrell, 2005). As several university officials argue, using aid dollars in this manner is inefficient and “tends to benefit students who would make it through college anyway” (Farrell, 2005). William Kirwin, Chancellor of the University of Maryland system, is troubled by these growing trends in higher education, saying “We have reached an indefensible point where a low-income, high-ability student is no more likely to attend college than a low-ability, high-income student” (Farrell, 2005).

Total costs at public four-year institutions currently represent about 6 percent of income for students from families with the highest incomes, while for low-income families, they represent 71 percent of their income (College Board, 2003). This has risen substantially since 1979-1980, when total costs accounted for 31 percent of low-income family incomes (College Board, 2003). Poorer students are the most sensitive to increases in tuition prices—they are most likely to choose not to enroll, be unable to
enroll in college as prices go up, and they are the most likely to drop out of college if already enrolled (Heller, 2004).

The decline in funding to higher education at the state level began about 1980. State budgets were constrained by social maintenance programs such as prisons and Medicaid, among other priorities above higher education. Measured as a share of statewide per-capita personal income, state tax funding in 2000 for higher education was $23.4 billion below the peak reached in 1979 (Mortenson, 2000). The 2000 appropriations were about 77 percent of the 1979 state tax effort (Mortenson, 2000). States, since the early 1990s, have also shifted a bigger proportion of money from need-based to merit-based financial aid (Mortenson, 2000). The fastest-growing type of aid in the states currently is merit aid, which is awarded disproportionately to higher-income students (Heller, 2004). In 1982, state need-based aid support accounted for 90.9 percent of financial aid to students, but as of 1999, it had decreased to 80.5 percent (Mortenson, 2000). The change in policies has shifted state assistance from needy students to many students who are not financially needy and who are likely to attend college without the merit aid.

Federal Student Aid policy has also shifted over time from the original grant-based system into a loan-based system. Federal financial aid for students based on need reached a high in 1986 of 86.4 percent, but since then, it has continued to decrease. By 1999, the percentage was 60.5, or about what it was in 1964 (Mortenson, 2000). During the past two decades, the federal government has aggressively expanded educational loan programs, with more of the costs allocated to borrowers instead of taxpayers (Mortenson, 2000). The increase in borrowing has been one of the most dramatic changes in financial
aid in the last decade (Choy, 2004). In 1990, the average amount received in grants at public 4-year institutions was greater than the average amount taken out in loans ($1,200 vs. $900), but in 2000, the pattern was reversed ($1,900 in grants and $2,500 in loans) (Choy, 2004).

Students from low-income families tend to view loans as barriers and burdens on themselves and their families. The uncertainties surrounding the ability to meet repayment obligations are a particular problem for students whose families lack the resources to help them financially if they have difficulty repaying their loans (Choy, 2004). This prevents many low-income students from participating in higher education (Mortenson, 2000). In the absence of low tuition policies, grant-based financial aid is most effective in getting low-income students into college and helping them persist (Heller, 2004). When the Pell Grant was first awarded in 1974, it purchased 78 percent of the annual cost of one year at an average-priced public institution (Mumper, 2003). Since 1974, Pell Grant funding has lagged behind the pace of tuition inflation, and while the maximum award has increased, its purchasing power has declined. As the program existed in the 1970s, the Pell Grant raised lower-income enrollment 20 to 40 percent (Leslie & Brinkman, 1987). Today, the Pell Grant, which is the largest federal need-based grant program available to postsecondary students (Wei & Horn, 2002) covers less than 40 percent of the cost of a public 4-year college (Mumper, 2003).

Approximately $12.6 billion was spent by the federal government on Pell Grants for more than 5.1 million undergraduate students nationally in 2003-2004 (Trends, 2004). Eligibility for Pell Grants for dependent students is based on the student’s family’s income and wealth, their number of siblings enrolled in college, and the expected costs of
attending the specific institution (Ehrenberg, Zhang, & Levin, 2006). Eighty-seven percent of Pell Grant recipients at four-year public institutions in 2002-2003 came from families with incomes of $40,000 or less. At private four-year institutions, the figure was 86.6 percent (Ehrenberg et al., 2006). Overall, 32% of full-time dependent undergraduates in 4-year public and private institutions received Pell grants in the 1995-1996 academic year, with public 4-year institutions enrolling on average 26% of these students and private, 4-year not-for-profit institutions 15% (Wei & Carroll, 2002). Because higher education institutions do not publicize their enrollment trends by socioeconomic status, the share of Pell Grant recipients among an institution’s undergraduate student body is a good proxy for the share of its students coming from lower- and middle-income families (Ehrenberg et al., 2006). Among all national universities, Alabama A&M University enrolls the highest percentage of Pell Grant recipients, while Princeton University enrolls the lowest, according to 2003-2004 data from the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. News and World Report, 2006).

Low-income college students currently face an average of $3,800 in unmet need at public 4-year colleges and $6,200 at privates (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). Because of the deficit created between what Pell Grant and other grant-aid does not cover and the tuition price, among students who took out loans, the average amount borrowed grew from $3,900 in 1990 to $6,100 in 2000 (Choy, 2004). Low-income students, even though they may be academically qualified, are often unwilling or afraid to take on substantial college loan debt. As a result, they often attend less selective schools, community colleges, or vocational programs, which are correlated with lower earnings and less social mobility (Mumper, 1998). Of students who first
enroll in a community college versus a four-year institution, 42 percent have intentions of earning a baccalaureate or post-baccalaureate degree (Boswell, 2004). Only 26 percent of students who begin their undergraduate degree at a 2-year college formally transfer to 4-year institutions, however. Of those of who do transfer, 70 percent eventually earn bachelor’s degrees (Boswell, 2004).

The ability to pay for college can affect how students interact with the college environment (Cabrera, 1992). For low-income students, inadequate financial aid can interfere with a student's academic and social integration, which may be related to persistence decisions. Researchers agree that “reduced tuition, direct grants, low interest loans, and subsidized work-study programs all seek to equalize (if not increase) the benefits of attending college relative to its costs” (Bowen, 1977; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990). Removing the price barriers associated with attending college may facilitate a student’s ability to fully participate in college life and to reap the benefits of involvement that a college can offer (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Research findings are mixed regarding the effect of different forms of financial aid on student degree completion (Cabrera et al., 2003). All forms of federal support may be equally effective in preventing students from dropping out (Nora, 1990; St. John, 1991). However, for students who attend a 4-year institution, it appears that the only types of financial aid that have a positive relationship to their degree completion after their first year of attendance are employment and grant aid, mainly work-study and campus-related, which is undertaken while the student is enrolled and for the purposes of covering the costs of their education (Adelman, 1999; Stampen & Cabrera, 1986; 1988).
Loans may have negative effects when directed towards low-income students (Astin, 1975). Socioeconomic variation exists in the type of financial aid students tend to receive, with a little more than half of the lowest-socioeconomic status students receiving grants-in-aid, while 36 percent of the highest-socioeconomic status students receive grants (Cabrera et al., 2003). The lowest-socioeconomic status students are as likely to rely on loans as their peers from the middle socioeconomic status groups, but regarding satisfaction with the cost of attending college, differences among socioeconomic status groups tend to be rather small, and no clear trend emerged (Cabrera et al., 2003).

Retention and Persistence of Low-Income Students--Integration

Assuming that low-income students overcome the barriers that challenge their college attendance and enroll in higher education, Pascarella et al. (2004) comments,

Access to higher education must be understood to mean not only admission to some postsecondary institution, but also 'access' to the full range of college experiences and to the personal, social, and economic benefits to which those experiences lead. It would be a cruel irony, indeed, if current financial aid policies and packages removed the barriers to college attendance for first generation students but then had the effect of denying them the opportunity to participate fully in the educational experiences and benefits that lay beyond the collegiate threshold (p. 281).

Understanding the dynamics that enable students to access higher education is only the first step in appreciating the factors that assist in their persistence, retention, and graduation from college. Low-income students face many obstacles to success once they arrive at college, and there are a variety of strategies and supports that can help in their transition and persistence (O'Brien & Shedd, 2001). The transition period is “a period of passage between the old and new, before the full adoption of new norms and patterns of behavior and after the onset of separation from old ones” (Tinto, 1993). Depending on a
number of factors, including a student’s family background, academic preparation, and the degree that their new life on campus is similar to the one they are leaving behind at home (Tinto, 1993) marks the degree of change a student’s transition will entail. Once a student has passed through the stages of separation and transition, which most likely occur early in their collegiate lives, they are faced with decisions and behaviors that will help incorporate them into the college community, indicative of persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Integration into the life of the campus is important because it positively affects their persistence and degree completion. Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) were some of the first researchers to study the retention and attrition of college students, and borrowed the concept of “social integration” from French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who explained the lack of social integration as a cause of suicide (Attinasi, 1989). Durkheim hypothesized that suicide was likely among populations where rates of interaction (“collective affiliation”) were too low, and explained that as a person removes him or herself from a social group, they find little meaning in life, which ultimately becomes an “intolerable burden” (Attinasi, p. 267). Spady and Tinto adapted this concept of social integration to explain student withdrawal from college as a lack of collective affiliation (friendship) as having an effect on dropping out behavior (Attinasi, 1989). Precollege programs, such as TRIO or institution-sponsored programs have a positive effect; students’ involvement in and attachment to their institutions is essential; and where students live has an impact on their attendance patterns (O’Brien & Shedd, 2001).

First-generation students often confront the same anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties as other students when making the transition to college, but their experiences
also often involve unique substantial cultural and academic transitions. This may be the first time they are away from home in an unfamiliar academic setting, one that no one in their family has experienced before. Once enrolled in higher education, first generation students college students have lower retention rates than students whose parents are college educated (Horn, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Riehl, 1994), and one study found that they had a 71 percent higher risk of leaving a four-year institution at the end of their first year (Ishitani, 2003). First-generation students are less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a persistence track to a baccalaureate degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a degree after 5 years (Pascarella et al., 2004).

First-generation students often demonstrate lower levels of academic and social integration in college (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). This may place them at a disadvantage in terms of developmental benefits associated with college because extracurricular involvement and interaction with peers play a significant role in low-income student intellectual and personal development during college (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Inman & Pascarella, 1998; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001).

First-generation students tend to complete less credit hours, take fewer humanities and fine arts courses, study fewer hours and work more hours per week, are less likely to participate in an honors program, less likely to perceive faculty are concerned about students and teaching, and make smaller gains on a standard measure of reading comprehension (Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation students are also less likely to live on campus, which can have an effect on their lower levels of extracurricular involvement, athletic participation, volunteer work, and lower levels of noncourse-related
interactions with peers. Even though first-generation students may be less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and non-course related interactions with peers (Pascarella et al., 2004), these students seem to derive stronger positive benefits from these involvements than did their continuing generation peers. The social capital gained through extracurricular and peer involvement in college may be a useful way for first generation students to acquire additional cultural capital that helps them succeed academically and benefit cognitively. This involvement may also expose first generation students to classmates with a better understanding of behaviors that help them succeed and maximize the benefits they receive from college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

First-generation student extracurricular involvement may also have positive effects on critical thinking, degree plans, internal locus of attribution for academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks (Pascarella et al., 2004). In contrast to extracurricular involvement, other nonacademic involvements such as work, volunteer activities, and intercollegiate athletic participation may have either a negative or smaller positive impact on outcomes for first-generation students than their peers. Since first-generation students tend to work in paid employment settings more hours per week during college, their work responsibilities tend to have stronger negative implications for their growth during college (Pascarella et al., 2004). The extent to which first-generation students are involved in academic/classroom activities overall has positive effects on their outcomes than other students (Pascarella et al., 2004). For example, the hours studied, number of papers or reports written, and books read improve their critical thinking, writing skills, openness to diversity, and degree plans. Pascarella et al. (2004) theorize that “these experiences act in a compensatory manner and thus
contribute comparatively greater incremental increases in first-generation students’ stock of cultural capital” (p. 280).

Research has been inconsistent related to the academic performance of first-generation students, with some studies finding that they have lower grade point averages in college than their peers (Billson & Terry, 1982; Chen, 2005); while others found no significant differences between the populations (Strage, 1999; Inman & Mayes, 1999). The academic rigor of a student's high school curriculum (Warburton et al., 2001) is strongly associated with their college grade point average, with the amount of remedial coursework they took, and with their rates of persistence and attainment. As overall high school academic rigor increases for first-generation students, so does student grade point average (Warburton et al., 2001). Additionally, Warburton et al. (2001) found that first-generation students had lower first-year GPAs than students whose parents had a college degree (2.6 versus 2.8) and these students were more likely to have taken at least one remedial course during their first year of college. The researchers also found that among students who took rigorous high school courses or scored in the top quartile on their college entrance tests, first-generation students had first-year GPAs and remedial course-taking patterns that did not differ significantly from their non-first-generation peers (3.0 versus 3.1) (Warburton et al., 2001). First-generation students may also need remedial assistance once they are enrolled in college, and a majority of the students in Chen’s (2005) study, 55 percent, took some remedial courses during their college career, compared to 27 percent of students whose parents held a bachelor’s degree or higher. Warburton et al.’s (2001) data were from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study First Follow-up 1996-1998. The students in the study started their
postsecondary education during the 1995-1996 academic year, and were first interviewed in 1996. This data is from the first follow-up of that cohort.

By contrast, Chen (2005) noted that in addition to the lower grade point averages attained during their first year, the first-generation students in his study had consistently low GPAs throughout their entire undergraduate career. Overall, first-generation students had an average GPA of 2.6 compared with an average GPA of 2.9 for their peers whose parents had a bachelor’s degree or higher (Chen, 2005). The data analyzed in this study were from the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. Specifically, this analysis focused on a subset of the NELS 1992 12th-graders who had enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000 and who also had complete transcripts available. PETS examined the majors and coursetaking patterns of first-generation students to compare their postsecondary experiences and outcomes with those of students whose parents went to college (Chen, 2005).

Credit accumulation, especially during a student’s first year in college, is integral to their persistence and continued academic success. Beardslee’s work in the early 1970s at Oakland University found that retention was more highly related to first-term credits than other variables, including sex, high school GPA, and residence hall versus commuter status (Duby & Schartman, 1997). A student’s credit hour load signals their commitment to their education. A student, for example, who enrolls in 12 (or fewer) credits is making less of a commitment to their education (Duby & Schartman, 1997). A student, therefore, “who enrolls for fewer credits may already be somewhat less committed, and because they have fewer credits, they are less involved and accumulate fewer credits, and the
lower level of involvement and the lengthening of the time to degree contribute to a further weakening of commitment” (Duby & Schartman, 1997). This may apply to other areas of a student’s life as well, such as the amount of time they spend socializing, studying or working. The patterns they establish during their first term or year may influence their behavior in succeeding terms and years in college and may affect their persistence, retention, and time to degree.

Students at 4-year colleges who earn fewer than 20 credits in their first year and accrue excessive no-penalty withdrawals and no-credit repeats (Adelman, 2006) severely damage their chances of completing a bachelor’s degree (Adelman, 1999; 2006). First-generation students may lag behind their peers in credit accumulation, with the students in Chen’s (2005) study earning an average of 18 credits their first year, compared to 25 credits earned by their peers whose parents had received a bachelor’s degree or higher. This may have long-term implications because it may prolong time to degree and it is associated with leaving postsecondary education without a degree (Chen, 2005). For students from the lowest socioeconomic quartiles, “moving in the top 40 percent of the academic curriculum intensity index and entering postsecondary education directly from high school would improve degree completion from 39 to 59 percent” (Adelman, 2006).

First-generation students are more likely to choose a major in a vocational or technical field, while their continuing-generation peers are more likely to choose a major in science, mathematics, engineering, and architecture, humanities, arts, or social sciences (Chen, 2005). Weak academic preparation may deter first-generation students from choosing “high-skill” fields, such as mathematics and science, and perceived low-earning
potential may also preclude them from entering fields such as humanities, arts, and social sciences (Montmarquette, Cannings, & Mahseredjian, 2002).

Student perceptions of a campus environment that is supportive of their academic and non-academic efforts have the greatest influence on low-income students’ gains in educational and personal development and acquisition of intellectual skills (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). When students perceive their institution’s environment is supportive of their intellectual efforts, they are more likely to exhibit gains in areas such as thinking critically and analytically, writing clearly and effectively, and learning effectively on their own. When students perceive an environment supportive of their personal development, they report gains in working effectively with others, understanding themselves, and developing a personal code of ethics and values (Filkins & Doyle, 2002).

Attinasi (1989) described the post-matriculation behaviors and attitudes of the Mexican American students in his study as “getting in”. When the students described their early impressions of the university, they used words that emphasized their impression of the “bigness” of their new environment. For some students, the campus was larger in size than their hometowns, the campus space also took up much more space their high schools occupied, and the campus seemed too complex to be easily resolved and managed (Attinasi, 1989). The inability of these students to deal with these dimensions often led them to feelings of “being lost” in their campus environment (Attinasi, 1989). Attinasi (1989) concluded in his study of Mexican American students that a student’s interaction with others is important for his or her persistence in college because it leads to the sharing of general values and orientations. This integration also helps because the students develop specific strategies for negotiating the physical, social,
and cognitive/academic “geographies”. This may be accomplished through a student’s peers and/or mentors who “integrate” the student into these geographies and provide them with the knowledge and skills to negotiate them (Attinasi, 1989). For the Mexican American college students, “the extent to which social integration influences persistence…endows the individual with the capacity to cognitively manage the university environment, that is, helps him or her to perceive the physical, social, and academic/cognitive geographies as negotiable” (Attinasi, p. 270).

Experiences and involvement in college can significantly influence students’ aspirations and persistence and (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987, 1993) play an important role in students’ cognitive and affective development as well (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994). Institutional integration may have important intermediary effects on the relevance and effects of the college experience.

The theory of student involvement posits that the most precious institutional resource may be student time and consequently, how students choose to utilize their time (Astin, 1999). It explains why and how the degree of student involvement affects persistence and success in college. The amount of physical and psychological energy (their actual behavior, not just how they think or feel) a student devotes to their academic experience translates into the amount of student learning and development they experience. This in turn, can also lead to significant persistence or dropout behavior. Astin (1999) suggests that “administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g., class schedules; regulations on class attendance; policies on office hours for faculty; student orientation and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic
pursuits” (p. 523). The factors on campus that contribute to a student’s persistence through college suggest involvement, while those that contribute to their decision to leave imply a lack of involvement. The most significant environmental factor on a college campus for positive involvement may be a student’s residence because living in a campus residence is positively related to retention (Astin, 1973; Chickering, 1974; Astin, 1999).

Residence and employment can be predictors of persistence or failure because of their "implications for conflict with student role, peer influence, integration with college versus social systems and achievement goals” (Anderson, 1981). Living and working on campus approximates membership in a total institution, which enforces upon the student the formal rules, activities, and goals of higher education. Active involvement in campus activities may strengthen goals or socialize low-aspiring students into accepting them (Velez, 1985).

Regardless of type of institution they attend, their age, family income or educational or living expenses, nationally, 70-80 percent of college students work while they are enrolled in college. Some say that working while enrolled is “perhaps the single most common major activity among America’s diverse undergraduate population” (ACE Issue Brief, May 2006). Students who attend four-year colleges or universities full time are likely to work 1 to 20 hours per week, but about 23 percent of full-time students work 35 or more hours per week while enrolled. College students often find that working helps them with their career preparation and coursework as well as their comfort on campus and access to information through faculty and staff they interact with.

Working off campus while in school may decrease a student’s chances for interaction with faculty and other students. The dynamics that contribute to the likelihood
of a student completing college may be reduced when students attend part-time and/or work off campus for more than 20 hours per week. As with Beadslee’s work with credit hour research, working off campus a substantial amount of time per week could affect a student’s commitment to their studies and involvement in college. The time and energy the student could be devoting to their studies and other campus activities is spent away from the campus environment (Astin, 1999). For some students, being employed may also add more stress to their lives, increase their exhaustion level, and interfere with their school responsibilities (Hey, Calderon, & Seabert, 2003). Also, certain job characteristics, such as income, having a job unrelated to their major, and having an off-campus job could relate to higher stress levels in students (Hey et al., 2003). This additional stress may have implications for course performance, and having to keep a stressful or high-demanding job, especially off-campus, may have the effect of a student leaving school, skipping semesters, or taking reduced course loads (Hey et al., 2003). These consequences may often lead to poor college transition and possible college dropout behavior (Hey et al., 2003).

Having a work-study job on campus, however, increases a student’s opportunities for interaction with faculty and students outside of class, augmenting integration into campus life and involvement. This may lead to engagement in other activities and impacts persistence and degree completion (Velez, 1985; Astin, 1999; Cabrera et al., 2003). On a more subtle psychological level, relying on one’s college as a source of income can also result in greater attachment to the institution (Astin, 1999). Velez’s (1985) study found that students who held work-study jobs had a 23 percent higher
probability of finishing college and it is possible that work-study has a positive effect on educational goals.

Hours worked do not always negatively affect academic performance. However, for students who work more than part time, employment may have a negative impact. At public and private 4-year institutions, students who work from one to twenty hours per week perform slightly better academically, on average, than those who do not work at all. As the number of hours spent working increases, however, the average grade point average for students who work declines modestly (ACE Policy Brief, May 2006). In terms of degree persistence and completion, analyses conducted by the U.S. Department of Education have consistently found that working more than 15-20 hours per week has a negative impact on persistence and degree completion (ACE, May 2006).

Residential factors affect college completion in part because students who are living on campus are more likely to participate in on campus activities, are structurally integrated into the college, and are insulated from external influences (Astin, 1977; 1999). Living on campus is positively associated with various forms of involvement such as interaction with faculty, involvement in student government, and participation in social fraternities or sororities (Astin, 1999). Residents more often than commuters are likely to achieve in extracurricular activities that involve leadership; to be involved in athletics; and to express satisfaction with their undergraduate experience, especially in the area of student friendships, faculty-student interactions, and social life (Astin, 1999).

Good academic performance in college may increase a student’s integration into college life and raise their achievement goals and college grades may predict more accurately college completion than high school grades (Velez, 1985). First-year college
grade point average, a measure of initial academic success, is a statistically significant predictor of retention in several studies (Allen, 1999; Mitchel, Goldman, & Smith, 1999; Murtaugh, P.A., Burns, L.D., & Schuster, J., 1999). In Murtaugh et al.’s (1999) study, first-quarter GPA was used to predict retention between the first and second years of college, and the probability of returning for a second year of college increased dramatically when students achieved higher GPAs. Students with the lowest GPAs (0.0 to 2.0) had a 57 percent probability of being retained, while students with the highest GPAs (3.3-4.0) had a 91 percent probability of being retained.

Active student involvement with faculty can have an important impact on student personal growth (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). When students engage with faculty members beyond social interaction into intellectual topics that interest them, they benefit from cognitive and affective growth (Terenzini et al., 1996). Using the theory of student involvement, frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement, student, or institutional characteristic (Astin, 1999). Low-income students especially tend to benefit more from educational practices that involve them in activities such as class presentations or participation in class discussions, as well as activities that engage them in a collaborative learning process (Kuh, G.D., Pace, C.R., & Vesper, N., 1997; Filkins & Doyle, 2002).

High Achieving Students

A number of labels are used for this population of students, including “gifted” (Neumeister, 2004); “honors”, relating to their status in many colleges (Long & Lange, 2002); “high ability”; and “high achieving”. High ability college students have been referred to as “extreme millennial students” for the characteristics they display above and
beyond those of millennials (Klein, 2006). Millennial students have been described as special, sheltered, confident, and pressured (Lowery, 2004); high ability millennials may display excessive amounts of some or all of these characteristics. These students have often been in advanced level classes for as long as they can remember. This sometimes places an inordinate amount of pressure on them to succeed—both from others (parents, teachers) and themselves. They and their parents often have high expectations for their academic success, which may lead them to become perfectionists (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2004). Perfectionism is a characteristic commonly associated with “gifted” or high ability individuals, which has been correlated with feelings of depression, anxiety, low self-confidence, and social phobias (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2004). Two dimensions of perfectionism seen in college students can be the tendency to set high personal standards for themselves and the tendency to be overly concerned with mistakes. For high ability college students, the perfectionist quality could lead to feelings of anxiety and a need to excel in all academic subjects.

Once these high ability students become accustomed to success, they can also be setting themselves up for failure. This may be in the form of a lower grade than they have received before or not knowing how to ask for help when they find themselves challenged where they never have before—the academic setting.

Combining the Literature: High Achieving Low-Income Students

In an examination of high ability, low-income college students’ experiences, Olenchak and Hebert (2002) found that students who excel in their elementary school years academically “are not necessarily guaranteed similar success in their university experiences” (p. 195). The researchers used a qualitative case study method and studied
two students who had been successful throughout their elementary and secondary school years and had earned substantial scholarships to “significantly dissimilar universities” (p. 198). The researchers conversed with the students about their families and peers, their university’s curriculum, their problems with university life, and mentoring relationships. Through these conversations, Olenchak and Hebert suggested that the degree of success the students attained in college was mitigated by their family, cultural, and educational backgrounds. Even though the students had strong high school academic records, they still needed support and structure throughout their undergraduate careers (Olenchak & Hebert, 2002). The students also faced cultural conflicts as they experienced college, in what they wanted for themselves personally and what their cultures valued. One student, an African-American male, felt the tensions associated with the low academic expectations held by his family and his desire to be successful academically and personally in college.

This study also reinforced the value and importance of peer relationships for these students, as Rendon (1996) noted, “we must find ways to help them negotiate the delicate process of separation from their family and friends while maintaining loyalty to their culture and allowing for healthy individuation” (p. 19). The students in Olenchak and Hebert’s (2002) study had difficulties with individuation and peer relationships seemed to pose problems for them—mainly because they had difficulty finding a balance between their personal and intellectual needs and the roles that their peers expected of them. For the students in the study, they did not feel supported by the university’s programs, curricula, or faculty (Olenchak & Hebert, 2002). Some felt as if the core requirements at the university were too restricting, while another found little stimulation
in his large, impersonal lecture courses, in which he did not see much meaning in to begin with.

Students from low-income backgrounds are often unique and different from their middle-income peers because for middle-class students, attending college is the norm and their decisions “concern choice of college and type of program” (Phinney et al., 2005). For low-income students whose parents did not attend or complete college, they may deal with more complex educational decisions, in choosing a college and once they are enrolled. These students are from families where their parents have lower incomes and they have greater financial needs, which adds additional stresses and anxieties. Returning to the discussion of self-efficacy, depending on how students appraise stressful encounters and successfully use appropriate coping strategies may predict their successful persistence in college. Self-efficacy has been linked with performance and associated with coping is academic performance in college (Lane, Devonport, & Horrell, 2004; Lane, Hall, & Lane, 2004 in Devonport & Lane, 2006).

Olenchak and Hebert (2002) reiterate other researchers’ (Rendon, 1996) suggestions that low-income students need mentors to support their collegiate experiences and ensure their retention in institutions of higher education. Educators working with first-generation college students “must create an academic climate that fosters not separation but convergence between what these students bring and what higher education has to offer” (Rendon, 1996). The results from Olenchak and Hebert’s (2002) study show that these gifted first-generation college students are still at a high risk of attrition and colleges and universities must pay special attention to their specific emotional, social, motivational, and intellectual needs.
Carter and Robinson (2002) examined the issues surrounding the interplay of college preparation, financial assistance, cultural norms, and transition to college for Appalachian first generation college students from low-income rural families who were involved in the Robinson Scholars program at the University of Kentucky. The students are selected as 8th graders as having potential for college and the scholarship consists of full tuition, room and board, and the students must maintain 2.5 grade point average to keep the scholarship (Carter & Robinson, 2002). The program combines financial support for low-income students with pre-college preparation in the summers, when students come to campus and participate in a "bridge" program designed to help them acclimate to the campus and the expectations of college.

