ABSTRACT

DAVIDSON, JENICA VAN TASSELL. Paths of Academic Resilience: The Educational Stories of First-Generation, Low-Income Students and the Processes That Led to Their Experiences of Success in the First Year of College. (Under the direction Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach.)

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand the educational experiences of academically resilient, first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who demonstrate first-year success in college. Through a framework based on academic resilience, this study aims to provide a strengths-based exploration of the contributing factors that led to educational success for these students throughout their K-12 and postsecondary experiences. It addresses the following three questions: 1) What are the stories of first-generation, low-income students' educational paths, including their experiences of college exploration, college preparation, access to college, and first-year success? 2) Academic resilience theory posits that protective factors are key elements in students' experiences of resilience processes. What protective factors do academically resilient first-generation, low-income students experience, how do protective factors interact with each other and with risk factors, and how do these factors and processes change throughout students' educational paths? 3) What role does social support play in students' educational paths, and how do the nature, source, and relative importance of social support change throughout students' educational paths?

Collected through semi-structured interviews and journal reflections, the data for this study included the narrative educational stories of eight first-generation, low-income students who had recently experienced a successful first year of college at a large public university. Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. Findings indicated three primary themes that emerged from across participants’ experiences. The first theme highlights how
each participant’s family emphasized education through prioritizing the value of education, holding high expectations for educational attainment, and actively protecting students from risk factors. The second theme emphasizes the ways in which students accrued educational resources and opportunities. Participants’ relationships with mentors, educators, and peers fostered social support and supplemented families’ resources. Additionally, educational programs and opportunities in students’ environments facilitated experiences that increased motivation, shaped aspirations, and imparted information. The third theme illustrates how students developed protective dispositional characteristics that supported their success, such as a strong work ethic, determination and self-efficacy, love of learning, proactivity and help-seeking, wanting to prove others’ negative expectations wrong, and positivity. Students described many ways in which they acquired beneficial traits from familial, environmental, and personal sources throughout their educational paths that they could draw on as strengths to achieve success despite the potentially negative effects of their risk factors. These characteristics were particularly important in mitigating postsecondary challenges as they arose during the first year of college.

The conclusions of this study highlight valuable ways through which first-generation, low-income students can accumulate meaningful educational resources, excel despite potentially negative risk factors, and navigate successful paths towards success in the first year of college. For participants, collaborative accumulation of educational resources led to success, social support networks adapted to facilitate success, and academic resilience effectively explained experiences of success. Participants’ experiences of academic resilience involved interactive processes through which protective factors worked together to minimize the effects of risk factors throughout their educational paths. A suggestion for broadening a
model of academic resilience to incorporate the collective and cumulative role of protective factors and participants’ shifting involvement in their own academic resilience processes is presented. The study concludes with implications for expanding future research, informing practice, and guiding relevant policy.
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Paths of Academic Resilience: The Educational Stories of First-Generation, Low-Income Students and the Processes That Led to Their Experiences of Success in the First Year of College

by
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DEDICATION

To the inspirational students who generously shared their stories for this study and without whom this work would not have been possible. May you all continue to soar.

To Mom, whose life inspires me in so many ways. I carry you with me in all that I do.
BIOGRAPHY

Jenica V. Davidson grew up in the college town of Blacksburg, Virginia. She attended The College of William and Mary, where she received a Bachelor of Arts in psychology. She continued her studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she obtained a Master of Education in school counseling. After a few years working as a licensed school counselor, Jenica returned to graduate school to pursue a Doctorate of Philosophy in Educational Research and Policy Analysis at North Carolina State University. Concurrently to making the jump into higher education research, her professional path took her to Duke University where she worked full-time in Student Affairs while completing her coursework at NCSU. Jenica’s interests in higher education include access and equity, educational transitions, and forging connections between all levels of education.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .............................................................................................................. xi
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................ xii

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................. 1
  Background of the Research Problem ............................................................................ 2
  Problem Statement ........................................................................................................... 8
  Research Purpose ............................................................................................................ 9
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................... 10
  Overview of Theoretical Framework ............................................................................. 10
  Overview of Methodology ............................................................................................... 13
  Significance ..................................................................................................................... 14
  Definition of Terms .......................................................................................................... 16
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 19

**CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW** ....................................................................... 21
  First-Generation, Low-Income Students and College Persistence ................................. 22
    Who are First-Generation, Low-Income Students? ....................................................... 22
    Precollege Experiences ................................................................................................. 27
    First-Year Success ......................................................................................................... 35
  The Social Context of Education .................................................................................... 45
    Social Capital ................................................................................................................ 45
    Networks of Social Support ......................................................................................... 47
    Variation Throughout Educational Paths ..................................................................... 59
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................... 60
    Shifting the Deficit Perspective .................................................................................... 60
    Academic Resilience ..................................................................................................... 63
    Application of Theoretical Lens .................................................................................. 73
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................ 74

**CHAPTER THREE: STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY** ......................................... 76
  Research Paradigm .......................................................................................................... 76
    Qualitative Research .................................................................................................... 76
    Narrative Inquiry .......................................................................................................... 78
  Research Methods ........................................................................................................... 81
    Setting ............................................................................................................................ 81
    Sample Selection .......................................................................................................... 82
    Sampling Strategy ......................................................................................................... 84
    Data Collection .............................................................................................................. 86
    Data Analysis ............................................................................................................... 90
    Role of the Researcher .................................................................................................. 93
    Trustworthiness ............................................................................................................. 97
  Limitations ...................................................................................................................... 101
  Chapter Summary ......................................................................................................... 103
CHAPTER FOUR: STORIES OF PARTICIPANTS’ EDUCATIONAL PATHS .......... 104
  Demographic Description ................................................................. 105
  Participant Narrative Overviews .................................................... 107
    Agustin ......................................................................................... 107
    Alexa ............................................................................................. 113
    Carmen .......................................................................................... 118
    Duke ............................................................................................... 124
    Gabriela ......................................................................................... 129
    Rachel ............................................................................................. 136
    Velma ............................................................................................. 142
    Victoria ............................................................................................ 148
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................ 153

CHAPTER FIVE: THEMATIC FINDINGS ............................................. 154
  Emergent Themes ............................................................................ 154
    Families Emphasized Education .................................................... 155
    Students Accrued Educational Resources and Opportunities .......... 167
    Students Developed Protective Dispositional Characteristics ..... 188
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................ 203

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS ....................... 205
  Summary of Findings ...................................................................... 205
  Key Conclusions ............................................................................. 208
    Collaborative Accumulation of Educational Resources Led to Success .. 208
    Social Support Networks Adapted to Facilitate Success ................... 213
    Academic Resilience Effectively Explained Experiences of Success ... 217
  Implications ..................................................................................... 223
    Implications for Theory ............................................................... 223
    Implications for Future Research .................................................. 229
    Implications for Practice ............................................................... 231
    Implications for Policy ................................................................. 241
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................ 245

REFERENCES .................................................................................... 247

APPENDICES ................................................................................... 289
  Appendix A—Study Design and Methodology Tables ...................... 290
  Appendix B—Pre-Participation Demographic Questionnaire ............ 292
  Appendix C—I informed Consent Form .......................................... 295
  Appendix D—Interview Protocol: First Interview ......................... 298
  Appendix E—Interview Protocol: Second Interview ....................... 301
  Appendix F—Journal Reflection Prompts ....................................... 303
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics. ................................................................. 106
Table 2. Three main emergent themes and related subthemes. ........................................... 155
Table A 1. Characteristics of the entering first-year class of 2014 at LPU......................... 290
Table A 2. Federal TRIO programs current-year low-income levels................................. 291
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Resilience Cycle (Morales & Trotman, 2010, p. 81) .................................................. 70
Figure 2. Illustrated processes of data collection and data analysis .................................................. 87
Figure 3. A general illustration of the main components of participants’ educational paths. .............................................................................................................................................. 107
Figure 4. A model of academic resilience as updated to reflect participants' experiences. Components of the original Resilience Cycle model are indicated in italics (based on Morales & Trotman, 2010). .......................................................................................................................... 226
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

College persistence is one of the most salient issues facing higher education today. With access to postsecondary education continuing to expand—undergraduate enrollment increased by 31% between 2000 and 2014 (Kena et al., 2016)—the opportunity for students to attain college degrees has never seemed greater. However, access to postsecondary education does not always lead to degree attainment. One group that research suggests has particularly low rates of four-year college persistence are students whose parents do not have college degrees and who are from low-income family backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Perna, 2015; Reardon, 2011; Stephens et al., 2014).

The associations between parental educational attainment, family socioeconomic status, and student success are strong, and have negative implications for many students (Reardon, 2011). As a group, only 9% of students from the lowest family income quartile attain bachelor’s degrees by age 24, compared to 77% of students from families in the highest income quartile (Calahan & Perna, 2015). Among first-generation, low-income (FGL) students who begin college at public four-year institutions, 26% leave college after the first year and only 34% complete degrees within six years, a degree attainment rate nearly half that of higher-income students whose parents have college degrees (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In an economic climate where college degrees are increasingly necessary for stable employment and financial security (Perna, 2015), differences in college completion based on family income and parental education create a background-based educational attainment gap that perpetuates social disparities and significantly decreases college persistence rates. The
aim of this study is to explore the educational experiences of successful FGL college students in order to contribute to an understanding of how to reduce this distressing achievement gap.

**Background of the Research Problem**

To increase college persistence, the need to support FGL students is especially strong. Because of risk factors they may experience, these students are often perceived as less likely to be academically prepared for college, able to afford college, or able to succeed in college (Strayhorn, 2006)—a perception that may become an actual barrier to these students’ achievement. Much research has focused on the disadvantages these students experience in both K-12 and higher education environments, and the detrimental effects their background characteristics can have on achievement outcomes (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000a; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012; Van T. Bui, 2002). This deficit-based approach contributes to a pervasive portrayal of marginalized groups like FGL students as educationally unprepared and incapable of success (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Yet, when studying gaps in college persistence, scholars can choose to focus on students who do not succeed, or they can shift the focus to students with positive outcomes who challenge negative patterns. In recent years, there has been an increase of this second perspective in research regarding the academic success of marginalized students that places emphasis on their strengths and assets rather than their deficits (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; McGowan et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013; Williams et al., 2014;
Williams & Portman, 2014). As Harper (2010) argues, taking an “anti-deficit” approach to studying marginalized groups of students allows researchers to understand how achievers overcome disadvantages. It shifts the focus of inquiry to the circumstances and resources that facilitate positive outcomes for these students and encourages exploration of factors that “empower, drive, inspire, and promote” rather than those that impede success (McGowan et al., 2016, p. 3). A strengths-based perspective, then, allows research to emphasize achievement rather than failure, shifting the restrictive deficit-based discourse surrounding these students to one of potential and possibility.

Viewing the experiences of FGL students from a strengths-based, anti-deficit perspective, it becomes clear that despite the challenges they face, there are indeed many who excel academically throughout their educational paths, defying odds and assumptions about their capacity for success. Their presence highlights the often-overlooked strengths, resources, and support systems that can help students with risk factors overcome educational barriers. In exhibiting success, these students demonstrate a concept rooted in a particularly positive theoretical perspective: academic resilience. Academically resilient students demonstrate that risk factors do not preclude success and that academic performance is not necessarily determined by background characteristics (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Academic resilience research is based on the assumption that “an effective and underutilized means of mitigating the achievement gap is through attaining a more complete and thorough understanding of success” (Morales, 2010, p. 164). Aligned with anti-deficit approaches, a focus on academic resilience provides a strengths-based foundation to the study of FGL
student experiences that can support more students in developing the resilience necessary to succeed academically despite risk factors.

However, an important part of the challenge in understanding how to facilitate academic resilience and college persistence for FGL students is that the path towards degree attainment begins long before students take their seats in a college classroom. Years of academic, personal, environmental, and social circumstances contribute to shaping each student’s educational path. In particular, students’ college exploration, preparation, and access experiences have a significant impact on future collegiate success (Astin & Lee, 2003; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Cole, Kennedy, & Ben-Avie, 2009; Grabowski & Sessa, 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). College persistence research suggests that, in addition to the qualities that contribute to success once enrolled, precollege characteristics play an important part in supporting students’ postsecondary success along such dimensions as retention, achievement, academic and social integration, and ultimately graduation (Kuh et al., 2006; Nora, 2004; Perna & Kurban, 2013). Students’ precollege demographics, family backgrounds, high school experiences, educational aspirations, and expectations are all important factors in setting students up for postsecondary success (Pike, Hansen, & Childress, 2014).

Research that considers students’ paths through K-12 experiences and into higher education is rare. Most studies of college persistence depend on longitudinal national datasets for analysis, yet few of these data sources are able to track students throughout their complete paths of educational experiences (Hossler, Dundar, & Shapiro, 2013; Kirst, 2007), and those
that do are often strictly focused on academic measures, ignoring the social and personal aspects of education that may facilitate or hinder students’ achievement. Moreover, this separation between scholarship of K-12 and postsecondary education exacerbates inequalities across the transition between the two levels by ignoring the relevance of students’ cumulative educational experiences (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Additionally, many studies frame students’ ultimate degree completion as the single salient measure of college persistence. By simple definition, degree completion is an accurate method of evaluating persistence, but it limits understanding of the persistence concept to that of only an output. In this way, much research overlooks the importance of underlying mechanisms that contribute to persistence throughout a student’s entire educational path (Stuber, 2011). Examinations of the processes contributing to persistence, rather than solely the outcome, allow for consideration of various factors in students’ lives that culminate in degree attainment. As emphasized by DeRosa and Dolby (2014), “Inquiries that explore ‘education as process’ (Stuber, 2011, p. 8)—where researchers acknowledge and study the complex social, cultural, and historical factors shaping education—provide a critical lens through which to study higher education and improve our understanding of retention and graduation” (p. 1). An increase in contextual, seamless studies of students’ cumulative educational experiences would allow researchers to better understand educational success at all levels.

From this perspective, some of the most relevant factors that combine with precollege characteristics to contribute to student persistence occur during the first year of college. For
FGL students who do not complete bachelor’s degrees within six years of enrollment, nearly 60% leave college after the first year (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The stressors associated with educational transition points, particularly the high school to college transition, have the potential to increase students’ vulnerabilities to negative persistence outcomes (Keels, 2013). As such, the first year of college is a critical time of adjustment, engagement, and integration to the postsecondary environment, and one that has significant implications for persistence (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). A successful first year is a significant predictor of many aspects of overall collegiate success and can be an invaluable foundation upon which students build towards degree attainment (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). First-year success is characterized by students’ successful completion of their first academic courses and continuation into the second year of enrollment, and it can be a complex phenomenon involving nuanced psychosocial and academic factors that impact students’ integration into the university setting (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Students who are successful in navigating the adjustment to, and success within, their first year achieve higher rates of academic performance, retention, on-time graduation, and overall satisfaction (Baker & Schultz, 1992). In an effort to expand the study of college persistence through connections across educational paths, first-year success can serve as both a proximal outcome of precollege experiences and a formative measure of persistence with essential implications for degree attainment.

In addition to expanding the focus of persistence research to the processes that occur along students’ educational paths, it is important to emphasize the social context in which
students’ educational paths exist. Although many factors contribute to the ways in which students achieve success, networks of social support have some of the most significant impacts on students’ educational experiences (Bergerson, Heiselt, & Aiken-Wisniewski, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Nora, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005). Comprised of parents, family, peers, and educators, networks of social support that are committed to helping students achieve educational success serve to facilitate students’ positive educational outcomes (Kim & Schneider, 2005). They also contribute to successful navigation of the college exploration, preparation, and access processes and the transition into higher education (Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 1997; Melguizo, 2011; Perna, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001). There is evidence that for many students, help from supportive individuals plays a crucial role in decisions about how and where to apply to postsecondary institutions, and which school to ultimately attend (Perna, 2000a, 2000b; Plank & Jordan, 2001). When social support networks provide college-related information, guidance, and advised actions, students’ likelihoods of postsecondary enrollment increase (Plank & Jordan, 2001).

Furthermore, once enrolled in college, students continue to experience the need for support from many individuals in order to achieve first-year success (Deil-Amen, 2011; Núñez, 2005; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009).

The evidence that social support is an important part of the educational process for many students is clear. However, the ways in which the role of social support changes throughout students’ educational paths, and how social support may differ for different
groups of students has not been as widely studied. Previous research, largely framed by social capital theory, describes social support as helpful primarily when it facilitates students’ accumulation of specific resources that align with those valued in higher education environments (McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). This perspective portrays students from marginalized social backgrounds whose experiences vary from dominant norms as inadequate, and undervalues the distinct resources they have. Research based on this deficit lens does a disservice to FGL students by overlooking the unique contributions of their own networks of social support. Moreover, most research explores how social support impacts education within either K-12 or higher education; few inquiries follow the role of social support across students’ educational paths and consider how it may change at various points. A shift in these perspectives to focus on the processes through which networks of social support positively influence FGL students and changes that may exist in the role of social support across students’ educational paths may highlight previously undervalued experiences and resources that can facilitate educational success.

**Problem Statement**

Students from low-income backgrounds whose parents did not attain college degrees are significantly less likely to persist in college than students with different family income or parental education backgrounds (Calahan & Perna, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Perna, 2015; Reardon, 2011). This contributes to a pervasive college persistence gap that is an economically and socially relevant educational issue. Existing research, however, typically
does not connect students’ K-12 and postsecondary experiences in order to holistically understand students’ education, nor does it often consider the complex components of educational experiences, such as first-year college success, that contribute to persistence. Similarly, current scholarship lacks a thorough understanding of how FGL students experience educational success and the variable nature of the social context of their educational paths. Because students with this background are typically portrayed in educational research through a deficit lens, the strengths, unique contributions, and exceptional experiences of those who succeed are rarely considered. In order to decrease the significant college persistence gap FGL students face, it is necessary to further explore successful students’ experiences and the dynamic processes of academic resilience that support them along their educational paths.

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the educational experiences of academically resilient, first-generation students from low-income backgrounds who demonstrate first-year success in college. Through a narrative exploration of these students’ educational stories, this study gives voice to the nuanced processes involved in their experiences of academic resilience and the role that networks of social support have played throughout their educational paths. This exploration builds meaningful connections between students’ K-12 and higher education experiences, with a particular focus on contributions to first-year success. First-year success is an important marker of eventual postsecondary degree
attainment and, as an experience proximal to students’ precollege backgrounds, serves as a valuable link to provide connection across students’ educational paths.

**Research Questions**

This study is a qualitative, narrative exploration of academically resilient students’ educational experiences. It addresses the following three questions:

1. What are the stories of first-generation, low-income students' educational paths, including their experiences of college exploration, college preparation, access to college, and first-year success?

2. Academic resilience theory posits that protective factors are key elements in students' experiences of resilience processes. What protective factors do academically resilient first-generation, low-income students experience, how do protective factors interact with each other and with risk factors, and how do these factors and processes change throughout students' educational paths?

3. What role does social support play in students' educational paths, and how do the nature, source, and relative importance of social support change throughout students' educational paths?

**Overview of Theoretical Framework**

Academic resilience theory frames this study in order to provide a strengths-based understanding of FGL students’ educational experiences. Perspectives focused on the successes of marginalized groups of students often highlight the abilities of students to achieve educationally despite barriers (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). In this way, academic
resilience theory provides a strengths-based lens through which to understand the experiences of FGL students who succeed throughout their educational paths and in the first year of college.

Academic resilience is defined as the process and results of students’ experiences when they face barriers that commonly prevent individuals with their backgrounds from succeeding, yet they demonstrate educational success (Morales & Trotman, 2004). The concept of resilience encompasses an interactive model of relationships between individuals’ characteristics and the specific contexts of their experiences (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). Both internal and external systems influence resilience through ongoing processes (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Academic resilience theory applies this concept specifically to educational experiences and focuses on the processes through which relationships between risk factors and educational outcomes are mediated by protective factors serving to support academic achievement.

In the context of academic resilience, risk factors are social and environmental influences that threaten students’ likelihood of success (Morales, 2008a). In contrast, protective factors are dispositional, familial, and environmental resources with the potential to bolster students’ positive educational outcomes through mitigating or counteracting the effects of risk (Masten, 1994; Morales, 2010; Williams & Portman, 2014). Much research using academic resilience theory focuses on identifying risk and protective factors that contribute to students’ experiences of educational success (Campa, 2013; Phinney & Haas, 2003; Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, & Abarca-Mortensen, 2008; Schoon, Parsons, &
Sacker, 2004; Williams & Portman, 2014; Wilson-Sadberry, Winfield, & Royster, 1991). However, Morales & Trotman (2004, 2010) enhanced the depth of this theory with the Resilience Cycle, a model which outlines components of the processes through which students experience academic resilience and the dynamic nature of academic resilience itself. Drawing from this theoretical model, academic resilience research can also contribute to a deeper understanding of how interactions between various factors contribute to student success, how resilience processes may differ between students, and ways in which these processes may change across time.

Using this strengths-based theoretical framework to explore the experiences of successful FGL students contributes to a shift in the previously deficit-focused research regarding this group of students. Students from low-income backgrounds with parents who do not have college degrees often have multiple risk factors on the path towards college persistence, and those who break from normative patterns through exceptional educational achievement demonstrate academic resilience. Addressing existing gaps in college persistence for FGL students necessitates gaining a better understanding of how academic resilience shapes educational success and how it can contribute to FGL students’ strengths in unique and powerful ways. From this perspective, this study aims to further understand the protective resources that emerge from FGL students’ stories of their educational paths and the processes through which these factors facilitate student success.
Overview of Methodology

To address the research questions, this study employs a narrative qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is appropriate for studies aiming to develop understanding of how individuals interact with the world in particular contexts and the meaning they draw from their experiences (Merriam, 1995). It often allows for a focus on a process and its internal dynamics rather than outcomes (Krathwohl, 2009), and emphasizes the unique contexts of phenomena under study (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, a narrative inquiry approach to qualitative research places value on individuals’ storied lives, as told from personal narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research focuses on the centrality of stories in individuals’ experiences and stems from an underlying worldview that frames reality as socially constructed and individually interpreted (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

Through the process of narrative inquiry, researchers and participants co-construct narratives that piece together elements of participants’ lived experiences in a way that showcases the temporal nature of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and honors the holistic nature of life stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Exploring the educational paths of FGL students through the lens of academic resilience aligns well with each of these tenets of qualitative research and narrative inquiry. The goal of using this methodological approach is to gain understanding of these students’ educational experiences through their own stories, with an emphasis on the longitudinal nature of their experiences. It facilitates consideration of the holistic educational paths that led students through their precollege experiences towards first-year success in college with a
focus on the connections between their experiences in both K-12 and higher education. It also allows for a focus on the dynamic processes of academic resilience and social support students experienced that influenced their lives throughout their educational paths.

**Significance**

This study is significant for future research, theory, practice, and policy. There is a discontinuity in existing research between studies of K-12 and higher education, and too few scholars choose to bridge these often-siloed domains. This study explores students’ educational experiences seamlessly, bringing together a holistic picture of their educational paths. This contributes to a strengthening of research that considers the cumulative nature of education across levels, and provides greater insight into ways that students’ experiences are connected throughout their education. This study also enhances the existing body of college persistence research by focusing on multifaceted first-year success as a marker of college persistence that is both influenced by precollege experiences and is influential in key college outcomes. By using a nuanced and multifaceted definition of first-year success, this study emphasizes interconnected components of college experiences that contribute to persistence. Combined with consideration of precollege influences, this provides an expanded view into an integral part of postsecondary success.

In addition, the study’s focus on FGL students contributes to a deeper understanding of the educational experiences of an important group of students whose educational paths research does not often portray in a positive manner. This study supports efforts to shift the deficit perspective of many studies of FGL students by focusing on students who counter
expected negative patterns of educational achievement. It aims to enhance the strengths-based study of FGL students with further understanding of their unique and valuable educational resources. Similarly, while much research suggests that social support is an important component of educational success, this study contributes to this work by focusing on ways in which the nature, source, and impact of social support may change throughout students’ educational paths. This provides a broader understanding of how the social context of education influences FGL students in unique and varied ways.

This study also applies academic resilience theory in a distinctive context and with an important focus that is missing from previous literature. Earlier academic resilience studies focus on groups of students based on racial or ethnic identity (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2008, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2010; Perez et al., 2009; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014). Considering the academic resilience of a group of students based on parental education and family financial background increases the diversity of student groups with which the theory is used. Focusing on the process of interactions between risk and protective factors, rather than their identification, also contributes to understanding the interactive, dynamic nature of academic resilience processes. Further, the framework underlying this study is based on the premise that understanding how academically resilient students succeed can lead to understanding how to help others with the potential to succeed (Morales, 2014). The greatest implication for practice of this study is in its ability to inform individuals and programs working to facilitate academic success for students from groups with educational risk factors. This includes suggested practices for
supporting the academic resilience of FGL students throughout their educational paths, and is relevant for families, educators, precollege preparation and exploration opportunities, college access and transition programs, or first-year college programs.

Finally, policy implications emerged from insight into influences on academic resilience processes that may help reduce college persistence gaps for FGL students. There is currently a significant focus in education policy on increasing college degree attainment, particularly for marginalized groups of students, and studying how to facilitate success for students who are likely to face barriers to persistence can inform ways of achieving this policy goal. Overall, a greater understanding of the connections between FGL students’ educational paths and postsecondary success through the lens of academic resilience allows policymakers, educators, and families alike to better support students throughout college exploration, preparation, access, first-year success, and ultimately postsecondary persistence.

**Definition of Terms**

**Academic Resilience**

Academic resilience encompasses the process and outcomes related to the educational path of a student who has demonstrated high academic achievement despite obstacles that serve as barriers to success for the majority of others with the same background (Morales, 2008a). Alternatively referred to as ‘educational resilience,’ this concept involves interactions between risk and protective factors and the influence they have on an individual’s educational success (Williams & Portman, 2014).
College Persistence

College persistence is an outcome measure characterized by students’ continuation from college enrollment to graduation and attainment of a bachelor’s degree (Niu & Tienda, 2013). However, it is also a process involving retention from one semester to the next that is marked by educational success throughout students’ college experiences (Kuh et al., 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). For the purposes of this study, college persistence is both a process and an outcome.

