

ABSTRACT

RICKS, JONATHAN RYAN. First-Generation College Student Success in Higher Education. (Under the direction of Dr. Edwin Gerler).

A college education is an essential component to obtaining many successful careers which lead to financial stability. Entering college can be a stressful transition that involves academic, emotional, and social adjustments for adolescents, and can be especially challenging for first-generation college students. A wealth of research has found that first-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage in regards to academic preparation and in terms of cultural knowledge and access to hidden rules of college success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992, Rendon, 1992, Terenzini, et al., 1994). As a result, fewer first-generation students attend college and of those who do, up to 50% stop attending during the first year. While much important research on first-generation college students has focused on the struggles these students face (Brock, 2010; Brooks-Terry, 1988; DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Hsiao, 1992; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1994, Zalaquett, 1999), the current study took a different approach of learning about first-generation students' experiences and investigated the world through the lens of *successful* students. This qualitative, phenomenological study explored the strengths, support systems, and coping skills that assisted first-generation college students through the successful transition to college and beyond. The sample in this study consisted of ten first-generation college seniors enrolled at a historically black university in the Southeastern United States. The participants were interviewed and they completed a demographic questionnaire. Each interview was transcribed and sent to the participants for review for accuracy to increase the credibility of the results. Pattern coding was used to find units of meaning from the

interviews. After collecting the interview data and coding the information, five major themes and 13 sub-themes were presented. The first major theme was pre-college characteristics of the participants and described the participants' high school characteristics, unique details about their families, and personal qualities they possessed. The second theme was decision to attend and experience assessing college. This theme provided information about the factors that contributed to the participants' decision to attend college as well as their experience of the application process. The third theme, transition from high school to college, included details about the participants' early academic and social adjustment to college. The fourth theme was student campus and social involvement. The final theme was coping skills utilized by the participants and described inner stress skills and other activities that assisted the participants in managing stress throughout college. The results of the study are useful to higher education and high school professionals and serve as a means for developing proactive interventions for other first-generation college students.

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First-Generation College Student Success in Higher Education

by
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, John Gordon Ricks, who taught me the importance of hard work.

BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Ryan Ricks earned his Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from East Carolina University in 2002. He obtained his teaching license and taught middle grades mathematics in his hometown, located in Warren County, NC. He received his Master of Arts in School Counseling from North Carolina Central University in 2008 and was employed as a school counselor for over 6 years. He served as a high school and elementary school counselor for 7 years. In 2012, he entered the doctoral program in Counseling and Counselor Education at North Carolina State University. While enrolled in the doctoral program, he worked as an academic advisor at North Carolina Central University.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As early as 1848, the path to prosperity in America has included education. The first secretary of education, Horace Mann, described universal public schools as “the great equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance wheel of the social machinery” (Mann, 1848, par. 6). Interestingly, in the 2011 State of the Union address given over one hundred sixty years later, President Obama exclaimed:

...this is a place where you can make it if you try. We have different backgrounds, but we believe in the same dream that says this is a country where anything is possible. No matter who you are. No matter where you come from. (Obama, 2011, para. 97)

Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung (2007) assert that one in six freshman attending four year American colleges or universities are first-generation college students. First-generation college students are students whose parents did not attend college and more than 25-50% of these students do not finish their first year in college. Ninety percent of first-generation college students do not graduate with their degree within six years (Greenwald, 2012). Although all first-generation students are not the same, a great deal of research has found that they share some similar characteristics. They are more likely to experience academic difficulties, have lower grades, work more during college than continuing-generation students, have fewer financial resources, and receive less rigorous college preparation (Stephens, Fryberg, Rose Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

Description of First-Generation College Students

There are two largely accepted definitions of first-generation college students in the relevant literature: a child in which neither parent *graduated* from college and a child in which neither parent *attended* college. Thirty four percent of all four year college students in the United States are considered first-generation students and have been found to face challenges in three major areas: pre-college characteristics, persistence, and graduating from college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Among pre-college characteristics, first-generation students have been found to have less academic preparation in high school, lower high school grade point averages, and lower college admission standardized test scores. These students are more likely to be a member of families with low socioeconomic status and receive less family support, especially with college assistance. Over the past ten years, there has been an increase in female, minority, and English language learners that are first-generation students (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Zeisman, 2012).

Whereas there is a wealth of research available on the obstacles and challenges of first-generation students, there is extremely limited literature that describes strengths and assets these students possess. Garrison and Gardner (2012) completed a qualitative study that investigated first-generation students' personal assets and found four major themes of strengths: proactivity, goal direction, optimism, and reflexivity. They found 13 common strengths that supported the development of these assets: resourcefulness, strategic thinking, self-reliance, practical realism, flexibility, persistence, positivity, hopefulness, self-

confidence, insightfulness, compassion, gratitude, and balance. Lived experiences were determined to have influence on the development of the students' assets. It was the desire of the current researcher to expound upon Garrison and Gardner's (2012) findings with the current study. Their strength-based approach was a unique inquiry for first-generation college students and their results informed certain aspects of this study.

Several researchers have contributed a great deal of information to describing first-generation students and how they differ from their non-first-generation counterparts. Of their challenges and obstacles is the lack of cultural and social capital as coined by Bourdieu (1977) which has been found to contribute greatly to college student success and failure. Garrison and Gardner (2012) pioneered research that examined strengths and assets that first-generation students may possess that help them transition to college and achieve success.

Theoretical Framework

Many theories have been used in previous research endeavors to help explain the experiences of first-generation college students. Two theories were selected to assist in conceptualizing, describing, and explaining the ways in which first-generation college students' access and transition to college and persist in higher education: Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural and Social Capital and Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure.

Bourdieu's cultural and social capital. Bourdieu defined *cultural capital* as "verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials" (Swartz, 1997, p. 74). Bills (2005) described cultural capital as the "degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the 'dominant' culture of a

society" (p. 90). Bourdieu (1992) proposed the concept of cultural capital as something that is acquired over time through home and parental socialization. He found that in education systems, even though it appears that students are rewarded by their academic talents, in fact, they are rewarded for their cultural capital. Middle and upper class families have more cultural capital than lower class families. Students with cultural capital are more likely to go to college and obtain a prestigious career.

Social capital has also been proven to be a useful way to understand the experiences of first-generation college students. Social capital terms the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1977; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Networks of relationships assist students in adjusting and maneuvering an unfamiliar environment by providing them with important information, emotional support, and guidance. Social capital is a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources (Attinasi, 1989).

The cultural and social capital perspective suggests that students from educated families have a distinct advantage over first-generation college students in understanding the culture of higher education and its role in personal development, career attainment, and financial stability.

Tinto's theory of college student departure. The purpose of Tinto's theory was to describe the reasons students depart from college before earning a degree. His theory of college student departure recognizes the significance of student integration in academic

achievement and retention. “*Integration* is the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in subgroups of it” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54). Tinto (1987) suggested the three stages to achieve integration were (1) *separation* from the students’ previous communities, (2) *transition* between the former community and the new college community, and (3) *incorporation* into the college community. College students may experience these stages in any order and they may also experience the stages partially or all simultaneously.

Tinto’s model is a helpful lens to use to investigate why first-generation college students are likely to depart from college during the first year or not return for the second year. He proposes several criteria that students must meet to obtain satisfaction and persist in higher education.

Significance of the Study

Mann (1848) and Obama (2011) exclaimed that education is truly equalizing, so why do so many first-generation students remain disadvantaged? Research on successful first-generation college students is limited as much of the literature provides a wealth of endeavors to determine the reason for lower college acceptance rates, higher first to second year attrition, and overall lower college graduation rates for this group of students (Brock, 2010; Brooks-Terry, 1988; DiMaggio, 1982; Dumais, 2002; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Hsiao, 1992; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, et al., 1994, Zalaquett, 1999). Additionally, the research does not provide

information on the lived experiences of *successful* first-generation college students. Several qualitative studies have been conducted, however, to learn more about the lived experiences of *unsuccessful* first-generation students (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Bui, 2002; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). Although this research is important, the current study focused on successful first-generation college students and the factors that contributed to their successful transition from high school to college.

The results of this study can be used within K-12 and higher education, and more specifically the counseling and academic support professions. It is hoped that the information from this study will be used in future research as it provides an increase in the knowledge of experiences of first-generation students. Learning more about their experiences is helpful for educators and support professionals so that more successful strategies can be implemented with all first-generation students to increase retention and graduation rates.

Research Questions

This study explored the lived experiences of successful first-generation college students. The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative design was to learn from the direct accounts of first-generation students about their college transition experiences. One central research question was explored: What are the lived experiences of first-generation college seniors who have been successful in college? To answer this main question, several sub-questions were explored: (a) What factors influence first-generation college students' decision to attend college? (b) What and who helps first-generation college students make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education? (c) What are the social

experiences of first-generation college students during the transition to college and how did the experiences impact their success? (d) What helped successful first-generation college students overcome obstacles? Finally, this study sought to evaluate the implications of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and integration (Tinto, 1993) on first-generation students' success through the answers to all research questions.

Key Terms Defined

There are several key terms used throughout the literature and this study that are important to understand. Some terms have been used interchangeably, therefore it is important to define the key terms of this study. Failure to define key terms could result in confusion. The following key terms are mentioned in this study:

1. Continuing-education college students – College students who have parents that attended college.
2. Cultural capital - “Verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials” (Swartz, 1997, p. 74).
3. First-generation college students – College students who have parents that did not attend college.
4. Formal academic integration - The congruence between the students' potential, aptitude, and academic demands of the college.
5. Formal social integration - Involvement of the student in extracurricular clubs and other social activities.

6. Informal academic integration - The similarities of the individual's common values and those held by members of the college.
7. Informal social integration - Interaction among peer-group members and friends.
8. Integration – Proposed by Vincent Tinto, “the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in subgroups of it” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54).
9. Lived experience(s) – The first-hand accounts, interpretation, and impressions of an individual. In the case of this study, it would be the lived experiences of first-generation college students.
10. Phenomenology – The study of conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view (Gallagher, 2012).
11. Social capital - The value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1977).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters: (1) introduction, (2) literature review, (3) method, (4) results, and (5) discussion. The introduction provided an overview of the subject matter, detailed the characteristics of first-generation college students, and explained the need and rationale of this study. It introduced the theoretical frameworks used in the study, provided significance for this study, stated the research question, and defined key terms that are used throughout the dissertation. Chapter Two presents a literature review on first-

generation students' college experiences, college access, and persistence. Various models and theories that help explain the experiences of first-generation students are further examined. Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the research design, method, participants, data collection, data analysis, and validation considerations. Chapter Four reports the results and findings of this study including quotes from the participants. Chapter Five includes a summary of this research. The limitations of this study and implications for future research are also reported.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

First-generation students have distinct characteristics that set them apart from other students in secondary and post-secondary educational institutions. A review of relevant literature is presented to provide information about first-generation students' strengths and challenges and their experiences in transitioning from high school to college. Additionally, research on college access, persistence, and success in general is presented. The current study utilizes Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital and Tinto's theory of college student departure as a framework for exploring the experiences of first-generation students. An analysis of both of these theories is presented.

Identified Characteristics of First-Generation College Students

Researchers have found that first-generation students possess limited knowledge of the college student role and college culture and generally complete fewer credit hours during the first year of college as compared to their non-first-generation peers. They reported lower participation in studying and extracurricular activities and generally received lower grade point averages in the first year of college. First-generation students overall report having to work during college and being required to complete more developmental coursework. These obstacles have caused the first to second year attrition rate for first-generation students to range from 25% to 50% (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Zeisman, 2012).

Comparison of first-generation and non-first-generation students. First-generation students are often disadvantaged "when it comes to postsecondary access – a disadvantage that persists even after controlling for other factors such as educational

expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools in planning and preparing for college, and family income” (Choy, 2001, p. 4). These disadvantages have been proven to proceed from K-12 educational levels to postsecondary education for those in pursuit of a higher degree (Choy, 2001). Research has found many differences between first-generation students and their peers whose parents attended college and can be clustered into five thematic areas.

The first difference is that first-generation students planning to attend college are required to maneuver the application process without help from their parents because many of their parents have limited knowledge of the often complicated process (Choy, 2001; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). A second difference is that first-generation students benefit more from college preparation during high school including learning what to expect of college life and an absence of this preparation puts them at a disadvantage (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Third, first-generation students have been found to lack rigorous academic preparation compared with their peers with college-educated parents because their parents may not realize the need to complete challenging courses (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). The fourth difference that has been recorded is that first-generation students often perceive college education as a requirement to successful employment and often choose to attend colleges that are close to their home even though the institution may not be a good fit for the student. Unfortunately, making the decision to attend a school that does not match the interest and needs of the student usually leads to students leaving before completing degree requirements (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nevill, 2006). The

fifth major difference includes the contrast of personality traits between first-generation students and their peers including differences in self-esteem and social acceptance and more often these students live at home and work part-time, while attending college (Horn & Nevill, 2006; Warburton, et al., 2001).

Strengths of first-generation college students. Garrison and Gardner (2012) studied first-generation college students for the sole purpose of identifying strengths of this population. First-generation students indicated a variety of ways they initiated action in order to make their college experiences possible and this effort was directly connected to learning and student persistence. These students were experienced in taking necessary first steps as well as having the long-term practice of taking action. First-generation students were found to be resourceful and repeatedly accessed expertise from adults to help them navigate personal, social, and academic dilemmas. The students demonstrated the ability to strategically research and evaluate information and thought carefully about the facts in order to make effective decisions. Students possessed individual initiative that is important in taking action and making personal choices that allow them to meet academic requirements (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

First-generation students have been found to be mission-driven and have developed short-term and long-range goals relating to academic intentions and their personal life. These students were able to identify challenges in terms of life direction and those related to their higher education objectives. First-generation students were flexible enough to adjust to transitions and indicated this was obtained from events in their family history. The students

also demonstrated unrelenting efforts toward personal and academic accomplishments, often times overcoming several obstacles (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

Students with parents who did not attend college displayed optimistic perspectives that impacted their academic achievement. They were very enthusiastic and eager and used these traits to their benefits in personal and academic settings. First-generation students were hopeful and desired to be self-sufficient, earn a good wage, and have an interesting career. The study also found this group of students to possess self-confidence and personal pride that was steeped in realism and humbleness (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

First-generation college students were self-aware, possessed personal insight, and developed well-being. Students were self-confident and utilized powerful positive thinking to confront disappointments with realistic solutions. They were accepting, empathic, and tolerant individuals and these attributes are important in higher education settings with group assignments and diverse campus communities. First-generation students also seemed to appreciate being in college and did not take the opportunity for granted (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

The work of Garrison and Gardner (2012) inspired the researcher to conduct the current study. Their strength-based approach was refreshing as much of the existing body of research was deficit-based. The results of the current study add to the findings of Garrison and Gardner's (2012) study as it also focuses on successful first-generation college students.

College Access, Persistence, and Success

Institutional factors like academic culture and faculty perceptions play a role in first-generation college students' college acceptance and success. Research has indicated that some faculty experience challenges in managing the faculty-student relationship. First-generation students may not meet the performance criteria expectations of faculty and this has been found to cause tension that impacts faculty attitudes toward students. The perception that first-generation students come to college underprepared academically impacts the culture of learning and faculty assumptions about students (Hardy, 2002).

Fundamental to being successful within any setting is having a knowledge about the environment, rules, codes, and possession of the skills to engage and negotiate through the environment (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). First-generation students enter a college environment that is drastically different from their previous experiences and this has caused them to feel unwelcome and marginalized (Thayer, 2000). The higher education system has components like a structural inequity that disengages first-generation college students. "Normative behavior and institutionalized practices can be demeaning to some individuals or groups" (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 100). Throughout history, higher education access has been limited to certain groups and current college processes and procedures have been found to disenfranchise first-generation college students (Schein, 1992). Environmental barriers have also been found to impede first-generation students' college access. There is a great deal of literature that indicates first-generation students' socioeconomic status plays a significant role in educational success (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006).

“Since the National Defense Education Act of 1958, a primary objective of federal higher education policy has been to increase access to higher education for those who would not otherwise attend, especially those from low-income backgrounds” (Tinto, 2004, p. 3). Access to college education has drastically increased over the last 4 decades (Brock, 2010). About five million students were enrolled in a United States college or university in 1965 and that figure increased to 17.5 million in 2005. The incredible increase in college attendance occurred at a time when efforts were made to make college more affordable. In addition, several programs were introduced and funded by the federal government to assist low-income and first-generation college students with college preparation and financial support. Some of these initiatives were the federally subsidized loan program, Pell grants, and the Trio program (Brock, 2010). Snyder, Dillow, and Hoffman (2008) reported that attendance at community and junior colleges also increased during this time period and they found that the rates of attendance for minority students and women increased significantly between 1970 and 2005.

Choy (2002) found differences in persistence and completion rates between racial and ethnic groups and genders. African-American and Latino students experience the lowest rates of persistence and completion with Asian and Pacific Islanders having the highest rates. Additionally, the study revealed that women enrolled at public higher education institutions have higher rates of persistence and completion than men. Non-traditional students are defined as students who do not attend college immediately following high school, students who have full-time jobs, or students who have children. Choy (2002) reported that non-

traditional students have lower rates of persistence and completion as well as students who did not complete a college preparatory high school curriculum in mathematics and reading.

Paulsen (1990) reported that economic variables like the cost of college, financial resources available for tuition, and perceptions of the importance of a college degree influence the decision to attend a college or university. Students' college choice is also impacted by one's psychological perspective of the college/university's climate and culture. An institution's diversity of student body, students' parents' level of education, peer groups, academic readiness, and family income are examples of sociological factors that have been found to affect access to higher education (Strange & Banning, 2001).

Experiences of First-Generation College Students

A growing body of educational and sociological research has focuses on first-generation college students. Most of the research has found that first-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage in regards to academic preparation (Bui, 2002) and in terms of cultural knowledge and access to hidden rules of college success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992, Rendon, 1992, Terenzini, et al., 1994). First-generation students are more likely to attend low quality high schools that do not provide a rigorous college preparatory academic curriculum needed for college level coursework (Zalaquett, 1999). This group of students have also been found to have a deficit in knowledge of the general college experience and an understanding of the university system (Brooks-Terry, 1998, Pascarella, et al., 2004). Perhaps this lack of knowledge is a result of first-generation students' parents having limited knowledge because they never attended college.

First-generation students typically engage in the college environment in different social and academic ways. They have been found to study less, earn lower grades, and take fewer courses in humanities, arts, and natural sciences (Pascarella, et al. 2004). They also have to work for wages several more hours each week than their non-first-generation peers. Lower levels of academic engagement and their unique financial needs causes first-generation students to take longer to complete their degrees (Terenzini, et al., 1996) and they are less likely to graduate compared to their continuing-generation counterparts (Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). They have also been found to be less involved in extracurricular activities like clubs and student organizations, less likely to get to know their professors, and hesitant about interacting with their peers in non-academic settings (Pascarella, et al, 2004, Pike & Kuh, 2005).

As indicated, first-generation students have lower levels of engagement and this prevents them from taking full advantage of the college experience. A growing amount of literature has found that a lack of involvement is especially harmful for first-generation students (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Inman & Pascarella, 1998; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). Pascarella et al. (2004) found that involvement in extracurricular activities and connections with peers benefits first-generation college students more than continuing-generation students. Engagement leads to greater gains in critical thinking, writing skills, reasoning, and plans for higher education for first-generation students.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories that have been used to aid in understanding the educational experiences of college students are Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural and Social Capital and Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. An analysis of each theory is presented to include key assumptions and constructs, usefulness and implications for counseling, and generalizability. Both theories are helpful in understanding the student transition and college experiences of first-generation college students.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed capital as assets that people can obtain to help them in different aspects of their lives (Bourdieu, 1977). In considering first-generation college students, Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital assists in understanding the obstacles encountered by this group of learners.

Assumptions and premises. Bourdieu believed each person occupies a position in a social space and that each individual is defined by more than social class membership. He found importance and value in social networks and understood social relations to be complex and something that individuals engage in daily. The social field will become even more complex as people participate and it will become a multidimensional social world. Cultural and social capital theory also recognize that social classes have social privileges across generations and the higher and intellectual classes work to preserve their privilege (Swartz, 2003). He wanted to uncover that the development of capital was more determined by social origin than by accumulating experience over time. He pointed out that people who were

reared by families with less social class and status were likely to possess the capital their families possess (Bourdieu, 1992). Bringing this topic to the forefront of his theory allows educators to promote social justice by advocating for and supporting individuals lacking cultural and social capital because of reasons out of their control.

