A Dissertation

entitled

A Grounded Theory Approach to Understanding the Persistence Issue that Exists for

Lower-Socio Economic Status College Students

by

Christine M. Knaggs

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education Administration

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An Abstract of

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Despite decades of research and program implementation in both the K-12 and

higher educational systems, students of low socio-economic status (SES) still have access

to and persist in higher education at significantly lower numbers than their more affluent

peers (Gollnick & Chinn, 2012; Perna, 2005). This study employed a grounded-theory

approach in order to better understand why this gap between lower- and higher-SES

college students continues to persist, despite such efforts. In addition, this study adds

another dimension to the grounded-theory data analysis process called Theoretical

Matching, as recommended by Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010). Two theoretical lenses

were used to narrow the research focus: Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory (1977) and

Tierney's Model of Cultural Integrity (1999). In addition, Tinto's Model of College

Drop-Out (1975) was also used to inform the emerging theory.

The theory that emerged: Knaggs' Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration Model

of Persistence for Low-SES College Students, describes the process of integration both

within the institution, and in the adult world outside of the university. Recommendations

to institutions based on Knaggs' theory include creating an environment that better

validates the culture of all students, therefore increasing the likelihood that cultural

integrity is possible. In addition, models of college-preparatory programs and full-service

community K-12 schools are used to show higher education institutions how they might

better help students, particularly those of low-SES, to integrate successfully into the

Extra-Institutional Environment as a financially-independent adult.

I dedicate my dissertation to my husband. Without his constant support and encouragement, this process would not have gone as smoothly as it did, and I am so very grateful for this.

Acknowledgements

The constant support that I have received from my family has truly kept me going. Thank you to my husband for making sure that I take time away from this project once in a while, and to my family for being the best cheering squad I could ask for!

Thank you to my friends for supporting me, listening to me, and celebrating with me throughout this process.

I could not have asked for a more helpful dissertation committee, all of whom were genuinely devoted to helping me reach this point. I am so grateful to Dr. Ron Opp, my Chair, as well as Dr. Debra Gentry, Dr. John Fischer, and Dr. Toni Sondergeld. They truly went above and beyond what I had ever expected.

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List of Abbreviations

AVID..........................Advancement via Individual Determination
GEAR UP....................Gaining Early Awareness Regarding Undergraduate Programs
PSO ....Post-Secondary Option
SES............................Socio-Economic Status

Chapter One

Introduction

Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the educational problem that is serving to steer the research of this study, followed by a description of the specific literature gap that this study will attempt to address. Next, the theoretical framework for the study is briefly described, and the research questions are stated. The next section includes an overview of the research methodology used, including a description of the population included, and how the data were collected and analyzed. My assumptions and biases are acknowledged next. Lastly, limitations of the study are outlined, including ways in which I overcame these limitations in the study.

The National Background

Lack of education is a huge detriment in our society, and it has been connected to high rates of teen pregnancy, delinquency, low socio-economic status (SES), and lower educational aspirations (Loza, 2003; Yampolskaya, Massey, & Greenbaum, 2006). Underrepresented groups in higher education include racial minorities, the economically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students (Johnson, 2008). Unfortunately, U.S. primary and secondary educational systems are not adequately preparing these groups for higher education, which leads to lower college entrance rates than for White, more affluent students (Weiher, Hughes, Kaplan, & Howard, 2006). There is a 30% gap in college enrollment between low- and high-income students (Perna, 2005), and a 60% gap exists in college graduation between lower- and higher-income students (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Additionally, high achieving, low-income students are five times less likely to attend college than their higher-income counterparts (Riley, 1998).

Student groups who are underrepresented in higher education are often called "at risk" students because they possess risk factors that are associated with lower educational attainment. Some of these risk factors are low-SES, belonging to a racial minority group, and low parental educational attainment (Baker & Velez, 1996; Carter, 2006; Corrigan, 2003; Johnson, 2008; Fox, 1986). These demographic and other risk factors can create barriers to college access and persistence. The first group of college access barriers that exist can be classified as academic in scope. One of the main reasons why minority and low-income students struggle to graduate from high school, attend college, and persist in college is because they lack access to the academic resources that many other students take for granted, such as technology and print materials (Watt, Huerta, & Lozano, 2007). In addition, disadvantaged students lack access to academic knowledge about college entrance requirements, the application process, financial aid, and institutional programs (Corrigan, 2003; Griffin, Allen, Kimura-Walsh, & Yamamura, 2001; Levin, 2008; Swail, 2000; Watt et al., 2007). Also, students may come from secondary schools that do not have a rigorous college preparatory curriculum in place, so students lack the means to become adequately academically prepared for college (Baker & Velez, 1996; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Kezar, 2001).

There are also a variety of non-academic barriers to college attendance and persistence for underrepresented students. For example, family circumstances, such as financial obligations, having dependents at home, and receiving less parental educational support, can act as barriers to college attendance and persistence (Corrigan, 2003; Swail, 2000). Attending college part-time can also act as a barrier to college completion, as can a demanding work schedule (Corrigan, 2003). Other non-academic barriers include

insufficient or ineligibility for financial aid (Corrigan, 2003; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005), as well as the racist and classist biases that are inherent in our society (Turner & Lehning, 2007). Notice that many of the above barriers come from a deficiency perspective, as if students of low-SES are lacking in specific areas and need to be given information, resources, and the right contacts in order to succeed.

One popular solution to the current higher education gap is the establishment of college preparatory programs, many of which serve to help students graduate from high school and transition into college (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). Many of these programs have certain aspects in common, such as providing academic support, test preparation, a mentor, and counseling, as well as organizing college visits and encouraging parental involvement (Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Loza, 2003; Riley, 1998; Swail, 2000; Watt et al., 2007). These programs serve to level the playing field in a sense, bringing to underprivileged students the resources that they lack, as well as helping to overcome barriers and to have success in high school and beyond (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Loza, 2003; Swail, 2000).

Another school reform method that has gained popularity in K-12 systems is the idea of a full-service community schools. Such schools are created to meet the distinct needs of the community within which they are located, which includes both academic and non-academic needs (Walker, Kronick, & Diambra, 2007). For example, such schools may provide academic support for students, as well as social-skills training, family-health care, mental-health services, child care, parent education, and employment services (Dryfoos, 1994). The basic premise behind providing such comprehensive services is that if students' basic needs are not met outside of the school, students will be less likely to

learn and excel in school; thus if persistence is a priority, then schools, particularly in areas serving students who would be considered "at risk", must take a vested interested in meeting the non-academic needs of its students, or academic efforts alone will not be as successful as they could be (Dryfoos, 1994, 2002). Providing such comprehensive services to a community obviously requires K-12 schools to develop partnerships with community service resources in order to meet the diverse needs of the community, as schools alone cannot provide such comprehensive services (Dryfoos, 2002; Protheroe, 2010). Such partnerships and the programming provided by full-service schools will look different in every community, as each community has a unique set of needs (Walker et al., 2007).

As students transition from fairly homogeneous, usually smaller high schools into the often larger and more diverse institutions of higher education, an inclusive, welcoming, and diverse college climate can greatly impact student persistence (Carter, 2006; Zamani, 2000). Therefore, developing such positive and supportive environments would be necessary to address the college persistence gaps for students of low-SES. Higher education institutions, particularly two-year and open-enrollment colleges, have also developed comprehensive programs to help foster a climate of inclusion and support for such students in college. Myers (2003) conducted a survey of college retention programs, and she found that the programs contained several components, with comprehensive programs containing most or all components: academic support, social development and support, family involvement, and job/career opportunities and support. Academic support includes skills training, developmental education, close academic monitoring, and tutoring. Social support and development is composed of leadership

development, mentoring, counseling, and providing a "home-base" for students. Families are involved in orientation programs with their children. Job opportunities can be career planning, internships, and research opportunities. Another type of common college retention program is a learning community, which involves linking a series of courses together thematically (Tinto, 1998). A cohort of students will complete the courses together, and the curricular program is designed to promote critical thinking and collaborative learning (Myers, 2003). Many institutions also "front-load" programs, as more services are provided to students prior to the start of college and during the freshman year in the form of orientation, summer-bridge programs, and mentoring (Myers, 2003).

Statement of the Specific Problem

Research suggests that that full-service community schools have been effective at increasing high school graduation rates, as well as other indictors of academic achievement (Dryfoos, 2002). In addition, college-preparatory programs and college-retention programs are effective at helping students enter and persist in college (Kezar, 2001; Myers, 2003). Myers (2003) found that comprehensive programs had success increasing GPAs, college persistence from freshman to sophomore year, and graduation rates for participants. However, college attendance and persistence gaps between lower-SES and higher-SES students have not appreciably declined with the advent of these programs. In addition, less is known about what other factors might be influencing college success for students of low-SES. One way to gain such perspective is by capturing the voices of such students, and asking them to reflect on the reasons behind their college persistence and success. A grounded-theory study can provide the context

for why this gap persists, despite many decades of program development at both the K-12 and higher education levels. In addition, a study that explores the perspectives of the students may shed light on potential needs or gaps in services that might be necessary for students of low-SES.

Theoretical Frameworks

In this study, Bourdieu's cultural capital theory was used as a theoretical framework. Bourdieu's theory states that the educational system as a whole is a product of the middle- and upper-classes, and as such has been designed based on the values and culture of these classes. Since the system is a product of the middle- and upper-classes, it serves to preserve the current classes by making it difficult for poorer students to receive the education they need to move up the social hierarchy. Bourdieu (1977) calls this self-perpetuation of the existing classes social reproduction, and the perpetuation of the educational system is called cultural reproduction. Bourdieu (1977) also defines cultural capital as the resources that students need to understand and have success in the current educational system, particularly knowledge about cultural and linguistic expectations. Therefore, the educational system itself creates barriers to educational attainment. This study will examine how and why students have been able to overcome these barriers put in place by our educational system and society.

In addition, Tierney's model of cultural integrity will also guide this study. Tierney defines cultural integrity as the ability to preserve one's existing cultural capital and cultural identity at school, and this can occur if the student's cultural capital is validated by the school environment (Tierney, 1999). Tierney's model was meant to be a direct challenge to Tinto's (1975) assimilationist theory of college student retention, and

it is based on Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. Therefore, Tinto's theory (1975), described in more detail later in this chapter, will also be used in the discussion to help situate and understand the grounded theory that emerges from this study. Research shows that students who are able to maintain cultural integrity persist to greater degrees than those who do not (Deyhle, 1995; O'Connor, 1997; Tierney, 1999). It would seem to be a wise priority of higher education institutions to help students feel as if their cultural capital is validated in order to increase persistence.

The lens used in this study is different from much of the literature described earlier. First, students of lower-SES are arriving at college with a rich array of cultural capital that may be different from the cultural capital expectations of the higher education institution. Thus, from the institution's perspective, the student may be "lacking" what is needed to have success in college, but no validation is given for the capital that the student does possess. The student may be labeled "at risk" due to the identified deficiencies in academic knowledge, basic skills, or available resources, and supplemental services are provided to fill in the "gaps" of what the student is missing. Additionally, the institution often expects that the student will actively embrace this new knowledge, and adapt or assimilate to the college environment, with additional support of course. According to Tierney, it is the responsibility of the institution itself to meet the needs of its students and to validate their cultural identity. It is not the responsibility of the student to "fit in" in order to have success.

Although Bourdieu's theory and Tierney's model help to explain why students of low-SES may struggle more in higher education than students of higher-SES, they fail to address how some low-SES students persist despite these challenges, and what factors

may contribute to the success of some low-SES students. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study is to explore how students of low-SES are handling the challenges that come with pursuing higher education. In addition, special attention will be paid to how assimilation expectations of the institution are impacting students' time at college, whether the students feel as if their cultural capital is being validated by the institution, and whether students have been able to maintain cultural integrity while in college.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are modeled after Mastera (1995) and Valerio (1995), who both posed questions directly related to the grounded-theory methodological approach that is used in this study.

1) What theory explains how students of low-SES are able (or are not able) to persist in higher education?

    a. How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold?

    b. What are the major events or benchmarks in this process?

    c. Who were the important participants in this process, and how were they involved?

    d. What were the obstacles to persistence?

    e. What strategies were used to overcome obstacles?

    f. What were the outcomes to this process?

Data that emerged from this study were examined through the lens of Bourdieu's theory and Tierney's model with this additional question:

2) How does cultural capital and cultural integrity play at role (if any) in the persistence of low-SES students in higher education?

Research question 2 is asked because although grounded theory emerges from the data, and categories are not developed a priori as with other qualitative procedures, it is still of interest to see if existing theory can shed light on the new theory that emerged from data in this study.

These questions are purposefully broad to allow the participant's experiences to emerge, without any leading or direction on the part of the researcher. I examined how students' own culture and the institution's culture emerged in their discussion, without specifically asking leading questions about either phenomenon. Although literature and research would suggest that a student whose cultural capital is being validated by the institution, and those who have been able to maintain cultural integrity persist to a greater degree in higher education, this study attempted to determine if these issues were meaningful from the students' perspectives, and whether these phenomena naturally emerged from open-ended discussions.

In addition, grounded theory allows for the research questions to evolve and change over the course of the study (Creswell, 2007), so starting with broad questions prevented the focus of the study from becoming focused too quickly, rather than letting the data guide the research.

Research Methodology

A grounded theory approach was used in this study due to a desire to determine causal reasons regarding why the SES persistence gap in higher education still exists today, despite decades of research and programs to address the issue. This approach allows for gathering a significant number of student perspectives regarding this particular

phenomenon in order to determine new and potentially enlightening ideas of why the higher education gap persists, despite the many efforts of those in higher education.

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach that uses data to construct a theory that proposes causality of a phenomenon or group of related phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory looks at a specific process, and determines how the complex variables involved in the specific process being studied interact with one another (Merriam, 2009). Grounded theory fit this study well, as there was an attempt to determine reasons why the educational gap exists, and this problem was explored from the perspective of lower-SES students who are currently persisting in higher education. Grounded theory allows for the proposal of causality for a problem that the many efforts of researchers, educators, and administrators have yet to address sufficiently, despite much research and action. Current theories, such as Bourdieu's theory and Tierney's model, can shed light on why persistence for students of lower-SES is such a challenge, but no existing theory has the ability to provide practical information to explain how some low-SES students are able to persist, so that this information can be used to help others persist in order to close the existing educational gap.

Population

The sample included in this study consists of nineteen low-SES college students who are part of the 2007-2010 graduating cohorts from an urban high school district in northwest Ohio. The number of participants was determined during the process of data collection, as collection continued until data saturation was reached (Creswell, 1998). All students participated in a college-preparatory program, GEAR-UP, or a similar program, at their high schools, and all students lived within the district boundaries of high schools

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with large numbers of students with free/reduced lunch status, which has been shown to negatively impact college persistence (Johnson, 2008). In addition, all are attending one of two northwest Ohio public four-year institutions of higher education.

GEAR-UP was established in 1998, and the program provides grants to secondary and middle schools to help them establish collaborative partnerships with local universities, as well as community organizations. The goal of such grants is to induce school-wide reform in schools that are located in low socio-economic neighborhoods, and the grants usually run over a five-year period (Fischer, Hamer, Zimmerman, Sidorkin, Samel, Long, & McArthur, 2004; Ward, 2006; Yampolskaya et al., 2006). Interventions are planned to be holistic and comprehensive; academic, behavioral, and social goals are set for each student (Yampolskaya et al., 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

Student recruitment was initiated by an e-mail sent by the researcher, and students were asked to fill out an Initial Survey if interested in participating in the program. An Informational Letter outlining the research was attached to the e-mail. In order to give consent electronically, students were required to answer a questions that verified they had read the Informational Letter, and were agreeing to participate in this research project. Students who responded to the final question by providing contact information were then invited to participate in an interview, and a $30 Subway gift card for participation was given to participants. Once data had been transcribed, participants then were sent the transcripts in order to participate in member checking.

The constant comparative method was used to compare segments of the transcribed data in order to determine similarities and differences (Creswell, 2007). Data were then manually grouped according to similar themes, and patterns in the data. As relationships are determined between categories, and a core category is defined, the grounded theory can be formed (Merriam, 2009). As a visual learner, I employed color-coding of transcripts in order to simplify this process, as no qualitative software was used.

Research Subjectivity

As the researcher, I must acknowledge my own assumptions and subjectivity regarding the population I have studied. My interest in studying low-SES student populations was fostered by my own educational experiences. I was raised in a solidly middle-class family, and I attended a very diverse high school in California with a significant population of students who would be considered low-SES. The high school I attended was rather large, with between 1,200-1,600 students while I was in attendance. It pulled from two very different areas of a large northern California city, and as a result had an ethnically/racially, socio-economically, and religiously diverse student body. However, when I graduated, only 33% of the students went on to higher education, so overall it was not considered by the local community to be a desirable school to attend. The entire district was struggling with low rates of college attendance similar to my particular high school. Who attended college was very much dependent upon the neighborhood in which you resided, with the vast majority of those attending higher education residing in the more affluent neighborhoods. Thus, the school was dichotomous in many ways, with a small group of college-bound students participating in

a college-preparatory curriculum, and with the majority of the students in non-college preparatory classes.

Seeing such obvious socio-economic connections with college attendance through my own secondary schooling stayed with me into adulthood, and I eventually became a teacher at a private Catholic all-girls college-preparatory high school in Ohio. I had the opportunity at this school to direct a full-tuition scholarship program for students coming from the urban central city. My role as director was to provide the academic and social support that these students needed to have success in high school, graduate from high school, and attend college. This experience really highlighted for me the many challenges that low-SES students face, and I found myself working very closely with family members in order to help the students have success. My experiences with these students led me to look into other college-preparatory programs similar to mine, and eventually to college retention programs for college students. My focus on college persistence rather than attendance is based on the statistics that show persistence is such a major issue for all but the most affluent college students (Gollnick & Chinn, 2012). College preparatory programs are opening doors for lower-SES students to get into college, but the real worth of a college education comes from actually obtaining a degree, which has been shown to be more important than GPA or other measures of academic performance (Prediger, 1965), so colleges must continue to support students toward this ultimate goal. My research subjectivity is a potential limitation that is addressed later in this chapter. In addition, I accounted for my subjectivity through member reflections and memoing, and triangulation of data sources to draw inferences. All of this is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Research Assumptions

This study relied solely on the survey and interview data from a small number of low-SES students pursuing a college degree. First, due to my research and my experiences working with low-SES high school students, I assumed that persistence is an issue for this particular group of students due to low-SES, but it might be found that these students have had success because they were able to avoid or were shielded from many of the typical barriers to college persistence that are identified by the literature. There was also an assumption that the participants were capable and willing to exercise transparency of experience and honestly reflect on their educational and personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings regarding their college persistence. In order for this to happen, I also assumed that students would be willing to open up to me, an individual that they do not know well. An effort was made to put students at ease so that they were willing to share personal experiences. It is interesting to note that in qualitative studies, student voices often elicit the most complex results, as students face their own unique circumstances, and deal with challenges in different ways (Anderson & Larson, 2009; Grimard & Maddaus, 2004; Lozano, Watt, & Huerta, 2009; Marks, 1967; Watt, Johnston, Huerta, Mendiola, & Alkan, 2008). Therefore, although assumptions are inherent in this type of data collection, the analysis may potentially reveal rich and complex results.

Limitations

As is the case with any qualitative research, validity of data is a concern, as well as the ability to generalize findings. In order to minimize the inherent limitations of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for quality qualitative research were used to guide this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability. More details regarding how these limitations were overcome in this study are described in Chapter 3.

I intentionally bounded this study to only include students who attended a specific high school district in Northwest Ohio, in order to create a homogeneous sample, but this limited the generalizability of its findings. It is possible that the geographic region, the school culture, or the participants' backgrounds resulted in a theory that may be atypical, or dissimilar to other students of low-SES. The method of recruitment may have also led to an atypical sample, for those who chose to fill out the Survey and met with me may not have been representative of their peers.

In addition, although I made every effort to acknowledge my subjectivity and assumptions throughout the study, they still influenced my data analysis, and potentially prevented me from seeing certain patterns or themes. This limitation is inherent in all qualitative research. In addition, interviews themselves can be problematic, as this type of social interaction can lead to potential omissions, exaggerations, or even deceptions to occur. To minimize these potential interview limitations, I attempted to build rapport and trust with each participant throughout the interview process. The strategies I used to build rapport and trust are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Significance for Theory

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tierney's model of cultural integrity provided the lens through which I could potentially form a new theory, grounded in the experiences of low-SES students currently in college. Tinto's (1975) Model of College Dropout was also used for discussion purposes as well. These three theories were used to

situate the new theory that emerged from this study within existing theory, thus moving toward a model recommended by Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010) called multi-grounded theory. A new theory, grounded in both the data and existing theory, would potentially provide us with a new way to attempt to serve this group of college-going students, and address the SES persistence gap that still exists, despite years of programs and services, financial aid, and affirmative action policies (Tierney, 1999). Recent movement away from financial aid and affirmative action policies that favor college access for minority and low-SES groups may also be a reflection of changing policies, and an inherent desire by the dominant culture in our society to preserve the social classes by preserving their access to higher education, even at the expense of underrepresented groups (St. John, 2006; St. John et al., 2005).

Significance for Practice

The results of this study are beneficial for a variety of readers. First, college program and student service coordinators can use the data to improve services by modeling them based on the theory formed by this study, or supplementing services as necessary. Second, college administrators can use student voices and perspectives as a guide to learn how to improve institutional climate and functioning in order to help low-SES students achieve and persist in the higher education system. Additionally, support staff and faculty can learn how to better meet the needs of their students of low-SES both in and outside of the classroom. K-12 administrators, teachers, and college-preparatory program directors may also be to use these findings to provide a stronger foundation for low-SES college-bound students. Lastly, financial aid policy-makers and advisors may learn how to improve the process of receiving and managing financial aid in ways that

would benefit lower-SES students and promote their persistence to a greater degree (St. John, 2006; St. John et al., 2005). As our populations in higher education continue to grow and become more diverse, the potential benefits of such a study are great, and the need for such research is growing as well.

Definitions

A summary of the key concepts and terms that are used throughout this study is provided below.

Socio-Economic Status: As defined by Gollnick and Chinn (2009), socio-economic status is a "composite of the economic status of families or persons on the basis of occupation, educational attainment, income, and wealth", thus SES is multi-faceted, and includes not only how much an individual makes and how much savings an individual has, but also what occupation (or lack of occupation) one possesses.

Persistence. A broad definition of persistence is used in this study to include students who have been continuously enrolled in higher education, but also students who have stopped out, have returned to higher education, and are currently enrolled (Williams, 1966).

College-Preparatory Programs: College-preparatory programs serve to help at-risk or underrepresented students graduate from high school and transition into college (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). These programs serve to level the playing field, bringing to underprivileged students the resources that they lack, as well as meeting the additional needs that they may require in order to have success in high school and beyond (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Loza, 2003).

College Retention Programs: College retention programs include a variety of programs and services aimed at increasing the college persistence and graduation rates of college students. Many focus on certain at-risk or underrepresented groups, such as students of low-SES and minority students (Myers, 2003).

Full-Service Community Schools: K-12 schools that develop partnerships with community organizations in order to provide a holistic set of programs designed to meet the varied academic and non-academic needs of the students that attend the school, as well as their families (Walker et al., 2007).

Cultural Capital: Bourdieu (1977) defines cultural capital as the resources that students need to understand and have success in the current educational system, particularly knowledge about cultural and linguistic expectations. However, this paper defines cultural capital more broadly to include the cultural capital of all students, not just that of the dominant society. Lareau and Weininger (2003) advocate for a broader definition of cultural capital, as by definition every person possesses it, not just those of the dominant society.

Cultural Integrity: Tierney (1999) defines cultural integrity as the ability to preserve one's existing cultural capital and cultural identity at school, and this is the definition used in this study.

Grounded Theory: Grounded theory is defined as a qualitative approach that uses data to construct a theory that proposes causality of a phenomenon or group of related phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory looks at a specific process, and

determines how the complex variables involved in the specific process being studied interact with one another (Merriam, 2009).

Constant Comparative Method: A process where data collection and analysis occur simultaneously in order to determine when data saturation has been reached (Merriam, 2009).

Member Reflections: A process by which participants review the data collected not only for accuracy, but are also provided the opportunity to add to data in order to make it more rich and complete (Tracy, 2010).

Multi-Grounded Theory: Grounded theory is not only situated within the data collected, but it is also grounded by existing theory, thus it is an extension of the traditional grounded theory approach (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010).

Summary

The college completion gap should be of national concern. As our country and the world become increasingly interconnected and reliant upon technology, the need for a skilled and educated workforce will continue to grow (Ward, 2006). In addition, our national minority populations are growing, thus these populations will become a much larger and more significant portion of our workforce in the future. If we ignore or dismiss the educational inequities in this country, our entire nation will feel the negative effects in the future.

Chapter 2 explores more deeply the context of why the SES college persistence and completion gap exists in this country, as well as the current policies, services, and

actions taken to close this gap in higher education. The theoretical frameworks serve as a lens through which we can better understand why the current actions may have not been significantly more effective at eliminating this gap, considering the rich context surrounding poverty and SES in this country.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter provides a contextual overview of the literature relating to the socio-economic educational gap in this country. An analytical review of the literature not only provides contextual, but also theoretical support for the reasons why such a gap is so pervasive in the U.S., and what solutions hold the most promise for diminishing this educational gap between students of lower- and higher-socioeconomic status. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tierney's model of cultural integrity are used as the theoretical framework in order to explain both why such a gap exists, and how this gap might be reduced in the future.

Part one of Chapter 2 consists of an overview of the theoretical framework and a related model that is used to guide this study: Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tierney's model of cultural integrity. Included in this section is the literature that has supported both Bourdieu's theory and Tierney's model in education. Part two looks at poverty from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint in order to better understand the impact of low-SES on college students. Part three summarizes the history of how higher education retention has been studied through the literature, including Tinto's theory and how it shaped the research. Part four overviews examples of the various college-preparatory and college retention programs that have been developed over the past few decades for "at risk" students, who are predominantly students of low-SES, and how these programs have impacted their target populations. Part five highlights the fact that although the college access gap has shrunk, the college persistence gap has not, and is still quite significant today, despite many years and many efforts to close the gap.

This study attempts to shed light on why this gap still persists, and how institutions of higher education can better meet the needs of students of low-SES, from the perspective of currently persisting low-SES college students.

Cultural Capital Theory

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tierney's model of cultural integrity are used as the frameworks for this research. Bourdieu's theory is rooted in traditional critical theory (Horkheimer, 1937), which strives to transform society and challenge authority. In particular, Bourdieu's cultural capital theory is postmodern critical theory, which situates social issues within historical and cultural contexts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The context provides a rich environment in which to study an issue such as this country's educational gap that obviously has deep social, historical, and cultural roots.

Bourdieu states that the educational system as a whole is a product of the middle- and upper-classes, and as such has been designed based on the values and culture of these classes. Students from middle- and upper-class households learn the values, behavior, and language that belong to the educational culture from their family experiences. As a result, they learn how to succeed within the educational system, because their background has prepared them to navigate and understand the system. However, lower SES students never receive such cultural instruction or immersion from their families, because their families are not a part of this culture. Therefore, they enter a school system produced by an unfamiliar culture, and they are expected to understand this culture, as their wealthier peers do. Therefore, our educational system, which strives to educate all students, is actually doing poor students a disservice by not helping them to become familiar with the

educational culture, so that they can navigate the system and have success. Also, since the system is a product of the middle and upper classes, it serves to preserve the current classes by making it difficult for poorer students to receive the education they need to move up the social hierarchy. Bourdieu (1977) calls this self-perpetuation of the existing classes social reproduction, and the perpetuation of the educational system is called cultural reproduction. Bourdieu (1977) also defines the dominant cultural capital as the resources that students need to understand and have success in the current educational system, particularly knowledge about cultural and linguistic expectations.

This study employs a broad definition of cultural capital, as described by Lareau and Weininger (2003). These authors argue that much of the research gathering empirical evidence of cultural capital theory has employed a very narrow view of what cultural capital is. It has been defined as "highbrow" culture, which includes the participation in "beaux-arts", or formal cultural activities such as visiting galleries, theatre productions, and concerts (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Sullivan, 2001). In addition, cultural capital has been defined to exclude "technical skills", including "ability" and "achievement". Lareau and Weininger (2003) argue that both formal and informal experiences can influence cultural capital, and there are certain standards defined by dominant institutions, such as schools through which people are evaluated, and some individuals are better able to comply with these standards than others. Characteristics such as "ability", "technical skills", and "achievement" are hence the products of cultural capital, for they are the means by which individuals are evaluated.

Cultural capital can come in several different forms, but it is usually studied from the perspective of what is valued by the dominant society. Roscigno and Ainsworth-

Darnell (1999) define two types of cultural capital: objectified and embodied. Objectified cultural capital includes the objects such as books, computers, and other resources that people possess or can access when necessary. Embodied cultural capital includes the characteristics, such as a more sophisticated vocabulary or the ability to negotiate successfully with teachers when it comes to academic questions or concerns that come from using the objects mentioned earlier. Tierney describes a third type of capital, institutional capital, which is the symbolic object given to those who have met certain goals or objectives, such as a college degree (Tierney, 1999).

Cultural capital has been measured in a variety of ways in the literature. Using a literature review conducted by Lareau and Weininger (2003), cultural capital in both students and parents has been measured by evaluating frequency of reading (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, & Robert, 1990; Sullivan, 2001) and sophistication of vocabulary (Blackledge, 2001; Carter, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Non-academic measures such as classroom behaviors have been used as a measure of cultural capital (Carter, 2003; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shaun, 1990), as well as number of days absent (Farkas et al., 1990). Parents' ability to help with homework (Smrekar, 1996), which could also serve as a way to measure the level of parental involvement in a child's education, has also been used to evaluate cultural capital. Further, the ability of both parents and students to understand and use educational resources such as counselors, and the ability to navigate through educational processes such as college admittance (McDonough, 1997; Reay, 1998), have also been used to measure cultural capital. The literature described above all measures whether students possess the cultural capital that is rewarded by the traditional educational system. Few studies look closely at the cultural capital that students may

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already possess when they enter school, unless it aligns with the cultural capital of the dominant society (see Tierney, 1999; Guiffrida, 2005 for exceptions).