Educational Path

Much educational research makes a distinction between students’ experiences in elementary, middle, and high school—their K-12 education—and their experiences in college. However, for many students this division is artificial, as they move through their education and cumulatively collect experiences that contribute to their overall educational success (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). As such, this study discusses students’ education from the beginning of their schooling through their current student status as one continuous academic journey, or educational path.

First-Generation and Continuing-Generation Students

This study considers students first-generation college students if none of their parents or guardians attained a four-year degree (Davis, 2010; Elliott, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, Stebleton, & Deenanath, 2015; Nuñez, 2005; Pascarella, Terenzini, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Stephens et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2006; Thayer, 2000). Some scholars exclude from this definition students whose parents attended
some college, or attained two-year degrees. However, these students’ families do not have the same experiences with, and knowledge of, four-year college education as families in which at least one parent or guardian completed a bachelor’s degree (McDonough, 1997; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). Because students’ networks of support and their familiarity with college is an important component of this study, parental degree attainment is the defining factor. Students with at least one parent or guardian who earned a bachelor’s degree are continuing-generation students.

**First-Year Success**

First-year success involves achieving good academic standing during the first year of college and continuing enrollment from the first to second year (Upcraft et al., 2005). In addition, based on the multifaceted nature of holistic student success, students demonstrating first-year success are those who also subjectively experience overall academic, personal, and social success (Upcraft et al., 2005).

**Low-Income Students**

Students have low-income backgrounds if their family’s income is at or below the threshold to qualify for receiving free or reduced lunch at the K-12 level (DePaoli et al., 2015) or federally funded TRIO services at the postsecondary level (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). TRIO programs are student support initiatives aimed to provide resources in higher education to first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, or students with disabilities. Based on these federal guidelines, the term “low-income individual” is defined as someone whose taxable family income is less than 150 percent of
the national poverty level; for a family of four in 2016 this would be $36,450 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Throughout the literature review in this study, the definition of low-income varies somewhat because research in K-12 settings typically uses the guidelines set by qualifications for students to receive free or reduced lunches (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2008). This level is equivalent to a family income level at or below 130 percent of the national poverty level, slightly lower than the guideline for TRIO qualification (DePaoli et al., 2015).

Strengths-Based Research

Increasingly used to understand the experiences of marginalized student groups, strengths-based research emphasizes positive aspects of students’ experiences that contribute to their educational success (Harper, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; McGowan et al., 2016; Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013; Williams et al., 2014; Williams & Portman, 2014). This is a reaction against the negative implications and effects of previous deficit-focused approaches to educational research that emphasize perceived problems, inadequacies, or limitations within students’ experiences.

Chapter Summary

Research regarding students who face barriers to educational attainment has an important place in increasing college persistence. In particular, studies focused on the success of students who might be considered likely to fail can highlight unique experiences that lead students to succeed and shift the deficit perspective of research that treats these students as inadequate. This study explores the educational experiences of first-generation, low-income
students who have success in the first year of college in order to better understand their educational paths, the processes of academic resilience they experience, and the role of social support in their success. Through a narrative qualitative research design, this study gives voice to these students’ educational stories and provides rich, contextual descriptions of their experiences.

The next chapter of this study, chapter two, provides a review of literature related to areas of research relevant to the study’s research questions. It outlines existing research regarding first-generation, low-income students, first-year success, the social context of education, and academic resilience. This is followed in chapter three with a detailed summary of narrative qualitative methodology and an outline of the particular methods I chose for this study. Chapter four provides an overview of each participant’s educational narrative, and chapter five summarizes the findings and themes that emerged from the study’s data. Finally, chapter six presents key conclusions drawn from the study’s findings and a discussion of implications for future research, theory, practice, and policy.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many students face barriers to educational success that can potentially increase gaps between their patterns of academic attainment and those of their peers. This is particularly true for students from low-income backgrounds whose parents or guardians did not attain college degrees (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). Yet there are individuals who achieve high levels of educational success despite the likelihood that students with their backgrounds will not (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Existing persistence research lacks the stories of these successful individuals and an understanding of the educational paths that contribute to their success. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of academically resilient first-generation, low-income (FGL) students who demonstrate success in the first year of college. Through narrative inquiry, I aim to explore the stories of their educational paths, highlight the processes through which protective factors interacted to facilitate their academic resilience, and better understand the role that social support played throughout their education.

This chapter focuses on a review of literature related to FGL students and college persistence, the social context of education, and academic resilience. It begins with an overview of research considering the college exploration, preparation, access, and persistence of first-generation, low-income undergraduates. I follow this with a review of the role of social support in students’ educational paths, through the frame of social capital, and I use the lens of academic resilience to inform the strengths-based theoretical framework that serves as a foundation for this study. Finally, I conclude with a chapter summary.
First-Generation, Low-Income Students and College Persistence

Who are First-Generation, Low-Income Students?

**Student characteristics.** First-generation, low-income students are those whose family income is at or below 130-150% of the federal poverty level (DePaoli et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and who have no parents or guardians who have attained four-year degrees (Davis, 2010; Elliott, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nuñez, 2005; Pascarella, Terenzini, Pierson, & Wolniak, 2004; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Strayhorn, 2006; Thayer, 2000). Not all first-generation students are low-income, and not all low-income students are first-generation. Most of the literature relevant to this population has focused on only one of these characteristics, rather than the intersection of both. Because FGL students experience overlapping factors that put them at risk of not achieving educational success based on the combined influence of socioeconomic status and parental education on achievement gaps (Falcone, 2011; Walpole, 2003), it is relevant to consider literature for this review that examines each characteristic, as well as that which focuses on the intersection of the two.

A recent report based on data from the 2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study suggests as many as 52% of undergraduates enrolled in all types of postsecondary institutions are first-generation students (Miller, Valle, Engle, & Cooper, 2014). Estimates suggest that first-generation students who are also from low-income backgrounds constitute between 24%-34% of the undergraduate population in four-year colleges and universities (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004). Thus, roughly one-quarter of the
undergraduate population at four-year institutions faces risk factors associated with the combination of these characteristics. Barriers to their success include an increased likelihood that they will make choices correlated with lower rates of persistence, such as borrowing high amounts of student loans (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014), delaying college entry after high school, working full-time while enrolled (Corrigan, 2003; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2014), attending institutions close to home, or living off-campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008). As a heterogeneous group, many FGL students are also from demographic backgrounds with additional educational risk factors. They are disproportionately likely to be students of color, non-native English speakers, or financially independent (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir et al., 2015; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Van T. Bui, 2002). These additional characteristics may increase the marginalized status of FGL students and lead them to experience complex interactions between risk factors (Nuñez, 2005). For example, Strayhorn (2006) found a small positive relationship between first-generation status and collegiate GPA, yet when race was considered, the positive effect vanished for first-generation students of color. FGL students possess an average of three risk factors in addition to socioeconomic status and parental education, and because risk factors are often interrelated, combinations of risk factors significantly decrease students’ likelihood of persistence (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Students with no risk factors are three times more likely to earn bachelor’s degrees within six years of enrollment than students with two or more risk factors (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). Students who identify with more than one marginalized group are less likely to persist past the first year of college than students with
any single risk characteristic (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Taken as a whole, the additional characteristics of many FGL students have significant implications for the challenges they may face on their paths towards college persistence.

**Patterns of achievement.** First-generation students from low-income backgrounds face unique challenges on the educational path towards attaining college degrees. Haveman and Wilson (2007) estimate that the likelihood of graduating from college for a child from a low-income background is roughly one-fourth that of a child from a high-income background. Because low-income students make up 51% of the population of public K-12 students (DePaoli et al., 2015), class-based gaps in achievement have significant implications for many individuals. Disparities between low- and high-income students start at the very beginning of students’ educational paths, perhaps even before students begin formal schooling. Attributed to differences in material resources and the quality of home environments (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Neuman & Celano, 2006), the average cognitive scores of four year-old children in the lowest income groups can be 60% lower than scores of the highest income children (Lee & Burkham, 2002), and students in the lowest socioeconomic status quintile have scored more than a full standard deviation below those from high socioeconomic backgrounds on kindergarten achievement tests (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). This pattern follows low-income students through elementary and middle school, where higher socioeconomic status is correlated with increasing academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Neuman & Celano, 2006; Reardon, 2011). At the high school level, low-income students are significantly more likely than others to dropout before
graduation (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011), and differences in resources between schools located in more and less affluent neighborhoods serve to enhance the established differences in paths (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Often due to less-rigorous curricular experiences (Corrigan, 2003, Horn & Nuñez, 2000), lack of postsecondary preparation (Kirst, 2007; Palardy, 2013), attending schools with fewer resources (Reid & Moor, 2008) and receiving fewer sources of educational support (Rowen-Kenyon et al., 2008), these patterns lead students from low-income families to graduate from high school at lower rates than those of their peers (DePaoli et al., 2015; Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). A recent report estimates the graduation rate for low-income students at 73.3%, considerably lower than the national average of 81.4% and the average for middle- and high-income students of 88.2% (DePaoli et al., 2015).

Once FGL students do reach college, they persist to bachelor’s degree attainment at rates significantly lower than their peers. Many low-income students enter college with lower academic qualifications (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chen & Carroll, 2005), take more remedial classes (Colyar & Stitch, 2011; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Strayhorn, 2006), and leave college before attaining degrees at rates 10-16 percentage points higher than their high-income peers (Chen & DesJardines, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). Similarly, first-generation students are also more likely to take remedial courses, less likely to be continuously enrolled, more likely to work full-time outside of school, and more likely to struggle with increases in tuition than continuing-generation students (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). In an extensive analysis of the academic patterns of first-
generation students based on national college transcript data, Chen and Carroll (2005) found first-generation students had average GPAs of 0.3 points lower than continuing generation students and were 5% more likely than continuing-generation students to withdraw from or repeat courses. These patterns suggest FGL students may have many academic and curricular college experiences that are closely tied to poor achievement outcomes. Because FGL students are at risk for factors that negatively impact college persistence based on both socioeconomic background and parental education, they can encounter a combination of any or all of the barriers each group individually may face.

While previous literature consistently reports that low-income students are less likely to attain positive college outcomes than those from higher-income backgrounds, there are some inconsistent findings in prior research that suggest more positive outcomes for first-generation students (Strayhorn, 2006). Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez (2001) found that among first-generation students who took rigorous high school courses and scored well on college entrance exams, there were no significant differences between their first-year college GPAs and those of continuing-generation students. Similarly, Strayhorn’s (2006) exploration of academic outcomes for first-generation students indicated that first-generation status had a small positive influence on cumulative collegiate grades. Furthermore, Strage (1999) suggested there were no significant differences in the relationship between social and academic integration and college success for first-generation and continuing-generation students. Unfortunately, none of these positive results stemmed from analyses of specifically low-income students within the first-generation student population; however, their promising
findings imply that further exploration of FGL student experiences may uncover more complex patterns of achievement than previous literature indicates.

**Precollege Experiences**

Successful degree attainment is closely linked to factors students bring with them into the higher education environment. As such, precollege experiences—especially those related to college exploration, preparation, and access—play a significant role in students’ likelihood of persistence (Astin & Lee, 2003; Astin & Oseguera, 2012; Cole et al., 2009; Grabowski & Sessa, 2014; Kuh et al., 2006). It is important to note here that individuals such as families, educators, and peers are important in many aspects of students’ precollege experiences; however, their influences are discussed in the subsequent section of this chapter within discussions of the social context of education.

**College exploration.** Students decide to pursue college at varying points along their educational paths. Many will explore the possibility of higher education from an early age, after exposure to individuals, institutions, or activities that facilitate college planning throughout elementary, middle, and high school (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Others begin college exploration through exposure to pre-college programs such as Upward Bound, or through the development of a career interest that may influence college aspirations (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). Research suggests that by the ninth grade, students develop career and educational expectations that are correlated with socioeconomic status (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). For FGL students, these exploration processes often occur later than for continuing-generation or high-income students (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002), which could
negatively impact their educational paths as students who begin exploring college earlier tend to have better success enrolling when the time comes (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005). In high school, students begin to develop increasing awareness of the need to understand the processes involved in going to college, but do not always know where to find the information (Bell et al., 2009). This is particularly problematic for FGL students, whose immediate families may have less knowledge to assist students in college access processes than their peers (Bryan et al., 2011). In a study of college transition patterns among students with risk factors, Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen (2000) found that first-generation students were less likely than those whose parents had attained college degrees to report frequently discussing college entrance exam preparation or college plans with their parents in both the tenth and twelfth grades. As such, FGL students may have limited experiences with college preparation activities, which can create barriers to college access (Rowen-Kenyon et al., 2008). These findings highlight the differences in college exploration experiences FGL students may experience.

**Academic preparation.** Precollege academic preparation also plays a significant role in the likelihood of college persistence for FGL students. Students’ performance measures in high school such as class rank, the academic intensity of their high school curriculum, and the extent to which they report understanding high school reading assignments have all been positively related to success in college (Pike et al., 2014). There is evidence of a significant relationship between first-year college academic achievement and students’ precollege test scores, grades, course patterns, and high school characteristics (Pike & Saupe, 2002).
Precollege characteristics that impact academic preparation, such as academic efficacy behavior and family educational culture in high school, may also have a positive impact on college students’ academic engagement (Grabowski & Sessa, 2014). Moreover, in an examination of the effect of precollege characteristics such as academic ability and hours spent studying in high school on college seniors’ academic and social development, Astin and Lee (2003) found that entering student factors accounted for as much as 86% of the variance in college outcomes. They concluded that precollege characteristics are often stable across educational contexts, and even academic and nonacademic engagement behaviors appear consistent between high school and college for many students. It is unsurprising that this research demonstrates continuity between high school academic preparation and college academic achievement. However, it is an important reflection of the reality that students’ educational paths, begun long before entering college, have valuable implications for college success.

Unfortunately, FGL students are less likely to describe their high school experiences as rigorous and more likely to have lower test scores than their peers (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Research suggests 35% of middle- and upper-income students report having a moderately or highly rigorous high school curriculum, compared to less than 20% of low-income students (Corrigan, 2003). Similarly, 20% fewer first-generation students take advanced mathematics courses in high school than continuing-generation students (Horn & Nuñez, 2000), with research suggesting that parents without college degrees are less likely to encourage their students to take advanced curricula (Choy et al., 2000). School curricula and
the availability of AP courses may also be a significant factor in differences seen in the persistence of students from low- and high-income high schools (Niu & Tienda, 2013), and high school resources such as highly qualified teachers, per pupil funding, classroom materials, and college preparation information tend to be less readily available in schools serving primarily low-income students (Kirst, 2007; Palardy, 2013). Still, even FGL students who have taken advanced high school classes report discrepancies between what they perceive as the quality and content of their coursework and that of peers from high schools with greater resources (Reid & Moore, 2008).

**College access.** In addition to college preparation, the complexities of college access are particularly salient in understanding persistence patterns for FGL students. College access is a concept encompassing application, choice, and financial-aid processes that students must navigate in order to proceed through the transition from high school to college. Encouragingly, educational data from recent decades have reflected greater college access for an increasingly diverse student population (Jones, 2013). For example, from 1997 to 2012, postsecondary enrollment rates of recent high school graduates from the lowest quintile of family income increased from 47% to 52% (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). However, despite recent improvements, elements of college access continue to impact persistence barriers for FGL students.

**Application and choice.** Application to college and choice of institution are critical steps in the college access process. Unfortunately, they are key areas of college access in which there appear to be enduring income-based gaps. Students from high-income
backgrounds are more likely to be aware of the types of information needed to pursue college education, have more individuals in their communities who have experience with college enrollment processes, and understand the financial implications of college attendance (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). This leads to application and attendance patterns that vary significantly by socioeconomic status. Based on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) estimated only 65.5% of college-qualified high school graduates from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds applied to four-year colleges. More recently, a report from the Institute for Higher Education Policy suggested that only 61% of low-income students completed college applications, a rate 20% lower than that of their high-income peers (Miller et al., 2014). Similarly, research suggests that institutional choice is stratified by income, with only half of college-qualified students from low-income families enrolling in four-year institutions immediately after graduating from high school (Miller et al., 2014; Perna & Kurban, 2013). As factors correlated with persistence, these gaps in low-income students’ college access processes contribute negatively to their likelihood of long-term educational success (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011).

Further highlighting income-based differences in college application patterns, research suggests that FGL students have fewer higher education resources in their communities and schools, which may limit their knowledge of application processes and types of institutions (Bergerson, 2009; Roderick et al., 2011; Ross, et al., 2012; Terenzini et al., 2001). Students who do not receive ample opportunities for guidance, information, and
understanding norms for college attendance may not conduct broad college searches, may limit their college choices based on lack of information about a range of opportunities, and may apply and enroll in four-year colleges less effectively than their peers (Roderick et al., 2011). In a study of student perceptions regarding college access processes, Avery and Kane (2004) found that of more than 65% of students from an urban, low-income high school who intended to attend college at the start of their senior year, less than 25% actually followed their aspirations through to successful college enrollment. The authors suggested that lack of knowledge about college admissions requirements and financial aid processes results in less participation in college application among lower-income urban students, ultimately negatively affecting college enrollment rates. Similarly, Plank and Jordan (2001) found a negative relationship between low socioeconomic status and students’ likelihood of attending a college, or a two- versus four-year institution. In addition, they found that this direct effect decreased as they introduced measures of college information, guidance, and actions, contributing the difference largely to whether students took concrete steps towards their college searches and applications such as taking the ACT/SAT exams, enrolling in entrance exam preparation courses, visiting colleges, receiving concrete guidance from their schools, applying to four-year institutions, and applying for financial aid.

Applying to multiple colleges is another important indicator of knowledge about college access and recognition of institutional options; yet, low-income students apply to multiple colleges at significantly lower rates than their peers (Bryan et al., 2011). This suggests low-income students have a narrower frame of reference regarding the availability
of college options, and that they pursue fewer opportunities that are likely to lead to successful college enrollment. Low-income students also do not apply to four-year institutions or selective institutions at rates equivalent of their affluent peers, even among groups who are equally high achieving (Hoxby and Avery, 2012; Miller et al., 2014), and are significantly underrepresented in the most selective institutions (Pallais & Turner, 2007). After controlling for extensive background characteristics including achievement, Pascarella et al. (2004) found that first-generation students tended to be enrolled in institutions significantly less selective than continuing-generation students. These patterns suggest access barriers that create fewer opportunities for FGL students to attain similar college attainment to their high-income, continuing-education peers who pursue application to multiple elite universities and attend four-year institutions at higher rates.

Financial aid. In addition to the challenges FGL students face while applying to and choosing between colleges, successfully navigating the complicated financial aid process is often problematic. Lack of accurate financial aid information may cause students to incorrectly understand college costs and resources available to support college opportunities (Bell et al., 2009; Luna de la Rosa, 2006; Roderick et al., 2011). In a study of the financial aid knowledge of low-income students from large public high schools, Luna de la Rosa (2006) found that 25% of students believed college was too expensive to attend and 21.6% believed financial aid was too complicated to even apply. While this also indicates substantial portions of students may not hold these beliefs, it reflects the presence of a
knowledge-based obstacle for a full quarter of the sample, whose college access may be limited by inaccurate information about this process.

Furthermore, the intricacy of the federal student aid system, including the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), may similarly pose a barrier to accessing financial resources. Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006) argue that this complexity disproportionately affects students “on the margin of college entry,” such as FGL students, and that simplification of aid processes would significantly contribute to increasing equitable college access. Exemplifying this, Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2012) conducted a randomized experiment providing FAFSA completion assistance to low-income adults who were preparing to enroll themselves or their children in college. Their results suggested that receiving individualized FAFSA guidance increased the number of completed applications, timeliness of aid application submission, receipt of need-based aid, and eventual likelihood of college attendance and persistence for participants. Senior high school students whose parents participated demonstrated an 8 percentage point increase in college enrollment the following year. Similarly, increased access to information increases high school students’ likelihood to be interested in pursuing college and seeking additional information about enrollment and financial aid (Oreopoulos & Dunn, 2012). Still, greater availability of information does not necessarily mean students will know what information is most relevant for their unique circumstances or how to successfully use the information they find without additional assistance (Perna, 2015). Understanding college access processes is important in pursuing college attainment, yet too often FGL students and their families find themselves
underprepared for negotiating the information about colleges, costs, and affordability their preparation for college entails.

The educational experiences students have leading up to, while preparing for, and in accessing college are essential steps towards college persistence. As previous research suggests, students who spend more time exploring the idea of college and the range of postsecondary options (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002), are well prepared for postsecondary academic rigor (Astin & Lee, 2003; Grabowski & Sessa, 2014; Pike et al., 2014), and have ample support and resources to navigate complicated college access processes (Perna & Kurban, 2013; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Roderick et al., 2011) are likely to be successful in higher education environments. However, many FGL students do not have these experiences and instead face challenges along their K-12 educational paths that make college success more difficult than it often is for their continuing-generation, higher-income peers. As a result, increasing college persistence for FGL students must begin by better understanding connections between their precollege experiences and postsecondary success.

First-Year Success

Once students enter higher education, they begin to build upon precollege experiences through adjusting and transitioning to life as college students. There are many factors that contribute to eventual degree attainment, and foremost among them are students’ experiences during their first academic year. The first year of college is a critical period on the path towards college persistence, particularly for FGL students. For all students, the risk for dropping out of college is greatest during the first year (Chen & DesJardines, 2008).
Unfortunately, for FGL students this risk is magnified, with research suggesting FGL students who enroll in public, four-year institutions are three times more likely to leave after the first year than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Because students may substantially benefit from early interventions and support during educational transitions, researchers have paid much attention to factors of the first year that are connected to longer-term success (Bowman, 2010; Kuh et al., 2008). In seeking to understand students’ experiences of success in their first few semesters of college, a comprehensive understanding of the definition, relevance, and components of first-year success is essential.

Scholars define first-year success most often as completion of students’ first two semesters with good academic standing and continuation into the second year of enrollment (Upcraft et al., 2005). However, this basic definition can be expanded to include the multifaceted nature of students’ experiences in addition to academic achievement. Concurrently with the cognitive growth students experience through coursework, social and emotional development often grow significantly during the transition from high school to college (Skipper, 2005). Students who learn to adapt effectively to both social and academic environments are more likely to persist past their first year (Bowman, 2010). Because first-year students spend only about fifteen hours per week in formal classroom settings, there is often much time that can be devoted to social and personal contexts (Stuber, 2011), and it is during this time that they develop important psychosocial factors that are also correlated with first-year success (Upcraft et al., 2005). Defining first-year success as a complex phenomenon involving dynamic personal, social, and academic elements emphasizes the
importance of student success within multiple contexts simultaneously. Aligned with broader general frameworks for undergraduate success (Kuh et al., 2006), a holistic understanding of first-year success that includes personal factors, social integration, and academic integration provides a thorough basis within which to explore student experiences. The following sections will explore these components in more detail.

**Personal factors.** Most first-year students enter college with the opportunity to explore, define, reshape, and better understand who they are as individuals. They are often in more control of their own choices and behaviors than ever before in their lives, and have access to an environment full of experiences with which they may have had little prior familiarity. This creates opportunities and challenges related to exploration of personal identity and psychological wellbeing. How students experience these personal opportunities and challenges can have significant implications for first-year success.

Identity development involves the processes students experience related to defining who they are, often in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, or disability (Upcraft et al., 2005). The study of this process stems from Erikson’s psychological theory of identity formation, and focuses on the links between identity and personality and their relationship with psychological wellbeing (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006). For first-year students, this can be an especially powerful experience that impacts success in other areas of their lives. First-year students’ active exploration of identity conflicts, for example, is linked to construction of a stable sense of identity, which positively relates to social and academic success (Adams et al., 2006). For FGL first-year students, this process is complicated by the
experience of integrating a new identity as a college student with existing identities connected to family and home environments, which may conflict with one another (Davis, 2010). First-year students often develop new awareness of their unique backgrounds and differences from their peers, and for FGL students this knowledge can “create dissonance between their home and school worlds” that presents challenges in the identity formation process (Jehangir, 2010, p. 537).

Psychological wellbeing is another important personal aspect of success in students’ first year of college. Stemming from autonomous functioning and decision-making, mastery of one’s environment, seeking opportunities for personal growth, maintaining positive relations with others, having a sense of purpose in life, and accepting and thinking positively about oneself, psychological wellbeing is related to numerous positive outcomes across individuals’ lifespans (Bowman, 2010). Research suggests coping with academic stress (Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2000; Leary & DeRosier, 2012), optimism (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001), and self-efficacy (Chemers et al., 2001; Elliott, 2014; Hutchinson, Follman, Sumpter, & Bodner, 2006; Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007) are some of the primary factors contributing to first-year students’ abilities to maintain positive psychological functioning during their adjustment to the higher education environment. Conversely, challenges to psychological wellbeing may have negative effects on academic performance, persistence, and graduation (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Kitzrow, 2003; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009). In particular, research makes strong connections
between anxiety, depression, isolation, and loneliness and first-year students’ sense of wellbeing (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007; Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2004).

For FGL students, psychological wellbeing is a particularly salient measure of difficulties adjusting to the college environment, as they tend to face decreases in autonomy and personal growth during the first year of college (Bowman, 2010). These students also tend to have lower confidence in their abilities (Ramos-Sánchez & Nichols, 2007), express greater fear of failing, and experience more stress stemming from concerns about college costs than their continuing-generation peers (Van T. Bui, 2002). For students who do not have similar backgrounds to the majority of their peers, psychological wellbeing may also be related to experiences of diversity and identity development, where negative interactions can have significant effects on feelings of personal success (Jackson & Finney, 2002). All of these factors contribute to risks FGL students face during the first year of college, and the extent to which students are able to navigate them has important implications for first-year success.