Key constructs and definitions. Bourdieu defined *cultural capital* as “verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials” (Swartz, 1997, p. 74). The model indicated the three states of cultural capital were embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. *Embodied cultural capital* is defined as “the ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalized by the individual through socialization and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding” (Swartz, 1997, p. 76). The embodied cultural capital describes properties that are acquired consciously and those inherited through socialization of culture and traditions. *Objectified cultural capital* includes material objects which are appreciated by means of embodied cultural capital. *Institutionalized cultural capital* refers to academic qualifications and can be acquired when one has high levels of embodied cultural capital. Most of the empirical research involving first-generation students focuses on the analysis of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997).

Bourdieu taught the concept of cultural capital as something that is acquired over time through home and parental socialization. He found that in education systems, even though it appears that students are rewarded by their academic talents, in fact, they are rewarded for their cultural capital. Middle and upper class families have more cultural

capital than lower class families and even though cultural capital can be acquired, Bourdieu argued that one's capital is always marked by its earliest conditions of acquisition. Furthermore, he proposed that children who possess cultural capital receive more attention from teachers and more encouragement to pursue higher education than students from more modest backgrounds. Therefore, students with cultural capital are more likely to go to college and obtain a prestigious career. When less-privileged students obtain cultural capital, they may not be recognized the same as those who come from more privileged backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu's powerful model of capital has been tested worldwide and focuses on cultural capital's effects on various educational outcomes (Dumais & Ward, 2010).

Social capital has also been proven to be a useful way to understand the experiences of first-generation college students. Social capital terms the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1977; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Networks of relationships assist students in adjusting and maneuvering an unfamiliar environment (Attinasi, 1989) by providing them with important information, emotional support, and guidance. Differences in the quality and quantity of social networks that students are able to access may explain differences in academic engagement and persistence in college (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Usefulness and generalizability of theory. Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital has proven useful in a wealth of quantitative and qualitative research projects in the field of education. DiMaggio (1982) assessed the impact of Bourdieu's description of

cultural capital on high school students' grades. The project included 2,906 participants and found that possessing cultural capital had a significant impact on grades in high school. To determine the impact of cultural capital on females specifically, Dumais (2002), employed a regression analysis to determine the effects of cultural capital. The study included white female participants and found that females with higher socioeconomic status tend to have more cultural capital.

Bass (2014) explored African-American youth attending boarding schools by conducting a qualitative study using Bourdieu's theory as a theoretical framework. The project evaluated the boarding school model by exploring the environments of these institutions and found them to aid in increasing students' exposure to social and cultural capital. Bass transferred her findings from boarding school research to developing successful practices for traditional day schools. Naidoo (2004) found Bourdieu's theory of social capital helpful in studying higher education and the reinforcement of social class structures in South Africa. The qualitative study included two case studies using institutional documents, policies, and interviews

Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital has been used with a wide variety of populations which proves the theory is generalizable to a diverse group of individuals. For instance, Erel (2010) used the theory with migrants to understand their continued development of culture after moving to a new country. Franklin (2002) utilized Bourdieu's theory to explain the culture of African-American people in the American education system. The theory was found to be helpful in describing the cultural attainment of this minority

group. Monkman, Ronald, and Theramene (2005) used the theory to analyze the dynamics of negotiation in a low-income, Spanish speaking, urban school community. They found these cultural and social constructs helpful in describing this group of children. Several studies utilizing this framework speak to the usefulness of the theory. Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital is also generalizable to various populations.

Implications for first-generation college students. Researchers have uncovered the link between students' socioeconomic status, parental education, and social capital. Students with high socioeconomic status typically are members of social networks that provide support, such as emotional and tangible resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). First-generation students have been found to benefit from participation in extracurricular activities and social interactions with non-first-generation peers. This form of social capital has been found to improve students' motivation, degree plans, intellectual development, and personal growth (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Despite the benefits of this support, first-generation students report lower involvement in on-campus activities (Walpole, 2003).

First-generation students have been found to have deficits in cultural (Dumais & Ward, 2010) and social (McDonough, 1997) capital, which have become obstacles to admission to college. First-generation students come from families lacking institutionalized cultural capital, or knowledge of college degrees and credentials, and therefore lack the experience of the college selection and application process. "A child's ambitions and expectations with regard to education and career are structurally determined products of parental and other reference-group educational experience and cultural life" (Swartz, 1997, p.

197). According to Bourdieu, many first-generation students will opt out of pursuing a college degree because they feel that it is not for them and they do not have the same sense of entitlement or belonging as their non-first-generation counterparts (Bourdieu, 1977).

Research on social class determined cultural capital among female high school students is related to how they selected colleges. Families without cultural capital were generally supportive of their children's desire to go to college, but they were not able to offer much assistance (McDonough, 1997). Students with a lack of cultural capital also continue to experience difficulties after enrolling in college. Beyond the usual adjustment process, first-generation students are encouraged to learn a new popular culture that involves styles of dress, vocabulary, and taste in music (Hsiao, 1992).

Social capital has also provided a useful way to understand the challenges for first-generation college students. Social capital highlights the value of relationships that provide support and assistance in certain social situations (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Unfortunately, many prospective first-generation college students lack the cultural and social capital that other college students possess, and that deficit makes it more difficult for them to be successful. Students with limited forms of capital will need additional support to fill the gaps in their knowledge and to bring about personal growth.

Tinto's theory of student departure. Vincent Tinto developed a theory to explain college student retention in 1975. The purpose of his theory was to describe the reasons students depart from college before earning a degree. His theory examined the unique aspects of individual students and the characteristics of colleges/universities. By focusing on

both of these aspects, Tinto determined areas of focus for college personnel in preventing attrition (Long, 2012).

Assumptions and premises. Tinto's theory is based on the assumption that students enter a college or institution of higher learning with a variety of personal, family, and academic characteristics and skills. Each unique student has a variety of patterns of intentions and commitments with respect for college performance and attendance and personal goals. Students' intentions are modified constantly as they interact with individuals at college and with the structures of the academic and social system of the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Positive experiences with the informal and formal academic and social systems of the institution lead to more student integration and persistence. Negative interactions, however, impede integration and can cause the student to distance themselves from the academic and social communities of the institution and reduce their commitment to goals and the institution. Tinto proposes that the degree of success a student has in his or her pursuit of higher education influences the level of commitment a student has to an institution, academic goals, and career goals (Tinto, 1993).

Key constructs and definitions. Tinto's theory of college student departure recognizes the significance of student integration in academic achievement and retention. "*Integration* is the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in subgroups of it" (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005, p. 54). Tinto (1987) suggested the three stages to achieve integration were (1) *separation* from the students' previous communities, (2) *transition* between the former community and the new college community, and (3) *incorporation* into the college community. College students may experience these stages in any order and they may also experience the stages partially or all simultaneously.

During the stage involving *separation* from the individual's former community, students "disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities associated with the family, the local high school, and the local area of residence" (Tinto, 1987, p. 95). The theory indicates that students who do not successfully separate themselves from family or friends who do not see the value in higher education would have difficult experiences integrating and have a greater chance of attrition (Morrison & Silverman, 2012).

During the second stage called *transition*, students who come from communities similar to college would experience a shorter transition period than those who did not. For example, students whose parents attended college are more likely to persist because they have the support and experiences of the parents to help with academic procedures and social difficulties. Students can reduce the stress they encounter and the length of their transition if they were able to "correctly anticipate the character of transition they will have to make" (Tinto, 1987, p. 97). Tinto's theory warns that individuals cannot predict all of the roles they must take on during their college career and this will most likely cause some difficulties during the transition stage.

The last state of *integration* is incorporation into the college community. In order to fully integrate into the college community, students must assimilate into both the academic and social communities of higher education. Both communities contain a formal and an informal component. *Formal academic integration* is the congruence between the students' potential, aptitude, and academic demands of the college. *Informal academic integration* refers to the similarities of the individual's common values and those held by members of the college (Morrison & Silverman, 2012).

Social integration refers to interactions between students within the social systems of the college. *Formal social integration* includes involvement of the student in extracurricular clubs and other social activities. *Informal social integration* is defined as interaction among peer-group members and friends. Tinto (1987) suggested that contacts between students and members of the college do not simply guarantee academic and social integration. However, he asserted that the absence of such contacts could reinforce values that separate a student from others in the college and could ultimately lead to student departure.

Tinto (1993) later expanded his model to include two primary determinants of college student withdrawal. The first factor includes experiences prior to college and student characteristics. These include students' family background, age, ethnicity and gender, academic performance and preparation, and prior experiences in school. The second factor includes experiences after admission to college. Examples of these factors are grade performance, intellectual development, peer and faculty interactions, and experiences in their

learning community of the college. Tinto termed experiences before college and students' characteristics as *input variables* and experiences after admission as *integration variables*.

Usefulness and generalizability of the theory. The usefulness and testability of Tinto's theory of college student departure is supported by both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Research related to the theory has received an impressive amount of respect and has expanded since its inception. Scholars have used Tinto's theory to explore ways to assist with student attrition through many research endeavors. Sorey and Duggan (2008) conducted a quantitative study to determine the predictors of persistence of traditional aged and adult degree students. Their results validated Tinto's theory and determined that predictors for traditional aged students were encouragement, support, and academic integration while predictors for adult aged students were social integration and commitment. Sorey and Duggan found the theory of departure useful in explaining student retention in their research study. Using Tinto's theory of departure, Downing (2005) conducted a logistical regression analysis to determine what academic and social integration factors cause African American students attending predominantly white institutions to withdraw before obtaining a college degree. In line with the theory, Downing found academic integration as a key predictor of retention during the first year of college for this population.

Henderson, Noble, and De George-Walker (2009) used Tinto's theory to conduct qualitative research on the experiences of "interrupted" first year students at a regional Australian university. They found the tenants of the theory to be applicable to mature or second chance adult students and proposed suggestions for college personnel to provide

support to this unique group of students. Christie and Dinham (1991) used Tinto's model to study freshman perceptions of college experiences that influenced their social integration. Through qualitative research, they discovered that the model was an accurate description of the importance of social integration in retention.

Although often criticized for not being applicable to various ethnicities, Tinto's revisions to his original theory proved to be more generalizable. For instance, Palmer, Davis, and Maramba (2011) found that Tinto's theory was accurate in describing the college drop-out decisions and experiences of African-American males attending historically black colleges and universities. The model was also used as a framework to understand the experiences of Native American/Alaskan Native students attending a major university in Lee, Donlan, and Brown's (2010) research on improving the understanding of factors affecting undergraduates' persistence. Attinasi (1989) conducted qualitative research by interviewing Mexican American college drop-outs about their decision to leave. They found the facets of Tinto's theory to be applicable with this population. Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice (2008) also found Tinto's theory helpful in researching first-generation college students who were white males. They found many of Tinto's concepts to be consistent with this group of students. Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, & Deil-Amen (2014) used the theory to research the persistence of community college students. Tinto's theory of student departure has been proven to be generalizable to college students of various cultures and institutions.

Implications for first-generation college students. Tinto's model of college student departure can inform the practice of school, college, and mental health counseling. Having a

thorough understanding of the reasons students decide to withdraw from college allows counselors to be proactive in supporting their students. From the model, pre-entry attributes like family background, skills and attitudes, and prior experiences in school can impact a student's successful transition and their decision to remain in college. School counselors are positioned to provide supportive interventions to students to address any pre-entry characteristics that may hinder a student's desire to persist in college. Tinto's model also emphasizes the importance of student goals and commitment in the withdrawal decision. School counselors may assist students through proactive student planning to create realistic, attainable goals and with having passion for completing their goals. Furthermore, school counselors can engage students in developing appropriate action plans to reach their goals.

Institutional experiences are another very important tenant in Tinto's model and can greatly influence a student's decision to persist in college. College counselors and academic advisors can provide support to students demonstrating challenges with academic performance. Counselors may assist by helping students with coping skills, time management strategies, study skills, and procrastination. Additionally, to respond to the importance of social integration, support staff can recommend extracurricular programs to students that match their interests. College counselors and advisors are also positioned to respond to the continued importance of student goals and commitment to the institution by revisiting the student's short and long-term goals and by exploring their feelings about the college and their experiences.

Intersection of theoretical frameworks. Bourdieu and Tinto's theory were selected as frameworks for investigating the experiences of first-generation college students because of their wide popularity and applicability in college access and student retention research. Interestingly, they have some commonalities in their approach, even though they were created by sociologists in two different countries during two different decades. Furthermore, even though neither theory was created with first-generation students specifically in mind, they are excellent models of understanding the experiences of this population.

Bourdieu's cultural capital corresponds naturally and appropriately with Tinto's concepts of pre-college characteristics. For example, students' families, socioeconomic status, and high school experiences are considered pre-college factors that affect student retention. These same factors impact student transition to college. Having the limited college experiences in students' family reduce the likelihood they will have goals to attend college or know the appropriate steps to get there. Social capital is also related to students' pre-college and college characteristics. College integration, as described by Tinto, is the involvement of the student in extracurricular clubs and social activities and interaction among peer group members and friends. This concept is very similar to Bourdieu's social capital concept and can impact a student's transition to and retention in college. Interestingly, both theories seem to be interconnected and clearly describe causes of college student success and retention for all students, especially first-generation college students.

Summary

There is a considerable amount of scholarly literature that assists in understanding the experiences of first-generation college students. This group of students often face a difficult transition to college due to academic, sociological, institutional, and environmental factors. They are less likely to persist and complete college and therefore not obtain a career that will sustain them. Most of the research on first-generation students describes the struggles these students face. Although the profession knows much about first-generation college students with respect to their academic preparation, transition to postsecondary education, and progress toward degree attainment, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences. In this study, the researcher took a different approach to learning about first-generation students' experiences by seeing the world through the lens of successful students. In addition, the researcher used Bourdieu's and Tinto's theoretical framework as a lens for conceptualizing and synthesizing the data collected. The results of the study are presented in terms of these theories.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

The purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of first-generation college students who have graduated high school and have achieved success in college. The central question being asked in this study was: What are the lived experiences of first-generation college seniors who have been successful in college? To answer this main question, several sub-questions were: (a) What factors influenced their decision to attend college? (b) What and who helped them make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education? (c) What are the social experiences of first-generation college students during the transition to college and how did the experiences impact their success? (d) What helped them overcome obstacles? Finally, the purpose of the study was to evaluate the implications of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and integration (Tinto, 1993) on first-generation students' success. The majority of research conducted has determined that first-generation college students face tremendous obstacles that impede their educational success and cause attrition in college. While this research is significant in understanding the realities of first-generation students, in this study the researcher focused on a population of successful students who persisted even though they faced the hurdles found in previous research. To obtain a rich description of the experiences of successful first-generation students, the researcher utilized qualitative research methods using a phenomenological approach

Research Design

The qualitative methods used in this study were a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study was conducted because this type of research is discovery oriented and aimed to clarify the meaning of the experience for the individuals who were living the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology emphasizes a person's construction of their everyday life and their world (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Hays and Singh (2012) noted that a main goal of qualitative research is to assess a participant's intentionality, or internal experience of being conscious of something. Approaching a phenomenon with a fresh, unbiased perspective, through the eyes of participants who have direct, immediate experience with it is phenomenology. The phenomenology process began with "understanding the life-world of a participant and then searching for commonalities across participants to see how the lived experiences relate to a phenomenon of interest" (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 51). A summary of general and unique characteristics of phenomenology are presented in table 1.

Table 1

General and unique characteristics of phenomenology (Hays and Singh, 2012)

General characteristics	Unique characteristics
Discovery focused	Emphasis on universal and divergent aspects of an experience itself
Focus on direct experience	Participants' direct, immediate experience within their worlds
Learning about a phenomenon	Researcher takes "fresh" perspective and refrains from subjective interpretation

As previously noted, phenomenology is unique to other research methods because it focuses on studying experiences from the point of view of the participants. The decision to conduct this study using a phenomenological approach was based on the information being sought. The goal was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students who have transitioned to college and are currently seniors. The participants in the study had the direct experience of being a first-generation student and transitioning from high school to college. Through their lived experiences, they were able to describe any challenges they faced and proven methods of dealing with obstacles. The exploratory nature of a phenomenological approach was ideal for the present study methods because there was a lack of prior direct research on the experiences of first-generation college students who successfully transitioned to college and experienced success in higher education.

Operationalizing Success

The researcher decided to focus on first-generation students who have been retained in college and were on track to graduate because other studies have investigated the lived experiences of students who did not succeed in college. Defining a “successful” first-generation college student, or any student, can be difficult because success is a relative term that has various meanings to different individuals. In this study, the researcher operationalized success by describing successful students as those who are classified as a senior at the research institution. Previous research has found that first-generation college students experience higher attrition rates from the first to the second year of higher education (Greenwald, 2012; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). Choy (2001) also stated that if a

college student persists three years, their probability of graduating is at the highest.

Therefore, first-generation college *seniors* were chosen to be included in this study. An additional criteria for success in this study was a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher on a 4.0 grading scale. This criteria was selected because the minimum grade point average to graduate from the research university was 2.0, but several degree programs required at least a 2.7 grade point average. Additionally, the university's undergraduate catalog indicated a grade point average of 3.0 is considered above average.

Participants

Patton (2002) described purposeful sampling as exemplifying rigor in qualitative research and emphasized the importance of developing specific criteria for the sample in the study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to this sampling technique as purposive sampling and states that it is required to obtain rich information about the phenomenon. The purposeful sample in this study included 10 first-generation college seniors enrolled at a public, historically black university in the southeastern United States. The sample was also considered a convenience sample as the researcher was employed at the university and had relatively easy access to the participants (Creswell, 2013). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to commencing and the approval letter is included in Appendix A. Creswell (2013) suggested a sample size of up to 10 people for phenomenological research in order to gain a depth of understanding about the research area. The sample size in the current study was sufficient, according to Creswell (2013), to adequately represent the phenomenon of inquiry.

The university where the research was conducted had 7,687 students enrolled at the time the study was conducted. About 77% of the students, or 5,917 were undergraduate students and 1,770 students were enrolled in graduate programs. While the university was comprised of mostly Black or African American students, the student body was diverse. Seventy-six percent of the students (5,843) were reported as Black or African American, 11.5% (882) were White, 3.8% (291) were unknown, 3.5% (267) were two or more races, 2.9% (221) were Hispanic or Latino(a), 1.2% (96) were Asian, 0.05% were American Indian or Alaskan Native and less than 0.05% (2) were classified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. About 67.7% of the students were female while 33.3% were male and 6,920 students were considered in-state for tuition purposes while 767 were classified as out of state residents (University of North Carolina General Administration, 2015).

The most recent information about students at-risk and retention rates came from the 2013-2014 academic year. Table 2 provides the number and percentage of undergraduate students who were classified as coming from low-income families, first-generation college students, low income and first-generation college students, students with disabilities, and low income and students with disabilities. The undergraduate four-year graduation rate for the 2013-2014 academic year was 19.5% and the six-year graduation rate was 46.8%. The first to second year retention rate was 76.6%.

Table 2

Number and percentage of total student body by race/ethnicity and other criteria

Category	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Low-income ^a	3013	48%
First-generation ^b	1714	28%
Low-income/first-generation ^{ab}	1042	17%
Students with disabilities ^c	291	5%
Low-Income/disabilities ^{ac}	170	3%

Note. The percentages presented are based on the undergraduate student enrollment at the university during the 2013-2014 academic year of 6,220 students.

^a Income classification came from Pell grant eligibility determined from information reported on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

^b Student self-reported on the FAFSA

^c Disability data obtained from Office of Students with Disabilities

In order to learn about the experiences of successful first-generation college students, the population of interest for this research study was first-generation college students who have an above average grade point average (equal to or greater than 3.0) and were classified as seniors. Table 3 displays a summarization of characteristics of the students who participated in the study.

Table 3

Self-reported descriptive characteristics of participants

Descriptions	Frequency
Gender	
Female	8
Male	2
Age	
20-21	7
22-23	2
24-25	1
Ethnicity	
African American	8
Caucasian	1
Multi-Racial	1
Grade Point Average	
3.0-3.24	5
3.25-3.49	1
3.50-3.74	3
3.75-4.0	1

Note. Participant demographics were obtained from questionnaire included in Appendix B.

Researcher Reflexivity Statement

Active self-reflection of an investigator on the research process is called researcher reflexivity. The opinions and thoughts of the researcher are part of the research process as it provides a “lens into the research process itself” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 137). The primary researcher in this study was a 35 year old, white male enrolled in a doctor of philosophy program in counseling and counselor education. He identified as a first-generation college student, as neither of his parents attended college. He experienced many of the obstacles that previous research has found with first-generation college students. He recalls having supportive family who were unable to answer questions about the college process. Furthermore, he attended a large, public university upon graduation from high school and recalled feeling afraid and confused by many college procedures. The researcher has earned a masters degree in school counseling.