Bourdieu's theory sheds light on the inherent expectation of educational institutions at all levels that students will need to assimilate and learn the cultural capital that is rewarded in our educational system. However, much research has shown that students who possess cultural capital that is different than what the institution expects struggle with this assimilation expectation (Deyhle, 1995; O'Connor, 1997; Tierney, 1999). In fact, it has been shown that students coming from cultural backgrounds different than the dominant middle- and upper-classes persist better in college if they are allowed by the institution to retain their cultural identification, a process Tierney calls cultural integrity (Tierney, 1999). Tierney developed a model based on cultural integrity and Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory. He argues that social assimilation is not necessary, and actually can be detrimental to the student. According to Tierney, it is best for all students if different cultural backgrounds are welcomed and embraced within the educational system, a concept he calls cultural validation (Tierney, 1999).

Several studies have connected a lack of cultural validation for students of low-SES in high schools to drop-out (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Levinson, 2007; Okey & Cusick, 1995). Diamond looked specifically at low-SES white students, Okey and Cusick studied low-SES black students, and Levinson looked at Gypsy students. The common element among all three studies was that all student populations were of low-SES, though they were different culturally and racially.

While some students not from the dominant culture find it difficult to assimilate, Davidson (1996) found that some students are able to successfully change their cultural identity as they move from one context to another. Those who do this in educational or other contexts are often referred to in the literature as "border crossers" (Magolda, 2001; Tatum, 2000). Other students are able to successfully maintain their cultural identity, yet also fit into a new environment (Khalifa, 2010). However, this does not occur often in traditional educational environments, as they rarely validate non-traditional cultural identities. Often, any non-traditional cultural capital that the student possesses is looked at as a liability to be shed in order to persist in education. For example, in a study conducted at an alternative high school, many behaviors were allowed that would not have been in a traditional school. Students were allowed more freedom to dress as they liked, speak using non-standard English, and exhibit behaviors that would not be tolerated in most traditional school environments. As a result, the students tended to persist and graduate in much larger numbers than similar low-SES African American populations. Parents were also much more involved in the school environment (Khalifa, 2010). Validating the cultural capital of the student can help them to persist by encouraging family involvement in the student's education as well.

Research shows that students who are able to maintain cultural integrity persist to college degrees more often than those who do not (Deyhle, 1995; O'Connor, 1997; Tierney, 1992; Tierney & Jun, 1999). What this study does that differs from most other studies that use Bourdieu as a theoretical lens is that it considers SES as it relates to cultural capital and cultural integration, which literature states is a gap that deserves closer attention (St. John, 2006). However, in order to understand how to maintain

cultural integrity of low-SES students, we must first understand poverty and how it impacts our students.

Understanding Poverty

There are many well-documented social and demographic factors that put students at risk of dropping out of high school and higher education. These factors include low-socioeconomic status (Baker & Velez, 1996; Ikenberry, 1961; Johnson, 2008; Peng & Fetters, 1978), low academic achievement, minority status, and academic ability (Corrigan, 2003). Males have also been shown to be more at risk for leaving school than females (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Other risk factors include family characteristics such as low educational and occupational attainment of parents (Johnson, 2008; Ou & Reynolds, 2008), large family size, and belonging to a single-parent or step-parent household (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). School-related factors include large school size, behavioral problems, school performance, high student/teacher ratios, and less involvement in extracurricular and school activities (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Many of the factors listed above are correlated with one another; therefore it is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine a causal relationship between any one characteristic and dropping out (Jimerson et al., 2001), since multiple risk factors are often present or intertwined for many students.

This study focuses on socioeconomic status and all the factors that tend to go along with this characteristic, as it exists across ethnic and racial lines. However, we must first understand poverty and the barriers that exist in the U.S. that make it challenging to escape poverty. The persistence of a socio-economic gap in our country despite numerous

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social and individual efforts to close it highlights the complexities that underlie the issue (Barton, 2004). A growing gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" only breeds social instability in an increasingly complex world, and closing this gap is of growing concern if our country is to be able to compete in a global society (Ward, 2006).

Sociological Theories of Poverty

Poverty has been on the rise since 1970, and understanding this growing population of people in poverty involves looking at both the behavior of the poor, as well as the social structures that affect them (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010; Turner & Lehning, 2007; Wolf, 2007). Within sociology, poverty theories can be organized around four major themes: 1) social stratification, segregation, and racism; 2) social capital; 3) culture and values; and 4) social policies. The first group of theories: social stratification, segregation, and racism, ascribe barriers to social mobility, including access to education, to society, and racism. These barriers are for the most part external, such as lack of public transportation, racial biases, and a lack of job opportunities, but internal barriers such as a lack of aspirations or hope are also acknowledged. The second group, social capital theories, looks at even larger external society barriers to education, such as the welfare system, or a lack of social networks and ties. Culture and value theories, the third group, narrow the lens quite a bit in order to study the behavior and values of the poor and how this behavior can create barriers to social mobility. Although previous groups have included the idea that a culture of poverty exists, this group is where such a theory originated. Lastly, social policies look closely at programs such as welfare, and how these programs have not only preserved poverty, but have also contributed to negative stereotyping of the poor, thus perpetuating racism or classism as well (Wolf, 2007).

From this theoretical overview, Wolf created a conceptual framework that includes aspects of all four groups of poverty theories into one web. This web highlights the complexity of poverty, and the multiple factors that serve to perpetuate and create barriers for those who live in poverty (see Figure 1). Each letter represents an intervention point where the relationship between factors can be changed to reduce the effects of poverty. Many of the education-related programs intervene at H, the last possible intervention point within the framework, after many other factors have already played out within the life of the individual. Wolf also distinguishes between root cause interventions, those that attempt to change the external factors of poverty, and individual interventions, those that attempt to change the internal factors of poverty (Wolf, 2007). Many educational programs also belong to the latter group, as they work with individual students as opposed to working toward systemic change in education.
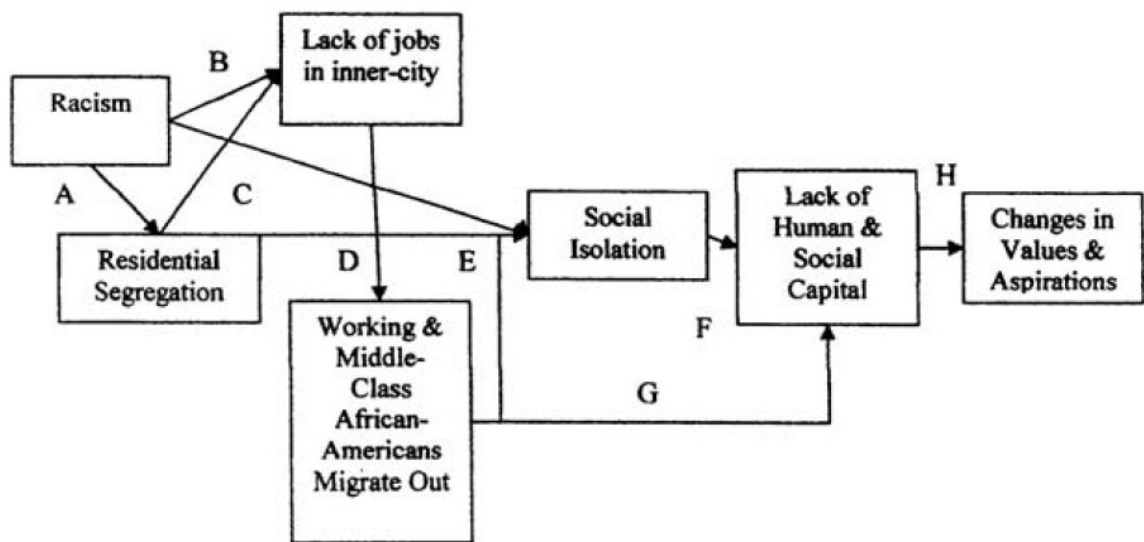
Figure 1. "Conceptual Framework of Understanding Sociological Concepts   Urban Poverty" (Wolf, 2007, p. 53).

Psychological Theories of Poverty

Older psychological theories of poverty attributed personal, cognitive, biological, and moral deficiencies to poverty, but these theories fell out of favor in the 1980s. Turner and Lehning (2007) see parallels between these theories and the theories that support a culture of poverty. These theories serve to both perpetuate negative stereotypes about, as well as to blame the poor for their position in society. Also, they for the most part focus on the individual and do not take into consideration larger societal structures' involvement in perpetuating poverty (Turner & Lehning, 2007).

In the 1980s, the culture of poverty theory reemerged, but this time it took into consideration the societal forces of wealth that keep the poor from overcoming barriers. Capitalism, consumerism, and classism were all to blame for the existence of poverty. In addition, the definition of poverty widened to include three pillars: a lack of security, a lack of empowerment, and a lack of opportunity (Turner & Lehning, 2007). Therefore, if one pillar is strengthened (such as the receipt of a scholarship for college to establish security), it does not eliminate poverty, if it is not accompanied by services to strengthen the other two pillars as well. This definition illustrates well the complex nature involved in preparing poor students for higher education, as all three pillars must be addressed before poverty is eliminated.

More recent psychological theories have addressed how interacting systems affect poverty (including the educational system), how discrimination (called distancing) affects poverty by creating stereotypes (cognitive distancing), erecting barriers to participation (institutional distancing), and encouraging negative behavior toward the poor

(interpersonal distancing) (Lott, 2002). Some theories go so far as to state that the dominant, wealthy, consumerist culture is sick and to blame for poverty (Turner & Lehning, 2007). One of the most promising theories is the theory of resilience, which looks at how some individuals are able to overcome the many barriers of poverty to find success. In education, it would seem that this theory might be very beneficial to the shaping of programs that are designed to help students to be more resilient. Those who are resilient are able to achieve success, despite risk factors, cope with extreme stress, and recover from trauma effectively (Fraser, 1997). Positive forces can help individuals become resilient, and they include a positive outlook, family support, and extended support outside of the family (Fraser, 1997).

A Culture of Poverty?

Much of the debate surrounding poverty right now in educational literature revolves around whether a "culture of poverty" exists. Those that ascribe to such a culture attribute certain characteristics to people of lower-socioeconomic status, and suggest that educational programs that focus on closing the gap should work on changing these characteristics. Proponents see culture theories as an effective way to design ways to remove barriers to social mobility and educational attainment (Cuthrell et al., 2010; Davenport, Tolbert, Myers-Oliver, Brissett, & Roland, 2007; Payne, 2009). However, researchers that deny such a culture exists paint a more complex picture of poverty, as they state that people of low-socioeconomic status are as diverse as any other socioeconomic group, so focusing on certain identifiable characteristics is not only narrow-minded and misleading, but classist and part of the reason why a gap still exists. Opponents to culture of poverty theories believe they only serve to perpetuate the ideas

that poor people are to blame for their position in society, and educational programs can fix them so that they can move upward. Additionally, opponents believe that culture theories do not address the problem of the larger societal structures that keep the poor from being able to overcome poverty, and they fail to see that a "culture of classism" is to blame, not poverty (Gorski, 2007; Gorski, 2008; Noguera & Akom, 2000).

Poverty as a Barrier to Education

Despite the differing perspectives regarding poverty in the literature, most literature has recognized similar risks and barriers to education for the poor. Early health and family risks include the following: low birthrate, lead poisoning, hunger and poor nutrition, lack of reading to children, watching television, lack of parent availability, and student mobility (Barton, 2004; Cuthrell et al., 2010). The following can also act as barriers to educational attainment: lack of parent participation (Cuthrell et al., 2010), low rigor of curriculum (Baker & Velez, 1996; Davenport et al., 2007; Noguera & Akom, 2000), lack of teacher experience with poverty (Cuthrell et al., 2010; Gorski, 2007), poor teacher preparation (Cuthrell et al., 2010; Davenport et al., 2007; Noguera & Akom, 2000), large class size (Cuthrell et al., 2010), lack of technology in the classroom (Barton, 2004), an unsafe school environment (Barton, 2004), and having a large population of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch (Johnson, 2008).

Corrigan (2003) created the following five broad categories of barriers that low-income students face regarding college persistence: academic background, family circumstances, institutional choice, attendance patterns, and work. The first group of barriers that exist can be classified as academic in scope. One of the main reasons why

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low-income students struggle to graduate from high school and to attend college is because they often lack access to the academic resources that many other students take for granted, such as technology and print materials (Corrigan, 2003). In addition, disadvantaged students lack access to academic knowledge about college entrance requirements, the application process, and financial aid (Corrigan, 2003; Griffin et al., 2001; St. John et al., 2005; Swail, 2000; Watt et al., 2007). Also, students may come from secondary schools that do not have a rigorous college preparatory curriculum in place, so they lack means of becoming adequately academically prepared for college (Baker & Velez, 1996; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Kezar, 2001).

There are a variety of non-academic barriers present to college attendance, persistence, and completion for low-income students as well. For example, family circumstances have been shown to act as barriers to college attendance and persistence, such as financial obligations to family, having dependents at home, and receiving less educational support from parents (Corrigan, 2003; Swail, 2000). An interesting finding related to socio-economic status by Johnson (2008) found students coming from high schools with large numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch were less likely to persist in college as well. Attending college part-time can also act as a barrier to college completion, as can work schedules, such as working full-time (Corrigan, 2003), and lacking clear and motivating career goals (St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004). The risk factors and needs of underrepresented students must be addressed early on in their educational careers, in order to give students the best chance of successfully completing a college education (Swail, 2000).

History of Higher Education Persistence Research

Persistence has been defined in the literature in several different ways. One way of defining persisters, or those who persist, is any student who attends an institution of higher education, regardless of whether that time in school has been continuous or intermittent (Williams, 1966). Other authors take a narrower view of the term, and define persisters as students who are consistently enrolled, while "stop-outs" are those who start, stop, and then return (Pascarella, Duby, Miller, & Rasher, 1981). This study defines persistence using the broader category, and includes students who may leave and then return as persisters, as long as they are currently enrolled in an institution of higher education.

Early Persistence Literature

Early literature studying persistence in higher education attempted to find characteristics that distinguished those who persisted from those who dropped out, or non-persisters, as they were sometimes called (Johnson, 1970). Many of the characteristics that received attention were cognitive in nature, such a academic or scholastic ability (Lins & Pitt, 1953; Yoshino, 1958) and academic records (Munger, 1956; Slocum, 1956). The need to study non-cognitive factors, such as class, social pressures, sex (Ikenberry, 1961), biographical data such as parent marital status and education, health, (Prediger, 1965), high school coursework background (Peng & Fetters, 1978; Prediger, 1965), race, receipt of financial aid (Peng & Fetters, 1978), parental expectations, career goal formation (Marks, 1967), family dynamics, and personality characteristics (Johnson, 1970), soon emerged as well. However, early research was

almost solely focused on the characteristics of the individual student, with much less focus on larger societal or institutional factors that might impact persistence. Other limitations existed in this early research due to the fact that it was purely quantitative in nature, as it continues to be to a large degree, it took place almost solely at four-year residential campuses, it studied college student groups without focus on non-traditional or underprivileged groups, and it was atheoretical in nature.

Tinto's Model of College Withdrawal

The emergence of Tinto's (1975) model of college withdrawal and persistence added much needed structure to persistence literature, and large numbers of quantitative studies testing the accuracy of his model resulted. Tinto's model posited that both academic and social integration into the college environment had the most significant impact on student persistence, and the ease of integration for a particular student was impacted by their background, high school program, and individual characteristics prior to entering higher education. Once the student enters college, integration is then impacted by level of commitment to future goals related to higher education, as well as students' commitment to their particular institution. Academic integration is demonstrated through student learning and academic performance. Social integration is demonstrated through interactions with peers and faculty within the institution (Tinto, 1975). See Figure 2 for a diagrammatic picture of Tinto's model, as adapted from his research by Pascarella and Chapman (1983a).
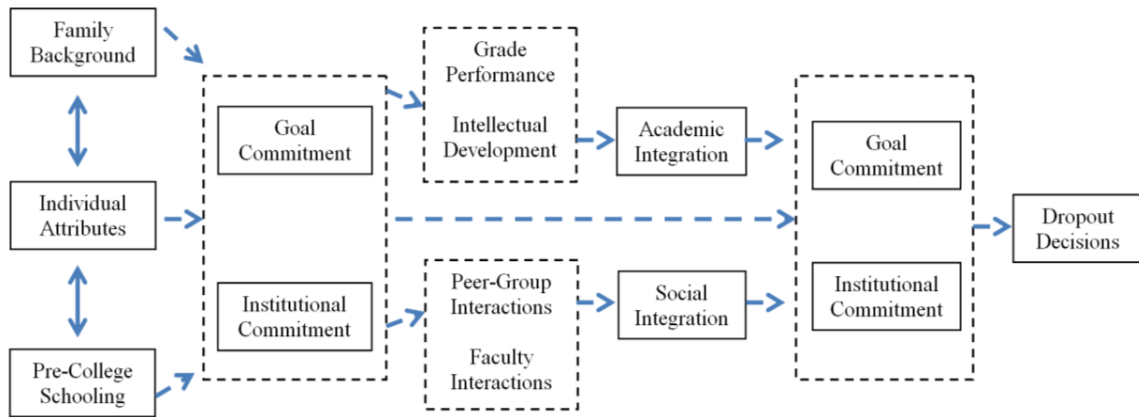
Figure 2. Tinto's (1975) Model of Dropout for College Students.

Much research that followed used Tinto's model as a framework for better understanding and predicting college persistence and withdrawal in different higher education students, and at different types of institutions. For example, in two studies by Terenzini, Lorang, and Pascarella (1981), the researchers looked at persistence at a large independent university and a large public university, and they found at both that the Institutional and Goal commitment component of Tinto's model to be the most significant contributor to persistence. Another early study looked at differences in characteristics among different types of students at a particular institution using Tinto's model (Pascarella et al., 1981). This study compared "stop-out" students from persisters and students who withdraw, as well as commuters versus residential students, and found that aptitude has a much less significant impact on persistence than other research had found. In addition, the study supported other research that had found withdrawal to be impacted more by college experiences rather than background characteristics (Pascarella et al., 1981). Pascarella and Chapman (1983b) also supported earlier findings, including

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the importance of a "career identity", which had been introduced by Chickering (1969). Similarly, a later study also found outcome expectations, such as future and career goals, to be a significant predictor of persistence (Kahn & Nauta, 2001).

Beyond simply testing the accuracy of Tinto's model, researchers also began to look closely at how the model's components interact and influence one another for a college student. Pascarella and Terenzini (1979, 1983) identified both accentuating influences of components and compensatory influences. Accentuating influences mean that when one component, such as academic integration into the institution, is met at a certain level, it increases the likelihood that another component, such as social integration into the institution, will be influenced positively as well. Compensatory influences are when one component that is being met at a certain level makes up for another component that may be lacking. Institutional/goal commitment was found to be compensatory with peer relations, as was academic integration and social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983b).

Through the varied research using Tinto's model, several weaknesses in the model emerged. First, it was only able to predict persistence and withdrawal 70-75% of the time (Krotseng, 1992; Munro, 1981; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a), so clearly either determinants for persistence and withdrawal are missing from the model, or are incorrectly defined by the model (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a). External circumstances for students outside of the institution, for example, were not included in the model, and they could dramatically impact persistence, particularly in certain student populations. There may also be personal characteristics not captured in the model impacting

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persistence, so more research was needed to explore these issues with Tinto's model (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a).

Recent Persistence Literature

The next wave of persistence literature began exploring different populations of college students in isolation or when compared with traditional or historically typical college students, such as disadvantaged students (Fox, 1986), two-year college students (Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986), and non-traditionally aged students (Grosset, 1991). Regarding disadvantaged college students, Fox (1986) found academic integration to have the most salient influence on college persistence, with social integration having much more limited influence. Fox (1986) suggests that Tinto's model may omit important dimensions of social integration for this particular group of college students, which might make this component more significant. Again, we see a possible weakness of Tinto's model, particularly when it is applied to an atypical college student group.

Tierney's Model of Cultural Integrity (1999), which emerged from the rise of persistence literature aimed at disadvantaged groups and was inspired by Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory (1977), was a strong counter-argument against Tinto's theory. Tierney, as well as other researchers who have critiqued Tinto's theory, see it as assimilationist. Tinto's theory does assume that the student must commit to the institution; thus the student must learn and meet both the academic and social expectations of the college environment. To not assimilate shows a lack of Institutional Commitment, as well as Goal Commitment, which can eventually lead to drop-out. As described earlier, Tierney's model ascribes to the idea that students should be allowed to

keep their cultural capital intact during the transition to college, and in addition the cultural capital of underrepresented students should be embraced and valued by the institution (Tierney, 1999). Therefore, when a student chooses to voluntarily drop-out of an institution, the institution must take responsibility for not providing an environment that allowed the student to integrate without compromising the integrity of their cultural capital. In response to such criticisms, Tinto acknowledged the need for institutions to take responsibility for the integration of students. Tinto (1998) encouraged the development of "learning communities" within the institution, which will be described in more detail later in the chapter.

One way to discern how Tinto's model might better apply to specific atypical college populations, or whether his model is applicable at all to these particular populations, would be to use qualitative research to ask students about their college experiences, and which has influenced their decision to persist or withdraw from college. However, quantitative research has dominated, and continues to dominate, the persistence research literature. A few early qualitative studies (Boyer, 1987; Farrish, 1991) served as an example of what could be for researchers that followed, and helped to illustrate the complex nature of social integration for students into the college environment, as well as the idealized view of college life that some students held prior to the start of their freshman year. More recent qualitative studies, such as Jackson, Smith, and Hill's (2003) study regarding persistence in Native American college student populations, have followed, but are still vastly outnumbered by their quantitative counterparts.

Although Tinto (1987) did urge institutions to carefully discern how their academic and social programs were impacting student departure, much of the research

described earlier was focused on student behaviors and attributes, as well as institutional attributes, rather than institutional actions. Both K-12 and higher education institutional actions that were based on high school completion, college access, and persistence literature follow in the next section.

Potential Solutions

College-Preparatory Programs

Unfortunately, many high schools' strategies for dealing with underprivileged students, such as tracking, remedial programs, or removal programs, have worked to widen the gap in educational quality (Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Griffin et al., 2002; Loza, 2003). In cultural capital literature, tracking and other forms of alternative education are called relegation, or placing those with less valued cultural resources in less desirable positions (Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999).

One popular way to address the barriers of poverty is the establishment of college- preparatory programs, many of which serve to help underrepresented students graduate from high school and transition into college (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). College-preparatory programs do not lower the educational expectations for underprivileged students; instead they encourage students to challenge themselves with a college-preparatory curriculum, while providing the support that they may need to succeed in these classes (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Pritzker, 2005). A rigorous high school curriculum has long been associated with college persistence (Baker & Velez, 1996; Marks, 1967; Peng & Fetters, 1978). Some examples of well-known programs today are the University of California Early Academic Outreach Program, AVID, Upward Bound,

GEAR UP, SCORE, and Project GRAD. Most of these programs have certain aspects in common, such as providing academic support in the form of tutoring and advising, mentoring programs, college and personal counseling, college visits, test preparation, and encouraging parental involvement (Fashola & Slavin, 1998; Loza, 2003; Riley, 1998; Watt et al., 2007). Some programs, such as Project GRAD, also provide scholarships and internship opportunities to students who participate (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). These programs serve to level the playing field, bringing to underprivileged students the resources they lack, as well as meeting the additional needs they may require in order to have success in high school and beyond (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Loza, 2003). Several college-preparatory programs that have been studied in the literature are discussed here: Upward Bound, GEAR-UP, and AVID, including studies that have measured their effectiveness at promoting high school persistence and college access. However, I spend some time discussing one particular college-preparatory program, GEAR-UP, in more detail, as the students who were included in this study had the opportunity to participate in this particular program (or one very similar to it) at their high school.

Upward Bound. Established in 1965 by the Economic Opportunity Act, Upward Bound recruits first-generation college students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Educational disadvantage is defined by one or more of the following: low socio-economic status, minority status, and low academic success (McElroy & Armesto, 1998; McLure & Child, 1998). However, Upward Bound accepts only students who are deemed capable to pursue higher education, which is defined during the application and interview process for each individual program (Zulli, Frierson, & Clayton, 1998). The

Upward Bound programs are located on college campuses, and students must travel to campus for the available services. Upward Bound provides supplemental instruction in the form of classes for students, emotional and academic counseling, and mentoring (Loza, 2003; McElroy & Armesto, 1998; McLure & Child, 1998; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000; Zulli et al., 1998). In addition, programs also provide test preparatory services as well as scholarship and financial aid awareness meetings for students and parents (Loza, 2003).

Studies have shown that Upward Bound is effective at improving student attitude and motivation (Egeland & Hunt, 1970), GPA (McLure & Child, 1998), ACT scores (McLure & Child, 1998), promoting a positive parent perception of student development (Zulli et al., 1998), and college access (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

AVID. AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) was established in 1980 by a single teacher in an English classroom. It began as an academic and social support elective class (Loza, 2003; Watt et al., 2008). The students who participated in the program are defined broadly as belonging to a group that is underrepresented in college, and part of the "academic middle", thus low- and high-achieving students would not be a good fit for this program. In addition, this program gives precedence to students who belong to underserved groups, are minorities, are first-generation college students, and are of low-socioeconomic status (Watt et al., 2008). AVID provides professional development in the form of a mandatory week-long training program for all AVID teachers, and lead teachers are established within the school to monitor the performance of the AVID faculty. Students are provided with academic tutoring, advising, and study-

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skills practice, with the ultimate goal of getting students enrolled in advanced courses, such as advanced placement curriculum (Loza, 2003; Watt et al., 2008).

AVID has been shown to improve high school student retention (Watt et al., 2008), encourage students to increase the rigor of coursework taken while in high school, and increase educational aspirations of participants (Watt et al., 2007).

GEAR-UP. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP) is a grant program established in 1998 (Ward, 2006; Yampolskaya et al., 2006). Grants are provided to secondary and middle schools to help them establish collaborative partnerships with a local university, as well as community organizations. The goal of such grants is to induce school-wide reform in schools that are located in low socio-economic neighborhoods, and the grants usually run over a six-year period (Fischer et al., 2004; Ward, 2006; Yampolskaya et al., 2006). The program provides professional development for teachers in the form of university mentors. Interventions are planned to be holistic and comprehensive; academic, behavioral, and social goals are set for each student (Yampolskaya et al., 2006). Case managers can be brought in from the community to teach conflict resolution skills. In addition, study skills classes and tutoring are provided, college visits are planned for students, guidance counseling is provided for students, and a variety of social activities for GEAR-UP students are planned throughout the year (Ward, 2006; Yampolskaya et al., 2006). Parents are also encouraged to participate in the program, and family academic programs are provided for this purpose (Ward, 2006).

GEAR-UP's vision to transform a school community captures Bourdieu's cultural capital theory very well, and systemic transformation epitomizes critical theory. This program also brings the services directly to the student, thus eliminating some of the barriers that might exist. In addition, GEAR-UP focuses learning not only on the students, but also on the teachers and the parents, thus it also captures the multi-dimensional nature of the learning process.

Research studies have shown that GEAR-UP is effective at improving GPA (Weiher et al., 2006; Yampolskala et al., 2006) and performance on a state standardized test, as well as decreasing the number of disciplinary referrals, and the number of absences (Yampolskala et al., 2006). In addition, GEAR UP has been shown to improve college attendance rates when compared to students who do not participate in the program (Weiher et al., 2006).

Full-Service Community Schools.

Going even a step further regarding school reform than many college-preparatory programs, "full-service community schools" have emerged within K-12 education, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. Full-service community schools have been designed to serve students and their families with a variety of services that go well beyond just education alone, as a student's learning is greatly impeded if his or her basic needs outside of school are not being met (Dryfoos, 1994, 2002; Protheroe, 2010; Walker et al., 2007). Walker et al. (2007) describe such schools as bringing a "culture of achievement" to students, and such a culture would align with the dominant cultural capital valued by our educational system (Bourdieu, 1977; Tierney, 1999). The basic

model of a full-service community school can be where the K-12 school becomes the hub that links and brings together a variety of academic and non-academic services together for the benefit of its students and families (Dryfoos, 2002). The school as a hub often acts to connect the often disjointed and difficult to access resources and services that may be available, but not convenient, within the community (Dryfoos, 2002; Walker et al., 2007).

Community school models were developed during the early 20th century by John Dewey and Jane Addams, so the idea is not a new one (Dryfoos, 2002). However, the needs of communities continue to change, which is why the exact full-service model is incredibly diverse, and looks a bit different at every community school (Protheroe, 2010). Besides providing services to students and their families, the model has also evolved to also encourage students and families to become involved in the community through service-learning opportunities (Dryfoos, 2002); thus there is a reciprocal benefit between the community and the families developed through the model.

By adopting a full-service model, K-12 schools not only better meet the needs of their students, but such a model also makes the school a more integral and important part of the community. As a result, community support for the school has been shown to increase. Such partnerships improve relations between the school and the surrounding community, increasing the likelihood of support in the future (Dryfoos, 2002). Therefore, in a well-designed full-service model, all constituents (students, families, community organizations, and the school itself) benefit from this school-reform process.

Research has shown that such schools are effective at increasing graduation rates within the K-12 system (Bireda, 2009; Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003; Bundy, 2005;

Dryfoos, 2002), which in turn increases access to higher education. Based on a review of over 49 programs, Dryfoos (2002) found that thirty-six programs increased academic achievement in students, nineteen improved attendance rates, eleven reduced suspension rates, eleven decreased high-risk behaviors in students, such as drug use and teen pregnancy, twelve were able to increase parent involvement, and six reported decreased rates of violence within the surrounding community. Clearly, full-service community schools can have a positive impact, not only on academic outcomes that lead to greater college access, but also on many of the community barriers identified by Wolf (2007) in his conceptual framework for understanding poverty.