**Social integration.** In addition to personal development, first-year students experience significant changes in social relationships based on the combination of new interaction with college peers, faculty, and staff and simultaneous distance from family and high school friends. Social integration, or an individual’s efforts to become involved and engaged in the interpersonal activities available in the college setting (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), is an important indicator within the multifaceted nature of first-year success. Measures of social integration that may predict success include sense of belonging
(Johnson, Soldner, Leonard & Alvarez, 2007; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012), social connectedness (Leary & DeRosier, 2012; Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, & Le, 2006), participation in co-curricular activities (Kuh et al., 2008), and ease at developing close friendships (Sax & Weintraub, 2014). Research suggests that social engagement within the college environment during the first year positively affects persistence to the second year, as well as academic achievement in the senior year (Kuh et al., 2008). Many first-year-specific social experiences such as orientation and freshmen seminars are also positively linked to college persistence (Hunter & Linder, 2005; Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989). In a study of predictors of first-year student outcomes, Robbins et al. (2006) found that students’ feelings of connection and involvement within the college community, as well as their level of comfort in meeting and interacting with other people, were both predictive of higher retention to the second year. Similarly, Leary and DeRosier (2012) found that social connectedness was one of the most salient predictors of student success during the transition to college, implying that “helping students build new social connections within the postsecondary environment would be expected to significantly improve both their adjustment to college and their likelihood of persisting in college to graduation” (p. 1219).

The relationship between social integration and first-year success for FGL students is also relevant, and may have unique aspects (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Langhout, Drake, & Roselli, 2009; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) indicated that first-
generation students who were satisfied with their social lives were 16.7% more likely to continue to their second year of college than those who were not satisfied. Pascarella et al. (2004) found that first-generation students gained greater benefits from extracurricular involvements than did other students. Strayhorn (2012) suggested that sense of belonging may be more important to the first-year success of students with risk factors such as low-income backgrounds or first-generation status than it is to their peers. In addition, Nuñez (2005) suggested that interactions with college staff and faculty may provide especially valuable support to first-generation students navigating the first-year of college.

Yet, sense of belonging among FGL students can be threatened by the tension that arises from conflicting social class values among peers (Cushman, 2007; DeRosa & Dolby, 2014), and may be related to intentions of leaving school (Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009). Martin’s (2012) study of the relationship between social class and college involvement found class-based differences in pre-college expectations, time and financial constraints, and greater work commitments led to significantly lower levels of campus involvement for low-income students. In findings from a study of first-year student engagement, Pike and Kuh (2005) indicated that first-generation students tended to have lower overall social integration and perceived the college environment as less supportive. These authors attributed their findings to discrepancies between first- and continuing-generation students’ previous experiences with the college environment, suggesting that first-generation students have less knowledge of how to become socially engaged in college activities. Based on these patterns, FGL students are at risk of experiencing less involvement
in social and extracurricular activities, which may impede their ability to fully integrate into the social college social environment and thereby may negatively impact their likelihood to persist.

**Academic integration.** Often closely tied to social integration, academic integration refers to students’ adaptation to the academic experiences provided within the college environment (Deil-Amen, 2011; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Tinto, 1993). Academic performance is one of the best predictors of first-year student retention (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005), and the effect of grades on college persistence outcomes may be strongest during the first year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Adelman’s (2006) analysis of longitudinal influences on bachelor’s degree completion suggests that students in the top two quintiles of first-year GPA increased their probability of earning a degree by nearly 22%, and number of credits earned during the first year was significantly tied to probability of degree completion. Further evidence suggests substantial portions of gains in learning and cognitive development in both math and English occur during the first year (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006).

In addition, varied measures of academic integration can be even more important than precollege ability measures or academic performance in predicting first-year achievement (Eimers & Pike, 1997). Successful academic integration involves participation in academically focused campus activities (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983), developing good academic habits (Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Strage, 1999), interacting with faculty (Berger & Milem, 1999; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Deil-Amen,
2011; Kuh et al., 2008), and motivation and satisfaction with academic work (Berger & Milem, 1999; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Astin (2001) concluded that heavy academic involvement, such as spending considerable amounts of time studying and attending classes, taking honors or interdisciplinary courses, participation in study-abroad or internship programs, completion of independent research projects, and participation in class presentations contributed to numerous measures of college success outcomes. More recently, Krumrei-Mancuso, Newton, Kim, and Wilcox (2013) pointed to academic self-efficacy as significantly predictive of first-year GPA. Not only do successful students begin college achieving academically in the first year, they also begin learning academic attitudes and behaviors that contribute to educational attainment (Upcraft et al., 2005).

For FGL students, first-year academic integration experiences may be particularly impactful. Aspelmeier et al. (2012) suggested that internal and external locus of control for academic outcomes were both more predictive of academic adjustment of first-generation students than continuing-generation students. Measuring cumulative academic impact throughout students’ first several college years, Pascarella et al. (2004) found a stronger positive effect of academic and classroom involvement measures for first-generation students than for their peers. Moreover, Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) findings suggested that for each 100-point increase in scores of academic integration, first-generation students’ likelihood of retention to the second year increased by 16%.

Despite the potentially supportive influence of academic integration, some measures of first-year academic experiences indicate negative patterns for FGL students. FGL students
may have difficult academic transitions in the first year, which can lead to challenges in achieving first-year success (Elliott, 2014; Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien (2006) attributed this to feelings of inadequacy experienced by some FGL students that stem from the perception that their content knowledge and study skills are not equivalent to those of their peers. Even when first-generation students’ academic confidence grows over the course of their first year, research suggests they are still likely to underperform academically compared to their continuing-generation peers (Elliott, 2014). In addition, first-generation students may demonstrate weaker cognitive abilities and lower degree aspirations, lower levels of engagement in honors programs, and fewer hours devoted to studying throughout their college experiences (Terenzini et al., 1996). Collectively, these patterns indicate both the potential of academic integration to enhance FGL students’ experiences and the academic barriers to success to which difficulties with academic integration may contribute.

First-year success is an instrumental component of students’ college experiences (Upcraft et al., 2005). Personal, social, and academic factors of students’ first year in college can combine to influence educational success and set students up for continued positive college outcomes. Yet similarly to precollege experiences, first-year success may be more difficult to achieve for FGL students than for their peers who face fewer risk factors. Unique challenges within experiences of identity development, psychological wellbeing, and both social and academic integration may contribute to the number of risks FGL students face during the first-year of college. While research varies regarding the strength of the influence
of these factors and how they impact success for FGL students, the extent to which students are able to navigate them has important implications for persistence. As such, a better understanding of how FGL students cultivate first-year success is a necessary step towards addressing the persistence gap that exists between FGL students and their peers.

The Social Context of Education

Social Capital

Scholars often use the concept of social capital to understand inequity in social structures that contribute to existing educational disparities, and which emphasize the role of social capital in access to social resources such as postsecondary education (Dika & Singh, 2002; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Walpole, 2003). In the context of education, social capital can be best understood through Coleman’s (1988) definition as a concept “which highlights ways in which social organization—in the form of small networks of relationships and broad societal patterns of interactions—enhances the productive capacity of individuals and groups” (Croninger & Lee, 2001, p. 553). Social capital facilitates attainment, and is embedded in the knowledge, skills, and growth an individual gains as a result of interactions with others (Coleman, 1988). As such, it specifically emphasizes the relationships individuals have with others who govern access to resources, and identifies social networks as resources themselves (Melguizo, 2011; Stephan, 2013). Accumulation of social capital occurs through access to resources such as information, norms, and support that are transferred through social relationships (Bryan et al., 2011; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2000a, 2000b). This is particularly relevant to studies of FGL student success because research
suggests students with families who have greater financial resources and more educated parents have greater access to informational and social resources and tend to be able to better navigate higher education (Saenz et al., 2007). Because of the connections between these resources and educational achievement, social relationships are critical components of students’ precollege and collegiate experiences and often serve a valuable purpose in students’ educational paths.

Additionally, social networks are an asset through which an individual develops a habitus, which Melguizo (2011) succinctly defines as “a durable and transportable set of subjective perceptions, thoughts, appreciations, dispositions, and actions that individuals take from their environment” (p. 411). In the context of educational success, the social capital-formed habitus influences the boundaries within which students perceive their opportunities to exist (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Prior to attending college, habitus controls the types of resources students access through their social networks, which may influence college enrollment decisions (Perna, 2000a, 2000b). This impacts the volume and quality of information about application, enrollment, and college access processes students receive, as well as the perceived value and expectation of attending college they internalize (Perna, 2000a, 2000b). During the first-year of college, social capital continues to play an influence in students’ abilities to navigate college resources, institutional and higher education culture, and ultimately success (Pascarella et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2010). The following sections will explore sources of social capital within students’ social
support networks, the unique qualities of social support for FGL students, and the potential ways in which these may shift as students move through the high school to college transition.

**Networks of Social Support**

One of the ways research suggests that students succeed in education is with the support of caring individuals who provide guidance, resources, and help throughout their lives (Nora, 2001). Variation in access to individuals who support students educationally has been widely cited as a barrier to achievement for students from low-income backgrounds, and those without parents who have attained college degrees (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000a). Social support is a common theme within college preparation, access, and persistence literature, and is often analyzed through the lens of social capital. Throughout students’ educational paths, support from family, educators, and peers are widely cited as potentially significant influences on students’ experiences of educational success.

**Family support.** Although all social relations and structures exemplify forms of social capital (Coleman, 1988), families are typically viewed as the primary source of social capital resources for students (Bryan et al., 2011; Fann, Jarzky, & McDonough, 2009). Parents in particular provide a multidimensional source of social capital in the context of educational attainment that is derived from extended family networks, larger community networks, and educational institutions (Fann et al., 2009). As Kim and Schneider (2005) emphasize, “through actions that are functionally specific to their adolescent’s goal of
gaining admission to college, parents can provide a bridge to resources and information outside the family” (p. 1182).

Research suggests that social capital received from families has especially significant influence on students’ experiences in the college preparation and access process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006). In particular, parent-child relationships and parental involvement in students’ education are important components of this pattern. Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) highlighted the link between parent-child relationships and precollege educational success, suggesting that students who had poor relationships with their parents were significantly more likely to drop out of high school regardless of academic performance. Perna and Titus (2005) indicated in an analysis of the effect of parental involvement on college enrollment that increased parental involvement in the college choice process was related to the likelihood of enrolling in college, even after controlling for economic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. They explained that for the students in their study, “parents convey norms and standards in ways that promote college enrollment through interactions with the student, the school, and other parents” (p. 508). Similarly, in a study of parent-child relational ties and their influence on students transitions to postsecondary education, Kim and Schneider (2005) found that students who shared stronger agreement on an educational plan with their parents had a greater likelihood of making “strategic choices about postsecondary education that [were] in line with available resources” (p. 1191), and a significantly higher probability of attending a four-year institution than not
attending college. Students with parents who expect them to attend college, discuss school in the home frequently, and participate in many school activities may be significantly more likely to enroll in four-year institutions (Sandefur et al., 2006). In addition, adult family members other than parents may also have significant influence in preparing students for postsecondary success through communicating early, clear, and consistent expectations (Rosas & Hamrick, 2002).

There is less prior research regarding the influence of family support once students begin college, however what is available generally confirms that parents and relatives continue to impact student success at the postsecondary level (Eimers & Pike, 1997; Mounts, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011; Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Wolf et al., 2009). Especially for first-year students, communication and perceptions of support from parents may contribute to psychological wellbeing (Mounts, 2004; Sax & Weintraub, 2014) and positive parental relationships may increase students’ positive adjustment and decrease stress associated with the college transition (Srigiani et al., 2013; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Contrastingly, close relationships with family members characterized by dependence may be more maladaptive than helpful in adjusting to college (Sax et al., 2004).

For FGL students, studies exploring familial support have demonstrated differential findings. Most researchers argue that low-income or first-generation students experience less parental engagement in their educational paths and obtain fewer college-related social resources than other students, attributing much of the variation to differences in social capital and parental educational experience (Bryan et al., 2011; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Perna &
Titus, 2005; Wolf et al., 2009). This perspective implies that, “as students of low-income families progress through their schooling, their parents may become increasingly limited in their own capacities to provide technical, psychological, cognitive, and informational assistance,” (Bryan et al., 2011). Exemplifying this, Smith and Zhang (2010) found that first-generation students received less support from parents in college preparation and access processes than did continuing-generation students. Scholars also suggest that FGL students may experience a contrast between their college and home cultures that can potentially strain relationships they have with family, leading to the provision of less social support (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Yazedjian, Purswell, Sevin, and Towes (2007), for example, found that the first-generation students in their sample expressed frustrations that they did not feel they could seek advice from their parents due to their lack of collegiate experience.

Yet, other studies have explored specific qualities of support among low-income and first-generation students and found nuanced patterns that suggest students from these groups do benefit from social resources provided by their parents and families (Ceja, 2004; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Jehangir et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Nuñez, 2005; Palmer et al., 2011; Saenz et al., 2007). Some first-generation students, for example, attribute educational success to the knowledge, experiences, and motivation they gained from their families (Ceja, 2004; Jehangir et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2011). Parents of FGL students may have important positive influences on students’ motivation, competency, and autonomy as they navigate the college access process (Mitchell, 2015). Low-income students’ successful college enrollment
has been linked to social capital in the form of parent involvement in school activities (Engberg & Allen, 2011), and first-generation students may be even more likely than continuing-generation students to report that parental encouragement was very important in their decision to attend college (Saenz et al., 2007). In Nuñez’s (2005) study of first-generation female students’ college transitions, findings indicated that families provided students with social capital in the form of strong emotional support, positive pressure to succeed, and educational values, all of which contributed to postsecondary success. Similarly, Palmer et al. (2011) found in a qualitative exploration of family support and postsecondary success among Black males that the perseverance and fortitude modeled by determined parents of first-generation students positively influenced their motivation to succeed in college. These findings suggest that social resources within families of FGL students may not mirror the types of social capital previous research suggests is aligned with postsecondary success, but that they may nevertheless contribute positively to educational achievement. Additional exploration of the unique nature of FGL students’ social resources and how these resources influence processes involved in student success may illuminate ways in which FGL students can benefit from their networks of social support despite the different characteristics their networks may have from those of their peers.

**Educator support.** It is possible that a network of social support limited to only family members may become a barrier to academic achievement when it prohibits a student’s ability to access resources outside the family’s capacity (Kim & Schneider, 2005). As a result, genuinely supportive relationships with educators can serve to enhance social support
networks in a way that provides greater access to social capital related to educational outcomes (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Moreover, if social capital accumulation does vary by socioeconomic status and family background as some literature suggests, FGL students may need to depend also on extra-familial social networks (Bryan et al., 2011). In this way, educators can serve as supplemental sources of both the relationships and resources necessary for social support and capital (Farmer-Hinton, 2008).

Beginning in precollege educational environments, research suggests that students can utilize school personnel as sources of social capital resources supportive of educational attainment (Bryan et al., 2011; Coleman, 1988; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Kim & Schneider, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Muller, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Students’ academic behavior and achievement can be influenced by their perceptions of commitment and caring from teachers who provide support in the form of positive expectations, emotional support, and motivation (Muller, 2001). Croninger and Lee (2001) estimated that stronger social relationships with teachers significantly reduced students’ probability of dropping out of high school, particularly for students with greater risk factors. They argued that teachers can compensate for lack of resources in other social networks by providing tutoring, counseling, and guidance about educational decisions, and through these efforts provide resources that facilitate success across students’ educational paths.

School counselors may also be important sources of college-related information, norms, and support, as Bryan et al. (2011) suggest in their study of the effect of interactions
with school counselors on students’ college application patterns. Their results indicated that student-counselor contact was a strong predictor of applying to multiple colleges versus one or none, thereby increasing student attainment possibilities and expanding educational boundaries. Similarly, Hurwitz and Howell (2013) found that increasing the number of counselors in a high school by just one led to an increase in college-going rates by 10 percentage points, suggesting that a reduction in student-to-counselor ratio may provide students with increased access to a relationship that can enhance college-related resources and improve educational possibilities.

Supportive relationships with educators continue to influence student success into college, as evidenced by extensive research indicating the positive relationship between faculty and staff interaction and students’ psychological wellbeing, social integration, and academic outcomes (Adams et al., 2006; Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Reason et al., 2006). Furthermore, interactions with educators can convey institutional information and procedural knowledge that facilitate students’ ability to integrate into college environments (Deil-Amen, 2011). As Reason et al. (2006) summarize, “few college experiences are more strongly linked to student learning and persistence than students’ interactions with faculty members” (p. 151). For first-year students in particular, supportive and friendly relationships with educators may improve the ability to learn problem-solving skills and academic decision-making that will help them flourish in the college environment (Adams et al., 2006). Faculty and staff interactions may also increase the likelihood that students will have positive
perceptions of support, develop commitment to the institution (Berger, & Milem, 1999), and an increased ability to cope with rigorous academic and social challenges while adjusting to the college environment (Hoffman et al., 2002).

Research suggests that networks of social support that include educators may be particularly relevant for FGL students in both precollege and postsecondary settings (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Perna 2000a, 2000b). Tierney and Luna de la Rosa (2006) found in a study of students from low-income high schools who participated in a national survey related to college aspirations, knowledge, and financial aid that half believed the encouragement from their teachers to attend college was “very important” in their college access process. Further, Pham and Keenan (2011) suggested that greater availability of school counseling for first-generation students led to lower rates of highly qualified students not attending a 4-year college, which buffered these students from the effects of persistence risk factors such as delaying college entry, initial enrollment in two-year colleges, enrolling part-time, and needing remedial education. Specific small group counseling for first-generation students preparing for college may also facilitate connections between similar students that increase needed peer support as these students navigate college access processes (Gibbons, 2004).

Once in college, FGL students may still be better able to succeed with support from educators, but are often less likely to engage in relationships with faculty and staff than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) indicated that interactions with
faculty were largely responsible for the positive effect they found between first-generation students’ academic integration and success, yet DeRosa and Dolby (2014) suggested that faculty and staff members’ perceived lack of understanding about students’ backgrounds may create negative perceptions among FGL students that their institutions do not value their experiences. Taken as a whole, these patterns imply a complicated relationship between student success and social support from educators, but one that clearly indicates the presence of influence in some way. Further examination of changes in the role of educator support from precollege to higher education environments, and the impact of educators on the educational paths of FGL students in particular, may contribute to building a better understanding of this relationship.

**Peer support.** Beyond the support of families and educators, students can potentially garner significant amounts of support in educational processes from their peer groups. Defined by Astin (2001) as “a collection of individuals with whom the individual identifies and affiliates and from whom the individual seeks acceptance or approval” (p. 400), peers exert much influence on students at all levels of education. Peer connections provide social support early for children, particularly during emotionally distressing experiences (Tierney & Colyar, 2005), and impact how students respond to educational environments (Van Acker & Wehby, 2000). Perhaps one of the most widely researched influences on student development, the evidence is strong that peers play an important role in students’ educational experiences (Dennis et al., 2005; Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2014; Tierney & Colyar, 2005).
However, patterns of peer influence on precollege educational achievement and college preparation are not clearly positive or negative (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001; Tierney & Colyar, 2005). Hoxby (2000) demonstrated a significant relationship between the test scores of a student’s peers and his or her own score in elementary and middle school, suggesting the higher academic achievement of one’s peers, the higher one’s own academic achievement is. Similarly, in a notable experimental study of peer influences on academic development during adolescence, Cook, Deng, and Morgano (2007) found that the average GPA of a student’s friend group was the most significant positive predictor of cognitive and social development. Yet peers can also be negative influences, as reflected in the work of Farmer and Cadwallader (2007) indicating that antisocial patterns of behavior can reflect peer influences from preschool through high school. Depending on the values of the peer group, students may receive resources such as academic guidance, educational encouragement, and achievement-oriented goals, or they may experience challenges from peers in the form of risky behavior and school discouragement (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001; Becker & Luthar, 2002).

In college access, precollege peers appear to have positive effects on choice, enrollment, and even persistence (Cherng et al., 2013; Choy et al., 2000; Cruce, 2004; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005). Cherng et al. (2013) suggested that students’ precollege friends could be a significant source of social capital related to college success, as their findings reflected that adolescents whose best friends’ mothers had attained college degrees were significantly more likely to persist in college than others. This highlights the
role peers can play in accumulation of social resources that may benefit students in college. Furthermore, research suggests having friends with plans to attend college is a strong predictor of college enrollment (Choy et al., 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). In a study of college enrollment patterns, Engberg and Allen (2011) found that students enrolling in four-year institutions were associated with a significantly higher number of friends who also had four-year college plans. Additionally, findings from Cruce (2004) indicated that students’ college choices were significantly affected by how many peers in their graduating classes also showed interest in the same institutions.

In contrast to inconclusive evidence about the nature of peer support during precollege years, the vast majority of literature regarding peers and college students suggests positive patterns of peer group influences (Tierney & Colyar, 2005). In a supportive way, Astin (2001) suggests, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398). This role of peers in college outcomes is especially well documented and has both academic and nonacademic implications (Astin, 2001; Dennis et al., 2005; Tierney & Colyar, 2005; Tinto, 1993). For example, Carrell, Fullerton, and West (2008) and Zimmerman (2003) each found in quasi-experimental studies utilizing random roommate assignment processes that as roommate SAT scores increased, so too did individuals’ own first-year GPAs. Peers may have significant influence especially in the first year of college on students’ academic effort, membership in social organizations (Sacerdote, 2001), openness to diversity and challenge, and critical thinking skills (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006). Additionally, social
support from peers within college environments has been connected to high retention (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

For FGL students, peer influences may vary by socioeconomic status and serve as proxies for the normative educational values or academic skills within students’ social environments that influence their attitudes, behaviors, and ultimately educational outcomes (Palardy, 2013). Students at high schools with low-socioeconomic compositions may experience negative peer influences on educational attainment, while students at high-socioeconomic composition high schools may experience positive effects of peer influences on attainment (Palardy, 2013). In college, some research suggests students from marginalized backgrounds particularly benefit from getting to know similar students who have already demonstrated success in college (Barefoot, 2000), yet contrasts between students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and those of the majority of their peers can contribute to difficulty adjusting to college environments (McDonough, 1997). Findings from McLoughlin (2012) suggest that low-income students’ college transition and satisfaction experiences are often positively impacted by first-year peer relationships. Research has also shown that the extent to which peers recognize or accept differences in socioeconomic status may influence FGL students’ satisfaction with social integration experiences (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014; McLoughlin, 2012), and that a perceived lack of peer support may be more strongly related to college grades and adjustment than support from family (Dennis et al., 2005). Altogether, this evidence suggests social resources and educational influences from peer groups are
likely relevant throughout students’ educational paths, particularly across the transition into and during college.

Variation Throughout Educational Paths

Although there is extensive literature highlighting the numerous roles networks of social support can play in students’ success at all levels of education, there is little that considers the variation in the source, nature, and impact of social support throughout students’ K-12 and postsecondary experiences. As outlined above, some social support research highlights ways in which students’ precollege social resources facilitate college access and impact college outcomes, and further research picks up this inquiry from the other side of the college transition, focusing on how social support once in college effects similar outcomes. Yet very few studies address how variation and changes in social support throughout educational paths may be important.

Nora (2004) approaches this idea through her study of the role of habitus and cultural capital in college choice. Her findings suggest that psychosocial aspects of college choice had significant connections to college persistence. Her analysis tracked measures of psychosocial influence, including the support and encouragement students received from parents, as well as people outside of their family, for educational pursuits. While she included some discussion of how psychosocial measures may change between college choice and persistence processes, this discussion was more focused on variation in students’ personal qualities than on changes in social support or encouragement. Palmer et al.’s (2011) exploration of the influence of social support on educational success of Black male students
also draws on the importance of social resources in precollege and college experiences. Their findings suggest both immediate and extended family had important influences on students’ experiences before entering college and during college, but they do not focus on whether differences existed in these influences.

With evidence that the impact of family, educator, and peer support may differ at various points across students’ experiences, especially before and after the transition into college and particularly for FGL students, consideration of the ways in which shifts in these relationships may contribute to student success is extremely relevant. As a key component of educational achievement, attainment, and success in many ways, it is important to better understand how changes in networks of social support impact student experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Shifting the Deficit Perspective**

As detailed in the previous section of this chapter, variations of social support and social capital serve to either inhibit or facilitate students’ educational success. Previous research suggests that because social capital is based on resources derived from an often-inequitable society, and accumulation is largely determined by the characteristics of networks to which students belong, students from dominant demographic groups may possess significantly greater social capital than others (Perna & Titus, 2005). From this perspective, access to social capital can be controlled by similar power dynamics to those that create broader societal inequalities, and can limit the ability of students’ networks of social support to provide resources that will facilitate educational opportunity (Enriquez, 2011). Research
suggests this may be particularly true for students from low-income backgrounds, whose social networks less often provide access to the type of social capital afforded to their peers (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000a). The perspective presented in most prior research suggests FGL students have less contact with individuals who have attended college, and therefore less valuable social resources. As Sparkman et al. (2012) explain, “When parents and family without college degrees form the primary support structure of students in college, there is a lack of experience surrounding the student that may lead to insufficient levels of emotional support or a lack of understanding of the commitment necessary for a student to persist in college” (p. 649).

However, this research largely stems from a deficit perspective, focusing on deficiencies in these students’ experiences that make them unsuccessful. This frames background-based achievement gaps as a result of the inadequacies of FGL students, which are often attributed to an interaction between lack of capital and necessary resources (DeRosa & Dolby, 2014). What this perspective fails to acknowledge is that FGL students do not necessarily lack resources, networks of social support, or social capital all together. Much in the way that scholars argue for the unique value of the cultural capital marginalized groups possess based on their experiences navigating adversity (Jehangir, 2010; Morales, 2008a, 2008b; Yosso, 2005), it is possible that the social capital FGL students have may take different forms or come from different sources than that of their peers, and may serve unique purposes in supporting their educational paths. In order to understand how these distinctive resources may help FGL students achieve educational success in the face of challenges and
barriers, research exploring the educational experiences of this student population must begin to shift towards a more positive, strengths-based perspective.