The researcher has been a school counselor in a rural, low-wealth community where he served a large percentage of first-generation college students. As a senior counselor, he worked to help students overcome obstacles to college access. He especially supported first-generation college students with the planning, application, and financial aid processes. After working as a school counselor for several years, the researcher became an academic advisor at a public university, the same site where the research in this study was conducted. As an advisor, he has worked with several first-generation college students and has witnessed this group of students face challenges that continuing-generation students did not experience. He supports first-generation college students by helping them discover hidden rules of higher

education. Because the researcher is a first-generation college student, he had assumptions about the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Without bracketing his experiences and assumptions, he could reduce the rich descriptions provided by the unique participants in this study.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used in the current study was a semi-structured, open-ended interview and a demographic questionnaire. This type of data collection was chosen because interviews: (1) allow participant to describe what is meaningful or important in their own words, (2) can gain the participants' story, and (3) allow the researcher to probe for more details and ensure that participants are interpreting questions correctly (Hays and Singh, 2012).

Demographic questionnaire. Hays and Singh (2012) suggested utilizing a written background or demographic questionnaire to get basic participant information because the answers to these questions are concrete and superficial. A written demographic questionnaire was administered to each participant prior to the interviews. The questionnaire was designed to provide basic demographic information and to provide a more descriptive view of the participants. A copy of the demographic questionnaire used in the study is included in Appendix B.

Interview. Developing the interview protocol for this study began with creating an outline of what was to be covered based on the research design and research question as suggested by Berg (2004). The next step was drafting questions that focused on each of the

research questions and the theoretical frameworks. A semi-structured interview, or an in-depth interview, was conducted because it allowed the participants to have more say in the structure and process of the interview. As suggested by Hays and Singh (2012), an interview protocol serves as the guide and starting point for the interview. However, additional interview questions were included and opportunities for clarification or more elaboration were pursued. Esterberg (2002) reported that a semi-structured interview was the most culturally appropriate as it included more of the participant's voice and provides a richer picture of the phenomenon under investigation.

Interview Question Analysis

The interview questions were developed to obtain a specific type of response from the participants. The questions were all open-ended and included a follow-up opportunity to probe further. The interview protocol was a standardized, open-ended interview as described by Turner (2010). This type of question style allowed the participants to fully explain their point of view and their experiences. Table 4 provides an analysis of each interview question including the purpose and source of each question.

Patton (2002) and Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg (1982) have outlined several types of interview questions that are useful in qualitative research. For this study, the following types of questions were utilized in the in-depth interview: (1) background or demographic questions, (2) behavior or experience questions, and (3) commentary. Background or demographic questions were foundational questions that are helpful in beginning the interview. Behavior or experience questions solicited information about the participants'

actions and reflections on those actions. These questions focused on what happened instead of why it happened. Finally, the use of commentary, instead of the use of a direct question, allowed the participants to respond without feeling pressure. Snow, Zurcher, and Sjoberg (1982) describe using a statement versus a question to solicit commentary from participants.

Table 4

Interview Question Analysis

Interview Question	Purpose of Question; Source or Background	Type of Question
Please tell me a little about yourself.	Build rapport and uncover background information about the participants; Researcher clinical experience	Background or demographic question (Patton, 2002)
When did you realize you wanted to go to college and what helped you make this decision?	Learn about the participants' decision to attend college; Researcher clinical experience	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)
Did you face any obstacles in planning, applying, and paying for college? How did you overcome any obstacles? Describe your experience of transitioning from high school to college.	Learn about the participants' college access experience; Determine if Bourdieu's (1992) concepts of cultural and social capital impacted participants' transition	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)
What and who helped you during the transition from high school to college? What specific actions did these individuals take to support you?	Learn about internal and external factors that assisted participants in enrolling in college; Determine if Bourdieu's concepts (1992) of cultural and social capital impacted participants transition	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)
During your first year in college, what were some questions or concerns you had about college processes, requirements, etc?	Learn about the lived experiences of the participants in college; Determine if Bourdieu's (1992) concepts of cultural and social capital impacted participants transition	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)

Table 4 continued

Describe your social experiences during your first year in college. How did these social experiences impact your transition to college and your experiences during your first year of college?	Learn about the participants' social experiences in college. Determine if Bourdieu's (2002) concepts of social capital and Tinto's (2006) concept of integration impacted participants transition	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)
How involved on your campus were you during your first year in college? Describe your involvement. How did your level of involvement impact your transition to college and your experiences during your first year of college?	Learn about the amount of social involvement the participants had in college; Determine if Tinto's (2006) concept of integration impacted participants college success	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)
Did you experience any stressful situation during your time in college? How did you respond to stressful situation during your time in college? Could you provide some specific examples of stressful situations and how you dealt with them?	Learn about the participants' coping skills in college; Researcher clinical experience	Behavior or experience question (Patton, 2002)
Is there any other information you would like to share about your journey to success, etc?	Allow the participant to discuss any additional information; Researcher clinical experience	Use of commentary (Snow, Zurcher, & Sjoberg, 1982)

Procedure

As previously indicated, the purpose of the current study was to learn more about the phenomenon of first-generation college students making a successful transition to college as well as persisting and earning senior classification in college. The procedures of the phenomenology designed to answer the research question includes details about the data collection steps and data analysis process. As suggested by Creswell (2013) and presented in

figure 1, the data collection information includes the process of locating the research site and participants, purposeful sampling strategy, specific data collection activities, recording process, field issues considerations, and data storage. The data analysis section includes the process of organizing data, reading and memoing data, describing, classifying, and interpreting data into codes and themes, interpreting the data, and representing and visualizing the data (Creswell, 2013).

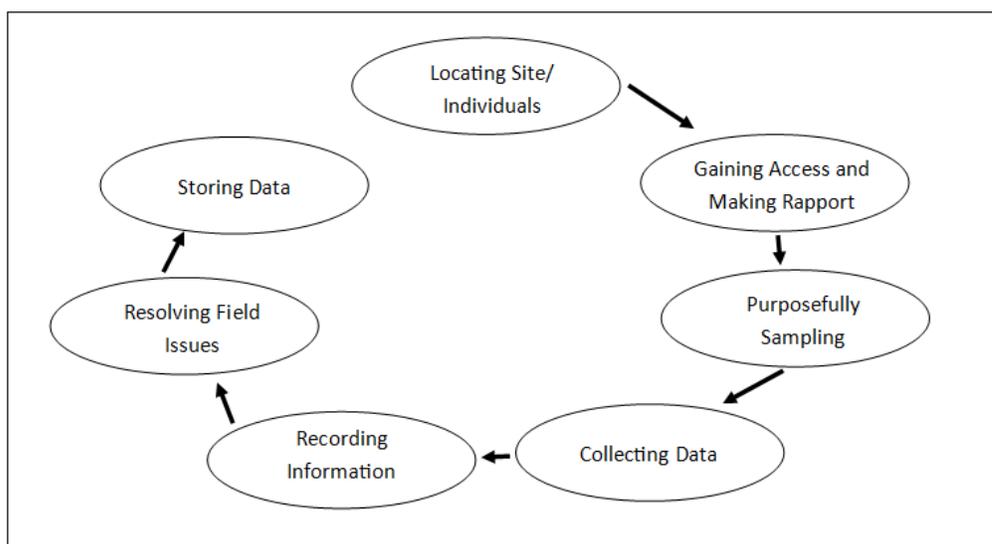


Figure 1. Creswell's (2013) Data Collection Activities

Data Collection

The research question that this study was designed to answer served as a guide to the data collection activities selected (Hays and Singh, 2012). Each collection method is described in step by step detail as recommended by Hays and Singh (2012) in this section along with critical considerations affecting the appropriateness of the methods in this phenomenology.

Site and individual selection. The goal in selecting a site and participants in this phenomenological inquiry was to find individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. By setting specific criteria to capture these individuals, a criterion sample was created (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, individuals selected must have been able to articulate their lived experiences so that the researcher could find common themes or experiences across all participants. The site selected for research in this study was a public, historically black, teaching university in southeastern United States with approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The site was selected because the researcher was employed at the institution as an academic advisor. In addition, the site was selected because it had a large percentage of first-generation college students in attendance. In 2014, approximately 38% of the student body identified as first-generation college students on the FAFSA.

Gaining access and making rapport. There were several steps in gaining access to the university for the current study. Step 1: Prior to accessing the university of interest, the researcher discussed and obtained approval of the research methods from a doctoral committee consisting of four faculty members of Counseling and Counselor Education. Step 2: After the proposal was accepted, the researcher, an employee of the university of interest, obtained permission from administration to conduct the study. Step 3: The proposal was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university in which the researcher was enrolled. The approval letter from the board is included in Appendix A. Gaining access to the research site and facilitating the collection of data was simplified as a result of the researcher's employment at the university in which the research occurred.

Building rapport with the individuals included several steps. Step 1: An email was sent to all senior students at the university who had grade point averages of 3.0 or above ($n = 515$) that explained the project and invited them to participate. The email that was used is included in Appendix C. The email was sent to all seniors with the specified grade point average because the university database did not provide a query for first-generation college students. To protect confidentiality, this information was not available in disaggregated form. Step 2: Interested, eligible students who responded were scheduled a time to participate in an interview with the researcher. Step 3: About one week prior to the scheduled interview time, the researcher sent a reminder email about the interview. Step 4: At the beginning of each interview, each participant was informed about the purpose of the study and signed the informed consent included in Appendix D. The participant and the researcher discussed the document including the purpose of the study, the participant's role, their ability to withdraw from the study, and the risks involved in participation in the study. Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym to be used in the final report of this project.

Purposeful sampling. A hallmark of qualitative research is the use of purposeful sampling and the process suggested to be used in phenomenological studies is developing a narrow range of participants. Criterion sampling allowed the researcher to study individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2013). In order to select the students who had experienced high school to college transition and success in higher education, the following criteria were used to select participants for this study: (1) participants were a first-generation college student, or having neither parent attend college,

(2) participants were classified as a senior, and (3) participants had a 3.0 grade point average or above. The criterion sample selected for this study was also considered a convenience sample because the researcher had easy access to participants through employment with the university.

The recruitment email included in Appendix C was sent to 515 college seniors with cumulative grade point averages of 3.0 or above. Within three days, 22 students responded to the invitation and ultimately a total of 34 students responded to the recruitment email. Four of the students did not meet the criteria for the study as they were not first-generation college students. Of the remaining 30 students, 18 responded to schedule a time to complete an interview. Eight students did not attend the scheduled interview and did not respond to a follow-up request to reschedule the interview. Ten students participated in the interviews and comprised the sample in this study.

Collecting data. Several forms of data collection were utilized in the current study. Data was collected to describe the demographics of the university including ethnicity/race and other unique characteristics of the student body. Demographic questionnaires were completed in writing by each participant and interviews were completed with each of the 10 participants to learn about their lived experiences. Each interview was recorded to create audio data to assist with the data analysis process of this study.

University demographic data. To describe the population at the research university, background statistical information was obtained from a recent Student Support Services grant proposal submitted to the Department of Education by the university in 2015. Additional data

was gathered from the University of North Carolina General Administration (2015) enrollment statistics database available via the Internet at the website of the governing body for all public universities in the state where the study was conducted. All of this information was available for the public on the Internet.

Demographic questionnaire. At the interview meetings, each participant was asked to complete a demographic questionnaire after discussing the informed consent document. This collection activity was designed to determine the participants' age, gender, ethnicity, current grade point average, college major, extracurricular involvement, and plans after college graduation. Requesting this information on a written questionnaire saved time from discussing this information in the interview and provided more time for participants to discuss their experiences.

Interview. Interviews with each participant were conducted on campus in the researcher's office. The location was confidential and suitable for recording the interview. The interviews ranged in length from 31 minutes to 64 minutes with an average length of 44 minutes. During each interview meeting, the researcher reviewed and discussed the research study and informed consent. After the participant consented to participate in the study, the researcher provided the participant with the demographic questionnaire to complete. After completing the questionnaire, the researcher began the interview.

All interviews were guided by the same open-ended questions presented in the interview protocol included in Appendix E, but the participants were able to discuss their experiences freely and had input in the structure and process of the interview (Hays and

Singh, 2012). The researcher provided each participant the opportunity to add any additional information after each question by asking follow-up questions. The follow-up opportunity further engaged the participants that provided brief answers or appeared to veer away from the original question with their answer (Creswell, 2013).

As recommended by Esterberg (2002) and Hays and Singh (2012), the researcher intentionally established rapport with the participants at the beginning of the interview. Rapport building was absolutely necessary for a successful interview and occurred before the interview began (Hays and Singh, 2012). To accomplish rapport, the researcher reiterated the confidentiality of the participants' responses in an effort to establish trust. Additionally, the interview was conducted with a conversational, informal tone in an effort to make the participant feel relaxed and more comfortable (Hays and Singh, 2012). Several natural counseling skills learned by the researcher in previous graduate coursework were used as suggested by Duncombe and Jessop (2002). To establish rapport with the interviewee, researchers should:

Consciously dress and present themselves in a way that sends the correct message to the interviewee. That is, they must seat themselves not too far away but not too near; maintain a pleasant, encouraging half-smile, and a lively interest. They should keep eye contact, speak in friendly tone, never challenge, and avoid inappropriate expressions of surprise or disapproval; and practice the art of the encouraging but non-directive "um." (p. 110).

It was important for the participants to feel like they were a vital part of the research in order to get rich descriptions of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013).

During each interview the researcher recorded data from the participants' responses on the interview protocol. During and after each interview, the researcher recorded written memos to describe findings as they developed during the interview. Writing initial thoughts about the research experience and the participants' responses in the research notes was an important part of data collection (McLeod, 2001). Memos were used with other data during the analysis stage of the study.

After each interview, the words of the participants were transcribed verbatim. The researcher emailed a copy of this transcript to each participant for review. The participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcription and they were invited to provide any additional information they would like to include in writing. This additional data collection activity allowed participants to further describe their experiences if needed. Two of the 10 participants provided additional information through the member check activity.

Recording information. Lofland and Lofland (1995) considered recording information, or "logging data" (p. 66) an essential process to qualitative research. Recording information refers to writing notes during the research process as well as sound recording information. The researcher took notes throughout the interview with each participant. The notes or memos allowed the researcher to record initial thoughts about the research process and questions to follow up on later. This data was analyzed and contributed to the results of this study.

All interviews were audio recorded using two devices. The researcher utilized the android applications “Voice Recorder” and “Sound Recorder” to record the sound or audio of each interview including the informed consent process. Using two devices ensured proper data collection in the event of device malfunction. Each participant was allowed to ask the researcher to stop recording at any time.

Resolving field issues. Creswell (2013) encouraged researchers to anticipate issues in the field that could impact the access to participants and the gathering of data. For example, he warned that gaining access to an organization can be a challenging task. Convincing individuals to participate was another factor to consider in the data collection process. The researcher in this study had access to the university and first-generation college students, and no challenges of gaining access were present. Additionally, the participants were very excited to participate in this study. They responded quickly to the email invitation and displayed enthusiasm during their interviews. Another issue that Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers consider was unpredictable behavior of participants in the interview. The researcher’s experience in counseling helped with unexpected participant behavior like shyness or playfulness. Furthermore, follow-up questions and probes were used to help participants stay on track.

Creswell (2013) also described the risk of researchers conducting research at their own place of employment. He commented that “this raises questions about whether good data can be collected when the act of data collection may introduce a power imbalance between the researcher and individuals being studied” (p. 151). The researcher has served

several students at the research university as an academic advisor. To prevent any conflict of interest, no participants were included in this study that were directly assigned to the researcher as their academic advisor or who had ever been assigned to the researcher.

Storing data. The researcher took several precautions to protect the data collected in this study. As suggested by Creswell (2013), backup copies of all data were created on the researcher's password protected computer. Files were saved with password protection and encryption. The computer remained locked in the office of the researcher. No files including information from the research study were transmitted via the Internet except for the transcription of the interviews and the responses of the participants. A master list of information gathered was created and participants' names were masked from collected data. One document was created that contained each participants' name, email address, assigned number, and selected pseudonym. This document was kept in electronic form only and secure on the researcher's computer. The data collected from this study will be stored for 5 years and then permanently deleted.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) provided a structured data analysis approach for phenomenological studies. More recently, Creswell (2013) presented a modified version of this method: (1) describe the participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon, (2) develop a list of significant statements, (3) take the significant statements and group them into larger units of information, (4) write a description of "what" the participants experienced with the phenomenon, (5) write a description of "how" the experience happened, and (6) write a

composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions.

At the early stage of data analysis, the researcher transcribed all of the in-person interviews verbatim. A member check was conducted by emailing each member the transcript of their interview so they could review the information for accuracy and provide any additional information. After receiving the transcripts from the participants and addressing any discrepancies and adding new information, a team of coders reviewed the transcripts. The coding team included the primary researcher and two doctoral students in Counseling and Counselor Education who have taken course work in qualitative research methods and who have engaged in qualitative research.

In the first major step of data analysis, the researcher considered personal experiences with success as a first-generation college student. The researcher reflected on the full description of his experience as a first-generation student and his work with first-generation students in various education settings. This critical pre-data analysis was called bracketing and helped to reduce researcher bias and assumptions about the study's focus (Hays & Singh, 2012). Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as epoche and suggested that completing this task helps to set aside the researcher's personal experiences so that the focus will be directed on the participants' experiences. In the next step of data analysis, the researcher read the transcripts of each interview several times to familiarize himself with each participant.

A research team consisting of the primary researcher and two doctoral students in counseling and counselor education worked together to conduct the next step of the data analysis. Hays and Singh (2012) noted research teams are an effective strategy to address issues such as researcher reflexivity and subjectivity and a team can be an important component to establish rigor in phenomenological research. The research team developed a list of significant statements from the participants' transcripts. The team members worked independently to locate statements from the interview transcriptions about how individuals were experiencing college transition and success and listed the statements. Each statement was evaluated as having equal importance. The research team developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Additionally, the research team performed data reduction and elimination by checking each significant statement for applicability to understanding the phenomenon (Mustakas, 1994). The team then took the important statements and grouped them into larger units of information called themes. Unrelated or eliminated data was not grouped into categories. This process is called coding and it involves aggregating the responses of the participants into small categories of information and assigning a label to the code. After this type of open coding procedure, the team evaluated the coded statements for patterns to see what experiences occurred the most through a process called pattern coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The team negotiated the themes found from each member and agreed on the major themes to include as results to this study.

After determining themes, a description was written of “what” the participants in the study experienced as first-generation college students moving to and through college. This information was a textural description of the experience and is presented in the results with verbatim examples. The researcher also provided descriptions from the transcriptions of “how” the experience happened. In this structural description, a reflection on the setting and context of the phenomenon is presented.

Finally, a composite description of the phenomenon was presented that incorporates textural and structural descriptions. This rich description is also called the essence of the experience. This description provided a thorough explanation that answers the research question in this study.

Validity and Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, validity is synonymous with several other terms: rigor and authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), truth, value, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), goodness (Emden & Sandelowski, 1998), and trustworthiness (Eisner, 1991). In counseling and educational settings, Hays and Singh (2012) prefer the term trustworthiness because the validity of a qualitative study refers to the truthfulness of the findings and conclusions based on maximum opportunity to hear the voices of participants. In describing the truth value of a study, researchers are encouraged to demonstrate research strengths as well as noting research limitations. In determining trustworthiness of this study, the researcher considered the question, “Why should others believe the findings of this study?”

Trustworthiness criteria. The criteria of trustworthiness in this qualitative research included several aspects that were considered throughout the design phase of the study, data collection and analysis, and reporting results. The criteria for trustworthiness included: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, (4) confirmability, (5) authenticity, (6) coherence, (7) sampling adequacy, (8) ethical validation, (9) substantive validation, and (10) creativity (Creswell, 2013, Hays & Singh, 2012). A description of each trustworthiness criteria is presented and includes aspects of the current study that responded to each criteria. Following the criteria descriptions, a detailed analysis of methods used in this study are presented. Table 5 provides the trustworthiness strategies used for each criteria in this qualitative study.

Credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the believability of a study is called credibility. They compare this concept to internal validity in quantitative research methods. Hays and Singh (2012) report that credibility is the most important criteria qualitative researchers should use to determine if the conclusions of the study are sensible and correct. The researcher in this study established credibility by taking field notes and memos throughout the research study, obtaining triangulation, and providing thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences.

Transferability. Transferability is the extent to which the results of a study can be applied to other people or situations. Lincoln and Guba (1985) compare transferability to external validity in quantitative research, however, generalizability is *not* a goal of qualitative research. In qualitative research, the goal is for researchers to provide a thorough description

of the research process, including participants and selection criteria, so that others can make decisions about how the findings can be applied to other individuals and settings (Hays and Singh, 2012). Stake (1990) refers to transferability as naturalistic generalizability and states that the more times a research finding is supported for various groups of individuals, the more confidence can be placed in the findings. The researcher in this study utilized triangulation, persistent observation, and thick descriptions of the research methods and participants' lived experiences to reach transferability.