College-Retention Programs

College-retention programs include a variety of programs and services aimed at increasing the college persistence and graduation rates of college students. Tinto (1998) has long advocated for institutions to step up and create programs that are designed to directly encourage student persistence, rather than placing the responsibility of academic and social integration in the laps of the students. Many focus on certain at-risk groups, such as students of low-SES and minority students (Myers, 2003; Valentine, Hirschy, Bremer, Novillo, Castellano, & Banister, 2011). Types of programs include those that are meant to provide support for students with "traditional" academic experiences, such as completing classwork and choosing a major. Other programs focus on creating "non-academic" experiences meant to help students acclimate to the college environment. Programs can also serve to accommodate the personal needs of students, such as through bridge programs, orientation programs, freshman seminars, distance education, and learning communities (Myers, 2003). Many such programs are front-loaded, meaning

most of the support or the experience itself occurs early on in the higher education experience, such as during the freshman year, or even before the first year begins (Valentine et al., 2011). The rationale for such a design is so that intervention strategies, particularly for at-risk students, occur right away, while students are still transitioning into the higher-education environment (Myers, 2003).

Effective college-retention programs often possess some basic program components, and I briefly describe them here. The first group of components is academic in scope, and they include the use of assessment tools such as COMPASS to place students in appropriate classes, study skills seminars, computer skills training, close academic monitoring, developmental education courses, supplemental instruction (SI), study sessions, and tutoring. The second group of college retention program components is social in scope, and it includes cross-cultural awareness events, peer mentoring, personal counseling, faculty mentoring, leadership development, and providing a "home-base" environment. Program components can also focus on career planning, such as providing internships, career advising, and research opportunities. Lastly, college-retention program components can also include the student's family, such as providing family or parent orientation, as well as family social events (Myers, 2003). Programs that offer most or all of the above services are defined as comprehensive (Myers, 2003; Valentine et al., 2011). An example of a comprehensive college-retention program that has demonstrated its effectiveness in the U.S. is Student Support Services (SSS), a federal program under the umbrella of TRIO (Myers, 2003).

Student Support Services (SSS) is a federally-funded program that provides competitive grants to institutions of higher education for a variety of services geared at

improving the retention and graduation rate of college students. SSS is designed to help

students who are determined to be of low-SES, are a first-generation college student,

and/or have documented learning disabilities. SSS can also provide additional grant aid

directly to students who are receiving Pell grants (www.ed.gov). A 2010 study conducted

by the Department of Education using longitudinal data showed that SSS was improving

college retention and degree completion for program participants (U.S. Department of

Education, 2010). The two four-year institutions that the students in this study attended

have received SSS grants, and they provide similar services for at-risk students, such as

advising, academic-skills tutoring, counseling, financial aid and scholarship support, and

close academic-performance monitoring.

Another type of retention program that has been shown to be effective at many

colleges and universities are learning communities. Tinto (1998) strongly advocated for

learning-community programs, and described their ability to increase both academic and

social integration of students by encouraging greater interaction with faculty and peers.

Greater interactions lead to greater involvement in the college community (Tinto, 1998),

which in turn has been linked to greater persistence (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1982, 1993).

Learning communities are a deliberate attempt by an institution of higher education to

link courses together, so students are encouraged to think more deeply about and make

connections between what they are learning in different classes (Tinto, 1998). Classes can

be linked to a specific cohort of students (Linked Courses or Learning Clusters), they can

be linked according to similar interests (Freshman Interest Groups), or they can be linked

by an interdisciplinary theme (Coordinated Studies) (Myers, 2003). Examples of learning

communities that have significantly improved college retention are "Students and

Teachers Achieving Results" (STAR) at Long Beach City College (Long Beach Community College, 2001), the Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) Program at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Evergreen State College's Coordinated Studies Program, and the "Model Institutions of Excellence", a Learning Clusters Program at the University of Texas, El Paso (Myers, 2003).

Freshman-year experiences are another type of college-retention program, and they include a variety of activities that help freshmen feel welcomed and assimilated into the institution (Myers, 2003; Valentine et al., 2011). Tinto (1998) advocated for a completely separate program for college freshmen with designated faculty and courses, though most freshman programs do not define such a sharp distinction between freshmen and returning students for the entire year, Orientation programs may be one of the experiences included in a freshman-year experience program. A type of orientation program specifically designed for at-risk students are Bridge Programs. Bridge Programs are designed to give students an academic head start on basic skills such as English and Math, and to provide more opportunities for students to become acclimated to the college environment (Robinson & Burns, 1996). Bridge programs that run over the summer are often residential, which enhances the acclimation process by immersing students in the college environment, potentially removing them from distracting and detrimental home-life experiences (Myers, 2003; Robinson & Burns, 1996). Tierney (1999) might take offense with such programs, as they support the assimilation expectation that often reduces cultural integrity, as well as cultural validation.

Unfortunately, despite over fifty years of research and governmental action, including the desegregation of public K-12 schools, financial aid, affirmative action,

college-preparatory programs, and college-retention programs, the high-school completion, college-attendance, and college-completion educational gaps between lower- and higher-SES students still persist today (Tierney, 1999). Researchers also argue that recent policies regarding affirmative action and in particular, financial aid, have begun favoring students that come from dominant cultural backgrounds, at the expense of access and persistence of underrepresented groups, such as minorities and lower-SES students (St. John, 2006; St. John et al., 2005). Clearly, more needs to be done to help students of low-SES persist in higher education.

The Persistent Educational Gap

The single most important factor that determines future occupation and career opportunities is level of education (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). However, when our society is split into groups according to income, some very disturbing patterns emerge regarding college enrollment, and in particular, college graduation by age 24. According to Family Income and Higher Education opportunity, the higher the family income, the more likely the student is to enroll and complete college (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). See Figure 3 for a summary of the statistics that support this claim. These statistics show a majority of students at all income levels are enrolling in college, though affluence positively affects college attendance. However, the completion gap drops off much more dramatically than the enrollment gap. For all but students from the most affluent families, a vast majority of students who start college do not persist to graduation by age 24. The programs that serve lower-SES students in K-12 are helping them with college access, but clearly college persistence is a problem that deserves more attention in educational research.
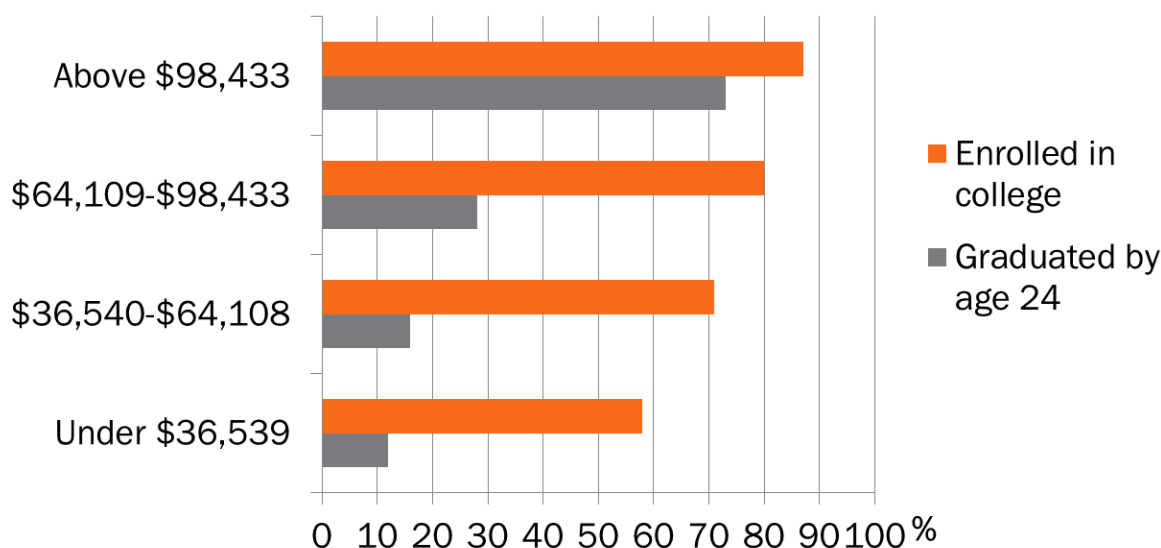
Figure 3. Statistics that show income is directly correlated to college access and completion.

Consequently, low socio-economic status becomes self-perpetuating in our country, because high school dropouts are four times more likely to be on welfare (Fashola & Slavin, 1998), and high-achieving, low-income students are five times less likely to attend college than their higher-income counterparts (Riley, 1998). In addition, high-school dropouts earn on average 30% less than high-school completers each year (Ou & Reynolds, 2008). They account for over half of all welfare recipients, and make up half of the prison population (Ou & Reynolds, 2008).

Many college-preparatory programs are improving college access, and many college-retention programs can demonstrate their effectiveness within their institutions, yet the college-persistence gap is not going away. Researchers need to look more closely at the factors that determine why some students of low-SES are able to persist despite

such dismal statistics, and despite the many barriers that are present in our society, and how these students have been able to defy the odds against them in education. This study attempted to do just that.

Summary

Chapter 2 summarized the problem of persistent higher education completion gap that exists today, despite many decades of research and action on the part of the government, higher education institutions, and private organizations. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tierney's model of cultural integrity serve as theoretical lenses through which we can better understand the challenges that exists for college students of low-SES. However, a practical theory that can help guide future action and research regarding this problem does not yet exist, and may be very helpful in shedding light on the reasons why current actions have been ineffective at closing the college-completion gap. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach that is used in this study to develop a practical theory to guide future action in order to address this problem in higher education.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Chapter 3 is separated into three parts. Part one provides a rationale for the methodology I chose for this particular study, and how this methodology aligns with my research questions. Part two describes how my specific study was conducted, including how participants were chosen, how data were collected, and how data were analyzed. Part three outlines the assumptions and limitations of my study, and how I addressed these potential threats to the research.

Methodology Rationale

My initial research on underrepresented students in higher education began with a broad literature review using the search database Education Full Text in order to see what type of research studies and methodologies were most common in the literature. Due to the vast amount of literature that has been recently published on underrepresented students, I limited my search to only studies that had been published since 2008 in the United States, and I used the keywords "at risk students" and "persistence" in my search. Forty-five studies emerged from this search, once all non-research papers were removed. What I found from this search was that a majority of studies (62%, n=28) were quantitative in nature, a majority (62%, n=28) studied programs, not students themselves, and a majority (78%, n=35) focused on K-12 students. The preponderance of quantitative studies, as well as program evaluations led me to want to know more about the personal experiences of at-risk students, as this seemed to be lacking in the literature. In addition, the focus on K-12 students is very worthwhile, as research shows that earlier retention efforts for students likely to drop out of high school are most effective. However, the

experiences of college students can be very different than those of K-12 students, so K-12 student findings are not necessarily applicable to adult students in higher education.

Next, I narrowed my search a bit to include "at risk students" and "persistence" in "higher education", and I included any research conducted in 2000 or later. Fourteen studies emerged from this search, once all non-research studies were removed. Again, I found the majority of studies (57%, *n*=8) to be quantitative in nature, and the majority also focused on program performance (57%, *n*=8), rather than looking at student experiences. When I only compared those studies that assessed at-risk students rather than programs, I found that the majority (67%, *n*=9) identified the attributes of the students or the student's life that acted as barriers to school persistence. Therefore, although the reasons why students do not persist has been well-defined by the literature, what factors for low-SES students lead to persistence and how some students are able to persist despite barriers has not yet been explored in any great detail, specifically with a cultural capital theoretical lens (St. John, 2006). Such questions would best be answered using a qualitative approach. Therefore, this study used a qualitative approach to explore these issues for currently persisting low-SES college students.

As a qualitative researcher, I adopted a constructivist worldview for this research study. Practically speaking, we are in need of determining potential causes for the persistent educational gap, as well as strategies for dealing with this gap that would result in closing it for future students of lower-SES in higher education. A constructivist viewpoint explores relationships, taking into consideration that each participant creates his or her own reality, and thus may have a very different perspective of the phenomenon

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studied, in this case higher education persistence. Relationships can then be formed based on those differing perspectives, based on participant data (Creswell, 2007).

Taking my worldview into consideration and my goal to develop a practical theory that would lead to action in order to close this completion gap, grounded-theory was the methodological approach that I used in this study. First of all, a qualitative methodology provided the rich contextual information needed in order to understand what factors influence persistence for low-SES students, and how some students of low-SES are able to persist in higher education, despite the challenges that they face due to their socio-economic status. Qualitative methodology is well suited to answer "what" and "how" research questions such as these (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the purpose of my study was to better understand the phenomenon of college persistence for lower-SES students. This allowed the researcher to create a model that was used to determine how this underrepresented group of students can be better supported in higher education, and hopefully increase the dismal persistence rates for this group of students through this increased level of understanding regarding their persistence experiences.

The research questions emerged from the grounded-theory methodological approach. As described in Chapter 1, the research questions for this study were:

1) What theory explains how students of low-SES are able (or are not able) to persist in higher education?

    a. How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold?

    b. What are the major events or benchmarks in this process?

    c. Who were the important participants in this process, and how were they involved?

d. What were the obstacles to persistence?

    e. What strategies were used to overcome obstacles?

    f. What were the outcomes to this process?

2) How do cultural capital and cultural integrity play a role, if any, in the persistence
    of low-SES students in higher education?

Question one is modeled after grounded theory data analysis called axial coding, which is
described in more detail later in this chapter. Question two ties my study to the theoretical
frameworks I chose: Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and Tierney's model of cultural
integrity. Although these frameworks provide a lens that can be used to understand why
low-SES students struggle to persist in higher education, this study goes a step further to
propose what factors promote retention, and how some low-SES students are able to
persist, despite such cultural challenges. Tinto's model was also used as a guide during
the discussion of findings.

Through these questions, the process of college persistence for students of low-
SES was studied. Participants were interviewed, and a theory was generated that is
"grounded" in the data obtained from participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The
systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin were used in this study, and these
procedures are described in more detail later in this chapter.

Participants

As with most qualitative studies, this study made use of purposeful sampling, as
all participants are of low-SES and are currently attending an institution of higher
education in the Northwest Ohio region. All participants were a part of the 2007, 2008,
2009, or 2010 graduating cohort from the same high school district in northwest Ohio, all

participated to varying degrees in the GEAR-UP program (or a similar college-preparatory program) situated within their high schools, and a majority were designated free/reduced lunch status in high school, thus defining them as low-SES students. Students are currently enrolled in one of two public four-year institutions, also situated within a 30-minute drive of one another in Northwest Ohio, called University A and B in this study. Therefore, participants are considered a homogenous sample. Homogenous samples are typically used in grounded-theory, as all participants have experienced the same phenomenon, in this case attending and persisting in higher education (Creswell, 2007) after attending high schools in the same urban district.

Table 1 shows a breakdown of pertinent school district demographic information obtained from the Ohio Department of Education, for the high-school district that the study participants attended. As this table shows, this urban high-school district has large numbers of minority and low SES students, which are two risk factors to college persistence (Carter, 2006; Johnson, 2008).

Table 1

School District Demographic Data

Demographic *Values*	Population School District	Sample 2008-2011 High School Graduates
Student Count	*N*=22,277	*n*=19
Race/Ethnicity		
Minority	57% (*n=*12,698)	42% (*n=*8)
White	43% (*n=*9,579)	58% (*n=*11)
Socio-Economic Status		
Free/Reduced Lunch	71% (*n=*15,817)	79% (*n=*15)
Regular Lunch	29% (*n=*6,460)	21% (*n=*4)

Thirty-three students elected to fill out an Initial Survey that was emailed to them requesting demographic and background information, as well as their participation in interviews for this study. A link to the survey was included in the e-mail, and twenty-four of those students who filled out the survey agreed to be contacted for an interview by the researcher. Nineteen were actually interviewed by the researcher, and the remaining four either did not respond to a request to set up an interview by the researcher, or did not show up to the designated-interview meeting. Data saturation was reached by the 17th interview, and two additional interviews were conducted to verify data saturation. According to Creswell (1998; 2002; 2007), 15-20 interviews are the minimum recommended for grounded-theory research.

Of the nineteen interview participants, the majority were White (58%, n=11), followed by African American (26%, n=5), and Hispanic (16%, n=3). Gender was unevenly distributed, with more females in the sample (68%, n=13) than males (32%, n=6). Three participants (16%) graduated high school in 2008, eleven in 2009 (58%), four in 2010 (21%), and one in 2011 (5%). All students attended two regional public four-year research universities. See Table 2 for a summary of each interview participant, including demographic data. Socio-economic status (SES) was based on senior year free/reduced lunch status. Any missing information was either not provided by the participants, or was not available for the researcher to access.

Table 2

Summary of Participant Demographic Data

Pseudo-nym	HS Grad Year	Race/ Ethnicity	# of Colleges Attended	Total # Credit Hrs	Major	SES	Univ. A or B	HS Cum. GPA
Jackie	2009	Caucasian	2	127	Engineering	Low	B	--
Tabitha	--	Caucasian	2	--	Education	Low	B	--
Eric	2009	Caucasian	2	100+	Sport Management	Reg.	A	2.45
Theresa	2009	Caucasian	1	109	Exercise Science	Low	A	3.14
Anna	2011	African-American	2	27	Nursing	Low	B	--
Alisa	2011	African-American	1	30	Business	Low	B	--
Amy	2009	African-American	1	54	Nursing	Low	B	--
Hope	2008	African-American	2	65	Business/ Fashion Design	Low	B	--
Brianna	2010	Hispanic	1	68	Business	Low	B	--
Andrea	2008	Hispanic	3	32	Nursing	Low	B	--
Andy	2010	African-American	1	45	Sociology	Reg.	A	2.64
Katie	2008	Caucasian	1	117	Accounting	Low	B	3.25
Shandra	2009	Caucasian	1	93	Criminal Justice	Reg.	B	3.15
Jim	2009	Caucasian	1	76	Criminal Justice	Reg.	B	2.92
Nate	2009	Caucasian	1	--	Exercise Science	Low	A	3.54
Tim	2009	Caucasian	1	95	Education	Low	A	3.25
Stephen	2009	Caucasian	1	52	Information Systems	Low	B	2.17
Carrie	2009	Caucasian	2	128	Nursing	Low	B	3.16
Sara	2011	Hispanic	1	--	Nursing	Low	B	--

Participant Descriptions

Jackie. What differentiated Jackie from other participants were her extensive post-secondary option (PSO) experiences she had had prior to entering college. Starting her sophomore year of high school, Jackie began taking college classes at University B, and her grandmother drove her to and from the school. By the time she graduated high school, she had already earned quite a few credits toward a Bachelor's degree, and had many interactions with college professors. Jackie belongs to a sorority on-campus, and lives off-campus in an apartment with her partner, **Tabitha**, who is another participant in this study, and both commute to University B.

Tabitha. One of the few participants interviewed who transferred from her first institution, Tabitha is obtaining her degree from University B. Also unique to other participants, Tabitha has a child, which she supports with her partner, **Jackie**, in an off-campus apartment.

Eric. Living in an off-campus apartment with **Nate**, another participant in this study, Eric and Nate are also close friends with a third participant, **Theresa**. The three of these students, who all have similar majors, are a strong source of academic and social support for one another. All three attended the same high school as well, so they grew up in the same neighborhood near one another, and now all attend University A.

Theresa. One of two participants who can be considered displaced, Theresa rotates between homes of family and friends throughout the school-year. Theresa also maintains close ties to her high school, often visiting with former teachers and advisors, which was not mentioned by many other participants.

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Anna. Anna is unusual in this population in that she has a mom with a college degree, and she also lives in the dorms at University B. She also belongs to a sorority at her school. She mentioned that since her high school graduation, her mom had opened up her own business and she was not sure if her family could still be considered low-SES.

Alisa. What makes Alisa unique from other participants is that she is going to be transferring to her third institution. She spent her first semester at one private liberal-arts institution in Ohio, transferred to a second for her second semester. She is now returning to live at home to take care of her sister, who is still in high school, because her mother has been incarcerated. She is now enrolled at University B.

Amy. What differentiates Amy from many of the other participants is she has a college-educated mother, and she is able to live at home, though her parents do not support her financially in any other way. Amy also did not start her degree right after high school; she first went to a local private four-year college for her nursing-aid license. Once she received this license, she began her degree at University B, working as a nursing aid to pay for her education.

Hope. Also able to live at home, Hope's mother is currently attending a higher education institution, pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Social Work. Hope is currently undecided as to whether she will return to University B where she is currently enrolled to study Business, or transfer to the local community college to study Fashion Design.

Brianna. Also living at home, Brianna works in her family's restaurant and has a brother who attended University B, which she currently attends as well. Brianna has

assumed leadership roles early in her college career, and has also served at Vice President of the Latino Student Union (LSU) on campus.

Andrea. One unique factor in the life of Andrea is that she has already attended three institutions, and is enrolled in her fourth, University B, in the fall. Andrea has also experienced family turmoil throughout her college years, such as her father losing his job, her parents almost losing their home, and her sister fleeing from an abusive relationship with her children. Andrea lives independently with her fiancée.

Andy. Living independently in an apartment near University A, Andy has had peer roommates to help with finances while in school. Andy is also unique in that he mentioned being involved in an Upward Bound program in high school that helped introduce him to the expectations of a college environment. In addition, Andy is one of the few participants in this study not considered to be low-SES, as he did not qualify for free/reduced lunch status during his senior year of college. However, Andy did claim during his interview that he receives no financial support from his family for either college or living expenses, so he lives as a financially-independent adult.

Katie. Living on campus in a dorm at University B, Katie had a unique opportunity to travel abroad in college because of a program for future educators. This program paid for almost all expenses, provided a living stipend, and allowed students to earn college credit while teaching abroad, all of which made it possible for her to travel.

Shandra. With almost no integration into University B, Shandra takes all on-line classes when she can and works 60 hours a week, yet this does not seem to be impacting her persistence, as she is continuing to make progress towards her degree. She shares an

apartment with her mom, and they split the rent and expenses, much like roommates would. Her living arrangement and financial independence seem to contradict her classification as regular–SES, as she did not qualify for free/reduced lunch status during her senior year of high school.

Jim. A student at University B, Jim lives in an apartment with a roommate and commutes to school for his classes. He also does not mention a high degree of social integration into his institution. Jim is unusual in that he received some financial assistance from his grandparents to help pay for living expenses and books, and he is also one of the few students classified as regular-SES, due to the fact that he did not qualify for free-reduced lunch status during his senior year of high school.

Nate. As mentioned previously, Nate rooms with **Eric**, is friends with **Theresa**, and attends University A. Nate receives emotional support from his brother, who briefly attended college.

Tim. One of the only participants to mention that he receives emotional support to persist in school from his church, he also mentioned a mission trip he was able to take recently where he taught students in a poor rural part of the country. This experience helped him to decide to major in Education at University A.

Stephen. As a participant Stephen's background is unique. Both of his parents are college-educated and held professional jobs at one time, until they were hit head-on by a drunk driver and sustained crippling injuries that prevented them from working for a long period of time. As a result, his family lost almost everything, and they were a victim of situational poverty. Stephen remembers going to work with his father before he lost his

job, and has chosen to pursue the same line of work that his father once did, Information Technology at University B. Stephen lives independently in an apartment with two roommates.

Carrie. A student at University B, Carrie lives independently and chooses to go to school year-round in order to finish her degree faster, even though that has been a challenge due to the way that her financial aid is allocated.

Sara. One of two participants who can be considered displaced, Sara moved out of her mom's house during her freshman year for unknown reasons, and rotated between family members until she recently moved in with her father, where she says she feels more comfortable. Sara is also unique in that as a commuter student, she does not yet have her license, so getting to and from school for her classes has been a challenge.

<div align="center">

Data Collection

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Recruitment of students was a multistep process. First, a list of all students who graduated from the GEAR-UP high school in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and were currently enrolled in University A or B was generated using a database at University A, that was previously overseeing the high school's GEAR-UP program. All students attended a high school with large numbers of free/reduced lunch status students in an urban district in Northwest Ohio. Most students were also defined as low-SES according to their senior year free/reduced lunch status. Thus, the potential program participants were a homogenous sample that is atypical of low-SES college students, for a minority of low-SES students attend and persist in college. Next, every person on this list was contacted via current institutional e-mail. The e-mail was sent by the researcher, but a GEAR UP

administrator agreed to sign her name on the e-mail next to the researcher, as all students are familiar with the administrator, who is also a teacher at the high school where the GEAR UP program was housed. She had contacted most students in the past; thus students would recognize the source of an e-mail from her. Participation in the study might have been increased if initial contact came from a familiar source rather than from an unknown researcher. After approximately two weeks, a second contact was made for any student who had not yet responded to the e-mail or letter. Since all students attended either one of two universities, and I had connections with both of these universities, this familiarity lent itself to a sufficient number of participants.

An Informational Letter was also attached via the e-mail describing the research in detail, along with a link to the Initial Survey. See Appendix A for a copy of the Informational Letter sent out to all potential participants. It was made clear that participation is completely voluntary, and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Students electronically gave consent by answering a required question at the beginning of the Initial Survey that affirmed they had read the letter, and agreed that any information they shared might be included in this research study. See Appendix B for a copy of the Initial Survey questionnaire. The survey was anonymous, with graduation year the only potentially identifying information, unless students chose to answer the final question. The final question on the survey asked students to share their contact information if they would be interested in participating in a short interview with the researcher. A $30 gift card to Subway was given to participants who choose to participate in the interview. Those who were interviewed were then sent the interview transcripts to review for accuracy and omissions, and to add information if necessary, a process called

member reflections (Tracy, 2010). The member reflection component is described in more detail later in the chapter.

IRB "Expedited Review" was obtained for this study, for several reasons. First, this study involved participants over the age of eighteen; therefore the population was not considered at-risk. Second, this study did not delve into sensitive topics, such as traumatic events or sexual behavior. Sensitive topics such as these must be reviewed more thoroughly to ensure that participants will not be placed in a compromising position during the study or after the research is complete. Lastly, this study involved minimal risk to participants, for it asked for participant's experiences and opinions regarding their educational experiences.

All participants were reminded frequently that they could opt out of any portion of the study, or choose to leave the study whenever they preferred. This reminder was included at the beginning of the Initial Survey, and was a part of the Interview Protocol (see Appendix C). Both data-collection methods are described in more detail below. In addition, participant confidentiality was ensured throughout the study. Interviews were transcribed using participant pseudonyms, and pseudonym identities were kept in a secure location separate from the interview transcripts throughout the study.

Initial Survey

The Initial Survey was sent out to all potential participants included on the list of students obtained from University A. It asked students to share information regarding academic progress (courses taken, GPA, major choice, expected degree sought), extracurricular involvement, and use of college services, including but not limited to

college-retention programs. The Initial Survey provided the researcher with basic demographic information, as well as basic information about the participant's activities while in college, and clarifying questions were asked if the student agreed to participate in the interview. See Appendix B for full survey items.

Interviews

A grounded-theory approach often utilizes interviews, as they give students the ability to share detailed stories and opinions regarding lived experiences (Merriam, 2009), therefore interviews were utilized in this study. The researcher recruited nineteen students to participate in an interview, and this number has been shown in past grounded-theory studies as sufficient to reach a data-saturation point (Creswell, 2002; Creswell, 2007). Interviews took place in a public location of the participant's choice, often involving travel to the student's institution or neighborhood. Examples of interview locations were a library, a conference room, and a restaurant. Interviews were then transcribed and data were grouped into categories, or units of information, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached. Data saturation means that additional interviews are no longer adding to existing thematic categories or creating new categories (Creswell, 2007).

Prior to the start of the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form and give verbal consent. In addition, the purpose of the study was explained to each participant, and each participant was reminded that they could stop the interview at any time, or elect not to answer any interview question. Participants were also assured that all information they shared would remain confidential, and personal quotes or insights might

be included in the final paper. Being honest and open about the study and how it would be conducted was the first step to building rapport with each participant, and also it minimized potential ethical issues that could arise with any type of research (Creswell, 2007). The interview protocol was open-ended and semi-structured (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, a small number of questions were asked of all participants, but there was flexibility to clarify or expand on ideas that emerged in the interview. The core questions were aligned to the research questions described in Chapter 1, and clarification questions or probing questions based on responses and experiences described on the Initial Survey were asked as necessary.

Potential interview questions included:

1) What experiences do you believe have most impacted whether or not you expect to persist in college?

    a. What role, if any, have experiences within the institution played in your college persistence?

    b. What role, if any, have experiences outside of the institution played in your college persistence?

    c. What individuals have been most impactful regarding your persistence, and in what ways?

2) How have you handled challenges that stemmed from these experiences while in college?

3) How do you perceive your experiences in college to be different from students who come from more privileged backgrounds?

4) Why do you believe you have been able to persist thus far in college, while some of your peers have not?

Question #1 identified the experiences that have both hindered and aided the college persistence of the low-SES participants. Parts A, B and C helped to distinguish the sources of these experiences in relation to the institution itself, as well as who had been most influential in their persistence thus far. This aligned well with the identification of intervening and causal conditions that were identified during data analysis (see Figure 4). Question #2 aimed at understanding the strategies students had employed in order to handle both the positive and negative experiences they had encountered while in college. This question aligned with the identification of strategies that participants used, which were identified during data analysis (see Figure 4). Question #3 asked students to reflect on their experiences in relation to those who have had a more privileged upbringing. This question guided the participants to think more critically about their experiences, what makes them unique, and how their experiences might be influencing their persistence in ways that other students', particularly more affluent students', experiences do not. Question #4 aimed at helping students think reflectively about causal conditions, as well as how outcomes differed for them as opposed to their peers (see Figure 4). The last question helped me explore from the participants' perspectives the reasons why some students persisted while others did not, which also helped participants identify outcomes to the phenomenon for themselves, and others (see Figure 4). Although I cannot assume that the causal explanations the students brought up are necessarily significant, this question allowed me to understand the perspective of the participant better, and how the participant viewed himself or herself in relation to those

with similar backgrounds who had not made it as far in education as they had. Therefore, the interview questions support the data analysis used in grounded theory, and are aligned well with the coding procedures that are described in the next section. See Appendix C for the interview protocol.