The researchers found that the first year students in the scholars program maintained many of their high school friendships and family connections by returning home on the weekends, particularly at the beginning of the semester. During the semester, the students began to transition to college by returning home less frequently, feeling less homesick, and participating in campus activities. Maintaining ties to home and their families were a critical lifeline for these students at first (the middle-class stereotype "paints college as a time to get away from home, loosen ties, to learn to live on one's own" p. 12). Building new friendships with college peers proved to be challenging to many of the first year students and there often existed a great difference between their college and old high school friends. The scholars were exposed to people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds that they had not encountered in high school, but they did not seem to have difficulties adjusting to the freedom and responsibilities of being on their own, and seemed to be very focused on their experiences.
The students were concerned about their academic achievement, due to the need to maintain a 2.5 grade point average, but felt that their high school preparation for college was sufficient except in areas of math and English. Their academic transition was influenced by high school experiences, especially their ability to do well in high school with minimal effort; their success in high school often came without the need to develop sound study habits—students had to develop new study habits & techniques once in college (Carter & Robinson, 2002).

Speirs Neumeister and Rinker (2006) combined the first-generation and high ability literature in their study of high ability first generation college women. They found that these students have an advantage over their economic disadvantage in the form of their academic talent. The women in their study discussed how “their ability afforded them different opportunities and experiences” (p. 315) that they would not have had otherwise. The students’ high ability functioned as a “passport” to other resources, including extracurricular activities, engaging coursework, and a high achieving peer group, which may have compensated for the lack of support they received at home. The students’ academic achievements exposed them to people and opportunities that continued to support their educational aspirations.

The strength of the peer group was a powerful theme in the Spears Neumeister (2006) study. These women shared their experiences living in an honors residence hall, making friends with other students who encouraged them personally and academically. These women learned that their friendships were “instrumental to academic success” (p. 317). As a result of taking advanced level classes, the women formed friendships with
peers who were “more academically minded than [their] families” and shared their intellectual interests (p. 319).

**Summary**

The literature and research in this chapter is presented in an attempt to paint a holistic picture of high ability students from low-income backgrounds not only as college students, but as people who have been affected by their family, social, and academic backgrounds before they arrive at college. The ways in which students transition to college is due to a variety of different factors and experiences pre-college, including their family background, the structure of their schooling, and their academic preparation (Astin, 1993).

Indirect influences on educational attainment include the childrearing strategies parents utilize, the value they place on the importance of education (Lareau, 2002), and the capital (cultural, social, academic) students accumulate and bring with them to college (Lareau, 2003). More direct influences on post-secondary choices and attainment include the level of encouragement students receive to attend college from their parents and others (teachers, peers, significant others); the strength of their academic preparation; and the amount of financial resources they have. Although not specifically part of a students’ background, the changes in financial aid at all levels and decline in support to higher education coupled with the rise of tuition at many colleges have also impacted low-income student college attendance. Whether perceived by students as a barrier or substantiated by research that demonstrates the gaps in college attendance by socioeconomic status, financial issues have become limiting factors for low-income students. These indirect and direct factors can present challenges, ease, or prevent low-
income student college attendance, depending on how they are present in the student’s lives. They can and do seem to vary by socioeconomic status, often to the detriment of low-income students.

The bridge between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their successful persistence and retention in college is access. In the case of this study, access to higher education is a full-tuition, room and board scholarship. As noted in the review of the literature, however, access is just the first step towards success for these students. Once the access bridge has been provided for them, there are a number of factors that influence and determine whether or not the bridge is successfully crossed.

Although these scholarship students are unencumbered by financial burdens and constraints and theoretically able to fully engage and integrate in campus life, they may still face unique challenges and barriers in their efforts to integrate into campus life. As Gladieux and Swail (1998 in Howard, 2001) suggest, “financial aid is necessary but is not enough for poor students to be successful in postsecondary education”. Low-income students still face many obstacles, academically and socially, once they arrive at college, and there are a variety of strategies and supports that can help in their transition and persistence (O’Brien & Shedd, 2001).

Successful retention and persistence in college depends heavily on a student’s ability to integrate into the life of the campus. Their experiences and involvement in college can significantly influence their aspirations and persistence. Institutional integration may also have important effects on the relevance and effects of the college experience (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987, 1993). Student involvement in college, i.e., “the amount of physical and psychological time and energy
the student invests in the educational process” almost always benefits learning and student development—and consequently, persistence and retention behavior (Astin, 1993). Students can make conscious choices regarding the types of involvement experiences they have in college that can have a positive impact on their persistence. In addition, these experiences may contribute to the social capital gained that can be a useful way to acquire cultural capital that helps them succeed academically and benefit cognitively. The involvement may also expose students to a better understanding of behaviors that help them succeed and maximize the benefits they receive from college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Positive involvement experiences in college include extracurricular involvement; involvement in classroom/academic activities; active involvement with faculty; and interaction with peers (Astin, 1993). These experiences demonstrate a “commitment to occupational and education goals and commitment to the institution…which significantly influence college performance and persistence” (Tinto, 1993). This increased interaction between the student and the institution often strengthens and reinforces student goals, and therefore makes it more likely that the student will persist to graduation (Tinto, 1993).

Other factors that seem to affect positive persistence in college include the strength of a student’s high school curriculum; significant credit accumulation during their first year (minimum of 20 hours); living and working on-campus; and good academic performance. Research related to these factors has found that a low-income student is more likely than their upper-income peers to be deficient in some if not all of these areas. An institution prepared to assist these students by (1) understanding where
they have come from and (2) the possible challenges they will face on campus will provide the necessary resources and supports to help these students succeed.

Student persistence and retention also seems to be influenced by their perceptions of the campus ecology. If they perceive the campus environment is supportive of their academic and non-academic efforts, they will make gains in educational and personal development and acquire additional intellectual skills (Filkins & Doyle, 2002). They are also more likely to exhibit gains in thinking critically and analytically, writing clearly and effectively, and learning effectively on their own when they think the campus environment is supportive of their intellectual efforts. Students also report gains in working well with others, understanding themselves, and developing a personal code of ethics and values when they perceive an environment that is supportive of their personal development (Filkins & Doyle, 2002).

This chapter explored the background characteristics, experiences, and factors that influence students from low-income families as they make their post-secondary enrollment decisions. It also discussed the indirect factors that may ease, challenge, or prevent these students from attending college as well as those that facilitate or challenge their persistence and retention once they are enrolled.

Chapter three will discuss the research methodology utilized in this study, including the theoretical framework, methodology, and methods and justification for their use.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

I had the unique opportunity to examine the effects of a new financial aid and scholarship program on the transition and persistence experiences of low-income, high ability students at a large, urban, Midwestern university. This is a qualitative, exploratory study of a particular program at “State University”. The program awards one student from each county in the state a full-tuition, room, and board scholarship based on both merit and financial need. The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of this program on the transition experiences, academic success, social integration, and persistence of the student scholars at this university.

Previous research has shown that success rates are mixed for these students. By studying the dynamics involved in their persistence, transitions, or departure from college, this study contributes to the overall retention literature and will be helpful for the university as an assessment of the program in its first year. Because of this university’s status as a land-grant institution, it is especially important that it remains loyal to those students from the state for which it was founded, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. I hope that this study will contribute research outcomes that the university can use in future years to help the persistence and graduation rates of low-income students. By knowing the factors that assist them in their educational goals, this
university can continue to best serve the disadvantaged and deserving students of the state.

**Research Questions**

In designing this exploratory study, the following questions guided my research:

- What are the factors that support high ability students from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds as they enter postsecondary education, and how do their family, economic, and schooling backgrounds influence their transitions?
- What resources or strategies do the students use in their transitions to college?
- To what degree can we draw conclusions about the impact of the structure of the program on student retention and successful persistence?
- What recommendations can we make to colleges who wish to support these students’ retention and successful persistence to graduation?

**Research Elements**

**Epistemology**

Epistemology is “the nature of knowledge”, one’s view of the world and one’s “assumption about how to know the social and apprehend its meaning” (Fonow & Cook, 1991 in Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995 p. 879). The paradigmatic lens that overarches the theoretical and methodological foundations of this study is a social constructivist one, meaning, “knowledge is a social and historical product and [that] ‘facts’ come to us laden with theory” (Miles & Huberman, 1994 p. 4). According to Erikson (1977 in Miles & Huberman, 1994), “social facts are embedded in social action, just as social meaning is constituted by what people do in everyday life”. We can only understand how particular individuals represent themselves symbolically, especially
through language and how they use language to shape or know their worlds; “human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it” (Schwandt, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 197). As distinct and unique individuals who live-out their own experiences, people “invent concepts, models, and schemes to make sense of experience, and we continually test and modify these constructions in the light of new experiences” (Schwandt, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 197).

Constructivism opposes realist or representationalist epistemologies, which believe that there can be “some kind of unmediated, direct grasp of the empirical world and that knowledge (i.e., the mind) simply reflects or mirrors what is out there” (Schwandt, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 197). Instead, constructivism posits that “all knowledge claims and their evaluation take place within a conceptual framework through which the world is described and explained” (Schwandt, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 197).

I reflected on my own history and interactions with higher education in an attempt to illuminate the fact that I am not an expert regarding access and do not have the personal knowledge of what these students I worked with are experiencing. I was not a first-generation college student, and do not claim to know or completely understand their transitions to college. Because experiences are different, we “cannot know the meanings of another’s life experiences, but only the inquirer’s own inscriptions or representations of said meanings” (Lather, 1991 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 986).

The students in this research study brought their own set of unique experiences and backgrounds with them as they transitioned to college, and their stories and experiences do not all resemble each other. Some of their characteristics are similar, e.g., from low-income backgrounds and high academic achievers, but beyond that, I have tried
not to “essentialize” their experiences as a “knowable cohort” (Delong, 2003). These students are not like all low-income, high ability students, and I have not represented or constructed their experiences as such. I will “seek to understand contextualized meaning, to understand the meaningfulness of human actions and interactions—as experienced and construed by the actors—in a given context” (Greene, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 986). Telling their stories in a way that represents them accurately and sensitively was challenging but very important to me and my research.

**Theoretical Framework**

“The theory of knowledge and the interpretive framework that guides a particular research project” (Lather, 2004) is as important as the methodology. In my attempt to understand these scholars’ transitions to college, I have focused my understanding on the experienced meanings of their “life world” (Kvale, p. 53), and how their perspectives shape their experiences and meanings. The phenomenological framework serves as the micro-level lens through which I have attempted to understand the experiences the scholars have as they transition to college. Phenomenology is concerned with describing, as accurately and precisely as possible, the nature, experience, and meanings involved in the phenomena under study. I have attempted to represent the scholars’ stories they have shared with me during the course of data collection as accurately and precisely as I can in my data analysis.

Phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience and with uncovering the essence of a particular phenomenon (Jones, 2002). Phenomenology has historical roots in the early 20th century philosophy of Edmund Husserl, was further developed by his follower Martin Heidegger as an existential philosophy, and developed in an existential
and dialectical direction by Jean-Paul Satre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Kvale, 1996; Barrit, Bleeker, Beekman, & Mulderij, 2001). At the most basic level of explanation, phenomena are experiences and phenomenology is the study of experience (Barrit et al., 2001). Phenomenology posits that social phenomena are best understood form the “actors’ own perspectives, describing the world as experienced by subjects, and with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (Kvale, 1996, p. 52). Husserl believed that there are “a priori categories of knowing”, but that philosophers and researchers should put aside their preconceptions and theories about knowing and “go to the things themselves…and examine them” in order to “understand human life” (Barrit et al., 2001).

Phenomenology is also “interested in elucidating both that which appears and the manner in which it appears…it studies the subjects’ perspectives on the world; attempts to describe in detail the content and structure of the subjects’ consciousness, to grasp the qualitative diversity of their experiences and to explicate their essential meanings” (Kvale, p. 53). The concept of lived or experienced worlds in phenomenology is used to demonstrate the individual experiences of very different worlds. The scholars have similar experiences to each other, but all are from and live in different worlds from each other.

All researchers, myself included, bring biases to their research. Phenomenology “calls for a suspension of judgment as to the existence or nonexistence of the content of an experience…which can be pictured as bracketing” (Kvale, p. 54). This involves a critical examination of the “presuppositions” (Kvale, p. 54) I may bring to my research as well as putting the knowledge between parentheses in order to arrive at an unprejudiced
description and analysis of the “essence of the phenomenon” (Kvale, p. 54). Barrit et al. (2001) suggest that researchers ask themselves the following questions when embarking on a phenomenological study:

- What are my pre-judgments?
- What personal commitments do I bring to this study?
- What do I know about the subject that could influence what I see?

If a researcher considers the answers to those questions for themselves, they will be aware of the potential biases and perspectives they bring to their study.

I have also attempted to manage the biases I hold by keeping a reflexive journal, which is “a kind of diary in which the investigator on a daily basis, or as needed, records a variety of information about self (hence the term “reflexive”) and method” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 327). In this journal I have recorded my mental biases, values, and interests and how they contribute to my interpretation and analysis of the data. I have also further developed ideas and insights I gather as I collect data and analyze it in the journal, and I have kept a record of the methodological decisions I have made and justification for why I made them throughout the research process as a way to “check and balance” my project. Keeping a reflexive journal also contributes broadly to the “establishment of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” in the study (Lincoln & Guba, p. 327).

As opposed to phenomenological description, which is concerned with elaborating individual meanings that are embedded in everyday experience, symbolic interactionism is “explicit in pointing out that understanding the individual is achieved through understanding the social group that provides the individual’s context” (Horn, 1998). Phenomenology and symbolic interactionism are similar in “the emphasis on the individual’s lived experience, the inner world of human behavior, the notion of meaning
perceived by the participant, and understanding a situation form the participant’s point of view” (Jeon, 2004).

I have used symbolic interactionism as the macro-level lens through which I studied and examined the identifiable group(s) that the scholars belong to, formally and informally. The meanings the scholars make of their experiences will inevitably be shaped by the social interactions they encounter within their groups (family, friends, faculty members, professional staff) from home as well as on campus. The students will take account of various things that occur in their everyday world and act on the basis of how they interpret them. Their “persistence behavior is related to the manner in which the university becomes and remains, through everyday social interaction, a reality for the student” (Attinasi, 1989).

Grounded in sociological theory, symbolic interactionism “emphasizes social interaction as a process that forms human conduct…it is from the interaction of the individuals with other that meanings of things arise, and it is on the basis of their meaning that the individual acts toward things…the concern of symbolic interactionists is then is shared emergent meanings (Attinasi, 1989 p. 251). It was developed in the early 1900s by a social psychologist from the Chicago sociological tradition, George Herbert Meade (Jeon ,2004). He was influenced by American pragmatism, particularly the views of John Dewey (Jeon, 2004). Another sociologist from the University of Chicago, Herbert Blumer, further developed and delineated symbolic interactionism as a methodology in his 1969 foundational book, Symbolic Interactionism. The goal of symbolic interactionism is the “understanding of group lived experience and the
meanings that are imminent in the language-based, and thus symbolic, interactions that occur within those groups” (Horn, 1998).

Symbolic interactionism’s three core principles of language, meaning, and thought lead to conclusions about the creation of an individual’s self and socialization into their larger community (Griffin, 1997). There is interplay between these principles, and each builds and relies upon the other. Meaning states that individuals act towards other people and things based upon the meanings they have given to those people or things. Symbolic interactionism holds the principle of meaning as central to an individual’s behavior. Language gives individuals a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols and it is by interacting through speech with others that individuals identify meaning and develop discourse. Thought is believed by symbolic interactionists to modify each individual’s interpretation of symbols, and thought, which is based on language, is a “mental conversation or dialogue that requires role taking, or imagining different points of view” (Nelson, 1998). Symbolic interactionists contend that,

“human beings are not sponglike, malleable organisms who passively absorb and adapt to their environments. Instead…people (are) active agents who shape and mold their destinies and continually fashion new joint actions based on their definitions of the situation” (Blumer, 1969 in Vander Zanden, p. 120).

The students in the study have been affected by their home environments when they arrived at college, and continue to be affected by the environment they find on campus and in their daily life. The college environment will “provide the framework within which (they) people forge their actions as they appraise, choose, and decide on alternatives” (Vander Zanden, p. 120). They make decisions and devise strategies based
on their environment, and one student’s choices will most likely be different from another’s. Their individual meanings of institutional and environmental behavior influence the ways in which they transition to college and persist throughout their undergraduate years. A continual interplay exists for these students between the meanings they endow things with and the meanings they come to understand through their experiences in college.

**Methodology**

The purpose of the methodology is to “describe the theory and design undergirding the research process” (Jones, 2002). The methodology is the “theory of knowledge” (Lather, 2004 in deMarrais & Lapan, p.167) that guides the choice of methods I have used in my research study. “Methods are not passive strategies. They differently produce, reveal, and enable the display of different kinds of identities” (Fine & Weis, 1996 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 119). The methods used in this research study refer to “the actual techniques used to gather data and analyze results” (Jones, 2002).

**Sampling Strategies and Participant Selection**

Sampling strategies in qualitative studies differ in nature and approach than those typically used in quantitative research. Qualitative sampling strategies are “based on informational, not statistical, considerations…its purpose is to maximize information, not facilitate generalization” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 202). Instead of sampling for the number of participants that will produce statistical significance, qualitative researchers often talk of “sampling for redundancy”. That is, “the criterion invoked to determine when to stop sampling is informational redundancy” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 202). Before data collection began, I hoped to have 10% of the Scholar cohort (10 students) in my sample. At the
conclusion of data collection, I had 15 (approximately 14% of the cohort) students in my sample. Dukes (1984 in Creswell, 1998) recommends that a phenomenological study have between three and ten participants, in order to “describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 122).

Glesne and Peshkin (1992 in Jones, 2002 p. 464) say that “the strategy of participant selection in qualitative research rests on the multiple purposes of illuminating, interpreting, and understanding—and on the researcher’s own imagination and judgment”. I have utilized purposive sampling, a way of “building in variety and acknowledging opportunities for intensive study” (Stake, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 446) when I selected my participants, understanding that purposive sampling does not seek representativeness or randomness as a goal (Hernandez, 2002). In order to learn as much as I can about the phenomenon I am studying, I wanted to choose students that “seem(ed) to offer (the) opportunity to learn…from which we feel we can learn the most” (Stake, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 446).

In addition to purposive sampling, Patton (1980 in Lincoln & Guba p. 200) developed six categories of sampling that “serve purposes other than facilitating generalization”. Included in these categories is maximum variation sampling, which “document(s) unique variations that have emerged in adapting to different conditions” (Lincoln & Guba p. 200). It is important to this study that a variety of students were selected to participate in the research for the uniqueness their perspectives and experiences can bring to studying their transitions to college.
To recruit the student participants, I relied on administrators at the university that worked with the scholars program (i.e., staff members in the offices of financial aid, first-year experience, undergraduate admission) to assist in drafting my recruitment letter. I sent recruitment letters to all 108 students in the scholar cohort, introducing myself, explaining my research, and asking them to participate in the study (Appendix A).

My sampling decisions were guided in part by the answer to two questions, (1) “who will provide the most information-rich cases?” (Patton, 1990 in Jones, 2002 p. 464), and (2) who is available and willing to participate during the timing of my data collection? Therefore, I employed convenience sampling, not only to “save time, money, or effort” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 102), but depending on the students’ and my schedules, to be flexible and accommodating to unanticipated conflicts. These students were not only intensely focused on their academic pursuits, but also involved in extracurricular and employment activities on and off-campus. Depending on their responsibilities and obligations when I gathered my data, some students were included in my sample while others were excluded based on how their schedules fit into my research timeline.

I sent recruitment letters to the home address of every member of the cohort (n=108) at the end of August 2006 (Appendix A). I started receiving responses via e-mail and phone from students interested in participating about 2-3 days after the letters were sent out. I communicated by e-mail and phone with these interested students and told them I would be conducting interviews in the beginning of the academic year. I set aside a week in October to complete these initial interviews, and after scheduling individual meeting times, we met in an academic support/tutoring building on campus.
Once I received responses from the scholars who were interested in participating in my study, there were certain characteristics I was interested in having represented in the sample that may produce differences and similarities in the collected data. I was interested in including both men and women in the sample (60 women, 48 men in cohort) in order to investigate gender differences; students from both urban and rural areas for the possibilities that their differences in family backgrounds and educational experiences may contribute to their experiences; and perhaps students from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (84 Caucasian; 11 African-American; 5 Asian; 5 Hispanic; 3 Unknown in first-year cohort).

Beyond the desired characteristics I wanted to have represented in my sample mentioned above, I did not have strict criteria in place for sampling or participant selection. I was not sure how my request for participation in my research would be received by the scholars, so I left the criteria open-ended from the outset of data collection. I believed that if a student was interested in participating, I would “select” them. Because the goal of my research was understanding and discovering the processes involved and the dynamics at play in their transition and persistence experiences more than validating something already formulated, having strict criteria was not as important to this study.

Site Description

This research took place at a large, urban Midwestern university (“State University” or “SU”). Over approximately the last 10 years the university has moved from an open admissions system to a more selective one. Approximately 15% of the
students in the fall 2005 first-year class received “university”, or merit-based scholarships from the institution. The Scholars represent approximately 2% of the first-year class, or stated differently, 108 out of 5,860 first-year students. In order to receive it, students must have demonstrated a significant amount of financial need (family incomes under $40,000) and must also have demonstrated high academic achievement from high school. The scholarship covered tuition, room and board through a combination of federal, state, and institutional grant and merit-based financial aid.

In order to retain the scholarship, students must achieve a 3.2 cumulative grade point average by the end of the winter term during their second, or sophomore year at the university. The students and their families are required to fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) every year they are enrolled, but even if their family’s income changes (i.e., exceeds the maximum requirement for qualification), once they are awarded the scholarship and maintain the grade point average, they are able to retain it.

Introduction to Participants

The 15 students in the sample were in their second year of study at the university at the time of data collection. They had been awarded the scholarship upon enrolling at the institution in the fall of 2005. Two men and 13 women participated in the study, and consistent with the requirement of the scholarship, were from the state where the university is located. The following table is a brief introduction to the participants:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Background Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>19 year-old Asian man from County C; 1st generation; parents divorced; sister was a senior at State at time of data collection; majoring in Economics; Mother employed as janitor, Father unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>19 year-old Asian man from County J; Both parents graduated from college and hold advanced degrees; Parents married; Majoring in Comparative Studies, Chinese, and Food, Agricultural and Environmental Engineering; Parents own restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>19 year-old Caucasian woman from County L; 1st generation; parents divorced; Sibling was 1st year Scholar at time of data collection; majoring in Accounting; Mother employed as administrative assistant, Father is fireman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>19 year-old Caucasian woman from County K; 1st generation; Parents divorced; Majoring in Pre-Nursing; Mother employed as insurance agent, Father is electrician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>20 year-old Caucasian woman from County G; 1st generation; Father deceased; Majoring in Communications; Mother employed as secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>19 year-old Caucasian woman from County F; 1st generation; Parents divorced; Majoring in Communications; Mother employed as receptionist, Father unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>20 year-old Caucasian woman from County N; Father graduated from college; Parents separated; Majoring in Medical Technologies; Mother current college student, Father retired Park Ranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>20 year-old Caucasian woman from County H; Mother graduated from college; Parents married; Majoring in Communications; Mother employed as lab assistant, Father owns business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>20 year-old Caucasian woman from County E; 1st generation; Brother was junior at State at time of data collection; Father deceased; majoring in Molecular Genetics; Mother employed as accounts due collector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>19 year-old Caucasian woman from County D; 1st generation; Sister was senior at State at time of data collection; Parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
married; Majoring in Radiological Technologies; Mother not employed outside of house, Father is truck driver

Rachel 20 year-old Caucasian woman from County M; 1st generation; parents separated; Majoring in Psychology and Biology; Mother unemployed, Father unknown

Charlotte 19 year-old African-American woman from County I; Father graduated from college; Parents married; Majoring in Biology; Mother employed as disabled assistant, Father retired businessman

Melanie 19 year-old African-American woman from County B; 1st generation; Father deceased; Majoring in International Affairs; Mother employed as nanny

Kimberly 19 year-old Hispanic woman from County A; 1st generation; Parents divorced; Majoring in Psychology and Criminology; Mother is current college student and nursing assistant, Father is state trooper

Jackie 19 year-old Asian woman from County G; 1st generation; Parents divorced; Majoring in Zoology; Mother employed as seamstress, Father is a chef

The two men in the study were both Asian; there were nine Caucasian women; two African-American women; one Hispanic woman; and an Asian woman. The average age of the scholars was 19 and 11 were classified as first-generation students in that neither of their parents graduated from college. The size of their high school graduating classes ranged from a low of 86 to a high of 611, with an average class size of 288 students. Six students were from families in which their parents had divorced; four from families in which their parents were married; two scholars’ parents were separated; and three had fathers who were deceased. Two scholars had siblings at the university who were seniors at the time of our interviews and one woman’s sister was a first-year Scholar.
The following table describes the counties the scholars were from; their designation as suburban, urban, or rural; per capita personal income level of the county; and the percentage of persons 25 years and older who have attained a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). As we can see, there is almost an equal balance between students from suburban (6), urban (4), and rural (5) counties in the state. The average per capita personal income for the state was $30,129 in 2003 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2005) and the average percentage of bachelor’s degree attainment for persons over the age of 25 was 21.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Per Capita Personal Income</th>
<th>% Bachelor’s Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County A (Kimberly)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$28,860</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County B (Melanie)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$34,439</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County C (Matthew)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$27,411</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County D (Maggie)</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$24,858</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County E (Kelly)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$27,642</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County F (Carolyn)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>$27,047</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County G (Jackie &amp; Annie)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$31,476</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County H (Erica)</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$26,787</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County I (Charlotte)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$34,471</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County J (Thomas)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$29,079</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County K (Alicia)</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$23,554</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County L (Alison)</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$21,762</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County M (Rachel)</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>$24,929</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County N (Ellen)</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>$20,705</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 County Descriptions
Although I did not have access to the scholars’ specific financial backgrounds (nor did I ask them during the interviews), all were from low-income families (family income of $40,000 or less). As displayed in the table, only four of the 15 scholars were from counties where the per capita personal income was above the average for the state. It must be mentioned, however, that not all of the scholars had been economically disadvantaged throughout their lives. It became apparent in the course of our interviews that while some scholars had been financially disadvantaged most of their lives, for others, events in the past couple of years had caused financial hardship. For example, Kelly had lived in another state until approximately 10 years ago. Her dad owned a successful landscaping business and her mom did not work outside of the home besides as a part-time aide at Kelly and her brother’s school. Her dad was diagnosed with cancer, and unfortunately after undergoing radiation treatment and a failed transplant operation, died during the summer of 1997. That fall, Kelly’s mom moved the family back to the state where they had other family members and her parents were both from. Relying only on their mother’s income after she went back to work full-time has been difficult for the family, something they had not dealt with when their father was alive and provided the income from his business.