Dependability. The consistency of study results over time and across researchers is called dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability in qualitative research is compared to reliability in quantitative research. To establish dependability, qualitative researchers must engage in strategies to show that similar findings extend to similar studies and research team members agree with the findings of the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The current study consisted of research methods such as a research team for data analysis and thick descriptions of the research process in order to achieve dependability.

Confirmability and authenticity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe confirmability as the degree to which the results of the research study are actual, genuine reflections of the participants investigated. To establish authenticity, qualitative researchers must represent participant perspectives honestly. Interference from the researcher, such as assumptions or biases, must be considered in order to protect the integrity of participant responses. The researcher bracketed personal assumptions and biases, collected field notes and memos,

utilized member checking, established triangulation, and provided thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences to establish confirmability and authenticity.

Coherence. The degree of consistency throughout the research design and the appropriateness of the selected qualitative research method for the research question is called coherence. Hays and Singh (2012) suggest establishing coherence by providing a thorough description of the research tradition and infusing the research tradition throughout the study. The researcher in this study provided a detailed description of phenomenology and provided a clear link between the research question and the goal of phenomenological research. Phenomenological research seeks to learn about the lived experiences of people who have experienced a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The research question in this study was, "What are the lived experiences of successful first-generation college students?" To further achieve coherence, persistent observation and thick descriptions were used to explain the steps in the research process of this study.

Sampling adequacy. Hays and Singh (2012) state sampling adequacy refers to using an appropriate sampling composition and sample size based on the qualitative research tradition being used. The sampling method must be congruent with the research design and data must be collected from enough participants. The researcher used interactive interviews with 10 participants who had experienced the phenomenon of transitioning and being successful in college. Creswell (2013) suggests a sample size of up to 10 people for phenomenological research in order to gain a depth of understanding about the research area. The sample size in the current study was sufficient, according to Creswell (2013), to

adequately represent the phenomenon of inquiry. A specific criteria was used to ensure that participants selected for the study are appropriate. A purposeful, convenience sample was selected for inclusion in this study. In order to further establish sampling adequacy, the researcher employed member checking, triangulation, and thick descriptions of research methods and participants' lived experiences. So the reader can better "hear" and understand the participants in this study, table 6 provides a snap shot of the first-generation college students who were interviewed.

Table 6

Demographics of First-Generation College Student Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Current GPA	Major
Courtney	F	African-American	22	3.15	Social Work
Gabrielle Broome	F	Multi-racial (Caucasian and African-American)	22	3.9	Criminal Justice
Jayla	F	African-American	21	3.6	Psychology
Josh	M	African-American	21	3.1	Mass Communications
Joy	F	African-American	21	3.4	Social Work
Leata	F	African-American	21	3.0	Social Work
Mare	F	Caucasian	24	3.0	Biology
Monique Whitener	F	African-American	21	3.5	Psychology
Rashed Jennings	M	African-American	21	3.2	Political Science
Tracy	F	African-American	20	3.7	Biology, Pre-Medicine

Note: Information was collected using the demographic questionnaire included in Appendix B.

Ethical validation. Ethical validation refers to treating all aspects of the research process as a moral and ethical project (Angen, 2000). Research should only be conducted that

is necessary to provide insights to meaningful real-world problems. All research procedures should be sensitive to the nature of human, cultural and social contexts as well as in reporting results. Member checking helped provide ethical validation to the current study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Approval of the study methods by the university institutional review board and the researcher's doctoral committee also increased the ethical validation of this study.

Substantive validation. Angen (2000) described substantive validation as the degree to which qualitative research adds something valuable to the profession. Also called relevance criterion, research must add new knowledge or support existing information about a phenomenon. As suggested by Hays and Singh (2012), the researcher produced a final product that is rich with evidence that supports the finding of the current study. By using field notes and memos, member checking, persistent observation, triangulation, and thick descriptions of the study methods and lived experiences of the participants, the results of this study are relevant and appropriate.

Creativity. Creativity refers to using research methods that are innovative and organizing and presenting data in imaginative ways. Showing flexibility in the research process is a sign of rigor in a research study. Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) identified creativity as one of the hallmark criteria for a trustworthy qualitative study. The researcher utilized triangulation of research methods to respond to the creativity criteria of trustworthiness.

Table 5

Trustworthiness Criteria and Strategies

	Field notes and memos	Member checking	Persistent observation	Triangulation	Thick Description	Bracketing
Credibility	X			X	X	X
Transferability			X	X	X	
Confirmability	X	X		X	X	X
Authenticity	X	X		X	X	X
Coherence			X		X	
Sampling adequacy		X		X		
Ethical validation		X				
Substantive validation	X	X	X	X	X	X
Creativity				X		

Note. X's indicate strategies of trustworthiness used in this study by criterion.

Strategies of trustworthiness. Several strategies were used in this study to establish trustworthiness of the research process, data interpretation, and presentation of results. It is important for researchers to use multiple strategies that address the research process and use strategies that are appropriate for the research tradition guiding the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). In this study, the researcher used field notes and memos, persistent observation, member checking, triangulation of research methods, thick description, and bracketing to

achieve trustworthiness. All of these strategies are appropriate for phenomenological studies (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Field notes and memos. The role of the researcher is an integral part to qualitative inquiry and keeping sufficient notes and reflections throughout the entire research process is important (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). Field notes and memos were recorded throughout the study to capture details of what occurred during the interview process and to record behavioral descriptions of the participants. For example, memos were details about a participant's reaction to a specific question and information about a question that was particularly difficult for a participant to answer.

Persistent observation. Persistent observation produces a wealth of data from the intentional effort of seeking detail regarding various aspects of a phenomenon. Researchers achieve persistent observation by asking refined and detailed questions during the interview (Hays & Singh, 2012). As indicated in the reflexivity statement, the investigator had been employed at the university where the research was conducted for three years. As part of his duties as an academic advisor, he met regularly with students to monitor academic progress. In situations where students were performing poorly, the researcher collaboratively developed action plans with students to help improve their academic performance. Additionally, the researcher had a thorough understanding of specific university policies and procedures and this helped him ask more appropriate follow up questions during the interviews.

Member checking. Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe member checking as the key strategy to establish trustworthiness. Member checking is the ongoing consultation with participants to ensure the results of a qualitative study are accurate (Hays and Singh, 2012). After each interview, the researcher completed verbatim transcriptions and emailed each participant a copy of their transcription. The participants were asked to review the transcription of their interview for accuracy. Additionally, they were asked if they would like to add any additional information to the study.

Triangulation. A common strategy for ensuring trustworthiness that involves using multiple forms of evidence at various parts of the study is called triangulation. Triangulation helps to support and better describe the results and strengthen the evidence that particular themes exist (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Triangulation of data. The researcher achieved triangulation of data sources by including several participants' voices by recruiting subjects in a manner congruent with phenomenological research design. To capture the voices of people who have experienced the phenomenon (first-generation college student success), specific criteria were established to recruit participants that match this population.

Triangulation of investigators. Using a team of researchers to analyze data in a research study is referred to as triangulation of investigators. Mays and Pope (2000) called this strategy stepwise replication and asserted that including other investigators in qualitative inquiry significantly strengthens and builds confidence in the results. After the data was collected in this study, a research team comprised of the primary investigator and two

additional researchers “blind” analyzed the results by coding. Afterwards, the team convened to discuss the results and come to consensus on the final main themes of the research. The additional researchers were doctoral candidates in counselor education who have completed coursework in qualitative research methods.

Triangulation of theoretical perspectives. This type of triangulation involves integrating theories at various stages of the research process and analyzing the data in terms of the theoretical framework. An essential component to triangulation of theoretical perspectives is using multiple theories to conceptualize, describe, and explain a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012). The current study utilized two theoretical frameworks: Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital and Tinto’s theory of college student departure.

Thick description. Thick description, or vividness, is a detailed account of the research process and outcomes. It goes beyond basic facts, feelings, and observation to including inferences into the meaning of the data. The current study provided a step by step process for data collection and analysis as recommended by Hays and Singh (2012). The results include selected remarks from the participants organized around the major themes from the study, but also include a synthesis of the themes and their relationship to the theoretical frameworks.

Bracketing. In phenomenological data analysis, Padgett (2004) suggested researchers complete a process called burrowing inward. As researchers attempt to understand the depth and essence of participants’ lived experiences, they immerse themselves in the data. Bracketing is an essential pre-data analysis method that assists the researcher in

recognizing bias and assumptions and preventing this personal interference from impacting the results of the study (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012). The researcher considered personal experiences with success as a first-generation college student. The researcher reflected on the full description of his experience as a first-generation student and his work with first-generation students in various education settings. Moustakas (1994) refers to this process as *epoche* and suggests that completing this task will be an attempt to set aside the researcher's personal experiences so that the focus will be directed on the participants' experiences.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn about the experiences of first-generation college students who have graduated high school and have achieved success in college and consented to participate in this study. The central question being asked in this study was “What are the lived experiences of first-generation college seniors who have been successful in college?” To answer this main question, several sub-questions were developed: (a) What factors influenced their decision to attend college? (b) What and who helped them make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education? (c) What are the social experiences of first-generation college students during the transition to college and how did the experiences impact their success? (d) What helped them overcome obstacles? Finally, this study sought to evaluate the implications of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and integration (Tinto, 1993) on first-generation students’ success. A description of the research design, site and participants, data collection, and data analysis methods was provided in the previous chapter. This chapter presents the results and findings that emerged after each interview transcription was coded by the research team. The results are presented in this chapter and are organized by five main themes: (a) pre-college characteristics, (b) decision to attend and experience accessing college, (c) transitioning from high school to college, (d) social and campus involvement, and (e) copings skills utilized by the participants.

Pre-college Characteristics

During each interview, the researcher began with the statement “tell me a little about yourself.” This opportunity was intentionally included so that participants could describe their personal characteristics, family structures, and beliefs about education in general. Most participants used this time as an opportunity to describe pre-college characteristics that were helpful in understanding their journey to and during college. Out of the 10 interviews, many statements about pre-college characteristics were made that were organized by the following sub-themes: (a) family-related characteristics, (b) education-related characteristics, and (c) personal and environmental characteristics.

Family-related characteristics. Seven participants specifically provided information about their families including their relationships with relatives and the role they played in the participants’ educational journey. Courtney described her experiences of her family moving several times:

My high school, I went to three different high schools. Yeah, um, because my mom got remarried. So I went to three different high schools. So, um, I think that, that takes a toll on, you know ... a lot of your success but I made it through.

Even though Tracy’s mother did not attend college, she valued education and helped her prepare for college. Tracy described her mother’s impact:

I went to a public school for uh elementary school. Then I went to a private Catholic school for middle school and high school. I have one sibling on my mom’s side and then I have 16 siblings on my dad’s side. Uh, home life, we grew up in, we grew up

by, by poor-class, well low-class um, most of the families battling uh, drug problems and stuff like that. So that's kinda what, my mom kind of saved up. I'm the only one that went to private school. So she kind of saved up and we had a voucher and stuff like that. So the state kind of helped pay for it.

Prior to college, Leata experienced unstable living arrangements:

I actually was with a biological aunt, because prior to, I was living with a godparent, but she passed away in 2006, so then I moved with my sister. I ended up in foster care because of, like, some things that transpired... and I was placed in foster care in December, 2009. Um, since then, I've been in foster care. I recently aged out at the age of 21 on this thing called a CARS agreement, which basically says, um, if you agree that ... to attend school, that they as the government can provide housing to you, um, until you're 21, so I did that, and I just turned 21 in October.

Monique Whitener has always been very close to her family. She stated, "I'm really family-oriented. Even though my family's two and a half hours away, I speak to, um, everybody in my family almost every day." She mentioned not being able to go a day without communication with her family. "If I go a day without speaking to them, I will randomly call them throughout the night until they answer because I...I realize I haven't talked to them."

Education-related characteristics. The participants described their pre-college educational experiences in great detail. Several participants indicated their high school experiences were beneficial in their success in college, while other participants recognized a

deficit in college-preparation. Jayla described her high school as catering to athletes in terms of college preparation:

That's where I came. Uh it was never a thing to talk about college. The only people that went to college if you played sports and got a scholarship. So it was never a ... the school I went to was sort of a sports school so everybody got scholarships.

Jayla further described her lack of preparation in high school:

In high school, you know your coach dealt with everything for you. He was like, "Oh let me see, let me talk to your teacher and see if I can help you with this." I was more spoon fed. Then when I got here it was more like, "Um well uh you need to go talk to your teacher." I called my mom like, "Well you can't come talk to the teachers, they're not gonna talk to you, I'm grown."

Joy described her high school teachers as not caring and then her experience of having a great teacher her senior year:

In high school, like I really ... I kind of struggled in high school with like math and stuff like that. And so coming from, I think a county where it's a little bitty county, I don't think that the teachers put as much effort into the students as they should. I really saw that with some of my teachers throughout. They really ... They really didn't care and you know, if this is what you needed to get by or ... They would give it to you. So I found out like senior year, I had a great math teacher. The best math teacher that I have ever had. Everything that I was confused about from 9th to 11th grade, it just seemed so simple.

On the other hand, several participants described their pre-college education-related experiences in a more positive manner. Courtney was a strong student in high school. She stated, “I always kept good grades. I just, that's just my personal ... you know, values.” She explained that this played a factor in deciding to attend college. Her mother also supported her efforts to be involved in high school. “I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities that my mom supported a lot of those.”

Some participants attended high schools with a strong focus on college preparation. Tracy's high school graduating class had a large number of students enrolled in college:

Um the high school I went to is very college bound. Um it was, it's 100, it was 132 um, students in my class. 131 went to straight to college and 1 went um, into the work field. So it was somewhat of an expectation um, to keep on going to college, so, yeah.

Gabrielle Broome's high school provided opportunities for college-preparation. She stated, “My high school was like a college prep school. Either you were um, in AP or IB classes.” In addition, her school offered a technical preparation program for students interested in the criminal justice field. “And I also went to um... [Western City] has a, a high school police academy, which is like, you go every day and learn some of the aspects of police work, like building searches, car searches.” She credited these experiences in determining her college major.

Leata described her high school participation as a helpful experience in her life during a turbulent adolescence:

During my sophomore year in high school when I lived with my aunt, uh, they was like really, really, really, really crazy, so, um, my, like, outlet was school and reading, you know. I don't really have much time like leisurely, but- ... then that's how I read a lot and, um, I kind of ... everything that was going on at home, I kind of channeled that into my schoolwork and stuff. Uh, um, I don't know, but I always, like, thrived in school. I'm not like a genius scholar or anything, but I don't think I do horribly, you know? So anyway, um, at that point in time, things were, like, just going, like, really crazy, and so I was channeling everything that I could into school, and so I, you know, I was like, "Well, I like going to school."

High school courses energized Mare and sparked her passion for the sciences. She remarked, "I took AP Biology in high school and I really enjoyed it. And so I pretty much, from that point on took every science class my high school offered." Mare also participated in additional educational programs between high school and college:

I didn't always know that I wanted to be a scientist. I um, I took a few um, what do you call them? Continuing education classes. Like I took um, a CNA class, took a pharmacy tech class, see if I want to get in the health field and you know, kind of just exposing myself to different things. So, that's why it took me a little while to, to get to this point.

Personal and environmental characteristics. Several participants described personal attributes or experiences that occurred prior to enrolling in college that were

influential in their lives. Jayla had to work part-time jobs during high school. She describes her experiences:

Um well when I first turned 15 my mom said I could work finally, no 17 actually, my mom said I could work. Um the first job I had, I worked at [ABC Company], which is a theme park in [Capital City]. It was fun at first because you know, you got a job but then you realize, "Oh, I have to go."

Jayla also suffered an injury prior to entering college that forced her to change her direction:

Oh um I was heavily in sports, I actually had a sports scholarship to go um to [FGC University], and I tore all of the ligaments in both of my ankles my senior year. This was I mean it was painful but it could be fixed.

Rashed Jennings described the community in which he grew up as frightening but it fueled his determination to earn a college degree:

And like, my neighborhood that I grew up in all you heard was shots firing and people going like, "Go back inside. Get back inside." And stuff like that.

So, I used to see fights every day. Go from like never seeing a fight in middle school to seeing a fight damn near every day in high school and I mean ... Then like even just going out places. Like, even just going to the Go-Go's, like I mentioned, you would see a lot of people fight there um, but then people try to fight you because you have better stuff, name brand stuff and stuff like that. So, it was like, you know, that's why I say it was hard for me to trust people and stuff like that because you never know what their intentions are and stuff like that.

Decision to Attend and Experience Accessing College

Another major theme that emerged from the participants' interviews was information describing their decision to pursue post-secondary education and the process of gaining admission to their respective institutions. Several subthemes were developed in analyzing the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Information pertaining to each person's decision to attend and access college is organized by the following subthemes: (1) internal influences to the decision, (2) external influences to the decision, (3) supports in obtaining admission to college, and (4) challenges faced in accessing college.

Internal influences to the decision. The participants described many personal characteristics, emotions, and concerns that had a major impact on their decision to pursue higher education. Some of these factors were seen as encouragement by the participants while other factors were discouraging to them in terms of deciding to attend college. Three of the ten participants explained personal factors that were to useful in deciding to apply and enroll in post-secondary education. The majority of participants that described internal factors explained a positive impact of these factors on their college decision making.

Courtney admitted, "I just never imagined like really being a college student." Even though she worked hard to earn above average grades, she did not think attending college was a possibility for her. Later she described experiencing indecisiveness about leaving home to attend college.

I never really planned for it. I'm like, 'I know I want to go. Do I want to go?' It was like a bunch of questioning, too. Actually I applied to a college and I'm like, 'Well, I guess I'm going.'

Leata was also unsure about attending college and did not feel ready to leave her home. She stated, "I didn't really want to go ...because I wanted to stay home because I didn't feel like I was ready to go off to college just yet, but things kind of turned out okay." Leata's spirituality played a significant role in her decision to leave home for school as well as her decision about which school to attend. She described the impact her religion had on her decision:

Um, well, it's not too far. It's about an hour and like forty-five minutes from home, um, so that's great. And then, um, there's a ... a ... we call it sister churches, you know, like a church that we affiliate with. There's, um, one here that we affiliate with and, um, my pastor and his son, which is like the assistant pastor, you would say, um, at the church, they were recommending it. They were, like, letting me know that I would be okay spiritually because I ... My ... My biggest concern about coming to college was, um, being that I just got saved, like, okay, what if I get there and then I just kind of like, I don't know, like, uh, I won't say go crazy, but, you know. Like I don't uphold, you know, like, my spiritual beliefs because, as I said, I just got saved like a few months prior to- Well, almost like a year prior to coming to college, so I was kind of just still new to, you know... um, everything, and so I just wanted to make sure that I maintained my spirituality and my relationship with God because

that was something that was really important to me and still is. So, um, so I kind of ... I think that's really it. And then, too, I didn't really want to come to [FGC University], if I can be honest. Yeah, because I wanted to ... I wanted to go to [East University] because I wanted to be home, but, um, I really believe that God, like, orchestrates everything, you know.

Similar to Courtney and Leata, Gabrielle Broome was also uncertain about attending college. She described not making definitive plans to leave home or enroll in high education as she was interested in pursuing police academy training at age 21. She explained her decision to pursue college:

Um, I- I guess when I got accepted, that's when I wanted to go to college because I really hadn't planned on going to college and my parents aren't the type of parents who... try to make my decisions- our decisions for us. And they were just okay with me waiting til I was 21 to go to the academy. But, um, when I got accepted, then, um, I decided to come.

Rashed Jennings reported a personal determination to improve was important in his decision to attend college. He explained, "You've got to take responsibility because everybody has their own decisions and their own choices to make, so I basically just used things that happened in my past to try to better myself in the future." He described that he always knew he would attend college:

I think I always wanted to go to college um, because I always thought I was going to be a basketball player or football player. You have to go to college to be a basketball,

football player. Um, but then I realized well, you won't hit six feet so you've got to find somewhere else to make your money and like. So, SVU [Special Victims Unit; television program about solving crimes] ... I started watching SVU when I was like eleven or twelve and I was like ... This is interesting like crime and stuff is very interesting to me. You've got to do something that interests you in life so ... I picked ... I picked being a criminal defense attorney and I was like since I can't be a basketball player, a football player why not be something close to it as well. And also be a sports agent, go to law school, kill two birds with one stone. So, that-that just swayed me to go [to college] right then and there.

Even though Rashed did not play for any athletic teams in college, he still possessed an internal drive to be successful in college. He further described his desire to be successful:

I want to impact the world. Like I want to ... When I leave this world I want people to be able to say ... When someone brings up my name they'll be like, "Oh man, I want to be just like him. Like, he did this and that, he came from this and that." So that's-that's my motivation to be great.

Monique Whitener stated that her lack of ability to excel in athletics was important to her in deciding to attend college.