The questions were purposefully broad, so that students felt comfortable discussing any personal, academic, current, or past barriers and experiences that might have impacted their college persistence and success. Glaser (1992) encourages the use of broad, open-ended questioning in order to minimize the influence of any preconceived ideas on the part of the researcher. The interviews also gave me the opportunity to ask clarifying questions regarding the responses on the Initial Survey; thus member checking and reflections could also occur. Interviews were transcribed word-for-word prior to data analysis.
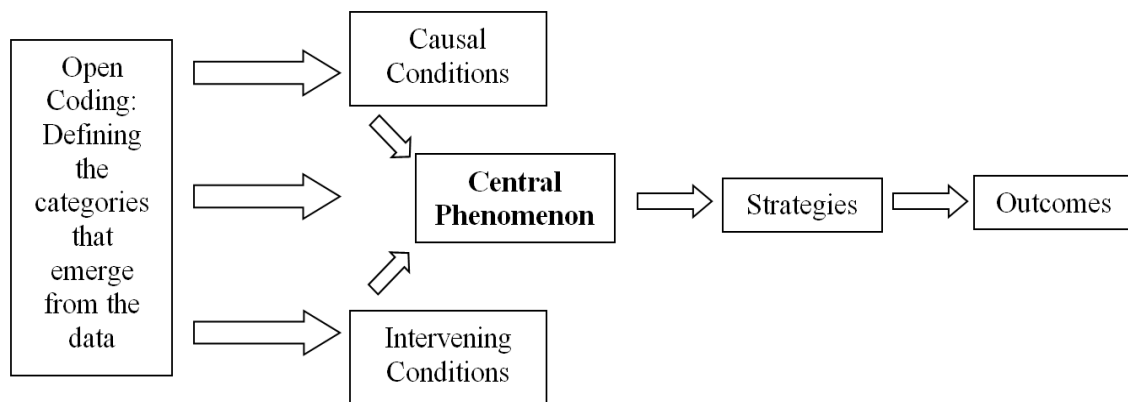
Figure 4. Pictorial Representation of Axial Coding in Grounded Theory.

Member Reflections

Often called member checking, I use the term member reflections here, (Tracy, 2010) because the process of reviewing data with participants can transcend mere checking of data for accuracy. This process elicited new information from participants, as well as clarified ideas and experiences, therefore ensuring that all records were as accurate and complete as possible. In this study, I transcribed each interview word for word within two days of its occurrence, and sent this transcript to the participant to review. I asked each participant to reread the transcripts, and to please respond with any comments within one week. Specifically, I asked participants to look the transcript over for inaccuracies, and also to feel free to add or change as necessary. All participants could contact me via e-mail or over the phone if they wanted to contact me directly to discuss the transcripts as well.

Memoing

Grounded theory often employs the use of memoing, as it gives the researcher the opportunity to write about the emerging theory, while simultaneously engaging in data analysis (Creswell, 2007). As described by Morrow and Smith (1995), I used both analytic and self-reflective memoing throughout my data collection and analysis. Analytic memoing involves forming questions and ideas regarding the data and emerging theory, while self-reflective memoing involves my anecdotal reactions and thoughts regarding the stories of my participants. The analytic memos were used as a cross-referencing tool during the development of categories, and both aided in understanding the relationships amongst the emerging categories found in the data.

Once data collection was completed, the Initial Survey generated both demographic and college involvement data on each participant; the interviews were all transcribed and generated a total of 85-pages of data; and 57-pages of interview notes were taken to supplement the transcripts. Additionally, the researcher conducted both reflective and analytic memoing after each interview, which generated an additional 71-pages of data. Each participant was then sent a copy of the interview transcription and interview notes, and additional feedback was collected through member reflections, as recommended by Tracy (2010).

Triangulation

Three sources of data are included in this study: the Initial Survey data, the interviews (enhanced by member reflections), and memoing. In addition the literature and theory used to support the findings can be considered a fourth source of data. Multiple sources of data allows the researcher to verify and support findings, or potentially find contradictions that can lend richness and depth to findings (Stemler, 2001). Thus, triangulation of data can be used to increase validity and reliability of findings, which is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

<p style="text-align:center">Data Analysis</p>

Data were collected and analyzed simultaneously using the constant comparative method, which involves engaging in simultaneous data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007). For this study, I transcribed each interview within two days of its occurrence, and immediately began the coding process, which is described below. As each interview was conducted, I transcribed and coded, then added this new data to my existing data. As each

new interview was added, emerging categories were added, and existing categories were combined or redefined in order to accommodate the new data collected. This process continued until any new data collected could be incorporated into existing categories without adding to, combining, or redefining categories, called data saturation. Data analysis consisted of three phases: open coding, axial coding, and finally selective coding, which will be described in more detail below.

Open Coding

The process of open coding, a close line-by-line reading of all transcripts, interview notes, and analytic memoing in order to isolate and code every piece of data generated by participants, utilized the constant comparative approach (Creswell, 2007), which helps to guard against bias (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Although several broad open-ended questions were included in the interview protocol, over time it became necessary to supplement the original protocol with several more specific questions about major, career aspirations, and future goals, as this provided important information regarding student motivation for persisting in college. Data were analyzed throughout the process, and as new data were added, categories were generated by the data and redefined until all data were grouped and accounted for in the process. Data saturation was reached when new data collected did not generate any new categories, and could be accommodated by the existing categories and sub-categories without the need to reorganize the existing data. However, the process of reorganizing codes and categories continued throughout the data analysis process, and throughout the writing process until the researcher was satisfied that all data were accounted for and included in the emerging theory. The result of this iterative process is a list of *in vivo codes* that described the

phenomenological experience of low-socio-economic status college students (Morrow, 1995).

Axial Coding

Axial coding is the process of making connections between codes and categories that emerged during the open-coding process. First, I defined which categories identified are causal conditions of the central phenomenon. Next, strategies were identified, which are actions that the participants took with regard to the central phenomenon, as well as intervening conditions that provide context for the factors that impact the strategies employed by participants. Lastly, the consequences, or outcomes of using the identified strategies, were defined (Creswell, 2007). See Figure 4 for a pictorial representation of axial coding.

Selective Coding

Lastly, selective coding took place, which is the process of determining the core category or categories that are related to all other categories. Once these categories have been established, then all relationships between categories must be defined. At this point, categories may be adjusted to better define these relationships. Strauss (1987) provides criteria for determining the core category, and they include the centrality of the category in relation to other categories, the frequency of the category occurrence in the data, its inclusiveness and ease of relation to other categories, the clarity of its implications to the general theory, and its flexibility in terms of the axial coding process. All criteria were taken into account in determining the core categories defined in this study. I then

developed a pictorial representation of the theory that emerged from the data, in order to facilitate understanding of this new substantive-level theory (Creswell, 2007).

Multi-Grounded Theory

Grounded-theory, as described previously, is "grounded" inductively by the data that is collected and analyzed, and theory should not be used to either guide data analysis or determine categories that emerge from data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010) suggest that grounded theory can also be grounded by existing theory, which is what this study attempts to do. This was accomplished by comparing and contrasting the theory that emerged in this study to the three existing theories or models described in Chapter 2: Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, Tierney's Model of Cultural Integrity, and Tinto's Model of College Drop-Out. Existing theories is used to support the theory that emerged in this study, and also this theory is used to highlight gaps in existing theory that may explain why the educational persistence gap for low-SES students still exists.

The data collection and analysis in this study occurred after a thorough literature review was conducted, so the researcher conducted the analysis with knowledge of various theoretical frameworks and models related to persistence in education. As mentioned previously, these existing theories served as a useful lens and tool for deeper understanding of themes and categories that emerged in this study. Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010), contrary to traditional grounded theory, recommend that researchers are familiar with existing theory, as these theories can be used to support and possibly challenge the emerging theory; thus new and existing knowledge is synthesized in the

data-analysis process. Therefore, the new theory is both grounded in the data, and theoretically grounded, combining the strengths of inductive empirical analysis with deductive theoretical analysis (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010).

This study also differs from a traditional grounded-theory approach with its second research question, which was written with Bourdieu's theory and Tierney's model in mind. Therefore, although the first research question is very open and lends itself to the inductive data-analysis approach required in grounded theory, the second research questions allows for a more narrow focus for this study on the cultural capital and cultural validity experiences of the participants, which is guided by the theoretical framework provided in Chapter 2. Such simultaneous broad and narrow research foci are possible with multi-grounded theory (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010). In order to extend a traditional approach of grounded theory to embrace the theoretical approach of multi-grounded theory, a data-analysis step will be added, as described here:

Theoretical matching. Once the categories and themes emerged through the inductive data-analysis steps described earlier in this chapter, the research then compares and contrasts the theory that emerged with existing theories related to persistence for college students. Existing theories are used to better understand the categories that inductively emerged through the data-analysis process, as such are used to adapt the evolving theory, ground the theory, and present potential comments or criticisms toward existing theories (Bowen, 2006; Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010).

Accountability

An extensive audit trail was kept throughout the data-collection and data-analysis processes for this study. Over 500-minutes of interview audio recordings were kept, and these recordings were translated into 85-pages of transcriptions. In addition, the researcher took over 57-pages of interview notes, as well as over 70-pages of reflective and analytic memoing. The Initial Surveys translated into over 26-pages of additional data. All initial coding efforts were recorded, as well as axial-coding efforts.

Assumptions

Qualitative research involves the researcher making certain assumptions about the nature and interpretation of reality. My ontological assumption, based on a constructivist worldview, is that reality is subjective, and multiple realities exist, as demonstrated through the varied words of my participants. The quotes included in this study demonstrate the differing perspectives of my participants, though the sample is homogenous according to a specified phenomenon. I also made the axiological assumption that all research has biases and is value-laden. For this reason, I openly discuss my values and potential subjectivity throughout the study. Lastly, my methodological assumption for using qualitative research to answer my questions is that I attempt to understand the details of my participants' experiences before I can grasp generalizations. In addition, the context of my phenomenon is as important as understanding the phenomenon itself, and my questions were revised and reworked throughout the research process (Creswell, 2007).

There are also several assumptions I made regarding my participants that must be acknowledged. First, I assumed that my participants were open and willing to share honestly their educational experiences with me. There is always the risk that participants will try to say what they may think the researcher wants to hear, rather than what they truly believe. I included in my interview protocol a statement that asked my participants to be open and honest, and also reminded them that they can skip any question they do not want to answer. I also reminded them that every experience is different, so there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to questions. Second, I also assumed that my participants were able to articulate their educational experiences, and reflect on how they have persisted in higher education. Indeed, some participants struggled to describe to me the reasons for their educational success, because for them it is just the way that it is. Therefore, for participants who struggled with my interview questions, I used the Initial Survey data to ask more specific, directed questions about their extracurricular activities, course of study, and academic performance as a college student, all of which helped to capture more detail about their college experiences. The information I gathered about college involvement and academic achievement shed light on the reasons behind their educational success, without all participants having to reflect on it directly.

Limitations

General Limitations

As is the case with any qualitative research, validity of data is a concern, as well as the ability to generalize findings. In order to minimize the inherent limitations of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for quality qualitative

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research were used to guide this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility. A credible study is one in which the data reflect the experiences of the participants (Anderson & Larson, 2009). There are several ways in which this study has maximized its credibility. First, as the researcher, I participated in self-reflexivity. I discussed my background and the potential subjectivity that I brought to this study. Self-reflexivity ensures that the researcher is approaching the research honestly and openly, and therefore the research is sincere (Tracy, 2010). Next, since multiple data sources are used in analysis (literature, initial surveys, interviews, and memoing), triangulation of data occurred. Data triangulation increased the validity of the study by reducing researcher interpretation subjectivity as well (Stemler, 2001; Tracy, 2010). To further enhance credibility, the interviews involved the analysis of thick descriptions, and special attention was given to understanding the tacit knowledge that emerged from the interviews (Tracy, 2010). Lastly, member checking was used in this study. Tracy (2010) more aptly calls this process "member reflections", as participants were given the opportunity to react, agree, or find issues with the research. Thus, this process in itself enriched the data, and it was not just meant to check the data for accuracy.

One potential confounding issue that must be acknowledged in this study was the use of small monetary incentives for students who chose to participate in the interviews. I feel that the incentive to participate encouraged greater participation, thus it was worth a potential threat to credibility. Additionally, the incentive was small enough that it should not be considered coercive in any way. Instrumentation is another potential threat that must be acknowledged. As with any study, perfect reliability of instruments is

impossible. Therefore, triangulation of data, as well as the ability to engage in member reflections after both the Initial Survey and the interviews, helped to minimize such threats to validity and reliability.

Transferability. Transferability is a measure of how well a study can be generalized to other situations or contexts (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Providing thick descriptions within the study helps readers ascertain whether this particular study overlaps with their own situations, and whether the findings can be applied to their own context (Anderson & Larson, 2009; Tracy, 2010). This study may also lead to naturalistic generalizations (Tracy, 2010), which means that readers can experience the context of the study vicariously, and this experience can then lead to improved practice.

Dependability. A dependable study is one whose findings are consistent, and this can be accomplished through the use of data triangulation (Ander son & Larson, 2009). The data sources for triangulation in this study were the Initial Survey, the interview transcripts, and the memoing. Additionally, the member reflections are considered a potential fourth source of data. There was also an effort to focus on disconfirming evidence that emerged during data analysis.

Confirmability. Data were analyzed closely in order to ensure that the data reflect the evidence gathered (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Confirmability was enhanced through the use of member reflections and by focusing on disconfirming evidence. In addition, stability of analysis was ensured, as the study researcher engaged in category analysis twice, in order to make sure that the categories established remained very similar over time (Stemler, 2001).

Grounded-Theory Limitations

One of the largest challenges to grounded theory is that the researcher must set aside any existing theoretical interpretations that may be used to analyze the data, in order to allow the substantive theory to emerge (Creswell, 2007). This weakness is reduced by embracing a multi-grounded theory approach (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010), which allows the research to not only gain familiarity with closely related existing theories before engaging in data collection and analysis, but to narrow the focus of the research based on these existing theories, and once inductive-data analysis has been completed, use these theories to better understand and ground the emerging theory in existing theoretical frameworks. Another challenge is the ability of the researcher to discern when data saturation has been reached. Creswell (2007) recommends the use of the constant-comparative method, where data are simultaneously collected and compared, thus it is easier to determine when no new categories emerge from the data-analysis process.

Summary

A grounded-theory approach helped me to determine potential causes that had not yet been identified for the persistent college completion gap between lower- and higher-SES students. By developing a practical substantive-level theory that addresses this problem in higher education, this study also aids higher education administrators, faculty, and staff in providing services and support to help close this gap for future students of low-SES.

Chapter 4 provides a summary of the data collected and patterns found, including thick descriptions of participants, participant quotes, and details from the Initial Survey.

The chapter is organized according to the prescribed data-analysis procedure outlined in

Chapter 3, so the reader can follow how the theory emerged from the data through this

process.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the inductive data-analysis process (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding), and the specific data sources that were collected throughout this process. A detailed description of how data analysis progressed then follows, including a complete list of in vivo codes generated by the researcher during open coding. Finally, the results are provided, and a pictorial representation of the theoretical framework both guides and organizes the remainder of the chapter for the reader.

Coding

As described in Chapter 3, the process of open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and theoretical matching were used in this study. The process of reorganizing codes and categories continued throughout the data-analysis process, and throughout the writing process until the researcher was satisfied that all data were accounted for and included in the emerging theory. The result of this iterative process was a list of *in vivo codes* that describe the phenomenological experience of low-socio-economic status college students (Morrow & Smith, 1995). A total of 53 in vivo codes were generated in this study. See Table 3 for a list of the codes and categories generated by this open-coding process. The bolded headings represent preliminary codes that emerged, the italic headings are the axial codes that emerged, and all other headings represent *in vivo* codes. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of pieces of data collected that fit within each category, sub-category, and code.

Table 3

In Vivo Codes (Organized through Preliminary Axial Coding)

STRESSORS (110 total)	

1. *Culture Shock* (41 total)
    a. Social isolation (16)
    b. Poor academic foundation (8)
    c. Underestimate academic expectations (8)
    d. Adjustment to environment (4)
    e. Underestimate cost of college (3)
    f. Too much pressure (2)
2. *Personal Issues* (21 total)
    a. Money burdens (15)
        1. Money tied to grades (3)
    b. Transportation (2)
    c. Illness (1)
3. *Enormous Responsibilities* (19 total)
    a. Work (8)
    b. Academic (8)
    c. Extracurricular activities (3)
4. *Family Issues* (12 total)
    a. Money (4)
    b. Illness (3)
    c. Displacement (2)
    d. Death (2)
    e. Abuse (1)
5. *Lack of Institutional Support* (9 total)
    a. Services (7 total)
        1. Financial aid advising (4)
        2. Tutoring (2)
        3. Parking (1)
    b. Professors (2)

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION: SUPPORT (148 total)

1. *Institutional Support* (61 total)
    a. Programs (21)
    b. Professors (11)
    c. Money (11)
    d. Environment (9)
    e. Advising/Mentoring (6)
    f. Major (3)
2. *Family Support* (50 total)
    a. High Expectations (24)
    b. Emotional Support/Encouragement (15)

(table continues)

    c.   Role Models (9)

    d.   Financial Support (2)

3. *Peer Support* (24 total)

    a.   Academic (12)

    b.   Social/Emotional (11)

    c.   Financial (1)

4. *High School Support* (13 total)

    a.   Strong academic foundation (7)

    b.   Teacher/staff encouragement (6)

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION (120 total)

1. *Goal Orientation: Obtaining a Degree* (46 total)

    a.   Maximizing the experience (12)

    b.   Mindset (10)

    c.   Sense of accomplishment (8)

    d.   Continuing Education (6)

    e.   Becoming a Role Model (6)

    f.   Improving grades (4)

2. *Goal Orientation: Chosen Field* (36 total)

    a.   Career aspirations (19)

    b.   Major choice (11)

    c.   Professional experiences (6)

3. *Reasons Others lack Intrinsic Motivation* (24 total)

    a.   Wrong mindset (9)

    b.   Privilege (8)—connected to lack of drive and wrong mindset

    c.   Lack drive (6)

    d.   Starting own family (5)

4. *Goal Orientation: Improving Quality of Life* (14 total)

    a.   Avoiding negative outcomes (9)

    b.   Better future (5)

Three broad categories emerged from the data collected from participants: 1) stressors, 2) extrinsic motivation, and 3) intrinsic motivation. Although the main purpose of open coding is to categorize all pieces of data collected and not to determine relationships between categories, it was clear throughout the open-coding process these major themes were closely related, and these relationships became more well-defined throughout the axial coding process.

Stressors

Five sub-categories emerged from the data that fit under the category of stressors, and all could be described as catalysts or reasons for stress during the college experience. Students had to overcome these stressors throughout their college experiences in order to continue to make academic progress, but there are times when stressors seriously impeded, if not temporarily halted progress for participants.

Extrinsic Motivation: Support

Examples of financial, academic, social, and emotional support appeared frequently in the data, and the support of others translated for many participants into motivation to continue their education, despite stressors that were present. Several sub-categories were developed that highlighted the sources of support for participants, and they are included in Table 3.

Intrinsic Motivation: Goal Orientation

Participants communicated their inner drive to finish school, and their reasons were overwhelmingly goal-oriented. The last sub-category is slightly different, as participants also described reasons why others they know have not possessed the same level of intrinsic motivation to pursue education that they do.

Results

The grounded-theory model for persistence of college low-SES students that emerged from data analysis, which is modeled after the framework by Strauss and Corbin (1990), is provided in Figure 5. Table 4 aligns the different components of the model to the parts of research question #1. The remainder of the chapter goes into detail regarding each component.

Causal Conditions of Persistence
- Family Support
- Mindset
- Financial Support
- Academic Preparation

Core Phenomena to Persistence
- **Intra-Institutional Integration:** Being a college student
- **Extra-Institutional Integration:** Being an independent adult

Strategies for Persistence
- Making it all fit
- Finding balance

Outcomes of Persistence
- Realizing progress toward future goals
- Improving quality of life
- Sense of accomplishment and pride
- Becoming a role model

Intervening Conditions of Persistence
- Peer Support
- Personal Issues
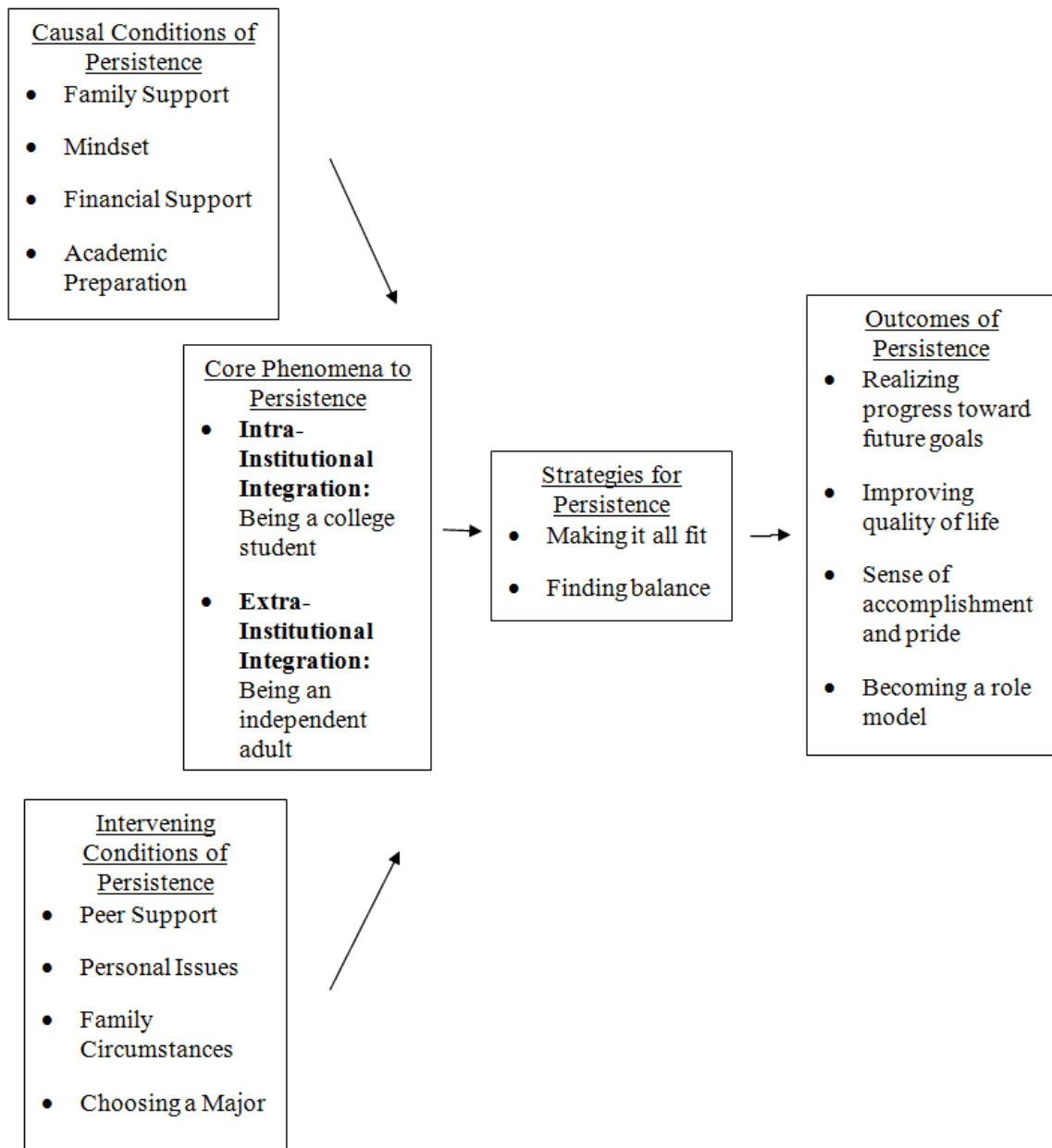- Family Circumstances
- Choosing a Major

Figure 5. Knaggs' Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration Model of Persistence for Low-SES College Students.

Table 4.

Alignment of Research Questions to Results.

Research Questions	Results
1) What theory explains how students of low-SES are able (or not able) to persist in higher education?	
a) How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold?	**Causal conditions**: family support, mindset, financial support, academic preparation
b) What are the major events of benchmarks in this process?	**Intervening Conditions**: peer support, personal issues, family circumstances, choosing a major **Central/Core Phenomena**: being a college student and an independent adult
c) Who were the important participants in this process, and how were they involved?	**Causal Conditions**: Family support, academic preparation **Intervening Conditions**: peer support **Central/Core Phenomena**: being a college student (faculty, advisors, counselors)
d) What were the obstacles to persistence?	**Intervening Conditions**: personal issues, family circumstances, choosing a major **Central/Core Phenomena**: being a college student (academic struggles, social isolation, financial aid issues); being an independent adult (handling finances, working)
e) What strategies were used to overcome obstacles?	**Strategies**: making it all fit, finding balance
f) What were the outcomes of the process?	**Outcomes**: realizing progress toward future goals, improving quality of life, sense of pride, becoming a role model

Causal Conditions of Persistence

Four different types of causal conditions emerged from the data, all considered

motivators to the phenomenological experiences of college persistence for the

participants. The causal conditions were a) family support, b) mindset, c) financial

support, and d) academic preparation, listed in order of relative importance to participants. Importance was determined based on the number of times a particular condition was mentioned by the overall group of participants included in this study. Support could be classified as extrinsic motivation, as this motivation is coming from the actions of others outside the participant, while mindset can be considered intrinsic motivation, as it originates from inside the student. Therefore, the causal conditions are a combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational forces that orient the participant toward pursuing a college education.

Family support. Participants in this study strongly communicated the importance of support in their lives as a precipitating factor for college attendance and persistence. The type of support communicated most often, over 50 times in the transcripts, and described by participants as being most influential was family support. For participants, family support that made it an expectation for them to go to college was most significant to them, regardless of whether their family members had attended college themselves. In fact, the expectation to go to college was communicated a total of twenty-four times by participants. Sara explained that "there was no way I was not going to college! That was out of the question.", and Tim stated simply that if he were not to attend college, "my mom would kill me". The expectation to go to college was communicated very clearly to Tim and Sara, although neither of them had parents that had attended college. For some participants, the high educational expectations started at a much younger age. For example, Andy explained, "my family kept talking to me about values on a daily basis, and they would ask me about situations at school. This shows they care". Not only did they encourage and support Andy, but his family expected him to engage in behaviors

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that would lead to college, and ultimately lead to his success in college. Stephen elaborated a bit regarding his parents' early educational expectations: "It wasn't an option to get bad grades in like elementary and junior high school. I would get in trouble. And I would get rewarded for good grades…Education is the most important thing to my family." Once again, we see family members recognizing the importance of education to the future, and this started with the encouragement, emotional support, and high expectations that were needed to help students achieve this goal in life.

Participants mentioned family support in the form of encouragement and emotional support on fifteen separate occasions; for example Jackie shared the importance of encouragement from her grandmother: "She has been my supporter of school…none of her children went to school, and she I think saw how that influenced their lives…I could get an 'A' on a paper I wrote, and she's still happy, you know? Cheering for the underdog, and she really loves it." Having a family that provides encouragement was a frequent sentiment of participants: "definitely my parents, they're definitely proud that I'm still in school. It's nice to hear their feedback on what I'm doing" and "the support of my family that knows I'm doing good, and want me to achieve all the goals I've set out for." Many participants felt that their family was proud of their accomplishments, and made this family pride known to the students.

Jim mentioned that his family has "my back when I'm feeling a little stressed", expressing the strong emotional support that he received from them. Another participant, Nate, described the special support he receives from his brother:

> My brother is probably my biggest supporter in college. He basically
> influences me and makes sure I'm doing everything I can to stay in
> college, cause he's 24, and I'm 21…he was supposed to go to college, and

his transcripts got messed up, and he just shut down. He didn't want to go anymore, but he's my biggest supporter.

Although Nate's brother was not able to fulfill his own educational goals, he had basically taken Nate under his wing, so he would not encounter the same pitfalls. In all cases described above, the participants had family members that valued education, saw it as an asset to the future of the participant, and therefore, provided both encouragement and emotional support for these college students, even if the family could not model the behavior for the students.

Family support in the form of high expectations, encouragement, and emotional support then translated into the motivation to pursue higher education for many participants. Participants communicated clearly that a strong motivating factor for many of them was to live up to the expectations that family and teachers had for them; for example, Jackie described her college experience as "living to the expectation." Eric shared the following goal for himself: "my dad didn't even finish high school, so kind of to impress my parents, and honor my grandpa who passed away. He told me, don't stop until you get a doctorate." Katie shared, "I don't want to disappoint my parents, that's mainly what it is." Andrea also added another dimension to this sentiment: "the money my parents paid, I don't want them to look back and think that they wasted it, either…cause like I said it was more challenging for them to put me through school than I could ever imagine." For Andrea, the disappointment was tied to the financial sacrifices that her parents made, which made the desire to complete college for her even stronger.

While it was not typical for this group of low-SES students, several participants were able to find role models in their family who could provide support as well as act as

an example, since the role model had or was currently attending college. A family role model was mentioned nine times in the transcripts. Some had a parent who attended or was currently attending college, and often had to work full-time and raise a family at the same time. For example, Alisa expressed the awe she felt for her mom, who seemed capable of doing it all: "She's been such a great support, and she's running a company, she's going to school full-time, and she has five kids that are all in sports, so she is working really hard, and she's just like an inspiration for me…I can't say I'm not able to, or that it'd be too hard. It's not too hard, if she can do it, I can do it." Stephen also described how both of his parents had college degrees, and this had helped him to see the importance of his own education. Another participant, Brianna, had a brother who had "paved the way": "he had a really bad GPA, but then senior year he got straight As, and then went on to college, so just like that, taking that on, going from a low GPA, showing me…you can do it, from the bottom up, so that was pretty cool to see that." Brianna saw that college was possible, even for someone who had struggled, so if he could do it, and excel at it, so could she. Brianna also had more distant relatives that served as role models for her educational endeavors: "I have family who are like doctors, and all these professionals, but they are in El Salvador. So, seeing my family outside of the U.S. excelling like that, it's just like, well I guess I can do it too".