One example of shifting this research perspective comes from the work of Harper (2007, 2010), who provides an anti-deficit framework for pursuing inquiry into the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) educational success of Black male students. He argues that empirical studies of minority STEM achievement tend to amplify failure and deficits, and that more work should pursue inquiry focused on understanding the experiences of successful students from minority backgrounds. While his work tends to be applied specifically to students of color, the concept of framing achievement gap inquiries around questions of how students achieve success rather than how they fail due to inadequacies is relevant for FGL students as well. As Kezar et al. (2014) suggest regarding low-income students, more research perspectives should shift away from “assuming the experiences and outcomes of low-income students can be solved by simply ‘fixing’ low-income students to behave more like higher-income students” (p. 238). In the context of FGL students, scholars must begin to recognize the inherent value of the resources, characteristics, and strengths they possess and how those can impact success.

Academically successful individuals do exist within all diverse groups of students, yet their experiences are often overlooked in empirical research (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Though social support and capital may look different for underrepresented students, many may seek and utilize resources in unique and valuable ways to support their achievement. It is with this underlying perspective of focusing on strengths, successes, and positive aspects
of FGL students’ educational paths that I approach this study. As such, the theoretical foundation for the design of the study is drawn from a model with a similarly strengths-based structure: academic resilience theory. The following section will explore academic resilience and discuss its use as the theoretical lens through which this study is framed.

**Academic Resilience**

Resilience theory stems from the fields of developmental psychopathology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, in which researchers explore how individuals function successfully despite factors that are typically predictive of negative outcomes (Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Masten, 1994). Described as “the positive pole of the ubiquitous phenomenon of individual differences in people’s response to stress and adversity” (Rutter, 1990, as cited in Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994, p. 47), the concept of resilience illustrates that some individuals demonstrate extraordinary positive functioning, adaptation, and/or achievement notwithstanding influences that are typically perceived to be detrimental to intended outcomes. Resilience reflects a long-term life pattern through which individuals demonstrate “good eventual adaptation despite developmental risk, acute stressors, or chronic adversities” (Masten, 1994, p. 5). Pioneering the study of this concept, Garmezy (1991) and Rutter (1987) emphasized the importance of focusing research on the study of individuals who overcame life stressors in order to better understand the processes through which barriers are broken. Within psychology literature, the concept has been used to describe three major types of phenomena: individuals from high-risk groups who have better-than-expected outcomes, individuals who demonstrate positive adaptation despite acute stressful
experiences, and individual differences in recovery from trauma (Masten, 1994; Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003). It is this first category—the study of individuals with outcomes more positive than what would be expected based on their risk factors—from which the specific study of academic resilience emerged.

Academic resilience theory explores “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (Morales, 2008a, p. 198). Also referred to in previous research as educationally resilient, students who are academically resilient demonstrate ‘exceptional’ educational performance by achieving beyond normative averages. These students are those who succeed at high levels irrespective of the barriers that often hinder similar students on the path toward educational attainment. For FGL students, this is exemplified by individuals who access higher education, demonstrate success throughout, and persist to graduation despite the achievement gap that is prevalent for similar students in studies of broad educational patterns. Because these groups of students are less likely to achieve academic accomplishments than their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Reardon, 2011), the individual students who do break negative patterns demonstrate academic resilience.

In contrast to the concept of resiliency, which is often understood as a static personality trait (Masten, 1994), resilience describes context-specific processes and outcomes resulting from interactions between individuals’ characteristics and the social systems and environments in which they live (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013; Williams & Portman, 2014).
This focus on resilience as a dynamic process is an important theme within resilience research. Both internal and external systems influence resilience through ongoing interactions (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). For students, academic resilience is thus a result of the processes through which protective factors serving to support academic achievement mitigate the relationship between risk factors and educational outcomes.

**Risk factors.** Risk factors are characteristics or conditions that increase the probability of an undesirable outcome (Masten, 1994; Williams & Portman, 2014). Considered a statistical concept, risk applies to groups of people who are associated with high likelihood of experiencing a particular type of adversity (Masten, 1994). Individual outcomes of people within a risk group will vary, and not all individuals who identify as part of a particular group will experience the risk factors associated with that group, despite their potential for harm (Masten, 1994).

In the context of academic resilience, risk factors are social and environmental conditions that place students in danger of low achievement (Morales, 2008a). For example, students from low-income backgrounds often experience risk factors through attending primary and secondary schools with few resources, institutionalized low academic expectations, or unsupportive school climates (Williams & Portman, 2014). Similarly, marginalized college students may experience risk-related barriers such as discontinuity between background and college environments or values, lack of nurturing and family support, lower expectations from faculty, lack of role models from similar backgrounds or reflection of similar individuals within the curricula, cultural or racial isolation, or lack of
financial resources (Padilla et al., 1997). Personal qualities that make individuals more susceptible to the negative impact of risk factors are known as vulnerability areas (Masten, 1994). Sometimes these manifest as problematic in particular contexts, such as gender, class, or race and ethnicity (Morales, 2008a, 2014). They can also be personality attributes that enhance the negative impact of risk, such as an inability to manage stress, or lack of educational motivation (Kitano & Lewis, 2005).

**Protective factors.** Protective factors are personal or environmental resources that have the ability to increase positive outcomes through offsetting or mitigating the effects of risk (Masten, 1994; Morales, 2010; Williams & Portman, 2014). Serving to support individual success, the presence of protective factors buffers against or weakens the relationship between a risk factor and an outcome (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Kitano & Lewis, 2005).

Based on the foundational resilience theory work of Garmezy (1991), types of protective factors can be divided into three categories known as the “characteristic triad” (Morales, 2000): environmental, familial, and dispositional. Morales and Trotman (2010) describe environmental factors as those that stem from the communities within which students exist and are largely social in nature; familial factors as those derived from immediate or extended family members and their values, culture, relationships, and resources; and dispositional factors as personal attributes of academically resilient individuals. In an academic context, resilience researchers seek to understand factors that protect against potential adverse effects for students in at-risk groups and how they
contribute to academic success (Wayman, 2002). Dispositional protective factors associated with academic resilience include social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, sense of purpose, and high positive expectations (Perez et al., 2009). These are learned traits that students actively utilize internally to succeed academically, and which are associated with educational achievement (Wayman, 2002). Environmental and familial protective factors, contrastingly, are external resources that facilitate student success through externally counteracting the impact of negative influences. The primary source of these types of protective factors is the social support of family, educators, and peers throughout an individual’s educational path (Perez et al., 2009; Wayman, 2002) and the social capital resources they provide (Morales & Trotman, 2010). Some protective factors, whether dispositional, familial, or environmental, manifest through compensatory strategies, or “protective factors in action, specific actions that alleviate or even defeat risk factors and vulnerability areas” (Morales, 2014, p. 94).

**Identifying protective factors.** Previous academic resilience research focuses primarily on identifying protective factors that emerge throughout students’ educational paths to mitigate risk factors and promote achievement. Evident from K-12 experiences, students articulate several themes as important protectors of academic success despite risk: shared responsibility for educational outcomes, being a part of the solution, parental involvement by any means, natural support systems, school counselors as change agents, and community collaboration to raise a scholar (Williams & Portman, 2014). Researchers have also found academic support from teachers and parents (Plunkett et al., 2008) and high parental
educational aspirations (Schoon et al., 2004) to be salient predictors of academic satisfaction and achievement. Other studies expand this research into higher education, exploring the academic resilience demonstrated by various populations of college students from groups with risk factors affecting their likelihood of higher educational achievement. Wilson-Sadberry et al. (1991), for example, explored various factors impacting Black male students’ college attainment, suggesting that socioeconomic status, family and peer influences, educational preparation, and postsecondary plans positively influenced students’ college achievement. Campa (2013) suggested that culture, close ties to family members, and an understanding that struggles and setbacks can be a pathway to educational success characterized the journey of five Mexican American community college students. Through a focus on coping-strategies, Phinney and Haas (2003) identified active seeking of social support and a strong sense of self-efficacy as the primary qualities that served to facilitate academic success for first-generation, ethnic minority first-year students. Scholars have also examined programmatic initiatives aimed at these groups of students with an academic resilience lens, such as in the work of Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007), in which first-generation college freshmen demonstrated significant increases in academic achievement after participating in a summer academic institute aimed at providing social and transitional support to students with few college-related resources.

Few studies have examined academic resilience across the K-12 and higher education spectrum. Cabrera and Padilla (2004) worked intensively with two students of Mexican heritage from impoverished backgrounds to explore the home, school, peer, and community
contexts that supported high academic achievement throughout their precollege experiences and continuing through graduation from Stanford University. These researchers concluded that maternal support and intrinsic motivation played critical roles in these students’ demonstrated resilience, and were supplemented by acquisition of knowledge about the college environment from extrafamilial sources. Similarly, in an extremely in-depth academic resilience study, Morales and Trotman (2010) identified protective factors involved in the resilience processes of 50 low-income urban students of color that students reported as being critical to their success. These included caring school personnel, a sense of obligation to one’s race or ethnicity, strong future orientation, a strong personal work ethic, persistence, high self-esteem, internal locus of control, attendance at out of zone schools, high parental expectations supported by words and actions, and mother modeling strong work ethic. These two sets of findings exemplify the value of considering students’ complete educational paths. Similar to aforementioned studies, they focus on identifying protective factors, but also begin to work towards understanding how protective factors may look different over time and play a shifting role in academic resilience processes.

There is evidence that many protective factors support resilient students throughout K-12 and higher education to lessen the effects of risk factors on educational achievement. The majority of academic resilience research, however, stops at cataloging protective factors—ascertaining that academically resilient students do indeed have access to them—rather than deeply exploring the processes through which they actively mitigate risk, or the associated compensatory strategies through which they impact academic achievement.
Furthermore, little previous research explores the ways protective factors may shift or adjust as students’ needs change. These studies fail to acknowledge the likelihood that the academic resilience process itself may adapt and adjust as students make progress through their educational paths.

**The Resilience Cycle.** Morales and Trotman (2004, 2010) developed the existing theoretical framework that takes this process-based approach, describing a model of academic resilience in which they outline the “Resilience Cycle.” This model, illustrated in Figure 1, was developed from a study of Dominican American college students at a highly selective private institution, and focuses on providing an in-depth understanding of how protective factors produce resilience, rather than on identification of the factors themselves.

*Figure 1. The Resilience Cycle (Morales & Trotman, 2010, p. 81).*
As framed by these authors, the Resilience Cycle consists of five steps, or “spokes”:

1. The student realistically and effectively identifies/recognizes her or his major risk factors.
2. The student is able to manifest and/or seek out protective factors that have the potential to offset or mitigate the potentially negative effects of the perceived risk factors.
3. The protective factors work in concert to propel the student toward high academic achievement.
4. The student is able to recognize the value of the protective factors and continues to refine and implement them while building self-efficacy.
5. The consistent and continuous refinement and implementation of protective factors, along with the evolving vision of the student’s desired destination, sustain the student’s academic achievement as new academic challenges present themselves and lead to enduring motivation. (2004, p. 61; 2010, pp. 17-19)

Additionally, these steps center on students’ cultivation of “closely related self-management abilities including skillful and effective management of emotions amid stressful times, adeptness in social environments, impulse control and effective decision making under duress” (2010, p. 19). This component amounts to a description of how the authors conceptualize emotional intelligence, and they argue that its development is at the core of how students are able to effectively utilize the protective factors they encounter.
Through these steps, the Resilience Cycle model takes into consideration the important reality that academic resilience requires continuous achievement as students progress through increasingly rigorous academic environments (Morales & Trotman, 2004). The model’s emphasis on reflection, active adjustment, and change further allows for students’ to define their own experiences of resilience, and exemplifies ways in which students’ personal autonomy is involved in the relationship between academic resilience and positive educational outcomes. It highlights that protective factors have interactions with one another in addition to their relationships with risk factors, which allows for a thorough understanding of how each factor works within the context of a student’s complex life to facilitate success (Morales, 2000). It also considers the idiosyncratic nature of resilience, allowing for application to a variety of students, and accounts for the enduring nature of resilience by emphasizing the progression of students through educational experiences (Morales & Trotman, 2010).

However, Morales and Trotman’s (2004, 2010) Resilience Cycle is a very specific way to look at students’ roles in their own academic resilience. It was developed from the study of a unique population at a particular type of institution, and has not been applied broadly to many other groups, though it is structured in such a way as to potentially work with different student populations. Furthermore, the components of the Resilience Cycle emphasize students’ active involvement in cultivating protective resources, which is a valuable student-centered approach, but may be a narrow piece of a larger academic resilience process. Particularly for studies of college students, a theoretical perspective with
this underlying theme of agency through emotional intelligence can be empowering. Yet such a strong focus on students’ active control of the academic resilience process may overlook critical external protective factors that work in conjunction with students themselves to facilitate success. Students may not always recognize protective factors in order to “manifest and/or seek out” what resources may benefit them greatly. One of the strengths of the academic resilience concept is the recognition that protective resources may stem from many sources, not all within students’ control. In particular, the potentially strong influence from networks of social support in the form of other individuals actively working to provide resources to students as they pursue academic achievement does not necessarily fit into this model. Further exploration of the components of academic resilience and changes in resilience processes across different groups of students’ educational paths may inform strengthening or modification of the Resilience Cycle framework.

**Application of Theoretical Lens**

Within the context of this study, I use a theoretical lens structured by academic resilience theory as applied to the educational paths and first-year success of first-generation, low-income students. From this perspective I explore FGL students’ stories of the processes that led to their educational success, beginning with their precollege experiences and continuing through their transition into higher education and a successful first year of college. The goal of this perspective is to illuminate the ways in which protective factors emerge, interact, and change throughout students’ stories of educational paths. Rather than focusing on the failures of students who demonstrate poor educational outcomes, studying
successful FGL students emphasizes the importance of understanding how students facing risk factors cultivate success. This exploration of academic resilience across K-12 and into higher education also fills a gap in the literature related to changes in the processes contributing to success throughout students’ educational paths. Further, in contrast to using theory in a way that discounts students’ backgrounds and highlights their perceived inadequacies, in the manner of previous deficit-focused research, this strengths-based perspective informs future research, practice, and policy in a way that accentuates the value of FGL students’ unique experiences and has implications for supporting their paths to college persistence.

**Chapter Summary**

First-generation, low-income students have unique experiences throughout their educational paths, but are often portrayed by previous research as deficient of resources and skills necessary to achieve educational success. Further, their experiences in the first year of college are important markers of educational success, and can be connected to precollege experiences and college persistence. Similarly, the social context of education has significant influences on students’ education, and may be particularly relevant to the educational success of FGL students. Yet little research considers how these factors interact in different ways across students’ educational paths to contribute to student success. Academic resilience theory provides a framework through which to consider the educational success of students with risk factors, such as FGL students, as well as the processes through which factors such as networks of social support impact students’ educational paths. This study considers all of
these components and aims to provide a necessary intersection between these existing bodies of research. The next chapter, chapter three, outlines the specific research design and methodology I used to conduct this study.
CHAPTER THREE: STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study explored the educational experiences of academically resilient first-generation, low-income (FGL) students who had success in the first year of college. The aim was for participants to share stories of lived experiences throughout their educational paths that contributed to academic success. Through the lens of academic resilience, the goal was to focus analysis on understanding the processes through which protective factors interacted to impact students’ educational journeys and the role that networks of social support played in those processes. Because this study centers upon the lived experiences that were meaningful to individual students in the course of achieving success throughout their educational paths, I chose to use a narrative qualitative research design.

This chapter begins with a description of this study’s underlying research paradigm through a discussion of the alignment of qualitative research and narrative inquiry with the research purpose. This is followed by a detailed outline of the study’s research methods, including data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a discussion of potential limitations and a chapter summary.

Research Paradigm

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research can illuminate the value of individuals, context specific experiences, and conditional circumstances of life (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Qualitative studies aim to develop understanding, rather than predict outcomes, and are formed around the assumption that interpretation and discovery of meaning are inseparable from the human
experience (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). They encourage this development of understanding of unique lived worlds through direct, personal accounts of meaning from individual cases (Spector-Mersel, 2010). As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) succinctly summarize, all qualitative research designs “seek to unearth and understand meaning. Moreover, they are after social meaning from the perspectives of research participants who are enmeshed in their context” (p. 12). Reflecting this, qualitative approaches allow participants’ understandings of reality, meaning making, beliefs and assumptions, perceptions, interactions, emotions, and relationships to emerge as the key elements of research (Schwartz, Donovan, & Guido-DiBrito, 2009).

This study’s research design is qualitative in nature in order to allow for the unique lived experiences of academically resilient FGL students to be the focus of analysis. As Morales (2008a) argues, “Comprehending academic resilience process requires complex, profound, and comprehensive understandings” (p. 201). This is made possible through the depth of understanding qualitative research provides, which studies focused on identifying general patterns of correlation, cause, and effect do not often capture (Williams & Portman, 2014). Qualitative research can also bring attention to experiences that have previously been ignored, which is well suited for studies of marginalized populations (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996). Because this study focuses on the educational paths of individuals who defy the odds, a qualitative approach provides a valuable insight into the often-overlooked phenomenon of academic resilience among FGL students.
Qualitative approaches are especially useful when the focus of study is a process and its internal dynamics, rather than products or outcomes alone (Krathwohl, 2009). This study’s exploration of the internal dynamics of resilience that facilitated college success for FGL students allows for consideration of unique strengths and resources that may not be evident through other methods. Rather than highlighting only the most common patterns of the complex, nuanced experience that is an educational path, a qualitative approach allows this study to elicit a deep understanding of educational stories as expressed by participants in their own words.

**Narrative Inquiry**

In seeking to explore successful FGL students’ processes of academic resilience, one of the best ways to understand participants’ experiences is to share their stories. Correspondingly, the particular qualitative approach I chose is narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry as a genre of qualitative research focuses on the documentation and analysis of lived and told stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Josselson, 2013; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Stories are verbal actions, or acts of telling, by individuals who are both constrained and enabled by social context (Smith & Sparks, 2009). The process of storytelling is an active means of conveying, shaping, and constructing experience and reality (Chase, 2005). As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) explain:

> Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they
interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (p. 477)

Narratives are storied embodiments of experience through which individuals develop understanding of their lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Using narratives as the focus of study, narrative inquiry emphasizes the many ways in which stories have a central place in the development of individual identity, connection with others, culture, and behavior (Spector-Mersel, 2010). It reflects an underlying worldview drawn from constructivist and poststructuralist paradigms that frame social reality as complex and interpretive, but further specifies stories as the means through which interpretation and understanding of reality occur (Spector-Mersel, 2010).

In narrative research, participants and researchers co-construct stories into narratives. As such, “narrative inquiry requires attention to narrative conceptualizations as phenomenon and method, and the interplay of the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place in the inquiry process” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007, p. 33). Through an interactive process between participant and researcher, development of narrative serves to explain an individual’s point of view about life experiences and history, both descriptively and through expression of emotions, thoughts, and interpretations (Chase, 2005; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). This process involves telling and retelling; that is, “the individual act of storytelling as well as how researchers select, shape, and present stories to stimulate engagement with a broader audience” (Ayers & Miller, 1997, as cited by Holley & Colyar,
Alternatively referred to as restorying, retelling encompasses the structuring of participants’ stories into frameworks that emphasize key elements, place them in sequence, and provide links between ideas (Creswell, 2007). Resulting narratives are temporal in nature, involve relationships between past, present, and future in descriptions of life experiences, and emphasize the importance of place and social contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin et al., 2007).

I chose narrative inquiry for this study largely because of the temporal nature of studying educational paths and academic resilience. The temporality of narrative fits this study’s emphasis on connections between K-12 and higher education, as it reflects the importance of understanding “life as it is experienced on a continuum” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19), and acknowledges the relevance of chronology in education. Narrative inquiry also facilitates the exploration of changes throughout students’ experiences of academic resilience processes, an important component to consider in academic resilience research. This research design helped me to co-construct participants’ stories of educational paths in a way that includes rich depth, and which examines particular ways in which these students overcame barriers to successful educational achievement. One benefit to narrative inquiry is its ability to capture important life events in fine detail, but simultaneously to holistically understand life stories (Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this way, I explored the details of participants’ individual experiences of academic resilience while also contributing to a broader understanding of the academic resilience process.
Research Methods

Setting

This study took place at a large, public, research university in the southeast United States, known by the pseudonym “Large Public University (LPU).” Data retrieved from LPU’s website indicate fall 2014 enrollment included 33,989 students, with 24,473 undergraduates. Bachelor’s degree graduation rates reported in this data suggest 76% of undergraduates at LPU complete degrees within six years of initial enrollment. LPU’s Undergraduate Admissions office website also provides data illustrating characteristics of each first-year class; descriptions of the class of 2014 are illustrated in Table A1 because the majority of participants in this study are members of this graduating class. Of note, 17.7% of students in this class were considered first-generation students. Average net price for full-time, in-state, beginning students was $13,579 for the 2013-2014 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

For the purposes of this study, it is important to understand the resources available for FGL students at LPU. Much like at other public universities, FGL students at LPU often receive federal work-study benefits, which help students acquire part-time employment, and/or receive federal Pell Grants, which are specifically available for students demonstrating financial need. LPU also provides two primary programs to facilitate support for FGL students: a TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) office and a financial aid program tailored to low-income students that guarantees to meet 100% of recipients’ demonstrated financial need. The mission of TRIO SSS, as described on it’s website, is “to encourage and
enhance educational opportunities for undergraduate students by providing academic and personal support to enhance academic skills, increase retention and graduation rates, and as appropriate, facilitate entrance into graduate and professional programs.” In order to participate in TRIO SSS programs, students must meet low-income requirements as determined by federal guidelines, be a first-generation college student, or be an individual with disabilities. LPU’s TRIO SSS website indicates the program serves 260 qualified students annually. The financial aid program provides services to in-state students with demonstrated financial need. According to the program’s website, students who qualify for this resource are guaranteed to have 100% of their financial need met, and are required to participate in various support programs designed to teach students financial skills, time management, academic strategies, and provide connections with supportive peers and staff. Both of these programs are potential resources for FGL students enrolled at LPU and are relevant in participants’ experiences of first-year success.

Sample Selection

There is no formal guideline for determining appropriate sample size in narrative research. However, as Patton (2002) suggests regarding all qualitative approaches, “in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information rich” (p. 244). Sample size for qualitative research should be determined by the purpose of the inquiry, the goals of the research, and what is logistically possible in terms of a researcher’s resources (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Patton, 2002). For this study, I sought FGL student participants who recently demonstrated success in the first year of college. The
number of students who met these characteristics forms a limited size population, one that can be difficult to access due to the sensitive nature of family and financial background. My final sample size was 8 participants, including 2 first-year students at the end of their spring semester who had already chosen to continue to their second year of enrollment at LPU and 6 current second-year students.

**Inclusion criteria.** Because this study explores the academic resilience experiences of FGL students who demonstrate first-year success, it was important to define the qualities participants needed to demonstrate in order to be included in the sample group.

**FGL status.** The United States government provides federal funding for outreach and student service programs, such as those offered through LPU’s TRIO SSS office, designed to provide support to postsecondary students from low-income backgrounds and those who are first-generation college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These programs use federally mandated criteria for qualification into their programs, based on the current-year low-income levels illustrated in Table A2. Because students’ family background information is private, willingness to disclose first-generation, low-income status was a prerequisite for participation in this study. Students in this sample are those who provided self-reports of first-generation, low-income status and information about income-based support programs at LPU for which they qualify, including TRIO SSS programs, financial grants for low-income students, and work-study programs.

**First-year success.** Demonstration of persistent enrollment, or intent-to-persist, from the first to second year, and participant-reported “good” grade point average (GPA) qualified
students as academically successful. Because the academic grading policy of LPU identifies a GPA of 3.0 as “good,” participants needed to report a GPA at or above this level. In order to gauge multifaceted first-year success, interested students answered questions regarding whether they considered their personal and social experiences during their first year successful. I collected specific information about a series of factors of personal and social first-year success as identified through the literature review using the pre-participation questionnaire (Appendix B). Responses of ‘Agree’ to a majority of these items indicated students’ perception of social and/or personal success in addition to academic success.

**Number of completed semesters.** All participants had completed, or almost completed, two full semesters of study at LPU. I included only those who had completed the majority of their first-year experience and chose to continue studying at LPU, indicating first-year success and persistence into their second year. First-year success as an indicator of persistence is an important component of this study, thus continued enrollment, or intent to continue, from the first to second year of college was a necessary element of the persistence process for participants to demonstrate.

Because recency is also important for the narrative reflection component of this study, particularly regarding precollege experiences, no participants had completed more than 3 full college semesters.

**Sampling Strategy**

In order to collect information-rich stories, I used purposeful sampling methods to select participants from among those students who demonstrated an interest in this study. The
aim of purposeful sampling is to select cases from which a researcher can learn as much as possible about issues central to the purpose of the research (Patton, 2002). Using the assistance of informal gatekeepers, I recruited participants through several pathways. Gatekeepers are individuals who have established relationships with potential members of the sample group a researcher seeks (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). They can be formal, for circumstances in which official permission to access a population is required, or they can be informal, in situations where their connections to potential participants shapes the researcher’s level of access (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this case, university professionals who work with FGL students served as informal gatekeepers who could facilitate contact between myself as the researcher and students who were interested in participating in my study. In particular, I requested dissemination of information about my study from staff of the TRIO SSS office, which serves FGL students through federally funded TRIO programs at LPU. The majority of participants in this study contacted me as a result of receiving information about my study disseminated via email from staff of the TRIO SSS office. In order to increase the appeal of this study for students, I offered compensation for participation. I advertised during participant recruitment efforts that students who completed a demographic questionnaire and the first interview would be given a preliminary gift card, and those who completed the second interview, journal reflection, and member checks would be given a second gift card.