Data Collection

Interviews

Data were obtained through individual, face-to-face interviews with the 15 scholars. The interview method is common in qualitative research because of the advantages it offers, including “the in-person contact with participants, the opportunity for the researcher to explore topics in depth, and the ability to experience the affective as
well as the cognitive aspects of the participants’ responses” (Manning, 1992 in Hernandez, 2002). Interviews were the best data collection method for my questions because “in an interview conversation, the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own words…” (Kvale, 1996 p. 1). I wanted to hear firsthand from the students their perspectives on their transitions and the meanings they’ve made in their first year at the university. In order to do so, an interview framed as a conversation would best accomplish my research goals.

Using interviews also corresponded to my phenomenological framework. They allowed me to understand the phenomenon (the students’ transition and persistence experiences) from the scholar’s own perceptions, understandings, and cultural frame of reference. Barritt et al. (2001) explains using interviews in phenomenological studies,

Language is a major force in binding subjective experiences together… it is a tool for affirming one’s vision of reality…as such it constitutes the major source of information for phenomenological research…

My conversations with the scholars used language as the instrument through which they could express how they experienced and understood their transitions, and language is “a profound tool for telling what is going on in [their] lives” (Barritt et al., 2001). Barritt et al. also say, “phenomenology is based on an acceptance of language as the means for communicating, for learning, for reaching agreements…this is not to say that language is the perfect tool; but it is often the only tool.”

An interview in qualitative research can be described as “a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (Kvale, 1996 p. 6), “characterized by a systematic form of questioning” (Kvale, p. 132). It is an interpersonal interaction between two people who
are interested in a “theme of mutual interest” (Kvale, p. 125), in my case, asking about the scholars’ experiences as they transition to college. Interviews fit well with phenomenology because the focus of a qualitative interview is on the participants’ experiences and meanings of their “life world” (Kvale, p. 53) and understanding their perspective and meanings of those experiences.

There is a degree of structure involved in interviewing, and interviews may be characterized on a continuum from structured to unstructured (Lincoln & Guba, p. 268). When utilizing structured interview protocols, the researcher “asks all respondents the same series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories” (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 649). If I had used a structured interview style, I would be constraining myself to a rigid set of questions I could not deviate from, and consequently might be missing out on spontaneous questions and additional valuable data from the scholars. I chose, therefore, to use a semi-structured interview style with the scholars. Semi-structured interviewing “has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions” (Kvale, p. 1996, p. 124). Semi-structured interviews have also been called “depth”, “clinical”, “elite”, “specialized”, or “exploratory” interviews (Lincoln & Guba, p. 268).

Using a semistructured approach to the interviews, I prepared an interview guide and predetermined set of questions before I began my conversations with the scholars, which essentially “indicates the topics and their sequence in the interview” (Kvale, p. 129). This predetermined list of questions were ones I asked all of the scholars (Appendix B). I mention that because I knew I should take care to avoid “directing” subsequent interviews based on responses I received from previous ones. I wanted to
ensure I asked all scholars the same questions for transferability. I also allowed myself the flexibility, however, to ask additional, follow-up questions where needed—if I wanted a student to clarify their answer, obtain more information, or because they brought up something I wanted to know more about in the course of our conversation.

Description of Interviews

The scholars were interviewed twice during their second (sophomore) year at the university. The first year is a crucial period for students to become acclimated to the college environment (Tinto, 1987), and there is “overwhelming evidence that student success is largely determined by experiences during the freshman year” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989 in Hernandez, 2002). If the scholars returned for their second year, they will have successfully completed that crucial first year and will have possibly returned to live with their families over the summer. This provides richer, detailed data and information regarding the entirety of their first year experience in college. Two scholars in the first-year cohort did not return for the fall term of their second year, but did in time for winter term. One was completing an internship in another state and the other chose to complete military boot camp. One student in the first-year cohort was academically dismissed at the end of their second fall term.

Approximately three weeks into their second year, I held initial interviews with the scholars (October 2006). Follow-up interviews occurred three months later in the beginning of their winter term. At this second time, they had recently received their grades from autumn quarter and had one more quarter to ensure their grade point average was at the minimum 3.2 required to retain the scholarship.
First Interview

I transcribed the interviews into individual word documents as soon as I could so the information, mood, and conditions of the interview were still fresh in my mind. Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) point out that “transcription is theory laden; the choices that researchers make about transcription enact the theories they hold and constrain the interpretations they can draw from their data”. I was careful that I was accurate and concise in my transcriptions, acknowledging that the decisions I made while transcribing can have implications for my data analysis.

Once the transcriptions were completed, I sent each student a copy of their individual interview via an e-mail attachment as a member check, the process “whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were…collected…” (Lincoln & Guba p. 314). Member checks are also encouraged because they are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba p. 314). When I presented the transcriptions to the students, I asked them to read over it, check to see if there was anything I misrepresented, and asked if there was anything they would like to add or change. Conducting member checks are important not only for the credibility of the study, but also to empower the research participants and ensure that they have a voice in the construction of the research product. A few of the students returned their transcriptions to me, for the most part providing the corrected names of people I had misspelled or filled in information I had not been able to understand from the recordings. Annie was the most thorough in her member check, sending it back to me with her changes “tracked” on the word document and clarifying things she thought did not make
sense. I also took these transcriptions with me to our second interviews, where I asked if there was anything else they wanted to change or add. Some scholars did have minor changes at this time as well, and I also found it was a helpful way to refresh their memory of our first meeting.

Second Interview

I contacted the 15 scholar participants by e-mail in the beginning of January 2007 and set up individual meeting times for the third week in the term. Again, we met on campus, this time in a staff member’s office in the Undergraduate Admissions and First-Year Experience office. The interviews were conducted over a four-day period and each lasted from approximately 30 minutes to over an hour. Our conversations were digitally recorded, then transferred and stored on my personal computer.

At the time of this second interview, the scholars had received their grades from autumn term and had one more term to ensure their grade point average was at the minimum 3.2 required to retain the scholarship. They had just returned from winter break and might have been experiencing some of the same emotions they felt when they returned in the fall—possibly homesickness or relief about being back at school and away from home (Hunter & Gahagan, 2003). These interviews were useful not only to probe for additional information but also for the opportunity to confirm my beginning analysis emerging themes and patterns. Additionally, second interviews added to the prolonged engagement I spent with the scholars, which can reduce misinformation or distortions in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I transcribed the interviews as soon as I could to ensure they were fresh in my mind and sent the transcriptions to the scholars for another member check. Two of the
scholars, Rachel and Matthew, did not complete second interviews with me. I followed up with both of them, and Rachel completed hers over e-mail. Matthew did not return his, so I have incomplete data for him.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is an “iterative” process (Lather, personal communication), and the researcher is encouraged to begin analyzing and writing as soon as data collection begins. As a qualitative researcher, I continuously analyzed and coded my data, even while I collected it. Ryan and Bernard (2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 780) explain that “themes are abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection”. The process of analyzing and coding qualitative data “forces the researcher to make judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text” and “the fundamental tasks associated with coding are sampling, identifying themes, building codebooks, marking texts, constructing models…” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000 in Denzin & Lincoln, p. 780). As I collected the data, I was continuously looking for those emergent themes and patterns.

I was also keeping up with my researcher journal, and after each interview wrote about what the scholars had been wearing, what their mood appeared to be, and my impressions of how the interview went overall. Following is an excerpt from my first round of interviews in October,

I just had my 1st interview of the day with Kelly. She was wearing a black “Under Armor” hooded sweatshirt and jeans, and her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She impressed me with her maturity, confidence, and what seemed like a really grounded demeanor. She was very well-spoken and seemed to possess a maturity beyond her sophomore status. Early in the interview, when talking about her family, she mentioned her father had died of cancer about 10 years ago, which I think had an effect
on her choice of major (molecular genetics) and commitment to cancer research. She’s hoping to attend med. school after grad. from SU, and has already made some good contacts with faculty members here—she’s hoping to work in a lab or 2 this quarter about 5 hours a week. Her brother also attends SU and is a varsity athlete…they seem very close, getting together for lunch a few times a week. She says her mom really misses both of them not being at home, and Kelly feels guilty about it, especially since her mom is in a job she dislikes, but Kelly really enjoys all of the opportunities she has here and doesn’t want to miss out on anything.

These entries served me well as I began to analyze the data. One of the first things I did as I began the formal analysis process was to write narrative descriptions of the individual scholars and my interviews with them. My researcher journal and entries like the one above proved invaluable as I wrote the narratives and moved forward with my analysis. The narratives ranged in page length, but averaged about five pages each, much longer than I had originally thought they would be. I had such rich, detailed information from the scholars’ interviews, however, that they were very comprehensive and detailed accounts of their experiences.

Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10) define qualitative data analysis as “consisting of three concurrent flows of activity”: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification”. These activities can be imagined as interacting with data collection in a data analysis “spiral” model, beginning with data analysis and ending with the finished account. In between those two activities involve a process that moves in analytic circles rather than a fixed linear approach (Creswell, 1998).

In my approach to the analysis of my data, I used a combination of inductive data analysis (the process of data management by coding, categorizing into themes, and drawing relationships among themes, Miles & Huberman, 1994); and the process
prescribed by Moustakas (1994), a specific, systematic approach to analyzing data gathered in a phenomenological study. He writes that “organization of data begins when the researcher places the transcribed interviews before him or her and studies the material through the methods and procedures of phenomenal analysis” (p. 118). The first formal step of phenomenological data analysis is the methodology of reduction, which includes the epoche or bracketing process. The epoche is described as “the first step in coming to know things, in being inclined toward seeing things as they appear, in returning to things themselves, free of prejudgments and preconceptions (Moustakas, p. 90). Husserl (1977 in Moustakas, 1994 p. 61) writes of this process:

My own experience working with the epoche process is that I can set aside many biases. I can intend an open and fresh approach to my knowledge of something but the problem of language and habit still exist; my own rooted ways of perceiving and knowing still enter in. The value of the epoche principle is that it inspires one to examine biases and enhance one’s openness even if a perfect and pure state is not achieved.

Husserl acknowledges that it may not be possible to achieve this “pure and absolute transcendental ego” (Moustakas p. 60), but encourages researchers to at least be aware of any biases or pre-judgments they hold as a result of their own history and experiences. I attempted the best I could to set aside any preconceived experiences I had to best understand the scholars’ experiences without judgment. Much of that bracketing occurred in my researcher journal as I wrote notes about the interviews and related how my experiences were different or the same from the scholars. The following is an excerpt from my own “bracketing” process that was also included in the introduction chapter,

In many ways I do not resemble the students involved in this program. I would consider myself academically motivated and have always received high grades in school, at all levels. Moreover, I never questioned the
inevitability that I would attend and graduate from college or that my family would have the ability to pay for it. I am not a first-generation college student, and like many middle- and upper-income students, the financial ability to attend college wherever I wanted (a small, private, liberal arts institution) was something I took for granted.

My next step in the analysis process was to read through my data corpus, looking for specific statements and themes regarding how the scholars experienced their transition and persistence. My data corpus included the transcriptions of both rounds of interviews; the narratives I had written of each scholar’s interview; handwritten field notes; and a listing of each interview question with every scholar’s response underneath. These documents together equaled approximately 1,000 pages. After reading through the data corpus a number of times, I started pulling out statements or responses to the questions and listing them together, called “horizonalization of the data” (Creswell, p. 147). I continued to look for and gather these “nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping” statements (Creswell, p. 147) and eventually grouped them into “meaning units” or themes. I listed these themes (family, peers, money, etc.) and wrote a textural description of the experience, “what was experienced, a description of the meaning [the scholars] have experienced” (Moustakas, 1994 in Creswell, p. 237). For example, for the theme, “college was an automatic”, I listed these excerpts from the scholars’ interviews, which then became my chronological, or linear descriptive analysis, my first attempt at an analysis draft,

Ellen: “In 8th grade I think I wanted to be a doctor so I kind of assumed I was going to college.”

Thomas: “College was pretty much the next step, kind of mindless, supposed to do that.”

Annie: “‘I always knew higher education was going to be a part of my life’.”
Moustakas recommends writing descriptions of the phenomenon that is being studied from a researchers’ perspective, then combining the textural and structural descriptions into one coherent analysis. I am not sure I wrote both textural and structural descriptions of the experience, but I did include a full description of my own experiences throughout the study in my researcher journal. Based on my interactions with the scholars, combined with my own history and experiences, I explored all of the possible meanings and perspectives of the phenomena the scholars shared with me. At this point I was working towards an overall description of the meaning and essence of the scholars’ experiences as they transitioned to the university. I concluded the analysis process with a written account that both explained and interpreted the meanings the scholars made in a way that accurately represented their experiences. I also interspersed my own experiences into the different chapters of this dissertation, hoping to give the reader a look into my own experience and how it maybe be similar or different from what the scholars have experienced.

Interpretation and Representation

In analyzing and writing up my data and conclusions, I must remember that “data is created in relationships” (Lather, personal communication, 2/28/06), and the information I have obtained from the students is a result of our relationships created through the interviews. It is important to convey in the interpretation and write-up of my research that the data represents the voices of students in this study. The results are not intended to be representative of all high ability, low-income students (Hernandez, 2002).
The presentation is my understanding, co-created with the scholars, of their lived experiences as they transition to college.

A goal of the write-up and presentation of a phenomenological study is for the reader to have “a better awareness of the other’s way of seeing things…by revealing alternative meanings, new ways for solving problems will be suggested” (Barrit et al., 2001). Research which describes the experiences of certain individuals in order to better appreciate it also has the potential to bring change in the form of better decisions in the future. Through my descriptions and representations of the scholars’ transition and persistence experiences, one hope is that this work can illuminate institutional and programmatic strategies and policies that will assist them and the scholars that will come after them.

In the representation and write-up, I am aware of my own autobiography, using reflexivity to be alert to limitations based on how gender, race, class, and educational background has shaped me and intersects with my research participants and setting (Ambert et al., 1995; Jones, 2002). Reflexivity can be described as “the main process by which the self is transformed in relation to knowledge” (Ambert et al., p. 887). My expertise regarding access is limited and I have not experienced the transition that these students experience. I was not a first-generation college student, nor was I from an economically disadvantaged background, and I do not claim to know or completely understand their transitions to college. I have listened carefully to the scholars, asked questions, and above all valued what they shared with me as important perspectives towards understanding their experiences.
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness asks the question, “to what extent can we place confidence in the outcome of the study?” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994 in Bonner, 2000 p. 5). In order to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative research study, the researcher must reflect on the following questions,

- How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?
- What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue?” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 290).

In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest alternatives to the quantitative researchers’ use of terms to measure trustworthiness, such as internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Qualitative researchers should replace these words with the terms credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability when discussing their concern with trustworthiness in a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

There are certain activities or techniques a qualitative researcher can engage in that make it more likely that their study meets trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility can be achieved by performing “prolonged engagement…[and] persistent observation” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 301). Prolonged engagement involves spending sufficient time in the “field” with the research participants so the researcher can learn about the studied culture, build trust and rapport with participants, and “test(ing) for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or of the respondents” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 301). I satisfied the criteria necessary for establishing credibility in part by interviewing the scholars twice during their second year and immersing myself in their
planned, group events. I attended their social activities (i.e., congratulatory luncheon and welcome reception) and informational meetings, interacting informally with the students in order to make myself familiar to them and build rapport.

Persistent observation means “to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail…if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 304). In order to learn more about the scholar culture and in preparation for my data collection, I conducted observations in a number of settings throughout the year. These included the meetings and events I attended; keeping close contact with the coordinator of the scholars program; and working with the Director of Financial Aid, another graduate student, and a faculty member on a survey for the scholars and a focus group with some of their parents.

The member checks I described earlier have also contributed to establishing credibility in my research. Lincoln and Guba (p. 314) describe member checks as the process “whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stakeholding groups from whom the data were originally collected, [and] is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility”. At the immediate conclusion of each interview, I checked with the student that what I heard and recorded was an accurate representation of what they shared with me. After completing the transcription process, I also shared the typed transcriptions with the students to ensure their accuracy, in representation and in meaning.

Transferability most often involves the provision of “thick description” of the data that will enable someone else interested in transferring “to reach a conclusion about
whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 316). As opposed to quantitative inquiry, which establishes external validity, the claims I make in my data and analysis apply to the specific time, contexts, and participants in my study. I cannot guarantee that they will “hold in some other context, or even in the same context at some other time” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 316), but I can provide sufficient descriptions and details about data collection and analysis to ensure that there is an opportunity for transferability. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 316) emphasize that it is “not the naturalist’s task to provide an index of transferability; it is her or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers.”

An activity I employed that helped meet all four criteria for trustworthiness is the researcher journal, which I also described as a way to record the potential biases I brought to the research. The reflexive journal serves a number of purposes, including having a record of (methodological and logistical) decisions I make during the process; it was a place for me to reflect on my own values and thoughts as they related to my research; and it provided a daily schedule and logistics for the study. I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process for these reasons, and to record my initial coding and early attempts at analysis and theory-building from my data.

**Ethical Considerations**

At all times during this research study I have been committed to the ethical considerations involved in this project. The students have trusted me with their stories, and I have kept their names, personal information, and any identifying characteristics confidential. Only my academic advisor and I have seen or read any documents or data that contain their real names, and I have assigned pseudonyms for my data analysis and
write-up. My field notes, recorded conversations, and any other documents or items that contain their names or identifying information have been stored at my home throughout the duration of this project. I made sure that the students knew their participation in my research was voluntary, and each of them signed an Informed Consent (Appendix C) before participating, as required by the Institutional Review Board at State University (Protocol #2006E0504).

As a researcher performing action research, my interviews and interactions with these students will have an impact on them. Action research is described as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing a practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes” and its primary purpose is to “produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in their everyday lives” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001 in Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, & Vallejo, 2004). During the course of my conversations with them, my questions might prompt “new insights into important themes of their life world” the students might not previously have held (Kvale, p. 128). The conversations we have might also prompt feelings of anxiety or tensions based on how the information they shared with me will be used. It was important to me, therefore, to conduct a debriefing with the students at the conclusion of each interview, for the purposes of answering any questions they had that surfaced during our conversation; to ease any anxieties or tensions; and to reflect on what I learned through our conversations. I know, as a student affairs practitioner, that these students may view me as a resource they can use during our interaction and in the future. I was prepared and well-versed in the resources I could give to them if they were struggling with challenges more complex than my skills could address.
Referring to my discussion of the three core principles of symbolic interactionism (meaning, language, and thought) previously mentioned, my action research will also impact these principles for the students. Just as the meanings of their transition and persistence experiences will be conveyed to me through their language and thought, my questions and nature of our conversation will impact the way they construct their meanings, language, and thought. The conceptions these students have of themselves and that they are continuously developing through a variety of experiences in college might be influenced by our interactions. As a researcher interacting with them for a prolonged amount of time, I will therefore become another influence on their social environment and the meanings they establish may be dependent on our interactions.

As a qualitative researcher, I was respectful of the participants at all times during the study, including appreciating their willingness to be part of the project; respecting their decisions if they declined to participate; and keeping an open mind regarding their experiences as they related them to me. I know that I brought certain biases to my research, but I have tried to suspend judgment and hoped to co-create with my participants a representative account of their college transition and persistence experiences.

**Summary**

It was my intent in designing this research project to examine the transition and persistence experiences of low-income high achieving scholars in their second year of college. I have chosen a constructivist epistemology, and used phenomenology as a theoretical framework and to guide my choice of methods, which best helped me understand the scholars’ “lived, everyday experiences” as they interpreted and made
sense of their new campus environment. Symbolic interactionism also provided a lens to assist me as I uncovered and examined the dynamics at play in these students’ transitions and strategies they used for success during their first year and into their second.
CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

Of the 15 scholars who completed first interviews, 13 completed in-person follow-up interviews. Rachel and Matthew were both scheduled to meet with me on the last day of my interviews, but failed to attend. In response to my query sent once I realized they were not coming, both replied that they had forgotten, Rachel replying that she had to return home over the weekend due to a family emergency. I sent both students my intended questions over e-mail, which Rachel answered and returned, but Matthew did not. Therefore, I have incomplete data for Matthew.

During the first interview with the scholars in October 2006, I spent much of our time establishing rapport and trustworthiness. I explained what my research was about, shared some background information about myself, and asked if they had any remaining questions before we began. These initial interviews covered their pre-college life (family history, educational background, path to college); experiences they had since enrolling at the university; and ended with what they were looking forward to as a student at State.

The scholars were overwhelmingly helpful, friendly, and easy to talk to. I had told them that if there were any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, they were free to abstain, but none of them refrained from answering any question I asked. Most of them seemed to enjoy sharing their experiences with me, and elaborated when I
asked prompts and follow-up questions. A few scholars did not seem to open up as much as I would have hoped, even with prompting and follow-up questions. I tried as best I could to draw a few of them out more, but some of the interviews were much shorter than others.

Approximately three months later at our second interviews in January 2007, I began by asking the scholars how the rest of their fall term had gone (academically, socially/personally); followed up on some of my questions from our first interview (involvement on campus, employment); and ended with a discussion of their identity as a student and whether they thought their status as a Scholar was a substantial part of their identity. The scholars were again helpful and willing to share whatever information they could with me in order to assist with my research. They seemed more relaxed this time, and as before, very interested in my research questions and goals. A few asked me to share in more detail what I had found as a result of their first interviews. Those questions served as additional member checks for my emerging analysis. I detected more of a sense of urgency for some of them about their grades this time, which was not the case during our first interview since they would be evaluated at the end of this winter term. Overall, they were pleasant interactions, and I enjoyed talking with them a second time.

After two interviews with the scholars, both over e-mail and in person, and follow-up conversations over e-mail, I had over 1,000 pages of data to analyze. As mentioned in chapter 3, I used inductive data analysis in combination with the process recommended by Moustakas (1994) as I reduced the data and began to draw themes and patterns from it.
Description of Themes

The data analysis yielded 6 themes that will be described and explained in this chapter. The theme that college was an automatic for the scholars was one of the strongest that emerged from the data, therefore I present it first. Following the importance of attending college, I discuss the roles of the scholars’ parents and families throughout their college experience, both pre-college and since they have attended State. Subsequent themes include the importance of peers throughout the scholars’ experiences; how money and their economic background has affected their lives; how their high school experiences and academic talent contributed to their college path and academic experiences at State; and how they identify as a student. I also explored how the Scholarship program affected the scholars’ transition and persistence experiences and if it was a substantial part of their identity.

Within these themes, the journey the scholars have taken both before college and continue to follow through their educational experiences will become apparent. It is a journey that many of them began when they were very young as they first aspired to college attendance; continued through their experiences pre-college; and remain on throughout their years at State. The following is my co-creation with the scholar students of their journey and experiences.
College Was an Automatic

“It [was] just always sort of assumed that I would go to college, I guess I just always assumed that too.” --Jackie

“I always knew I wanted to go [to college], no matter what.” --Alicia

With the exception of Rachel, all of the Scholars said it was an automatic that they would attend college and had always known they wanted to go. Although the students in this study were all from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, their early aspirations to attend college did not seem to be mediated by their family’s economic situations. For many of them, there were no other options after they graduated from high school, and while financial issues and decisions about where to attend would eventually surface, they knew college was always in their post-secondary “plan”. This college-going mentality struck me as very powerful throughout the course of our interviews.

Rachel was the one exception, and commented,

I did really well in high school; I was our valedictorian in my class. I got a 4.0 and of course when you have good grades you get all these papers from colleges and counselors and people. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, I’m still kind of, I don’t really think it’s [college] what I want to do, I think I have to find what I’m meant to do. I really don’t know, I was just pressured with ‘that’s the way it is, you’re going to college, and you have no choice’. I’m not saying I’d rather work a minimum wage job, but…

Rachel’s mom and her high school teachers and counselors pressured her to attend college, but she is not certain State University or college in general is where she belongs or wants to be.

Four of the scholars knew from a very early age, four years old in some cases, that they would attend college. The remaining students had college aspirations by middle school; however the decisions about where to apply for most of them came in the latter
half of their high school careers. Jackie explained, “It was just always sort of assumed that I would go to college, I guess I just always assumed that too…but honestly, I did not think about which one until before senior year”. From scholars who knew they would attend college from an early age to those who thought about it later in their academic careers, it was never a question for them that they would go “somewhere”. Alicia also commented, “I always knew I wanted to go, no matter what. But it would be hard to pay for it probably. That would be taken into account but I would still go and would figure out some way.”

**Role of Parents and Family**

Eleven of the fifteen scholars in this study were classified as first-generation students in that neither of their parents had attended college. I was surprised, therefore, that many mentioned family and especially parents as the people who fostered their college aspirations and encouraged their college attendance. As Annie said during our first conversation,

J: When did you first start thinking about attending college?

A: My parents always encouraged college. When I was really young, I always said I’m going to be a teacher. And so I always knew that higher education was going to be part of my life. Then really thinking about what colleges and decisions about what we could afford and stuff, that came probably when I was a freshman in high school, just starting to think about where I wanted to go, and my career choices changed, but still college was…at my high school, everyone goes to college.

Scholars reported that their parents encouraged them so strongly because they wanted them to have a better or easier life than they had. I inferred that for these parents, success for their children was defined by graduating from college and receiving their
degree—the advantages it would give them in their lives, both personally and professionally. I followed up my questions with Annie,

JD: You’ve already said your parents encouraged you, were there others around you who encouraged you to attend college or help you in the process?

AP: My teachers and counselors, but basically my parents really wanted me to attend college to have the chance at a good, stable career that would support me. They wanted me to have an easier life, a college degree today is so much more important…my mom is now figuring out after my dad passed away that she doesn’t have that college degree, so for her to go back to work, even to go back to a secretary job, she doesn’t have the computer skills. If she had gotten that degree, it would have helped her out more…and now it is important and that’s hurting her, so she’s like, you need this…you need to go to school so you’re prepared for anything.

Many scholars also told stories of their parents saying similar things, such as Carolyn, whose mom “always tells me about how I’ve gotten so far and I shouldn’t give up and how she could have done more to improve her life and how I have such a good chance to do that and I shouldn’t give up—it’s very inspiring”. Kelly’s mom and dad “always made education our top priority, and we always got rewarded when we got straight A’s or made the honor roll…my dad always stressed that we get a good education”. I heard repeated over and over from the scholars how much they seemed to be motivated and “inspired” by what their parents said to encourage them, and really took what they said to heart as they pursued their college goals.

Some of the scholars described their parents as “pushy” when it came to encouraging their college aspirations, and often said they had no choice about whether or not they would attend college. When I asked Carolyn who encouraged her to attend college, she said, “my mom was always pushy…she’d try to joke and say ‘look at my life, you could do so much better’. She was just inspiring about it, just trying to show me
that I could have what she never had”. Alicia also said, “my mom, she’s always pushed me, [saying] ‘you have to go to college, it’s not an option for you not to go...you have to pick one of these schools and you have to go there’. Some of her cousins who attended State University also “pushed it hard because it’s their school.” Thomas said, “if anything, it was my mom saying you have to apply to university”. The students relayed that it was never a question that they would attend college, but the extra push their parents gave, often at the expense of seeming “pushy”, was enough to motivate them further.

The ways in which the scholar’s parents encouraged them took various forms, and they helped in any way they could. Jackie reported that her mom “took me to visit campuses whenever I needed her to” and Alicia said, “my mom didn’t really know much about the process or how to do it or anything so we kind of learned together, we went on visits and set up applications and sorted through all the financial aid together”. Although most scholars said their parents helped by taking them on visits or assisting with applications, none mentioned that money had been saved or put aside for college. This is another way that parents can demonstrate their commitment to their student’s college education.