Mindset. Participants also seemed to recognize the importance of intrinsic motivation in their pursuit of post-secondary education, as they mentioned the importance of possessing a college-oriented mindset ten times. As Nate described succinctly, "you just gotta want to, cause even if you have the friends and family to support you, if you don't want it yourself, it doesn't matter if they push you." Several participants described

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this mindset as something that had always been with them, like a personality trait. Eric stated the following reason why he was still in school: "probably my determination, cause I'm a person that once I start something, I don't want to finish it till it's over…I don't give up on things. I like high school, and I like college…I don't skip class ever, and even when I know it's an optional day, I'll still go, I don't mind school." Similarly, Andy shared the following: "I was not easily influenced and I really wanted to go to college and no one was going to stop me from doing that. I set a goal." Stephen shared a similar sentiment: "It's just kind of my ethic, I guess, um, you go to school. I get on my friends all the time about not going to school. College isn't something you should try to do, it's something—in my opinion, it should be a state-mandated thing, like high school. That's just how it is." Obviously, these and other students had a determination that kept them focused on pursuing higher education, even if friends and family did not support them.

With this strong and focused mindset also came a desire to really maximize the college experience, as this was mentioned twelve times by participants. After all, they were not just there to go, or because others wanted them to go, they were there because they personally wanted a college education, and a degree. This personal desire helped them to get as much out of their educational experience as possible. Jackie explained, "that's why I'm in school now…to gain all that it has to give me…it's like if I don't work hard and I don't get the knowledge I need out of this, it's not going to benefit my life, and that's what it's for, so it really pushes me to get all I can out of it." Theresa found strength in the same desire and drive of her college peers: "everyone's there because they want to be, everyone's there to learn…with the same goals in life".

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However, participants also recognized on nine separate occasions that they seemed to possess more internal drive and intrinsic motivation to have success in college than some of their classmates. Tabitha found that her desire to maximize her experiences often meant that she was willing to take on a lot academically, sometimes more than others: "I am more willing to take 80% of the work and split 10% and 10%, just because I want to know that it's going to be done to the full extent. I feel as if I am definitely more willing to put work in than other people who might just be there---they're not accountable for very much". Jackie identified a relationship that many participants in this study echoed: students of higher socio-economic status often lacked or possessed less intrinsic motivation than students of lower-SES in college. This relationship appeared in the transcripts eight times. Jackie explains,

> I think a lot of kids have that, just get an A [mentality], they just fell into college, especially if they're just kind of there because their parents went to college, and their parents are paying for their college, they're not always trying to learn from it, they're not trying to get the most knowledge out of their classes, they don't always read their books, they're just trying to pass.

Andy shared a very personal experience he had with a roommate during his freshman year:

> I think it's more about mindset. I had a roommate where his mom was a doctor, but he barely went to class…he ended up doing bad because he didn't have a work ethic…he came to college and he barely went to class, all he did was live in the dorms. He's paying 15 grand a year, that's okay…being privileged does play a part, but it's really your mindset and your work ethic

The statements described above show that although being privileged can provide some advantages to college persistence, such as more support or role models, a certain type of mindset was necessary for college persistence and college success as well.

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Moreover, many of the students interviewed saw that their less-privileged background gave them a distinct advantage with regard to mindset: they wanted it more, they saw college as an opportunity to better their life and therefore, doing well and persisting, became that much more important to them.

Financial support. Participants shared on eleven separate occasions that without significant financial assistance, college attendance would not be possible. Most received significant aid through their institution. Jim mentioned receiving the GEAR UP scholarship at his high school. Fortunately, both four-year institutions that participants attended offer a full-tuition scholarship to students from their urban district that met GPA and ACT cut-off scores, and eight participants mentioned receiving this scholarship. Others were able to make college financially feasible through a combination of other scholarships and loans, and by working. Eric described the importance of the full-tuition scholarship he received: "I was very fortunate cause I was just juggling through community colleges to see what I wanted, and then when that [the scholarship] came out I was like well I want to go to a four-year, so I took advantage of that." For many participants, this scholarship made going to a four-year college, as opposed to a two-year college, possible.

Academic preparation. Another common thread among participants, mentioned seven times in the transcripts, was the fact that they challenged themselves academically in high school. Most shared that they were in Honors classes, and Jackie started taking Post-Secondary Option (PSO) classes, which are college classes made available to high-school students at a local college. Jackie took advantage of this academic opportunity in high school because of the encouragement of a high school teacher:

I had a teacher in high school my sophomore year, and he pushed me into the PSO program…he said, you know Jackie, you could do this, and you're mature enough, you're smart enough, you can handle the amount of course load they're going to give you, and he just knew I could do it, and I was like, okay I guess I will…if I hadn't done that, I don't know how successful I would have been. That really was a jump start for me…they give you all the things you need except transportation, and I was like, I got that, I can do it if they give me everything else…it was an awesome experience…

Jackie recognized the benefits to taking college courses through the PSO program this early, as it gave her time to get used to college expectations and experience college culture much earlier than her peers, making her ultimate transition into college that much easier: "it [PSO classes] made me understand the way college worked, and the way I should interact with professors and other students, and class size, I didn't understand how different it would be…I need to focus more on exams and the syllabus…that word, I had no idea what it meant." Thus, Jackie benefited not only academically, but it also provided her with an opportunity to get acquainted with college culture and expectations. No other student interviewed for this study mentioned taking PSO classes in high school.

Similarly, Andy spoke enthusiastically about the benefits he received from participating in an Upward Bound program at the local university: "Upward Bound program, they exposed me to a lot, things like colleges, and showed me that this is what you can have if you go to college and graduate from college. That's what you want, basically". This program required that Andy commute to and from the university for classes designed for high-school students, much like Jackie did for the PSO college classes.

Another student, Stephen, actually was able to change schools within his district, with his family's help, in order to receive a better academic foundation for college:

I originally went to [his first high school], and I transferred to [another high school] my junior year, and the workload between [the two schools] was even different. [At the first high school]—it was just impossible to have a class there. There were too many distractions. After the neo-Nazi riots happened, they had metal detectors every morning, you literally could not go to a first-period class, so I really didn't take Algebra, cause I was like waiting for the metal detector, and we'd have like 5 minutes of class and the bell would ring. It was pretty bad. And then I moved in to help take care of my grandpa on [a different region of the city] and transferred to [another high school in the same district].

The participants showed through their desire to take challenging coursework, and actions like Jackie and Stephen to improve and enrich their academic experiences show that being prepared for college was a priority for them.

Intervening Conditions of College Persistence

Intervening conditions, which are general and broad conditions that influence the core phenomena for low-SES college students, were also present. Intervening conditions, in order of most commonly mentioned, included a) peer support, b) family issues, c) personal issues, and d) major choice. The first and most significant condition, peer influence, as it was mentioned most often by participants, can be considered a motivator to persistence, while the next two conditions: family and personal issues, can be consider stressors. The last condition, major choice, served as a stressor prior to a student making the major choice, and a motivator once an appropriate major choice was found.

Peer support. Participants found social support through friends who were educationally likeminded, thus minimizing or eliminating stress, particularly during the transition into college. Such peer support was mentioned a total of twenty-four times in the transcripts. For example, Theresa shared the following: "the group of friends I had in high school were very dedicated to their education, we were all in Honors classes,

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graduated top ten, and a lot of that helped to kind of give me that push to go forward with my education, and stay in it." Participants mentioned twelve times that they received similar academic-peer support. Likewise, Nate shared that he had decided to room with a friend from high school, and this helped provide him with social support in college. Social-peer support was mentioned eleven times in the transcripts by students. Theresa, Nate, and others who had likeminded friends were able to find role models and motivation from peers, particularly if they did not have them in their family.

Personal issues. First and foremost in the minds of almost all participants were the stresses associated with supporting oneself as an adult and a college student, as it was mentioned by participants eighteen times. These money stresses served to complicate the already stressful experience of being a college student. Sara shared her many worries as a college student: "I would have to worry about my loans and worry about my scholarships and worry about how I'm going to be able to pay for school next year, my books…". Alex shared how stressful money issues outside of college expenses can be: "For me, like I have to pay my own bills and make sure I still have money in my pocket, [other college students might not] have that, they get less stressed and have to worry about that". In addition one student, Andrea, experienced illness, which sometimes made her miss classes, and this impacted her academic performance as well.

Family circumstances. In addition to the academic stresses that come with college, and the personal stresses of money and potentially illness, some participants also expressed stressful-family situations that affected their education in one way or another. The types of family circumstances mentioned a majority of the participants (53%, $n=10$) were varied: money stresses at home affected several participants (21%, $n=4$), three

(16%) mentioned family illnesses, two (11%) participants' families experienced a death, one (5%) dealt with a parent in prison, and one (5%) had a sister who was attempting to flee an abusive relationship. Jackie had to handle her father's death and her grandmother's illness while in school, while both Sara and Andrea were emotionally burdened by a family-job loss, and extreme family-financial stresses. Both were displaced as their parents fought foreclosure of their own homes. Andy had a death in the family, and he shared how this experience affected him: "my little cousin passed away, he was four years old, had to re-gather myself because I still have my little brother, in my mind I won't stop what I'm doing, what I'm achieving while I have my little brother right here". Stephen helped his parents take care of his ill grandfather, and Anna had to move back home to take care of her younger sister due to the fact that her mother had returned to prison. Such stressful-family circumstances no doubt impacted both academic performance and progress for students, and determined what coping strategies were needed to deal with such stress.

Major choice. Participants declared a variety of majors at their institutions. The most popular major was nursing, with five (26%) participants declaring it, followed by Exercise Science (16%, $n=3$), Criminal Justice (11%, $n=2$), Business (11%, $n=2$), and Education (11%, $n=2$). Other majors represented by one participant each were Engineering, Biology, Sociology, Accounting, and Information Systems.

For some participants, the process of selecting a major was at times stressful, and sometimes was necessary for them to find the motivation they needed to succeed academically. Participants mentioned the process of choosing a major as significant to their college persistence eight times in the transcripts. Theresa explained that before she

found her major, she was "not sure exactly what I wanted…like not caring." Hope

shared, "I have always struggled at University A because they didn't have the major I

wanted to go into…so a lot of the courses I took weren't really courses I was interested

in." This serves as another example of poor student-college fit, which eventually led to

the student transferring out. Eric described a similar experience:

> I couldn't figure out what major I wanted to be in…for a while I didn't
> even know if college was right for me…it just wasn't interesting me. I
> couldn't find something I wanted to do, but then when you take just one of
> those random classes, and all of a sudden you find something that clicks
> and you just fall into it.

Stephen found motivation in a minor at his institution until he decided what he wanted

his major to be:

> I also have a minor in Music Technology that I've already completed, so, I
> spent my first two years completing that minor, cause after I switched
> majors I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to do, so I said, well I wanna
> do this as a minor, got that out of the way, and by the end had decided
> what I wanted to do.

These experiences show just how important choosing a motivating major can be for the

phenomenon of low-SES college student persistence.

Central Phenomena to Persistence

The causal conditions—support, mindset, and preparation resulted in the

development of two closely-related core categories of phenomena for participants: a)

intra-institutional integration: Being a college student and b) extra-institutional

integration: being an independent adult. Being a college student means experiencing the

college culture and all of the experiences and expectations that originate from inside the

post-secondary institution that participants attended. This is considered to be intra-

institutional integration because all of the cultural experiences and experiences originate from inside the higher education institution itself. Being an independent adult explores all those additional experiences and expectations that come with the experience of moving out and supporting oneself. In this model, the process of learning the outside culture and expectations of adulthood is referred to as extra-institutional integration because those experiences originate from outside of the institution, yet can impact persistence of the college student.

Intra-institutional integration: Being a college student. Participants expressed some widely differing experiences when it came to being a college student and experiencing college culture, which ranged from complete culture shock to cultural acceptance and integration. I attempt to represent all types of participant experiences in this section.

Culture shock. Participants mentioned experiencing some type of culture shock fifty times in the transcripts, but also mentioned experiences of cultural integration an additional fifty times, so it was very common for students to experience both, and transition from shock to integration over time. I communicate all of the varied experiences presented by participants with examples of each, but first I provide some contextual information regarding the college experience for the participants included in this study.

Participants had all completed between 27- and 128-credit hours, with four (21%) completing between 0-50 credit hours, eight (42%) completing between 50-100-credit hours, and five (26%) completing over 100-credit hours. To put this into perspective, a typical Bachelor's degree program requires the completion of between 124-128-credit

hours, and two participants were already in this range, having completed 127- and 128-credit hours. Two participants did not specify a credit-hour completion number.

The majority of participants (68%, *n*=13) responded on the Initial Survey that they had attended one school, while six (32%) had attended two different schools. However, for five of the six students (83%) who had attended two institutions, their second school was a local community college, where they would pick up extra classes for a more-affordable price, primarily in the summer. One participant (5%) had attended two different institutions, and was in the process of transferring to a third due to a family issue: her mother was in prison, and she needed to return home to take care of her sister, who was still in high school. Another participant (5%) had attended three institutions and was in the process of transferring to a fourth due to money and family issues: she had unpaid tuition bills that prevented her from returning to her former institutions, her family had recently been experiencing serious-financial issues that forced her to take on the entire expense of her education, and her sister had been involved in an abusive relationship that forced her to return home to help out. Anna described the extraordinary financial circumstances of her family: "my dad had lost his job, cause he's an iron worker, and there's not always work, but…they were facing foreclosure… so they couldn't really afford to help at that point, so yeah, it was less money, but it was a lot more responsibility on me, so… financially I had to take off semesters…" Except in these exceptional circumstances, most participants remained with their original institution, which created a relatively stable-educational experience.

Institutional stressors. For four (21%) participants, the college environment was not what they expected. Tabitha shared, "the environment wasn't very welcoming to me,"

and she felt she experienced discrimination, so she decided to transfer, which actually resulted in her taking a break and returning to another school once she was able to save up some more money. Tabitha's experience is an example of poor student-college fit. Other participants described the college environment as "intimidating" and "hectic". Participants expressed frustration on nine-separate occasions in the transcripts when it came to finding support on campus. Sara explained, "Inside the institution, I feel like I would go for help, but they [the professors] would tell me the same thing over, so I would be at a loss." Andy described a frustrating ordeal he had with one of his professors during his freshman year:

> The teachers, I didn't like some of them, they would just keep me from achieving. One teacher, she would always try to talk down on me, tell me I was late or that I missed several classes. She let someone sleep in her class and she said that wasn't allowed. I was looking at her and she came over to me and kicked me out, cause she said I was sleeping in class. I clearly was not sleeping, cause I was looking dead at her...We had a project due that day in class, and I couldn't turn my project in cause she kicked me out. So, I tried to turn it in to her later, I put it in her mailbox, the only thing that was in her mailbox—she told me she didn't have it, how can she not have it when I put it in her mailbox?

Katie told the story of a friend who had a similar experience to Andy's, and became so discouraged with a particular course that he quit school. Eric shared a story of his brother who had transcript issues at his institution, and finally just gave up. Whether this lack of support on the part of professors at the institution was real or perceived, the participants who shared these experiences were clearly frustrated and discouraged by their experiences, which are ultimately detrimental to persistence.

There were other institutional frustrations that participants described regarding services on campus, mentioned seven times by students. Amy brought up the issues of

parking that she encountered as a freshman: "I would keep getting tickets, and I did not understand why…no one had told me where I could park." However, the most frequent and detrimental frustrations came from issues regarding financial-aid awards. Nate described a financial-aid ordeal that threatened his academic progress:

> There was a big three- or four-month block that my financial aid did not go through, and they were threatening to kick me out because I wasn't paying my tuition. I can't give you $5,000 I don't have…that was very stressful, everyday having that worry on my shoulders, cause I couldn't schedule my classes, worrying about whether I was going to get the classes I needed…it was finally November that I finally got it, cause they put a new system in and everything was denied. It shouldn't be that way.

Nate's institution was able to put him on a payment plan, and he could register for and attend classes until the aid went through, so he did not have to take off a semester of school. Carrie also had a similar frustrating issue with her financial aid:

> I'm in the nursing program, and I've been trying to fit in as many classes as I could before I got into the program, and so I had to go every semester, and they wouldn't split up my loans and my financial aid right, so you know, there was one semester where I told them I did not want any financial aid for the summer, I'd pay for it myself, and they still put it on there, and then fall came and I owed them $900.00. It was just a big mess.

Carrie was able to come up with the extra money, so she too did not have to take a semester off. However, Stephen's financial-aid experience did force him to stop and return, once he was able to get his finances back in order:

> The biggest challenge I had was there was a big financial-aid issue I had, where they gave me too much of a refund. I bought a car and I actually had to miss a whole semester of school and go work at Office Max, and my whole paycheck went to paying it off, and that forced me to move back in with my parents…I had to drop the [apartment] lease and—it was a big mess.

It is disturbing that out of the nineteen participants included in this study, three had such catastrophic financial-aid experiences, and it makes one wonder how often these issues happen, and how many students are unable to recover from them and return to school. Although it may seem that Carrie and Stephen should have been keeping track of their aid, and therefore should have known if more aid was being given out then necessary, we must remember that for most college students, they have never handled their own finances before, let alone the enormous amounts of money that are needed to pay for tuition and books. Three participants acknowledged that they had entered college without a real grasp on the true cost of a college education: "I had never seen that amount of money before," Jackie stated, and Sara also shared, "not realizing how much college was, and how much I had to pay for…I got scholarships, but at the same time it wasn't enough…I really didn't think things through at the time…I wasn't prepared for how much it was going to be." The overwhelming cost of a college education, coupled with the complex-aid packages that many student receive, can be enough to confuse many students. Therefore, if mistakes are made on the part of the institution regarding aid disbursal, students may be oblivious to this until the mistake is caught, and they find themselves responsible for a huge bill for which they had not budgeted.

Academic Stressors. Besides grappling with the institutional challenges described above, participants also came to the realization once they started college that they had not been as well academically prepared by their high school experiences as they had thought, despite taking Honors-level and other challenging courses. Inadequate-academic preparation emerged eight times from the transcripts. Tim described this realization about his own academic preparation during his freshman year:

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> For one coming from [his high school], like, it's a really good school to graduate from, but I feel like it's like thing is to get you through high school, and not really prepare you for college, so I mean my four years at [his high school] I probably wrote like four papers, and my first semester at [University A] I wrote like, almost fifteen.

Stephen, who had originally stated at another high school in the district, went on to describe that although his new school was better than his original high school, it still did not challenge him academically: "There was no workload. I was in all Honors classes, I graduated with a 3.7 on the Honors scale…and I breezed through school, I didn't even try. I would do my homework in class before it was over, I would come to school and not pay attention and just get A's."

Nate, another student who challenged himself with Honors-level classes in high school, shared how his weak-academic preparation led to a rude awakening during his first year of college: "First semester freshman year was rough…I underestimated it. I went in thinking that I was going to take it like I did in high school, just breeze through, get As and not even really try. Got my first 2.0 of my life…I was stressed cause of the poor grades." Eric, another Honors student, shared a similar story: "it was very stressful…It seems as if I was not pushed enough at [my high school]. You get hit with reality, how tough it is, how much you have to read and do all your studying." Unfortunately, even though many of the participants tried to challenge themselves academically at their high school, the best courses it had to offer were not enough to adequately prepare them for college studies, as participants mentioned eight times that they had erroneously underestimated college-academic expectations. Jackie was more prepared, as mentioned earlier, as she began taking college-level classes as a sophomore at a local institution through the PSO program.

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There were a few exceptions to this feeling of weak-academic preparation by the study participants. Six students expressed that their high school had indeed prepared them academically for college, and provided them with the academic capital to have success in college. Brianna expressed that she felt she was "prepared [academically] for college", as did Shandra: "I think my high school prepared me pretty well", but it should be noted that these were exceptions to the experiences of the majority of students interviewed in this study.

Social stressors. Coupled with the environmental and institutional challenges described above, participants also acknowledged sixteen times the social isolation of college for them, particularly during their freshman year. Tim addressed this in his interview: "coming from [his high school], you really don't see a lot of...like your friends don't go, so you go to college not really knowing a lot of people, cause like from [his high school] I think there are only like 6 left out of the 20 or so that went." Shandra also stated, "a lot of my friends got pregnant and then stopped going…they thought it was going to be easy," and Andy shared the following: "out of my friends, I am the only one that graduated high school…the rest I grew up with dropped out and went on the street."

Participants stated that they became more distanced from their former friends, and this was difficult for them. Andy described this challenge for him: "I feel like I lost focus, then with personal stuff because I lost a couple of friends, we just stopped hanging out, and that kind of took a toll on me." Although this process seemed to happen against Andy's will, Nate acknowledged that he had to distance himself from a former friend purposefully:

> He [a former friend making poor life choices] would try and contact me,
> but I—my sister's fiancée told me to 'trim the fat' in my life because

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being around that activity, whether you want to admit it or not, you're
going to end up being brought down…cause if they have a poor attitude
it's going to wear off on you.

Stephen shared a similar experience:

I have a lot of friends, who are like twenty, and they live with their
parents, they don't have a job, they just sit at home all day. And those are
all the kids, like my good friends from high school are all like that and
I've kind of distanced myself from them, cause it just brings me down.

Friends from home who had decided not to pursue higher education and were making

very different life choices were liabilities for this particular group of low-SES students.

Three participants also expressed feelings of isolation from their family as well,

particularly those who started at a more remote institution. Andrea shared, "and that was

hard, I've never been that far from my parents…I didn't know a lot of people, and it was

far from home." This isolation was too much for Andrea, who eventually transferred to

an institution closer to home, and thus was a better fit for her. Jackie also expressed not

physical isolation, but isolation from her family due to their inability to help her or relate

to her college experiences: "My family had no advice. They'd never been to college; I

didn't know who to talk to about that." Most participants (68%, n=13) were first-

generation college students, eleven of those students were the first to ever go to college in

their family, and an additional three participants had a parent who was currently in

college. Therefore, most participants lacked educational-role models in their family, and

the resulting guidance that would come from a family member who had already obtained

a college degree.

Andrea, who was transferring to her fourth institution, and Anna, who was

transferring to her third, both expressed the isolation and disconnect with their

institutions that they were not able to overcome. Andrea explained this isolation: "I didn't know I lot of people, like it was far away from home, so at first it was scary." Even when she transferred to her third institution, where she did know some students, the isolation persisted: "it always seemed like, even transferring in, like a lot of the friends that I had at [the institution], you know, there was still always that distance, so I always felt like one out of a lot." Andrea is an example of a student who was unable to find the support she needed to minimize or compensate for social isolation, thus she was in the process of transferring to her fourth institution, and her academic progress had been impeded as a result. Although she graduated in 2008 from high school, she had only earned 28-credits toward her degree, due to her frequent transfers and breaks she had taken while in college.

Cultural Integration. In contrast to many of the above experiences, participants were also able to express the ability to integrate into college culture, either initially or after a transition period, as often as they mentioned feelings of culture shock. Participants perceived the environment of their institution much differently than the students described above. Students commented nine times on their institution's positive atmosphere, and described it as welcoming, friendly, diverse, helpful, and even amazing. Theresa explained, "the environment is really helpful and everyone just seems to want to be friendly…the morale there is very high, so it's a fun place to be at school." Two participants described the benefits to living in the dorms in terms of being involved in campus culture. Andrea described the dorms as "actually interesting…I had a learning community, so a lot of students that were in the same classes as me were in the same dorm as me, so I was able to have at least a little community there, at least studying-

wise." Andrea, like some other participants, described both feelings of both culture shock and cultural integration throughout her interview, which shows the complexity of feelings that can emerge during the transition into college. Therefore, students could feel integrated in some ways, such as through a dorm experience, but isolated in others ways, such as from family or former friends.

Institutional and academic support. Participants also mentioned twenty-four times the support they received from programs within their institution. For example, Sara described a mentoring, academic, and social-support program she discovered for Hispanic students at her institution: "the PRIMOS program was a big help, too, cause I got to know people who were able to help me". Katie found an academic program in her discipline that became a major motivating factor for her persistence: "I was mostly doing part of the day camp [teaching] program, but they're really big on keeping you in school, especially here. We've got a big family atmosphere. Anything you need help with, you know you can go to anybody in camp and they will try to help you as much as possible". Andrea mentioned the benefits of belonging to a learning community in her dorm at her previous institution: "a lot of the students that were in the same classes as me were in the same dorm as me, so I was able to have at least a little community there, studying wise." Andrea was also required to use academic services due to a special scholarship she received as an incoming freshman: "we like had Study Table where we had to like physically clock ourselves in at the library, clock out, and you know sit, study, and it would be verified, so you know at least then I was—had to study, you know". Although technically Andrea was forced to use this academic service, she also seemed to recognize

how it helped her, though not enough to persist at this particular institution past her freshman year.

To counter the descriptions given here, Hope expressed her avoidance of using academic services at University B, even though she was struggling in a math class: "I know that for a fact that I was one of those students who was offered tutoring, who knew about the math lab, but failed calculus twice, and who, like who—I don't know—I struggled in school and there were ways that I could have struggled less, and I didn't— didn't grab those opportunities". When asked why she didn't take advantage of the services she needed, Hope could not answer, but it potentially may be related to her earlier comment about lack of motivation due to the inability to find a major she liked at University B.

Many participants, in contrast to the few described earlier, also expressed how helpful their professors were, particularly if they had a question. In fact, there were eleven instances in the transcripts where participants described professors as helpful and supportive. Amy summarized the sentiments of these participants who discussed the help they received from professors:

> I would say to the teachers—they've been very helpful. This past semester, I took public health, and she told us not to be afraid to go out there. She helped us enhance our resumes…but the teachers they say not to be afraid to approach them. You can come to them during office hours, e-mail them, or they have extra sessions for some of the harder classes, so that was pretty helpful, too.

This runs counter to the experiences of the two students described in the previous section, and again highlights the variation of experiences for low-SES students in college.

Social support. There were also six instances in the transcripts where participants favorably mentioned the support they received from institutional advisors and mentors. Andrea, for example, mentioned how helpful her mentor was during her freshman year. Although she had since transferred from the institution, she still maintained contact: "mentors that I've had, cause I'm still in contact with my mentor from [her previous institution], she's a grad student right now. I mean that's nice to have people who understand… their support gives me support in myself". Carrie had a similarly positive experience with her advisor: "my advisor too, she's been very helpful. Even when I was having second thoughts about nursing, she kind of you know supported me and showed me other options, and kind of helped me fit my own plan."

Extra-institutional integration: Being an independent adult. As students embarked on the new academic experiences of college, many were also transitioning into adulthood and financial independence, as for many their families could not support them beyond high school graduation. With this financial independence came some enormous responsibilities beyond the typical-academic responsibilities of college. The enormous responsibilities of being a financially-independent adult were mentioned by participants a total of nineteen times, clearly a significant factor in their experience as a college student. Many students had to move out of their homes, and for some this transition was challenging. Two participants expressed the fact that they became displaced, essentially moving between the homes of various family members and friends throughout the school year. Sara explained,

> I wasn't living at home, I was living with my aunt, but I would never be at
> home…for a while I was kinda homeless cause, like family-wise, and it
> was kind of hard sometimes, cause I needed my family there… I moved in

with my dad, it's more stable you know. Um, I don't feel like I'm such a burden, cause it's my own dad.

Theresa described a similar situation:

> My parents moved [to Cincinnati], so I lived in my dorm, and then I left my dorm, and I kind of rotate houses where I stay, so kind of the housing situation has affected my college. I stay with different family members that are close to campus…just jumping from place to place definitely impacted my difficulties in going to school, and also working.

Several other students lived in the dorms, and this helped to ease the financial burdens, since room and board costs were often covered through financial aid. However, a majority of participants were living off-campus, and were working long hours to pay for rent, school, books, food, and other living expenses. Sixteen participants worked, and four of these worked full-time hours, while also going to school full-time. Theresa explained just how crazy her schedule was for a while: "at one point I was working third shift, and then going right to class afterwards, so staying up 16-, 17-, 20-hours at a time, and then just sleeping a couple before I had to be back at work or back in class." Shandra described her three jobs, which amount to about 60-hours of work per week. She also shared an apartment and the rent with her mother, which helped her out financially. Nate explained that he worked 20-40-hours a week "just to make ends meet, pay for my own books, pay for tuition, food, all that." Jackie shared the response she got from high school friends and her family when it came to her responsibilities: "A lot of people thought it was, like, miraculous I was doing all this stuff, but, somehow it just fit in my life."

The additional burden of being an independent adult on top of being a college student highlighted to quite a few students the disadvantage they had, compared to those who came from more privileged backgrounds. Eight instances emerged from the

transcripts where participants discussed the academic disadvantage they had to those of higher-socio-economic status. Sara shared, "They have backgrounds where they are able to go for support, whereas like me, of course my mom is going to do anything she can to try to help me, but at the same time, it's going to hurt my family. So, I try not to rely on her too much." Both Andy and Tim pointed out how stressful having to worry about money is on as daily basis, and those who don't have that worry can concentrate more on their studying, so it gives them an academic advantage as well. Theresa echoed this belief:

> They were more laid back, and I was more high strung cause I had so much to do…I know with a lot of them, some would get the extra hours in for studying and get slightly better grades than me on certain things…feeling like they didn't have as much to worry about…I guess stress of having so much to do, so they were definitely more, like relaxed on exam days.

Having the additional-financial burden of being an independent adult definitely weighed heavily on the minds of the students interviewed in this study, which made finding a balance between the stressors and motivators in their lives that much more important.

Strategies for College Persistence

Considering the context and intervening conditions described above, the two core phenomena led to two-parallel strategies for college persistence: a) finding a balance between stressors and motivators and b) making it all fit.