I realized I wanted to go to college when I was in middle school. The way I realized was because I actually failed at a sports event. Um, we lost our championship and it was my fault, (laughs) and I realized that if you ... if you can't, like, excel with a sport, you most likely won't get into a good school, or you'll have to pay out of

pocket, so I tried to let that motivate me to do better like with school in general, my academics, so I was just like I want to be successful in basketball and playing softball. It's not going to get me there, so I ... I need to take a different approach at how I'm going to do good and make money for my family.

External influences to the decision. In addition to internal personal characteristics, the participants identified several other factors that had an impact on their decisions to attend higher education. External influences are categorized by family, friend, and school-related influences. Family influences included things like encouragement from parents, distance from family home to college, and positive impact on family including siblings. Influences from friends included plans to be roommates in college with high school friends and viewing college attendance as a tribute to a deceased friend. School-related influences included input from teachers, sports, and coaches, scholarship opportunities, and completion of advanced placement courses.

Family influences. Courtney's parents encouraged her to attend college and they emphasized how important further education was to her success.

It had always been preached to me growing up. Like I never imagined that I wouldn't actually go. But, so, um, my mom and dad all, uh, mo, mostly my dad, he was a stickler for like, "Make sure your grades are this." And he, you know, "You want to go to college. And I want you to be better than me." He still preaches his lecture, that lecture to this day.

Tracy stated that she always knew she would attend college and felt encouraged to do so because no one in her family had attempted higher education. She describes her encouragement:

I knew I wanted to go to college just because no one else has went to college in my family. Um I think I kind of always knew I wanted to go. So it, it wasn't a question. It was just kinda like going from middle school to high school. So with me and especially my mom kinda, the expectations for me were high, so, it just happened that way.

Joy felt like she was required to attend college because of her parents' strong desire for her. She recalls that she knew as a young child that she would attend college:

Well, I didn't really have an option. My parents had always told me, you know, "You've got to go to college." So I knew that that was something that I had to do. Even before high school, I was kind of preparing for it, visiting places, going places because I knew that that's where I was going to go. So it's like I've never thought about doing anything after high school other than going to college. It wasn't like ... You can't just graduate and get a job. That wasn't one of the options my parents gave me. It was college or ... It was just college. You had to go.

Mare reported the impact of witnessing her mother's various jobs throughout her childhood as important to her personal decision to further her education:

So what my mom used to, when I was bad she used to make me go to work with her and work with like, she had ... like she did very labor intensive jobs so I'd have to go

like ... she did stuff like lay sod or do roofing. And um, so she kind of, you know, it kind of showed me that this is what happens when you don't have a college education, you have to do something you really don't enjoy. And it um, it was, it was hard on my parents to have like a dead end job and it just created a lot of strain. So I guess, most of my childhood I knew like I wanted to go to college because I wanted to do something that I enjoyed and that helps you have a better life in general.

Rashed Jennings partially attributed his decision to enroll in college to the message it will send his younger brother and other family members:

And so I have to finish it and set the bar high because other people ... If I set it high then it'll show my little brother, my cousins, even my cousins that are older than me that haven't finished college and stuff like that, they will see that they can actually finish it and they can get through it. You can do it on a high level. You can walk the stage and have magna cum laude and stuff like that. You can do that, and I want to be that person to do it. Like, I'm not ... I'm not scared of the spotlight and like um, so it's like I want to be that first person to do this. I want to be the first person to ... In my family to be a multi-millionaire.

Friends influences. Josh's friends were very important to him in high school and they played an important role in his decision to attend college:

My friends were like, they played a big part in me actually going to college. I got it from my friends and then when I went to my parents and said I want to go to college

and they did like, as much research as they could to help me out. Yeah, my friends were like, definitely most of the inspirational part.

Gabrielle Broom's described a high school classmate that was very excited about going to the university and encouraged Gabrielle to attend and become her roommate. Gabrielle stated, "There was a girl, um, in my JROTC class who wanted to be my roommate here, so um, she already had her room picked out and everything, so that's when I decided to go"

Rashed Jennings described the sad reality of the impact his friends had on his decision to attend and complete college:

Well uh, a lot of people who've passed away in my life have impacted my life, my friend [John], who passed away in 2013, it'll be three years this summer. I lost a friend every summer from 2012 to 2015. I lost my friend [Ron], he was beat to death at a party. My friend [John] fell over a bridge. And the one with [John] hit me the most because it's like I knew him since I was seven, eight years old. And I wanted to be just like him. I wanted to be just like him growing up. He had a car, he had nice clothes, shoes and ... the females and he was even good at video games, what couldn't he do?

Rashed Jennings further described qualities of his good friend and his desire to finish what his friends started prior to their deaths:

And it's not like he didn't get good grades. Like, he was smart. He was super smart too and I wanted to be just like that, someone who doesn't have to study, stay up all

night, go out all night, come back in the house five o'clock, six o'clock in the morning or be in class nine o'clock getting A's on your test. Like, that was unbelievable to me and so he ... He was supposed to graduate last year but he obviously couldn't. So, I always dedicate my senior year to [John], and my friend [Tom]. My friend [Tom] died um, the summer before last from cancer. So, all of them impacted me really so it's like I want to do what they couldn't finish basically.

School-related influences. Some participants discussed athletic coaches at their high school who were instrumental in their decision to attend college. Jayla made the decision to attend college based on her experiences with athletics:

Yeah so going into my senior year. Because that's when the coaches come and you have to work out and ... I was like somebody actually thinks I'm really good. You know ...because you always have your family whether you're terrible or great. And you know you got your coach because I was like I'm going to school, I'm going somewhere.

Josh explained how his desire to be a college athlete fueled his decision to apply to college:

Um, what helped, when I realized I wanted to go to college is like when I started playing football. That was really the main thing on my, I guess, goal list was to go to college and play football and so that's what I did and I had friends. And talking to coaches and things like that because I couldn't get any of that from my family.

Three participants explained how high school teachers encouraged them to attend college. They attributed this encouragement to their final decision to pursue college. Gabrielle Broom had no intentions of applying to college until two teachers and a college advisor at high school stepped in:

Uh when I was in JROTC, the teachers- my 2 teachers, Colonel and First Sergeant, they cornered me. Like, I wasn't staff, which meant like... I had to do like some administrative work. So we had a separate room, so when they told me to go get something, there was a, um, college planner. And I was avoiding her all year, but she was in there and she was like, "Just apply."

When asked if anyone encouraged her to consider attending college, Leata described a teacher and support professional at her high school:

There was a teacher I had, science teacher named, um, [Mr. Science]. He was the greatest, not because of his teaching style, but just because of his compassion and empathy outside of class and stuff. He kind of knew what was going on at home and so, you know, he took it upon himself to be a little more helping, not in like a forceful way, but, you know, he just made sure that I was okay. And so that really meant a lot, but I think he and the librarian kind of encouraged me.

Monique Whitener said a high school teacher sparked her interest in higher education and suggested she attend college:

I had one teacher. Her name was [Ms. Red] and, um, she actually taught us a class on different laws in the United States, and she told me that I would do great in law

school and that I should probably, you know, try to go to a school with a great law program, and she actually attended here at [FGCU], so that is honestly when I started looking into this school, and when I applied, I actually applied to this school, [Eastern City College], and [East College]. I got into all of them, but I decided to go to [FGCU] because of that class.

Supports in obtaining admission to college. The participants included in the study described their experiences with accessing college and specific factors that helped them in the admissions process. Similar to the organization of responses that responded to the participants' decision to attend college, the information about accessing college is also organized by internal and external support factors. Internal support factors include the participants' personal characteristics that assisted with maneuvering the college application and admissions process. External support factors include support from institutional services and other people in the lives of the participants.

Internal support factors. Two participants discussed personal characteristics that assisted in their college access experience. However, all participants described positive, personal characteristics when asked specifically about their responses to stressful situations. Because they were not provided as being helpful during the college access process, these responses are not included in the "decision to attend and experience accessing college" section. It is likely that participants' possessed and utilized additional personal characteristics that are described later in this chapter with the coping skills theme during the college admissions process.

Courtney's self-confidence and independence helped her access her college education. After seeing her sister attend college, she recalled feeling confident that she can also get accepted and be successful in college. She completed the college application without any help. She stated, "So I like to figure things out on my own." She further commented, "I like to be alone so yeah, I was just at home one day on the computer and I was like let me just try this, you know...application out, and I filled out the application." Similar to Courtney, Josh also indicated that he applied to college without any help. He remarked, "The application part is...It wasn't really hard. It's kind of like a job application."

External support factors. The participants in the study described several external people and factors that supported them in accessing higher education. Some of the external support factors included family, high school educators, and financial support. Additionally, some participants discussed actions by the university that supported them.

Joy said her family was helpful in her accessing college by encouraging her to attend an institution in which several family members had attended. She also indicated a family campus visit helped her determine the best college fit. She describes her family's impact:

I came here because this is kind of my family school. My aunt went here, my cousin went here. I felt like it was ... It just felt like home here in [University City]. It's not too far from home although I wanted to go farther, but it's not too far. But everybody in my family has went to a black college but I said, "No. I'm not going there. I want to go somewhere else. I want to go be different." But I went to those universities and it just ... I felt kind of odd, like you know, I felt like ... I didn't feel like I felt here. When

I visited here, it was like, "Okay. This is where I want to be." Somewhere I said I would never go, but ... You know, like I said, my aunt went here, my cousins went here and I was like, "You know, I love it down there."

Joy also described being confused with applying for financial aid and receiving support from an educator in her high school. When asked if she experienced any difficulties, she explained:

It really was because when you're the oldest, you're like the test child. So it was very confusing but luckily, my ... I worked as an assistant in the guidance department and so they had these people come in. FAFSA people to help students who were seniors who really didn't understand like what these terms mean on the FAFSA, like, "What does this income stuff mean?" They came in and they helped us, um ... With our FAFSA, if we needed it. It was really good because a lot of the students that I graduated with had parents that hadn't been to college, so that help was really good. He came in, made sure everything was good with everyone's FAFSA and answered any questions. So whatever we were confused about, we just went to his office in guidance and he gave us help, so that worked out.

Even though he applied to college independently, Josh stated that his parents were instrumental in helping with more complicated issues like financial aid. He said, "My parents were like doing most of the leg work. So, they were like calling and talking and helping with my financial aid and my applications and things like that." He attributed his ability to pay for

college to the hard work of his parents during the first year of college as well as each year thereafter.

Rashed Jennings had a mentor in high school who was a lawyer and encouraged him to attend college and pursue law school. His mentor recommended Rashed apply to the research university. He described his mentor's encouragement:

Mr. [Mentor] was my mentor at the time and he used to go [FGCU]. For Mr. [Mentor] he was a lawyer. He wanted me to go to [FGCU], he wanted me to pledge his fraternity and everything.

Gabrielle Broome described a supportive college advisor in her high school that helped her determine which colleges to consider. She discussed her advisor's support:

The college advisor and I we, we- first looked at my SAT scores, and then we compared them to the requirements for [Western College], and um, [FGCU], and she was... just very encouraging just like, "Look, you- look, you can just get in. Like- you have everything you need, you just have to do it." So I did apply those two days. And I had, um- since my mom was unemployed I had waivers. So I mean, it wasn't... it wasn't a hard process to apply.

Two students described scholarship awards as being beneficial to their college access by helping provide financial support during the first year. Jayla stated, "I did get a scholarship where I didn't have to take out any loans being an out of state student. And then I had outside scholarships. I don't have any loans, which is great." Mare also received scholarships that made it possible for her to attend the first year of college:

So I applied to a lot of scholarships and I got two scholarships and that's what started me off being able to go. Um, I found the two scholarships because they were um, kind of localized to my home town of [Maysville]. It was a Garden Club scholarship and a Rotary scholarship. So I found those. They just happened to be on um, the high school scholarship board.

The university reached out to Courtney and helped her with the admissions application fee. She explained how the university assisted her:

Actually, you know what? [FGCS] sent me an invitation to apply because of some of my academic achievements and then my SAT. They waived, um, the application fee for me. And that's how, um, I was like, well, there's no financial struggle with that. So I, that's how I actually applied. And it was easy to apply, really. It wasn't hard to apply.

Jayla experienced a similar simplification of the admissions process by the university. She described her application process:

I never applied to school because [FGC University] had well, I don't know if they still have it where um you send in like your GPA and your transcripts and something, and they could accept you. So I never had to apply for a school. I didn't look at any schools or anything.

Challenges faced in accessing college. Five of the participants disclosed they faced challenges in accessing college. The challenges include family-related issues, trouble finding a college, and a difficult financial aid application process. Tracy faced a combination of

these factors during her senior year in school. She was faced with a complicated access issue that involved selecting a college and satisfying her mother:

The biggest obstacle was um, deciding to come to [FGCU] cause I didn't want to come to [FGCU] cause I didn't want to play basketball. My mom wanted me to. So it came to an ultimatum of either you're gonna go to [FGCU] and play or you're gonna, stay home and go to community college, which she knew I was not doing that. So, that was the toughest um, that was definitely the toughest decision I had to make by far.

Rashed Jennings also experienced some difficulty with family-related access issues. He described the impact on his ability to pay for college fees:

It was the one with my mom, [she] kept threatening not to do my financial and stuff like that because I got a tattoo. I got a tattoo in July. My father went to take ... My father took me to get my first tattoo. And my mom got really mad at me and she was like, "I'm not paying for you to go to college."

Josh also experienced challenges in accessing higher education. He described the financial aid process and selecting a college as difficulties he faced:

The hardest part, I would say is, financial aid. That's the most irritating part 'cause everything has to be precise and you have to have the tax papers and yeah. Um, it was stressful. Probably more stressful on my parents because like I said, they did most of that work but it was stressful for me so I'm pretty sure it was pretty stressful for them also. Another obstacle I had was trying to find a college 'cause I didn't really look

into colleges. I didn't know what to look for so I was just looking for colleges, you know with football teams. So, I didn't actually look at the programs and how the dorms would look, which is one of the main reasons I transferred, uh, why I didn't look at curriculum or anything like that. I was just going with the flow.

Mare also struggled to obtain financial aid to help her afford the expenses of attending college. She described unique family circumstances that impacted her ability to receive financial support:

I had a lot of financial aid obstacles because um, my mom had, I still lived with my, technically he's, it's complicated, he's my ex-step dad. So technically he's not, he wasn't related to me, so because of that I didn't have any information for FAFSA. I couldn't qualify for a Pell Grant or anything. So I ... that was really tough for me to figure out how I was gonna go to school. And I um, because the local community college I was at, they didn't, they don't even let you take out loans. Financial aid was the biggest pain.

Transitioning From High School to College

The third major theme that emerged in the data collected from the 10 participants' interviews was various experiences during the transition from high school to college. Each participant described their transition from home to the university setting and several sub-themes emerged. The data on transition is organized by four subthemes: (a) questions or confusion during the first year of college, (b) academic transition experiences, (c) personal and social transition experiences, and (d) support provided during the transition experience.

Questions or confusion during the first year of college. Several participants described experiencing confusion about different procedures when first entering college. They recalled questions they had in which answers were not readily available. The types of questions and confusions the students described are grouped by three categories: (a) academic questions, (b) financial and housing questions, and (c) personal and social questions.

Academic questions. The first-generation college students who participated in this study had questions about academic procedures. These questions included specific information about academic policies, resources, class supplies, and degree requirements. Two participants recall being confused about which textbooks to purchase for classes. Jayla described being confused about the best place to purchase her books:

Buying books. I had a problem with that because you know they tell you, "Oh the bookstore sells every book" but you know online it is \$1,000 cheaper but you gotta wait 2 weeks and that whole thing. Um freshman year ... that was confusing.

Josh described having questions about which books were required and he eventually found a way to be resourceful to make it without books:

Like, what books do we actually need? Um. A lot of people will tell you to get the books and a lot of times you don't really need them. I would say, I haven't bought a book since like freshman year and I've been getting A's and B's, so.

Josh further explained being confused about other academic procedures using technology:

Yeah, I'd definitely say it wasn't easy. Um. When I first got to college, you know, I didn't check my email. I didn't ... I knew nothing about blackboard [online course content management system] and going on the websites and looking for work online because high school, all of our work was, you just go to the class and they tell you what to do and I didn't know anything about that like, syllabus, syllabi and any of that really.

When asked if he remembered having any other questions or uncertainties during his freshman year, Josh explained:

Uh, yeah, definitely, like I was trying to graduate on time. Well, I've been trying to graduate on time. So, I kind of needed to know exactly what to take and when to take it. A lot of people won't tell you the truth. Like, a lot of people will just steer you all in wrong directions to get you to take stuff just because. They don't really adhere to your best need.

Gabrielle Broome also had concerns about course credits and requirements during her transition. She stated, "Some of the sophomores would, like, freak us out, because they would be like, 'If you don't have 33 credits, you are not a sophomore,' and I was freaked out about that." She also stated that she had initial questions about where her classes were located during the first week of school.

Similar to Josh and Gabrielle Broome, Monique Whitener also was confused about courses during her first year:

I would say one thing that really confused me when I first got to college was why I couldn't start my classes that dealt particularly with my major, why did I have to take courses that were out ... like outside of my major. I didn't understand why we had to do that, and then I remember taking, um ... I can't remember what class it was. It was my freshman year where we learned about the school, and then they broke it up into two different classes. That was so confusing to me, and then you get ... I got two separate grades, like I got A's in both, but it was ... it was confusing. And then, um, I didn't understand how different advisors, they'll persuade one person to go ahead and take a course, whereas I took a lot of electives, and now I'm here in my senior year and I have three or four classes that I need to graduate. I just didn't understand like, you know, like how they broke that up.

Mare had questions about course requirements, prerequisites, and the order in which she should take courses. She explained her confusion:

So I remember my very first semester um, we had group orientation. And it was a little confusing figuring out ... because you know you have your required classes that those classes have prerequisites you have to take, and those prerequisites are only offered at certain times of the year cause it's such a small school. And that's not always something you always understand going in. And so that was, that was a little confusing of figuring out the um, I guess the chronological order of classes to take. And when you needed to take them, some of them are only offered one section once a year.

Financial and housing questions. Financial aid procedures were particularly confusing to many of the participants in this study. Among financial aid questions, the participants discussing having questions about student loans and financial support. Jayla experienced a very difficult time with financial aid:

Financial Aid. Oh my god. It's terrible. It's the devil, that's what it is. Uh I didn't know anything about it, they were saying something about taxes, all I know is you file taxes and you see the commercials on TV... I didn't know anything about that and I was calling my mom, she didn't know. So like the first 2 weeks of school, I didn't have classes because ...I didn't have financial aid. And I didn't know I'm thinking, "Oh, I got a scholarship, I don't have to do... none of that stuff". Yeah no. They were about to take my housing, they were about to take everything and my Community Director [University Housing Employee] helped me. She was like, "You know I understand." My mom came down that day we got everything situated and it was good to go, but it was really confusing like I hate it. To this day I get confused.

Joy also described a procedure with financial aid involving the process of obtaining a student loan that was very confusing to her:

There's like a little packet thing you have to do online with your loans and stuff like that before you can get them. So it's like you have to go in and do the little ... You have to do the little process before you can get certain loans and financial aid, and I didn't know that. I'm like, "Okay." I'm sitting here waiting for them to come, and you have to do those little things online. Accept and say you're going to pay it back and

all that stuff. I can't think of what the name of it is, but I was confused about that because I was like how would you know to do it if nobody tells you? That was probably the most confusing thing, just the financial aid part. The whole financial aid part, the FAFSA, all of that was kind of like, "Okay. This is new." Some of the stuff was kind of confusing, but ... It was better next year because you've done it one time. Monique Whitener also had a challenging transition because of a difficult financial aid process:

It's still confusing, honestly. Each year I have to, it's always something different. I think I've asked for help every year, so definitely my ... my first year even just applying for financial aid was ridiculously challenging because you have to get so much information, and my mom, she ... she didn't understand either, so I went to my aunt. She's like the go-to person in my family when it comes to anything in technology or numbers, like she still does everything. So, um, I went to my aunt, and she actually helped me fill it out.

In addition to the financial aid process, Monique Whitener recalled being confused about the housing application process:

Yes, applying for housing. Um, it was a group of, um, some of my friends. We all got together and, like, tried to put our heads together how to do this and where we wanted to stay, and then we came to the realization there were not too many options, first off, because we were freshmen. So, we all stayed in [High Rise Dorm], I believe, and a couple people stayed in [Brick Dorm], and I had a couple friends that stayed in

[Honors Dorm] for honors program, but it was ... it was really confusing, and then not knowing that you have to do it by a certain time, you kind of start to rush. So, trying to keep up with dates. It was a lot of dates my freshman year.