Parents influenced the scholars regarding which colleges they applied to and where they subsequently enrolled. Many encouraged the scholars to only apply to in-state and/or public institutions, Charlotte saying, “my parents really wanted me to come to SU because it was in-state”. Erica said as the application deadlines got closer, she wanted to attend college out-of-state “just to do something different…but that option was
kind of pulled off because of money and we [she and her parents] looked around to find the best options.”

Three of the scholars had older siblings who were attending State concurrently, and one had a younger sibling begin as a first-year scholar during her second year. Kelly and Maggie said their older siblings really influenced them to attend State University. Kelly’s brother was an upperclass high-profile varsity athlete, and told me,

My brother (helped her get to State)…not just because he’s here but because we’ve always been very competitive with each other. The reason I wanted to get first in my class was basically to point at him and say I was smarter than him. It’s all good-natured, he’s my best friend.

Maggie’s sister was a senior at the time of our interviews, and said that since Liz came to State first, she saw all of the things she was involved with and wanted to come as well, “I really wanted to be in the band, and I never thought I’d have the chance to try out…Liz was the biggest influence cause she was already in college, she was at SU, and I was like, I really want to go there.” Both of these students saw the accomplishments and success their siblings had achieved and wanted to experience it for themselves.

Once the scholars enrolled at State, they faced a variety of challenges and successes, which were often aided or impeded by the relationships with their families. Kelly’s brother was her best friend, and although he lived off-campus, she said it was nice to know he was around. They met for lunch a few times a week, and one of her favorite things to do on the weekends was to visit him at his apartment, play video games, and spend time together. Besides playing his sport and attending classes, her brother was not actively involved on campus, so he did not play a role in her involvement, but indirectly helped her transition. Matthew’s sister was a senior when we talked, and she
helped him transition academically. When he was worried about failing math, she said he probably wasn’t, “even though it looks like [it]”. He received a B in the class and his sister helped increase his confidence in himself academically. Maggie’s sister had tried out for band at State, which encouraged Maggie to do the same. They both joined State’s athletic band, so they saw each other at practices, ate meals together, and as Maggie said, “she has the wheels”, the car on campus, so they shared that.

Family issues posed challenges to some of the scholars’ transitions. As Rachel articulated, “my major challenge right now is I’m getting to think about stuff that happens at home and I need to quit worrying about that…just cause I can’t worry about that.” Her dad had almost lost their house and had used her social security number to apply for credit cards, so when she was at school, she felt helpless because she could not monitor his mail or control what he did financially. She knew that since she was no longer living at home with her mom and grandparents, she was not costing them any money, “so I’m not taking anything from them financially”, but worried nonetheless. She had also experienced personal problems with depression and anxiety disorder and attended therapy over the summer, and said of the experience, “I think it would be so much easier for me to deal with classes if I didn’t have a disorder”. Compounding her situation was the fact that her mom did not believe there was anything wrong with her and thought Rachel was upset because she was not doing well in school. This obviously upset Rachel a great deal, and she spent much of her time worrying about family issues. Rachel was the scholar most affected and distracted by her life and family at home, which had caused her to consider transferring to a school closer to home, “I just want to apply to see how much money they’ll give me and if they’re not going to beat what I have here,
then, which is pretty impossible, I doubt that they’re going to…but you never know sometimes.”

Because of certain family events, Alison also had a challenging first year. A family member close to her in age committed suicide and as a result, she had severe depression over the winter and spring terms. As she says, she “worked it out a little by spring…it was hard trying to pick myself back up and I’m still trying to pick myself up now.” The event negatively affected her grades, and she was frustrated that she let herself get that low. What helped, she said, were “amazing roommates, amazing suitemates, they helped me pick myself up and made sure I was doing the things I needed to do.” At the time of our conversations, she was working on bringing her grade point average up, but in hindsight wished that she had taken the term off when the death occurred, which could have prevented some of her drop in grades. As opposed to Rachel, who seemed to have ongoing stressors related to her family during both interviews, Alison had received a lot of support from her friends and suitemates as well as counseling on campus and was optimistic that she was getting better.

The first time the scholars went home to visit their families their first year ranged from 1-2 weeks since they had been on campus to over five weeks or because of a holiday, like Thanksgiving. Because so many of them had such strong connections and ties to their families, they said it was always good to visit home, they had missed it, but after awhile, especially on extended vacations, were anxious to return to school. As Annie told me, “I always like going home, [but] I always want to come back cause I miss my roommates and having my own place, but I’m also really sad to miss my mom and
brother.” Alicia returned home for the first time over Thanksgiving, and said while it was fun and made her miss being home, she liked school as well and could do both.

None of the scholars seemed to be conflicted about how they should or could behave when they were home, although many mentioned it was hard to get used to their parents’ rules again after being independent at school. Kimberly found herself acting a little differently at home, as she put it,

It’s my mom’s house! My house I do whatever I like, throw things around, make a mess…there I have to behave, I have a curfew…I’m just not used to checking in with her [mother], like I was this summer. She calls my phone, all the time!

Charlotte also mentioned that, “I think when I’m at school I kind of make my own rules, but going home and having my parents tell me what to do is kind of hard and different”. She said there is tension over those kind of things, but overall she enjoys seeing her parents, being able to relax, and not work or study.

Some of the scholars noticed improvements in their relationships with their families when they returned home for visits. Thomas said, “I guess I start to realize the more I spend time away from home, the more I come back….for my family at least, they’re more welcoming…this is really family, there’s a connection you can’t really throw away there.” Annie and her brother, who still lived at home, had grown closer since she’d been at State, saying they used to “bicker” when she lived at home, but “when I’m away from him, we don’t have the bickering, we talk, and we don’t argue…it’s just nice to catch up. We are very close and I think that’s helped, me going away has helped with it”. Melanie also quarreled quite a bit with her family when she lived at home, especially with her sister and aunt and uncle, over things that bothered her living with
them “my whole entire life”. After living at State for a year and returning home over the summer, however, she noticed, “now we get along pretty well.” Her family was very proud of her and told everyone they knew what she was doing and how successful she was at State. The scholars realized how much they valued spending time with their families, especially when they did not see them every day.

Because the scholars had such strong ties and connections to their families, I wondered whether they would still utilize them as resources if they had problems or issues once they were living at State. When I asked who they went to when they did have frustrations, over half mentioned their peers, but also about a third said they went to their families. Many said both, that it depended on the situation, as Annie said, “if it’s anything with my roommates or at school, I’d ask my mom…my grandma sometimes.” Alison also said that it was situational, “a lot of times, roommates, mom, people I’m comfortable with.” Kimberly also used a mix of family and friends when she needed personal help, “I go to my mom, boyfriend, or friends, it depends…if it’s my boyfriend, I go to my friends, if it’s my friends, I go to my mom.” Carolyn and Erica both replied that they most likely talked with their moms, whatever the issue was, as Carolyn said about hers,

She knows everything, things she doesn’t want to know…she’s more of a listener, she’s not much of an advice kind of person. Cause most of the time she doesn’t understand where I’m coming from, but she at least listens to me and that helps.

Erica said she most likely “vents” to her mom when she had issues, and that was about it.

Three scholars said they also went to their families when they had challenges academically. For some it was a shock that they had done worse academically than they
had expected or performed in high school. Alison called her mom when she received low grades because,

    At first I had a lot of issues telling people that I was having issues with grades. I graduated with a 4.3 GPA, and then I come to SU and I’m like, ok 2.8, we can handle this…that was kind of hard to admit, even to my mother it was hard to admit.

Alison said she had become better about asking for help when we talked at our second interview, and had not yet attended any of her faculty member’s office hours, but had gone to tutoring sessions in the academic assistance center. Kimberly said although her mom did not always understand her academic challenges, she would call her to “vent” and she listened. Maggie also called home or talked to her sister, who was an upperclassman at State, asking for her advice about what to do or if she had gone through a similar experience what she had done to resolve it.

    I was curious whether the scholars would feel a responsibility to return to their hometowns and families when they graduated from State. Overwhelmingly, the responses from the scholars were that they did not plan to. Many said that they could not move home because of a lack of job opportunities and/or a poor economy. Carolyn was quick to tell me that, no, she did not plan to go back, “Never, I don’t like being there. I feel much more home here in [the city where State is located]”. She thought staying in the city or relocating somewhere else in the state or country was much more of a possibility than going home, saying the economy was “pretty poor” where she was from. Erica also did not plan to return to her hometown, saying “maybe to say hi to people, but not to live there.” She hoped to move anywhere that gave her good job opportunities, which she did not have in her hometown.
Because many of the scholars’ career choices required post-graduate schooling, many viewed State as a viable option to continue that education. Charlotte was hoping to attend medical school after graduation, and was “definitely” considering State for their program. Once finished with medical school, however, she knew she may have to relocate for her residency anywhere in the country, and was not opposed to relocation. Alicia was considering a career in Nursing, was impressed with State’s nurse practitioner program, and was interested in staying in the city when she was finished with her schooling, “I could see myself going anywhere, but I really like it here.”

Some scholars’ family members had encouraged them to relocate after graduation from State and not return to their hometowns. Alison was exploring internships on the west coast, and had a cousin helping her with resources, saying if that happened, she might relocate to another state, and her mom was encouraging because it was somewhere she had always wanted to live. Kimberly aspired to a doctoral degree, which she considered attending State for, and said she would be open to moving to a bigger city or setting when she was finished with all of her schooling, “my mom wants me to go somewhere warm so she can visit.”

Some scholars were understandably undecided about where they would go when they graduated, and were keeping their options open. Annie had visited a major metropolitan city on the east coast with the Honors program her first year and was really excited about the possibilities and opportunities it held for her. She could see herself living there, but was also anxious about leaving her mom, who she was very close to, especially after her father passed away. Some of her other family members had moved out of the state, so she had models, but still was not sure what she would do.
Rachel was one of the only scholars who was adamant that she would have to return home after graduation from State, she could not foresee any other options,

I’m gonna have to [go home], I won’t have anywhere to live after college. I’ll have to work somewhere and get enough money to at least look around the rest of the state or the country and have enough money to go establish myself and partner and whatnot. Yeah, I definitely have to go back there even if it’s just to get set up.

She followed that up by saying there were not many jobs in her hometown, so she was not sure if that would work out, maybe she would go to an adjoining state not far from her house for employment. She was already overwhelmed after being at State, which was about two hours from her home, so she did not seem too enthusiastic about staying after graduation or relocating too far away.

**Importance of Peers**

A majority of the scholars’ peers from high school also attended college. Because they had been enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes, the scholars were automatically surrounded by other high achieving students who possibly had college-educated parents. These peer groups may have served as models to the scholars regarding the importance of attending college. As Alison commented,

Most of my friends did [go to college], yeah. I was in a lot of honors classes and stuff in high school, so they were all college prep and most of my good friends were in those classes because we were together all the time…most of my graduating class went to State…top 40 students, probably 50% of them went to State.

Alicia also mentioned, “pretty much everyone I can think of went to college”; a majority to the state college closer to her hometown, and a few at State. Annie was very emphatic that everyone at her high school, not just in her classes, went to college. She seemed to be surrounded by a very strong college-going culture, saying, “at [her high school],
everyone goes to college, there’s a really small percentage that does not.” Thomas commented that he could only think of a “handful” of his friends from high school who did not enroll in college, “college was pretty much the next step, kind of mindless, [you’re] supposed to do that.”

When Melanie was younger and started taking advanced level classes, she told me, “[I] would get teased for being smart and black, and acting white or something like that”. I asked if that bothered her, and she said it did when she was younger, but by the 5th grade, “I had my own friends I was just proud of in it…in middle school it was totally different because I branched out and made totally different friends…and by the time high school came, nobody cared anymore.” Although Melanie had faced taunts from friends when she was younger, it did not prevent her from pursuing those advanced classes because as she said, “my grades were always so important to me and I was happy, I was proud.” By the time she graduated from high school, Melanie said “every one of my close friends went off to college.”

It was rare that the scholars mentioned friends from high school who did not attend any type of post-secondary institution. The scholars who did have those friends mentioned it as an anomaly. They were most likely to report that they had grown apart from these friends, as Kimberly explained,

Friends at home, the ones that went away to college, we keep in contact through Facebook and all that stuff. And the ones that stayed home, that are just working and stuff, when I’m at home I kind of visit them, but we don’t really have any of the same interests anymore cause they more or less hang out with the high schoolers still. I try not to [hang out with them] cause they’re into totally different things.
Once enrolled in college, a student’s peer group may supplement or in some cases substitute for the roles once played by their family. The Scholars’ peer groups on campus served many powerful purposes. From friendships they made that helped their social transitions to using them as academic resources, the scholars mentioned how important their peer groups were to them many times over the course of our interviews.

In our first interview, I asked how easy or difficult it was for the scholars to make friends and find peer support on campus. Most of the scholars told me that it had been very easy to make friends and had found a good peer support and social network on campus. Carolyn said because of the size of the campus, “you’re bound to find someone you can get along with”. Charlotte was so worried about her grades and studying during her first fall term that she did not make many friends or get involved. Once she felt like she was settled, however, she thought it was easy to make friends through the groups she joined, “I guess since my dorm is all the same major, we study together so that helped with more friendships.” Scholars also commented that most relationships they had with other students had been friendly and they did not have many negative experiences to share.

Rachel seemed to have the toughest time making friends and finding peers that had backgrounds and interests similar to hers. Much of her frustration stemmed from her first-year roommate, who would return to their room after weekends away or at home with $600 purses and $300 sunglasses. Rachel thought a majority of the people on her hall were like her roommate, so she did not make any friends and said “I didn’t feel like I fit in at all, period…I’m not the best at making friends anyways.”
I further realized how powerful a purpose their peer group served for the Scholars when I asked what had helped them the most in their transition to State. Over half of the scholars mentioned peers as helping them in their transition. Thomas replied, “I think it would have to be my friends [that helped]…yeah, definitely friends.” He met a lot of people his first year in his residence hall, classes, and extracurricular activities, saying that one of the advantages to a large university like State is “that it’s a lot of people, but you have a lot more chances of picking out very close friends.”

Ten scholars were involved in scholars, honors, and/or living-learning programs, in which they lived together and took some of the same courses together. Melanie’s scholars program seemed to help the most in finding her niche on campus,

I liked it because it was a group of people and it’s a big campus, but you’re in International Education scholars, so a lot of my friends I hang out with now are all IE scholars…it was good, I don’t know how it would have been if I wasn’t in any kind of LL program, if I was just by myself…I liked that a lot.

For Melanie, being an IE scholar immediately gave her a group to affiliate with and belong to, and from there she branched out into other student organizations on campus. Kimberly similarly said her scholars group, Politics, Law, and Society helped, “it made a huge campus small…it started you off with a small network and made you feel comfortable in that and then I could branch out…that helped a lot.” She added that by taking classes together and meeting weekly as a group, a bond formed among them and she made some really good friends. Erica was a member of the Art Scholars and acknowledged that being part of it helped in her transition, “cause there’s people that like the same things you do and you get to room with one of them too…I got one of my best friends out of that too.” Again there was a natural affinity for the same types of things,
and Erica enjoyed having similarities with the peers she lived with from the beginning of her first year.

Even those scholars who were not involved in a living-learning program or scholars housing said that living in a residence hall was valuable to their experiences at State. Although many (six) of the scholars lived off-campus their second year, living on campus their first was key to smooth transitions. Carolyn found living in a residence hall helpful, “it was nice to have that many people around at first, but now that I’m comfortable here, I need more of my own personal space.” By living in a residence hall her first year, there were always lots of people around “that I got to know…it was easy to meet people, everyone’s doors were always open, it was easier to feel comfortable with.” In her second year, Carolyn lived off-campus with a woman she had known from her hometown since first grade.

Annie’s roommate her first year, whom she knew from her hometown, was a big help to her transition. Annie’s father died at the end of her senior year in high school, so it was especially important that she surround herself with people like her roommate, who understood her situation,

Partly because her mom knows my mom so they would tell each other things and then she would know what’s going on with me and I’d know what’s going on with her…and she was just very understanding. There were lots of weekends that I’d want to go home. Like there was a wedding in the family or my mom was upset, especially since my dad was gone, that was hard. So my roommate has been awesome through everything.

For Annie the difference in her transition was not the quantity of people she met but the quality of the relationships she made and further nurturing the ones she already had.
Becoming involved in extracurricular activities and student organizations was another way the Scholars felt more comfortable in their transitions to State. They were able to meet even more peers outside of their residence halls who may have been in their same situation and have similar interests. Erica signed up to be an SU Welcome Leader, where first-year students move into their residence halls early and help other first-year students move in at the beginning of the year. Of the experience, she said, “that helped a lot because you get there and you’re kind of freaked out, but then you’re with 10 other people that are just as scared”, which made her feel more comfortable. Scholars also reported that they liked knowing what was happening on campus through being involved, as with Annie, who got involved on her hall council and State’s campus activities board,

That’s [her activities board involvement] been interesting seeing how students help other students and the volunteering and putting on programs with public relations…it’s just another way to meet people. People that we were with last year in a group, we’re still in contact with them and we’re all still the same little group. I guess that helped, finding something I enjoy and people that I got along with…that was just fun to be involved with.

Kelly had become very involved in the university’s “host” program, which she started working with her first year. Part of her responsibilities involved answering questions of incoming or prospective students, so “by answering their questions you learn more about the university”. Also through interacting with other students and staff who had been working with the program longer helped her become more comfortable on campus.

During the course of our conversation, she told me the senior students in the program had asked her to be more involved in the leadership of the organization, so she was excited to take on that challenge.
Melanie became involved on campus because of negative experiences involving racial issues her first year. As an African-American woman, she explained that being at State,

Is a different experience than my home. Just the whole racial thing, like where I’m from, it’s majority black. I was in AP classes with white kids. It didn’t bother me, and here, it’s a little different because I guess the white kids from my hometown are used to being around black people so they know a little more about our culture and they’re cooler, I guess. A lot of white kids here have never seen a black person before and they say ignorant things and it’s really upsetting. So I never had to deal with that before, so coming here it was like, wow, this is how it really is.

As a result of a few racist incidents that occurred on campus Melanie’s first year, she was prompted to join various minority organizations, including the Black Student Association. She said those events “made me more active”; they staged a racism rally, for example. While she said it still felt like there were a lot of problems on campus regarding race, she had met many new friends through the organizations and had gotten to know a number of staff members that served as the advisors.

The scholars approached their peers when they had personal or social challenges. Alison said, “my roommate [helps when she had problems]. She’s been my best friend since 4th grade so whenever I have a problem I go to her…we’re really good friends and it always seems to work out that way.” Maggie also talked to her friends, “my RA kind of doesn’t exist on our floor, so normally he’s not around to resolve those situations. If we have a problem, we normally just try to resolve it among ourselves.” Rachel felt like her personal issues warranted more serious, professional help, so she had gone to the university’s counseling center to get the help she needed.
For at least two of the scholars, their peer relationships went beyond social purposes. Maggie and Alison told stories of meeting upperclassmen on their residence halls who became academic resources, mentors, and role models. Maggie was emphatic when she said, “definitely the people I would say is the number one thing that’s helped in the transition”. A number of sophomore women lived on her floor, whom she used for resources such as what classes to take with which professor and who was helpful on campus. Alison also lived in a suite with upperclass women and says of the experience, I was in a quad, which was horrible and miserable but it was worth it. Half of us were freshmen and there were three girls who were upperclassmen. They were fantastic; those three were the most amazing girls I’ve ever met in my life. And Marie was an accounting major also, so she helped me study for exams and stuff. She was really focused and driven, too, someone I tried to use as a role model…they were absolutely fantastic…I’m really glad they were the ones who were there with me!”

As with Maggie, Alison formed personal friendships, but was also able to translate their experiences as upperclassmen into resources for her as she navigated the academic side of campus.

When they faced academic challenges, the scholars were also most likely to approach their peers first, before tutors, faculty members, teaching assistants, or other staff members. Alicia found a lot of peer support on her floor as well as in her suite among students who took a lot of the same classes, and reported, “that’s usually the first place I turn”. If she could not find the help she needed there, she would then go to a tutor or teaching assistant. Kelly also asked her peers for help first, and if was something they all did not understand, they went to a faculty member’s office hours or their teaching assistant. Maggie also turned to the women who lived on her floor first, and then she
would call home or talk to her sister on campus for additional assistance, “normally the first person I go to is someone that lives on my floor, a friend or something like that.”

Influence of Money

Most of the scholars reported that finances were the main obstacle to their college attendance. Melanie’s answer was, “money, definitely money…that was my only thing (obstacle)...cause we didn’t have any money in savings or anything.” Two scholars responded that they foresaw obstacles to their college attendance other than finances, Maggie saying “definitely the increase of the workload” and Thomas saying how much responsibility being in college brings, “you need to start becoming an adult and you’re faced with all that freedom…” In other parts of their interview, however, both students alluded to the fact that finances did play a role in the reason they chose to attend State. Maggie had planned to attend the branch campus of the university and transfer after a few years, although she says, “I had no idea how I was going to pay for it (at the branch campus)...I was hoping to get a little federal funding and then just take loans out…I would not be here and not be able to do all the things I’ve done in the past year with this scholarship”. Thomas received a full tuition scholarship to State University before receiving notification of the Scholarship award, and had originally thought, “ok, full tuition, that’s good enough”, but after receiving the award, he said “oh yeah, I’ve gotta do this cause it’s a lot of money.”

Financial barriers often restrict low-income students’ choices and decisions regarding their college enrollment. These students differed from many of the low-income students in the literature, however, because in addition to being from low-income families, they were also high ability, and realized that gave them options in regards to
college. Because they had achieved academically and had been recognized for their achievements throughout high school, most had numerous options for college, and were confident in their abilities to succeed in enrolling in and persisting, as with Kelly,

JD: Were there any obstacles you could foresee being in your way of attending college?

KB: Primarily the financial obstacles. I did well academically in school and I wasn’t very worried about that, but my mom, she’s worked a job, it doesn’t pay that well and she’s been digging into her savings and stuff and paycheck to paycheck so we didn’t really have financial resources for college. I would have paid my way, and I’m a very determined person, I would have done it through loans, just gone $80,000 in debt or whatever it took. But it would have been all on my shoulders.

The scholars were realistic about their family’s inability to pay for their education, but did not seem to be averse to accruing loan debt. Ellen shared a conversation she had with her mom, who told her,

‘You should consider other options because you know you have to pay for college yourself.’ I was like, I really don’t care because to me it was more important to go to college than to worry about how much money it costs. Cause I know lots of people pay off their loans.

Most of the scholars had generous financial aid offers (a combination of need and merit-based aid) from multiple schools, as Kelly explained,

I was looking at three schools primarily. [One school] offered a full tuition scholarship but I would have ended up paying about $8,000 a year for room and board so that would have been about $32,000 in loans after… I was seriously looking into that…I didn’t realize I had the scholarship until April or May.

Because this was the first year the scholarship was awarded, the notification letters were not sent to the students until early April, much later than other financial offers. Annie had already paid her deposit to another state university when she received her award letter,
I was actually headed to [a different] University. I had paid a deposit for housing and it was just because they had offered me a scholarship, obviously it was not very big, but it was some money. I decided, well, they’re offering me something, I’ll go there. And this institution at that point had not offered me any money. The week of spring break I was supposed to visit [the other] University again, and two days before the visit, I got the letter that said you have received this scholarship. And we were kind of like, is this for real?! And that changed my whole thinking…

Rachel was the only scholar who said she would not be attending any college were it not for the scholarship, saying, “I had no idea how I would be here right now” (if it weren’t for the scholarship). I asked,

J: Do you think you’d be in college at all?

R: No, not at all. I worked a summer job to pay for the food that I ate during the summer. And I’m not exaggerating at all. That’s just the way it was. I bought food and I bought gas for my car. The only way I have a car, not because we had the money to buy it, I actually won it off a radio station. And this (the scholarship) is the only reason I have a college education, or I’m getting one. It’s kind of crazy.

While financial background did not seem to affect their aspiration for college attendance, money did seem to shape where they applied. Two scholars only applied to State University, while the others applied to an average of three to four schools. The scholars were less likely to apply to private or out-of-state schools, however. Four applied to schools out-of-state and six applied to private institutions, one of which was an Ivy League school. Although I did not directly ask if finances had restricted where they applied, it came up in several of our conversations. Kimberly had always wanted to go to a more prestigious (public) school in a nearby state, but tempered her aspirations as she got older and became more aware of her family’s financial situation. She says,
I always wanted to go to the University of [this school] just because I always wanted to go there. My grandparents pushed for it, they’re huge fans. Then I asked them, are you going to pay the tuition? Out-of-state’s not that cheap…it’s a little expensive.

When I asked where she ended up applying, she listed two state schools and the local community colleges and added, “I didn’t do [that school], there’s no way we could have afford that.”

Once students have enrolled in college, their financial backgrounds continue to be part of who they are. Even though they no longer live with their families, their backgrounds have been shaped by the financial situations they lived in growing up, and they continue to be affected by the economic situations in which they were raised.

When I asked the scholars whether there were times that they had worried about their personal finances since they had been at State, four scholars said that they had at one time or another. For Alison and Carolyn, neither had worked over the summer between their first and second years, and did not have as much extra money saved for expenses the scholarship did not cover throughout the year. Alison had contracted mononucleosis the first month she was home over the summer, so she did not work as much as she usually had. She said that coupled with a few other events significantly depleted her savings account, so she did not have a lot saved up for extra expenses at school. Carolyn did not work at all over the summer, “the first time in a long time”, so she was hoping to receive some of her winter term money in advance for expenses such as living off campus.

Along with Carolyn, Kimberly and Annie had also moved off campus, and they were surprised by how expensive it was. As Kimberly exclaimed, “all the bills, it didn’t really hit me til I had to actually write all my checks…I thought, man!” Carolyn had the
same sentiments, “getting an apartment is pretty expensive, it sucked up a lot of my scholarship money right away.” Although Annie had also moved off campus her second year, she had not worried as much as she thought she would, “it’s still something in the back of my mind, but not as much as I would if I did not have the scholarship.”

More likely, the scholars did not worry about their personal finances because of the scholarship and what it covered. They often said they wished they had money for extra expenses like clothes and eating out, but none of them seemed stressed because of their lack of money or how they were going to pay for what they needed. As Thomas said, “I worked over the summer and the scholarship is helping me out a lot…it’s not that I have a surplus and I’m being reckless, but it’s enough for me to practice being responsible with spreadsheets and stuff.” Like Thomas, most scholars said they were not worried because of the scholarship and because they had work-study jobs that gave them extra spending money. They were also grateful that they did not have student loan debt that would have to be repaid when they graduated.

Ten of the 15 scholars replied that they did worry about their family’s finances, however. I had thought the loss of their income contributions for the families when they left home might cause concern, but this was never mentioned. Instead, a few of the scholars were glad the burden was off of their family to provide for them financially. As Charlotte explained, “I think we’re good [financially] now cause I’m not at home and I don’t ask for money that much anymore.” The scholars were determined to be fiscally independent, even if their parents offered to help them financially. They saw college as a time where they could start becoming financially responsible, and were realistic that their families did not have much extra money to give. Thomas commented, “I try not to accept
money gifts from them, not because of the situation but it’s the principle of it…I really want to start being independent and being treated like that.” Maggie, who still had four siblings at home, said in our second interview that she worried about her family a lot, even though she knew there was not too much she could do except help when she could with what she had,

Here and there you can tell things are tight. When I went home over [winter] break, I was buying things for them and my mom would try to pay me back and I would make sure she didn’t give me any money—if she tried to give it to me, I’d stick it back in her purse. I’d try to do things like that, pay for gas or pay for groceries, there’s nothing else I can do. It’s been kind of a hard year for them, but not too bad…not as bad as year’s past.