Finding a balance. Imagine that the experience of becoming a college student and an independent adult is shaped by the many conditions described previously, and all conditions can be categorized as either helping or hindering the phenomenological experience of college persistence. The experiences that hinder college persistence can be

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called stressors, and those experiences that help encourage college persistence can be known collectively as motivators. The stressors that have been described include lack of support, poor academic foundation, and family circumstances. Motivation can be separated in to two sub-categories: extrinsic motivation, or support, and intrinsic motivation, such as mindset and goal orientation. Imagine that the phenomenological experience of college persistence for low-socio-economic status students is a teeter-totter, with one side of the teeter-totter representing persistence, and the other side representing dropping out. On the persistence side of the teeter-totter would sit the motivators, and on the side labeled stopping out would sit the stressors described previously. Motivators can be extrinsic, such as family, peer, and institutional support, or intrinsic, such as mindset and goal orientation toward a career or other future plans. Stressors include the financial issues, family issues, personal issues, institutional issues, and social-isolation issues described earlier. It is important to note that overall, participants mentioned motivational factors in their lives more than twice as often as stressors, and this illustrates the fact that students who persist must find enough motivators in their life to outweigh the inevitable stressors that come with being a college student, and often an independent adult. As long as students are able to create a balance where the motivators outweigh the stressors, then persistence can result. See Figure 6 for a pictorial representation of this description.

MOTIVATORS:

Extrinsic:
- Family support
- Financial support
- Academic preparation
- Peer support

Intrinsic:
- Mindset
- Choosing a major
- Progress toward goals
- Improving quality of life
- Sense of accomplishment
- Becoming a role model

STRESSORS:
Intra- and Extra-Institutional

DROPPING OUT

PERSISTENCE

MOTIVATORS:
Extrinsic and intrinsic

STRESSORS:

Intra-Institutional:
- Culture shock
- Academic responsibilities
- Lack of Institutional support
- Choosing a major

Extra-Institutional:
- Work Responsibilities
- Family Issues
- Personal Issues (money)
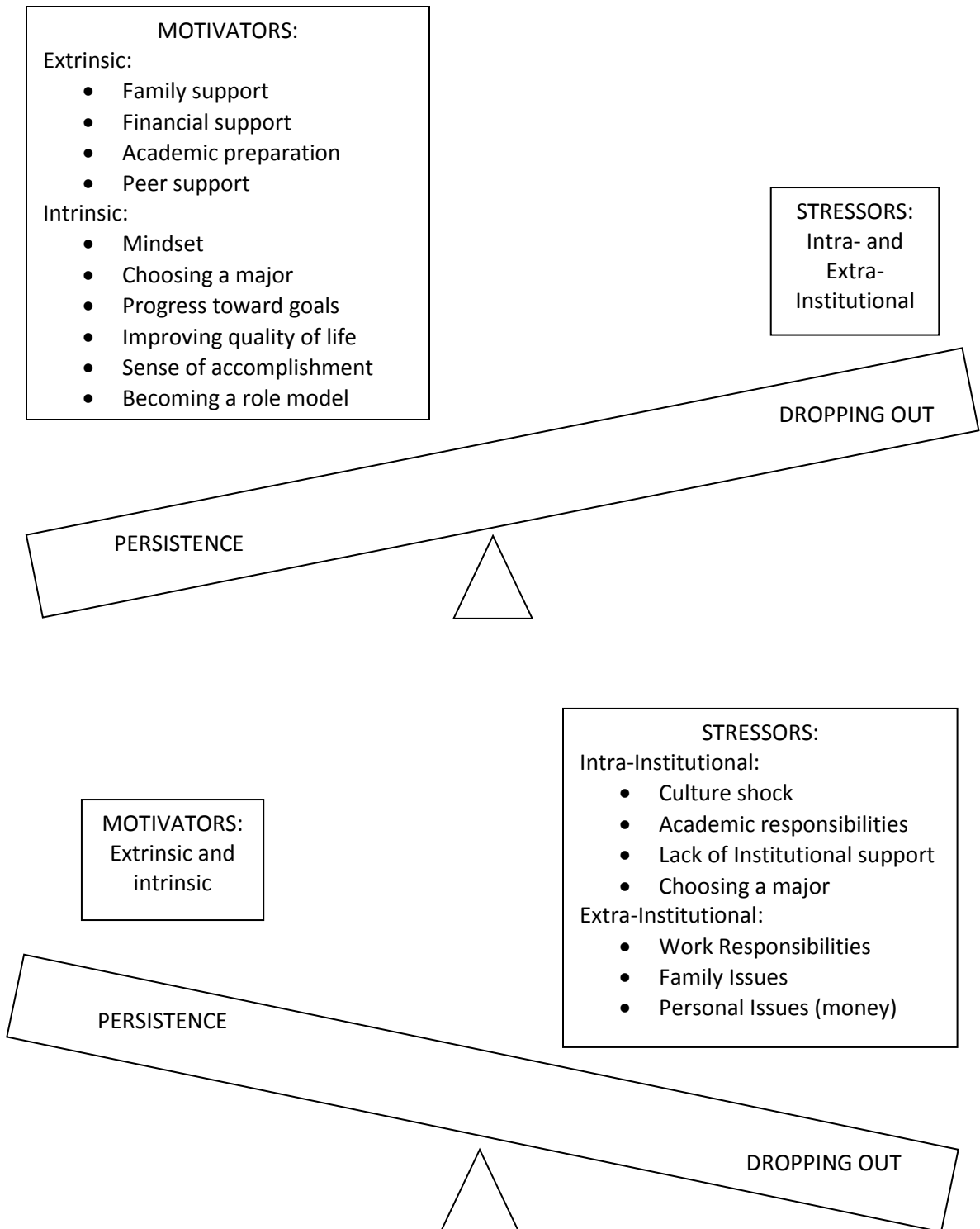
PERSISTENCE

DROPPING OUT

Figure 6. Pictorial representation of the phenomenological college experience of both persistence and dropping out for low-SES college students that emerged during theory development

In order to minimize academic stressors and receive additional support as needed, participants exhibited proactive behaviors that served to either prevent them from, or minimize experiencing academic challenges. For example, Jackie approached her professors and made sure that they knew her if she ever needed their assistance: "I just interacted with my professors a lot, and just said, hey I'm younger than a lot of the students, I just want to let you know that if I need help I'm going to come to you. I did, I talked to a lot of my professors, that was something my advisors had told me, so I did it and it seemed to work a lot." Alisa had a similar strategy that she used, particularly if she thought she might struggle in a course due to her test anxiety: "I make sure I e-mail the professors, or try to go over there and let them know. I try to show my professors that I am at least trying." Many of the eleven positive comments regarding professor support originated from these student proactive behaviors.

The participants who experienced academic struggles in college described the strategies they employed to improve their grades and to get back on track. For some, it was just a matter of finding the internal motivation, the focus, and the drive to improve their situation. Sara explained, "You have to keep telling yourself to keep trying…when you keep working like your grade changes in the other direction." Nate had to modify his behaviors in order to improve his grades: "I pretty much just made myself buckle down…how I studied to help me retain information more, and it just really helped", and so did Tim: "A lot of it was just me trying to tweak things a little bit, study habits, or how you go about writing papers, and the time you need for it."

Andy reached a point where he knew they couldn't do it on his own. He shared, "I came in [the tutoring center] and decided I needed to get help. It was draining, but I had

to do what I had to do. I was just scared out of my mind." For Andrea, it was a matter of discovering resources within the institution that could help her: "I've learned that there is a system that they've worked out in school, especially if people are not doing well there are programs, classes you can take, stuff like that." Sara found peers who could provide her with the academic support she did not find through her institution: "I would attend like the Tutoring Center, and it would seem like, it wasn't really helpful, so I actually had to go through friends to help me with my math class, um, and he was really helpful towards me." In all, there were twelve instances in the transcripts where participants mentioned using academic resources on campus.

Regarding college services, a majority (53%, $n=10$) took advantage of advising services, six (32%) participated in tutoring services (either receiving or giving), five (26%) used a writing center, four 21%) used counseling services, and three (16%) took advantage of mentoring services. Obviously, there may be significant overlap of services when it comes to advisors, mentors, and counselors, particularly because the type of counseling was not specified. The large numbers of students that also took advantage of advising, mentoring, and counseling services, as well as utilizing writing centers and other resources, shows that most participants were willing and able to receive guidance and help as needed.

Students also exhibited proactive behaviors by seeking out social experiences in the college environment in order to avoid the stressors that come with social isolation, and there were eleven examples of this shared by participants. Amy shared her college involvement experiences: "There were lots of things I could get involved in. My freshman year I was involved in the freshman-leadership program, and from that it

branched out into a whole bunch of different opportunities." This sentiment and enthusiasm to get involved was shared by several participants, and served to strengthen a strong supportive network for participants at their institution.

Making it all fit. A key strategy to college persistence for participants was finding the time to fit school, work, and leisure activities, and there was no magic formula for this balance, as it was different for every participant. Participants mentioned on eight occasions the strategies they employed to stay on top of their varied responsibilities as a college student and as an independent adult. On one side of the continuum is Shandra, who worked 60-hours a week at three jobs and went to school full-time: "I take most on-line classes now, and I only go for an hour, twice a week at school, so that helps a lot. I have three jobs now… I'm almost all on-line, so I never hang out at school, I'm barely ever there." Although it may seem to some that Shandra's life was very hectic and she lacked any type of connection to her college or to leisure activities, this balance seemed to work for her, and she communicated no regrets or displeasure with her current college experience. However, most participants had at least some college involvement and leisure activities in their life beyond just school and work, as described previously. Eric described why it was important for him to get involved: "I just like to stay involved with my friends, like playing intramurals. We have monthly cookouts and stuff. And people I knew freshman year still get together…Just staying involved and making sure that you don't stay in a room all the time and study…I feel that that's a big part of not going crazy." Most participants needed other outlets besides school and work to keep their sanity, and to achieve a healthy balance in their lives. That social outlet from school and work was essential for many participants to stay at an institution, but of course

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exceptions exist, like in Shandra's case. To find this balance, most participants needed to seek out and become involved in extracurricular activities.

Although most participants had to work, a majority of participants (79%, *n*=15) made the time to participate in at least one-extracurricular activity on campus, either currently or in the past. Six (32%) participants shared that they had participated in a Freshman-Orientation Program. Four (21%) participants played intramural sports, while three (16%) belonged to a sorority, three (16%) were in LGBT groups, two (11%) were in an Honors Society, two (11%) belonged to the Black- Student Union, and two (11%) belonged to the Latino-Student Union. Other extracurricular activities represented were the Engineering Council, the Kinesiology Club, the Freshman- Leadership Program, the Student-Nursing Association, Campus Ministry, and Chorus. It is interesting to note that several participants mentioned the challenges of being involved in particular extracurricular activities due to financial constraints, such as sororities and travel experiences, yet other students found a way to financially afford these opportunities. One (5%) participant, Katie, was involved in a program called Camp Adventure, which allowed her to travel to Japan and Italy to teach, with most expenses paid.

Meeting all the responsibilities of being a college student and an independent adult was often a challenge for students, and was often a source of stress for students. Jackie described the importance of "time management…I'm a procrastinator…I have to really push myself to be on my school work." Andrea also expressed her frustration for making everything fit: "you're only allotted so many hours every week for sleep and school and work." Students had to be able to prioritize properly in order to get it all done. Stephen shared how he had to really focus on what was most important to him as a

college student: "I guess I don't do anything but those three things now. I kinda pushed everything away, and it's like: band, school, work, that's all." This type of mature thinking was only possible if students remained unwaveringly focused on the prize, so to speak, or the degree, and the rewards that come with it, which is described next.

Consequences of Strategies Utilized by Participants

The strategies employed by participants have so far made them successful at persisting in college, and making progress toward their degree. The consequences or outcomes of the strategies employed are: a) improving quality of life, b) feeling a sense of accomplishment and pride, c) becoming a role model, and d) realizing progress toward future goals.

Developing clear and tangible goals for the future. Mentioned thirty-six times in the transcripts, the college experience seemed to have significantly helped students form clear, tangible, and specific-future goals regarding their career and future-educational endeavors. Although quite a few participants did not begin college with a clear major or career goal in mind, at some point these had been determined, and this was a clear outcome of the educational experience and college-persistence phenomenon. Participants expressed generally the importance of having a career, and doing something that they enjoyed in life, as many of the people around them did not have this. As Sara described,

> It seems natural to go to school and want to do something with your life. I mean, I guess I could do something with my life where I would just get by, but it's not what I would want to do…I like my work…but it's not what I want to do with my life, I'm not going to be happy with a job unless it's actually what I want to do. So it's definitely to fulfill my dreams.

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Amanda shared a similar sentiment: "a decent paying job, something I look forward to going to every day, something that I'm happy with until it's time for me to retire."

Career aspirations were the most significant factors in this outcome, with participants mentioning them nineteen times. The career goals of participants were often related to professional experiences that they had gained through research opportunities, practicums, or internships. When asked about her future-career goals, Theresa explained, "I would love to be a director of a wellness center for a hospital. I did my practicum hours in cardiology rehab, my internship this coming fall is at [a specific local business] for corporate fitness, but I would like to get my doctorate and direct wellness programs, help with the general population, and trying to get them into exercising." Andy shared his own future aspiration: "I want to have my own organization, a mentor group like Upward Bound…make it go nationally to have it that successful". Several other participants also expressed a similar desire to help others as being a driving force behind their career aspirations. Shandra shared, "I have a million things I want to do in life, so I picked Criminal Justice, and through that I've learned I want to work with kids. I want to help them when they get out of jail, help change their lives." Likewise, several students pursuing nursing degrees also shared their desire to help others through health care. Although the process of finding a major for some students was stressful, all participants had reached a point where they were able to articulate clear, tangible goals, and most also expressed enthusiasm and excitement for their future-career opportunities.

Improving quality of life for the future. Many participants saw their education as a way to build a better future for their own families, and also to avoid some of the

struggles and challenges that their own families and friends had to experience. In fact, participants mentioned this outcome on fourteen-separate occasions. Tabitha described,

> I want to make more money, make it easier for my children to have access to college, even if something goes wrong in their life. I want to be able to save money, and the way you do that is by making it, so the more degrees I can get I think the more pay I can get or the more promotions that come with that.

Andrea also described the importance of education to her life: "I feel like there's more job security in a place where you've got a degree, versus a trade. Like my dad, he went to high school, went to trade school, but there's not always work for people like him." Andrea also echoed a sentiment of some other students: they want to avoid the negative outcomes of those without education. For example, Andrea did not "want to work retail" her whole life, Shandra did not want to have to rely on an "insecure job", and Alisa shared an experience of a family member: "my Aunt K., she basically got a full ride to Ohio State, and then she got pregnant and just didn't go back, and now I see her, she's struggling." Other participants witnessed how their peers who decided not to go to college have ended up, and wanted to avoid that outcome, such as Stephen: "I don't want to be like those kids I grew up with on [a specific side of town]. I have a lot of friends who are like twenty, and they live with their parents. They don't have a job; they just sit at home all day." Education became the vehicle through which students could realize and build a better future for themselves and their future families, and avoid the struggles that come with a lack of education and poverty.

A sense of accomplishment and pride. Participants communicated a clear sense of pride and accomplishment at their educational progress a total of eight times. Theresa shared, "I'll be the first generation in my family to come out of college and that's a big

reminder of why I'm here and kind of a big motivator, so that I can say I graduated from college…that sense of pride…it's just a sense of accomplishment." Katie also shared just how much this accomplishment would mean to her: "so I just knew that without the degree, nobody can take away that education, nobody can take away that degree no matter what." Only one participant, Andrea, expressed disappointment with herself regarding her educational progress, and described how she had expected to be farther along, but the frequent breaks and transfers had held her back along the way.

Becoming a role model for others. Participants also expressed the desire to help others who come from similar backgrounds as theirs to go to school and better their lives six times. Being a "role model in the community" was very important to Brianna, and for both Andy and Katie, as they hoped that they were setting an example for younger siblings, nephews, and nieces in their family. Theresa shared her hope:

> Just knowing I could come back and share my story and help other people see, if I can do it, you can do it kind of thing. I come back to [her high school] and talk to seniors a lot about college experiences and what they should look for… I like that sense of helping people who are like me, showing them that here's more than just the [specific region] of [her city], that you can branch out and get your education and help other people as well.

Helping others to continue their education was an outcome that the students were already realizing, simply because they were persisting in school themselves.

Remaining focused on these rewards of obtaining their education was a strong motivating factor for all participants, and every step toward achieving their goals served to encourage their persistence and progress, despite existing stressors in their lives. As mentioned previously, as long as the motivators outweighed the stressors in the minds of the students, they were able to continue to progress and persist in higher education.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 introduced a new theory of college persistence for students of low-SES. Numerous quotations and thick descriptions from interview transcripts provided support for this theory as well as observations and notes from my analytic memoing, and data collected from the Initial Surveys. Knaggs' theory suggests several things. First, although this was a homogenous sample and all participants mentioned very similar causal conditions to their phenomenological experience of persistence, their actual experiences of persistence varied greatly. Although all are maintaining a balance weighted toward persistence, students experienced a wide variety of stressors and motivators that was unique for each participant; thus the balance may be more important than the actual experiences themselves. Next, participants also experienced a wide variety of stressors that impact persistence, called extra-institutional stressors, which originated from outside the institution itself. The significance of such stressors on persistence was clear based on the data included in this chapter.

Chapter 5 discusses the significance and implications for this new theory with regards to literature and existing theory, how it might be used by institutions of higher education to better meet the needs of students of lower-SES, and what research still needs to be done to further strengthen or expand this theory.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Implications

Chapter 5 first embeds the significant components of Knaggs' Model of Intra-Institutional and Extra-Institutional Integration for Low-SES College Student Persistence in both theory and research. Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory, Tierney's Model of Academic Integrity, and Tinto's Model of Dropout for College Students are integrated throughout the discussion of findings, therefore completing the final analysis step of multi-grounded theory used in this study: Theoretical Matching. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the discussion of findings is framed here by existing theory in order to achieve multi-grounded theory, as recommended by Goldkuhl and Cronholm (2010). Next, the implications for both higher education and high-school groups are discussed. Finally, contributions to the existing literature and theory are shared, as well as possible directions for future research.

Discussion of Findings

To review the purpose of this study, the research questions are restated below, and are mentioned as they relate in each section:

1) What theory explains how students of low-SES are able (or are not able) to persist in higher education?

    a. How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold?

    b. What are the major events or benchmarks in this process?

    c. Who were the important participants in this process, and how were they involved?

    d. What were the obstacles to persistence?

e. What strategies were used to overcome obstacles?

f. What were the outcomes to this process?

2) What role, if any, does cultural capital and cultural integrity play in the persistence of low-SES students in higher education?

To answer the overarching first question, Knaggs' Theory of Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration for Low-SES College Persistence is presented below in Figure 7. The theory highlights the importance of supporting low-SES student integration into the adult world of financial independence, as this is a phenomenon that occurs concurrently with the typical intra-institutional integration expected of college students. Lack of extra-institutional integration created significant stressors in the lives of students interviewed in this study, and greatly impacted persistence. The term integration in Knaggs' theory is not used to mean student assimilation should occur, as Tinto's (1975) original theory implied. In Knaggs' theory, integration is meant to reflect the reality of many of the participants: assimilation is still expected by the institutions that these particular students attended, which often led to a transition period punctuated by academic challenges and social isolation. Likewise, the adult world also requires integration by participants: they must adhere to the same rules and requirements and meet the same expectations of other financially-independent adults, such as meeting financial obligations and managing time appropriately. Therefore, integration in this case is not meant to perpetuate an expectation that students integrate into the intra- and extra-institutional environments; rather it is meant to reflect the reality that these environments still expect assimilation to a large degree in order for a student to persist in higher education. Question two will be answered throughout this chapter, and will be integrated into each section as appropriate.
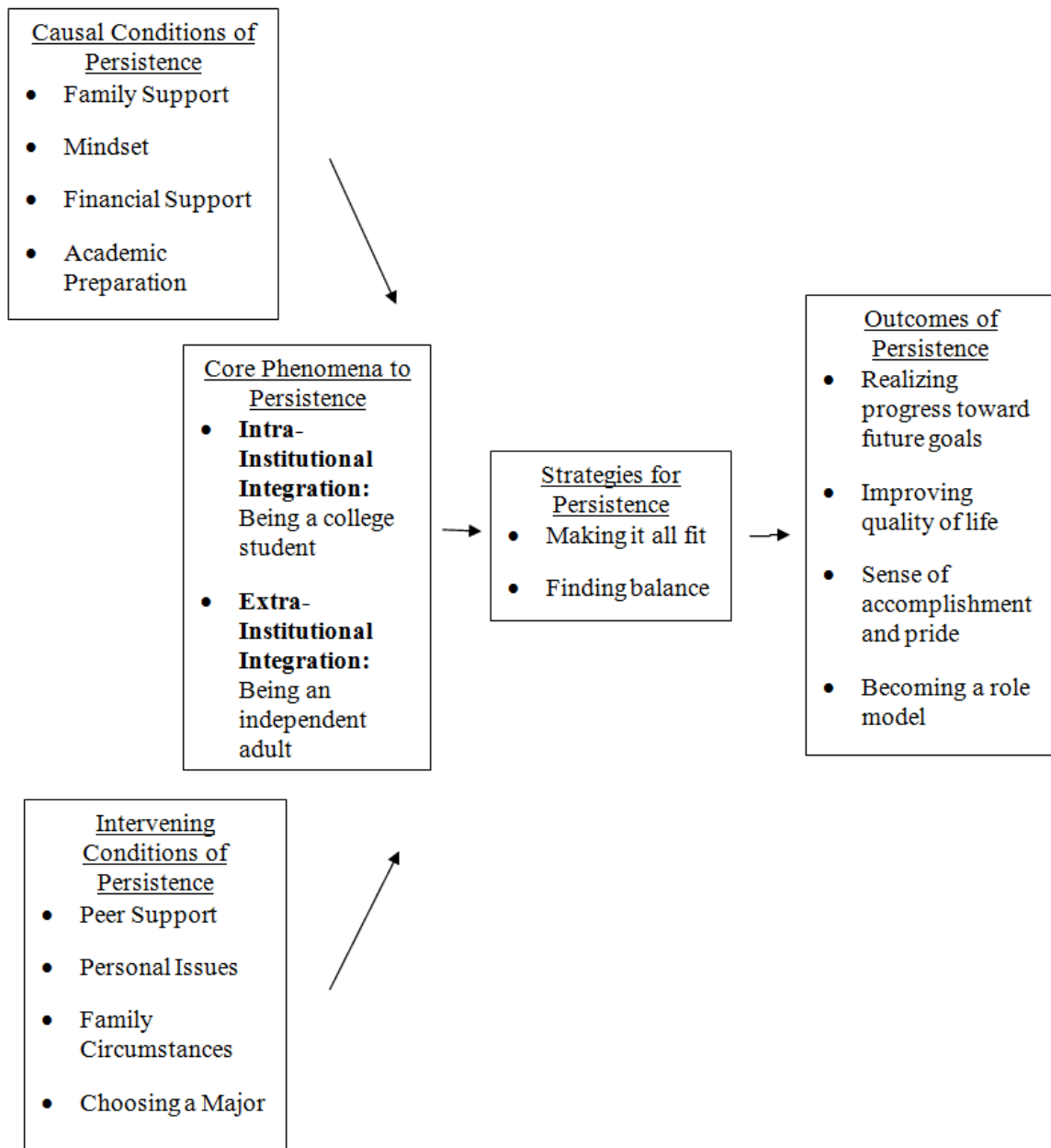
Figure 7. Knaggs' Theory of Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration for Low-SES College Persistence.

Causal Conditions of Persistence

The causal conditions that emerged from the data analysis serve to begin to relate the following questions to literature and existing theory: Question 1a) How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold, as well as Question 1c) Who are the major participants in this process, and how were they involved? To review, family support, in the form of high expectations, encouragement, and finding role models, respectively, emerged as the most significant causal condition for the currently-persisting students that participated in this study. Mindset was the second-most significant causal condition to emerge, followed by financial support, and finally high-school academic preparation.

Persistence literature in higher education supports many of the causal conditions that emerged in this study. This section will outline the literature, research, and theoretical support for the causal conditions presented in Knaggs' Model of Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration for Low-SES College Student Persistence.

Family Support. Family support has shown to be crucial during the transition process into higher education (Guiffrida, 2004, 2005). Similarly, family, particularly parental educational attainment, has been shown to be a predictor of college access (Ward, 2006), and these educated family members can serve as role models for students who also wish to pursue a college education. Bourdieu's (1977) theory would attribute this predictor of college education to the fact that educated parents are more likely to possess and pass on the cultural capital that is valued and taught in our educational system. However, the strong family support found in this study is not consistent with what other studies have found when interviewing at-risk student populations (Lessard,

Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2009), and may deserve more study in this population of college students. Although most of the parents of participants had not attended college, and thus were less likely to possess the cultural capital needed to successfully persist in higher education, participants felt strongly that their parents valued higher education, and believed strongly that their children should obtain a college degree.

Mindset. Mindset, called college-going identity in the literature (Saunders & Serna, 2004), provided the students in this study with the foundation needed to defy the odds and not only go to college, but continue to persist in college (Allen, 1999). Being committed to education has long been associated with persistence in the literature, and it has also been recognized that mindset alone is not enough to promote persistence; other factors must be present as well (Marks, 1967), which study participants also communicated in this study.

Tinto recognized the importance of mindset, or college-going identity, in his Model of College Persistence (1975), which he called Goal Commitment (see Figure 8 for a pictorial representation of his model). Tinto placed Goal Commitment prior to entrance into the academic and social system of the higher educational institution, which illustrates the fact that such commitment must be made prior to college entrance. Knaggs' Model found mindset to have a significant influence on college persistence, according to participants. In addition, mindset was often attributed by participants to the strong family support they received; thus a relationship exists between these two causal conditions. Such relationships in models such as this have been called accentuating influences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979).
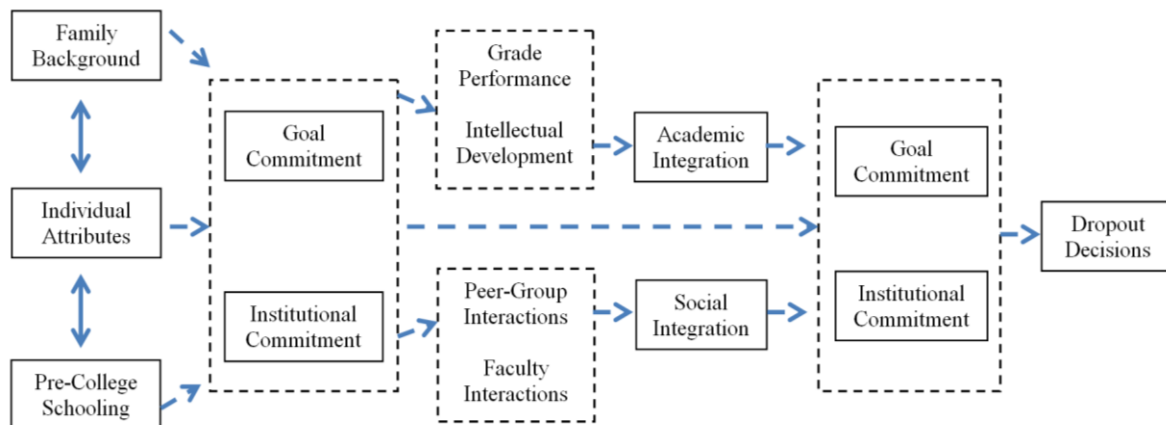
Figure 8. Tinto's (1975) Model of Dropout for College Students.

Financial Aid. Likewise, financial aid has also been shown through research to promote persistence (Baker & Velez, 1996; Carter, 2006), and thus is a significant causal condition to persistence. Although literature supports the importance of aid packages for low-SES college students, literature also states that the current aid packages are insufficient for many low-SES students to attend four-year institutions (Adelman, 2007; St. John, 2006), where persistence is also more likely (Corrigan, 2003). In addition, financial aid alone is not enough to promote persistence (Gladieux & Swail, 2000), which is why it is only one of several other causal conditions proposed here for promoting the phenomenon of college persistence.

Academic Preparation. Tierney (1999) defines "academic capital" as the familiarity with the academic expectations of college that student receive through a college-preparatory curriculum. Study participants were able to gain this capital by taking Honors-level classes, and through early college-going experiences in high school through the post-secondary option (PSO) program and college-preparatory programs. Strong-

academic preparation by taking challenging coursework or participating in college-preparatory programs has long been shown in the literature to promote persistence (Baker & Velez, 1996; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Kezar, 2001; Marks, 1967; Peng & Fetters, 1978; Pritzker, 2005). However, similar to what has been found regarding financial aid, academic ability alone, often demonstrated through the completion of challenging coursework, is not enough to promote persistence, and indeed has been found to be less important than other factors, such as mindset and support (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Pascarella et al., 1981). These literature findings support the relative level of significance that the participants in this study attributed to the four-causal conditions that emerged from data analysis. It is also interesting to note that another accentuating influence exists here, as a strong academic foundation, according to participants, also leads to a college-going mindset.

Intervening Conditions of Persistence

The intervening conditions that emerged from the data analysis in this study will serve to relate the following research questions to the literature and existing theory: Question 1a) How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold, Question 1b) What are the major events or benchmarks in this process, Question 1c) Who were the important participants in this process, and how were they involved, as well as Question 1d) What were the obstacles to persistence? The intervening conditions that emerged serve to inform all four of the research questions. To review, the most significant-intervening condition to emerge according to participants was peer support, and the vast majority of the support students received from peers positively impacted their persistence. Personal issues, most significantly money issues, emerged next as an

obstacle or barrier to persistence, followed by a second obstacle: family circumstances. Lastly, the process of choosing a major served to be a challenging experience that ultimately impacted persistence in a very positive way, once students found a motivating major within their institution.

This section provides an overview of the literature, research, and theoretical support for the intervening conditions that emerged in this study, and are included in Knaggs' theoretical model (see Figure 7).

Peer Support. Much literature supports the intervening condition of peer influence and support, as college involvement in extracurricular and other peer activities has been shown to support college persistence (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1982, 1993, 1999a, 1999b; Carter, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983b). Since research has shown that student involvement positively impacts persistence in college students, this is a significant-contextual condition to include in any theory pertaining to college persistence. Social support has also emerged in other studies as an important external factor for educational persistence (Lessard et al., 2009). However, this study shows that college students themselves appreciate the importance of peer influence in their own persistence. It is interesting to note that many participants sought support from those with similar backgrounds as their own, such as high-school classmates, and this interaction may have also been a way to support their own cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and maintain cultural integrity (Tierney, 1999) within the institution; however the researcher was not able to verify these assumptions.