Personal and social questions. Three participants recalled having questions about non-academic and non-financial issues during the first year of college. These questions dealt with making friends, accessing campus life, and general guidance on the new stage in life. Courtney stated, "I think my biggest questions were more personal like, um, making friends and who I was going to hang out with." In his discussion about first-year questions, Josh also said, "Um, like campus life. Different organizations on campus. Uh, just like how to go about talking to people, what to talk about to people in the residential life, about housing and things of that nature."

When asked if she remembered having any questions or concerns during her first year of college, Jayla described needing guidance:

I would say guidance wise ...my freshman year I did some things I will regret forever. Just because it was like, "Oh yeah let's do it, everybody's doing it" "Well if everybody did it must not be bad." And I shouldn't be here. I ain't gonna say you know off the wall but some things that I know now that I shouldn't have done. You know, I'd tell my mom and she'd be like, "Now you know you weren't supposed to do that", as a parent but I'm like, "You don't really know what happens in college" but she's like, "I'm still your mom." We had that problem a lot.

Academic transition experiences. As the participants described their transition from high school to college in terms of academic experiences, two concepts were evident. First, few first-generation college students described challenges with academic skills like time management and study techniques appropriate for the college level. Second, many of the participants remembered feeling well prepared for the rigor of higher education academics.

Challenges with academic skills. Leata described her experiences in dealing with college academic demands:

It was harder because in high school, I was the person that as long as I'm in class and as long as I can hear you, you know, like, teaching a lecture, then I'm okay and I can maneuver that way, so I didn't really study, you know, in high school. But in college (laughs) you can't do that. I guess because it's more difficult. But, um, but that's probably like the biggest thing is like really having to study and, like, getting disciplined to get myself in a discipline to study... and to read consistently or outside of class. So ... Um, but in class, um, I was pretty quiet, you know, and I didn't really say much. I don't say much unless I have to, you know... or unless I really feel like it's something that's something interesting to me. But at the same time, I've grown in myself a lot more, you know, so I think I'm more confident to be able to.

Monique Whitener recalled her experiences of learning how to manage her time when she entered college:

It was different. Time management, I've ... From day one, everybody was just like, "I know you'll be on your own, but I need you to stay focused," so that's what I tried to

do. Like my freshman year, it was really me trying to figure out where ... where to be at certain times and when I needed to get my work done. I wasn't working, so it should have been no excuse as to why I couldn't get my work done, so I always had to find out, like, when it was okay to be with friends and when it was time to study, and I never tried to wait until the last minute to do things because I realized that's when you have a lot of problems with technology when you wait until the last minute, and then a professor they can't help you as much, so it's kind of like a trial and error trying to figure out time management, but that really helped me thus far.

Feeling prepared for higher education academics. Gabrielle Broome felt prepared for the demands and rigor of higher education. She stated, "Academically, it was easy. Like I said, I love going to school. I'm kind of sad that this is my last year (laughs)."

Other than time management, Monique Whitener felt like college classes were more focused than her high school classes:

The only difference is you don't have to worry about kids talking ... like talking and screaming all over the classroom, whereas middle school and high school, you know, like a teacher can barely speak, whereas with a professor, we're paying you to talk to us, so we're going to sit here and listen. Even though some people may not listen and may have their iPads and all that stuff, I actually listen, one, because I'm paying for it, so I want to ... I want to get all the information possible. I have run into a couple incidents where I didn't understand something and I'll go to my professor, but they've always been helpful, so because they were helpful, it ... it helped me stay on

track, and if I ever felt lost in a class, I'm not afraid to ask questions, so it wasn't too much harder.

Mare recalled that some aspects of college academics were more difficult, while some were easier for her:

I feel like in high school it's actually harder because um, in college you don't have class every day, so you have time to go get the help you need before you move on.

Um, In that way it's harder but the material itself from high school is really watered down compared to the college material.

Mare also appreciated the additional resources available to her in college that assisted her with academics:

I liked college a lot better than high school, because in college um, I had a lot more resources than I did in high school. Um, as far as being able to stay at the college to be able to use their computers and their internet for my homework because I didn't have that opportunity in high school.

Personal and social transition experiences. In addition to academic transitions, the participants also described their adjustment in terms of personal and social issues. Their experiences are organized by two categories: (a) feelings of fear, loneliness, and homesickness and (b) feelings of renewal.

Feelings of fear, loneliness, and homesickness. Seven of the 10 participants in this study described feeling lonely, sad, or depressed during their early time in college. Jayla described her discomfort of moving to college:

I live in [Capital City], so it's not a quick ride home and the first week I got here I sat in my room, for 4 days, I didn't eat anything because I had food my mom made sure I had everything... so I didn't have a roommate, so I didn't have that bond you know like the ones you see on TV or in the movies, like I thought that I would have. Um I didn't have anyone to look up to, so you know I was kind of like winging it. And um I didn't go anywhere, like I was ready to go home, I was home sick. I didn't know one person, nobody from [Capital City].

When asked about the emotions she experienced during this time, Jayla further explained:

Coming here was like, "Nobody wants to meet me. Nobody knows who I am," like, "What do you do now?" I was sad. I cried every day. Every day. It's really sort of sad to talk about. Because it's like I'm a wimp and um ...I cried every day. Oh it was terrible. I can't even believe I did it. Uh I wouldn't say more depressed, I was scared. That's it, scared. Because I didn't know what to expect. Um the one girl that I did bond with that was supposed to be my roommate, she ended up getting a scholarship to play soccer at like [Soccer University] or something. So it was ... I was just devastated. Like I don't have anybody but yeah it ... I got through it. It's okay now.

Although she remembered feeling excited about going to college, Joy also experienced loneliness:

When I first came, I said, "I cannot wait to get here and just do what I want to do," but I was kind of lonely at the beginning because I was so used to being around my parents. Like I said, I'm close to them. The first couple of days, I was having a good

time and then it just ... It started to hit me. Like you know, I'm here. My boyfriend at the time was back home. My sister was back home, and I didn't have my car freshman year, so I couldn't just drive. So it was kind of lonely. It's like when you're at the top, it's a little lonely on top. It was lonely.

Leata remembered feeling pressure because she saw attending college as gaining a great deal of additional responsibility:

It was kind of a shock a little bit, but, uh, it wasn't, like, too bad. The biggest thing was, like, the independence, you know? Even I kind of consider myself to be independent, but it went to, like, a whole other level (laughs), you know, when I got to college because, you know, everything is on you. You take your own responsibility. Now, I did that in high school, but it was just like a ... another level, so, um, it was kind of ... it was a little overwhelming at first, but not so much. It wasn't as overwhelming as I thought it would be. I thought it was going to be to the point where I had to come home almost every weekend, but I didn't.

Courtney shared similar feelings during her transition to college as Leata. She recalls this was a very significant event in her life:

Um, well, as far as like moving from the home it wasn't really too big of a transition because home was not that far. And I, I went home every weekend. I probably shouldn't done it but, um, so that wasn't as big a, of a transition. To me, um, the biggest thing was actually taking on more responsibility and learning how to do things for yourself, how to think for yourself and you just become yourself. So that's

the biggest transition to me that took place and even to this day, like I'm totally different than how I was first day of freshman year. So, um, that's the biggest transition that really took place. Like I say I'm still home now. Like I've been many places. I've been on campus. I've stayed with different people and I decided that home was the best place for me to, you know...be successful.

Josh described his feelings when he initially enrolled in college and his feeling when he transferred to a different institution:

My first year it was starting out was a little rocky. I didn't know ... I didn't have anyone to talk to. I met a couple guys, um, and we got like really cool. Mm, so we used to travel a lot from [Original College City]. We traveled to [FGC University City] and [Middle City]. Um, which is why I chose [FGC University]. Um, after that, after transferring, it was, it was, everything was good 'cause I had people to talk to. Um, I had good friends and I had one family member, like a close friend that I could talk to. Uh, we hung out here and it was still not all the way around where I wanted it to be because I just felt like out of place kind of when I first got here.

Feelings of renewal. Several participants described an insightful, positive personal experience of post-secondary transition. Tracy felt like going to college gave her the chance to start over:

It [the transition] was difficult, but refreshing just because I didn't have to deal with um, like the home situation and stuff like that. It was, it was exciting. Other than me not wanting to play [sports], it was, it was exciting. Um it was, it wasn't that hard. If I

were here alone without the STEM program, it would have been hard because I really didn't do much without my mom, but having them there it was kinda, it was, it was real easy actually. So yeah. Um I think cause it's like a new start, so, you kind of get to reestablish yourself. Um, new people, new environment, things like that, so it was exciting. Kind of a little more freedom, living on your own and things like that.

Rashed Jennings described moving to college as an empowering experience for him as he equated college to maturing:

Um, moving from ... I was ... I was happy to be moving from home. Um, just for the simple fact that I'll be on my own and it just be like, I get to prove I can manage myself and I don't need nobody looking over my shoulder and stuff like that. And that was a key part of growing up because it's like nobody's watching your back, only you're watching your back.

Courtney experienced a new and broader peer group as she had a much larger peer group with similar interests to choose from:

Even though I was an introvert, I was still eager to meet new, new people. And it was never hard for me to, you know, say, "Hey, my name is this and this and that," and share a little bit about myself. Um.. when I moved in freshman year, um, I stayed in [ABC Dorm], fourth floor at a high side. I always remember that because we used to like rep it. But, um, so but I still hang out with those same people today, well, a couple of them. Um, and we all just got really close, like the whole high side of the fourth floor. We all stuck together. We all went to the caf together, partied together,

studied together, all of that. So, I mean, that helps to find who you fit in with like right when you get there. And some people, you know, you might need, not even want to fit in. You just, you know, find in, some associates that you can get by with and stay with them, and it will help your confidence, too, because nobody wants to be walking around campus, you know, um, bored or being left out. So I think that was, um, that played a major part. And they also served as kind of my support system as well, so I think that was the, um, the part about it. And then we participated in on campus activities.

Support provided during the transition experience. All 10 participants described support they received during their transition from high school to college. Nine first-generation college students described supportive actions taken by college personnel including counselors, advisors, and professors. Two participants recalled personal characteristics that were especially helpful during this time. Eight participants discussed family and community factors that helped make the transition easier.

College personnel. Six of the participants identified college advisors or counselors who supported them during their college transition and through the first year. Courtney discussed the support she received from her academic advisor:

My advisor at the time was [Ms. Blue]. She helped me along the way with that and she gave me a whole bunch of advice and different websites that I could use if I needed additional help outside of what had already been provided. And the writing studio, the speaking studio, those resources were helpful.

Similar to Courtney's experience, Josh described his advisor's role as significant in his transition:

My advisor definitely helped a lot. Um. Well, he made me definitely feel comfortable. Um, probably one of the first people I talked to upon coming to college. Um. Giving me, like a better outlook on what to expect because at my old school I didn't know what to expect. I didn't like, I was just blinded basically. Um. Yeah, giving me an outlook on what to expect and just like being there really and helping with class and things like that.

Joy had a great relationship with her academic advisor during her freshman year and described her as a supportive resource:

Freshman year, I remember my academic advisor, Ms. [Advisor]. I used to go in her office and just laugh and just have a good time, even though we were just like ... We were ... You know, she was helping me with my classes and she was just somebody like you could just come in and I can be like, "Let me tell you about what my sister did." She was so sweet. I don't even know if she still works here, but she was nice. Yeah, I think that's the person I remember the most from freshman year because I started to meet more people sophomore year.

Gabrielle Broome also reported her advisor provided her with important information that eased her transition:

[Ms. Hightower]. She's my academic advisor. And she kind of, like, adopted me, and so she- she was very encouraging and she was a great advisor. If she did not know the

answer to something, she would not just BS me. She was very, like, "You need to go to this person and ask them."

Tracy cried as she elaborated on the specific types of support her STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] advisor provided during her transition to the university:

Um, Dr. [Science]. Um, she's the director of the STEM program. Now she's the director of the Research Institute as well as associate director. Um she did check in's with us, like "how's classes going?" Um, other than, I mean, I remember one time I didn't have my books, she helped pay for my books. Um, I was gonna drop out after I, um, stopped playing basketball and she like walked the campus with me, we went to financial aid together, she got me like um, a scholarship packet so I could stay, so she helped a lot.

Four of the participants in this study described professors that were instrumental during their transition from high school to college. Rashed Jennings recalled the support of two professors in his major area and one professor in another department:

Um, professor ... I mean Dr. [Polisci]. He was one of my first professors and we still keep in communication today. Well, he's still here and we still set up meetings just to talk and stuff like that. Really good guy. Um, um, Professor [Blue], she's ... She's great too. She's great um, even though I just took her for the first time last semester. Um, a lot of those two professors have ... Well, those two and Dr. [Orange] from

mass communications um, those three professors impacted me greatly. Like, they, they helped me see a change in myself and helped me better myself here.

Leata discussed her family situation with a professor at the beginning of her freshman year and the professor supported her in different ways. She described his help:

I had a history professor freshman year. Um, he just kind of, like, offered more support as far as ...because I kind of told him like a ... not the whole situation. I kind of told him, like, a little bit of background, and, um, he was like, “Well, you know, if you ever need, like, anything, like any study tips or a book or, you know, or anything of that nature you can let me know, and I can do the best I can to help you with it,” so that was pretty ... Yeah, that was good.

Monique Whitener recalled professors in her major area that provided consistent support through communicating with her:

I've had a couple professors that ... that checked on me, especially through email if I miss like a day of class like, um, Ms. [Political]. She's actually one of my, uh, professors again this semester and she would check on me. She was excited to see me in her class, so she's actually, um, helped me. I was going to do an independent study and she was trying to make sure I stayed on top of that, so she's been helping me especially with political science. Um, as far as writing, I do have a couple professors, but she's the one that's really been helpful. And Dr. [Blue]. That's my advisor. He's excited about my GPA, so (laughs) he's been helpful.

Personal characteristics. Gabrielle Broome had personal determination that guided her through the uncertain period of transition to college. She describes her reason for persisting:

The fact that I knew that my siblings- this is their first example of somebody who- who can do it without their parents, and, and I needed to, you know, kind of make it look flawless, or kind of make it look doable and functional. So I can't, you know, I can't just give up, just because, so I need to make- if I do give up, it has to be a good purpose, and you know, me not being comfortable at first is not a good reason to give up.

Leata relied heavily on her spirituality to help her during the transition. She described her blessings from God as being crucial to her success:

My church family has been the absolute best, and I really do think I ... I don't know how I would have handled this. Like they helped me move in, they helped me pack, they helped me get, um, my things together for school, so my church family. But they've helped me, like, get the things I need for my room and they helped me, um, like with, um, like getting money that I need or getting, like, food and snacks or, you know, just things that most people, you know, usually get like from their birth parents or, you know, family and stuff. God uses them to supplement like my parents, so it's like I have a whole lot of parents. And then they've always been praying for me, and they've always kind of encouraged me, even when I feel like I can't do it.

Family and community support. Several participants received support from family, friends, and participation in extracurricular activities. When asked who supported him through his transition to college, Josh described friends and family:

Those two good friends that I met and like they were good people. Um, my parents, family and friends they helped a lot from just like, you know being ... Just listening when I needed to talk. Um. Some of them would like give advice, like what they thought. Yeah, just doing whatever they could really, to make sure I felt a little more comfortable.

Joy received encouragement and support from several family members during her transition:

Back home, I would definitely say my cousins. Some of them who had attended college, they would come down and see me. Um, and just my family in general. They would just call just to make sure I was good, I was okay. If you need money ... Because I wasn't able to work like my freshman year because I didn't have my car. Um, and yeah, just I think family. My mom, my dad, my aunts, definitely. I have a lot of aunts. And just my friends and the people that I met when I joined organizations here on campus, so ... That definitely helped with it, too.

Joy found support from her brother and grandmother during her transition and throughout her years in college:

I would say my grandmother and my brother. My brother is no longer in school. But at first, since he had already done his first year and it would have been, um, me next,

he was the person that motivated me and tell me, um, you know, like, “Stay focused and you’ll do great,” and also my grandmother. She’s always been like the glue that holds my family together, so like with her it was just like, “Do what you want to do, but,” you know, like, “Put forth all your effort,” like, “Just stay focused.” And a lot of times, if I did get a bad grade or something like that, my grandma always told me it’s a learning experience, so you can get better and just continue, you know, to push yourself. So, to this day, like, my grandmother, I would say, like, she’s always been there. She checks up on me, asks me how my grades are doing, and yeah, she’s not the type of grandmother that may, like ... She has tough love ... but she knows when to be sympathetic, I guess. Like she knows that I try my best that even if I get a B she’s proud.

While working a part-time job, Gabrielle Broome found support during her transition from a coworker:

I used to work at a retirement home near here, there was another lady, um Mrs. [Margie]. And she took me under her wing, and was kind of like that mother figure here. Um, just giving me advice, teaching me different trades, she taught me how to sew, so just different things. She was a Nursing Assistant. But she was very nice and helpful.

Gabrielle Broome also found support from mentors and friends in extracurricular clubs on campus:

I've made some friends. So I joined [African American Female Club], I joined [Women Development Club], so um, I had- I had a few mentors. Um, which was nice, and... so I got friends through those organizations. And I used to go to all the meetings, I used to go to activities on campus. Um, so I tried not to stay in my room, and you know, kind of be depressed. Got to try to get out. Um, we would go to lunch, like weekly. Um... just keeping in contact with me, asking how I was doing, and stuff like that.

Social and Campus Involvement

The fourth major theme that emerged from the data collected in this research study is social and campus involvement. The information that supports this main theme is categorized by three sub-themes: (a) campus related involvement, (b) other social involvement, and (c) positive impact of campus and social involvement. Four participants described having very limited participation in campus-sponsored events, while all participants discussed social involvement of some type.

Campus related involvement. Several of the first-generation college student participants were members of campus based extracurricular activities that afforded them various experiences during college. Gabrielle Broom described her involvement in two campus clubs:

That first week [of college] I didn't really talk to anybody. I went to every event, but I would just stay to myself and then I would leave. And um, so like, for like 3 weeks, I didn't really talk to anybody. I joined [Women's Development Club] and at the first

meeting another member said, "Can you come- you want to come sit with us?" So after that I- I'd hang out with this one girl. It was great. The club's big activity, we went to, um, [Northwest College] to see Maya Angelou. So that was great. Um, I, I got a few mentors, like 2 mentors from that program. Then I joined the [African American Women's Club]. They were very encouraging, and um... make your experience personal like a big family. Uh we did a million meals, where you pack food, like community service, and you pack up meals for those who are less fortunate, and may not have a hot meal every day. We had a weekly meeting for each of the organizations. We would do kind of bonding experiences, talk about upcoming events, and those that have passed.

Monique Whitener recalled her participation in an on-campus extracurricular organization:

I was in. Um, [African American Women Club]. It's just women getting together discussing what's going on, and when we were in meetings, we would have, like, debates about what was going on at that time, and we even, we had a collaboration with [African American Male Club], and we would talk about, you know, the rights of women, the rights of men, you know, what was going on. And I did love that.

Mare was involved in campus organizations during her early years in college as well.

She described her experiences:

During my first year I was an SGA representative for the Extreme Science Club. I was a part of the Extreme Science Club, and then I went to SGA meetings to kind of

um, let people know what we were doing within our club, if they wanted to join us.

So it was ... I was involved in two different clubs and it wasn't a big time commitment the first year. The Extreme Science Club was a very casual club, we didn't even have meetings. We pretty much just, you know, we had a garden on campus. Then once a month we would have a field trip. Like we would come up here to [Capitol City] to the Natural Science Museum or various other um, like the fossil museum in [Science City]. And so we would go to those different places like once a month.

I met the division chair for Natural Sciences. And um, through her, being involved in that with her helped her to, you know, I guess get to know me. And it actually helped me um, because we came up to [Capitol City] almost every year, it actually helped influenced my decision to come to school in the [University] area because um, it was just so research involved.

Tracy's involvement in the STEM program at the university was very time consuming and beneficial to her:

The STEM program had like um, the weekly meetings, they would bring researchers and scientists in. Um, sometimes we would go visit laboratories or like um [Another City], things like that. Um, that first year that summer after I kind of got introduced to STEM we would go to [Middle City], um, to see [Other University] and [Second Other University]'s science labs. They have a new lab there or something like that.

Other social involvement. All of the participants described social involvement in some form. They discussed the opportunities they had to meet new people and build friendships. Rashed Jennings described making a strong friendship during his freshman year:

Um, first year of college I was ... funny experience, I made a long ... Well, I think I made a life-long friend that year um, and my friend named [Henry] who was from [Western City]. He was a quiet guy. Um, quieter than me at least I kind of talked and stuff like that. But he was like a nerdy, skinny, tall guy, really was like in his own lane. Just played Call of Duty [video game] professionally. So, people would pick on him and talk about his stuttering problem. I was like, I mean ... In my heart that's- that's not right so I just hung out with him and stuff like that. Got to know him, we got to know each other and became really good friends. Like brothers. Um, freshman year.