Some scholars told stories of their families having recent financial problems due to bankruptcy or unstable working situations. Carolyn worried about her family because “they’re not in the best of shape;” her mom just filed for bankruptcy and her stepfather had just finished going through his own. She continued, “so they’re both having a lot of trouble, and they’re struggling a lot…if I had the money I would send it to them…I worry about them.”

Carolyn brought up a point I was curious about, whether or not the scholars sent money home to their families. To my knowledge, none of them did, and when asked, none of them said that it was something they had done since being at State. They all agreed, as Carolyn said, that they would send money home if they could, such as when Thomas said, “it’s not that I have a surplus…” Kelly, whose brother was a varsity athlete, said she thought he made more money off of his scholarship checks and stipends than their mom did from her employment. They both worried about her, and said they
helped her financially by sending money home for their cell phone bills and paying for their car insurance.

Melanie seemed to take on the most responsibility for family members, specifically her younger sister, who still lived at home with their aunt and uncle. Her mom lived and worked in a different state, so Melanie had taken on many of the parental responsibilities in her absence. She paid for her sister’s cell phone, took her shopping for clothes and other necessities, and said of her responsibilities, “I just want to make sure she has everything she needs since my mom is gone…so I just look out for her, if she needs something.” In our second interview, Melanie told me she was going through the formal process of becoming her sister’s guardian, which involved going home to attend a court hearing. In her words, it will help so she can “take her to the doctor and stuff when my mom isn’t home”. She would have liked for her sister to live with her and attend high school, but her sister was happy with her school and friends in their hometown.

A few scholars were concerned about their parents because of the field they worked in or specific job they held (listing of parental employment in Chapter 3 under “introduction to participants”). Some parents worked at low-paying jobs and/or in unstable environments. With the exception of the three deceased fathers; three unknown fathers’ employment; and one unemployed mother, all of the scholar’s parents held employment. Many of their occupations ranked high in responsibilities, skill, and independence; the scholars had worthy role models in the area of employment and hard work. Still, the scholars worried because maybe it was a single parent who was trying to support the family; their parent(s) employment was not the environment they wanted them to work in; or some aspect about their employment had caused financial hardship.
Matthew worried about his mom, who worked as a janitor, “she can’t work there her whole life….she’s getting carpal tunnel in her hands and it’s affecting her ability to work there.” Kelly also said that her mom worked in a “terrible” job,

I would love to set her up if I make it and start doing well. I’d love for her not to have to work that job anymore, because it’s really terrible…I went to ‘take your daughter to work’ day, and it was not a good job…she’s in it for the benefits, we have good medical and dental benefits.

Both Matthew’s and Kelly’s mothers were single, Matthew’s parents had divorced and he had no contact with his father. Kelly’s father died of cancer approximately 10 years ago. Before her father died, Kelly’s mom had worked as an aide part-time at her school, but had to return to work full-time when he passed away.

Maggie’s father worked as a truck driver and the family had some problems with credit cards a few years ago. He owned his own business as a truck driver and when the economy was not doing well, had to quit and take a job with another company. Maggie said of that experience, “it was hard times for awhile, and my mom is always very careful with money…so if you wasted money, she would say that’s five loaves of bread.” Maggie felt more comfortable with her family’s financial situation when we talked at our second interview, and helped them out when and however she could.

Rachel’s family financial situation seemed the most serious,

I know I’m not costing my family anything except for the money my mom gets from my grandparents, she sends me $100 a month, which I live off of, buying clothes or whatever. So I’m not taking anything from them financially, but I worry about what my dad’s conspiring, credit cards and stuff. I do kind of worry about when my grandparents aren’t around and my mom has to get a job, and she’s certified in a job that doesn’t exist anymore.
Rachel’s parents were older when she was born, her mom is now 64 years old and unemployed, and as Rachel says, certified for a job she could not return to. She has told Rachel that she might have to work somewhere like a fast food restaurant, which Rachel replied was “crazy…she’s not able to do that, so it’s pretty much like a matter of time until something else happens and I’ll have to figure out what’s going to come of that.”

Part of the Scholars’ award package was work-study, which they had the option of taking advantage of. If they did not obtain a work-study position, money would not be taken away from their scholarship, but it was additional money they could earn for additional expenses if they chose to. Not only did employment provide additional monetary resources for the students, it was also a way some scholars became acclimated to the campus and made for positive persistence experiences. Annie worked as an office assistant in her residence hall her first year and it helped her get to know the hall directors and office manager as well as know what was going on in her hall and around campus. Kelly had obtained employment in the Registrar’s office, which helped her learn how paperwork is processed on campus, how to add and drop classes, change grades, and as she said, “sees how the university runs.” Maggie was also an office assistant in her residence hall, and talking to staff in the hall helped her become more active on campus in general.

At our first interview, scholars reported working a range of 0 to 30 hours per week; six held two jobs; and three were not employed. Matthew and Erica had work-study jobs their first year, but were not working when we talked. Matthew had worked six hours a week on campus as a lab assistant, but said all he did was sit on a bucket and wash dishes, “so I didn’t like it”. He told me it was boring work, and did not continue
with it into his second year. At the time of our first interview, Matthew was trying to obtain a job in the library. Erica had worked for one term at the art department on campus doing administrative tasks (answering phones, putting up posters), but since she lived off campus her second year it was more difficult to get to campus for a job. She was debating whether she would look for one when we talked. Rachel had signed up to tutor with the minority affairs office during the spring term of her first year, but had only tutored one person and had not been in contact with the office at our first interview. At the time of our second interview (over e-mail), Rachel reported that she had returned to tutoring in the minority affairs office 15 hours per week.

Maggie worked the most of the scholars in two jobs on campus; one as an office assistant in her residence hall and another in an engineering building. When I asked if she was able to balance everything between work, her academics, and her social/personal life with the two jobs and the number of hours she worked, she replied,

“It’s not too bad, it’s normally the weekends that aren’t so fun cause I’ve had bad scheduling. I’ve been working 12 hour shifts, and that’s only in my residence hall. I’m running between classes to my other job, so it’s not too bad…and then also go to class. It’s not too bad working two jobs because as long as you get all the office work done you’re free to do whatever you want. If you’re not busy, they’ll let you go ahead and pull out your homework and work on it or read a book. And since I’ve been with the one job so long they’re pretty lenient, they know I’ll get the work done, so they’ll let me do my homework. And with working in my residence hall, they know you’re a student living in the building…they know you have homework.

As justification for the two jobs, Maggie explained that she had tried out for State’s marching band the summer before she enrolled and again between her first and second years. She had anticipated making the band, which is especially expensive the first year because of the uniforms she would have to buy, and wanted to have the money saved up.
Sadly, she says, she did not make it either year, which was “devastating”, but she did join the athletic band and says the experience over the summer trying out for band helped with her transition.

Annie worked at a retail clothing store about 45 minutes from campus on the weekends, a job she had held since high school. At the time of our first interview, she was looking for a clerical position on campus, “I’m trying to decide if I want a position on campus because I don’t have to drive anywhere….but then again, they want you to work during the week...at the retail store, it’s just on the weekends, so during the week I come home from class and can get my work done and study...so I’m not sure.” At our second interview, Annie was no longer working off-campus, but instead had gotten a job on campus in a research office and commented about the switch, “it’s a lot nicer because I don’t have to drive 45 minutes to work.” She was able to divide her 12 hours of work up during the week, and while she had to do homework on the weekends, for her it was worth not having to drive the distance and miss out on campus events and socializing with her friends.

I asked the scholars if they had felt pressured to obtain employment once they arrived on campus, either from themselves or others and what their reasons were for having a job (or not). They responded that they wanted to be independent from their parent(s) and work for their own money; liked the idea of having extra income; were used to working in high school or before; thought it was mandatory as part of a scholarship requirement; or felt no pressure.

Ellen’s rationale for obtaining employment at State was as follows,
I knew I needed one [a job], cause my parents don’t pay for anything and I have my cell phone bill, things that I want…I just knew I had to have one, and plus, I worked all the time in high school [at a pizza shop, babysitting], since my junior year, so I was just used to having a job. So I kind of went about getting an interview and getting a job.

Alison felt pressure from herself to get a job,

I’m pretty much on the independent side. I refuse money from my parents. I basically want to do it on my own…apart from having a car, I try not to depend on my parents for anything because I’m going to have to jump out and do it myself, if I relocate, I’m going to have to do that completely on my own…I might as well start now.

Kimberly had worked since she was 14 years old (as a waitress, at a swim club), so she felt pressured from herself to find one at State, “I don’t know how to handle myself when I’m not working”. Melanie said she just wanted one and would have one regardless of the scholarship or work-study award, saying she worked in high school at a retail store. She was the most ambitious in getting her job of the scholars I talked to. She browsed the work-study job listings over the summer before she enrolled, had her interview when she came to campus for orientation for the summer, and began working almost immediately when fall term began.

Some of the scholars thought it was mandatory to obtain a work-study job as part of the scholarship requirements. Erica, who had worked for one term in the art department, thought she had to, and did not find out it was optional until after she began working. She said it was a good experience, and might get another one “if I need to…I’ll probably do another work-study because it was pretty lenient, if I had to study, they let me.” Charlotte also thought it was mandatory, but found that “if you have work-study and don’t get a job, they don’t do anything to you…I thought they did, but they don’t.”
Her reason for getting a job as an office assistant in her residence hall was because it was so close to where she lived.

Alicia, the lone only child in the study, was also one of the only scholars who had not worked before coming to State, saying she was always busy with extracurricular activities in high school and never had time to work. As far as her reasoning for obtaining a work-study position at a non-profit organization off-campus, she said, “everyone always talks about it, like I got e-mails like ‘you have work-study, take advantage of it’ and the importance of it and how people do better when they have a job and stuff like that.”

Following is a table illustrating the scholar’s employment at our first and second interviews (“Jobs 1 and 2”); their GPA at those two meetings (“GPA 1 and 2”); and the hours per week they were working when we met (“Hrs 1 and 2”).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholar</th>
<th>Jobs 1</th>
<th>Jobs 2</th>
<th>GPA 1</th>
<th>GPA 2</th>
<th>Hrs 1</th>
<th>Hrs 2</th>
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<td>Annie</td>
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<td>3.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>3.71</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>2.82</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20+</td>
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<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20-30</td>
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<td>Charlotte</td>
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<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
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<td>1 On-C</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>Not Employed</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>2 On-C</td>
<td>1 On-C</td>
<td>Above 3.2</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>2 On-C</td>
<td>1 On-C</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>1 Off-C</td>
<td>1 Off-C</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>20-25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>2 On-C</td>
<td>2 On-C</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>Melanie</td>
<td>2 On-C</td>
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<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>1 On-C</td>
<td>2 (1 off/1 on)</td>
<td>Above 3.2</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>10-15</td>
<td>30+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On-C=On Campus (end of 1st year) (Jan. ’07) Average=14
Off-C=Off Campus

Table 4.1 Scholar Employment

128
At the time of our second interviews, about half of the scholars were in different employment situations, many of them working less jobs and/or hours. Nine were working 15 hours or less per week and five were working 20 or more hours per week. I was curious at the time of our second interviews if some of the scholars who were working multiple jobs and/or more hours per week had cut back. Indeed, some of them had.

Ellen, Kimberly, and Annie were no longer working off campus. Ellen had been working at a local restaurant in the fall and on campus in the medical diet program. Her decision to stop working off-campus came when the restaurant began scheduling her for more hours than she felt like she could handle, for example when she had already worked 40 hours during a week and they wanted her to work overtime. She said when she told them she could not work extra hours, “they’d get mad at me and make me feel horrible…it was just too much pressure being there all the time.” She said it was hard to quit, she had never resigned from a job before and felt really bad about it, but was much happier without it and reported she hardly worked at her on-campus work-study job. It gave her extra money and allowed her to concentrate more on her academics and other interests on campus. When I asked if she had gotten involved in anything else since we talked in the fall, she told me she was auditioning for a musical on campus the next day. Having the extra time for her when she stopped working off-campus meant engaging in more on-campus activities she was passionate about, like the play.

Kimberly was working at a restaurant off-campus at our first interview. At our second interview, she was no longer employed there. One of the reasons for not working there anymore was a change in her class schedule, “I’m in school til 6pm on Mondays
and Wednesdays, so I couldn’t work at the restaurant like that.” She had gotten a work-study job off-campus at an elementary school that specialized in language immersion. She worked about 15 hours a week, “which is much better…I have my evenings to do my homework instead of not having a spare second…last term I was really run down, and this quarter being that I have a lot of reading for all of my classes, it’s much better to have my weekends free.” Kimberly seemed very happy with her decision and said her work at the language academy would hopefully be a valuable experience to add to her resume.

A few of the scholars had added additional jobs and/or hours to their employment schedules since our first interview. Five students at the time of our second interview were working 20 or more hours per week, and three of these students were working around 30 hours. Even with the scholarship’s financial assistance, I was curious why this was happening and if it was detrimental to other facets of their lives.

Thomas was still working on campus at the research office, but had also obtained a job as a cook in a local restaurant. As explanation for the additional job, he said,

I’ve never had a real job before, I’ve never had to apply like that or anything. With the hours that they would like me to have there, and with schoolwork, it’s going to be a lot of real world stressors and I need more of that so I can stay responsible in school. It’s going to be hard, I acknowledge that, but it is gonna be, can I do it? Or will it be, whoa, I want to have my hands off of it?

When I asked if he thought having this new job would be manageable with his academics and personal time, he quickly replied, “yeah, definitely.” The restaurant wanted him to work at least 30 hours per week initially, but Thomas was confident that after he had worked there for awhile he could settle into 20-25 hours.
I admired Thomas for taking on this responsibility for the “real world experience” it would most likely give him, but with the demands of his academics, I was not sure it was the best decision for him at that time. His GPA of 3.54 was certainly above the 3.2 requirement, but he wanted it to be at least a 3.8 by the time he graduated. He aspired to attend graduate school for a Master’s degree and had thought about pursuing his doctorate, “you’re not really gonna be competitive in a good way without at least a graduate degree.” Thomas mentioned during our second interview that he had been studying and/or working on academics an average of 10 hours per week so far that term, which he commented, “is not anything good at all…at all!” He had cancelled all of his plans for the upcoming weekend because he had so much work to catch up on, as he explained, “one whole day for one class, another whole day for another class…midterms are coming up and I really have no choice.” I was concerned that he had taken on too much with this off-campus job coupled with the fact that he was already behind in his classes the third week in the term.

Maggie’s employment situation had not changed since the fall; she was still working 15 hours a week at each of her jobs on campus. Because of her class schedule that term, she was working a portion of her hours from 4am-7pm four days a week before a class that started at 7:20am. As she said, “I am not a morning person so I knew I wouldn’t wake up, so with the office assistant job, I work 4 til 7 in the morning, and then I go and start the class and go out for the rest of the day…it’s a little weird, but I think it’s working out really well.” Maggie had found a creative way to make sure she was up for the class, and by knowing herself, scheduled her hours accordingly. When I asked since
she worked so many hours if there were things she wished she could be doing instead of working, she said,

Not really, if I need to get something done, I’ll let them know, like, ‘hey, I need to get this done. I’ll make sure all of my work duties are done before I work on it [academics], but once I get what they need me to do, or sometimes I’ll have to leave early to finish an assignment…normally they’re very flexible.

As she had told me in the fall, both of Maggie’s work environments seemed very flexible to accommodating her schedule of involvements on campus (band, university hosting, service-sorority) and her academic commitments.

I still wondered if Maggie was spreading herself too thin. She seemed to get everything accomplished that she needed to, but was also one of the scholars below the 3.2 (3.01) GPA requirement. When I asked if she had ever thought about cutting back on her hours or only working one job, she said she guessed she had thought about it, but it had never been a serious consideration. She would eventually like to work in the school of medicine since that was where she was headed (radiological technology program), but that it would probably be during her 3rd year and beyond. She had also considered moving off-campus for her third year, so she was not sure how that would work with her on-campus jobs, especially the one as an office assistant in her residence hall. She also brought up the fact that she was worried about losing the scholarship, and if so, she thought she would need both jobs to make up for the loss of financial support.

At our second interview, Carolyn was still working her on-campus work-study job in the library as a security patroller, but her hours had increased from a maximum of 20 to 20-30 hours per week. When I asked why her hours had increased, she told me she had received a promotion to supervisor, “my boss is a lot harder on me now, he wants me
to work more.” She had recently cut back her hours and only worked Monday through Thursday mornings, instead of on Fridays as well. When asked if work prevented her from doing other things, she replied, “sleeping…I work at 8 in the morning every morning and I’m not a morning person, so I would rather be sleeping but I get homework done a lot that way, so that’s good.” She was able to balance work with academics and personal time even with the amount of hours she worked, and emphasized the fact that she could get homework done while working, especially since she worked in a library that facilitated concentration in a quiet environment.

Carloyn’s 3.7 GPA was one of the highest of the scholars in the study, but she was also one of the scholars who had not gotten involved in any campus activities, organizations, or personal interests. When I asked if she had joined anything during our second interview, she said she had not, but was planning to talk with her advisor when she had free time about getting involved in some academic-geared clubs. She did not have any specific ones in mind, and said, “last time I talked to you I had no idea about getting involved, I still don’t really know.” Carolyn had a much different perspective regarding involvement than someone like Maggie, who said,

We have organizations and activities going on for everyone here, 1st year students, Hispanics, etc…they have all that kind of stuff out there…unless you’re under a rock or never leave your room, you might feel like you’re not being touched or reached, but if you don’t open your eyes and walk around campus, it’s hard to miss something. There’s stuff like that all the time for all kinds of groups.”

While Carolyn’s experience seemed to be a good one so far overall, she was still trying to find her niche on campus.
When I asked the scholars if there were ever times since they had been at State that they had noticed their economic backgrounds more, six replied that they had at one time or another. Alicia was one of the only people on her floor and in her learning community that had a job. Looking around at her peers, she felt like most of them had parents who paid for everything and finances were not a big deal for them, which was not her case. She said “it’s something I’ve had all my life…it’s just how it is to me.” When asked if it ever caused tension because she worked and had to pay for everything herself, she said not that she had noticed, although she would have liked some of the extra time her peers seemed to have, when they “just sit there and watch movies and stuff.”

Kelly noticed her economic background more when she decided to move off campus into an apartment with four other women her second year. She said when they went to sign the lease,

There were four of us there and the fifth one had already gone home for winter break, and they said ‘we’ll just write double checks for the girl who didn’t have her checkbook and the one who went home.’ So they just got out their checkbooks and wrote $790 checks, like that…and it said their name, care of their parents’ name. It was an extension of their parents’ bank account. I was like, I’m lucky if you get the $400 out of my account. I would bounce an $800 check…it wasn’t really that big of a deal to them.

Kelly said obviously she did not have her mom’s bank account to pay for her share, and felt a little uncomfortable signing a binding contract for the lease, which read that together they were obligated to pay $24,000 over the course of the year. Again, she said the other women did not think it was a big deal. When I asked if she had talked with the women about it, she said not to the women who wrote the checks, she did not know them as well, but she talked to her other friend, who said, “don’t worry about it, we’re all taking out loans, and we’re all in the same boat.” Kelly felt a little better after that
conversation--until she found out this woman’s parents paid for her rent as well, “so it wasn’t that comforting.”

Carolyn commented, “I notice financially differences in the way people live as compared to the way I lived when I was at home…parents helping them out with money, I notice that a lot.” She did not think it made her act any differently, but said “I do notice that I feel very poor around people here.” She felt like a lot of her peers also had parents who paid for their car and apartment, for example, and added, “my parents would love to do that but they can’t….so I do notice that, but it doesn’t make me act any differently.” I wondered if that made her any more responsible with her money, but Carolyn said for her it did not. She said she had a “little bit of a problem with money”, but was working on it and had just opened a savings account at her bank.

Melanie also noticed her economic background around some of her peers. She often became frustrated when she heard them say they needed money,

I just want to hit people [on the] side of their head cause they don’t know how lucky they are. They can say, ‘hey mom, hey dad, I need this’…and anything I want I have to work for it and plan it out, I can’t do that. That’s the biggest thing, the financial thing.

I asked if it ever came up in conversations she had with peers, and she said that it hadn’t; she doesn’t talk about it that much. Sometimes she tried to give people advice when they complained about money, for example, encouraged them to get a job, although she said, “you can lead a horse to water….”[but you can’t always make them drink].
**Academic Performance**

All of the scholars mentioned taking honors, Advanced Placement, or college-level curriculum throughout high school and at least three were valedictorian of their high school class. I did not ask them to report their standardized test scores or grade point averages from high school to me. Averages for the scholarship the first year it was awarded were available: 90% scored between 24-32 on the ACT (which roughly equates to between 1110-1420 SAT score) and approximately 70% of the cohort graduated in the top 10% of their high school class (16 scholars were valedictorian of their high school class).

**High School Preparation**

When asked if they felt like they were prepared from high school for State, many volunteered their credentials and academic achievements in high school. As Adelman emphasizes in *The Toolbox* (1999) and *The Toolbox Revisited* (2006), the highest level of math a student takes in high school often predicts their academic success in college. Therefore, I directly asked the scholars what level they accomplished. Seven scholars completed Calculus (either Advanced Placement or college-level); four took through pre-calculus; two through trigonometry; and one through Algebra II (Ellen).

The majority of the scholars said that their high school experience “felt like a joke” (Thomas) or “a complete breeze” (Erica). Most emphasized how little studying or out-of-class work they completed in high school in order to be successful, as Charlotte did, “I could coast in high school and still get good grades”. Melanie also said, “I didn’t have to study too much in high school”, and most scholars said similar things. As long as Annie paid attention in her classes and completed her homework she did well. Alison
said while she took all honors classes in high school, “I still rarely found it necessary to open a book and read through the chapters to be able to understand what was going on.”

The scholars felt like they were well-prepared from high school for college-level work because of the classes they took and the teachers they had. When asked if she felt well-prepared from high school, Alison answered, “with the instructors I had, yes”. She reported that her chemistry instructor was “fantastic” and really prepared her, so much that she received a B+ in chemistry at State, which her advisor told her was “really good.” Melanie echoed Alison’s statements, saying her high school “wasn’t the best”, but she was fortunate enough to be in a “good track” with Advanced Placement classes. Ellen, who switched high schools in 10th grade, said she would have been much better prepared at her first high school than the one she graduated from, but, “I think the most preparation that probably helped me was my chemistry and physics teachers”. Annie was taking physics when we talked, and found it very similar to the physics class she took in high school, saying her high school offered a lot of hard courses. She was in all honors courses and felt like, “especially with English, my English teacher prepared me, and the English classes I’ve taken so far here have been nothing compared to that one specific class.” She added that her high school definitely prepared her for the introductory-level courses at State, and while the other classes she’s taken that she did not have in high school have been challenging, they’ve been challenging “in a good way.” Annie articulated feelings common to many of the scholars as they began taking classes at State, that while they found themselves working harder and studying more, overall, they were well-prepared as a result of the track they took in high school and the teachers who taught them.
In addition to honors and advanced placement classes, Maggie and Kimberly took college classes their junior and senior years of high school, which seemed to give them an idea of the nature of college classes, a kind of anticipatory socialization (Pavalko, 1971) to college life. Kimberly took college classes her senior year so she “had a clue” about what college would be like, although she said “those classes were at a community college and it was really small…my classes here are huge lectures.” Maggie’s high school eliminated Advanced Placement classes in favor of an arrangement with a local college for students to take classes, and as she says, “I think that was the best thing they did for me” in terms of being prepared for the course load in college.

Thomas and Rachel were the only scholars who did not believe their high school or the classes they took prepared them for work at State. Rachel commented,

I wasn’t really prepared too well when I came here at all, except for writing classes cause I took an advanced writing class and I got an A in freshman comp this year. Honestly, I had a terrible high school education; I do believe that…the experience was pretty bad. I feel like if I had gone to another [high] school it would have been more of a match [with State University]. The way my school was set up, they pretty much prepare you to go to another college or the community college or the branch campus of another state school.

Before her senior year, Rachel’s high school cut the second level calculus and chemistry courses from the curriculum. She also did not end up taking calculus because of a “moral argument” she had with the calculus teacher over wearing sweatpants to school. Rachel was valedictorian of her class, and even with the pressure from her mom, teachers, and counselors at school, still was not sure that college was where she belonged. She also talked of political influences and mismanagement in her school district that she thought affected her education in a negative manner. Thomas, who said high school “felt like a joke”, did not think he was prepared as a result of his high school, and when he arrived at
college, said he felt like “this is where I should be”. Much of what followed related to Thomas’ frustrations with the exploration program and first-year survey class he took at State, but he ended our discussion of his lack of preparedness by saying “I basically had to figure out everything the first year [at State], and I still am”.

Over half of the scholars reported that the key to their success in high school was their high expectations of themselves and motivation to do well. For many, there were no other options after high school besides attending college, which gave them extra motivation. They also mentioned not wanting to disappoint their parents, who pushed them and supported their academic goals. Erica told me that it was just the motivation that as she said, “I have to go to college, or that’s it, there’s no other options, I have to!” Annie said,

I was always the kid that, I had to make my parents proud but they wouldn’t even expect it. I had to get an A so I wouldn’t let them down, but they didn’t expect the A, they expected me to do my best and try to do what I could, but me holding those high expectations of what I thought my parents had and I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. I think that’s what kept me going and I held high expectations for myself too. I didn’t want to get anything lower than what I knew I could do.

Ellen shared that her dad was “really hard” on her in high school and pressured her to do well, promising a car if she received all A’s. She also put pressure on herself, “I would study and write stuff over and over again until I could write it without even thinking about it.” She wanted to be successful, not just because of her dad’s pressure, but for herself as well. Kimberly’s success came from a combination of her mom’s “pushiness” and her internal motivation to do well, “[I] always had it in me when I was a little kid…I’ve just always been into my studies and I’ve always wanted to do the best that I could.” Maggie’s “constant support” from her family helped her be successful in high
school and continued to “help show me what I’m doing here, what I want to get out of my education now and further down the road”.

A few scholars mentioned specific strategies they used to be successful in high school, including time management, organization, hard work, and the importance of setting goals. Alicia credited her success in high school to “managing your time and keeping everything organized and doing what you have to do to get it done.” Kelly said she worked very hard in high school, explaining that,

I’ve never been the smartest or the brightest or had the best test scores. I’ve always been right above average and below gifted, right on that bumper. So I think the thing that separates us is just working harder and hoping to understand it.

For Melanie, she said it took a lot of motivation, staying focused, and having goals. It was easier, she said, to have goals and a plan, “know what you’re doing” in order to be successful. She had goals in high school to attend college, and since she had accomplished it, she was working on telling her younger sister how important it was to aim for those goals.