Personal Issues. In addition, having to work negatively impacts persistence (Corrigan, 2003), as well as insufficient-financial aid (Carter, 2006; St. John, 2006; St.

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John et al., 2005), both of which can contribute to the money burdens expressed by students. Personal issues often fell within the realm of the Extra-Institutional factors, such as paying rent and other personal expenses, which can act as barriers to integration into the adult world of financial independence.

Family Circumstances. Family circumstances have also been identified as a barrier to persistence, and these can include financial responsibilities and other emotional issues that arise (Corrigan, 2003). These types of family issues have been called "emotional burdens" in the literature, and they can prevent students from becoming socially integrated into the institutional environment (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005). Likewise, such circumstances fall outside the realm of the institution, thus could impede student transition into financially-independent adulthood.

Major Choice. Research has shown that major choice, whether it is a lack of choice or a choice that does not motivate the individual student, has been shown to negatively impact persistence (St. John et al., 2004). In addition, lack of career goals has also been identified as a barrier to persistence in the literature (Rendon, 1995; Zamani, 2000), which supports the emergence of major choice as an intervening factor from the participants in this study. Participants shared that both peer support, an intervening condition, and family support, a causal condition, positively impacted major choice, thus two more accentuating influences exist in this theoretical framework.

Central Phenomena to Persistence

The central or core phenomena that emerged in this study serve to further address the following research questions: Question 1a) How does the process of persisting in higher education unfold, Question 1b) What are the major events or benchmarks in this

process, Question 1c) Who were the important participants in this process, and how were they involved, as well as Question 1d) What were the obstacles to persistence? As described in Chapter 4, students described two distinct and influential phenomena in college: the intra-institutional integration experiences that result from being a college student, and the extra-institutional integration experiences that result from being a financially-independent adult. Although there is much more literature to support intra-institutional integration experiences of college students, I will provide literature, research, and theoretical support examples in this section.

Being a college student. The transition into college as a college student emerged as a core phenomenon to persistence, and each participant had varying experiences when it came to this transition. First, participants recognized the importance of their college environment to them, and this importance is also supported by literature. An inclusive and positive environment has been linked to persistence (Carter, 2006), so it would make sense that the opposite experience would be detrimental to persistence at an institution, as students in this study communicated. Research has shown that poor student-college fit negatively impacts persistence (Baker & Velez, 1996; Nora, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Zamani, 2000), particularly for disadvantaged college-student groups (Fox, 1986). Integration into the institutional culture has been shown to influence persistence in college students in the literature (Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

The institutional fit described by this literature and described by participants in this study is akin to the Institutional-Commitment component in Tinto's model (1975). It is significant that Tinto includes this component, much like Goal Commitment described earlier, as occurring prior to entrance into the academic and social system of the

institution, and also after the processes of social and academic integration into the institution. It would seem according to the participants in this study that for some, this commitment may develop over time, as they form peer relationships, choose a major, develop career and other long-term goals, and adjust to academic expectations in the classroom. Tinto's model reflects the process of institutional-commitment development for the low-SES students included in this study with this dual placement.

Becoming a college student is a process that requires both social and academic integration into the institution (Tierney, 1999), which can happen immediately, over time, or not at all. Tinto (1975) acknowledges the academic and social integration integral to college student persistence in his model as well. Tinto recognizes two components within the academic system of the institution that lead to academic integration: grade performance and intellectual development. Likewise, students in this study recognized two components also as a part of their academic integration: academic performance, which corresponds to grade performance, and getting the most out of their education, which corresponds to intellectual development. Students expressed the desire to get as much knowledge out of their classes as possible, and even downplayed "just getting an A" in favor of getting a lot out of their educational experiences. These comments seem to epitomize and support Tinto's Intellectual Development component in his model. These comments also reflect that the participants seem to possess a high level of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977); thus this explains why many were eventually able to culturally integrate into the university setting.

Feelings of social isolation were present for some participants, and literature supports the idea that underrepresented groups in higher education can have more

difficulty building social networks and making connections in college (Rendon, 1995; Zamani, 2000). Social isolation can come from the distance from family and former friends who have made different educational and life choices. These social-isolation experiences illustrate a phenomenon described by Guiffrida (2004) regarding friends as liabilities for African-American students at PWIs. Friends from home who have not decided to pursue higher education and who have made very different life choices also can be liabilities for this particular group of low-SES students as well. Tierney's model (1999) provides an explanation for the social isolation that students may be experiencing as well: students who are unable to find peers with similar-cultural capital as their own may be struggling to maintain their cultural integrity. In other words, students do not have anyone at the institution with whom they feel they can relate, and thus they feel isolated and alone.

Students in this study communicated the gamut of integration experiences, from complete culture shock and feelings of isolation, to almost seamless immediate integration into their college environment. The fact that so many different experiences are present among a small group of students who are persisting shows that students can remain resolute on persisting, despite initial feelings of culture shock at their institution. The dramatic variations of experiences expressed by this relatively small group of low-SES students who are currently persisting in higher education may also reflect the compensatory interactions that researchers have found within Tinto's model. For example, researchers have found that a high level of academic integration can compensate for a lower level of social integration into the institution, and vice versa (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). This would explain why

some participants expressed the need for high levels of peer interactions and social experiences in their institution, while others had virtually no cultural integration outside of classes; yet both types of students expressed satisfaction with their college experiences. There is no optimal level of academic or social interaction, as every student will find a balance of the two that suits their needs as a college student.

Bourdieu's theory (1977) may also be able to shed light on the varying experiences of the participants included in this study: students may have entered their freshman year with differing levels of cultural capital: those with family members who are already in college, or students who were involved in high school programs that brought them onto college campuses, such as GEAR UP, Upward Bound, and PSO, may have an advantage because they possess higher levels of cultural capital that their peers; thus they are able to more seamlessly integrate both academically and socially into the college environment.

The fact that some students express little need for social integration may also mean that as researchers we may not be looking at social integration in a way that makes sense for this particular population of students. Fox (1986) suggested that possibly there are dimensions of social integration missing from the current models that do not account for the ways that disadvantaged students might be integrated into the institutional environment. Knaggs' model may be able to shed light what may be missing from Tinto's model, as participants' experiences are potentially defining a new compensatory relationship between intra-institutional and extra-institutional integration. For participants like Sara and Theresa who were able to integrate to a high level in to the college environment, this seemed to make up for extra-institutional integration issues, such as

displacement, which could potentially be very detrimental to persistence. Counter to this, other students expressed virtually a low level of integration into the institution, yet were managing multiple jobs and had stable-housing situations, such as Shandra. Both types of students were satisfied with their college experiences, and expressed high levels of confidence when it came to their persistence, so it would seem that a higher level of one type of integration may make up for the other.

Being an independent adult. There is not a lot of literature to support the idea that college students might need help with their integration into financially-independent adulthood. However, Baker and Velez (1996), through a survey of college access and persistence literature, found evidence that institutions make the assumption that students can rely on financial support from their parents, which this study has shown cannot be assumed. Research has also shown that commuter students are less likely to persist than residential students (Baker & Velez, 1996; Pascarella et al., 1981; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983b), which could also be a reflection of the increased level of financial independence of the commuter student who is not living at home. In addition, Baker and Velez (1996) also found a lack of attention to external influences, or extra-institutional experiences, as they are called in the theory posited in this study, in the current literature.

Tinto's theory also lacked the dimension of extra-institutional integration in his model of persistence and drop-out, yet through his research he acknowledges the impact of such experiences on persistence (Tinto, 1993). However, Tinto's recommendations were to purposefully remove such variables from his persistence model, as they were beyond the control of the institution itself. In fact, Tinto encouraged students from low-SES and other underrepresented backgrounds to "divorce" themselves from their former

community influences, such as family and friends, as he recognized their potential negative influence on persistence (Tinto, 1993). However, what he failed to recognize at that time, and what researchers including Tinto since have since recognized, is that such extra-institutional influences can also be extraordinarily-positive influences on persistence (Guisfredi, 1995; Tierney, 1999), as this study also shows through family and peer support. In other words, much like other influences, extra-institutional influences can both positively and negatively impact persistence, thus partitioning them off from college students does not make practical or logical sense.

Such influences, included in Knaggs' theory within the Extra-Institutional Integration component, are an integral part of the phenomenological experience of persistence, and cannot just be ignored by researchers, policymakers, and those working in higher education. In addition, handling the responsibilities that come with being a financially-independent adult were mentioned frequently by participants, as the findings in Chapter 4 showed, so it would seem important to study this aspect of the college experience for low-SES students in more depth.

The multitude of challenges that can be present for financially-independent traditionally-aged college students is immense. For example, how do you rent an apartment if you do not have a credit history or a job? How do you find a job that will pay enough if you have very little work experience and only a high school diploma, or a job that will work around a college-class schedule, particularly considering the large numbers of unemployed citizens today with whom students are competing? Such challenges can make the responsibilities that come with being a college student insurmountable, thus leading to decreased rates of persistence for low-SES students.

Since Bourdieu's theory focuses on education in this country as a system that perpetuates the social classes, called social reproduction, and also perpetuates itself, called cultural reproduction, the struggles that participants are facing as financially-independent adults may also be better explained using Wolf's Conceptual Model of Urban Poverty (2007). The barriers present in our society to accessing education are also present when it comes to upward-social mobility, and participants may be experiencing such barriers as they struggle to support themselves as very young and inexperienced adults. For example, Wolf presents in his model (see Figure 1) the barriers of social isolation and lack of social and human capital, which sound very similar to the Intra-Institutional Challenges that participants have expressed as well. Perhaps there are many similarities to Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration that have yet to be explored.

Strategies for Persistence

This section answers the following research question: 1e) What strategies were used to overcome obstacles? Since the strategies used for persistence directly led to the outcomes, the last section will also address the following question: 1f) What were the outcomes to this process? Two strategies emerged from the participant data related to the core phenomena of being a college student and an independent adult. The first strategy: making it all fit, attempts to explain how participants managed to make time for all of the college and life responsibilities for which they were responsible as young adults. The second strategy: finding balance, describes how students developed the extrinsic- and intrinsic-motivational forces to keep them going, despite encountering at times extreme stressors in their lives. This process can be visualized as a scale, where the motivational factors must outweigh the stressors for persistence to occur, and students demonstrated a

variety of proactive behaviors to maintain this balance in their lives. Both strategies will be situated within the literature and theory below.

Minimizing Stressors. The most notable stressor in the lives of the low-SES participants interviewed for this study was money, so minimizing this stressor could involve increasing financial aid packages to ensure that they meet the needs of low-SES students. However, even more important may be providing accurate oversight and support to students receiving significant aid packages in order to ensure that mistakes do not happen, or if they do, providing direct support to students to rectify the situation. Support may also need to extend beyond just financial-aid issues, to include managing money needed to support oneself as an adult. Students may need support finding employment, making living arrangements, and balancing a budget. If students do not manage their money appropriately, this will greatly increase the likelihood that a student will drop out of school, so institutions truly committed to persistence of low-SES students may need to provide such non-academic services to students as needed.

Lack of cultural and social integration into the college environment was the second most-notable stressor that emerged from the findings. Residential students have been found to be more likely to persist than commuter students in the literature (Baker & Velez, 1996; Pascarella et al., 1981; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a), which in part may be explained by less social integration into the college environment for commuters. Although students exhibited a variety of proactive behaviors in order to reach out to professors, seek out services, and get involved in extracurricular activities, support in this process would no doubt be helpful, as it was identified as being so significant to the participants for their own higher-education persistence.

Another significant stressor identified by students was lack of academic preparation, as well as underestimating the academic expectations of college. Again, many participants exhibited proactive behaviors when faced with academic challenges at college, but since this was a group of currently-persisting students, it is not known how often students from similar backgrounds do not seek this help and instead drop out. It would seem important to help students exhibit the proactive behaviors that this group models, which many college-retention programs attempt to do (Myers, 2003). See Figure 9 for a pictorial representation of the most significant stressors mentioned by participants that can eventually lead to college drop-out.
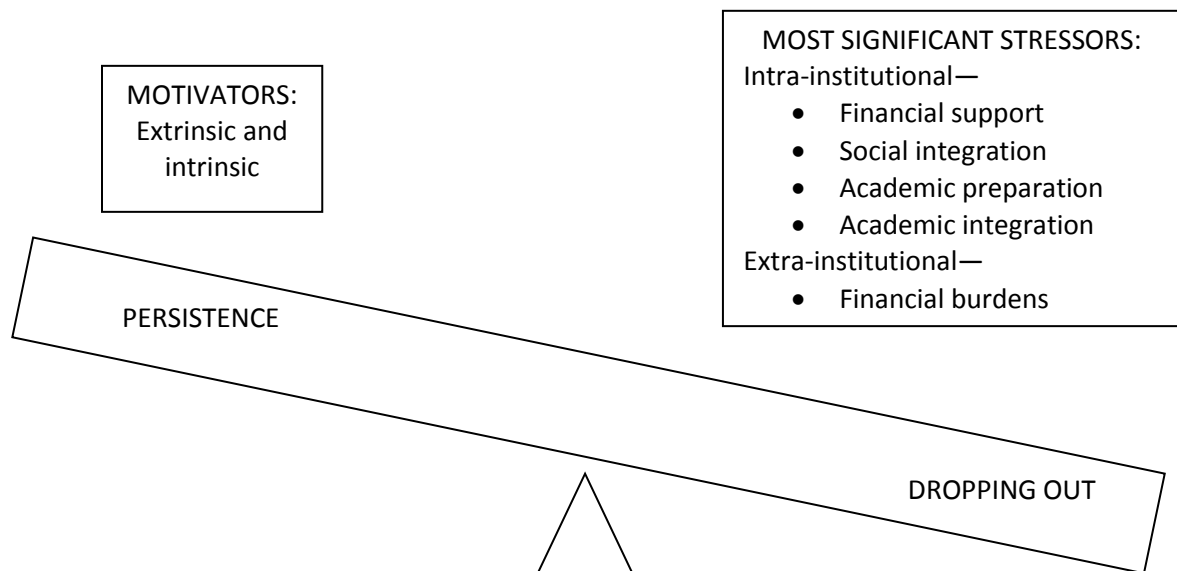

Figure 9. Most significant stressors that can lead to college drop-out.

Building Extrinsic Motivation through Support. The support that participants received from their families, their peers, and their professors or other staff members became a motivational factor for persistence. Students identified family support as most influential to their desire to access and persist in college, which directly contradicts literature that claims underrepresented groups in higher education have less family support than more privileged groups (Tinto, 1993). It would seem important for institutions of higher education to not only encourage greater family support, but to also celebrate the family support that low-SES students are already receiving. Perhaps family support for low-SES students presents itself in ways that institutions do not acknowledge or recognize, and this is why it is believed that lower-SES students receive less support than high-SES students. Whatever the reason for this contradiction, more research needs to be done to empirically determine whether a lack of family support truly exists for underprivileged groups, or if this is just due to perception.

Encouraging peer support can only come from the development of strong-social networks in college, and the low-SES students interviewed in this study expressed this as challenging for them. Students need support, particularly during their freshman year, to find likeminded peers with whom they can study and socialize, who will encourage institutional persistence. Students in this study often mentioned peers with similar backgrounds and interests as their most influential peers, so providing students with both social and study opportunities would be important in order to encourage persistence. Having peers with similar backgrounds also may increase cultural validation of low-SES students, and one way that institutions try to encourage this is through the development of cultural centers (Tatum, 2000). Although some research claims that cultural centers

create separation and divisiveness between cultural groups, others have found that they actually help to encourage cultural validation. Tatum (2000) calls this affirming identity, as well as building community (Smith, 1997). To support the importance of cultural centers, six participants in this study participated in culturally-oriented student groups at their institution.

Building Intrinsic Motivational Forces. Collectively, the intrinsic-motivational forces that emerged from data analysis are the outcomes included in Knaggs' theory, thus this section will answer the research question: 1f) What were the outcomes to this process? The outcomes that emerged from this process will be discussed below in order of significance, and will be connected to the relevant literature and theory as appropriate.

The most significant intrinsic-motivational force that emerged from the data was realizing progress toward future goals. Goals included major choice and career goals, and participants often had very clear and specific career goals in mind. A lack of clear career goals has long been negatively associated with persistence in the literature (Marks, 1967). Likewise, high aspirations have long been associated with persistence (Peng & Fetters, 1978). The importance of "career identity" has long been identified in the literature with regards to persistence (Chickering, 1969; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a). Tinto's model (1975), much like Institutional Commitment, includes Goal Commitment twice: once before entrance into the academic and social system of the institution, which is akin to the Mindset students in this study identified, and once again after academic and social integration into the institution has taken place. The second Goal Commitment can be equated with the Realizing progress toward future goals, which emerges as an outcome

that developed over time for participants in this study, based on the classes they completed, the peers they met, and the professional experiences they had.

Fostering experiences that would directly help students form clear major and career goals would seem to be a very effective way to promote persistence in this population of students, as they may have had few college-educated role models with professional jobs prior to entering college. It is also interesting to note that research has found that Goal Commitment is the most significant factor in his model for impacting persistence (Terenzini et al., 1981), and realizing goals emerged as the most significant outcome in Knaggs' model for developing intrinsic motivation towards persistence, according to its frequent occurrence in transcript data. It also makes sense that major choice was an accentuating influence for this particular outcome in Knaggs' theory, as was improving one's quality of life, which is discussed next.

Students also shared the importance of improving their quality of life for the future, and in fact saw themselves as possessing more intrinsic motivation in this respect than their more affluent peers in higher education. The students in this study reveal an advantage of lower socio-economic status in higher education that in my experience has not been explored in the literature. If students of low-SES see themselves as particularly driven by their desire for a better quality of life, then they could make extraordinary role models for all college students.

Setting life goals would seem a worthwhile exercise for students of low-SES in college in order to help them focus on the "big picture" for attending higher education, as such "big picture" goals have been shown to positively impact persistence (Kahn & Nauta, 2001). Students are often so focused on the day-to-day activities of college, or the

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short-term assignments, that at times the big reasons for getting a degree might get lost. Higher education is a long-term investment of greater future opportunities, and students who lose sight of this may have a challenging time with persistence.

Feeling a sense of accomplishment and pride for their educational progress was also significant for participants, so students should be given the opportunity to celebrate their progress over the course of their education, not just at the end. Such celebrations can serve as a reminder for the "big" celebration at the end, and also keep students' spirits elevated when the degree still seems very far off in the future. Likewise, giving students outlets where they can serve as role models for others, particularly those with similar backgrounds as themselves, might also serve as a powerful motivational factor for persistence. Some participants in this study actively found ways to become a role model, but others may need to be encouraged to serve in such a capacity, and may benefit from this experience, thus encouraging persistence.

Summary of Findings

Many of the conditions that influence the phenomenological experience of college persistence for low-SES students that emerged in this study are supported by existing literature. However, the strategies that students employed when overcoming stressors can be useful in understanding how to encourage persistence in this particular group of college students. By learning from the specific stressors and motivators that participants in this study raised, as well as the proactive behaviors that they developed in response to stressors as they unfolded, we can take these students as examples to help others to learn and develop such healthy behavioral responses to college and life as an independent adult. What follows are recommendations for how what we have learned from

participants can be applied to higher education and K-12 professionals who both prepare

and support students throughout their educational journey.

Discussion of Implications

This section explores how different constituents within higher education and K-12

education may be able to use Knaggs' theory in order to improve persistence for students

of low-SES. Each heading focuses on a specific constituent who may find worth in this

new theory, and each sub-heading describes the specific categories within the theory

which would relate to this particular constituent. Special attention is given to highlighting

ways to encourage cultural validation of this particular group of students, as well as how

extra-institutional support may be given to this group of students.

Financial Aid Policy Administrators

Two conditions captured within Knaggs' model would relate to this particular

constituent: first is financial support, a causal condition, and second category is personal

issues, most of which involved money burdens for students, an intervening condition.

Financial support. Inherent in the current financial aid system are several

assumptions that can place low-SES college students at a disadvantage for receiving aid.

First, there is an assumption that traditionally-aged college students are dependents, and

as such can rely on their parents for help in two ways: 1) applying for aid and 2)

providing money for college. As the participants in this study communicated, often their

parents could not help with the process of applying for financial aid, because they were

not familiar with the forms or the process. FAFSA requires documentation that some

low-SES families may not be able to readily provide. In addition, FAFSA is now online,

which puts families without an internet connection at a distinct disadvantage. The

FAFSA is a complex form, and it would be very challenging for a high school senior to fill out and supply the needed documents without family support. Bourdieu's theory (1977) would argue that a lack of knowledge, or cultural capital, about the process places low-SES students at a disadvantage, particularly those who are first-generation college students, as many of the participants in this study were.

Personal issues. The second assumption that our current financial-aid system makes is that traditionally-aged students are still dependents, and as such can rely on their parents to contribute financially to their college education. Almost none of the students interviewed in this study had families who could contribute to their education, and many had to live as financially-independent adults once they reached eighteen. However, our current financial-aid system continues to place college students who are traditionally-aged in a one-size-fits-all mold that just does not work for the students who were interviewed in this study.

According to The Student Loan Network (www.studentloannetwork.com), students are considered dependents until they reach the age of 24 unless they meet one of the following criteria: they are in a graduate program, are married, have a child or other dependents, both parents are deceased, are in active duty in the Armed Forces, were a foster child after the age of 13, are emancipated, or are homeless according to HUD. If students do not fit the above criteria but cannot rely on their parents for financial assistance, then they must go through a rigorous process to claim themselves financially independent, and these exceptions according to The Student Loan Network happen extremely rarely. Unfortunately, financial independence alone is not grounds for a claim of independence, even though being a dependent assumes financial support from parents

or guardians. Independence can only be claimed if a student was forced to leave their family home, and multiple detailed documentation from school officials, police reports of abuse, or other close family members regarding the circumstances of this displacement are needed. This sets up a situation where it is virtually impossible for most students to claim independence before the age of 24. Therefore, such policies should be studied to see how they are impacting underrepresented groups in higher education, as they may be setting up a financially impossible situation for students of low-SES.

As independent adults, there are many more financial variables in the lives of low-SES students that the FAFSA may not capture. Thus, the financial-aid package that students receive would not take their extra-institutional responsibilities into consideration, thus it may be insufficient for the low-SES student to persist in college. In addition, for low-SES students, grants are much more likely to increase access and persistence than loan packages (St. John et al., 2005). Therefore, aid packages must be responsive to the needs of low-SES students if they are to be effective in promoting access and persistence to higher education. In addition, if persistence of all college students is a priority in this country, then the financial-aid system must take into account the diverse needs of the current college student body when they apply for aid, or extra-institutional integration will continue to be a barrier to student persistence.

Financial-aid policy administrators need to look closely at the assumptions they make about the typical college student, as well as who institutions of higher education are currently serving, particularly as our higher-education student body continues to become more diverse. Bourdieu would argue that such assumptions reflect the idea that our educational system was created for the middle- and upper-classes, which just does not

make sense when you consider the diversity of today's college-student body. The financial-aid system, therefore, should account for such diversity, and if it were streamlined and simplified, this would benefit all college students as well.

Higher Education Financial-Aid Advisors

Since financial aid advisors often are the first resource if students need support with their aid packages, this section is particular pertinent when it comes to dealing with the personal issues, a intervening condition, that emerged from data analysis.

Personal issues. Low-SES students who are able to navigate the complex financial-aid system and are accepted into an institution now face a new set of challenges: 1) deciphering complex-aid packages and 2) handling problems with financial aid when they arise. Anyone who has either attended college within the last fifteen years, or helped others to attend colleges has had experiences with aid packages, and they are often extraordinarily complex. Students must understand the differences between multiple types of grants and loans, which may or may not be renewable. There may be other variables included in the package, such as work-study, and students are often asked to make an individual contribution to their education as well. This aid package is often split over multiple semesters or quarters, and at this point it becomes increasingly difficult to determine whether an aid package is sufficient, how much money the student may need to pay out of pocket, or how much debt the student can expect to incur over the course of receiving his/her degree. Several participants in this study communicated that they had a hard time comprehending the costs involved in going to college, and although they may have applied for aid and done everything they could to prepare themselves, they still felt unprepared for the financial burdens of higher education.

Additionally, if you then consider all of the other financial responsibilities that come with being an independent adult: finding a job with an adequate salary, finding affordable housing, paying bills and rent, affording transportation to and from school, paying for food, buying books, etc., it soon becomes obvious why low-SES students could become overwhelmed with the financial responsibilities of being a college student and an independent adult at the same time. Quite simply, low-SES students need help, not only managing their aid packages, but also managing their personal finances.

Although many institutions provide financial-aid advisors, particularly for first-year students, the level of support that low-SES students require may be more than a typical financial-aid office can handle. In addition, low-SES students may also require financial counseling beyond just aid; they may need help with personal-finance issues as well. These additional resources would then be the first line of support when a mistake or an issue arises. The three participants who experienced significant issues with financial aid would have benefited greatly from an advisor helping them to problem-solve through the issue, thus decreasing the likelihood that such an issue would require a student to withdraw, and potentially not return.

Institutions might consider providing financial advisors, rather than just financial-aid advisors, for the benefit of low-SES students. Many of the assumptions that financial-aid advisors may make, such as a student's familiarity with opening a checking account, filling out a rental application, or balancing a monthly budget, cannot be made with some low-SES students, who may have very little if any experience with such actions. If an institution is serious about retaining low-SES students, it would seem important to devote

more resources to developing such support for these students with extra-institutional responsibilities, particularly during the first year of college.

Higher-Education Administrators

Administrators in higher education institutions can potential influence several components of the Knaggs' theory: intra-institutional integration, including both academic and social integration, as well as extra-institutional integration, both core phenomena to persistence.

Intra-institutional integration. According to Tierney, it is the responsibility of the institution itself to meet the needs of its students and validate their cultural identity. It is not the responsibility of the student to assimilate and "fit in" to the school's environment in order to have success, as Tinto's (1975) original model suggested (Tierney, 1999). Therefore, many higher- education administrators could find salience in a study that attempts to understand how to better meet the needs of low-SES students.

Unfortunately, participants in this study often communicated the challenges they experienced during their academic and social transition into their institution, which would imply that some higher-education institutions still expect assimilation to some degree from their students, regardless of background. Many students in this study needed to seek out academic support in order to meet the expectations, and several struggled with feelings of social isolation within the institution. Academic and social integration is still a challenge for students of low-SES, due to the still-present expectation that students assimilate into the existing institutional environment.

Given the importance of academic and social integration to college persistence that has been supported in decades of research, as well as reaffirmed in this study, it

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would seem prudent for higher-education administrators to take a close look at the environment of their own institution from the perspective of lower-SES college students on their campus. If lower-SES students are struggling with social isolation, student-college fit, or other issues that were mentioned by participants in this study, then it is the responsibility of the institution itself to develop and become a warm and welcoming environment for all students it wants to retain. Students may not necessarily vocalize their frustrations or issues, they may just drop-out, so if institutions do not develop policies to reach out to those who left, or even more proactively reach out to underrepresented groups who are more likely to leave in order to resolve any issues that may exist, persistence and retention efforts may not be successful.

Although there will always be academic expectations in a higher-education environment, administrators do have more control over their institutional environment, and can take steps to foster cultural validation in underrepresented groups on campus, due to socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, or any other number of factors. Cultural centers, present at many institutions, have been shown to promote cultural validation (Tatum, 2000), but I feel that this validation should not be compartmentalized, that it should permeate as many facets of the institution as possible. Administrators should study their institution department-by-department to determine what implicit assumptions are made about college students in general, and then about particular groups of underrepresented students on campus, and then attempt to challenge these assumptions through professional development for all staff and faculty. The desire to transform a college environment that validates all students' cultural identities must be embraced by all

aspects of the higher education community, and must start and end with the administration at that institution.

In addition, an institutional project that interviews underrepresented students at different times in their college career may shed light on the potential strengths and weaknesses of an institution's climate, and would be a worthwhile activity for higher-education administrators to develop. It is the responsibility of the higher-level administrators to lead such a charge and mission to increase persistence of underrepresented groups, and this can then potentially create an environment that is welcoming and validating to all.

Extra-institutional integration. Higher-education policy administrators at four-year universities who are concerned with persistence issues in their institution may also seriously consider using K-12 community schools, and community colleges as a model for how to better support students with extra-institutional integration. Rather than having to provide the varied services that students may need, many community schools created a network within their own communities that bring outside organizations to students, thus making their services more convenient (Protheroe, 2010). This increases the likelihood that students will be able to access and use services of an extra-institutional nature that they may need, particularly as a new college student. For example, students may need counseling to deal with family circumstances, and low-cost services for students of low-SES are usually available, yet students may not know where to look within the community. Students may also require help finding and securing appropriate housing, and community services can also help with temporary and eventually permanent placements for college students, so they are not forced to move from house-to-house

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while going to school. Financial services beyond aid advising may not be possible for an institution, so services in the community may be able to supplement what the college can handle. However, making these community connections will take time and research, based on the needs of the student body and the availability of services in the surrounding community. Administrators must take the lead in making the connections needed within the community, attending the meetings that must take place, and taking an active role in the development of a community "web" for students to use (Colgan, 2003). With strong leadership, persistence of low-SES college students can be supported by an entire community, not just by a single institution working in isolation; such extra-institutional integration issues should be a community concern, not just an institutional concern (Protheroe, 2010).

Higher-Education Student-Services Staff

Student services staff often work closely with and provide a variety of services to students, thus they can have an impact of a wide variety of components within the Knaggs theory. Staff can influence intra- and extra-institutional integration, both core phenomena to persistence. They can also provide the support students may need to develop strategies for persistence, such as helping with making it all fit and finding a balance. In addition, staff has the ability to influence a variety of outcomes to persistence: realizing progress toward goals, sense of accomplishment and pride, and becoming a role model.