In addition, I designed a flier that was displayed in public posting locations throughout campus with the goal of catching the attention of individuals who may not be
reached through the connections of gatekeepers. Fliers included information about the criteria for participation, compensation for participation, and researcher contact information. Each of these methods directed interested students to email me indicating interest to participate so that I could explain the purposes of the study in more depth and discuss the details of participation. I used a short electronic pre-participation questionnaire (Appendix B) at that time to gather basic demographic information that helped determine variation within my sample group and measured the inclusion criteria outlined above. After interested students demonstrated a fit for the study based on the questionnaire, I provided them with an electronic copy of the informed consent to review (Appendix C). At the beginning of the first interview meeting I asked each participant to sign two printed copies that I also signed, one for my records and one for the participant.

Data Collection

The narrative inquiry in this study focused on meanings derived from participants’ storytelling. In most similar narrative research, the primary methodology is the interview (Mishler, 1986; Josselson, 2013; Riessman, 2008). As such, this study’s primary source of data was participants’ stories of educational paths, academic resilience, and success collected from in-depth interviews and supplemented with written journal reflections. To help clarify how my processes of data collection and analysis occurred, I have illustrated them in Figure 2.
**Figure 2.** Illustrated processes of data collection and data analysis.

**Interviews.** In order to collect narrative data via interview format, I employed a life story narrative method (Atkinson, 1998; Riessman, 2008). I used a semi-structured interview protocol that offered some guidance to the interview conversation, but also provided openness to allow participants the freedom to speak about what was important to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The goal in narrative interviewing is to collect detailed stories, rather than short responses or statements (Riessman, 2008), which was guided by a semi-structured format that included both interview questions and probes to solicit rich, detailed information. Because narrative inquiry requires co-construction of participants’ narratives, I also approached the interview like a conversation by treating the discussion as informal and loose, rather than a strict question-and-answer interaction (Atkinson, 1998; Kvale, 1996). As
recommended by Riessman (2008), I designed my interview questions and prompts to allow respondents to construct answers in ways they found meaningful, and I allowed the participants’ stories to dictate the direction of the conversation as much as possible. In order to cover the depth of information necessary for a thorough narrative inquiry, I conducted two interviews with each participant.

The initial interview focused on participants’ educational histories, with an emphasis on their experiences of exploration, preparation, and access to college, and their first-year success. The interview protocol I used to guide the first interview can be seen in Appendix D. The purpose of this interview was to establish the context of participants’ educational paths through discussion of their educational life stories. In life stories, “people telling their own stories reveal more about their own inner lives than any other approach could” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 24). I asked questions related to students’ early educational experiences, original development of interest in college, their personal timelines of educational achievements and experiences in preparation for college, how they made decisions about where and why to attend college, and elements of their social environments that may have influenced them throughout. We also explored participants’ demographic, cultural, and family backgrounds during this interview, as well as relationships they had with family, educators, and peers in educational contexts.

The second interview occurred approximately two weeks later for each participant, and focused on a detailed exploration of participants’ educational narratives, academic resilience, and first-year success. The protocol I used to guide this interview can be seen in
Appendix E. Following the focus on educational life stories in the first interview, I used the time between interviews to construct an extended educational narrative for each participant. These extended narratives were drawn entirely from participants’ first interview data. A detailed outline of the process that led to narrative construction is included in the data analysis section below. This process involved a piecing together of participants’ educational stories with consideration of chronology, context, and connections across experiences. I presented these narratives to participants prior to the second interview at which time they were able to adjust how the narratives were constructed through feedback, clarification, and correction. The rest of the second interview emphasized additional discussion of influences on participants’ educational success, how these changed over time, processes through which academic resilience impacted the course of their educational stories, and specific details of their first-year experiences. It also provided an opportunity to return to points raised in the first interview that warranted further discussion or examination (Squire, 2008).

The length of interviews depended upon the flow of the conversation and rapport developed between participant and researcher; however, I allocated 90 minutes for each interview in accordance with patterns of previous qualitative interview research design (Morales, 2008a; Seidman, 2006). Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and sent to a third-party transcription service, Rev.com, for prompt transcription. I carefully reviewed transcribed data and made edits to each transcript to maintain the integrity of the interview conversations. After I had a reviewed draft of each interview transcript, I asked participants to read their transcribed interviews, provide feedback, and make adjustments as
necessary. I also recorded field notes immediately after interviews to document aspects of the interview that may not have been captured in audio data, as well as my own reflections of the interview experience. These field notes served as another source of data.

**Journal reflection.** Because written materials can also be an important element of narrative inquiry (Squire, 2008), I asked each participant to provide a written journal reflection prior to the second interview meeting. Participants responded to a series of writing prompts centered on aspects of their stories that most saliently contributed to their academic resilience, the role that networks of social support played in their educational paths, and how these processes impacted their achievement (Appendix F). I asked participants to complete their journal reflections between the first and second interview, and during the second interview they had the opportunity to share their reflections. These journal reflections further developed participants’ educational narratives and supplemented data gathered through interview format.

**Data Analysis**

Unlike in other approaches to qualitative research, there is no strict, prescriptive, or universal method for conducting data analysis in narrative inquiry (Floersch, Longhofer, Krank, & Townsend, 2010; Josselson, 2011; Riessman, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). However, two of the most common and distinctive components of narrative analysis involve exploring details within each individual case narrative prior to developing themes across individuals (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2012), and preserving extended accounts as analytical units, rather than fragmenting stories into brief coding segments (Riessman, 2012; Saldaña, 2013).
Analysis of narrative data seeks both to discover themes that unify a story, and to highlight unique voices that provide specific meaning to the phenomena of interest (Josselson, 2011). From this perspective, narrative scholars attempt to retell participants’ stories in complete forms, theorizing from within cases in addition to identifying common thematic elements across cases (Riessman, 2012).

In this study, my first analytical task was to retell each participant’s educational narrative holistically and individually. Immediately after the first interview, I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to facilitate data analysis of transcripts. Using thematic narrative analysis, as described by Riessman (2012), I examined the content each participant’s story communicated and restructured it based on how the participant’s educational path unfolded and progressed across time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This resulted in the composition of an extended narrative educational story for each participant, which was essentially an in-depth story of their educational history.

Open coding led my initial phase of data analysis, which allowed me to “reflect deeply on the contents and nuances of [my] data and to begin taking ownership of them” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100). Honoring the foundation of narrative inquiry during this process, my open coding involved categorizing segments, complete thoughts, and whole stories within the data rather than single words or phrases. This practice helped maintain the integrity of the narrative form and identify codes that communicated components of participants’ stories. My second round of coding in this phase was based on themes that emerged within each narrative. This involved grouping initial codes into categories that, through additional coding
and analysis, eventually evolved into themes. This sequence of open coding and thematic coding provided an opportunity to outline the story, plot, characters, and key elements of participants’ educational narratives, constructs that served to structure the organization of narrative development (Colyar & Holley, 2010; Holley & Colyar, 2009). These constructs also allowed me to highlight how participants’ experiences changed throughout their stories, acknowledging the temporality of the narratives (Colyar & Holley, 2010; Holley & Colyar, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

These first two rounds of coding occurred in two phases: once after completion of each participant’s first interview, and again after I collected journal reflections and second interview data. At the completion of these rounds of coding with each participant’s first interview, the extended narratives with participants so that during our second interview we could thoroughly discuss the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and voice of the narrative. Through this process, participants provided corrections, additions, and confirmation of the appropriate representation of their experiences. After this collaboration with participants I adjusted the codes and themes from the first two cycles of coding to incorporate participants’ feedback. The second phase of open coding and thematic coding occurred after the second interview, once I had finished collecting data for each participant with the addition of journal reflection and second interview data.

After I analyzed each narrative individually, in a third phase of coding I used both thematic coding and structural coding driven by the theoretical lens to provide multiple ways of accessing meaning across all narratives. This version of thematic coding involved analysis
of the code categories and themes I developed within individual narratives at a more global, cross-case level. Finally, I also used theory-driven structural coding to group individual and cross-case themes according to components of academic resilience. I used this structure to identify risk and protective factors, compensatory strategies, and active processes of interaction between factors that were represented within the data.

Throughout my data analysis processes, the primary focus was participants’ voiced details of experience (Riessman, 2012). I linked pieces of participants’ told experiences to develop themes across the data and make connections with the study’s academic resilience framework (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). These coding strategies aligned well with the tenets of thematic narrative analysis (Saldaña, 2013), which emphasizes what is told through participants’ stories rather than how it is told, and results in a “three-dimensional rendering of the participant’s life, with emphasis on how participant transformation progresses through time” (p. 134). Through the multiple phases of coding I conducted, a detailed and thorough analysis process allowed for extensive meaning to emerge from within participants’ told experiences.

**Role of the Researcher**

In narrative inquiry, the role of the researcher is to find ways to develop meaning from and sense of order in participants’ stories, co-constructing narratives that become explanatory of the phenomena of study (Chase, 2005). Because the researcher actively participates in construction of narratives, it is critical for narrative researchers to identify, acknowledge, and explore the ways in which personal interpretations, contexts, and
experiences influence the presentation of participants’ stories, emphasizing how their work is influenced by their positionality (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Positionality includes the researcher’s perspective shaped by his or her multiple identities (Srivastava, 2006), the relationship between the researcher and participants, and the familiarity between the researcher and the topic of inquiry (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Decisions made at every point in the research design and activities are impacted by the researcher’s positionality through personal perspective, worldview, and values. In order to explore how my positionality impacted the course of this study, it was important for me to develop insight into my own educational experiences and reflect on the subjective context from which my research emerged.

My own educational path has thus far been successful, relatively unencumbered, and marked by high achievement. As a privileged, white, middle-class, continuing-generation student, I do not identify as a member of any demographic group associated with the educational risks discussed in the literature review, and my experiences reflect this lack of obstacle. I finished high school in the top ten percent of my class, graduated cum laude with a bachelor’s degree from a highly selective public university, and completed a master’s degree with recognition as an outstanding student. Educational achievement and attainment have come much easier to me than they do to many students, and my privileged identity is partly to thank for that. This positions me as an outsider to the research problem I explored, and with that comes the recognition that I have not lived the same experiences as the students who chose to participate in my study. In contrast to insider research, which demonstrates
researchers’ intimate knowledge of participants or research topics, scholars who are not personally familiar with the individuals or phenomena of study conduct outsider research (Hellawell, 2006). Outsider positionality could have potentially created a barrier to full disclosure or complete stories in my research, or influenced the ways in which I co-constructed participants’ narratives. In research design, data collection, and analysis it was important for me to include significant levels of strong objectivity and reflexivity, which are intended to encourage a researcher to “consider how she reproduces her own privilege through the analyses she produces” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 205).

To begin this process, I reflected on how I came to study this particular research topic, so far removed from my own educational experience. After obtaining my master’s degree, I began my education career working as a professional school counselor in a rural elementary school. In this position, I worked with students and families in a supportive role, providing counseling services, referrals to community support resources, and behavioral and academic management. The student body of this school was diverse, with roughly one third each Latino, Black, and White students, and was characterized by high poverty, with over 80% of the student body coming from low-income backgrounds. Much of my work with these students involved strengths-based school counseling; or, advocating for positive development for all students and for school environments to support such development (UNC School of Education, 2015). This often involved working with students to build on personal strengths and develop new adaptive skills in culturally relevant ways. Through this work, I was also responsible for the school’s college and career exploration opportunities, creating
curricula to foster academic motivation and positive goal setting. The combination of this strengths-based work, a focus on motivation and goal setting, and working with students from many backgrounds led me to develop an interest in my students’ long-term educational success. Particularly because many of my students already believed that their families’ backgrounds limited their future options, I think the experience of seeing elementary school students feel the weight of their perceived achievement barriers contributed to my desire to study how students from marginalized groups can cultivate success in the face of risk factors.

Subsequently, as I began my doctoral journey I simultaneously began to work in student affairs at an elite private university with an increasingly diverse student population. I saw students with backgrounds full of possible risk factors excelling academically, and was again drawn towards understanding the processes through which they overcame what research suggested would likely be barriers to their success. In this context, my coursework led me to begin exploring literature regarding college persistence, and my professional role led me to consider how to challenge the prevalence of a deficit perspective regarding students from marginalized backgrounds.

These professional experiences are largely how I came to pursue inquiry into the research problem I identified for this study. I recognize that I am exploring a phenomenon through perspectives from which I have no personal experience. My focus is on a group of students with whom I have worked in different contexts and for whom I have the utmost respect, yet I remain an outsider to their experiences and cannot ignore my positionality in exploring their lives. An important part of my research process included identifying the role
of my privilege and positionality in the co-construction of participants’ stories. Through reflection and open dialogue about representation of their stories with participants, their educational narratives were constructed to reflect their perspectives, their voices, and their own experiences. Through designing the study with this in mind, incorporating multiple levels of trustworthiness, and maintaining high ethical standards for research, I hope I have produced a study in which the influence of my outsider position is minimized, and a high-quality, accurate representation of participants’ lived experiences is provided.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative studies maintain research quality through the use of methods to increase trustworthiness (Jones et al., 2014). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four primary components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In addition, efforts to ensure ethical practices further enhance research quality. The following sections will outline the methods I used in this study to maximize the quality of my research.

**Credibility.** A study reflecting credibility elucidates confidence that findings and interpretations accurately represent the data (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). In the case of this study, credibility would exist if participants’ co-constructed narratives and the themes I drew from them as the researcher accurately reflect students’ experiences. Webster and Mertova (2007) write, “the trustworthiness of the narrative research lies in the confirmation by the participants of their reported stories of experience” (p. 99). As such, I asked participants to conduct member checks at two different points in the research process. Member checking involves taking data and interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and
asking for an evaluation of accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants had the opportunity to edit the initial extended narratives I constructed based on the first interview and provide feedback via discussion during the second interview. Each participant read the extended narrative ahead of the second interview to make notes about feedback and then we had a detailed conversation about corrections I needed to make, the comprehensiveness of the themes and details that were included, and the voice with which the narrative was written. At the conclusion of data collection, participants also reviewed their transcripts from each interview in order to provide clarification or suggested changes to the conversations we had. I offered the opportunity during each review for discussions regarding their data or feedback, treating these steps as opportunities for participants to specify how they wanted their stories to be treated (Josselson, 2007). These efforts contributed to the co-constructed nature of participants’ narratives (Schwartz et al., 2009) and helped to minimize the impact of my subjectivity in retelling their stories.

Transferability. Generalization of findings is not the goal of narrative inquiry. Instead, however, transferability of the research should be possible to those who want to apply the findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Researchers facilitate this process by providing thick description of the context of the study, findings, and interpretations so that readers can determine whether the findings apply (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Characteristics of thick descriptions should include “detailed, expressive, and explicit explanations of the phenomenon under study” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 36). In this study, transferability is enhanced through detailed overviews of the participants
and their educational narratives, a clear depiction of the university participants attend, and extensive description and discussion of findings exemplified with participant’s own voices through direct quotations.

**Dependability.** A research study with dependability is one that a reader can judge to be the outcome of a consistent and dependable process (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This includes explicitly outlining activities and processes undertaken at each stage of research (Jones et al., 2014), as well as journaling, memoing, developing a data collection chronology, and recording data analysis procedures clearly (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In order to increase dependability of this study, I explicitly outlined methods used to collect and analyze data. I included consistency within the design of the study by engaging with each participant in the same sequence of interactions and collecting each participant’s story with the use of the same interview guide and journal reflection prompts. Throughout data collection, I also developed an audit trail including a research log containing field notes, reflections, and documentation of decisions made that impacted the course of the research.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability is the extent to which findings and interpretations result from a reliable process of inquiry and data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). As Mertens (2010) describes, “confirmability means that the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher’s imagination. Qualitative data can be tracked to their source, and the logic that is used to interpret the data should be made explicit” (p. 260). I made efforts to achieve confirmability in this study through maintaining detailed analytical memos outlining data analysis procedures, through consultation with my faculty advisor during the
development of the structure and sequence of data collection and analysis, and through engaging with a committee of faculty scholars to provide a detailed review of my processes, analyses, and interpretations. In addition, an important component of confirmability is for researchers to be open and upfront about their assumptions, beliefs, and biases through reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Reflexivity is an important component of my analytical memos and has been a source of constant self-scrutiny as I moved through the research process (Hellawell, 2006). A summary of my self-scrutiny regarding my worldview, privileges, and positionality is illustrated previously in this chapter.

**Ethical considerations.** There were important ethical factors to consider in the design and implementation of this study. It is imperative to respect participants’ stories, institutions, and experiences throughout the course of the research process, particularly within narrative inquiry where relational ethics need special consideration (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). For this study, I developed rapport with participants from the beginning through open disclosure of all activities that would be involved in the course of the research project. After extensive discussion of the research activities involved, I asked participants to sign an informed consent document that outlined the complete expectations for participation and confidentiality measures, and which indicated their ability to withdraw from participation at any time. Confidentiality measures included: keeping identifying information for participants in a file separate from any written or digital data; eliminating references that would allow for the identification of participants from all final reports; storing data exclusively in my home office within password-protected files on my personal computer and
a personal external hard drive; password protecting all electronic communication between myself and participants; and using private file exchange folders to conduct member checks (explicit details of these methods are outlined in the Informed Consent Form for Research, Appendix B). Further, I obtained approval for this research from North Carolina State University’s Institutional Review Board before conducting any research activities.

**Limitations**

As with all research, there are limitations to the scope of this study. In choosing to frame this research through the lens of academic resilience, I limited the exploration to participants who demonstrated educational success in the first year of college. As previously noted, this is not necessarily the most common experience of FGL students. This provides a unique opportunity to learn from the strengths of students, rather than focus on their deficits, but narrowed the scope of the study to the particular educational experiences of successful individuals.

In addition, the sample of participants is limited to a small group of students with a variety of demographic characteristics that does not necessarily represent the balance of those characteristics among the general FGL student population (details of these characteristics appear in chapter four). For example, the sample of participants included in this study were all traditionally-aged, full-time students, whereas many FGL students are non-traditionally aged students pursuing degrees part-time while working or raising families. The context of the study, situated within a large public university with a particular level of selectivity is also specific. The experiences of FGL students with different demographic characteristics or those
experiencing the first year of college in dissimilar postsecondary contexts may differ from those illustrated in this study. I am hopeful, however, that the findings and conclusions from this study highlight elements of these particular students’ experiences that can inform future research of broader scope and scale.

The narrative inquiry used to gather data in this study may be limited by the nature of reflection across time. Participants were asked to recall experiences across their educational paths, sometimes remembering back many years. Connecting students’ experiences through their educational stories is an important part of this study, but also brings with it challenges associated with telling stories from the past, such as difficulty recalling details or confusion about chronology. However, the purpose of narrative inquiry is not to create an objectively accurate reconstruction of an individual’s life events; rather, through this process individuals recount their subjective experiences of living, which naturally reflect the most significant and impactful aspects of their histories despite the passage of time.

Regarding data analysis, this study was limited because I was the only individual collecting, coding, and analyzing the data. It is possible that working with multiple reviewers would bring perspectives yielding different understandings of participants’ stories, and perhaps lead to different conclusions. I attempted to mediate this limitation by allowing participants to review data analysis at various points in the research process and by designing my study to incorporate numerous aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These efforts to build a trustworthy study were aimed at ensuring that my
work as an independent researcher accurately reflects participants’ experiences to the greatest extent possible.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a methodological overview of this study. It outlined the appropriateness of narrative qualitative inquiry for the topic of research and followed with a detailed explanation of research methods including sample selection, setting, data collection, data analysis, the role of the researcher, and trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter concluded by identifying potential limitations of this study based on research design. The following chapters—four, five, and six—will outline the findings, conclusions, and implications that emerged from conducting this study according to the methods described in this chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR: STORIES OF PARTICIPANTS’ EDUCATIONAL PATHS

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of academically resilient first-generation, low-income (FGL) students who demonstrate success in the first year of college. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the stories of first-generation, low-income students’ educational paths, including their experiences of college exploration, college preparation, access to college, and first-year success?

2. Academic resilience theory posits that protective factors are key elements in students’ experiences of resilience processes. What protective factors do academically resilient first-generation, low-income students experience, how do protective factors interact with each other and with risk factors, and how do these factors and processes change throughout students’ educational paths?

3. What role does social support play in students’ educational paths, and how do the nature, source, and relative importance of social support change throughout students’ educational paths?

This chapter presents an overview of each participant’s narrative educational story. Directly addressing the study’s first research question, these stories illustrate the holistic educational experiences of eight FGL students culminating with success in the first year of college. The chapter begins with a demographic description of participants, provides an overview of each participant’s educational narrative, and concludes with a chapter summary. Because the participant narratives presented in this chapter are overviews, I provide
additional details of each participant’s experiences in chapter five where I identify themes that provide connections across narratives.

**Demographic Description**

This study included eight participants who each self-identified as a FGL student and had experienced success during the first year of college at LPU. All students described themselves as coming from low-income family backgrounds and provided information about family income-based support programs at LPU for which they qualify. They each characterized their first year at LPU as successful, demonstrating a GPA above 3.0 and describing the year as a success along multiple dimensions. Participants chose pseudonyms for themselves and I refer to them by their chosen names throughout this study. I interviewed six of these students during the middle of their second year and two of these students during the last month of their first year. Table 1 displays details of participants’ demographic characteristics, including their age, gender, race/ethnicity, first-year GPA, parents’ education, and family income-based support programs at LPU for which they qualified. It is important to note that race/ethnicity categorizations are represented exactly as participants self-described in their pre-participation questionnaires.

In addition to being successful FGL students, all eight participants were in-state students at LPU and each of them spent the majority of their K-12 experience attending public schools within the same state. Other similarities in their experiences are expressed through the participant narrative overviews and discussed within the emergent themes section of chapter five.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Self-described Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>First-Year GPA</th>
<th>Mother's Education</th>
<th>Father's Education</th>
<th>Family Income-based support programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Mexican</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>Some Middle School</td>
<td>Pell Grant/ TRIO/ Work Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Some college (B.A. 2015)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Pell Grant/ TRIO/ Work Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3.6</td>
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<td>High School</td>
<td>Pell Grant/ TRIO/ Work Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>TRIO/ Work Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Pell Grant/ TRIO</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.0</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Some High School</td>
<td>Some Middle School</td>
<td>Pell Grant/ TRIO/ Work Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participant Narrative Overviews

The following section provides an overview of each participant’s educational story. The narrative overviews presented here illustrate key elements of each participant’s family background and educational path, including early education, college exploration and access, and first-year experiences. A general illustration of the main components of participants’ educational paths is presented in Figure 3. Drawn from the extended narratives I co-constructed with each participant, these stories highlight participants’ experiences progressing through their education while managing challenges, gaining support, and navigating their paths to a successful first year of college.

Figure 3. A general illustration of the main components of participants’ educational paths.

**Agustín**

Reflective and open-minded, Agustín is as intentional and precise with his words as he is with his actions. His proactive nature leads him to carefully plan each new step in his
life whenever possible. He has a strong sense of autonomy, which has propelled him towards academic success throughout his life.

Family background. Both of Agustín’s parents came to the United States from Mexico as teenagers, with their elementary-aged schooling barely completed. His father has worked as an equipment operator for the same construction company for Agustín’s whole life, except for one year of unemployment during the recession of 2008. His mother worked in a sewing factory while Agustín was young, but currently works in his brother’s elementary school cafeteria. Agustín is the oldest of three siblings; he has a sister in high school and a brother who is six years old. Growing up in his house was not always easy; his father had a history of alcoholism, which created many negative experiences for Agustín and his siblings, and pushed Agustín towards self-reliance at a very young age. As he describes, “I believe that led to depending more so on myself … depending on myself to solve problems.”

Navigating school on his own. In raising Agustín, his parents were clear in conveying their belief in the value of education; he explains:

Growing up I would hear the phrase “education is important” from my mom at least once a week. Usually she would also include the same story of what it's like growing up without an education to make sure I knew the value of going to school.

Recognizing how important school was to his family, Agustín did not take his academics lightly. He says, “I always strived to make the most of what was offered to me because I knew that not everyone in the world is guaranteed an education.” School was relatively easy and not particularly memorable for him throughout elementary and middle school, though his
parents’ lack of knowledge about school processes and academics became increasingly important as he progressed through grade levels. He felt his parents’ support for his education, but their ability to provide help or guidance with his school experiences decreased as he got older. He learned quickly to depend on himself to find information when he had questions about his academics. This led to Agustín being mostly responsible for navigating school on his own. Throughout his education his independence sometimes made it difficult to find guidance when he needed it, but at the same time facilitated development of his ability to plan carefully for his future.

Once he reached high school, he became aware that not everyone around him cared about school as much as he did. Agustín had little in common with many of his peers because, as he remembers, “Most of them weren't applying to go to college anyway.” The difference between his attitude towards school and that of his peers’ was not conducive to building friendships and sometimes made his social experience “a bit rough.” Despite the independence this fostered, he did participate in several extracurricular activities, most notably as a member of the honors society and the yearbook club. Citing it as his most memorable high school experience, he enjoyed the feeling of making a difference the volunteer activities brought him as a part of the honors society. Working on the yearbook also helped shape his confidence and responsibility, and connected him with an invaluable resource in his yearbook teacher. The relationship he had with his yearbook teacher expanded his support beyond his family’s capacity and proved to be extremely helpful in getting through high school and into college.
Discovering college possibilities. Before he began approaching high school graduation, Agustín’s concept of college was based on what he knew of collegiate athletics. Abstractly, he knew his achievement would not end with graduation, but he had no concrete picture of what that would look like until his junior year of high school. It was at that point that Agustín realized he had a lot to learn about colleges and universities and that he would need to teach his parents more about applying to and enrolling in college alongside his own learning. Though they encouraged him towards educational success, it was difficult for them to let him go away to college. They expected him to pursue a postsecondary degree, but they did not necessarily want him to go. He felt like his mother, in particular, often did not have the same idea as Agustín of what his education or future plans should look like; he describes:

My mom didn't want me to move far away from where we were. All the things that she heard from college were either shootings from the news, or just the stereotypical parties all the time … She was supportive in the sense that [her support] was there, but it was clouded by a lot of judgment and a lot of opinions that weren't really supported thorough facts. I had to really pick at it and pick at it until I found that support system that I knew was there.