Four of the scholars did not know what helped them be successful, sometimes because high school had been so easy for them and when compared to State, wished they knew what they had done. Alison, who had faced numerous academic challenges in college, commented, “I don’t know what the heck I was doing, but I wish I could do it now, I really couldn’t tell you, I have absolutely no idea!” Ellen, who had transferred high schools in 10th grade, said her second high school was much easier, she did not have to study much, and did not have to take mid-term or final exams because her grades were
so high. Charlotte, Carolyn, and Thomas all said similar things, that high school had been so easy for them, they did not have to study or put much effort into their academics,

Before college? I just got by. I mean I did well in high school, but I didn’t really have to go above and beyond, the curriculum was really easy in high school—Carolyn

I was the kid that never studied or did anything [in high school]—Thomas

I don’t know…high school was so much easier. I don’t think I studied half as much as I study now—Charlotte

While the scholars’ parents and family members strongly encouraged their aspirations for higher education, many had not attended college themselves and did not know how to help with the practicalities of navigating the college admissions process. Teachers and guidance counselors served that role for a few of the scholars. Two talked about teachers who had an impact, whether it was through a formal class setting or more personally going above and beyond what the scholars expected. Maggie took a class her senior year called “life management”, where the teachers stressed the importance of college attendance, “they’re pushing college a lot, like saying you need to start looking and you need to start applying, things like that. It’s definitely when I seriously started looking around and thinking about it.” It was a teacher in that class that first introduced her to the scholarship, and was probably the reason she decided to apply to the main campus of the university instead of her local branch campus where she had planned to attend for a few years before transferring. Maggie also mentioned that her teachers in high school stressed the importance of taking a college preparatory curriculum, which she did.
Annie was very complimentary of her high school teachers, saying,

    Especially the honors ones [helped/encouraged her]…and I even took a
    ceramic arts class and that teacher was just ‘you can do anything you want’
    and if we needed anything, recommendation letters and that kind of thing.  
    They cared and I think they took their job more personally than at some of the
    other public schools around my area.

Melanie worked with a guidance counselor at her school who was very helpful,
    “the college liaison at my school was also the advisor for our class, so I spent a lot of
    time with her and she made everybody get on track…she was always helpful with
    resources or different scholarships or things.”  In Melanie’s case, “everyone” in her
    family, especially her grandmother, encouraged her to attend college, but the logistics of
    applying for admission and financial aid came from this college counselor.

In contrast to teachers or counselors who were helpful and encouraging, a few
    scholars talked about ones that were discouraging, if not in the scholars’ college
    attendance, but which institution they chose to attend.  When I asked Erica if any teachers
    or guidance counselors helped her with the college application process, she said, “well,
    my guidance counselor told me not to go to [a certain] university, so I guess he marked
    that off…”  When asked if he gave a reason, she said, “he said everything was the same,
    there was no diversity.  I don’t know if he was right, I never visited.”  Although perhaps
    Erica was not as interested in that college to begin with, this story demonstrates the
    power that guidance counselors can have over students trying to navigate the college
    process, especially those who may not receive the guidance or “college-knowledge” at
    home.
When I asked the scholars what challenges they faced in their transitions to State, academics--as it related to their grades, studying, and their class load/style of classes came up the most. As repeated throughout their interviews, most of the scholars were not challenged very much academically in high school, and did not spend much time on their classes or studying outside of their time spent in school. Adjusting to the class styles and load at State had been the most difficult for Kelly, “cause I didn’t quite comprehend only being in class two or three hours a day required five hours of out-of-class stuff”. That was her biggest challenge, along with studying and learning good study habits for exams since she was not used to taking them in high school. Carolyn also reported that classes had been a challenge, they were “more challenging than anything…it’s more challenging than being in a new place and taking new classes…it’s definitely harder this year [her second] than it was last year.” She also said spending more time on classes helps. Erica was not used to having only a few grades during a term for a course and having to write essays for her history class exams; it was something she had to adjust to academically. Kelly could not believe the amount of work she had for her classes and said studying that much proved to be a challenge for her, “it’s so hard, because I kept trying to catch up in all my classes and nothing seemed to be working.”

Comparison with High School

When asked how classes at State University compared to those they had taken in high school, most scholars said they were harder; required more studying; and were more in-depth than those they took in high school. Carolyn, who had taken advanced classes “ever since I can remember”, felt like she was prepared as far as material was concerned, but her study skills “weren’t up to par” when she arrived at State. As with most of the
scholars, she did not have to study much in high school, so she had to learn study and
time management skills when she arrived at college, “because classes are so much harder
and involved than high school ever was.” When asked if they have found themselves
changing their study habits, scholars predictably said they had to study more. Rachel was
one of the only scholars who said she felt like she studied a lot in high school,

I was the type of person in high school that really studied all the time.
I mean all of the time, and had extracurriculars and stuff. Then I get here
and I study, and I thought I studied all the time then, but I study all the time
now…I didn’t get involved in anything last year.

Some of the scholars learned the hard way that their study and academic habits
needed to improve. Kelly occasionally attended some of her lecture classes her first term,
only attending on days when she had a test, and said, “It showed on test days. I learned
my lesson, now I sit down and do my homework for 3 or 4 hours a night…putting in
more time and just sitting down and doing it and not procrastinating.” Maggie also felt
like State is a lot more in-depth than high school, “you have to do a lot more work and
studying outside of class; if you don’t you’ll be behind…it’s a lot harder than high school
and I would tell anyone that you better be ready for it otherwise you’re going to get
behind”. Maggie emphasized that she was trying to do not only more studying, but
“better studying…not just quick memorizing for he test because they make you recall it at
the end of the quarter when you have a comprehensive exam; you have to learn it and not
just memorize it for that day.” Ellen, who also thought college classes were harder than
high school, had learned, “I have to ask for help instead of people asking me for help”.
Sitting in her Calculus class the first week of school Ellen thought, “I don’t know what to
do! I don’t know what I’m doing here!; I found out real quick that I could go for help.”
As Ellen mentioned her challenges with her Calculus class, I began noticing that many of the scholars had at least one class they had struggled with at State. For a lot of them, college was the first time they had received grades lower than a B, and in some cases, lower than an A. Science courses seemed especially daunting, with chemistry coming up the most—five of the scholars told stories of frustration. Alicia received a C in Chemistry during the first term of her sophomore year, and said, “it was just difficult for me to figure out exactly how I needed to study and how I should divide my time”. She went to the tutoring center for help and worked with other people in her residence hall, and felt she did the best she could, “I tried really hard”.

Annie reported that in her case, frustrations with a teaching assistant’s lack of help caused her to have challenges with her physics class. She e-mailed him when she had a question well in advance of when the assignment was due, but he never responded—until three weeks later, much past the due date of the assignment. She said “so I was a little upset that he didn’t [get back to me]”. The TA could not explain why she did not get some of the quiz problems correct when they were the same as their homework and she had gotten those right. Like Alicia, Annie worked with other students from class, and said, “it was hard trying to teach ourselves if somebody else didn’t know how to teach us”; she felt like she could do the problems and work them out, but did not understand the concepts.

There were more serious consequences of taking a challenging class. Maggie decided to drop her chemistry class during the fall term of her sophomore year, which led her to also change her major, from medical technology to radiological technology. When she dropped the class, she talked with her academic advisor “cause I was concerned that
maybe the major I was in wasn’t a good fit for me.” Although Maggie switched to a major that more closely aligned with her interests and skills, it complicated her degree plans. She later told me that because of her switch, it will most likely take her longer to complete her degree at State,

I really wish I would have started off in Rad Tech. Cause either way, even if I keep the scholarship, I’m gonna have to be here another three years because of the GEC’s—a lot of them fit [from her Med Tech requirements], but there’s too many that I’m far behind in that I’m not ready to even apply to the program for the coming school year. I’m gonna have to wait til next year to apply and then hopefully make it in the next year.

Maggie’s grade point average at the second time we talked was not at the minimum required to keep the scholarship, nor was it where she needed it to be for entrance into the radiological technology program. Consequently, she was worried that she might not have the scholarship at all for the possibly longer amount of time it would take her to graduate.

Many of the scholars had done very well, often exceptionally-well academically in high school, and found it hard to accept their lower grades since they had been at State. Ellen was a 4.0 student in high school, had never received a grade below a B, and said going from that to receiving C’s in college was a “big deal”. In addition to Calculus, Ellen also had a hard time with chemistry and biology, “it’s like a kick in the face, it really is….I’ve never been more frustrated in a chemistry lab in my life because I’m very exact and like to do it right.” Over the course of our interactions, Ellen had not received above a C in any science class she had taken at State. It was very difficult for her to accept, “it’s hard to sit in there [in class] and be like, I don’t even know what we’re talking about”. She had worked with other students in her classes, visited the tutoring center on campus for writing and math, and had gone to talk with her professors,
I don’t know how many times I’ve been to the chemistry tutor along with two of my professors. And sometimes I still get a C in the class. I think the first two years I guess it’s like, oh, it happens, and then when it happens again, you’re like oops…I actually had to re-take one of my classes, which is a big pride issue. I did that this summer and still got a C-.

A possible explanation for the scholars’ relative ease in high school and the challenges some of them encountered at State may have been related to the fact that some of them were not required to take exams in high school if their grades were at a certain level. In Ellen’s case, when she transferred schools during 10th grade, she went from a high school where she worked hard and had exams. At her new high school, “there weren’t any exams, no mid-terms, the classwork I did in 10th grade in [the new school] I did in 8th grade in [the previous school].” Although she felt prepared for the course load at State, she commented that not having exams was almost unfair in that it did not fully prepare her for some of the challenges at State.

Kelly had struggled specifically with biology and chemistry at State, and at our second interview told me she had received her lowest grade point average for the fall term, a 2.6. When I asked what she thought contributed to it, she told me she had never taken an exam in high school,

I think that was the worst thing. I’m always like, why am I doing so bad on exams? I’m not particularly nervous, I just block it out. If you had an A in high school the first two quarters, you didn’t have to take the mid-term, if you had an A all four nine-weeks, you didn’t have to take the final. So I never had to take one.

While it was a reward to not have to take those exams in high school, these high schools might be doing their students a future disservice. At least Ellen and Kelly felt they were at a disadvantage when it came time for exams in their courses at State.
**College Grade Point Average**

In order to retain the scholarship, students must have a 3.2 grade point average by the end of winter term during their sophomore year. During our first interview, I asked the scholars to share their grade point averages with me if they felt comfortable. I also asked if they were satisfied with their grades and if they were worried about meeting the requirement by the end of winter term.

Below is a table illustrating the scholar’s GPAs at the time of our first and second interviews as well as a follow-up at the end of winter quarter (beginning of April 2007), when they were evaluated (“Evaluation”). At our first interview, their GPAs ranged from a low of 2.8 to a high of 3.85, and the average was a 3.36. Nine of the scholars had above the 3.2, two were right at the requirement, and four were below. At the time of our second interviews, their GPAs ranged from a low 2.82 to a high of 3.89; the average was 3.41.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Scholar</th>
<th>1st Interview</th>
<th>2nd Interview</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Below 3.2</td>
<td>Average=3.36</td>
<td>Average=3.41</td>
<td>Average=3.48</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table 4.2 Scholars’ Grade Point Averages**
Of the scholars who were below the GPA requirement, all four were dissatisfied with their grades and three of the four were worried about meeting the 3.2. Alison, who reported the lowest, said she was “definitely not satisfied…anything below a 3.5 to me is unacceptable”. She was working on “forging on, getting it all taken care of, [and] studying my butt off until I get it up”. When I asked if she was worried about the requirement, she replied, “like every second of every minute of every hour of every day…I hope I’ll be able to do it, [but] I’m not sure that I will”. She had talked to the scholarship coordinator at that point, too, who had explained the evaluation process to her, but still said, “it’s frustrating that I have to worry about it.”

Maggie had the next lowest, and told me it was not where she wanted it to be, she would like it higher “to make me feel a little bit safer”. As explanation, as she had alluded to earlier in our discussion of classes, “chemistry has been the bane of my existence…it’s kicking my butt.” One of the frustrating parts for her was the fact that she understood concepts and classes in high school but already felt behind at State.

Although Charlotte was not satisfied with her grades and 3.18 grade point average, she was pleased that they had been going up, saying “I like the trend they’re going.” She liked the classes she was taking when we talked and knew she had until the end of winter term to bring them up, saying, “I have to bring them up anyway for my school, so I need to make sure.” She was optimistic about her chances to bring her grades up, and as her career aspirations included attending medical school, she knew her GPA needed to be much higher for acceptance.
Of the scholars who had grade point averages above the requirement, some were still not satisfied and/or were worried about the requirement. Nine were dissatisfied with their grades, as Melanie commented, “I’m never satisfied, right now I have a 3.39 and I hope to raise it above a 3.5…I’m extremely worried about the requirement [so] I plan on raising it up and I want to get it as high as possible so if I ever need it later on…”

In addition to the external pressure placed on them by the scholarship requirement, many of the scholars also seemed to have internal motivations for doing well academically. Additionally, they knew some of the programs they were applying to had averages that were higher than 3.2, and that motivated them as well. Annie was satisfied with her achievements so far, but explained that she was a perfectionist and was trying to learn that she would not always receive A’s in college. She was not worried about the requirement, explaining, “the expectations I have for myself are higher than that [the 3.2]…I never foresaw that as a problem.” Kimberly was also satisfied and was not worried about the requirement, “I came in with a 4.0 from senior year to college, so I’m trying to keep it up there.” Kelly said that “they [her grades] could be better”; she had all A’s in high school and had gotten a few B’s at State, and said, “I had my first B winter term and I thought I was going to jump out a window (laughing as she said it)…but I’m coping”. Her career aspirations were to become a doctor, and professors had already told her that she needed at least a 3.8 to be accepted into medical school, so she said, “I’m working on it.”

I opened the second round of interviews by asking the scholars how the rest of their fall term had gone after we had spoken. All automatically began by sharing with me how they had done academically, and their comments ranged from “academically it was
my worst quarter ever” (Kelly) to “I did the best I have so far…I got a 4.0 last quarter, so I was excited about that” (Carolyn). As a reminder, at the end of this term, their grades would be evaluated to see if they had achieved the required 3.2.

A few of the scholars, who were below the 3.2, most noticeably Ellen and Alison, were worried about not meeting the requirement and losing their scholarship. In talking with the scholarship coordinator at the time I was conducting second interviews, she told me that if a student had a minimum 3.0, they would be allowed to keep the scholarship and perhaps be placed on a probationary status. When I checked back with her in early April (the beginning of spring term), she relayed to me that as long as the scholars had a 3.15 or higher at the end of winter term, they had met the 3.2 requirement. The students who had a 2.8-3.15 at the conclusion of winter term were required to file an appeal to retain the scholarship, but would be allowed to. Those that fell below the 2.8 (11 of the 105) also had to appeal, and their financial status would be decided by the scholarship committee based on that appeal.

Ellen said the fall term “didn’t go as well as I planned it to... I passed with what I needed, I got C-‘s; it wasn’t what I wanted but it happens I guess.” Ellen’s chemistry and biology classes had contributed to it, “they’re my main problem here”, and the labs had been time consuming and difficult. Compared to last year, when Ellen wasn’t as worried about her grades, she says she “had more fun”, and performed better academically. She had already calculated at our second meeting that if she received all A’s and one B+ (in organic chemistry), she would have a 3.2 by the end of winter term,
So it’s possible at this point so that’s why I took so many credit hours this quarter. So we’ll just have to see how it goes cause it’s early in the quarter to say I’m gonna get these grades. I know the specific classes I’ll probably get A’s in and then “O” chem…it’s a horror story.

I asked if she had already gone for help for that class, and she reported that she had not but needed to talk to her teacher, as well as help for her statistics class, “stats tutor tomorrow cause I tried to do my homework tonight and I couldn’t do it.”

When I asked Alison how her quarter had ended, she replied, “not bad, I got 2 A’s, 2 B’s, and a C.” When I asked if she was worried about meeting the 3.2 requirement, she had this to say,

Yes. I’m absolutely positive that I’m not going to make the 3.2 requirement by the end of this term. But I just talked to the scholarship coordinator and we were discussing the whole financial aid process and stuff. So I feel a little bit better about it now than I did 5 minutes ago. I’ll do what I can if it works, and if it doesn’t, I’ll go to plan B.

When I asked what plan B was, she said she didn’t know yet. Alison was obviously less optimistic than Ellen about meeting the 3.2 requirement, and while she had talked with the scholarship coordinator, she was still worried. Also as opposed to Ellen, Alison was taking a chemistry class during the term in hopes of bringing her grade point average up.

When I followed up with the scholars over e-mail at the beginning of spring term, I asked them to share with me their winter term grades; their cumulative GPA; and if there had been any consequences of having a GPA lower than the required 3.2 at the time of evaluation. At this time, the GPAs ranged from a low of 2.73 to a high of 3.89 and the average was 3.48. Charlotte, Maggie, and Alison were below the 3.2 at this time. The scholarship coordinator told me that only if they were below 3.15 (how the university defines 3.2) would they be asked to appeal and possibly be placed on probationary status.
Both Maggie and Alison wrote in short e-mail responses to me that they were in the process of filing appeals to see if their scholarships would be renewed for the following academic year.

*Interaction with Faculty*

In both interviews I asked the scholars how much they interacted with faculty and staff, how comfortable they were doing it, and if they worked with any faculty members outside of class. In terms of their faculty interactions, scholars said for the most part that they were comfortable approaching them, but sometimes it depended on who it was; they often approached teaching assistants more than faculty members; some had negative experiences approaching faculty; and often in their larger classes, they approached faculty in order to have a more personal relationship with them.

Annie had not gotten to know many of her faculty members, although she had good things to say about her Spanish professors, “I’ve gone to see them, I run into them and talk to them”. Annie was interested in conducting research at State, and with regards to finding a professor or project to work on,

> I know they said when you came here, is there a professor that you could see yourself doing research with down the line in your field, and to this point I haven’t. There’s some that I really like, but none that I’ve really gotten close to. I haven’t gotten to the major so their fields aren’t very interesting to me.

Annie had heard and been told that there would be a professor she would feel comfortable working with, but when we talked, she had not found one yet.

Alicia, Alison, and Ellen felt comfortable approaching their professors if they needed help or had a question. Ellen said it was their job to help students and she was not intimidated by any of her professors.
Erica said that since she was from a small town, she used her professor’s office hours her first year to “feel more personal with them…I like to have them know me and I know them so I can ask questions—cause I always ask questions!” Thomas also used office hours as a way for his professors to get to know him better, which was something he started doing in high school, “I keep a pretty personal relationship with a lot of the teachers…I try to at least get to know them and stuff, and I just try not to feel intimidated by the fact that they’re faculty.”

Carolyn shared a negative experience she had when she tried to talk with a professor during their office hours,

I missed a couple of days last week because I had to go to a funeral, so I was behind in my statistics class. I tried to meet my professor in her office hours, and she didn’t tell me she was going to be in a different room, so I sat there and waited for her for an hour. So that really discourages me wanting to talk to her. I really haven’t had any professors that I feel like I can really talk to and really care cause their classes are so big.

Through the behavior of that professor, Carolyn was turned off from trying to approach other faculty members, and as she said, did not feel as if many cared about her success to begin with because their large class sizes prevented personal interaction.

A few scholars felt more comfortable approaching their teaching assistants than faculty when they needed help or had questions. Melanie had gone to her teaching assistants for tutoring, especially in math, before she approached her professors, and said overall she’d had good experiences with them. Maggie, who had challenges with her chemistry classes, said she had yet to feel comfortable approaching her professors and asking them to explain things she had questions about. Instead, she had gone to the TA’s, who had been “pretty decent.”
Besides Kelly, who had just started working in a professor’s research lab, none of the other scholars worked with faculty members outside of class on research, although many expressed an interest in doing so. It was a requirement for Kimberly’s program (psychology) to engage in research, but in order to do so, she had to take a number of pre-requisite courses first. Charlotte, a biology major, said it was also encouraged for her program, so she was hoping to get a work-study job in a research office soon. When I met with the scholars the second time, most of them had just applied to their major program or school and were waiting to hear if they had been accepted. Most likely, if they do become involved in out-of-class research, the opportunities will present themselves after they begin taking major classes and are more fully engaged in their area of study.

I asked the scholars if they felt like faculty members were helpful and cared about their success. Most scholars replied that they had found them helpful. They also responded that faculty members often go beyond office hours if students needed to meet at other times; if they had legitimate questions and showed interest, their professors had been helpful; and they found faculty members at SU fair.

Alison had not experienced any faculty members who weren’t willing to help her, and she was impressed that some of them had scheduled appointments outside of their office hours if she needed to meet with them at different times. Charlotte also had good experiences with faculty going beyond their office hours to meet with her, saying, “most of them try to make it work…as long as you give them multiple times they can pick from, it works out.” Jackie had yet to “meet a professor who is genuinely foul or, you know
what I mean, those high school teachers who are just out to get you…they’ve been mostly helpful for all the things that I need.”

Kelly qualified that it seemed like faculty members were helpful especially when she had a “legitimate” question and expressed interest in the class and course material. She had benefited from going to their office hours, although she said just because you show that interest, it doesn’t always reflect in your grades. She explained, “because in high school, if the teacher liked you, you’d do well…” Realistically, at a large institution like State, “the classes I’ve had problems in are very large, so they kind of shift you through and keep you moving…but, they do help you and they do try to answer questions the best they can.”

Kimberly was the most enthusiastic about sharing specific stories regarding how helpful her professors had been so far. She related to me,

Especially in the psychology department, it’s my favorite. And my women’s studies teacher this quarter. She’ll let us send her our response papers and she’ll revise them for you before it’s due. I sent it to her last time and have already done it for our next one that’s due…she’s amazing with that. She’s from China, so it’s really cool because it’s a Chinese literature class, so she brings in her personal stories with what we’re reading with her experiences and brings in her friends…I like it a lot.

Unlike many of the large introductory level science courses some of the scholars had taken and struggled with, Kimberly had taken a lot of language, especially Spanish courses, which seemed to be smaller and had given her more opportunities to have personal relationships with the instructors. I also had the sense, based on her outgoing and friendly personality, that she made a point of going out of her way to get to know them, whether through turning in a paper early for feedback, staying after class to ask questions, or speaking up during class. Her grade point average was a 3.7 the last time
we talked, one of the highest among the scholars, which I can only assume is helped by
the extra things she does to ensure she does well in her classes. Interacting with her
faculty members is most likely one of the ways it had been helped.

Aspirations after College

All but two of the scholars aspired to degrees beyond the undergraduate one they
would receive at State. Rachel was not even confident that she would receive her
bachelor’s degree, “if I don’t have a mental breakdown in the next two years…but I feel
like my education will stop there.” Carolyn would like to think she would pursue a
graduate degree, but thought she would stop after that. When I asked her reason, she
replied, “I know it’s early to be thinking about it, but I want a family. I want to be more
of a housewife with a part-time job than a career woman.”

Six of the scholars aspired to graduate school in the form of a Master’s degree and
five hoped to attend professional school or receive their terminal degree. Most knew that
their intended programs and subsequent careers required a graduate or professional
degree, as with Kimberly,

I just found out from my professor that you pretty much have to get your
Ph.D. to do what I want to do, be a forensic psychologist. In order to do
that you have to start off as an investigator with the FBI. That’s my career
goal, to eventually do that but in the meantime I might teach at the college
level to get there, so yeah, I’m getting my Ph.D.

Annie was thinking about attending law school after she graduated from State, and had
discussed her options with her mom. Law school was always an interest during her
sophomore and junior years in high school, and she thought she would major in pre-law
at State, but decided to major in communications to have a different background going
into law school. Kelly and Charlotte were both interested in medical school, Kelly less
sure if she would be accepted, “I’ll try for it, but I would like to take a break after undergraduate work and get some work experience…I could see myself going to graduate school and getting a master’s or doctorate, but I’m not sure which right now.” The scholars, whatever they planned to do after graduation from State, had clear goals and ambitions and knew they had the motivation and confidence in their abilities to do it.

**Engagement**

To better ascertain if the scholars were taking advantage of the opportunities at State and the campus community, which most likely contributed positively to their persistence experiences and integration into the campus community, I asked them to tell me in their words if they felt like they were integrated into the campus community and engaged in campus life. What I may define as taking full advantage of what is offered and engaged in the community may be different than their perceptions. I received mixed answers--some students enthusiastically said that they were (engaged) and shared evidence and stories; some thought they were not and offered reasons and solutions; and others thought they were but not because they had joined any activities or organizations.

Rachel and Ellen were the most adamant that they were not engaged in campus life, Ellen because she lived off campus and too far away to be involved. She felt much more engaged last year when she lived on campus. She was trying out for a campus musical the day after our interview and said as a solution to her lack of involvement, “I think I can probably get involved in more things since I’m not in anything yet…my schedule is a little bit better this quarter…and laziness I guess, I admit it.” Rachel was seeing a counselor for her personal and family struggles and also wanted to get involved in church activities. She also had this to say about her lack of engagement with campus,
I do not enjoy residence hall life. I am tired of people spilling beer and getting drunk in front of my room and outside my door. This really bothers me, but as far as healthy activities go, I do not feel as though I am experiencing college the way that I should. I want to be trained to go into the work force in some area, not pressed through courses that teach research. I know that it is my own problem and I’m not blaming SU for not getting involved, but I feel as though I cannot be involved in any activities because I have to work to survive.

I had the sense that Rachel viewed college as a practical way to receive training for a subsequent career, and also wanted to get involved, but had not found the route to do so or the people to identify with.

Four scholars felt like they were engaged in campus life even though they had not joined any clubs, organizations, or other campus pursuits. Erica played flag football in the fall, but had not joined anything else since, and said regarding her engagement in campus life, “I’d say yeah, just because everyone here kind of is…we all make up the community and I feel we have to be part of it.” Just by being a student at State, Erica felt there was a bond and support among other students that automatically made them part of the community. Jackie also reported that, “sadly, no”, she had not gotten involved in anything, “I’ve tried two different organizations, I’ve had work and class conflicts.” Like Erica, she also felt engaged,

I’m glad I’m here. I feel like I’m part of the campus and I’m an SU student and proud to admit it. Even though all I do is take classes here, even though I’m not in a million clubs, I’m not even a sports fan really, I don’t think that those should just be criteria for what an SU student should be.

Kimberly and Carolyn also said that they had not gotten very involved on campus, but felt they were engaged, Kimberly explaining because she usually knew what was going
on and Carolyn because she attended athletic events and was more active than many of her peers.

The remaining scholars affirmed that they were engaged in the campus community through their involvement in various clubs and organizations. Annie was taking more of a leadership role in the campus activities board and had been accepted to travel to a national conference with her peers. Through her involvement in the organization, she felt like she was able to meet a lot of people and learn leadership skills she would not have otherwise; it also helped make a large institution smaller. Alicia had chosen a few activities to become immersed in, such as the activities board and an honors society and had found a good balance between academics, employment, and her social activities. Maggie, who worked 30 hours per week, still found time to be involved in a service sorority, help with university hosting, and be a member of the athletic band. She explained that working helped her engagement,

I think a lot of the different organizations [have helped her engagement]. It’s not just one sort of thing, I’m in the band, in first-year experience, and I have a job on campus. The job really helped me get to know different faculty and staff. They’re like, oh, you should talk to this person if you’re interested in this area. That’s really helpful.

Becoming more comfortable approaching faculty and staff helped Maggie learn about different areas she was interested in, and that made her feel more connected to the campus community.

Sense of Belonging/Identity

When I asked if being a Scholar was part of their identity at State, most students said that it was not a salient part. They realized and articulated the fact that it was the reason why many of them enrolled at State, as Annie said, “I think it is a big part of who
we are because it’s how we’re here”. Alison also said it was part of her identity, “but not a huge part of it.” Melanie wouldn’t immediately name herself as a Scholar, explaining,

It’s more down the list because we really don’t meet or do things that much…I’d probably say I’m in IA (international affairs scholar), that’s the first thing I was involved in and do things with all year. I’m a second year student, my major is part of my identity as well, and the groups I’m involved with. That’s who I am here.