Joy discussed her social involvement during her first year of college and her efforts to work social activities around study time:

I would say my social experience was really good. I didn't go a lot of places because I was so focused on trying to study, like ... So I didn't really go to a lot of places. I would probably go to something on campus if they had it. I was too scared to go to anything off campus because I didn't really know the area like that. So I would say that my social experiences were really good. Um, some people that I met freshman year, I see them now and I'm like, "I remember them from freshman year," or they've grown so much. So yeah. I would say I had a pretty good social life, if I wasn't like

studying or ... Because I would stay up to like 2 or 3 in the morning and study. So I got out a little bit.

Leata recalled an enjoyable time during her first year of college spending time with a small group of friends:

I met a young lady during orientation and we just stayed in touch a little bit, and then we found out we stay in the same resident hall. So, um, during the semester, we kind of started hanging out, and then me and her and her roommate started hanging out, and then her roommate's cousin also stayed in the same building. So all of us kind of started hanging out and then, um, friends from home that they knew, we kind of just like formed up a little crew. We call it the crew. Um, we went to the mall. You know, we did like college stuff. We went to the mall, we went to the movies, we went out to eat. We went to all the things together and we had, like, movie night. We'll all meet up in somebody's room. We'll have, like, snacks and stuff, or, um, I think we, like, we would play games like one night like Truth or Dare or this game my friends knows called Zip, Zap, Zop. I hate that game. But we would just play, like, you know, little stuff like that. And then, um, we would pray together, which was really great. Um, I think, like ... Well, freshman year, a few weeks we went to this thing called Midnight Prayer. Then we just started praying like on Sunday evenings together.

Positive impact of campus and social involvement. All of the participants described their social experiences as helpful during their transition from high school to

college. Gabrielle Broome commented on how helpful joining two college sponsored activities was:

I mean, um... it helped me get out of my room, so... I didn't like getting in my room anyway, but they helped me get out of the building area. Because I believe that if somebody, like, stays in their room, or in one place, like it becomes very depressing, and people do feel like they're alone.

Monique Whitener appreciated the group support she received during her adaptation period to college. She stated, "It helped a great deal because knowing there are others in your same situation that are trying to adapt like you, you kind of stick together and it helps you ... it helps you grow."

Mare also discussed how being involved helped her during the transition to college: Doing SGA really helped me to come, kind of come out as a student leader instead of kind of being the quiet meek person that follows everybody. So, once I actually became comfortable, you know, you kind of get your own circle of friends that, you know, you take the same classes with and you see all the time. Um, I was initially doing pretty good as a student, but it made me like do even better once I had a social group of friends, and you know, cause you look forward to going to class every day and seeing them, even if you don't really enjoy the class.

Tracy described an "in-depth" relationship with the other members in her extracurricular organization and how this helped her:

I think it made, it definitely made it easier. Cause if I didn't have those people I would probably just connect with someone in class or something like that, but it wouldn't be um, in depth. I would kind of be lost somewhat. Especially living by myself I would probably be definitely secluded.

Rashed Jennings described the complementary nature of a close friendship he built during freshman year:

I think they definitely helped um, no hurt at all. I just think that them being like, having a friend who's like super smart that can help you with things in areas that you lack in. Like, and then you help him in areas that he lack in I think that's just like a dynamic duo and I think that you can feed off each other like that so we both helped each other per se.

Tracy also felt support from the group of friends she met during her freshman year and described how it helped her:

Yeah, definitely. If I didn't have them, I probably, you know, would've been terrified. Like they kind of, it's a way to like ease your mind like because everybody was all going through the same thing that I was going through so it was kind of like a way to, you know, we all come together and say, "Oh, my gosh, guess what happened to me today?" or something like that. And it got us by. It really helped.

Copings Skills Utilized by First-Generation College Students

The fifth major theme that emerged from coding the data obtained during the participant interviews deals with how the first-generation college student sample responded

to stress. There were many different skills revealed during data collection that depicts how the participants managed their level of stress and included specific actions taken when a stressful situation occurred during college. The coping skills are categorized into two sub-themes: (a) inner stress regulators and (b) seeking outside support to regulate stress.

Inner stress regulators. Seven of the first-generation college student participants in this study described personal characteristics that helped them work through stressful situations in college. Examples of these inner stress regulators are having a positive outlook, managing time, planning, sleeping, and writing poetry. Many students also discussed their spirituality as helping them deal with stressful situations. Courtney described her reaction to being placed on academic probation during her freshman year of college:

I was like why am I in this position? How am I going to get out? But I'm a very optimistic person, so I don't like to dwell on negative things. So I'm just, I'll just do what I have to do to, you know, get out of this. And I was only on it for one semester. And then after that, it was, never happened again. I didn't, that's like my biggest, I don't like failure. So it's like I do anything I can to avoid it.

In addition to her optimism, Courtney described self-care and spirituality as important factors in managing stress:

I'm a firm believer in my faith. So I think that goes a long way, too. Doesn't matter if you believe or not. I mean, I think faith can carry you a long way so I think that minimizes stress as well. And then also, you know, just going out every once in a while and practice in self-care, like and not always worried about what bill is due,

what due date is due. Not that you're not going to get it done but sometimes you just need a break. And I took advantage of that, too.

Jayla utilized positive self-talk when she was stressed at the beginning of college. She stated, "I told myself, you're gonna get through this." She stated this was especially helpful when she felt lonely after first moving to campus. In addition, Jayla further described her method of managing her tasks to reduce stress:

You know you gotta give something up, you can't be SGA, work 2 jobs while here, RA, sleep, homework, class, eat ...somewhere in between. You know hey, just take it a day at a time no day is the same. And you just keep moving. That's college.

Similarly, Rashed Jennings, stated, "But I mean, I always figured, um, tough times don't last, tough people do." He further discussed his resilient frame of thinking that helped him with stress:

To me it's all a part of the game, the game of life. You lose people, you gain people. People die, people live. Some people get strung out on drugs, some people get ... Some people become poor, some people become rich, some people stay middle class. Some people do great things with their life, some people still live at home with their mom doing the same thing they was doing years before. So ... It's like you've just got to pick and choose and then run that course. Um, I honestly pray. That's my thing. I don't know what everybody else believe in and stuff like that but my thing is pray through the good, pray through the bad, pray when things are just okay.

Seeking outside support to regulate stress. Several participants described coping skills that involved others like family, friends, advisors, and counseling. Joy described several strategies that helped her deal with stress:

I had to really go to church, had to do a lot of ... Hanging out with my friends, going to church, too. Just making sure I took time for self-care. So even if I was really busy, just taking out a little time to go out to eat with my friends or ... So they wouldn't feel like I was blowing them off because they feel like I'm too busy for them sometimes but taking time to make sure I hang out with my friends. Actually and going home, too, just to hang out with my family or just to see them and take a little breather, but ... Making sure I plan everything out and take time for yourself and go to church.

Josh talked about finding support from the people involved in the on-campus organizations he was involved in:

Uh, well, joining those organizations is like confidence boosters so you do something and it boosts your confidence and you do something else and it boosts your confidence and then you know, you just like, okay, well, I can do it and you just go and really you just reach out and talk to people, you know just stepping out of your shell, outside of your comfort zone. That's like one of the biggest things is getting outside your comfort zone. Um, just going and talking, ask questions.

When Tracy was stressed about exams and her grades, she found comfort in talking with her mother and her peer group:

Um I would call, I would call my mom. I would talk to my mom. Um I would talk to Dr. [Science]. She kind of reassured me that, you know, it's nothing to worry about. Um, it was easier just talking like um, the cohort so my friends in cohort, since we're all going through the same classes and the same thing. It was just easier saying like you know and then there's um, there's um, 20 seniors, traditional seniors and it's 20 juniors and um, they had already been through it and we have big group meetings so we would just like uh talk stuff in there. How tests were, what not to worry about, what to focus on, and just having someone to refer to um, in those times who understand.

Monique Whitener discussed receiving help with stressful situations from a special family member:

If I'm extremely stressed, I have to talk to my grandmother. That's the only way out. My grandmother can pretty much make anything that seems completely horrible seem like a little stepping stone to her, like she always makes it better somehow. I don't know how she does it, but she can calm me down pretty quickly. Most of the time if I can't get in touch with my grandmother or I haven't heard enough words from her, words of wisdom, I turn to writing poetry. I write my feelings down and most of the time after I write it down it's gone. Yeah, definitely, and then I look back on it later and I ... I'm like, "Wow, was it really that bad?"

Summary

Results from the 10 interviews conducted with first-generation college seniors were presented in this chapter. The purpose of the interviews was to learn about the experiences and perceptions of successful first-generation college students. After collecting the interview data and coding the information, five major themes and 13 sub-themes were presented. The first major theme was pre-college characteristics of the participants and described the participants' high school characteristics, unique details about their families, and personal qualities they possessed. The second theme was decision to attend and experience assessing college. This theme provided information about the factors that contributed to the participants' decision to attend college as well as their experience of the application process. The third theme, transition from high school to college, included details about the participants' early academic and social adjustment to college. The fourth theme was student campus and social involvement. The final theme was coping skills utilized by the participants and described inner stress skills and other activities that assisted the participants in managing stress throughout college. These themes are presented in table 7 and are further discussed in chapter five.

A synthesis of the results from the research study are presented in chapter five. The findings are discussed in terms of the research questions presented in this study as well as in relation to the theoretical frameworks. The discussion chapter also includes limitations of the study, implications for practice and research, and final conclusions.

Table 7

Themes and Sub-themes that Emerged in the Study

Themes with Sub-themes
Pre-college characteristics
Family-related characteristics
Education-related characteristics
Personal and environmental characteristics
Decision to attend and experience accessing college
Internal influences to the decision
External influences to the decision
Supports in obtaining admission to college
Challenges faced in accessing college
Transitioning from high school to college
Questions or confusion during the 1st year of college
Academic transition experiences
Personal and social transition experiences
Support provided during the transition experience
Social and campus involvement
Campus-related involvement
Other social involvement
Positive impact of campus and social involvement
Copings skills utilized by the participants
Inner stress regulators
Seeking outside support to regulate stress

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn about the experiences of first-generation college students who have graduated high school and have achieved success in college and consented to participate in this study. Data was collected by interviewing 10 first-generation college seniors about their transition experiences. The data was analyzed by describing the participants' personal experiences with the college transition and success and developing a list of significant statements. Through coding, the significant statements were grouped into larger units of information called themes. A description of "what" the participants experienced and "how" the experiences happened was provided in the previous chapter organized by major themes. The findings consisted of five main themes and 16 subthemes. The current chapter provides a composite description of the first-generation participants' experiences while transitioning from high school to college. A synthesis of the findings from this study organized by research sub-questions, central question, and theoretical frameworks is provided. In addition, limitations to the current study, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Results by Research Question

The central question being asked in this study was "What are the lived experiences of first-generation college seniors who have been successful in college?" To answer this main question, several sub-questions were developed: (a) what factors influenced their decision to attend college? (b) what and who helped them make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education? (c) what were their social experiences during the transition and

how did they impact their success? (d) and what helped them overcome obstacles? The results are discussed by sub-questions and then by the critical research question.

What factors influenced first-generation college students' decision to attend college? The first-generation students who participated in the study identified several personal, social, and environmental factors that influenced their decision to apply to and attend college. Four of the participants stated they knew they would attend college all along their pre-college educational journey. Of the remaining participants, six first-generation students came to the realization in high school that they would pursue higher education. Two of the participants described a half-hazard decision to attend only when they were accepted. In other words, when they applied for admission, they had no intention of actually attending college.

The first-generation students described various emotions surrounding the decision to attend college: excitement, uncertainty, fear, pressure, determined, encouraged, dedicated, and sadness. Several students identified their own personal determination as a key factor in their decision to attend college. "Being the first in my family is important to me," was a common statement among the participants. Additionally, three participants stated they wanted to set a higher standard for their younger siblings.

The overwhelming majority of the participants described their family as having a major role in the decision. Five of the students received encouragement from their parents, siblings, and extended family to pursue a college education. Two students recognized indirect encouragement from their parents. For example, one participant's mother forced her

to accompany her to a labor intensive job in hopes that the student would decide to pursue education to have more desirable career options. Similarly, another student described her mother encouraging her to do better than her parents have done. Other significant people in the decision process of the participants were high school athletic coaches, teachers, and advisors/counselors. One student was determined to attend college so he could leave his unsafe neighborhood and have more likelihood of being successful. Figure 2 provides a graphical overview of the factors that influenced the students' decision to attend college.

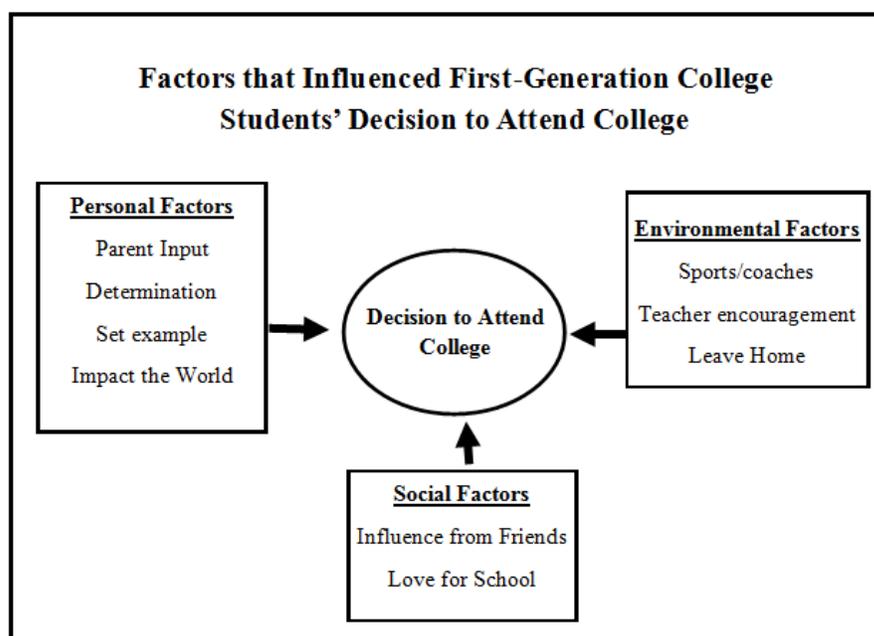


Figure 2. Factors that influenced first-generation students' decision to attend college.

What and who helped first-generation college students make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education? Recognizing that the transition to college begins in high school, six participants described supportive measures that assisted

with college access. Again, first-generation students in this study identified support from their family members as being a key factor to helping them access college. Examples of family support provided was financial resources, assistance with applications and financial aid procedures, and encouragement.

The students also received support from members outside of their immediate family. High school advisors and mentors were pivotal in helping the participants gain acceptance to the university. In addition, two students cited scholarships that made it possible for them to attend college and without this funding, they would not have been able to attend. Students also identified personal qualities that supported in accessing higher education like self-confidence and independence.

The participants identified several factors that helped them during the first weeks to the first year of attendance in college. Interestingly, many students found support from their families by calling home, frequently visiting their home on most weekends, and by receiving financial support from their families. This support helped the students persist through an uncomfortable and often stressful adjustment period. In addition to parents, first-generation students found support from older siblings and cousins who have attended college. They were able to ask questions to these older family members and appeared to be more comfortable reaching out to them rather than peers or professionals on campus.

First-generation college students found support from college counselors, advisors, mentors, and professors. The participants felt supported and cared for by higher education professionals who were helpful and provided them resources during their beginning stages as

a college student. Empathy and authenticity from these educators felt familiar and familial to the students and provided them with a “go to” person on campus when things were difficult or confusing.

Many first-generation students described their spirituality as a support to them during their transition. Praying, attending church, and writing poetry were common among the participants in the study. The students felt supported in their religious beliefs and stated they received strength and encouragement from their spirituality. The students’ faith in a higher being than themselves helped them make it through the transition to college. A graphical overview of the support that assisted the students during their transition from high school to college is provided in figure 3.

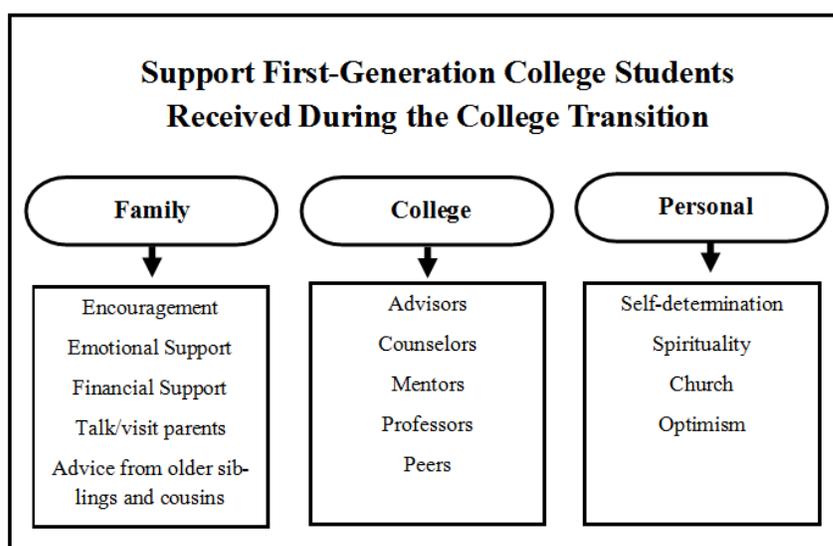


Figure 3. Support received by first-generation students during the college transition

What were the social experiences of first-generation college students during the transition to college and how did they impact their success? Social and campus activities proved to be helpful during the students' transition to college. Some of the first-generation students participated in campus-based extracurricular organizations. These organizations were linked to their academic major, student government, or social justice activities. The students who participated in these activities received support from weekly meetings with other members and mentors. They also received consistent group support and "check-ins" from the organizations faculty advisors. In addition, this participation afforded them the opportunity to engage in additional learning activities like trips in the field and workshops to expand their knowledge base.

While most of the participants in this study were not involved in campus-based activities, they did receive social support from their peers. All of the participants reported their social experiences as having a positive, helpful impact on their adjustment period. The friendships built during the first year of college helped first-generation students avoid loneliness and helped them venture out of their dorm to get involved on campus. The students also found it helpful to be with others who were experiencing the same emotions and transition. Some participants realized that college could be a comfortable place for them once they met just a few people and built friendships. They reported being less nervous, more confident, and feeling a sense of belonging from their social experiences. The participants were helped by these experiences and they contributed to their decision to persist in college.

What helped first-generation college students overcome obstacles? The first-generation students who participated in this study identified several coping skills that were helpful during the college transition and beyond. There was a strong optimism and positivity among many of the students that helped them put stressful situations in perspective. Many students practiced intentional self-care like taking time to relax and spend time with friends. Several participants found comfort in calling home to parents, grandparents, or aunts and uncles to talk about problems. There was a strong sense of resilience among the first-generation students as they overcame various difficult situations in college. An overview of the coping skills utilized by the participants is included in figure 4. Examples of stressful occurrences for the students in the study were loss of family members, loss of scholarships, and the murder of friends. Even with such difficult circumstances, the students were able to continue their college journey and are on track to graduate.

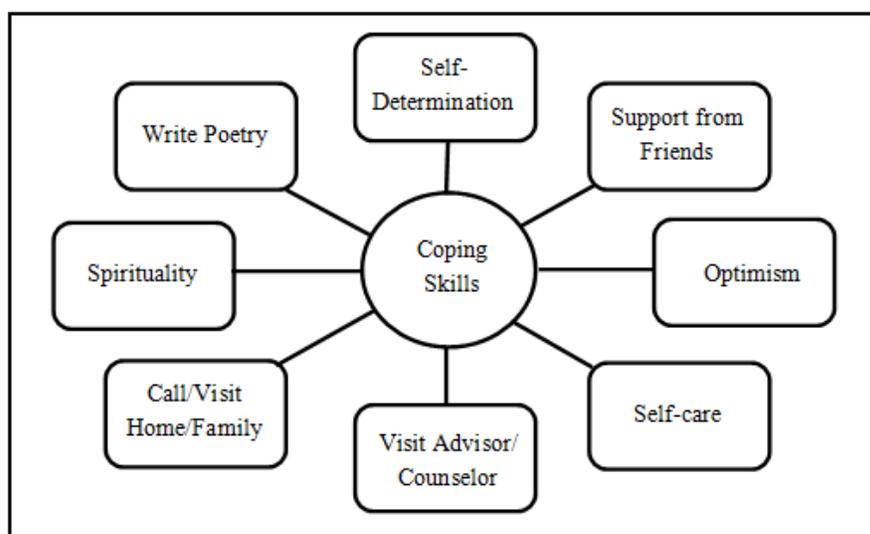


Figure 4. Copings skills used by first-generation students

Central question: What are the lived experiences of first-generation college seniors who have been successful in college? First-generation college seniors in this study came from families who did not attend college, but who saw an importance in education. Even though their parents had limited knowledge of college procedures and processes, they were instrumental in many of the students' transition to college. Because the students had limited information about college from their parents, they experienced a range of emotions. First-generation college students in the study felt scared, depressed, anxious, shocked, lonely, intimidated, and homesick. Despite all of these negative emotions, all of the students have persisted and are scheduled to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree within the next few months.