Agustín was largely responsible himself for completing his college applications, understanding the processes involved in deciding where to go, and eventually enrolling. His high school advisor provided some guidance for the college application process, mostly providing proofreading of his essays, and his yearbook teacher provided recommendation letters and encouragement that helped him both complete his applications and become more
confident in his potential to get into college. His relationship with his yearbook teacher was especially meaningful during this time because Agustín’s parents were not very involved in his school experiences; he explains, “It felt good to have someone that had been through college and knows what he's doing academically, to be there and give compliments and provide validation.”

After Agustín was accepted to LPU, he quickly started seeking information about how to prepare for college, again taking responsibility for finding out on his own. In combination with financial aid received from LPU after applying for FAFSA himself, several local scholarships he received were extremely important in helping his parents feel comfortable with the idea that going to college at LPU was a good path for him. He knew college was his greatest opportunity to be “able to live by myself and support myself financially, and move away from my home.” Once he felt his family’s support of the decision to attend LPU, he became excited to take concrete steps towards these goals through leaving for college.

An “eye-opening” first year. Agustín’s transition to college was academically strong. Though most of his first semester involved classes that were remedial or general requirements, this early academic achievement gave him confidence in his ability to adapt to college-level courses. Throughout the year, he continued to feel that he was doing well academically—maintaining a GPA of 3.4—and that he was able to handle stress arising from academic work during the rest of his first year. He was also admitted to LPU’s scholars
program towards the end of the year, which was an accomplishment that made him feel grateful for the recognition of so much hard work.

Socially, Agustín felt that during his first year he “grew up in one year what I was supposed to grow in like five or six years back home.” He attributes this feeling to the challenges of adapting to new social norms, meeting new people, and learning a lot about himself throughout the year. As someone who did not spend time with many peers during high school, transitioning to a social life in college was a big adjustment for Agustín. Though he lived in an arts-themed residential living community, through which he appreciated having a community of peers with similar interests, it was difficult for him to make strong friendships at first and he went through some tough experiences with people he thought were good friends, but who did not treat him well. Eventually, he found a few close friends with whom he was able to study and who could help him when he had difficult assignments, which was very important to him. He made friends with several older students who served as informal peer mentors, helping him understand where he wanted to go with his academic future. When his social support shifted to include more peers, he felt more comfortable and confident at LPU. He also made an active effort during this year to seek resources from offices across LPU that could support his needs as a new college student, attributing this effort to a large part of his success.

In reflection, Agustín feels like his success in his first year was mainly due to figuring out how to create balance in his experiences. As a whole, he characterizes his first year of college as one that broadened his understanding of opportunities and choices that he may
have. “I would say my first year was eye-opening to what life has to offer,” he explains, “…I
did not know that there are so many experiences to be had before coming to college.”

Alexa

At her core a “people person,” Alexa describes herself as much more outgoing once
you get to know her than she initially appears. A warmhearted student who finds joy in
seeing those around her fill with happiness, her genuine care for others has always fueled her
desire to find a career in which she can make a difference. She admits to often
procrastinating academic tasks, yet she is also a self-motivated and independent young adult.

Family background. Alexa has one sister who is two years older and was a junior at
LPU during Alexa’s first year. Alexa’s mother raised both girls and the three became a close-
knit trio. Alexa’s mother finished some college before either of her children were born, but
left before she completed her degree. She worked various jobs while raising the two girls,
mostly in retail stores, and stayed home with them for a period of time while Alexa was in
her early years of school. When Alexa was a sophomore in high school, her mother decided
to go back to college to finish what she had started. She earned an associate’s degree, and
then transferred to a four-year university where she earned her bachelor’s degree at the end
of Alexa’s first year of college. Partially because she did not have the chance to finish her
college degree the first time, Alexa’s mother always held education in a very high regard.
Her mother is someone Alexa depends on for support, who has always been dedicated to
seeing Alexa succeed, and whose consistent encouragement helped Alexa through her
education.
In addition to her mother’s supportiveness, Alexa’s sister has been extremely helpful throughout her educational path. Her sister has often been through similar educational experiences before Alexa, so she has provided much guidance along the way. Similarly, Alexa’s grandmother was also a key figure in her life. Another strong woman in her family, Alexa’s grandmother was very “into the educational field.” Like Alexa’s mother, her grandmother pursued higher education as an adult, and was nearly finished with a graduate degree when she lost her second battle with breast cancer. Though her mother’s and grandmother’s atypical paths to higher education were eventually successful, Alexa identified for most of her life, including during her first year of college, as someone who did not have family members with college degrees and still considers herself a first-generation college student.

**Developing a love of learning.** Alexa remembers being fascinated by learning when her sister entered kindergarten two years ahead of her and came home excited to teach Alexa everything she was learning. When it was time for Alexa to start school, she loved to read so much already that as a kindergartener she was sent up to fourth grade for reading lessons. By middle school, she was easily passing honors classes and participating in a Saturday school program sponsored by a local university. This program was aimed at encouraging teenagers to pursue math and science-based college majors and careers through academic enrichment classes and activities. It sparked her interest in science and helped her make connections with some of her life-long best friends. Describing her experience, she says, “I think it definitely influenced me to choose the field I'm in today.”
In high school Alexa continued to take honors courses, consistently demonstrating strong academic achievement throughout her educational path. Her high school curriculum did not offer many advanced courses, though she took advantage of AP offerings when she could. Her social support began to expand beyond her family at this point, because she took courses with many of the same students every year and often depended on peers who were in all of her classes to help when coursework became difficult. Most of her friends were headed towards college as well, which created an environment of friendly competition that Alexa believes helped motivate her during high school; she describes:

I feel like, we kind of fought to see who was going to be the best. Who was going to come out on top. I think it was more of a positive thing … we're trying to be the best students we can be so it's kind of a competition to see who can get the best grades.

One of the most meaningful experiences for Alexa during this time was her mother’s decision to go back to college. Alexa describes how it changed their relationship:

I really liked it and … it kind of reversed our roles. There was a lot of stuff that she didn't remember and she was frustrated with. I was like, "Okay. We're going to do it and we're going to get it right." I remember, one semester, she brought home—she had a biology class and that was before they put the labs online—she had to bring home this huge lab kit. Every week we would just sit in the living room and do all of her different experiments. Just do it until she got the answers right. It kind of reversed the roles for me. It was like, “Okay, well you helped me so now I'm going to help you.”
Her mother’s reentry to college increased the amount of time Alexa got to spend with her, made their educational support more mutual, and helped them both do well in school. During this time, Alexa’s independence also emerged as a strong part of her personality. She remembers noticing this and thinking in school, “I know what I'm doing … I'm running my own thing.” The combination of knowing she had support from her family, but also experiencing independence to thrive in many ways in school made a positive impact on her precollege educational success.

**Determination for college success.** Postsecondary education was something Alexa always knew would be a part of her life, so she planned for college by taking the most rigorous courses available to her and participating actively in extracurricular activities such as clubs, prom committee, being a trainer for the football team, serving as junior and senior class president, participating in national honors society, and running for the track team. When it was time for Alexa to begin her college application process, her sister and her high school counselor provided support, reminded her when deadlines approached, explained the FAFSA application, and kept her aware of what she needed to complete throughout the process. After visiting her sister at LPU and falling in love with the campus, she was offered a “great financial aid package,” through a program aimed at meeting 100% of low-income students’ financial need and she decided to attend LPU.

Before Alexa began her first fall semester at LPU, she attended a summer transition program that offered an opportunity to start coursework, live on campus, meet other entering students, and build a relationship with an upper-class student mentor. Though she appreciated
this opportunity, transitioning from an easy experience with college courses during the summer into the full load of courses she took in the fall semester created one of the most difficult parts of Alexa’s first year. Her determination to motivate herself and evaluate how to manage her time were key in allowing her to feel like she could “just throw myself in there,” and come out with a positive academic experience.

Alexa joined a few campus organizations during her first year, but was not as involved as she was in high school. “I'm not as involved as I can be,” she says, “because I feel like, coming here I have to work harder here as far as studies go. I don't want be as involved in as much stuff and my studies slip.” Alexa credits her academic advisor with helping her develop the study habits needed to maintain a good GPA and with holding her accountable for doing her academic work; she explains:

She was one of those people that was always there no matter if you needed anything. If she didn't know an answer she would go look it up and be right back with an answer. She's pushing you because she wants to see you succeed.

At a time when Alexa needed specific guidance to manage her college experience, her advisor played a critically supportive role. In addition, Alexa’s mother and sister remained equally supportive people in her life during her first year at LPU—perhaps becoming even more supportive in college than they were when she was in high school. At one point during her first year, Alexa started questioning whether LPU was the right institution for her because it did not offer a path of study in which she was starting to become interested. Alexa
did not really want to leave LPU and the advice she received from her sister was integral in motivating her to work with her advisor solve the problems she saw with her academic plans.

At the end of the year, Alexa emphasizes, she recognized that the independence she learned in high school helped her remain motivated for achievement and contributed to the success she experienced at LPU. She feels like her experiences in college have been positive, despite the “ups and downs” of her first year, and appreciates what she has been through to experience college success.

Carmen

Carmen is an outgoing, optimistic, and enthusiastic student who considers LPU her dream school. Her determination to succeed and self-motivation have propelled her through difficult times in her life and prepared her for challenges that arise in college.

Family background. Carmen describes her childhood as “pretty normal,” explaining that she felt like she lived a similar life to most of her peers. She grew up in a small city with her older brother, older sister, and their mother and father. Her father moved to the United States from Palestine after graduating from high school so that his older brother could attend college. He worked for a few years and then moved back to Palestine where he met Carmen’s mother. After their children were born, they decided together to return to the U.S. where they believed their children would have greater opportunities, especially through better quality education. While Carmen was growing up, both of her parents worked full-time: her father in social work and insurance, her mother for the county’s nutritional services department.
Carmen describes her mother as the most important person in her educational path. Her mother provided encouragement, helped to manage the stress of being a hard-working and highly involved student, and was always willing to seek help when she was not able to provide it herself. As Carmen describes, “There was never really a limit on what she would do to help me succeed.” In addition, Carmen’s siblings became incredibly supportive individuals for her after their father was diagnosed with a challenging terminal illness, ALS, when Carmen was in seventh grade. This was a major challenge in Carmen’s life that significantly impacted her relationships with her family members, as well as how she experienced school. During her first year of college, her brother was attending community college and her sister was about to graduate from a different 4-year state university.

**Balancing independence and seeking support.** Though not particularly memorable, Carmen’s experience in elementary school was characterized by feeling at ease because her brother and sister went to school with her. By middle school, Carmen’s classes began to challenge her more, though she continued to do well. As a result of her family’s medical challenges, Carmen developed much more independence than many of her peers at this age. Her father’s illness created a dynamic in which she and her siblings became more responsible for their own lives academically, socially, and at home. They also supported one another in ways for which siblings are not often responsible, especially when her mother was occupied with her father’s medical care; Carmen explains:

My mom was kind of wrapped up in that. … I think that's another reason why my siblings and I are so close, because they kind of took over in [my education] to help
out my parents. … I was having a hard time in, I think, algebra one or something. This was in seventh grade. My mother couldn't make it to the school, because my father. There's just no way she could. She wrote a note allowing my siblings to take over for her. They just talked to my teacher and helped her figure out a way that I could get tutoring and get help without having my mom have to come in, because I don't think she really would have been able to fill in for that.

Because ALS is a progressive disease, her family’s difficulties continued to increase as Carmen went through high school. As she describes, “I think those challenges kind of grew in high school, just because [ALS is] degenerative, so it kept getting worse. It just kept getting harder on my family.” With two older siblings in college, in addition to her father’s medical bills, Carmen could feel the stress that financial strain put on her family and wanted to do her part to lessen the burden. She began working at a part-time job and found it difficult balance work, school, and numerous extracurricular activities. However, she also began learning how to ask for help, which was a turning point for Carmen. She found that when she began to struggle in a class, if she asked the teacher for extra help she almost always received some sort of support. As she explains, “I learned the hard way that you just really have to reach out to teachers and peers for help. You don't have to feel like you're doing it on your own.” Once she started finding the help she needed in her more difficult courses, Carmen achieved excellent grades throughout the rest of high school.

Attending college was always something Carmen thought would be in her future. Partly because her parents often emphasized that going to college would increase her
opportunities in life beyond what they experienced, and partly because she heard about college in school; she says, “I just realized that if I really wanted a successful and happy life I would want to go to college.”

Once her siblings reached college themselves, her college aspirations became more concrete. She began preparing for college by taking challenging high school courses and doing well, and doing research on her own, turning to the internet for information about college and ideas for how to mentally prepare herself for college life, knowing that becoming acclimated to college would be a challenging transition. She also made it a point to listen to those around her who had suggestions for how to “look impressive” when applying to colleges. Carmen’s father had learned about college processes when his siblings attended college years earlier, and further gained understanding through helping Carmen’s siblings through college preparation and enrollment. With his help, Carmen applied to four universities, and after finding out that she could receive full financial aid from her top two institutions, her decision to attend LPU was easy. As she recalls, “I toured both schools, and I just ended up falling in love with LPU.”

**Overcoming first-year adjustment challenges.** Though Carmen felt ready to come to college, in reflection she says, “I don't think you really can be fully prepared for it.” Her transition into her first year of college was challenging, and she found it “really hard to adjust,” in many ways. Carmen realized the academic quality of her high school had not been as strong as she perceived it to be when she met peers at LPU whose high school curricula had been taught much more rigorously; she describes:
I think that AP classes at my school weren't really taken as seriously as they were in other places, because I always thought they would prepare me for college, but … it's a lot harder. … I actually kind of realized it when I was talking to my roommate. … We took a lot of the same AP classes, but she came in with a lot more credit, and she knew a lot more and just remembered a lot from it.

She quickly discovered that her studying skills also needed changing for college-level courses and she began to focus on the details and depth of her course material in a way that enhanced how she could understand her classes. Her advisor was especially helpful in adjusting to LPU, particularly because she was able to direct Carmen to new resources on campus to help with whatever problems were arising. In addition, she found that making connections with faculty members improved her ability to succeed in her courses. Depending on educators to help her navigate college-specific processes expanded her social support in a way that was particularly valuable when her needs were specific to understanding college life and LPU. Academically, Carmen did well during her first semester, but the second half of her first year was much smoother after she felt more adapted to college-level rigor and more comfortable, much like in high school, seeking help from her educators.

Describing her social transition as the easiest part of getting used to college, Carmen never had a hard time meeting people once she arrived at LPU. Instead, the most difficult part of Carmen’s transition to college was getting used to being away from her family. She describes finding a “close-knit” group of friends as an important part of helping her cope with missing her family:
Your family tends to be that person that motivates you or pushes you and tells you “You can do it.” I think the friends that I made here did a good job of doing that. When I was stressed out and overwhelmed, they filled the void that I guess my family would've if they were here. … It's funny, because none of my friends actually are interested in the same topics that I am academically, but we're still all very supportive of each other.

Despite her social support shifting to more prominently include her peers, she says of being away from her family, “It was just a lot harder than I expected it to be. I didn't realize how much I guess I leaned on my parents, and my siblings, and their support until I got here.” Yet she also felt that her family became even more supportive of her educational success once she began college. They have continued to help Carmen make connections with people and opportunities in different ways, such as when her sister introduced her to several friends at LPU who had experiences with Carmen’s difficult classes and when her father helped her secure an internship for the summer at another local university.

Overall, Carmen feels that her first year of college was successful because she met her goal of maintaining good grades—finishing her spring semester on the Dean’s List—and being generally happy with her college experience. She experienced a lot of self-exploration during her first year, and describes learning more about herself personally than she had while she was growing up. These insights included recognizing what was important to her within her friendships, how to motivate herself through stress and anxiety, and what her priorities are in all areas of her life. She summarizes the year by saying, “I think that when things get
really tough is when you learn the most about yourself, and that's what happened to me here. … It was a good experience, but it was really hard.”

**Duke**

Duke has a contagious smile that reveals an outgoing, ambitious student. He describes himself as positive and goofy, but with a level of philosophical thinking that deepens his character and his friendships. He is often motivated by seeing the big picture, rather than getting bogged down in daily challenges, and is always looks for a silver lining.

**Family background.** When Duke was two years old, his mother and father made the difficult decision to move with Duke and his older sister to a new state with the hopes of offering a better life for their children. As Duke describes, they came from an area without a safe or supportive community, in which he does not believe he would have had the same kind of life he eventually did.

Both of Duke’s parents are high school graduates. Duke describes his mother as the most important, positive influence on his educational success. While he was growing up she worked a desk job in a bank, but has recently experienced nearly five years of unemployment. Duke describes his relationship with his mother as one characterized by encouragement, attentiveness, and high expectations. In contrast to his mother’s consistent pressure, Duke’s father had a different type of influence on his educational success. Duke’s father held various shift jobs in blue-collar professions after completing his high school diploma, and currently works sterilizing medical equipment. Observing a strong work ethic and a commitment to providing for the family, Duke has grown to regard his father with
tremendous admiration. “I really respect my dad,” Duke says, “because his dad left his family, and he wanted to be the dad that he never had, so I really respect my dad and everything that he's done.”

**Discovering educational aspirations.** Duke’s most memorable experience in elementary school was during fifth grade, when a particular teacher made a significant impact on how much he believed in his academic abilities. As he remembers, this teacher “put extra effort into teaching us how to write, and cultivating us, and helping us do better than what we were expected to do.” Until then, Duke had not recognized quite how much his teachers saw in him; Duke explains:

> When someone starts believing in you that you can do something, and the teachers around you are saying, ‘He's going to be president one day,’ it just started for me that belief in myself, that I could do something.

As Duke entered adolescence, his mother encouraged him to attend an international baccalaureate (IB) school rather than his local public middle school. Middle school was the point at which Duke started having to work “drastically harder” to achieve academic success, which allowed him to “grow and become hardened and ready for if something was going to become hard” in his future educational path. It was also during middle school that his parents connected him with a mentor through their local 100 Black Men organization who would become an invaluable part of Duke’s life. 100 Black Men of America, Inc. is a leadership and mentorship organization dedicated to improving quality of life and enhancing educational and economic opportunities within African American communities (100 Black Men of
America, Inc., 2016). Eventually, Duke’s 100 Black Men mentor became someone he was close with, to whom he could go when he needed someone besides his parents to talk to, and who guided Duke to many opportunities that helped shape his college aspirations.

High school was a time during which Duke remembers feeling the need to “reinvent myself.” Socially, he felt like he was more isolated than he wanted to be and began working to change his identity among his peers. The high school he attended was much less rigorous than his IB middle school, and he recalls that other than one particularly difficult pre-calculus experience, the rest of his classes “were a breeze.”

Even though Duke excelled academically throughout his educational path, and had aspirations of “becoming somebody,” it was not until his senior year of high school that he began to think about what his actual college plans would be. His practical planning for college then started during his senior year when his mother and his mentor separately asked him to start looking into college options and make some choices about attending college; Duke explains:

My mom was like, "Okay, you need to look at all of the colleges you possibly can," and my mentor pretty much said the same thing, and he was saying, "What do you want to do?" I was like, "Well I want to do some engineering something," and we pretty much just went down a list of things, and that's how I came across LPU.

Duke’s mother was the only person he recalls helping him apply to college. Though he is not very close with his older sister, his mother’s experience helping her apply to college was helpful because his mother knew some of what he needed to do when it was his turn. While
he was deciding where to enroll, he started receiving emails from a program administrator with LPU’s minority engineering program. As Duke recalls, “The reason I mainly came to LPU was because she was blowing up my emails and … she genuinely showed me that this school wanted me.”

Navigating “culture shock” and the college environment. The next step for Duke was to attend LPU’s summer transition program. In addition to providing orientation to the campus environment and a glimpse at college-level academics, this opportunity allowed him to head into the fall semester having already established friendships with peers who had similar interests to him, which was a major benefit to Duke’s social adjustment to college. However, LPU was the first community in which he was often reminded that he was part of a racial minority. The area in which he grew up was very diverse, so he describes this experience at LPU as “culture shock.” In addition to feeling different, Duke experienced microaggressions based on his race and started noticing subtle cultural patterns at LPU that negatively impacted his social relationships and made him feel less connected to the university. He says:

I didn't seem to feel as if I fit in at times. Of course you hear a lot of the stories of like how there would be one Black kid in a class of 200 at LPU, but it doesn't really affect you until you start hearing how other people can really compare [experiences], and come closer, and you're like, "Oh I can't really, I don't have that same experience," or, "I don't have those same resources so I can't do that." For me it's been mostly feeling different, and at a point I just had to accept my differences.
One of the things that helped him combat some of these feelings of disconnection with the campus culture was his part-time job. He worked as a student employee for a student affairs office and he built valuable relationships with the office’s staff members who supported him in understanding how to deal with his experience of LPU’s campus culture. Expanding his social support to include staff members who could help him address this specific need was particularly beneficial. Without their support he felt he would have been much more negatively impacted by these experiences than he was.

In classes, Duke started feeling like his academic preparation was less rigorous than he thought and that he had more to learn than many of his peers. His pattern of academic excellence during his K-12 years had given him high expectations for his performance in college, so this experience was discouraging. As he recalls, “I fell short from the bar that I kept setting for myself, so it was just constant disappointment.” This feeling intimidated him and damaged his pride, though he explains that he eventually got past those feelings and recognized that he needed to learn new methods of studying and learning materials to get ahead in class. It took him the entire year to uncover habits that worked for him in order to complete assignments before deadlines and figure out the challenging course materials he was expected to learn, but eventually he developed the skills he needed; he explains:

Academically, college is where you learn that your professors don't teach you anymore, they're just here to educate you, so you're supposed to teach yourself, and that's where finding out your learning style is what you have to do to get the information inside your head, and keep it to stay there.
Duke joined numerous clubs immediately during his first year of college including the Collegiate 100 extension of 100 Black Men. He participated actively in a mentoring program for elementary school students and he worked about eight hours a week. While these activities helped him feel involved within the campus community, he also became overburdened and exhausted. When he realized this schedule was contributing to his lower grades, he dropped several clubs and cut back his hours at work, which helped him redirect his time so he could focus more on studying.

Demonstrating his proactive nature, Duke was able to handle challenges at LPU throughout his first year of college by refocusing his efforts and thinking about his big picture goals. His ability to shift his perspective in this way has carried him through the more difficult parts of transitioning to college. In summary, Duke describes his first year of college as a mountain; he describes:

A mountain whose top seems to grow nearer and nearer as I step, yet I never quite make it to its peak. …Basically, I feel as if I'm taking great strides throughout my academic, or educational experience, but I know, no matter what, I'm always going to be more fueled to gain more knowledge, so I know I'm never going to be done with my education.

**Gabriela**

Gabriela is quiet and considerate with a deep commitment to living true to her values. A self-motivated and disciplined student, she has worked hard to do well in school as long as
she can remember, describing herself fondly as a “book worm.” She prioritizes her family, education, and community service above most other things in life.

**Family background.** Gabriela’s parents moved to the United States from Mexico shortly before she was born. She grew up just a short distance from the campus of LPU, living with her parents and older brother in one bedroom of a small apartment shared with other family members and friends. While attending LPU, she lives at home with her parents, older brother, and two younger sisters who attend elementary school.

Both of Gabriela’s parents and her older brother dropped out of school before completing high school. Her mother used to work in a factory, but when Gabriela was born she stopped working to raise Gabriela and her siblings. Gabriela’s father has worked in a landscaping business for more than twenty years. As the first member of her family to excel in school, Gabriela felt from an early age that her parents believed she would, “amount to something.” They provided much encouragement for her education, particularly through praise and enthusiasm for her achievement. For Gabriela’s parents, seeing her become the first person in the family to do well in school has helped them feel successful as well. This is a large but positive responsibility, as she describes, “For them it was like I was the one who is accomplishing everyone's goals, in a sense. Like leading the way. … It's a tough role, definitely. It [is] a lot of pressure but it feels good.” Because of this responsibility, Gabriela hopes that her education will allow her to help bring her family “out of our economic situation.” Her educational decisions—such as attending LPU while living at home—reflect how important this is for her.
Cultivating self-discipline. When Gabriela began school, her biggest challenge was overcoming a significant language barrier. Once she learned to speak English well, she immediately began to develop a passion for learning that has carried her through the rest of her educational path. She started excelling academically, always completing her homework and receiving good grades, and began wanting to please both her parents and her teachers with her school performance.

As Gabriela finished elementary school, she sadly experienced the traumatic loss of an uncle who was “like a second father” to her. Her family was significantly affected by this tragedy, and she headed into middle and high school a more reserved, anxious, and family-oriented person because of this. Middle school became difficult for Gabriela socially, which impacted the pressure she felt to participate in behaviors that were not conducive to her academic achievement. Many of the adults in her family and neighborhood demonstrated dangerous and sometimes illegal behaviors around her; however, Gabriela says the experience of observing them helped her become resolved to remain strong against the pressure to participate in dangerous habits as a teenager; she explains:

A lot of alcoholism runs in my family, especially the men, so I got to see a lot of that when I was growing up. … a lot of drug dealers, drug deals, the men always outside, drinking. I think ever since I saw that I made a little promise to myself, I wouldn't drink, I don't want to drugs. … I guess I started to hate it. I hated alcohol, I hated drugs. It's probably just stuck with me all throughout my life.
In high school, Gabriela spent most of her time outside of the school day at home studying because her family lacked the ability to provide transportation to after school activities. She had always been self-reliant learner, which continued as she proceeded through high school and surpassed the level of education anyone in her family had previously reached; Gabriela recalls:

Throughout my whole education I was very independent. It wasn't like I could ask my mom, “Hey could you help me with these fractions?” or “Hey can you help me with this biology stuff?” I was all by myself because my mom only finished eighth grade and my dad finished around some early year in high school.