Carolyn and Alicia more strongly vocalized than the others that being a Scholar was a big part of their identity at State, Alicia saying, “I think it’s definitely part of my identity cause that’s the main reason I am here, because of the scholarship.” Carolyn said, “that’s a big one, being here on scholarship is huge. That would probably be one of the first things I would say.”

About half of the scholars said they felt like they were bragging if they told people they were at State on a full scholarship as Annie did,

And not so much that I’m ashamed…I would tell people that I got a scholarship for academics and financial need. But I don’t like to tell people that I got a scholarship to begin with. I feel like you offend the person or they kind of think, ‘well, she got a scholarship.’ And I don’t want that to come across. Cause I know how hard it would have been to come here without getting a scholarship.

As Charlotte commented, “I feel like I would be rubbing it in their faces, like I’m going to college for free and you’re not” if she made that a daily part of her identity she shared with others on campus. Not only did Erica feel like it “would come off [as] bragging” if she told her peers at State about the scholarship, she also did not want people from her high school and hometown knowing about it either,

In high school when I got it, I didn’t even want it in the paper. I thought everyone would be angry at me or something and thought I was bragging. And when they said it at graduation, how much I got, I was
like, ‘oh, god’, and everyone was staring at me. I didn’t tell anyone cause I didn’t want to come off like I was snobby…so I didn’t bring it up.

Like Annie and Charlotte, many of the scholars were very sensitive to the fact that some of their peers struggled to afford State and they would be too if they had not received the award. Charlotte added, “I just know so many people who are commuting or who are having to get all these loans to pay for college and I would feel bad if I told them that [she had a full scholarship]…I just don’t like bringing it up.”

Others were hesitant to name themselves as a member of the Scholar group because they did not know who else was a member and who they were representing.

Thomas explained it this way,

If I said that [I was a Scholar], I would have no idea who the other people are. I don’t know what kind of group or community that makes [us] up…like my only notion of what a Scholar is supposed to be is like rewarding me and then I’m trying to generalize myself into some kind of archetype, at least other Scholar recipients are like me, but I’m not sure.

Thomas does a great job explaining the feeling I had from many of the scholars. They were grateful for the award and the opportunities it had given them and the burdens that had been removed from themselves and their families. They also knew their experiences might have been much different were it not for the scholarship, but they were unaware of who the other students were that shared the distinction, whatever a Scholar was or was supposed to be. Ellen also said, “I don’t feel connected to the other students in the program…in fact the only person I know in the program is somebody else from my high school—and we don’t talk”. Ellen thought it would be “cool” if they did get together more often and she knew more students for the commonalities it would bring and maybe others on campus would know more about it.

162
Administrators at State who developed the scholarship were intent on making the experience one where the students were not singled out for being “low-income”. Instead, they focused on the fact that the scholars were being recognized and awarded for their academic ability. In light of this, beyond a reception held after they were accepted, another reception during their fall term, and a few meetings throughout their first year, the scholars were not singled out as a visible cohort on campus. Kelly recognized that they did not identify as a cohort, and while she knew a few scholars from her residence hall her first year and a class she took, she said, “we know they’re out there, but it’s like saying you’re a Scholar, high ability, I’m not going to say low income but high financial need, if we were to go around wearing t-shirts, it’s kind of like, you have high need.” As Kelly plainly put it, there was a stigma attached to the financial need side of the scholarship that the scholars were sensitive about and did not necessarily want to be known as the “poor kids” on campus.

When asked if the structure of the scholarship program helped the scholars with their transition, most replied that it helped because it removed the financial burden that accompanied their education at State. Matthew said, “yeah [it has helped], because I don’t have to worry about money”. Melanie also said, “yes, because I definitely like that they pay for school.” Thomas phrased it differently, but in essence repeated what the others had said, “I haven’t really benefited from the program as far as things to do, but financially it’s helped a lot.”

A few scholars said the program helped because they were able to meet more people and the meetings and group gatherings were helpful for the information they provided. Carolyn had met more people through the lunches and meetings, and said,
“knowing that these people got the scholarship for the same reason I did makes me feel not so alone on such a big campus…it was just nice to know that there were people there that cared about us” (referring to the scholarship coordinator and other university staff members). Kelly explained that going to the meetings her first year helped with the specific question of finding a work-study job, but she did not keep in touch with or see any of the other scholars her second year. Kimberly said that the informational packets she received from the program before she enrolled helped and she attended a few of the meetings her first year, which helped her meet people from the program, “because we all kind of come from the same thing.”

Some scholars specifically named the scholarship program coordinator, who was their main point of contact, as the most helpful as related to the scholarship program structure. About half of the scholars mentioned her, saying they e-mailed when they had questions and she always answered them promptly or referred them to someone who could help. She helped Matthew resolve some financial aid questions; she encouraged Thomas to participate in student panels to share his perspective regarding the program; and Maggie said when she had questions about her taxes, she sent her resources on campus she could go to.

A majority of the scholars attended or tried to attend all of the meetings and events the scholarship program sponsored their first year. While they found some useful information and met other scholars, most did not find their niche or “home” within the Scholars program. In my follow-up interviews, I asked what they thought their identity was on campus. Most began their answers by saying what scholars group they belonged to or what their major was; what they were involved in on campus; or where they
worked. Alison replied, “I’m an undergrad business major who loves chemistry and theater and your average student who doesn’t drink and doesn’t really party.” Maggie identified some of her personal characteristics as well as the activities she was involved in, “[I’m] enthusiastic, friendly…I like to play music, I like to play trumpet, I’m in the band…just very outgoing, people know me.”

**Summary**

All of the participants in this study knew from an early age that they would attend college, regardless of the scholarship. The importance of family encouragement to attend college emerged as a strong support for the scholars; overall, they were very well-prepared and excelled academically in high school; teachers and guidance counselors served as “coaches” as they prepared for college; and they were all part of a strong peer culture in that most of their friends from high school also attended college.

Once the scholars arrived at State, most of their transitions appeared to have gone smoothly, mostly due to strong peer relationships they found in their residence halls, classes, and extracurricular activities. These peer relationships often went beyond social and personal purposes to those of academic mentors and tutors. The scholars found employment off and on campus, which also eased their transition, and beyond providing extra spending money, proved to help acclimate them to campus life as well.

The following are some quotes from the scholars about their experiences so far that I think does a good job, in their words, explaining what their experiences have been like so far in their collegiate journey,
I would say I just love it…it’s just a wonderful experience altogether, my parents aren’t breathing down my neck anymore, telling me what I should be doing all the time. I’ve made mistakes, but I’m doing ok…I’ve learned a lot…I think it’s been more of not even academic things, but I think it’s more personal growth overall.

--Ellen

Just the day-to-day has been awesome, just doing different things; the Living Learning Program and doing things with them as been fun. I can’t think of anything I’ve done or gone through that I’ve been like, wow, really wish I hadn’t done that…at least not school related…everything’s been fabulous.

--Alison

[First words that come to mind about experience so far are] Phenomenal, well-deserved, challenging. I really enjoyed my first year a lot, I learned a lot about myself. I went back to my parents and told my mom, ‘when you start growing up, it really doesn’t stop, does it?’

--Thomas

[First words] Amazing, wonderful, great…it’s been amazing so far

--Charlotte

It’s a lot of fun but a lot of hard work, it’s kind of overwhelming sometimes, everything you have to get done and there’s extracurricular stuff and friends and you have to balance it all together…I kind of eased myself into everything once step at a time.

--Alicia

It’s been exciting and a little bit overwhelming at times; just being thrown into your own world, going from living at home with your parents to being on your own. Well, this year especially with bills and stuff along with classes and work, just juggling everything. Even being overwhelmed is exciting some times…knowing I’m actually here for a purpose, it’s exciting.

--Carolyn

It’s been the best experience of my life probably. I’m so happy to get out of my town and get to a place where there’s so many opportunities and being with professors [to work with]. Meeting everyone has been good and I’m glad I didn’t go to such a small school [another option she was deciding between].

--Kelly
[First words about experience] Amazing, unbelievable, I’m so grateful to be here. I’m very thankful for the people giving me the opportunity, the chance.

--Maggie
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a new financial aid and merit scholarship program on the transition and persistence experiences of low-income, high ability students at a large, urban, Midwestern university. The research questions that guided the study were:

- What are the factors that support high ability students from low-income, disadvantaged backgrounds as they enter postsecondary education, and how do their family, economic, and schooling backgrounds influence their transitions?
- What resources or strategies do the students use in their transitions to college?
- To what degree can we draw conclusions about the impact of the structure of the program on student retention and successful persistence?
- Based on those answers, how can colleges support these students’ retention and successful persistence to graduation?

Findings in Relation to Research Questions

Parental involvement is often a key predictor of student enrollment in college. The odds of attending college can be almost twice as great for students whose parents frequently discussed school-related matters with them as opposed to ones who had little or no discussion (Choy, S.P., Horn, L.J., Nunez, A., & Chen, X., 2000). The scholars’ parents in this study strongly encouraged their higher education aspirations and supported
their plans, although only five had attended college themselves. They viewed college as giving their children access to a “better” or “easier” life than the one they had. The parents’ encouragement and support was crucial to the students’ success and fostered their early aspirations to attend college. For most of the scholars, finances were the biggest obstacle they foresaw on their path to college.

The importance of academic preparation and a strong academic curriculum is crucial for any student to access college and their subsequent success, but may be especially important for students from low-income backgrounds and/or classified as first-generation (Strayhorn, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). From an early age, the scholars were recognized as high ability and were placed in honors and advanced classes that prepared them academically for college. Participating in a rigorous mathematics curriculum significantly increases likelihood of attending college (Choy et al., 2000), and with the exception of one scholar, all took through an advanced Pre-Calculus class. Instead of being a member of the 35% of low-income students who are less likely to be highly prepared for college as compared to their higher socioeconomic peers (Cabrera et al., 2003), they were academically prepared for the rigors of college.

Once enrolled at State University, the scholars’ families continued to serve as resources and sources of support for the scholars, both academically and personally, even though they admitted their parents did not always understand what they were experiencing in college. This is common with first generation students, whose parents do not have the college knowledge or experience themselves to offer adequate support (Billson & Terry, 1982; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). A few scholars’ families posed challenges to their transitions.
The scholars, who performed so well academically in high school, found themselves challenged academically at State. Issues related to academics (difficulty of classes; necessity to change study habits) presented themselves as the scholars’ greatest challenge to their transitions. They were often surprised by this, but seemed to find resources, especially in their peers, to cope and adjust to the difficulties they faced. The financial aspect of the Scholars program helped relieve the burden to finance the scholars’ education, and they enjoyed the programming and events connected to the program, but it was not their identity on campus, nor had it become their niche.

The most positive aspect of the scholars’ transition and persistence experiences was their peer group. Peers emerged as strong support for their transition and were mentioned many times over the course of our conversations. A students’ peer group may be “the single most potent source of influence n growth and development during the undergraduate years” (Astin, 1993) and peer support can be vital to students’ academic, social and emotional adjustments; social identity on campus; and goal commitment (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Hurtado, S., Carter, D.F., & Spuler, A., 1996; Lapsley, Rice & Fitzgerald, 1990 in Dennis, J.M., Phinney, J.S., & Chuteco, L.I, 2005). Peers not only provided them with a social outlet, but also as a resource for their academic problems. It was often a peer that the scholars approached first when they had a question about academics, not a faculty member or academic tutor. Their own financial situations did not seem to worry them or affect their daily lives, but worries about their families’ finances often affected their experiences. None of the scholars sent money home, but often helped their family financially by paying for their cell phone bill or car insurance, and not accepting monetary gifts from their families.
Where the scholars lived, especially their first years, also appears to have contributed to positive persistence experiences. Living in a living-learning program or in specialty housing was where many of them discovered their identity and niche. They credited their first-year living situations and especially the people they met their first year as crucial to their positive transitions. Those who lived in a specialized living-learning program (LLP) enjoyed the fact that they had instant connections with those they lived with, and many of them said it made a large institution seem smaller. Roommates also contributed to these positive experiences, and scholars enjoyed getting to know those whom they lived with their first year, whether it was in their room, suite, floor, or hall.

Most of the scholars said it was easy to become involved in campus extracurricular activities and organizations. This helped their engagement in campus life by meeting more people, gaining leadership skills, and feeling more connected to the campus community. A few scholars, however, had not become involved in any out-of-class pursuits, some because they did not know how and others because they were content with academics and peer involvement. None of the scholars worked with faculty members outside of class on research or projects, but they seemed comfortable approaching them if needed. A few scholars shared negative experiences they had encountered with teaching assistants and/or faculty members, which undoubtedly contributed to negative persistence experiences.

Employment experiences also appeared to contribute to the scholars’ persistence. This contradicts the expectation that more time spent working takes away from time spent studying and therefore undermining academic performance. The scholars’ employment often gave them a way to balance their time between academics and social
pursuits and was another way for them to meet and interact with faculty and staff members on campus. Their on-campus jobs also gave them more insight into how the university functioned and made them more comfortable with campus life. It also appears that employment was an ongoing part of the scholars’ identity, since many of them had been used to working pre-college, and continued to do so once enrolling at State. As one scholar commented, she did not know what she would do with herself if she did not work. All but three scholars had obtained employment at our first interview, and one of those was still not working at the time of our second interviews. The scholars worked an average of 14 hours per week at our first meeting, 15 at our second. Their average grade point average was 3.36 at the time of the first interview and 3.41 at our second.

As the scholars looked beyond their graduation from State, most said they were interested in pursuing a graduate degree, whether because the career they had chosen required it, or for their own pursuit of knowledge. When asked if they would return to their hometowns after graduation, I heard a resounding “NO” from most of the scholars. Reasons for this varied, but most said that there were not many opportunities for them at home; they enjoyed the city where State was located and would most likely remain there; or they hoped to relocate to another part of the country for the new experiences, professionally and personally, that it would give them.

Most of the students I worked with in this study would have been attending college regardless of the scholarship. The Scholars program provided the students with the financial resources they needed to access higher education, specifically this institution, and hopefully persist to graduation. The structure of the program provided programming during the scholars’ first year in the form of a congratulatory luncheon and
informational session before they enrolled; a reception at the beginning of their fall term; and three informational meetings held throughout the year. These meetings had specific purposes, for example one exposed the scholars to resume writing and internship options, while another presented the scholars with housing options for their second year and beyond.

The scholars were relieved to have the financial burden of paying for college lifted, and were grateful to not have to repay loans and debts when they graduated. They attended most of the events that were planned for them their first year, and found them helpful for the information they received and people they met. All mentioned keeping very close contact with the scholarship coordinator, both before they enrolled at State and continuing into their second year. Beyond that communication, however, most scholars did not mention the structure of the program as helping in their transitions. They did not know many other scholars except ones from their residence halls and weren’t exactly sure who they were representing when they said they were a “Scholar”. Planned programming through the scholarship program was not provided during their second year, and many of the scholars wished it had been, if it were tailored to their second-year needs.

As of April 2007, only one scholar had involuntarily departed from the first-year cohort. This individual was academically dismissed during the fall term of their second year. Two other students did not return for the fall term of their second year, but did for winter—one was completing an internship off-campus and the other was completing military boot camp. I did not explore reasons for scholar departure since there was no one to contact who had departed from the program of their own volition at the time of my
data collection. A follow-up with the student who was academically dismissed, however, would be valuable for the insights they would provide into the reasons for their departure and suggestions for how they could have been better served and supported by the program and/or university.

**Relating Findings to the Literature**

Literature which combines the intersection of low-income and first-generation students with high ability characteristics is scarce, which was one of the main reasons for pursuing this research. Literature often highlights the “at-risk” nature of first-generation and low-income college students (Choy et al., 2000) or separately discusses the unique needs of high ability students. This is not to minimize the many unique qualities and needs of this population of students (i.e., first generation, low-income). They attend college at lower rates than their continuing generation peers (Choy et al., 2000), even when they are academically qualified (Akerheilm et al., 1998 in Thayer, 2000); they are at a higher risk of dropping out once they enroll (Riehl, 1994 in Strayhorn, 2006); and they have much lower graduation rates (Mortenson, 1998; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). Therefore, this population of students must remain a research priority in the higher education literature, especially as programs like the Scholars are established and these students enroll in higher education in increasing numbers.

*High Achieving Aspect of Scholars’ Identity*

The scholars repeatedly shared stories of how easy high school had been for them. They also shared how difficult they had found academics in general or one specific class when they arrived at State. I noticed in the course of our interviews that they especially had a difficult time when they received lower grades than they had been accustomed to in
high school. Many of them had been valedictorian of their high school class or graduated with over a 4.0 grade point average. Research comparing high school grades with college ones often highlights the trend that students’ grades decline between high school and college (Astin, 1993). When individual comparisons are made between a students’ high school and college grades, about one in three students obtains the same grades in college as in high school, one in five obtain higher grades, and about half obtain lower grades (Astin, 1977).

A danger for these students could be the fact that since they were not used to being challenged academically pre-college, they may not have the coping skills to deal with the experience and emotions that accompanied their sense of failure. They were often shocked and surprised when they received a low grade or did not understand concepts in a course and were the ones asking for help at State (instead of being the ones who helped in high school). This can be paralyzing for some students if they refuse to ask for that needed help or continue to think that they can get through it on their own.

Differences between First- and Continuing-Generation Low-Income Scholars

Four of the 15 scholars, Ellen, Charlotte, Thomas, and Erica, were not first-generation college students. Although no strong patterns emerged for them as a group, a few noticeable differences are worth pointing out. In terms of GPA, the only real difference was at the time of evaluation, when the non-first generation scholars had an average GPA of 3.42, while the first-generation scholars had an average GPA of 3.45. As far as employment, the non first-generation scholars worked less hours on average (10 versus 15.2 at our first interview; 11 versus 17.2 at our second) than the first-generation students.
Both the highest and one of the lowest reported GPAs were among the non-first-generation scholars. At our first meeting, Ellen had attained the 3.2 required GPA, but at both times after was below. At the time of their evaluation, however, it had improved to a 3.04, which she was hoping would be adequate to keep the scholarship. She attributed her academic struggles to moving from one part of the state to another in 10th grade, where she believes her graduating high school did not adequately prepare her academically for college.

In contrast to Ellen’s academic challenges, Erica reported the highest GPA of the scholars, a 3.85 at our first interview and a 3.89 at the second and at their evaluation. She was one of the only scholars who had not obtained employment, nor was she involved in any campus activities or organizations. She did not seem concerned about not working or her lack of involvement and said that she might get a job in the future if she needed one.

Both Thomas and Charlotte’s GPAs went up between our first and second meetings, although Charlotte’s had decreased again at the time of their evaluation to a 3.19. Unlike many of the first-generation scholars, Thomas had not worked in high school, but at the time of our second interview, he was employed in two positions, one off-campus at 25-30 hours per week. Charlotte, who was below the 3.2 GPA at our first interview, did not seem anxious or stressed about it, and had confidence in herself that she would achieve a higher GPA, both for the scholarship requirement and in order to gain acceptance into medical school. Both Thomas and Charlotte had become involved in various campus organizations and seemed to be able to balance their academics, employment, and social lives well.
**Scholars Accumulated Capital through Academic Talent and Experiences at State**

The college environment is a place where students obtain academic credentials or capital, and may also gain other cultural, social, or economic capital, “which is important for its conversion potential” (Walpole, p. 50). Students are exposed to many opportunities and resources to obtain cultural, social, and economic capital, through their academic pursuits, out-of-class experiences, and peer relationships. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may enter college with lower amounts of cultural and other forms of capital.

The scholars were a unique low-income population because they were also high achieving. They had an advantage over their economic disadvantage in the form of their academic talent. They were placed in advanced classes and “tracked” as an honors student; met peers who were also high achieving and possibly had college-educated parents who served as role models; and were given opportunities that many of their other low-income peers were not. They may have entered college with skills and advantages that their comparable low-income peers may have been lacking. The students’ high ability functioned as a “passport” to other resources, including extracurricular activities, engaging coursework, and a high achieving peer group, which may have compensated for the lack of support they received at home. As a parallel to the Spears Neumeister and Rinker (2006) study, the scholars’ academic achievements exposed them to people and opportunities that continued to support their educational aspirations once they arrived at college.

Good academic preparation and high achievement may have compensatory effects for students like the scholars who may enter college with little sociocultural capital or
without strong encouragement from their family (Terenzini et al., 1996; Strayhorn, 2006). It may have an indirect influence on success for the scholars because it exposed them to resources and support systems that more easily facilitated their achievement and educational aspirations before they entered college (Spears Neumeister & Rinker, 2006). It may be even more critical for those students whose parents did not attend college and cannot offer specific guidance both pre-college and in terms of persistence. Through their advanced classes, the scholars gained access to those experts (guidance counselors, teachers) who served as proxies for their parents’ lack of college knowledge.

A student’s habitus is a “web of perceptions about opportunities and the possible and appropriate responses in any situation” (Walpole, 2003). Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds may have lower educational aspirations, which may lead them to use educational strategies that are less successful than their high socioeconomic status peers. Walpole (2003) reminds us, however, that habitus has a dynamic component and,

An individual can adopt new elements as a result of novel experiences, historical changes in the material environment, exposure to another individual’s habitus, or associating with people who originate from a different habitus, all of which are possible in the college environment” (p. 50)

Although the scholars may have certain elements of their own habiti in common because they were from low-income backgrounds, they were exposed to these different experiences and people in college, through their high academic abilities and their peer groups. Their educational decisions and choices they made within the context of their habitus may be an attempt to accumulate capital that can facilitate their social mobility on campus and that can be converted later to occupational and educational gains (Horvat,
Beyond encouraging the scholars to do well academically and supporting them personally and socially, it seems like the scholars’ high achieving peer group, both pre-college and at State also served as a source of social capital. The effect of a students’ peer group is strong, with some research finding that having friends in high school with college plans is the strongest predictor of college enrollment (Choy et al., 2000). For students with risk factors such as from a low-income background or first-generation, the odds of enrolling in college can be four times higher for those who had friends that planned to attend college themselves (Choy et al., 2000). The friendships students make with other high achieving peers often contribute to their achievement by setting standards and providing competition. Students see these peers as the norm rather than the exception and want to succeed in the way that they do or more than they do (Spears Neumeister & Riker, 2006).

Student involvement can be important to student persistence, growth, and change (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987; 1993), but low socioeconomic status students may engage in different activities than their high socioeconomic status peers while in college, spending less time in student clubs and groups than their peers (Berger, Milem, & Paulsen, 1998 in Walpole, 2003). This pattern of less involvement may lead to accumulation of less cultural and social capital, which can be converted later to occupational capital.

Becoming involved in extracurricular activities and other nonacademic experiences may be a way the scholars acquired the cultural capital necessary to succeed
at State (Pascarella et al., 2004; Hahs-Vaughn, 2004). About four of the scholars did not seem to be involved in any out-of-class activities, and as one scholar commented, did not know how to. This may put them at a disadvantage as they experience the academic and non-academic environments at State and move towards graduation and obtaining employment. The remaining scholars, however, had become involved in one or more activities or organizations that they were interested in, including the campus activities board, service organizations, and host programs. Through these pursuits, they met other peers, faculty members, and staff who served as advisors and made them more comfortable on campus. Beyond helping in their transitions, these involvements could also add to their cultural and social capital accumulation, including leadership development and communication skills and learning how to work with others in different situations.

**Sense of Belonging as a Member of Two Underrepresented Groups**

First-generation students are often described as “falling in between two worlds” (Spears Neumeister & Rinker, 2006) or “on the margin of two cultures” (London, 1992) as they make the transition from home to college. They are often leaving home for the first time for an academic setting that is unfamiliar and often never-experienced by their parents or other family members. It may be a “double assignment” to do well academically and also to internalize the lifestyle of the college-educated middle-class,

In order to better achieve his or her career goals, the [first-generation] student must reject the values of home, peers, and neighborhood, and take on the attitudes and behaviors associated with the work world he or she wishes to enter (Brooks-Terry, 1988, p. 123).
The rejection of values connected to their families and home communities for those found in higher education may cause conflicts for first-generation students as they travel between the two worlds. They may find themselves “renegotiating relationships at college and at home to manage the tension between the two” (London, 1992).

The scholars did not report feeling as if they were straddling two different cultures when they returned home after living at State for almost two years. They admitted, however, that they missed their independence and resented their parents’ rules when they returned home after being on their own at college. Other than that, their relationships with their families remained close and they did not find themselves acting any differently when they were home. Perhaps because they had already accepted the values and culture associated with being a high achiever long before they arrived at college and had already decided to pursue “intellectual hobbies and careers foreign to their parents” (Speirs Neumeister & Rinker, 2006), they felt like they had already renegotiated some of those relationships at home. Another explanation might be because they were only in their second year of college, they had not fully experienced their identity development within the collegiate culture and differences may surface as they mature and become closer to graduation. Their response to this question might be quite different if asked again when they are seniors.

In the middle-class world of the academy, students from low-income backgrounds often find themselves lost, frustrated, and alienated because their cultural background does not match the one they find in higher education. Individuals who have been raised in working-class families have experienced discrimination, oppression, and the subtle reinforcement of their class status all their lives, and they have not forgotten what that
feels like. Once they arrive at the university, they find things are much the same.

Academia has a very powerful class structure in its hierarchy of professors, assistant professors, and part-time instructors, and it is “not solely a ladder based on merit, but a track based on a number of gender, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic factors” (Fay & Tokarczyk, p. 5).

Issues connected to fitting in and having a sense of belonging may surface for these working class students, who may not feel as if there are many people like them on campus. Students who were the first in their families to attend college often speak of experiencing a sense of alienation as they transitioned to the middle-class world of higher education, as one working-class student (not from this study) commented (Van Galen, 2000, pp. 5-6),

In the end, it all came down to a question of belonging…certain events that had happened many years previous that emerged now [in college]. Just an overwhelming feeling of having a huge array of forces stacked against me, of knowing I did not belong, of knowing the only way out was to leave. Soon. So I left.

The scholars felt as if they belonged on campus, were welcomed by the faculty, staff, and other students, and were at a loss when I asked if there were ever times they felt like they did not belong or out of place. I was surprised by these responses, but when I was more specific and asked if there were times that they noticed their economic background more, they replied in the affirmative. hooks (1994, p. 177) wrote that “nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class differences than in educational settings”. The scholars felt as if they were surrounded by middle- to upper-
class peers who had money readily available to them from their parents and did not struggle to pay for their education or other necessities.

**Understanding Student Scholars through their Individual Journeys**

One of my last interviews during my first round was with Thomas. It was about 6pm on a Wednesday evening; I had been talking with students all day and was a little drained. Thomas came in soaked from a sudden rainstorm, running over to our interview after being at the campus recreation center. Dressed in black athletic shorts and a black “Microsoft” t-shirt, glasses, and running shoes, he shook my hand and I thanked him for meeting with me. I was not sure our interview would happen, as we had had some miscommunication and his schedule had been difficult to coordinate with mine.