Intra-institutional integration. The participants in this study took advantage of a host of different programs and services at their institutions, such as academic centers, tutoring, learning communities, counseling, and advising. This group of students

commented that the services they used were for the most part helpful to them. However, one participant made a comment that might potentially shed light on why some, particularly underrepresented groups, may not take advantage of services, even if they are available. One participant commented that she did not take advantage of services provided to her, and she did not know why, but also mentioned that she had not yet defined her major, did not know what she wanted to do regarding her career, and was not enjoying her classes as a result. This comment may highlight the importance of helping students decide on a major that is motivating to them early on. However, even more significantly, students also need to define big picture goals, such as career aspirations, as well as life goals that relate to their chosen major, so students can see the importance of passing a particular math test or writing a paper, tasks which may not be very motivating in isolation.

Extra-institutional integration. Student-services staff can also play an active role in creating a "community" model at institutions of higher education, much like higher-education administrators. While administrators are instrumental at defining the vision, making contacts within the community, and supplying the resources necessary to make such contacts possible, students-services staff are often the individuals who plan and carry out the details of such collaborative relationships, and how new services may fit within or supplement existing student-support services in order to best meet the needs of the diverse student body. Staff members often know and can make recommendations of what services are needed, as they work with students closely, and thus can help to direct the creation of a community web of services. The additional extra-institutional

support that students of low-SES may need would not come about without the direction of higher-education student-services staff.

Making it all fit. Providing students with help regarding non-academic skills such as time management and prioritizing work would seem to be a worthwhile investment of time, according to the participants in this study. Students may have more responsibilities on their plate than they have ever had before (both academic and work related), and they may not be able to organize and plan for the many new responsibilities that they now have. The movement in many school toward freshman orientation classes would seem to be a good program to foster such skills, as well as helping students schedule appropriate amounts of time for school work with mandatory study tables.

Finding a balance. Many of the proactive behaviors that the participants in this study exhibited may not necessarily occur to another struggling student, and may result in that student dropping out. Teaching such proactive behaviors would also seem a worthwhile lesson for student services staff to integrate within other academic programs, as often a struggling student will need to learn and practice such behaviors for the future. Student services staff can provide a comfortable, nonthreatening environment where students can practice such behaviors, and then employ them in the classroom or with professors at their institution. Additionally, student services staff are also in an ideal position to provide additional support services, or direct students toward support services within the community, so students can work through stressors that they may encounter either intra-institutionally or extra-institutionally.

Realizing progress toward future goals. The participants in this study had all defined for themselves very clear career and life goals, as mentioned previously, and

these goals were the most significant-motivating factor for them to persist and obtain their degree. However, as also mentioned previously, students did not necessarily enter college with these well-defined career- and life-goals; they developed over time, just as many students chose an appropriate major over time as well. If student-services staff want every student who needs support to take advantage of student-service and retention-program services, it would seem wise to work with students on finding an appropriate major, and developing big-picture goals that will then serve as the motivating factors to seek out help when needed. Without defined career- and life- goals in place, students may be left to wonder why they are in college, or why they should work so hard on a particular assignment that may not be in isolation very interesting or motivating to them. Learning the discipline to complete such tasks well in order to reach a larger goal is also an important life lesson that will help students in their future careers and life, as such less motivating work and personal tasks do not go away once an individual graduates from college.

Sense of accomplishment and pride. Many college-retention programs also still operate from a deficiency perspective with regard to the students who make use of their support services: students need to build basic skills, they need to learn proper grammar, etc. By focusing on what students lack, students are left to feel deflated and deficient, and Tierney (1999) attributed such thinking to institutions that expect assimilation as integration. However, student services could be designed to provide services, while also celebrating accomplishments of students as they progress toward their degree; thus programs become not only a source of academic challenges, but a source of positive affirmation as well. In addition, programs can encourage students to share their own

talents and knowledge, which may not necessarily be valued in the college classroom, but can be valued in other venues on campus. Such an approach of cultural validation toward low-SES students, and other students who possess cultural capital that is less valued on college campuses, can promote cultural integrity, and thus persistence (Tierney, 1999).

Becoming a role model. The fact that participants also expressed the desire to be role models for others with similar backgrounds as themselves might give support-services staff a new way to organize and deliver services. If students of low-SES desire such leadership roles, then it would benefit all students to provide them as many opportunities as possible to serve as role models for others within the institutional community, but particularly for those with similar backgrounds. Placing students of low-SES in leadership roles also affirms their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), validating their culture, and encouraging their own cultural integrity (Tierney, 1977) within the institution, thus positively impacting persistence.

Higher-Education Faculty

Faculty members at universities have the ability to influence both intra- and extra-institutional integration in a number of ways, which is described below.

Intra-institutional integration. As a faculty member myself at a small liberal-arts private institution, I see a need for diversity-professional development at my institution, and I would venture to say that such professional development would probably benefit faculty at most higher education institutions, for two reasons. First, our student bodies are becoming increasingly diverse, and as faculty members we must be able to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse- student bodies. Second, college faculty is a group that is more homogenous than our student body, particularly when it

comes to socio-economic status. A majority of college faculty comes from middle- and upper-income backgrounds, which makes it difficult to relate to and understand the unique socio-economic status issues that lower-income students may bring with them into the classroom. It may seem disrespectful or irresponsible when a student falls asleep in class, or fails to complete an assignment. However, this student may have just worked a double shift and has been up for twenty-four hours, or may have had to deal with a family issue that prevented them from having the time to write a paper for our class. Understanding poverty, including the complex nature of poverty that is illustrated in Wolf's conceptual model (2007) introduced in Chapter 2, would seem an important and increasing necessary professional-development topic for all higher- education faculty.

Bourdieu (1977) might go a step further and argue that higher-education faculty members need to open their mind to new and different forms of cultural capital in the classroom. Although certain types of cultural capital, such as proper grammar, content-specific vocabulary, and familiarity with classic novels, might be highly valued in the college classroom, not all students are coming in with such capital. As long as faculty have a mindset that such a student is deficient or lacking, and if a student is corrected every time he or she talks in class or writes a paper, this may ultimately lead on the part of the student to discouragement, frustration, and anger, and eventually the student may quit trying. Faculty can easily wipe their hands of such students, and claim that they did not have the academic foundation to succeed in higher education, did not have the right college-going mindset to stick with it, or had not clear goals in mind for the future. Such reasons, though they may all be true, ultimately do not solve the problem of persistence for low-SES students in higher education. Faculty members are on the front lines when it

comes to shaping students' experiences at an institution (Tinto, 1999), and they need to

seriously consider the impact they can have on persistence with their actions toward a

student in class. Although faculty may have students in their class who do not have the

ability or drive to finish their degree, the participants in this study showed that such drive

and ability can develop over time, but that may be too late for a student who has quit

trying.

In order to create a culturally-validating classroom environment, dialogue that

openly discusses cultural capital, social justice, and privilege is recommended by

researchers (Khalifa, 2010; Tatum, 2000). Such dialogues are often avoided by faculty, as

they can be uncomfortable and potentially create tension in the classroom, but avoiding

such discussions just perpetuates the existing cultural norms that continue to validate

dominant-cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Tatum, 2000). Faculty who have received

professional development that encourages them to dialogue about and lead dialogues

about privilege and cultural capital might be more likely to broach such topics in the

classroom, breaking down the taboo nature of such topics. Open dialogue in a safe

environment creates an atmosphere that is affirming to all, and helps students to

understand and appreciate the differences in each other. This is a huge step toward

creating an institutional environment that is culturally validating to all students, and

faculty can have a pivotal role in creating this environment on campus.

Extra-institutional integration. Lastly, if higher education administrators are

considering creating the community "web" described earlier, social-work faculty might

play a pivotal role in identifying and accessing appropriate extra-institutional services

that might help students of low-SES. Together with student-services staff, social-work

faculty could help organize relationships in order to bring such services to the campus and to students.

College Preparatory Program Administrators

Three causal conditions can be influenced through college preparatory programs: family support, financial support, and academic preparation, and these are described in more detail here. In addition, college-preparatory programs have the opportunity, and often provide services to help foster the two strategies for persistence that emerged from the data analysis: making it all fit and finding a balance.

Academic preparation. Although participants all attended high schools with college-preparatory programs in place, such as GEAR UP, few students actually mentioned such programs directly with regard to their own persistence in college. However, much of the strong academic preparation that they received was developed as a result of the programs being present at their high school. For example, the GEAR UP program at the particular school where eleven participants attended encouraged students to take challenging coursework, such as Honors and AP classes, provided college application and financial-aid support to both students and parents, and also developed mentoring programs to help support students through the process of preparing for higher education. One participant did mention the positive influence that a mentoring program had on her, Grads Mentoring Grads, yet she did not connect this particular program to GEAR UP, which was responsible for its development.

The fact that few participants mentioned the college-preparatory programs, however, may not be due to the fact that these programs did not have a significant influence on these students and their college persistence. Instead, programs such as

GEAR UP may be so enmeshed in the high-school experience that students fail to recognize the influence of GEAR UP from all of the other high-school experiences. In other words, GEAR UP is their high-school experience, and they do not have anything else with which to compare this experience. One participant who supports this idea transferred in to a school with a GEAR UP program from another school in the district that is currently in Academic Emergency according to the state of Ohio. He immediately noticed that his new school had a much more serious attitude when it came to academics, and many more students were serious about pursuing higher education, as he was. Although once again, this participant did not attribute this atmosphere to the GEAR UP program, the atmosphere was created due in large part to the many academic and social programs developed through GEAR UP.

Family and financial support. If we can indirectly attribute two additional causal conditions to the college-preparatory high school programs that participants experienced, then we can say that these programs provided students with important cultural capital that prepared them for college, thus increasing the college persistence. For example, GEAR UP encouraged family involvement in the high-school education of their child through social and informational events, and GEAR UP provided families with financial- and college-application information so that they could better support their children to access college. All of these important components of the program served to develop the causal conditions that participants attributed to their college persistence. However, attributing these conditions to GEAR UP or any other college-preparatory program is an assumption, since students did not directly make this connection in the interviews.

What this means is that it may be a challenge to attribute college persistence to college-preparatory programs using qualitative research, as students may not recognize the influence of the program, particularly if it is well integrated into the high-school environment. Indirect measures, such as those mentioned earlier, may be the only way to decipher from the experiences of student the direct benefits of such programs.

Making it all fit. As described in Chapter 2, college-preparatory programs often include a variety of support services such as advising and counseling to help students with important skills for academic success such as time management and prioritizing. Although the sheer number of responsibilities for college students may be much greater than in high school, practice with such skills through college-preparatory programs would no doubt help students with the transition into college and the adult world.

Finding a balance. The counseling and advising services provided through college-preparatory programs such as GEAR UP can also help students deal with both intra- and extra-institutional stressors that may arise in high school. Knowledge that such support services exist, and experience using such services may encourage students to seek out such similar help if needed in college as well, thus encouraging the type of proactive behaviors exhibited by participants interviewed in this study.

High School Administrators and Teachers

More focus on curriculum to help students function as financially independent adults can help address the intervening condition of personal issues, as well as the core phenomenon: extra-institutional integration, as described below.

Personal Issues and Extra-Institutional Integration. Although financial-planning courses in high school are typically not considered to be part of a college-

preparatory curriculum, it would seem as if these types of courses would greatly benefit

students of low-SES, who assume the role of a financially- independent adult at

potentially a younger age than their middle- and upper-income college-student peers.

Although financial advising can come later, a proactive curriculum that can help students

prepare for independent living would no doubt minimize much of the financial stresses

that participants in this study experienced, and give them the tools, skills, and knowledge

needed to be a financially-independent adult at a young age. College-preparatory

curriculum should go beyond the book knowledge and academic skills that students need

for college; students also need practical- and real-world knowledge and skills, those

extra-institutional knowledge and skills, as well.

Contributions to Literature

Using a grounded theory approach, this study created a new theory of college

persistence for students of low-SES. The theoretical framework that emerged from this

study: Knaggs' Model of Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration for Low-SES College

Student Persistence, supports Tinto's (1975) model of college persistence and drop-out in

several ways. Regarding intra-institutional persistence, the participants in this study

affirmed the importance of Goal Commitment, Institutional Commitment, Academic

Integration, and Social Integration for college persistence. However, Knaggs' model adds

a new dimension to Tinto's model: Extra-Institutional Integration. The low-SES students

interviewed in this study expressed the stressors they experienced from being financially

responsible and independent from their parents. This financial independence, with all of

its responsibilities and expectations, greatly influences college persistence, and is not

included in Tinto's model. The implications described above provide examples of what

this extra-institutional support might look like on a college campus, and how different entities in higher education might contribute to creating a community "web" that would provide such support for students who need it. This dimension of extra-institutional integration deserves more study in order to see whether larger and more diverse populations will express the same level of significance with regards to these extra-institutional experiences, particularly for students of low-SES. See Figure 10 for a side-by-side comparison of Knaggs' theory and Tinto's theory. Similarities are highlighted in yellow, and differences are highlighted in green. Table 5 follows, which aligns the similarities between the two theories that are highlighted in Figure 10 with each other. Differences represent components included in Knaggs' theory that are missing from Tinto's model.
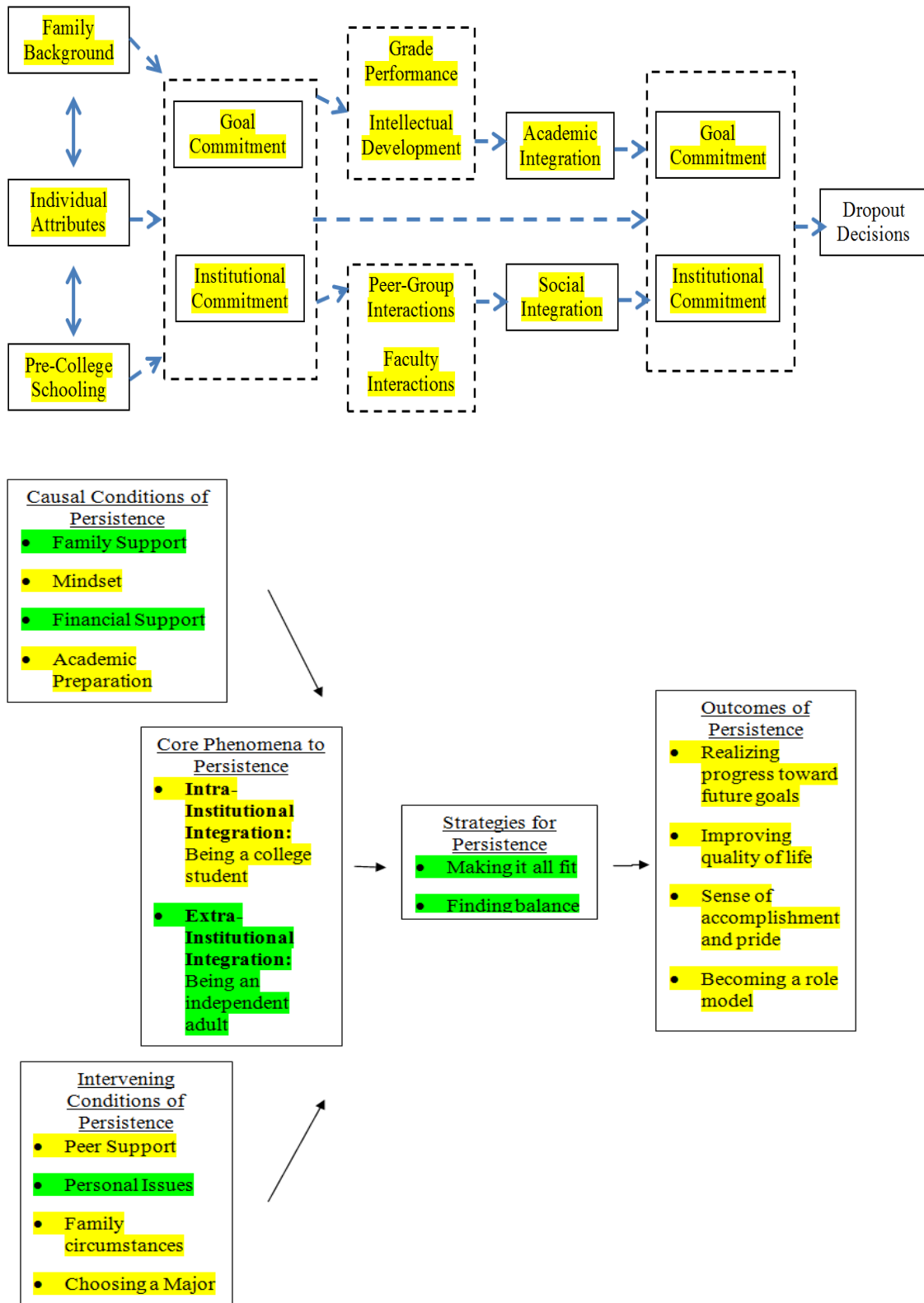
Figure 10. Side-by-side comparison of similarities and differences within Knaggs' theory and Tinto's model.

Table 5.

Alignment of Similarities Between Knaggs' Theory and Tinto's Model

Tinto's Component	Knaggs' Component	Alignment Description
Family Background	Family Circumstances	Both components take into consideration SES and other family factors that can influence persistence.
Individual Attributes	Mindset	Both components take into consideration personal intrinsic characteristics that can influence persistence.
Pre-College Schooling	Academic Preparation	Both components discuss K-12 education, in particular high school preparation.
Goal Commitment (first box)	Mindset	Both components reflect the student's commitment to pursuing higher education.
Institutional Commitment (first box)	Mindset	Both components reflect a student's desire to pursue higher education at a particular university.
Academic Integration	Being a college student	Both components reflect the process of a student learning and meeting academic expectations at their institution.
Social Integration	Being a college student	Both components reflect the process of a student becoming social involved and acclimated in to the institutional environment.
Goal Commitment (second box)	Choosing a major, all outcomes	All components reflect how goal commitment becomes much more well-defined and tangible as students progress over their college career.
Institutional Commitment (second box)	Choosing a major	Both components reflect how a student's commitment ot the institution becomes much more well-defined and specific over the course of a college career

Knaggs' model of college persistence for students of low-SES also supports Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital. Students expressed frustration and stress when it came to institutional policies, academic expectations, and financial aid, all of which students had little or no support with once they entered college. Although colleges do provide support for such areas through student services and college-retention programs, and students in this study expressed that they took advantage of such services, this group of students will need to have extra support, understanding, and compassion with regard to a lack of knowledge or skills that higher-education staff and faculty may assume students should already know. Those assumptions cannot be made when it comes to students of low-SES. Participants also confirmed the reality that cultural assimilation is still expected in many ways on today's college campuses, and this resulted in the academic challenges and social isolation that many participants experienced, at least initially.

This study also supports Tierney's model of cultural integration, particularly because social integration was so important to many participants. Participants also tended to choose peers who have similar backgrounds, interests, and/or future goals in order to keep themselves motivated and focused on the outcomes that emerged in Knaggs' model. The importance of becoming a role model to some participants also illustrates an untapped resource within higher education: encouraging low-SES students to serve as role models and leaders for fellow peers. This role would serve to validate and celebrate the cultural capital that low-SES students bring to college, which may not be affirmed in many ways by the institution itself, but also serves to motivate students to persist as college students. Tierney would support such efforts, according to his model. The

implications section in this chapter provided examples of how such cultural validation might occur in a college environment, and how different entities within a university setting might contribute to create a culturally-validating environment for all students.

Future Research

Given the relatively small and homogenous nature of this group, made up of mostly white students from one urban district in Ohio, the majority from a single school in this district, it would seem beneficial for future researchers to explore larger and more diverse groups in order to test or modify this theoretical framework. For example, studying groups with different racial or ethnic backgrounds, from different geographic areas, such as another region of the U.S. or from a rural area, might lead to very different persistence experiences than the students described in this study. A different recruitment strategy might be needed, as this study relied on students responding to a survey and then meeting for an interview, and this may have skewed the population towards a more high-achieving, and potentially more extroverted- and social- student group as well.

The new dimension of college persistence phenomena that emerged in this study, Extra-Institutional Integration, deserves much further exploration, in order to see whether it emerges from studies that explore different groups of underrepresented college students, including low-SES students. A quantitative scale that can test this new dimension and its influence on larger numbers of college students would be extremely useful, and may help to define this dimension for current-college students, as well as help those in education to better meet the needs of students within this particular dimension in order to promote persistence. It is not acceptable for institutions to ignore the needs of students outside of the institution, or claim that these factors are outside of their realm,

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for these influences impact persistence and cannot be downplayed or ignored. Higher-education institutions may need to begin to model their institutions more on some K-12 schools that have become "community" centers, providing more than just education to their students, much like the holistic college-preparatory programs like GEAR-UP, described in Chapter 2. Institutions can develop relationships within the community to create a "web" of services that bring additional support to students as needed, without the institution having to provide all the services itself. Residential colleges have a distinct advantage at providing such "community" and extra-institutional support, and many already do this, as their students live on campus, but such services may also be needed for those who are commuters, as were many of the students interviewed in this study. Institutions must start thinking and supporting all students holistically in order to promote persistence, particularly for low-SES student populations.

Conclusion

Despite decades of research and action aimed at closing the educational gap between lower- and higher-SES college students, it has stubbornly persisted (Gollnick & Chinn, 2012). A multitude of programs have been developed for those underrepresented college-student groups, often called "at risk" because of the factors they possess that make college attendance and persistence less likely (Corrigan, 2003). College-preparatory programs, for example, provide students with a multitude of services aimed at helping them obtain the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) they will need to have success in higher education (Fashola & Slavin, 1998), as well as providing support to address other personal, family, and community issues that arise from poverty (Wolf, 2007). Colleges have also developed a variety of programs aimed at encouraging the

persistence of underrepresented groups of students on campus, such as low-SES students. These programs provide a variety of academic and social support mechanisms for students to use as needed (Myers, 2003). However, despite the many K-12 and college programs that exist, the gap still persists. Clearly, there must be aspects of the persistence phenomenon for low-SES students that are not being addressed adequately, despite these measures.

Tinto (1975) developed the first widely tested model of college persistence and dropout, based on a synthesis of the research that had been conducted up to that time. Over time and through much research, it became clear that Tinto's model was incomplete, particularly when used to predict the persistence of disadvantaged students in college (Fox, 1986). One of the strongest attacks against Tinto's model came from Tierney (1999), who claimed that Tinto's model was assimilationist, assuming that each student should integrate into the established academic and social environment of the institution, rather than the institution attempting to accommodate a diverse student body.

Tierney's Model of Cultural Integrity, rooted in Bourdieu's (1977) Cultural Capital Theory, and backed by research, showed that students who were able to maintain their own cultural capital, called cultural validation, persisted to greater degrees than those who were forced to learn and adopt the cultural capital that the institution valued (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Levinson, 2007; Okey & Cusick, 1995). In response to criticism, Tinto (1998) also became an advocate for institutional change with regard to disadvantaged populations, and encouraged the development of "communities" within the institutional environment that were welcoming to all students. Tinto (1993) also acknowledged the extra-institutional influences that impacted persistence, but

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recommended that underrepresented students divorce themselves from community influences, such as family and former friends, who might adversely impact their progress toward a degree. Researchers, including more recent literature by Tinto, now recognize that such advice may not be wise, as low-SES students, for example, receive a tremendous amount of support from family and friends (Guiffrida, 2005; Tierney, 1999), as this study also supports. Therefore, such extra-institutional influences can no longer be ignored by institutions, as they impact persistence in both positive and negative ways.

Utilizing a grounded-theory qualitative approach, this study interviewed nineteen persisting low-SES college students in order to shed light on why this underrepresented group continues to lag behind their affluent peers regarding college persistence. The goal was to capture the phenomenon of persistence for this disadvantaged group, understand what might be lacking in our current knowledge and programs, and develop a new theory that more fully addressed the issues of persistence for low-SES college students.

From data analysis, Knaggs' Theory of Intra- and Extra-Institutional Integration emerged, which adds to our current level of knowledge regarding the phenomenon of persistence of low-SES college students. Tinto's model, as well as many decades of research, validated many of the Causal Conditions, Intervening Conditions, and Outcomes that emerged from the theory. See Figure 9 and Table 4 for a summary of how Knaggs' theory aligns with Tinto's model.

As Figure 10 shows, the Extra-Institutional Integration component of Knaggs' theory is missing from Tinto's model, which may be a significant factor in better understanding how to support the persistence of low-SES college students. In addition, Tinto does not account for the strategies that students may be using that foster

persistence, as well as two significant causal conditions of persistence: family and financial support.

There are also several accentuating and compensatory influences among the different components of Knaggs' Theory that will be summarized here. Accentuating influences include family support and a strong academic foundation (causal conditions) accentuating mindset (a causal condition). Peer support (an intervening condition) and family support (a causal condition) both accentuate major choice (an intervening condition). Lastly, major choice (an intervening condition) accentuated two outcomes: setting goals and improving quality of life. Regarding compensatory influences, for the core phenomenon of being a college student, academic integration and social integration were compensatory, which means a higher level of integration in one area makes up for a lower level of integration in the other.

Knaggs' theory also highlights continued frustrations for low-SES students regarding the different cultural capital they possess (Bourdieu, 1977), and cultural integrity issues that exist for some participants as they transition into higher education (Tierney, 1999). This unfortunately validates Bourdieu's theory regarding our educational system over thirty-five years after he first developed it; thus, not enough has changed for those who belong to low-SES groups in our educational system. Therefore, more effort on the part of the institutions, University A and B, to support, celebrate, and embrace the cultural capital that low-SES students bring to their institutions, is needed for persistence to increase. Recommendations are given in this chapter regarding how such cultural validation can occur, and who might be involved in cultural validation efforts on campus.

My hope is that there are practical applications of this theory in order to improve persistence rate for low-SES students in higher education. For example, institutions should strongly consider what support services they currently offer to help their students transition into adulthood, as they simultaneously begin their journey as a college student. Such extra-institutional factors are so important to consider, as they can have a dramatic impact on persistence, as the participants in this study expressed. All participants had managed to integrate themselves or were in the process of integrating themselves into both the intra-institutional environment of the university, as well as the extra-institutional environment of the adult world, but not without potentially extreme stressors and frustrations. These students represent the minority who were able to persevere and overcome these stressors as they presented themselves, but they are the exception.

Institutions need to start thinking about supporting students extra-institutionally as well as intra-institutionally if they are truly committed to helping low-SES students persist. This will be a challenge, as it will no doubt require an investment of resources beyond what institutions currently possess, but it is an investment that can ultimately pay off with significantly higher retention rates. Community colleges and K-12 "community schools" might be a good place to look for models of what such support might resemble for low-SES students. This chapter provides ideas regarding how institutions might want to set up such a web, and who might be involved in its development. Ultimately, it will require the institution itself to become much more enmeshed into a web with its greater community as well, which could also positively impact the institution. Communities that see their higher-education institutions as directly and positively impacting them are more apt to support them, which is ultimately good for all.

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Appendix A

Participant Consent Form

 "A Grounded Theory Approach to Understanding the College Persistence Gap that Exists between Lower- and Higher-Socio Economic Status Students"

Dear Participant,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in this study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the researcher or with the University of Toledo.

The purpose of this study is to understand why lower-socio economic (SES) college students struggle to stay in college, despite the many programs, resources, and aid at most universities. The research for this study is being conducted by a current doctoral student at the University of Toledo in order to fulfill the requirements of her degree.

If you agree to participate in this study, data will be collected at three separate points. First, you will be asked to fill out an Initial Survey, which will ask you for demographic, academic, and extracurricular information. Second, you will be asked to participate in an approximately 30-45 minute interview with the researcher. Third, you will be asked to meet once more with the researcher to look over the interview transcripts for accuracy, omissions, or other errors before the data is included in the study.

Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating. The researcher would be happy to share her findings with you once the research is completed. However, your name will not be connected to the research findings in any way, and your identity as a participant will be known only to the researcher.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. Your participation will allow your experiences in higher education to add to the literature on this very important topic in our society today.

By completing the Initial Survey, you are consenting that the information in this survey may be used in this research project. You will be asked to sign a similar Consent Form to this prior to the Interview, if you choose to participate in this.

Please contact Christine Knaggs if you have any questions regarding this research project: Christine.knaggs@rockets.utoledo.edu.

Christine M. Knaggs, Ph.D. Candidate, UT

Appendix B

Initial Survey

1) Name: _____ Age: _____

   Currently Attending:_____# Semesters Completed: _____

   # Credit Hours Completed: _____ Current Major:_____GPA: _____

2) Have you attended any previous institutions? If so, list them here, and give how many credit hours you completed at each institution.

   _____

   _____

   _____

3) Are you currently involved or have you been involved in any **student services programs** provided at your institution, such as a tutoring program, a writing center, a mentoring program, a Bridge program, a Freshman Orientation program, counseling services, advising services, etc. If so, please list them here.

   _____

   _____

   _____

4) Are you **currently** involved in any **extracurricular activities** at your institution? Activities can include anything that is organized within the college, such as sports, clubs, bands, teams, volunteer service, service learning, societies, fraternities/sororities, etc. Please list them here, and include how long you have been involved in each activity.

   _____

   _____

   _____

5) Please list any **past extracurricular activities** you have been involved in, and approximately how long you were involved in them.

   _____

   _____

   _____

6) Please list any **other activities** you are involved that are not extracurricular in nature, such as work, church, family obligations, or other responsibilities outside of your college.

   _____

   _____

   _____

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Project: A Grounded Theory Approach to Understanding the College Persistence Gap
that Exists between Lower- and Higher-Socio Economic Status Students

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

(Briefly describe the project here. Remind participant that they can choose not to answer
any question asked of them, or choose to terminate the interview at any time.)

Questions:

1) What experiences do you believe have most impacted whether or not you
    expect to persist in college?

    a. What role, if any, have experiences within the institution played in your
        college persistence?

    b. What role, if any, have experiences outside of the institution played in
        your college persistence?

    c. What individuals have been most impactful regarding your persistence,
        and in what ways?

2) How have you handled challenges that stemmed from these experiences while in college?

3) How do you perceive your experiences in college to be different from students who come from more privileged backgrounds?

4) Why do you believe you have been able to persist thus far in college, while some of your peers have not?

(Ask the participant if there is anything else they would like to share. Thank the student for participating in this interview. Assure him or her of confidentiality of responses and potential future interviews.)