Being forced to spend so much time at home on schoolwork, she further developed the strong sense of self-discipline that helped her learn to enjoy what she was doing in school and find motivation for achieving success. She encountered more difficult classes in high school than she was expecting, but receiving her first low grade did nothing but increase her motivation to succeed. She studied even harder than before, as she remembers, “I decided my senior year I was going to get a perfect 4.0, that's what I did.” This determination and commitment to her academic performance helped her excel once again, and she finished high school in the top twenty percent of her graduating class.

**Making college a reality.** Living near the campus of LPU as a child, Gabriela became aware of college at an early age; however, it was not until high school when she started to understand what college meant beyond knowing that there was one nearby. Though her friends in high school were not planning for college, she started to observe that other
students were, and got some ideas about how to prepare for possibly attending herself. She learned more about getting to college through representatives who visited her high school and distributed brochures, posters the school administrators hung in the hallways, and other pieces of information she picked up from peers.

Gabriela began applying to college and realized she would have to figure out the process on her own. She did research online and picked up a lot of ideas about how to navigate her college preparation and application from listening to what other students in her high school were doing. Discovering that she could find help paying for a college education was a major milestone in her application process. Once she understood there was a possibility of receiving tuition assistance, she chose four universities to apply to based on their locations within a thirty-mile radius from her home so she could continue to live at home while attending. She was accepted to two schools, and though LPU was already preferable because it was the closest geographically, it was when she found out that she would receive full financial aid that she decided LPU would be the college for her.

**Acclimating to college life.** Gabriela’s transition to college began with freshman orientation during the summer before her fall semester, which was an extremely overwhelming experience. Before that, she says, “I was completely blind to what college actually was.” The number of freshmen in her entering class especially shocked her because it was roughly equal to the size of her entire high school student body. Following orientation, Gabriela describes her first week of college as “pretty awful.” It was a major challenge for her to figure out what time to leave home, how long it would take her mother to drive her to
campus, where her classes were located, how to find the bathrooms, and what to eat for lunch. Slowly, though, she began to acclimate to her new routine and thrive in her classes.

The coursework was easier for her than she expected it to be during her first semester, and though her second semester was challenging, she was so used to working hard and independently figuring out how to learn material for class that she continued to do well. She maintained an excellent GPA throughout her first year—finishing the year with a 4.0—and credits her success partially to the motivation she felt to take school seriously because of the scholarship money she received to pay for it.

Living at home with her family also helped Gabriela maintain the level of academic discipline she had developed in high school, and being away from campus in the evenings kept her separated from the distractions she saw her peers experiencing. She explains being grateful for having strength to focus on her schoolwork:

I would see a lot of people drinking, having parties, they seem to have a lot more fun than me, but I guess I just developed the mind set that, “Yes, they might be having fun, but I'm going to end up being more successful eventually.” So the time I put in now, the hard work I put in now, I'm going to be paid back for that later on.

This was a challenge socially, however, as living off-campus at first made her feel isolated from campus activities and she had to find ways of making friends other than hanging out outside of class. She learned she could continue to spend time volunteering with an organization she began working with during high school and found a way to participate in the pre-health club by volunteering on Saturdays at a center for adults and children with
developmental disabilities. She was also especially glad to get to know another commuter student from one of her classes, and they often bonded about the positive and negative sides of living off-campus.

Gabriela made good connections with two LPU employees during her first semester at LPU, her academic advisor and a chemistry professor, who helped her figure out many of the things she did not understand about college at first. Her advisor, for example, connected her with the career center, workshops about internships, the TRIO SSS office, and even a food pantry where she could help provide for her family during months when they needed extra support. She says of their significance in helping her understand LPU and its resources, “I guess [my chemistry professor and advisor] took up the roles that parents who did go to college and did go to high school would have.”

Depending on her peers and college educators for support became especially important during the spring of her first year when her mother was in a car accident and she had an uncle pass away during the week before final exams. These experiences were extremely difficult for her to get through with her family and it was hard for her to be prepared to return quickly to campus to complete her exams. However, in some ways the stress these events caused served to motivate her more. Gabriela’s experiences throughout her entire educational path contributed to a determination in her to achieve no matter what was going on in her life; she describes:
Even though I was super stressed and pretty depressed as well, I studied well for my exams and again, similar GPA. I think it was just the motivation that developed since I was a kid that helped me be where I am right now.

At the end of her first year, one of Gabriela’s memorable moments was receiving two awards from the multicultural student center for her academic performance. This was an extremely meaningful moment for her, and her feelings about this experience summarize her entire educational path; she says:

It makes me feel proud of myself, despite all of my circumstances, despite the fact that my parents didn't go to college or that we may not be the richest people in the world or that we live paycheck by paycheck, I'm still here, I'm still doing great.

Rachel

Naturally curious, Rachel has a bubbly disposition and an enthusiastic passion for being a hard-working student. Though she is a self-described worrier, her concern for herself and those she cares for manifests as a genuine sense of responsibility and empathy. Fueled by those throughout her life who have imposed limiting expectations on her, she hopes to excel beyond her degree at LPU and through medical school.

**Family background.** Rachel grew up living with her mother, father, and younger sister in the same city where LPU is located. Her mother stayed at home to raise Rachel and her sister, while her father worked for a local printing company. Living nearby her very traditional Chinese grandparents, Rachel’s childhood was characterized by learning her family’s culture and integrating those experiences with the American culture that surrounded
her. This created challenging experiences for Rachel, as she explains, “I think it almost made me feel like I didn't know exactly who I am.”

Rachel’s parents highly valued education and wanted her to succeed academically throughout her educational path. Though neither of her parents attended college themselves, she has several older cousins with college degrees who became models for what her parents expected from her future. In many ways, these expectations served to motivate Rachel throughout most of her education. Though she does not have a particularly supportive relationship with her parents—culturally they do not expect to share many emotional experiences with one another, which she feels would be necessary to feel truly supported—she does believe they always want the best for her and hopes she can reach their aspirations for her future. She endeavors to achieve accomplishments that will make her parents proud, and believes her parents’ expectations had everything to do with how she became such a diligent, hard-working student.

**Learning to enjoy school.** Rachel’s formal education began at the age of three, when she began attending Chinese school every Saturday—a practice she would continue until her freshman year of high school. Her family spoke Cantonese at home, but her parents wanted her to learn the more prevalent Mandarin Chinese dialect and study Chinese history to become more knowledgeable about her Chinese culture, and as Rachel describes, “Be able to see this is where you're from and be proud of it.” When she began elementary school several years later, she was excited to go, but overwhelmed by the amount of English being spoken. She was very shy at the time, largely because she was unable to communicate well. She was
also bullied for the first few years of school because her Chinese accent was so strong and her peers teased her about how quiet she was. After spending time with an ESL teacher with whom she connected, she gradually became more comfortable in school, and started to enjoy what she was learning.

Her enjoyment of school carried through to middle school where Rachel loved the detail into which her classes could delve about subjects that interested her; she recalls:

[The academic rigor of middle school] was a huge jump, but once I made that jump, I loved it. I actually spent time every day to just study for it and learn more about it before I would even consider watching TV.

Her high school experience further offered many opportunities to enhance her already strong academic skills and she continued to be heavily involved in extracurricular activities. Her academic performance was outstanding in high school despite her busy schedule. Though she describes receiving her first “B” on a report card during her sophomore year of high school as one of her most memorable experiences, it was helpful for her to learn that even imperfect grades were not going to prevent her from academic success overall. Similarly, she had several teachers who told her she was never going to be as successful as she wanted to be, which motivated her to do well in order to prove them wrong. She finished with a GPA in the top ten people of her graduating class.

Socially, Rachel experienced a shift in peer groups during high school that helped her focus on educational success. She began surrounding herself with other students whose goals and aspirations were similar to her own, which helped her celebrate success and maintain her
enthusiasm for doing well in school. In addition, she learned quickly upon entering high school that developing close relationships with teachers could help her find the support and success she needed to excel academically and pursue her college aspirations. Two teachers, in particular, stand out as the most important figures in Rachel’s educational path. One of them stayed after school to talk with her often; with the other, Rachel formed a bond that was almost “mother-daughter-like,” where Rachel could discuss personal things like friendship upheaval. Since Rachel wasn’t comfortable talking to her own parents in this way, these teachers were integral in her ability to handle the pressures of a demanding high school experience.

**Actively preparing for college.** When Rachel was young, she had an admittedly humorous understanding of what college is; she explains:

This is going to sound so silly. When I was in second grade, my cousins were in college. … I saw pictures of them. They're like really, really big kids, and so for me … I was like, “Fifth graders are really, really big kids. Therefore they must be college students.”

College became more concrete during middle school when Rachel’s parents imposed the expectation that she should pursue a college degree and began preparing her to do so. They bought her SAT preparation materials, put her in a test preparation class, and started teaching her what kinds of activities they learned from their friends and neighbors that students needed in order to “look good” when it came time for applying to college. She also spent much of her adolescence with her best friend’s family, which was an important point in
Rachel’s educational path because her friend’s father, who was a biology professor, became a valuable part of her support network. His expertise nurtured her emerging interest in natural sciences and helped her form aspirations to attend college and pursue a career in science.

By the time she reached high school, she was used to actively seeking opportunities to fill her resume, and as she describes, turning them into a “checklist” for college preparation. When college entrance became a tangible reality towards the end of high school, Rachel decided to apply to five universities despite her high school counselor’s suggestion that her preferred schools were probably too selective for her. She navigated the application process independently and ended up not only being accepted, but also receiving full-ride scholarships to two selective institutions close to home, including LPU. The most difficult part of the college enrollment process for Rachel was choosing between these two schools. Her decision finally came from long conversations after school with one of her teachers, which helped her clarify her choice to attend LPU.

Finding first-year support. Though Rachel spent many years leading up to college trying to prepare through activities and academic achievement, the reality of attending college did not set in for her until just before she moved onto campus during the fall of her first year. As she began at LPU, the social transition was the hardest part of adjusting to college for her. She found herself surrounded by acquaintances quickly, but needed more time than she expected to develop strong friendships. During this period, she felt anxious without a close circle of friends, but fortunately this did not last past the first semester. Her friends became an important support system because they were there for her when she had
personal issues or when school became overwhelming, and they helped boost her self-esteem when she experienced anxiety. As the year progressed, developing relationships with advisors and the supervisor at her part-time job also helped support her emotionally, providing resources in a similar way to what her favorite high school teachers had done for her; she explains:

I have a couple of advisors that are really nice, and I'm part of TRIO so I have a mentor there too, and we get coffee and we talk about life … It’s helpful finding that other person on campus that is not just a student, but actually works with the university, but is still able to just talk to you.

Expanding her social network to include educators on campus allowed Rachel to build relationships that helped her “find peace and resolution” to many of the anxieties she experienced as she adjusted to LPU.

In contrast to her social experience, Rachel felt at ease academically very quickly in college-level courses. Her coursework seemed easier to her than the last few years of high school had been, and she adapted more quickly to her classes than many of her peers. She does not identify any major academic challenges from her first year, and though she recognizes that she had to work hard to get through her courses, she felt like she knew how to do so without too much trouble.

Overall, Rachel feels like her academic excellence and integration into campus life at LPU, along with her learned ability to manage stress, are the most telling markers of her first-year success. As she describes,
I have a 4.0, so that's like, well, college is hard. I still have a 4.0. … I felt like I
definitely accomplished a lot … I adjusted really well. … I'm definitely involved with
the school community, my community itself, and everything around school and I'm
not 100% stressed.

Velma

Velma is outgoing, attentive, and very open with most people. She describes herself
as “an extraverted introvert,” because although making friends has always come easy to her,
she also enjoys introspective time alone. An inquisitive and creative learner, Velma finds that
wanting to learn new things impacts everything she does.

Family background. Velma describes her life growing up as a “very good
childhood.” She says, “We weren’t rich or anything, so it wasn’t extraordinary, but there
was a lot of love in the household.” Velma’s mother earned a certificate to be a paralegal
before Velma was born, after finishing her education with some community college
experience, but she has not worked since Velma was born. Velma’s father dropped out of
high school before earning a diploma and now owns a construction company that he founded
himself. Though they always had limited financial means, Velma’s parents provided a
tremendous amount of encouragement and support for her education as she progressed
through school. An only child, her parents spent as much time as they could with her; she
says:
My parents were always around as much as possible. My mom quit her job so that she could be around and give me everything that I could possibly want. They would go without if I needed something.

In school, Velma’s parents weren’t able to be involved in much academically, but they showed their support through presence at her athletic events and consistent praise for her educational accomplishments. Their work ethic is something that Velma has internalized through observation, and which continues to drive her motivation towards success.

**Early educational enrichment.** As Velma entered school, her mother decided to enroll her in an elementary school deemed better than the one she was assigned, even if it meant driving Velma to school every day. This school was newer and in a community with greater resources and less crime than where Velma’s family lived, and Velma’s mother hoped it would help Velma get a better start to her education. Velma enjoyed her time in elementary school, particularly because she was able to participate in various enrichment camps that would not have been offered at her assigned school. Once Velma reached middle school, she attended another new school, but one which was in a more rural and less affluent community. Of particular importance during this time, Velma met her first boyfriend, John, whom she is still currently dating. As she describes, “That influenced probably the rest of my life.” John’s parents quickly became mentors who would contribute to her educational success in valuable ways; Velma explains:

> His parents both went to LPU and they have this huge room in their house that's completely devoted to schoolwork. … Anytime I'd go over to their house we'd do
homework, and his parents would help us do homework, and they made me want to come to LPU, and they made me want to work even harder than I already was in school.

This type of adult investment in education did not exist for all of her peers, many of whom were not interested in their own educations at all. She took honors classes and did well academically, but the social atmosphere was particularly “weird” because she felt like she was one of the only ones who cared about school. She “flew through everything in high school,” easily getting good grades in all her classes. The curriculum offered at her high school was not as rigorous as she would have liked—with only a select few AP options—but she enjoyed the “laid back” environment that manifested, with the school culture emphasizing learning for the sake of learning rather than grades or test scores. She recalls having excellent teachers who went beyond their pedagogy to teach broader life lessons. In particular, her physics teacher and Key Club advisor was one of the most helpful people she encountered as she completed high school and started thinking about college. She also enjoyed the extra mini-seminars that her art teacher and librarian frequently held to teach students concepts such as, “If you put yourself in the shoes of the person that did [something], you can understand why they did it and it's a lot harder to hate anyone if you understand why they're doing things.” While she continued to demonstrate high academic achievement during high school, it was these character-building lessons and exceptional teachers that had the strongest influence on her success.
Planning for postsecondary opportunities. Attending college was an expectation Velma had for herself from a very young age. After growing up assuming college would be in her future, her aspirations became a tangible reality during the summer between her sophomore and junior years of high school when she participated in a state-funded enrichment program where she spent four weeks living on a university campus away from home, taking a physics and exploratory data analysis class, and conducting her very first scientific research. The experience impacted her in numerous ways, as she explains:

I already wanted to go to college, I knew I was going to, but [the enrichment program] made me ready to be there. I was so excited to be on my own and be able to take higher-level classes that I couldn't take in high school and to really just blossom out of my experiences there.

Once she reached her senior year of high school, Velma began taking practical steps towards attending college. She navigated the financial aid applications for schools she applied to all on her own, which was one of the biggest challenges throughout the process. She applied for every scholarship she could find, but received none of them, which was disheartening until she received enough other types of financial aid. Though LPU was her first choice to attend, Velma had so many people she admired who were LPU alumni she was not sure she would be “good enough” to get accepted. “I never thought I'd get into LPU,” she says, “It really threw me for a loop when I realized I got in. I didn't think I was smart enough. I didn't think I had good enough grades… it was like my Harvard.” Velma admits her preparation for college once she had plans to attend was minimal. She did realize that she
needed to improve her math skills after she had a difficult experience with a math placement exam, and tried to spend time at John’s house during the summer before college studying calculus. Describing her preparation, she says:

I could have done have a lot more. Concretely, I bought sheets. I had never bought sheets before coming here. My mom just had the same sheets forever, so I bought my first tangible sheets. Which wouldn't seem like a big stepping-stone, but it definitely was. …It represents independence in a lot of ways. … Buying sheets, putting them on my own bed, that was sort of liberating and a wonderful feeling of new. It felt like a fresh start, like a new person could be born from going to this college.

**Adapting to college as challenges arose.** Velma’s entrance to college included many immediate changes that felt “drastically” different from what she was used to. She describes it as a “weird transition”, saying, “I went from being the only child and living in a rural community to having a roommate, living in a building full of students my age, and being in the middle of a city.” That roommate turned out to be someone Velma would grow to consider a best friend, as Velma made friends quickly at LPU and felt like her new peers became the most important part of her support network during her first year of college. She lived in an arts-themed residential living community, in which she particularly appreciated that she was able to find a group of friends similar to herself.

Expanding her support network to include her college peers so quickly upon arriving at LPU allowed Velma to find the guidance she needed to adjust to her college environment, schedule, habits, and academics. Velma’s friendship with her roommate not only facilitated a
positive social transition to LPU, but also supported Velma’s academic transition by modeling good studying behavior. At first, Velma was surprised how hard she needed to start working to succeed in her college courses, and after failing her very first test she realized her study habits needed to change significantly if she was going to reach the level of achievement she expected for herself at LPU. At that point, she remembers, “I realized life was going to get a lot harder. I also sort of realized exactly how hard I was going to have to work in order to make my parents proud.”

During her first year of college, Velma continued to feel supported by John and his family, though the distance made it more difficult to stay as closely connected as they were in high school. Her parents also remained supportive, and her mother in particular found little ways to show Velma how much she cared about her success and wellbeing despite the geographical distance. In addition to social support, Velma’s flexibility and problem-solving skills carried her through her first year of college, helping her to adapt as challenges arose and find ways to turn most obstacles into success. One of the challenges that most influenced her first year was a particularly difficult life event that made a significant impact on her motivation to succeed; Velma describes what happened, beginning right before she left home for college:

My uncle found out that he had pancreatic cancer, and he was always one that pushed me. … He wanted me to go to college, do great things. … He passed away during my finals of my first semester of college. … It was horrible, and then it was during finals, so I missed three of my finals and had to come back and retake them. … Not only did
my uncle die, but eight hours before that my grandfather died. So, I had really rough finals. … Getting through that, and still doing most of my finals that week, was rough, but I did it anyways because I knew I had to and I couldn't fail my classes. This experience made the end of Velma’s first semester extremely difficult, as she wanted to be able to spend time with her family grieving instead of completing her exams at LPU. The strength she had to return to school and perform well on her exams largely came from the motivation she felt from her commitment to proving she could rise to her uncle’s expectations and her parent’s aspirations.

In reflection on her entire first year of college, Velma is surprised she could learn so much in just one year of classes. As she says, “I learned so many things and even if I didn't do as well on a test as I wanted to, I still studied really hard and realized new things.” The excitement she gets from gaining knowledge, combined with the relationships she built at LPU and her life-long motivation to excel, has fueled her enthusiasm for education and eagerness to continue her success in college.

Victoria

A self-described introvert, Victoria exudes a sincerity that exemplifies a cautious, contemplative nature. She is a thoughtful, personable student with a kind demeanor and a steadfast commitment to improving her family’s life through the rewards of her success.

Family background. Victoria is one of four siblings raised in a small, rural community. Both from Mexico, neither of her parents completed their secondary education. Victoria’s mother assumed responsibility for five siblings during her high school years,
preventing her from completing a diploma. Victoria’s father faced financial barriers as an adolescent that prevented him from both completing school and pursuing his dreams as a talented soccer player. Her father has worked most of her life in factory and construction jobs and her mother has worked sporadically in secretarial jobs and cleaning houses. During her first year of college, Victoria’s older brother worked as a mechanic in Mexico, and her younger sister and brother attended middle and high school.

One of the most important influences on Victoria’s academic success has been the consistent encouragement and inspiration she feels from her parents. Both parents emphasized to Victoria from an early age that if she needed help in school they were unable to provide, they would find someone who could. Their commitment to seeing Victoria do well has cultivated in her a deep pride for her family’s support and fostered her determination to return their kindness once she reaches a level of professional success. She also feels an obligation to share her experiences with her younger siblings, which exemplifies her determination to do well for the sake of her family; Victoria explains:

Succeeding in college not only affects me, but it affects my siblings from what I understand, because my mom always tells me that I'm the example in the house. I have the feeling that if I fail them it's going to give them a reason to not want to succeed themselves

**Developing academic excellence.** When Victoria was only four years old, her mother enrolled her in kindergarten with a slightly older cousin. Though Victoria was not technically old enough, school quickly became a stimulating experience she remembers fondly. Even as
a child, she never felt like it was possible to fail academically with her mother already pushing her to excel. For every subject, her mother would tell her, “You have to know everything about this,” and require her to try again each time she made a mistake.

This commitment to academic achievement continued into middle and high school, where Victoria began to explore new avenues of learning independently. The combination of feeling awkwardly “anti-social” amongst her peers, dislike of school lunches, and being an avid reader led her to spend much of her time in the school library. Alongside this independent studying, several memorable teachers fostered skills that would serve Victoria well as she reached advanced levels of achievement. She excelled in her classes throughout, and finished high school by taking five AP courses, out of six available, and enrolling in two courses at a nearby community college to experience a higher level of academic challenge. These courses were indeed difficult, but she felt that she learned much from them about what to expect from the demands of college-level academics.

Though Victoria has always succeeded academically, it was not until high school that she realized there were steps she needed to take in order to be prepared to go to college. During this time, she attended two different college preparation programs outside of school that both influenced her aspirations to pursue postsecondary education. Following these experiences, Victoria was ready to move through the processes of preparing for and enrolling in college. When she had questions, her high school counselors helped guide her through making a decision about where to go. Though her parents were unable to be very involved in many of the college access processes because of their inexperience with college and
sometimes the language barrier, Victoria made an effort to learn as much as she could about what she needed to know about processes and procedures and translate the information for her parents’ knowledge. A family friend was also integral in helping Victoria through the application process, thanks to a connection her father made. She applied to three schools and ended up choosing LPU because it offered a highly regarded program she wanted to major in and it was relatively close to home.

**College as “a challenging but new adventure.”** Victoria came to LPU during the summer before her first semester of enrollment to attend a transition program aimed towards students of color interested in engineering. This program provided Victoria with a gentle introduction to college life, one that significantly helped her acclimate to the differences from living at home. In addition to helping Victoria establish a college routine, the transition program included trips to see companies where alumni work in fields related to her career interests. She recalls a visit to one company in particular that took her out-of-state for the first time that was particularly meaningful in helping her think about her future.

Despite having experience with college courses in high school and during the summer transition program, Victoria was still surprised by the difficulty of a full academic semester once she began her first year at LPU. Her first calculus class, in particular, was much harder than she expected it to be; however, it also motivated her to take her studying more seriously and change her habits so she was able to shape her learning to the needs of each course. While this helped her do well academically her first year, finishing with a GPA above 3.2 and earning an A in the calculus class with which she initially struggled, she continued to
adjust to college academics each semester. “I feel like every time I start a new semester,” she says, “I have to learn and adapt because the classes aren’t taught the same. Even though they're science classes, I have to learn the way they're teaching it.”

Personally, Victoria experienced a lot of anxiety throughout her first year, as she was learning more and more about what it was like to be in college. She describes this stressful feeling with an example of a particular misunderstanding that caused her undue worry:

I thought that if you had bad grades you would end up paying everything back, like every scholarship penny that you got, you would have to end up paying it back. I was so scared out of my mind to get bad grades because I thought I was going to have to pay back everything. It wasn't until recently that I found out that you don't pay back anything.

One of the most memorable experiences Victoria had during her first year was the feeling of intimidation when she walked into her first large lecture class. She remembers:

I heard before that college was big, but I was really shocked when I entered my chemistry class and it was a class for 200 and some people. I was incredibly shocked.

I was like, “This is a lot of people.”

Bringing a network of established friendships into her first year from the summer transition program, however, made a significant difference in Victoria’s ability to handle the overwhelming size of the university community. In addition, Victoria’s parents’ support for her commitment to her academics never wavered from high school into college, though her connection to them became more difficult to maintain once she was not living at home. She
visited her family often, but felt lonely during her first year because of the distance she was living away from them. A strong connection with a tight-knit circle of friends was the most important thing that helped her cope with that experience.

Overall, Victoria feels that she had a successful first year largely due to the work ethic and determination to succeed she developed from her parents’ support, the preparation she received in the summer transition program, and the resources and friends she found at LPU. In summary, she adds a valuable caveat to the description of her first year experience:

[Preparation before college] is helpful, but you're going to have to learn every step. Every year you're going to have to adapt, I think, that's in my opinion. You're just going to have to learn your way because no one way is the perfect way for trying to get through college. … I'd say [the first year of college] was a challenging but new adventure, that even though there was some struggle, in the end working hard is definitely a must for succeeding.

**Chapter Summary**

Each participant in this study experienced a unique educational path that led to success in the first year of college. Their stories, as represented by the narrative overviews presented in this chapter, speak of the challenges, opportunities, strengths, and support that impacted their achievements and abilities to succeed throughout their K-12 and postsecondary experiences. The next chapter, chapter five, will present connections between and across participants’ stories through identification of emergent themes within the data.
CHAPTER FIVE: THEMATIC FINDINGS

This study aims to understand the educational experiences of first-generation, low-income (FGL) students who experienced success in the first year of college. Each participant’s story of educational success was collected through two in-depth interviews, a written journal reflection, and co-construction of a narrative educational story. These sources of data, capturing both verbal and written reflective thought, complemented each other to create a holistic picture of participants’ educational paths, which are summarized in chapter four.