As we were finishing up our interview, I asked Thomas if he had anything else to add. He asked me to tell him a little more about my study and what I was looking for. I said one of the things I was exploring was if scholars, because they had their education paid for, would take advantage of the opportunities to get more involved and perhaps work less. I told him what I had heard so far and decided to ask Thomas what he thought as a “mini” member check in order to gauge his thoughts as a member of the scholars group, the larger organization that they all belonged to. This is an excerpt of that discussion we had,

J: With some of the scholars, a few of them have two jobs and they still really feel pressured to earn money, sometimes at the expense of not getting involved in activities or organizations on campus. I’ve seen a mix, some scholars have taken advantage of being able to work less and get involved and be engaged on campus, but others have not…in my head, some of it doesn’t seem to be working out like I thought it might…. 
T: Right. It’s hard to say if an opportunity can erase the way a person was raised, though. My parents never let me have a part-time job, but I wanted to. But if I did, it would have fit with our condition and it would have always been on my mind so I always have to work just in case. Like, with some of the people I’ve met, that’s kind of how I think of them.

I thanked Thomas for his insights, and told him our conversation was a great way to end the day. I valued his perspective, maturity, and thoughtfulness in the way he answered my questions, and remember it as a very enjoyable interview.

I kept repeating those words, “it’s hard to say if an opportunity can erase the way a person was raised”, over and over again to myself that night and throughout the rest of the interviews. They reminded me where many of these scholars were from and how their experiences growing up, not only in the academic world, but at home with their families, had undoubtedly shaped how they approached their lives at State and the decisions they made along the way.

Although I have presented their many commonalities through the themes involved in their journey both before and during college, these students are unique individuals who will react and interact differently in the college environment. They are part of their larger groups in their families at home and through their pre-college academic experiences. They may or may not have been involved in extracurricular activities or held employment before entering college. This shapes who they are before they arrive at State and affects the decisions and behaviors they exhibit once they enroll.

Maggie was one of seven siblings, from a small village of approximately 500 people, 86 students in her graduating class. Her transitions to State involved missing her family, in which her brother was starting kindergarten her second year, and getting acclimated to living in the city as opposed to her rural upbringing. Her transition and
persistence experiences were eased by having a sister who was a senior at State and joining the band, which she had been involved with in high school. Annie was from a large suburb, graduated in a high school class of 611 students, and her father had died at the end of her senior year. Her transition was often challenged by missing her mother and brother still at home and grieving for the loss of her father. Her persistence was eased because State was very similar to her high school in its diverse population and opportunities to become involved. She had found a group to connect to in the campus activities board, and had taken on a leadership role in the organization, including traveling with it to a national conference.

Once at State, the scholars became members of new groups, including the Scholars program. As Thomas pointed out, his parents never allowed him to work in high school, but it would have “fit his condition”, meaning his family’s socioeconomic status. Other scholars, like Melanie, had always worked, and really did not know what they would do or who they were if she did not continue working in college.

Their stories are all different, yet what bonds them is their economic backgrounds and their high academic ability. They share many more similarities, but they are distinct students with a variety of experiences and backgrounds, as evidenced in the stories above and throughout the chapters. They will continue to cross paths, perhaps not even realizing it, and their stories will converge and diverge while they are at State and after their graduation.
Recommendations for Practice

University and Scholars Program Outreach

State University already has outreach programs in place through the offices of admissions, financial aid, minority affairs; and there may be others of which I am unaware. Especially for low-income students it is important to begin to make connections in grade school (Cabrera et al., 2003). Because the Scholars program hopes to reach high schools across the state that have never had students apply to SU, the university has increased their recruitment efforts among these underrepresented schools. The message they are trying to communicate to these students is that it is possible to attend State, there is financial assistance available, and they can be successful once enrolled.

Degree aspirations often lead to academic preparation, and some research has found that factors like strong academic preparation play a larger role in a student’s path to college than socioeconomic status (Cabrera et al., 2003). Not only should institutions encourage college attendance, but they should also be suggesting choices students and their families should be making to make college attendance a reality. University personnel are experts regarding the college application and financial aid processes, and are the best equipped to share with parents and students what college is all about (Cabrera et al., 2003).

The message that also needs to be communicated is the importance of parental involvement and encouragement and the inclusion of a strong academic curriculum while in high school and before. As Adelman (1999) advises, “curriculum is at the heart of academic preparation for college”, and low-income students specifically should be
encouraged as early as the 8th grade to engage in curriculum that “foster[s] the development of critical competencies, values, and skills known to prepare the student to successfully undertake collegiate work” (Cabrera et al., 2003). Many programs have been established for high school students to visit the campus and participate in programming, but making the opportunities available for students as young as middle school can help early awareness about the college experience.

Retention of Low-Income High Ability Students

Creating an environment that is welcoming to all students, regardless of socioeconomic background is one of the first steps that lead to persistence and degree completion (Cabrera et al., 2003). Inviting students to become engaged in their academic and social environments will help them feel as if they belong and ease their transitions and persistence experiences.

A major finding in this study that correlates with the retention literature is the importance of a students’ living situation, especially their first year. For the scholars, living in a learning community or honors housing gave them an immediate sense of community and many found their niche within these programs. Just living on campus their first year was helpful for the strong peer relationships they formed and continued into their second year. It helped make a large institution and campus feel smaller, and they found a number of academic and social resources through their living situations.

Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and classified as first-generation often report that they feel more pressure to work while in school than second-generation students (Billson & Terry, 1982). There is a positive effect for working part-time on campus (Astin, 1993), specifically working 15 or fewer hours per week in a position
related to academic interests. This may have a positive effect on persistence and degree completion (ACE Issue Brief, May 2006).

Working on campus rather than off and providing practical information regarding obtaining employment was helpful to positive persistence experiences for the scholars in this study. It gave them the extra spending money, job experiences they could use on their resumes, and they often made connections with faculty and staff they would not have otherwise. It was another way they engaged in campus life and felt more comfortable in the campus environment. These students should be encouraged to work on campus part-time, but also warned about the dangers of working more than 15 hours per week, for the interference it may cause in their academic balance or performance.

Contrary to the belief that high ability students do not need specific academic services, these students have needs that require special consideration (Klein, 2006). Many of these students feel “tremendous amounts of pressure” (Klein, 2006) from their specific program, classes, or in the case of the Scholars program, to achieve a certain GPA. This encourages perfectionist tendencies in some of these students, who feel the need to excel in all of their academic subjects like they did in high school.

These high ability scholars should have access to resources including advising tools such as time and stress management workshops or sessions; informational meetings that assist the students in meeting the specific requirements of their program; and effective advising meetings to build strong relationships and keep track of their progress. These students may also benefit from resources, workshops, or counseling sessions devoted to learning about managing emotions resulting from their first experiences with academic failure or disappointments (Speirs Neumeister, 2004).
Scholar Program Structure

Single Point of Contact Model

The scholars repeatedly told me how often they communicated with the coordinator of the Scholars program, beginning before they enrolled and continuing through our second interviews. When Ellen was having problems with her calculus class the first week of school during her first year, she immediately e-mailed the coordinator to tell her she did not know what to do, she did not know what she was doing in the class, and asked for her advice and guidance. After Kelly had a challenging first quarter her second year due to an injury and taking a biology and chemistry class concurrently, she received a 2.6 GPA for the term. It was very hard for her to accept, saying, “I was freaking out, I called my advisor, I re-thought my major, I was thinking business…I was losing it.” She also called the coordinator at that point for her advice, telling her she was thinking of switching majors, from molecular genetics to communications, in an effort to keep her scholarship. From what I was able to understand, the coordinator advised her not to switch her major if the only reason was to keep her scholarship.

From my own experiences working with her, I know as the scholars do that the coordinator is extremely responsive to the students and their families, and always says if she does not know the answer, she will find the person who does (and she always delivers on her promises!). Students, staff, and faculty members respect her expertise and caring for the program and its’ students. I think it is invaluable to have a staff member be the single point of contact for these scholars, especially when they are first admitted and have many questions regarding the enrollment and transition process. At some point, however,
I wonder if these scholars will sever the close ties they have with her and begin to find resources and answers for themselves.

Unfortunately, since this is not a longitudinal study, I will not know these answers, but it poses an interesting question, especially since new classes of scholars enroll each year and the first-year class inevitably warrants the most time and attention. Will these scholars who were admitted for the 2005-2006 year still be relying on her in 2009 when they are seniors anticipating graduation? Some of the scholars seemed to be finding answers independently or through other resources at our second interview, but I still wonder about students like Ellen, who said “the coordinator has been very helpful…I ask her about everything and anything” and Carolyn who said she e-mailed her “all the time…I ask her everything.”

*Programming*

The scholars attended planned events and programs before they enrolled and throughout their first year. Most reported that these had been helpful for the information provided, and some wished the programming continued into their second year and beyond. They would most likely attend these meetings and events, but only if they were practical and tailored to their needs as they progressed through SU. Maggie commented,

> I don’t feel connected, I don’t have a clue if something’s going on that I need to be aware of…I don’t feel that connection. Last year, they were like, you have this coming up, make sure you have this date on your calendar. This year I have not felt that a whole lot. I thought we’d still have the once a term meetings, but we really didn’t do anything last term…just so I could feel like I was up to date or information contacts, like don’t forget me, I’m still here!

Many scholars had found their niche on campus by the time I spoke with them and knew where to get information they needed, but missed the social aspects of the
Scholar gatherings. Annie commented, “sometimes I wish there was more…I think it would be nice to know some of the scholars a little bit more.” Some students suggested having more informal gatherings to get to know other scholars, both before their first year began and throughout their first and second years. Many did not feel connected to other scholars and were curious who they were. Kimberly mentioned that for her other scholarship programs, they have more events and opportunities to interact, but feels it is lacking in this program. Melanie also participated in a leadership colloquium during the summer, and said components of that program could be incorporated into the Scholars structure.

Other students felt that the structure of the program was adequate, they appreciated the meetings their first year, but since they had become more involved on campus, did not feel the need for additional structured activities. It was just one more thing they had to schedule on their calendars, which had become harder as they became more involved in their coursework and out-of-class activities. Alicia said,

I love the structure of the program. Everything seems to have fallen into place for me and I don’t have any complaints at all. I don’t have any questions or things I need to know. If I did, I think I could do it on my own.

She also added that she knew three other Scholarship students and did not have a desire to know more.

Having the congratulatory/welcome luncheon on campus after the students had been awarded the scholarship (spring of their senior year in high school) was a valuable experience for them. It eased their familiarity with campus and having the president of
the institution address them was a powerful way of demonstrating how important their presence on campus was to the university. As a follow-up to that event, the scholars could also have a one to few day retreat before classes started as another specialized session. This might be a combination of formal and informal activities aimed at helping them get to know one another and it could also include a meeting with upperclass scholars for the bond it may create between classes. This could also be an opportunity to meet with and hear from faculty and staff members about resources available at State; another attempt at making them feel more comfortable in the campus environment.

The scholars I talked with relayed that they had been assigned first-year “contacts” for the incoming/second year scholars, which they sent e-mails and postcards to over the summer after their first year, but did not receive much of a response or have much success with the program. Perhaps meeting with them in person would personalize their interactions and make for more productive and successful relationships that could be sustained throughout their time at State.

Connecting students with faculty members who are also from low-income backgrounds may be another way of showing students that there are people like them on campus, including those who teach them. Faculty members who disclose this information can use it to demonstrate to students that “motivation can help to overcome some obstacles to one’s goals in life” (Vander Putten, 2001, p. 16). Tally Hart, a former director of Student Financial Aid at Ohio State, often shared with prospective students and incoming low-income students her experiences as a first-generation college student from a working-class family, and her story resonated with the students she was addressing for the power it had as she was successful in her life and career.
In addition to connecting students to faculty and staff members from similar backgrounds, the scholars might also benefit from academically-focused sessions regarding what to expect in college, perhaps during their orientation or at least before classes start. Many of the scholars were very worried and upset when they received what they thought was a low grade, maybe even a B. Addressing college pressures and grades before classes begin might alleviate some of those stressors, or at the very least, make the students aware of the possibilities that await them. This might also be a helpful place for upperclass scholars to have input. One of my questions for the scholars in their first interview was what advice or “words of wisdom” they would give to incoming scholars based on their experiences. Many of them talked about the academic challenges they had, and how they could have been better prepared, even if it was a mindset. Additionally, a list of “helpful hints” could be included in some kind of handbook the upperclasses could make for the incoming first-year scholars each year.

Sessions that also focus on navigating the “social and cultural terrain” of higher education that they find themselves in (Van Galen, 2000) may be helpful for these incoming students. As they will find, just meeting the required academic standards may not be sufficient for success. The peers they associate with, most likely high ability ones like them, will help to a degree, but more formalized instruction and guidance may also be needed. At the scholars’ welcome reception their first year, one of the deans in the Undergraduate Admissions/First-Year Experience Office spoke to them about the year they were about to embark on, adding useful tips for working with faculty members and providing a mini etiquette lesson as well. A few scholars shared that experience with me.
as one of the highlights of their first year for the exposure it gave them to senior-level administrators at the university and the invaluable advice they gave them.

Limitations of Study

Duration

I was fortunate to spend a good amount of time with the Scholars program in my many roles as a researcher, observer, and participant in planned events. I was also lucky to have the opportunity to interact with the program as an observer and researcher for a year before I began data collection for the insights those opportunities provided. An obvious limitation of this study, however, is its relatively short duration. A longitudinal study following these students throughout their college careers would be beneficial for the answers it would provide as they persist to graduation. What other challenges will they face and successes will they have? Will some of the students lose the scholarship because of low grade point averages? Will some scholars leave State voluntarily (not due to an academic dismissal)? Will their relationships with family and friends from home change over time? These and many other questions would be better answered through a longitudinal study.

Sample

This study examined a relatively small sample of students in a particular scholarship program at a specific institution. As a qualitative study, the sample is not meant to be generalizable to the larger low-income, high ability college student population. However, there is a noticeable lack of gender representation (or an overrepresentation of women) among men in the study (2 versus 13 women); and one of the men, Matthew, did not complete both interviews. Although I tried to recruit more
men for the study through purposive sampling, the two men who did participate self-selected into participating. Sampling strategies in qualitative research do not attempt to reduce or eliminate self-selection bias, but the lack of gender representation in this study may be indicative of larger differences in attitudes by gender towards higher education and college performance more generally.

It might appear from the substantially higher number of women who self-selected into the study that they were more interested in this research and subsequently could have been more involved and engaged in campus life. Women have begun to outpace men in college attendance and college completion in the last few decades so that in 2004, they received 58 percent of all bachelor’s degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Recent research regarding gender differences in higher education “engagement” has also found that (Hu & Kuh, 2002) men are typically less engaged than women in their collegiate experiences; defined as scoring well below average on the scales from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) that represent effort devoted to educationally purposeful activities. The gender gap in this study seems to mirror that research, that men may be less engaged and interested in pursuing “educationally purposeful activities. As a result of the higher self-selection of women and the general self-selection bias inherent in this study due to the sampling methodology, there are questions obviously left unanswered. Are there Scholars who did not self-select who are less engaged than those in this sample? How different are the experiences of the larger Scholars’ group than the 15 who participated?
Additional Analyses

There were many other dimensions of the scholars’ experiences I could have explored, both qualities they possessed and as a result of their backgrounds. I did not explore differences by gender or race, nor did I analyze differences due to their geographic or schooling backgrounds. The scholar program, admittedly, has a low number of racial and ethnic minorities enrolled, but comparisons among different racial and ethnic backgrounds would also be helpful for the insights they would provide. I also did not follow-up with the one student who departed from the Scholars program and the university. A conversation with that student may have provided better information regarding support and retention strategies for this student and others like them.

Although it was not one of my research questions, I could have included more information about the scholars’ lives before they arrived at State. In the time that I had, I asked the scholars about their families and academic backgrounds pre-college, but would have liked to know more in-depth details about that time in their lives. For example, what was their parents’ philosophy regarding education? What do they remember about their earlier academic experiences, such as elementary and middle school? What did they think was the reason for their inclusion in advanced and honors level classes? Since my focus for the study was their transition and persistence experiences, those questions were not asked, but they would have been helpful for a more comprehensive study.

Because one of my major findings was the fact that parents play key roles in encouraging their children’s educational aspirations, including the parents of the scholars in this research would also add to a more comprehensive study. They could better explain questions of why they pushed their children to attend college; how they feel about
the experiences their children were having; and how programs like the one at State could do a better job in the recruitment and information sharing with the families.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

As more of these scholars programs are established, this research will become even more timely and valuable for the insights it will provide into this population of students. Both private and public institutions have initiated these scholarship and financial aid programs designed to enroll and successfully graduate more students from low-income backgrounds, and they can learn from each other best practices for accomplishing these goals. In the fall of 2006, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill hosted a policy colloquium entitled, “The Politics of Inclusion: Higher Education at a Crossroads.” Attendees included public policy experts, scholars, and financial aid and admissions experts and topics surrounded policies and practices aimed at reaching these students. Speakers also encouraged the need to reach the elementary and secondary schools not only to find students, but to help them make their way through the academic pipeline. Forums like this conference are essential for institutions to share ideas and policy and hopefully more academic research will come from their efforts and meetings.

Longitudinal studies will be useful, not only during the students’ higher education years, but the years leading up to their entrance and access to higher education. Institutions that begin recruiting students for these programs long before they enter higher education will benefit from collecting information and data while they are still in secondary school programs. This information will serve institutions better in their retention and persistence efforts once the students arrive on campus.
Research should also concentrate on what these students accomplish and the choices they make after they have graduated from college. A majority of the scholars in this study aspired to graduate and professional degrees once they graduated from State. Will they reach these goals or will their plans change? Will they not return home to their families as they said and experience other parts of the state, country, or even world? How will their efforts in higher education possibly affect younger siblings still at home when they attended college? For someone like Melanie, whose sister was in high school at the time of our interviews, will she also attend college and begin a legacy of college-going for their family?

**Summary**

Programs like this one at State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Harvard University are attempting to address the issue of enrolling and successfully graduating more economically disadvantaged students. As the disparities between the wealthy and poor become greater in the United States, data also indicate that the gap between the lowest- and highest-income students who attend college is also growing wider. By age 24, 75 percent of students from the top income quartile receive their baccalaureate degrees, but for students from low-income families, fewer than nine percent earn a bachelor’s degree by the time they are 24 (Mortenson, 2005). As Mortenson comments, “for students growing up in low-income families, almost no amount of hard work will earn them that degree.” The social class someone is born into and grows up in often has serious consequences for their chances at higher education, life opportunities, and outcomes (Lareau, 2003).
These financial aid and scholarship programs are not perfect, nor are they the only solutions to the problem of access for low-income students. Shirley Ort, Director of Financial Aid at UNC, explained that the programs have changed the conversation regarding access and have hopefully encouraged other institutions to take action and enact policies that will encourage changes in their enrollments. She commented at the fall colloquium that, “there is a growing awareness that we have to do more, especially given the population that’s coming at us…Carolina and others are just trying to do their part” (Lederman, 2006).

The transition and persistence experiences of the students from the first cohort of Scholars at State University seemed overwhelmingly positive, with a few exceptions. They had received support from their families to attend college from a young age in most cases and their degree aspirations had been formed early. They had been enrolled in advanced and honors level classes for as long as most of them could remember, which further fostered their aspirations and surrounded them with other high achieving peers who aspired to higher education as well.

Access to higher education is only the first step for these economically disadvantaged, high ability students, who then must transition and successfully persist through college. The scholars felt welcomed and comfortable as they arrived on campus. They seemed to find their niche and the places they belonged through their living situations, such as a Living Learning Program and Honors Housing, meeting peers who had similar interests, academically and socially. They turned to these peers first when they faced challenges, both in their academic and social/personal lives, but also sought out resources across campus.
Involvement in extracurricular activities and employment also contributed to their positive persistence experiences, again meeting peers, gaining valuable leadership skills, and becoming engaged in the campus community. A few scholars did not seem to be integrated into the campus or surrounding community, and struggled how to find a way to do this. Hopefully as they experience more of campus life, these resources and experiences will become more apparent to them as they take advantage of all that State University has to offer.

There are now two classes of Scholars at State University, and more will be added each year. Hopefully the research presented in this study will contribute useful knowledge about this population of students, not only for State University but for other institutions of higher education. It is with anticipation that I and others in higher education watch this population of students grow at institutions across the country, and have the success that this first cohort of Scholars seems to be having. I look forward to following their educational and life outcomes, for they have a lot to gain from their experiences at State.

At the end of the first round of interviews with the scholars, I asked what they were looking forward to in the future as a State student. Their answers and our conversations ended up being one of my favorite parts of our time together. Here are some of their responses,

*Just being here…there’s a lot of possibilities here and I just love that. Sitting on my porch or riding my bike through campus I just keep thinking there’s so much I have yet to experience in the same place over and over. It excites me, because there’s always new people coming in and out.*

--Thomas
I’m looking forward to getting into my program and actually doing the things I’ll be doing the rest of my life. I’m very glad to be given the chance to go into this program.
--Maggie

Getting involved in the school and different activities around it. I’m just kind of excited about the whole thing. I just want to do what I can in the time I have and do it well.
--Alison
APPENDIX A

U.S. Mail Letter of Invitation to Participate

August 2006

Dear (Potential Student Participant),

I am a doctoral student in the College of Education at The Ohio State University, and am conducting my dissertation research on the college experiences of students in the Scholars program. I am contacting you to ask for your voluntary participation in my dissertation research project.

I am interested in learning more about the experiences of Scholars during the first year of the program, which will be especially beneficial for proceeding scholars. I will be conducting interviews twice during this academic year, and am asking for your voluntary participation—once during a week in Autumn term and again during Winter Term 2007 (timing and location to be determined). The interviews will be held on campus and will last approximately one hour. Our conversation will be taped, but will be kept private and confidential and I will assign you a pseudonym for analysis and write-up purposes.

If you agree to participate in this research, please understand that it is completely voluntary. During your participation in the project, you can refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer as well as refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or repercussion. Your participation in this project does not in any way affect your status Scholars program or as a student at State University.

If you are interested in participating in my research project, please contact me at deafenbaugh.4@osu.edu or (614)638-1767. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or concerns about the research. I appreciate your time and input in this valuable research, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jaime W. Deafenbaugh</td>
<td>Co-Investigator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Ada Demb</td>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

203
APPENDIX B

List of Interview Questions

First Round

1. Tell me about your hometown—how would you describe it (i.e., big, small, rural, urban, suburban)? What size was your high school?

2. Can you share with me some background about your family? Who did you live with before coming SU? Do you have siblings? Has anyone in your family before you attended and/or graduate from college?

3. When did you first start thinking about attending college? Were there people around you who encouraged you to attend college and assist you in the process? If so, how did they help you?

4. Were there people who discouraged you from attending college? If so, how?

5. Were there any obstacles to your attending college? If so, what were they? Were they overcome, and how?

6. How important was the scholarship to your decision to attend State University? Were there other schools you were considering attending? If so, which ones?

7. What are some of the first words that come to mind when you think about your experience in college so far?

8. How do your classes here compare to your high school classes? Have you found yourself changing any of your study habits? Do you think you were well prepared from high school for academics in college?

9. How have your grades been since you’ve been at SU? Are you satisfied with them and/or your GPA?

10. Have you decided what you will major in? What do you anticipate doing when you graduate from college?
11. Do you interact with faculty or staff members on campus? If so, how and how often? Are you comfortable approaching faculty and/or staff members?

12. What helped in your overall transition to State University (i.e., people, strategies, etc.)?

13. Have you worried about your finances while attending SU? What about your family’s finances?

14. Are you employed through the work-study program? Did you feel pressured to obtain employment either last year or this year?

15. How has your relationship with your family and/or friends at home changed, if at all since you’ve been in college? When did you first go home after moving in on campus? How was it the same or different?

16. Did you return home this past summer and/or live with your family? If so, how was the experience, i.e., your relationships with your family and friends?

17. Share with me your experiences with making friends and getting involved on campus. What kinds of activities, organizations, etc. have you gotten involved with on campus?

18. Do you think being in the Scholars program has helped in your transition? If so, how?

19. What challenges have you faced as a student this year and thinking back to last year as a first-year student? What has helped you overcome them?

20. What are you looking forward to as an SU student in the future?

21. If you could share one or more things about your experience or advice with incoming Scholars, what would you do or say?

22. What have been the highlight(s) so far of your experience here?
Second Round

1. Tell me about how the rest of your fall term went (academically, socially, etc.). How did it compare to last year? What challenges and/or successes did you have?

2. What did you do over Winter break (go home, work, etc.)? How was it same or different?

3. What about your GPA? Is it where you want it/at the minimum 3.2 to keep the scholarship?

4. What was the highest level of math you completed in hs? Do you think it prepared you for college math?

5. How are your finances? Any different from the last time we talked? Any worries or concerns? Have there been times that you’ve sent money home to your family? If not, if you could, would you?

6. Are you still working at _______ job(s)? If so, how many hours? Do you feel like you’ve been able to balance work with academics/personal life? If you have more than 1 job and/or work more than 10-15 hrs. per week why do you feel you need to?

7. Have you gotten involved in any more organizations/activities since we last talked?

8. Have there been times since you’ve been here that you’ve felt out of place or didn’t fit in? When and how? Does it happen often?

9. What are the similarities and differences between last year and this year for you? Have you found it easier, harder, the same?

10. Do you feel like people at SU care about your success (faculty members, staff, administrators)? If so, how do they demonstrate it and who are specific examples? If not, how do you feel it’s lacking or could be improved?

11. Do you feel like you’ve engaged in campus life, integrated into SU? If not, why, are there things you could do to accomplish this? Do you care if you’re not?

12. When you received the scholarship offer, did you feel like you deserved it? If not, why?

13. What would you do differently since you’ve been at SU if you could? Any regrets or mistakes you feel you’ve made?
14. Have there been times when you notice your financial background more at State University? Do you find yourself acting or behaving any differently because of this?

15. Do you think the environment or climate here is welcoming to students from your situation? Are there specific examples? Are there things they could do differently?

16. Can you identify one person or people who helped you get to college? What about since you’ve been here? Is there a person or people who have made the difference in your transition experiences?

17. When you’ve had problems academically, where have you gone or what have you done for help? What about socially or personally?

18. What is the highest level of education you see yourself accomplishing at this point?

19. How often do you work with other students outside of class on assignments and projects?

20. Do you work with any faculty members outside of class?

21. How many hours a week would you say you spend studying and/or preparing for class? Socializing/personal time?

22. How would you characterize in general your relationships with other students on campus i.e., are they unfriendly, unsupportive, and you have a sense of alienation, or are they friendly, supportive, and you have a sense of belonging?

23. What about your faculty members—would you consider them unavailable, unhelpful, and unsympathetic, or available, helpful, and sympathetic?

24. What about your relationships with administrative personnel and offices on campus—unhelpful, inconsiderate, rigid, or helpful, considerate, and flexible?

25. Overall, how would you rate:
   - The quality of academic advising you’ve received to this point?
   - Your entire educational experience so far?

26. Is being a Scholar part of your identity here? Why or why not? Do you feel connected to others in the program and the program itself?

27. Do you wish the Scholars met more this year for meetings and events like you did last year? Are there things you could suggest to improve the program?
APPENDIX C

Statement of Informed Consent

Consent for Participation in Research

Title of Study: Low-Income, High Ability Scholars: An in-depth examination of their college transition and persistence experiences

Principal Investigator: Dr. Ada Demb
Co-Investigator: Jaime W. Deafenbaugh

Protocol # 2006E0504

I consent to participating in research entitled: Low-Income, High Ability Scholars: An in-depth examination of their college transition and persistence experiences.

Dr. Ada Demb, Principal Investigator, or her authorized representative, Jaime W. Deafenbaugh, has explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.
Date:  

Signed:  

(Participant)

Signed:  

(Principal Investigator or his/her authorized representative)

Signed:  

(Person authorized to consent for participant, if required)

Witness:
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216


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