A common experience among the first-generation participants was the feeling of isolation and loneliness at the beginning of their college journey. They reported staying in their dormitory as much as possible and being hesitant to forge relationships. However, after meeting just a few peers and making friendships, the students began to feel more comfortable in their new setting. While keeping family close to them and contacting and visiting them often, the first-generation college students slowly ventured out of their comfort zone and joined clubs and engaged in other social activities. They described a sense of belonging from this type of social support and they became even more comfortable in college.

Despite their social and family support, they were constantly faced with questions, confusions, and challenges. First-generation students were confused about academic policies, degree requirements, and the financial aid process. Some also faced obstacles in the

classroom as they adjusted to the new level of rigor that accompanied higher education. Managing time and meeting due dates were examples of academic difficulties the students experienced upon entering college.

Even in dealing with stress and other emotional discomfort, the first-generation college students in this study were optimistic and determined to complete college. They were self-motivated and dedicated to college graduation. Their ability to persist in such an uncertain environment reveals the level of perseverance these individuals possessed.

Results Related to Theoretical Frameworks

Chapters 1 and 2 presented two theories that were selected to assist in conceptualizing, describing, and explaining the ways in which first-generation college students' access and transition to college and persist in higher education: Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural and Social Capital and Vincent Tinto's Theory of Student Departure.

Bourdieu's cultural and social capital. As discussed previously, Bourdieu defined cultural capital as "verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials" (Swartz, 1997, p. 74). Bills (2000) described cultural capital as the "degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the 'dominant' culture of a society" (p. 90). Bourdieu (1992) proposed the concept of cultural capital as something that is acquired over time through home and parental socialization.

Several participants described aspects of their transition experience that relate to cultural capital. Three of the first-generation students indicated they experienced challenges in finding a college or university that was a good fit for them. Lacking college-going cultural

capital made the decision process difficult and caused many of the participants to attend institutions close to their homes. The process of securing financial aid was difficult and played a major role in their ability to attend college. Knowledge of these external procedures was limited and therefore caused stressful early transition experiences. Even after initial admittance and enrollment in college, six participants described a consistent struggle with the financial aid application process. The first-generation students who participated in this study were confused about academic policies. They discussed having questions about credit requirements, how to graduate on time, accessing class content online, checking email, and how to determine what courses to take. These academic cultural capital factors caused many of the participants to worry and experience confusion at the beginning of their college careers. Two students described factors that would be considered as contributing to their college cultural capital. Joy's family traveled to the university to tour the campus and learn more about what the institution had to offer her. In addition, Mare completed advanced placement courses in high school that helped her build academic cultural capital.

Social capital has also been proven to be a useful way to understand the experiences of first-generation college students. Social capital terms the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1977; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Networks of relationships assist students in adjusting and maneuvering an unfamiliar environment by providing them with important information, emotional support, and guidance. Social capital is a form of capital that resides in relationships among

individuals that facilitate transaction and the transmission of different resources (Attinasi, 1989).

The first-generation college students who participated in this study recalled their social experiences and support they received from these experiences. One participant received consistent support from membership in a science, technology, engineering, and math program. She described feeling support from weekly meetings with her peers in the program and learning together as a group. Three participants were active in extracurricular organizations during their first year of college and indicated the social support received helped them build confidence and avoid isolation. One student credited her involvement in social activities as helping her determine which major she should select. Another participant described building a very good friendship with someone whose strengths complimented his own. The social experiences of the first-generation students contributed to a sense of belonging for them that made their time in college more comfortable.

When discussing reactions to stressful situations, the participants described many social experiences that proved helpful. Spending time with friends doing activities like eating in the cafeteria, going to movies, shopping at the mall, and praying together were described as actions that helped alleviate stress. These external actions are examples of social capital for the participants. Several participants described feeling lonely and secluded themselves to their dorm room during their initial days and weeks at college. They credited social interactions as being significant factors that helped them get out and participate in events on and off campus.

The results from this study support the propositions of Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital. In terms of cultural capital, the first-generation students did experience difficulties with college procedures and processes that were required of them as students. They did not find "ease and familiarity" with several confusing elements of college access and enrollment. (Bills, 2000, p. 90). Additionally, in terms of social capital, some of the students used isolation as a coping technique when they moved away from home to the college campus. They described feeling an array of negative emotions during this adjustment period, however, they eventually became more involved socially and saw positive effects from these social interactions. As proposed by Bourdieu, when the students were involved in social networks, they did receive guidance, social support, and cultural resources.

Tinto's theory of college student departure. Tinto's theory of college student departure recognized the significance of student integration in academic achievement and retention. His model also included two primary determinants of college student withdrawal. The first factor included experiences prior to college and student characteristics. These included students' family background, age, ethnicity and gender, academic performance and preparation, and prior experiences in school. The second factor included experiences after admission to college. Examples of these factors were grade performance, intellectual development, peer and faculty interactions, and experiences in their learning community of the college.

The first-generation college students in this study described many pre-college characteristics. Some of these characteristics were stressors for the participants like moving

residences several times prior to high school graduation or suffering an injury in high school during an athletic event. Some participants described their academic preparation as being college-preparatory and having high expectations while others felt a lack of rigor in their high school courses. One student described living in a dangerous neighborhood with fights and gunshots being a frequent occurrence. Some students described struggling academically in high school and being an average student. As first-generation college students, their parents did not have experiences of applying, selecting, and attending college. While Tinto proposed these characteristics can be a predictor of college student attrition, it was not the case with the students involved in this study. All of the students are seniors and on track to graduate within months from the time this research was conducted.

The goals of this research study were to learn about the experiences of first-generation college students' transition and therefore focused on the initial adjustment period and first year of college. Therefore, data was not collected to measure the students' level of integration to the university all throughout their college career. As discussed earlier, the participants did engage in the campus involvement socially and academically and indicated that these actions were helpful during their transition period.

Limitations to the Study

Limitations to the current study include the reliance on self-reported data, the time elapsed between the phenomenon under investigation and data collection, and the researcher's positionality. Each limitation is explained in more detail in this section.

Reliance on self-reported data. As with most qualitative research studies, self-reported data is limited by the fact that it rarely can be independently verified. In this study, the researcher had to take what people said in the interviews at face value. However, self-reported data can contain several potential sources of bias. The possible bias of the first-generation college students in this study could have included: (1) selective memory, or remembering or not remembering experiences or events that occurred at some point in the past; (2) telescoping, or recalling events that occurred at one time as if they occurred at another time; (3) attribution, or the act of attributing positive events and outcomes to one's own agency but attributing negative events and outcomes to external forces; and, (4) exaggeration, or the act of representing outcomes or embellishing events as more significant than is actually suggested from other data (Hays & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, when describing experiences in the academic setting, the participants may have wanted to paint a better or worse picture of their adjustment experiences.

Elapsed time between initial phenomenon and data collection. The second limitation of the procedures of this study was related to the reliance on self-reported data. The phenomenon being studied in this qualitative study was the transition experience from high school to college for first-generation college students who had experienced success. The transition period occurred during the participants' later high school years and early college years. However, the data collected in this study was conducted during the students' last year of college. Data collection occurred three to four years after the participants experienced the phenomenon under investigation. With so much elapsed time, the

participants may not have been able to remember all of the details surrounding their transition to college. The researcher considered this limitation in the planning stages of this study. A major purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of successful students in college. Therefore, students who persisted and who were close to their graduation date were selected.

Researcher's positionality. As discussed previously, the researcher in this study was employed at the university in which the participants were enrolled. While the students never worked with the researcher, they understood his role was an academic advisor, a professional who is responsible for helping students transition to the college environment. The participants may have felt the need to buffer their answers since the researcher was directly responsible for helping students. The interviews were also conducted in the researcher's office on campus. The participants may have felt obligated to refrain from reporting information that would make the university look negligent in their support of students.

Additionally, the researcher identified as a first-generation college student and has worked with many first-generation college students in his professional career. At the beginning of this research study, the researcher reflected on his thoughts, opinions, and potential biases he had in reporting the experiences of first-generation college students. To respond to his positionality, he bracketed his assumptions and personal feelings and constantly reflected throughout the research process in order to make every attempt to report

the data accurately. However, it is impossible to eliminate all bias and therefore this was a limitation in the current study.

Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to learn about the lived experiences of first-generation college students as they transitioned from high school to college. The results of this study can be used within K-12 and higher education, and more specifically the counseling and academic support professions. It is hoped that the information from this study will be used in future research and provide an increase in the knowledge of experiences of first-generation students. Learning more about their experiences is helpful for educators and support professionals so that more successful strategies can be implemented with all first-generation students to increase retention and graduation rates. Results from the interviews with first-generation college seniors was presented in Chapter 4. The results were synthesized by research questions, previous scholarly literature, and theoretical frameworks at the beginning of this chapter. The following section provides practical recommendations for educators in K-12 and college settings for supporting prospective and current first-generation college students.

School counselors. School counselors are perfectly positioned to provide targeted support to prospective first-generation college students. Using the results of this study, counselors can improve the services they provide directly to their perspective first-generation students, expand their services to parents and the school community, and advocate for perspective first-generation students. By offering support services to this population, school

counselors can influence the daunting statistics of college drop-out among first-generation college students.

The American School Counseling Association (2012) charges school counselors to assist *all* students with personal/social, academic, and career development. One method of accomplishing this task is through direct services to students. School counselors can provide direct services through individual counseling, group counseling, and other programs for students. The results from this study indicate that successful first-generation students had many influences to their decision to attend college. Additionally, counselors can work with students on developing character traits that have proven helpful for the students in this study: self-determination, optimism, and self-confidence. School counselors should conduct needs assessments to determine what deficits students possess and which students are prospective first-generation college students. These assessments may be conducted prior to enrollment in high school to help counselors identify students who are at-risk so that specific, proactive plans can be developed. School counselors can address the needs of prospective first-generation students by scheduling regular sessions on setting goals, examining personal strengths and challenges, and creating action plans to achieve each student's goals. Regular sessions will also be a time for counselors to help students assess their progress on a consistent basis.

School counselors can also incorporate the findings from this study into group counseling activities for high school students. The group counseling sessions could be helpful in assisting students in developing appropriate coping skills. The participants in this

study relied heavily on their coping skills at various points in their transition to college. Additionally, students may receive support from the group by realizing that college is possible even though their parents are not as informed about the process as their continuing-generation counterparts. School counselors can use the group time to pose examples of stressful situations college students may face and allow the group to brainstorm healthy responses and develop problem solving skills. Additionally, the group process would help students improve their social skills so they will be more likely to enter college with more social capital. This was a very important component for the students in this study to have a sense of belonging in college.

School counselors can plan programs for perspective first-generation college students to prepare them for the adjustment from high school to college. These large group programs will allow counselors to teach skills or college-going cultural capital to perspective first-generation students. The questions and confusions discussed by the participants in this study provide great topics to include in these programs. School counselors can provide information on the application process, financial aid procedures, and the housing application requirements. In addition, the counselor can help students develop friendship making skills and explore what campus life would be like.

Another strategy for improving the preparation of perspective first-generation college students is to deliver outreach to students' parents and the community. Parents who did not attend college may have many questions about how to help their child get to college. The results of this study revealed the importance of family in students' decision, college access,

and transition. Counselors can provide workshops or parent meetings to present this information. It is important to let parents know that they are still very influential to their children in terms of college. Other topics that may be helpful to parents are college admission requirements and financial aid procedures. Through outreach, school counselors can demystify the college process for parents.

School counselors should also advocate for perspective first-generation college students to teachers, school leaders, and beyond. Many participants in this study described efforts made by teachers, counselors, and advisors that helped them access college. School counselors can make sure all educators realize their power and influence on perspective first-generation college students. They also should understand the importance of encouragement during high school and the harmful effects of non-constructive criticism. For example, some of the students in this study applied to college with no intention of attending. Perhaps if they received negative feedback from high school educators about their college potential, these students may not have followed through with college.

School counselors have the opportunity to identify the perspective first-generation college students they serve. They also can provide leadership for programs that will assist this population. Through individual and group services, parent and community outreach, and advocacy, they will be able to better prepare these students for quite possibly the biggest transition of their lives.

College counselors and advisors. When high school students become first-generation college students, school counselors “hand off the torch” of support to college

counselors and other support professionals. The results of this study can inform educators on the higher level of support needed by first-generation college students. College counselors and advisors should provide immediate support to first-generation college students. The participants in this study described being isolated and experienced emotions such as anxiety, depression, loneliness and fear. Counselors or advisors should conduct initial sessions with students, routinely meet with them, and provide supportive programming to this population.

Immediately upon arrival to college, support professionals should meet and begin building rapport with first-generation college students. These students need to have a person on campus whom they can go to for help, questions, and other support. During the initial meetings, counselors should get to know the student's pre-college characteristics and screen for homesickness and adjustment distress. By intervening early, students can be referred to the mental health counseling center in a timely manner. Additionally, during the initial stages of the first year, advisors may want to assign first-generation students to peer supporters. By setting up a safe process for developing social networks, students will be less likely to isolate themselves.

Consistent support is also a crucial part of the services needed by first-generation college students. As found in this study, they have questions and confusion all along the way, especially during their first year. They may also not feel as comfortable reaching out and asking for help. College counselors and advisors can ask questions to determine how the student is adjusting and what additional resources may be needed. As with the initial

meeting, counselors should consistently assess for homesickness or signs of mental health distress and make appropriate referrals as needed.

Knowing the importance of social connections, college counselors can develop group meetings or clubs for first-generation college students to meet and receive support from their peers. In addition, college advisors should help first-generation students review the extracurricular organizations on campus and seek membership in groups of interest. Many of the participants in this study found membership in extracurricular organizations extremely helpful and benefited from the group support.

Additional programming like workshops and seminars should also be planned to provide specific help to answer questions for first-generation college students. An assessment of the students' needs should be conducted and used in the planning of these workshops. From the student responses in this study, some program topics could include: (a) financial struggles, (b) balancing jobs and academics, (c) study skills, (d) coping skills, (e) and course requirements for various degrees.

College counselors are positioned to help first-generation college students persist. By understanding their personal characteristics including strengths and challenges, they can respond to specific needs. Perhaps the most important thing for college professionals to consider is developing a process of checking on first-generation college students very often to ensure they are adjusting smoothly.

Future Research Implications

As indicated in previous research, first-generation college students face unique obstacles that often prevent them from finding academic success. Future research studies are needed to further explore the positive characteristics first-generation students possess and how they develop these characteristics. Additionally, research studies that determine specific school-based and college level interventions and empirical support for such interventions are needed to better serve this population.

Future qualitative research endeavors may include similar studies that collect data from multiple sources including observations and focus groups. It will also be helpful to continue to learn about the experiences of successful first-generation college students from various backgrounds including race and ethnicities and geographical location. These additional studies could help expand the picture of the experiences of most first-generation college students.

Experimental research is needed to develop specific interventions for school counselors to use with students. These studies should include methods of helping prepare students for the college transition and adjustment. Researchers may want to explore ways of building social and cultural capital in high school students so they are more prepared for college academics and social experiences. In addition, experimental research can also inform the practice of college counselors and advisors. By developing interventions and measuring students' various characteristics or emotions, college personnel can better support first-generation students and ultimately assist them in reaching graduation.

Another interesting research approach may be to study first-generation college students' parents' experiences. Since the importance of family support has been found in the decision making process and the college success experiences of first-generation students, learning more about parent experiences may be beneficial. After exploring the thoughts and experiences of first-generation college students' parents, educators may be able to develop helpful programs for perspective first-generation college students' parents.

Conclusions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn about the lived experiences of first-generation college students who have graduated high school and have achieved success in college. The central question being asked in this study was: What are the lived experiences of first-generation college seniors who have been successful in college? To answer this main question, several sub-questions were: (a) What factors influenced their decision to attend college? (b) What and who helped them make a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education? (c) What were their social experiences during the transition and how did they impact their success? and (d) What helped them overcome obstacles? The experiences of successful first-generation college students were reported in the results section of this dissertation. The results were discussed in this chapter in relation to Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital and Tinto's theory of college student departure.

Much of the previous research on first-generation college students was conducted to determine what obstacles this population faces. Research on successful first-generation

college students is limited as much of the literature provides a wealth of endeavors to determine the reason for lower college acceptance rates, higher first to second year attrition, and overall lower college graduation rates for this group of students. The research does not provide information on the lived experiences of successful first-generation college students. Although this research is important, the current study focused on successful first-generation college students and the factors that contributed to their successful transition from high school to college.

School counselors may use the results from this study to tailor the direct services they offer students in the K-12 setting. They also can use the results to provide programs for parents of first-generation college students. College counselors and advisors can use the results from this study to provide specific support and resources to their first-generation college students. Awareness of the themes and sub-themes from this qualitative study can be used in designing future research studies on first-generation college students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Approval Email from Institutional Review Board

from: IRB Administrative Office pins_notifications@ncsu.edu

to: jrricks2@ncsu.edu

date: Mon, Jan 4, 2016 at 2:11 PM

subject: Gerler - 6596 - IRB Protocol assigned Exempt status

Dear Jonathan Ricks:

IRB Protocol 6596 has been assigned Exempt status

Title: First-Generation College Student Success in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

PI: Gerler, Edwin

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101. Exempt b.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

NOTE:

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.

Please forward a copy of this notice to others involved in this research, if applicable. Thank you.

Thank you,
The IRB Team

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Gender: _____

Age: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Current College Grade Point Average: _____

Current College Major: _____

Extracurricular Activities: _____

What are you plans after college graduation? _____

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Subject: Seeking Seniors for Study on First-Generation College Students

Dear Student,

I am conducting a research study on first-generation college students and factors that contribute to college success. The goal of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of students' journey to higher education so that interventions can be identified to help other students.

You are invited to participate in the study if you meet the following criteria:

- Current senior status
- Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher
- Neither birth parent attended college

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at Jonathan Ricks, LPCA, jrricks@ncsu.edu or [252-203-1317](tel:252-203-1317).

I will be conducting interviews on your campus at a confidential location at a mutually-agreed upon time. This interview should take approximately 1 hour and will be audio recorded. After the interview is transcribed, the transcription will be emailed to you for your review to ensure accuracy and you will be given the opportunity to add information at this time.

You can choose not to participate. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate or if you change your mind later.

If you would like to participate or have questions about this study, please contact me at jrricks2@ncsu.edu or [252-203-1317](tel:252-203-1317).

Thank you for your consideration,

Jonathan R. Ricks, NCC, LPCA

Appendix D: Informed Consent

North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study:

First-Generation College Student Success in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Jonathan R. Ricks

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Edwin Gerler

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research project is learn about the experiences of first-generation college students to help discover interventions and best practices for college personnel. The study is important because first-generation college students face many obstacles that cause them to drop out of college.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to (1) participate in an interview and (2) review a typed copy of the interview. The investigator will interview each participant individually for approximately one hour on their college campus in a public location. The interview will be audio recorded. The investigator will transcribe the interviews and provide each participant with a copy. Each participant will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy and will be invited to add any additional information that was not shared during the interview.

Risks

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to participants. However, the study will potentially help future first-generation college students by identifying interventions that college personnel can utilize to contribute to students' college success

Confidentiality

The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in North Carolina. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

Compensation

You will not receive anything for participating.

What if you are a student?-

Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Jonathan R. Ricks, at 1801 Fayetteville St. Durham, NC 27607, 252-203-1317, or jricks@ncsu.edu.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

"I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled."

Subject's signature _____ **Date** _____

Investigator's signature _____ **Date** _____

Appendix E: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.
2. When did you realize you wanted to go to college and what helped you make this decision?
3. Did you face any obstacles or challenges in planning, applying, and paying for college? How did you overcome any obstacles?
4. Describe your experience of transitioning from high school to college.
5. What and who helped you during the transition from high school to college? What specific actions did these individuals take to support you?
6. During your first year in college, what were some questions or concerns you had about college processes, requirements, etc?
7. Describe your social experiences during your first year in college. How did these social experiences impact your transition to college and your experiences during your first year of college?
8. How involved on your campus were you during your first year in college? Describe your involvement. How did your level of involvement impact your transition to college and your experiences during your first year of college?
9. Did you experience any stressful situations during your time in college? How did you respond to stressful situation during your time in college? Could you provide some specific examples of stressful situations and how you dealt with them?
10. Is there any other information you would like to share about your journey to success, etc?