Though the process of thematic narrative analysis emphasizes first understanding each story individually, subsequent analysis of stories together allows key themes to emerge from across participants’ experiences. In this study, although each student’s educational experience was unique in many ways, together these eight narratives highlight important shared elements that suggest common themes among their educational paths. This chapter presents these themes using extensive examples to highlight each theme in detail and explicate its importance to students’ experiences. The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

Emergent Themes

The three main themes that emerged from analysis of all eight narratives considered together identify components of participants’ stories that overlap and highlight shared experiences that contributed to students’ educational success. The primary themes these stories shared were that families emphasized education, students accrued educational
resources and opportunities, and students developed protective dispositional characteristics.

These themes and their related subthemes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Three Main Emergent Themes and Related Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Families Emphasized Education.</td>
<td>a. Families prioritized the value of education.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>b. Families held high expectations for educational attainment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>c. Families’ focus on education actively protected students from risk factors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Students Accrued Educational Resources and Opportunities</td>
<td>a. Mentors, educators, and peers fostered social support and emphasized resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Programs and opportunities facilitated experiences that increased motivation, shaped aspirations, and imparted information.</td>
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<td>3. Students Developed Protective Dispositional Characteristics</td>
<td>a. Students acquired beneficial traits from familial, environmental, and personal sources throughout their educational paths.</td>
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<td>b. Dispositional protective factors mitigated postsecondary challenges.</td>
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**Families Emphasized Education**

Across their stories, participants told of growing up in families that had little experience with postsecondary education. Most participants’ parents never attended any college, and many did not finish high school. Yet in all situations, the emphasis families placed on the importance of education was a key factor in the success students experienced throughout their educational paths.
Families prioritized the value of education. Families prioritizing education at home was something all participants identified as a memorable aspect of their precollege experiences. However, families demonstrated the value they placed on education in varied ways. For Alexa and Velma, this meant strict rules about completing schoolwork before participating in other activities. As Alexa describes:

We did a lot of extracurriculars in middle and high school. It was to the point where [my mother] was like, "I don't care if you have a basketball game. If your homework is not done, you're not going to go to this game. I'm pulling you out."

Velma recalls her mother’s active role in prioritizing schoolwork:

She pushed me. Hard. If I was laying around watching TV, she'd say, "Oh, have you done your homework? Are you going to do your homework? You should do your homework." She would nag me until I would do it.

Though Rachel felt conflicted by the expectations of her family’s cultural traditions, her parents’ encouragement of her academic interests from an early age allowed her to explore her scientific imagination and exemplified the extent to which they highly valued education. Alongside their encouragement, this value also began to influence her future aspirations; Rachel recalls, “They would always tell me that I would have so many more opportunities if I have a good education, and get a degree, and have a good occupation in life.”

In addition to encouragement and support, one of the benefits participants received from their families’ emphasis on education was the internalization of values and personality
traits that contributed significantly to their success. Among these were a strong work ethic, determination to excel academically, self-discipline in the face of distractions from education, educational self-efficacy, and resolute motivation to achieve success. As Rachel further illustrates, “I value education a lot and my parents definitely value education a lot, so it cycles into me wanting to excel so I can do better in school.”

Duke highlights how he internalized a personal drive to do well in school at an early age while describing the ways his mother pushed him towards educational achievement. She often compelled him to try harder and go farther academically, but she made sure he also knew that it was the effort rather than the achievement that mattered to her. Duke recalls that other parents would “allow their children to settle, so settling for C’s,” whereas his mom would say to him, "It's okay if you get a B or a C, but I want to know that you worked extremely hard to get it." As he says of believing in himself and learning to take work ethic and a drive towards success seriously, “I just built up the natural instinct to do it.”

Gabriela, full of gratitude towards her parents, exemplifies how she developed these traits from the way they celebrated and placed value on her education at home:

My parents were always very proud of me. I would always overhear their phone calls with my grandmas or other family members where they were praising me for my hard work. I definitely loved hearing them praise me, even until this day I show my grades to my parents and they are happy for me. … I will always be thankful for everything they did for me. They encountered many struggles, but despite all of the hardships, they still encouraged me. They never did lose hope for me. Despite the circumstances
and the high chance that I would end up in the same path as them and my brother, they believed in me. And because they believed in me, I gained the strength and determination to work hard, to not let their efforts be neglected. This determination evolved into self-efficacy and motivation to continue achieving success as Gabriela moved through her educational path, which she attributes to her desire to achieve enough success to have the means to help her family in return for their support.

Victoria and Velma were also extremely motivated by the educational emphasis in their families. Though Victoria’s father was less directly encouraging of her education than her mother, it was the example he set through his attitude towards education that truly inspired her to want to work hard; she says:

Even through all of [his adversity], he keeps telling us how important it is to go through school, how important it is to try and succeed. … His parents did not encourage him to succeed, yet rather than maintaining the same mentality with his family, he instead emphasized to his children that success was attainable for all of them. This is something that truly moves and motivates me.

Velma also describes internalizing motivation based on her family’s values and her hopes for their future:

I've always wanted to do really well in life to help my parents out, to be able to give them a better house, give them better cars. That's been my motivation most of my life, to work really hard and make them proud. … I have a very high standard in most things because my dad always told me, “Be the best or don't do anything at all.” …
They work so hard and watching them work hard and not have as much as other families have had ... I really have a good appreciation for how hard they work and I don't want to let them down. In a lot of ways I want all their hard work to build me so that I can build my children up and give back to them.

Alexa emphasizes that the independence she learned from her family’s prioritization of education helped her remain self-motivated for achievement and contributed to the success she experienced in her first year of college. She explains:

If you don't have self-motivation you really can’t do anything. There will be times when it will be like, "I really don't want to do this homework but I need to get up here and do this homework." Just things like that. Or, "I don't really want to go to class but I really need to get up and go to class or else I'm not going to get it." I feel like if you can't motivate yourself, nobody really could motivate you. If you don't give yourself a reason why you need to do something, any reason that somebody else gives you might not stand up.

Through focusing on education to the extent that students recognized and appreciated it as an important family value, participants’ families prepared them to take school seriously and actively pursue academic excellence. In the same way, establishing a foundation of prioritizing education above other responsibilities also created within students many internal qualities that facilitated their paths to success.

**Families held high expectations for educational attainment.** While similar to the ways in which families prioritized education as an important value at home, another specific
aspect of families’ emphasis on education manifested in their aspirations for students to receive high school diplomas and pursue postsecondary degrees. For all participants, the emphasis families placed on education included high expectations for achievement throughout their educational paths and into the future. Most families’ expectations resulted in the assumption that after graduating from high school, postsecondary education was the obvious next step in students’ futures. Often, students described being expected to attend college for as long as they can remember, despite their families’ lack of college experience. As Velma recalls:

I've never heard of [college] talked about as an option to me. I was going. It was never, “Oh, you can go if you want to.” It was, “You're going, it's the next step. It's what you're doing.” … There was never a time in my life when I ever thought about not going to college. … It's like it was absolutely required.

Victoria remembers thinking college was just a natural step after high school. She says, “It was just kind of like those things, you always hear, ‘You have to do this. You have to do this as a grown up,’ like having to do taxes.” Similarly, Rachel recalls her parents’ unwavering expectations leading her to view college as an obligation, not necessarily something she was choosing for herself; as she explains, “I think it was always expected of me that I need to go to college. I don't really remember a time when I wanted to go, not that I don’t want to now.”

An important aspect to this experience was that students felt their families made an active effort to emphasize education and convey their expectations about postsecondary degree attainment more so than many of their peers’ families, particularly those peers with
college-educated parents. Participants attributed this to their parents’ experiences knowing how limiting it is to seek economic stability as adults without college degrees. Agustín’s parents were especially clear in conveying their belief that education is critical to success in life; Agustín describes:

> When it came to middle school and high school, [my parents] would start saying that education was incredibly important, and to not take it lightly. Because they know what it's like to not have education. What extra strides have to be performed to reach levels that people with education have. What they can't even reach because of not having an education. They’ve kept repeating it in college, while I'm here, that education is important and to take it seriously. They've always been very firm about the notion that it's incredibly important. … I knew that there were people that didn't take education seriously, and I knew that that wasn't the path that I wanted to take because of knowing that education was so important to my parents, as well as it was for me.

Carmen echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that because her parents saw their lack of education as a significant barrier to their success, they were particularly supportive of the educational attainment of both herself and her siblings; she explains:

> Education is very important to my family, but I guess [our parents] weren't provided the same opportunities that myself and my siblings were. So them not going to college didn't really mean that it was okay for us not to. It was just that they didn't
have the opportunities, and they wanted to make sure that we would be able to have those opportunities.

Alexa describes a similar experience:

College was not an option for us. It was, "You're going to college. It's just a matter of where you're going." … Because it was something [my mom] regretted the most, not finishing when she had the chance, she was like, "I want y'all to have that. I don't want y'all to be forty, trying to go back to school, when you could have had your degree in your career field."

In contrast to receiving lifelong college expectations from family, Gabriela shares a counterstory that highlights a way in which family expectations for attainment without a focus on postsecondary education can combine with students’ development of responsibility and autonomy to influence educational success. Rather than express a future educational goal for Gabriela, her family instead saw her excellence as she progressed through school and gave her steadfast trust that she would know what was right for her own future. Gabriela remembers:

During high school, my parents never brought up the topic of college. I was never forced to choose whether I wanted to go or not. I guess because I was so independent about my education, I was just figuring things out on my own. When I was younger, my parents did tell me that I would probably go to college. But as I grew older, they never really mentioned it again … They probably figured that I would make the right decision on my own.
Though they never imposed expectations for Gabriela to attend college, her parents did make it clear that they believed she would, as she says, “amount to something” and “be successful.” She always felt that she was expected to do well, even if those expectations were not specifically directed at postsecondary education.

While Gabriela was the only participant to express not growing up with expectations to attain a college degree, others had similar experiences with families encouraging independence and self-direction in pursuit of success. For Carmen and Velma, this became clearest once college became a tangible reality and they began the application and enrollment process. Carmen describes how she experienced her mother’s trust and support when she was empowered her to make her own decision about what college to attend, even though her mother had a particular preference; Carmen says:

I think she was really supportive. She did give me her opinions on things, but she didn't overly do it to where it would sway my own opinion. She was just really supportive, and I guess when I needed advice, she was there to give it. … I was really torn between two schools. She was a great help with that, because she just let me talk it out with her and listing pros and cons of each school. She wasn't really being biased about one school over the other when I knew she liked one over the other.

Similarly, Velma describes that by the time she was navigating college applications, her parents were so comfortable with her independence they respected it and knew she would ask for help if she needed it; she says, “If I asked them a few questions, they were more than willing to help me find out the answers, but they didn't really actively seek out ways to do it.”
Families’ high expectations for students’ educational attainment served as both encouragement and motivation. Often cultivating independence and autonomy, families’ expectations for students’ success were central components of participants’ experiences navigating their paths towards college. Whether or not these expectations were concretely directed at college, they influenced students’ own aspirations for postsecondary degree attainment in all cases.

**Families’ focus on education actively protected students from risk factors.** In addition to fostering valuable internal characteristics, demonstrating support, and providing encouragement, families’ emphasis on participants’ education served to directly mitigate potential negative impacts of risk factors. Most notably, many families sought to actively shield students from the effects of their limited financial resources. In Victoria’s case, her parents went to noticeable efforts to ensure she was adequately prepared for school and would not need to worry about having what she needed to be successful. Victoria explains:

> My parents always made sure I had school supplies, went to school, and focused on my studies. My mom would let me skip doing chores if that meant I studied, did homework instead. … They told me what they couldn't afford and what they could. I never worried about it, because I never went for whatever was out of their bounds. … Although I grew up without having too much money, I can’t say money was a problem in my education because my parents always made sure I had school supplies and my mom even used some of her savings to buy me a laptop.
Alexa discusses what she realizes in retrospect were the lengths her mother went to in order to make sure she had what she needed educationally:

She made sure we had everything we needed to succeed. I feel like it would have been harder for me to fail than it would have been for me to succeed. . . . I don't know how she did it. She would always make whatever happen, if we asked for it and she knew it was something that we either really wanted or really needed; she would always make it happen.

Families often recognized the resources they were lacking based on their financial or educational backgrounds and made concerted efforts to seek external sources to supplement their students’ needs. Victoria’s and Agustín’s mothers, for example, both had friends with college experience to whom they could go for educational advice for their students. Victoria’s mother had a network of friends in her hometown to which she went for help when she needed guidance for Victoria in school. “If there was anytime I didn’t understand how to do a project or homework assignment,” Victoria remembers, “she would make calls to find someone who could help me.” Likewise, during his college exploration and admissions process, Agustín’s mother gathered as much information as she could from co-workers whose own children were attending college.

Velma’s family demonstrated their efforts through enrolling her in a different elementary school than the one to which she was assigned because they believed there were more opportunities for academic growth at the one they chose; Velma describes:
[My mom] wanted somewhere that would give me the best base for my life. Then in that area they had wonderful camps. ... They were fun and made me think, like Innovation Camp was one of them and none of the other schools, the elementary schools, had it, but that one did, and really every summer I would go while I was in elementary school and learn about science and math and it just created a love of science which I'm very thankful for.

When Duke was in middle school, his mother wanted to connect him to successful adults with similar backgrounds as their family. Eventually she found the 100 Black Men organization that provided Duke with a mentor who could guide him through parts of his education with which his parents were unfamiliar. Demonstrating his support by also finding guidance for Duke where he was unable to provide it himself, Duke’s father made an important connection with this mentor; Duke explains:

My father came to him, and my father said that he didn't have the right gifts or toolset to really give me. … Man to man, my dad confronted him and said, "Hey could you help out my son, because I can't do it by myself." … My dad wanted me to grow up and be powerful, and make money, and be happy and all of that, so that's why he was trying to get me to be more proactive with my mentor, because he could literally show me which road I need to take to get to where I want to be.

For Carmen, learning to deal with her father’s illness and the increased financial burden it created for her family was extremely difficult, yet her family’s efforts to help her through it made her significantly more able to continue excelling in school. As she describes:
What really helped me overcome the grief was the support of my family. The support and selflessness I received from my older brother and sister, mom, and even my dad helped me thrive in school again. They provided me with anything necessary to succeed. Whether it was finding extra help for me outside of school, networking in order to provide me with better opportunities, or working twice as hard in order to provide me the proper funds to succeed, they did it all.

Taken as a whole, aspects of families’ emphasis on education worked together to overcome the potential negative effects of parents’ limited educational experiences, understanding of college processes, and financial means. In these ways, families contributed to shielding students from the effects of risk factors, helping students expand social networks when students’ needs grew beyond the scope of familial support, and actively filling what they saw as gaps in the educational resources students needed to succeed.

**Students Accrued Educational Resources and Opportunities**

In addition to the educational encouragement, guidance, and values provided by their families, participants benefited from numerous individuals, programs, and experiences in their environments throughout their educational paths. These educational resources also contributed significantly to the preparation students needed to excel academically, develop aspirations for their futures, understand postsecondary opportunities, navigate access and transition to college, and achieve first-year success at LPU.

**Mentors, educators, and peers fostered social support and emphasized resources.** Throughout their educational narratives, participants often gave credit to individuals outside
their families for having valuable influence on their educational paths. Particularly as students advanced in their education and began to need more and different support than what their families could provide, these mentors, educators, and peers offered different types of resources than students received at home and supplemented the support students received from their families.

**Mentors.** For Duke, Velma, Rachel, Agustín, and Alexa, formal, informal, and peer mentors provided connections with opportunities, guidance, and educational knowledge that served to positively influence their academic success. Interactions with these community members contributed to students’ motivation to excel in school and helped them develop aspirations that drove them towards pursuing postsecondary success. Duke’s formal mentor from 100 Black Men was someone he could talk to about things of which his parents had little knowledge, who Duke says, “broadened my perspectives,” and who introduced him to opportunities that Duke feels he otherwise would have missed. Duke describes several such programs his mentor connected him with and what those opportunities meant to him:

There's a program in [my hometown] which allows you to pair up with one of the city facilities, so I got paired up twice with the utilities department and the engineering department. Just those connections, meeting those people, and having actual experience with maybe work I want to do one day, or learning about, "Hey I don't want to do this work, [cough cough] civil engineering." … Another program that he got me in was the 100 Pathways program, where actual business professionals come in and they sit down in an auditorium, and it was a 10 week program where we
learned both the corporate path and the entrepreneurial path to the professional work.

… Every time my mentor showed me something new, showed me something that I'd never even imagined, growing up, I always rose my bar to that next level like, "Hey, this is a possibility now. I can actually do this."

Velma's experience with mentorship came from a less formal mentoring relationship with her boyfriend John’s parents; she elaborates on how spending time at their house impacted her education:

Going over there, they all knew the answers to questions I had and could explain it very well, rather than when my parents would have to Google it or look through the book to find the answer, which I could do myself.

Even in college, John’s father still shows a particular interest in what she learns, which she believes contributed to pushing her farther in school than she could have gone without this kind of support. As Velma says about John’s father, “Every time I tell him about what I'm doing in school, he knows all about it. He's an engineer so he's incredibly smart and he'll question me about it in depth.” Similarly, Rachel grew up with an informal mentor in her best friend’s father, who worked as a biologist at a local university. During middle school, she began joining their family on vacations, which fueled her interest in studying science, particularly nature and biology; Rachel describes:

Whenever we go on beach trips, [my best friend’s dad] would always bring a microscope with him and we would look ... we would literally prepare slides at the beach and do dissections when we find a dead jellyfish and stuff like that. He'll bring
out kits so I can do it, and he definitely helped me get into that biology mindset of,

“This is what I want to do with my life.”

Because of these experiences, Rachel describes her friend’s father as one of the most helpful people she has encountered throughout her educational path. At a time when she needed more support for her developing aspirations than what she received at home, being able to explore her interests in natural sciences through his expertise facilitated her goals of achieving a career in biology, and solidified her motivation to pursue higher education in a more concrete way than her family’s expectations previously had.

For Agustín and Alexa, peer mentors in college were also important sources of information and motivation. During their first year, both Agustín and Alexa needed specific guidance with many aspects of LPU with which their families were unfamiliar. To find this support, they both felt it was important that their social relationships shifted to include other students who had experiences at LPU with aspects of the university that were similar to what they were trying to navigate. Distinct from the other relationships he built with peers who became friends, Agustín met several older students at LPU who were meaningful to him because they helped him understand what his academic journey in college could potentially look like; he elaborates:

It means a lot to me to have someone that cares about me enough to show me what paths they took to get to a place where they are … Academically I find it to be a lot more important to have those role models, in a sense, to know what's possible in my career.
Alexa was assigned peer mentors both through the summer transition program she attended and a peer mentoring student organization during her first fall semester. The support she gained from these mentors was particularly helpful in guiding her through administrative and academic aspects of LPU when her sister did not have answers for her questions. She appreciates her relationships with these mentors so much, she wants to become a peer mentor herself, saying, “I hope to be a mentor next year possibly … I feel like because I had such a great experiences with mentors that I want to give that back to someone.”

**Educators.** Educators also made lasting impacts as participants progressed through their educational paths, often providing support that was as important as families’ support while preparing for and transitioning to college. For many participants, educator support emerged as most important when their needs shifted towards college preparation and planning. Victoria and Alexa both credited high school counselors with opening doors to experiences they valued as they prepared for college and helping to guide them through college application processes. For example, when Victoria was in her sophomore high school year, she got to know one of her school counselors quite well, partially because Victoria and her friends spent their downtime at school sitting in the lounge of the counseling offices, and partially because Victoria was so willing to take advantage of extra educational opportunities. This was important to Victoria because the counselor directed her to opportunities that led her to make concrete goals for her future; Victoria says:

> My high school counselor was the one who saw potential in me and as a result suggested wonderful opportunities to lead me to my career and university choice. She
helped by informing me of great opportunities such as the camp here in LPU, a camp I attended when I was a high school sophomore. She was the one that recommended I apply for the college preparation program, she gave me college advice, she talked to me about the SAT and ACT, she always answered my questions, and she was very kind to me.

In a similar manner, Gabriela, Duke, Velma, Agustín, and Rachel each described teachers who were especially helpful in offering them emotional support, guiding them through preparations for college, and helping them understand their postsecondary options. For Agustín, a relationship with his yearbook teacher opened him up to resources, ideas, and experiences that helped him plan for his future. Agustín explains:

He helped me with recommendation letters as well as socially becoming more confident and more responsible, more aware of what my actions caused. ... We took a trip senior year to the art museum in the capital of my state, and it was really just a matter of showing us what's out there in the world, like what's possible and what the experiences are to be had, that people like my parents weren't really knowledgeable of. … I appreciated someone that was trying to show us a good time, and what more there is to the world than just the tiny town.

As Agustín approached his college application process, he appreciated the encouragement and support he received from his relationship with this teacher. Especially because this teacher became a male role model, their interactions were meaningful in a way that expanded
Agustín’s social network to include a type of informed educational guidance he felt he had “missed out on with my actual father.”

Rachel had uniquely strong relationships with two of her high school teachers, which she emphasizes as critically important to her success transitioning to college. Perhaps because as she approached college her parents provided more expectations than encouragement, Rachel learned quickly that developing close relationships with high school teachers could help her find the support she needed to excel academically and pursue her college aspirations. Spanish class was one of Rachel’s most difficult throughout all of high school, but Rachel often stayed after school to talk with the teacher, especially when she needed help making decisions about her plans for college. “She gives me life advice,” Rachel says, “and she helped me through my college process when I was freaking out, just almost wanted to quit.” Similarly, Rachel formed a strong bond with her library teacher, with whom Rachel could discuss personal questions and concerns as her transition to college neared. Since Rachel was not comfortable talking to her own parents in this way, her library teacher helped her through some difficult times when she very much needed emotional support. The presence of these two caring adults was integral in Rachel’s success handling the pressures of her demanding high school experience and becoming ready for a successful first year at LPU; as Rachel says, “They gave me the [emotional] support that I sought from my parents but never actually got. Without them, I would not be where I am today.”

Once in college, educators played an even more important role in facilitating first-year success for several participants. Because of the specific nature of the support students
needed during their first year, especially with elements of academic integration, educators sometimes became more prominent in students’ support networks during this time than families. Rachel, Agustín, Velma, Alexa, and Gabriela all described the importance of their first-year academic advisors in helping them become adjusted to LPU, solidify their educational aspirations in college, solve problems as they transitioned to college-level academics, and navigate the administrative side of the university’s requirements. While Agustin was in the process of choosing a major, for example, his advisor was one of the most supportive people he met at LPU. He appreciated having someone who believed he could complete whatever major he chose and encouraged him throughout the year; he recalls:

She helped me, no matter what I thought of majoring in. She always gave me steps to how that would be possible, and she never doubted that I was able to complete the majors I was thinking of, whether it be accounting or genetics or finance or something like that.

In much the same way, Duke spoke of the director of an engineering program of which he is a participant as “another mother figure on campus to check up on me if I ever needed it.” She especially became an important source of support when he was struggling with the challenges of adjusting to LPU.

Carmen and Gabriela also had positive interactions with professors whom they felt made extra efforts to help them understand material and how to succeed in college-level courses. Gabriela credits a professor, along with her advisor, as providing her with
relationships that helped fill what she felt like she was missing because of her parents’ limited educational experiences; she explains:

Students always say chemistry is super hard and I would always go to office hours and I guess [my chemistry professor] saw that I was very motivated so he helped motivate me to do very well in the class. I actually spoke to him about my personal issues, he helped me a lot with that as well. Also freshman year, my advisor, she was probably the most important just in terms of my freshman year. I still keep in contact with her ‘til now. She helped me. A lot of the questions I had about college, clubs, different majors, careers, events going on here… Because of her, I think, it was part of the reason that I did well in my first year. … I guess [my chemistry professor and advisor] took up the roles that parents who did go to college and did go to high school would have.

**Peers.** For some participants, peers also provided necessary motivation and information as they sought success in school and worked towards postsecondary opportunities. Alexa and Carmen both surrounded themselves with peer groups growing up that had similar postsecondary goals, and credited their peers with keeping them focused and pushing them towards achievement as they completed high school. Victoria gives an excellent example through a story of how her peers fueled her work ethic in two distinct ways. As a freshman in high school, she inadvertently began a friendly competition with another student who she describes as her rival:
He looked for the person who was number one in the school, academically in our class, and that's how he found me. He told me he made it his goal to beat me. … We were in the same calc class, all the science and math classes, we were all in the same classes because we were a small high school, so we were always in the same classes. We would always fight about the answer and who would get it right first. For me, that was, again, competition which was really great. I would always try to show him up. This competition helped her build relationships with other students who were friends with both of them, and pushed her to achieve throughout high school and into college, where the two now attend rival universities. Not all of Victoria’s experiences with peers were so positive, yet she still drew encouragement from them. As a student who worked hard in high school, Victoria felt like she knew few other students who were similar to her. Many, she explained, did not have parents who encouraged them or expected them to attend college, which was an important distinction from Victoria’s own experience. As she described:

Most of the parents were like that actually. They always stay in the same job. They would work picking up blueberries, oranges. I got to do that … I saw it really was hard work, but I don't understand why they would want their kids to do the same thing.

This difference in aspirations and expectations between Victoria and many of her peers further contributed to her desire to continue her education and surpass the achievements of those around her in her high school community.
Duke also experienced the benefits of peer impact high school, detailing how two of his best friends each taught him particular traits that he believes helped him become successful in school. Duke explains:

One friend, he always asks questions. If a speaker came, he would ask 50 questions, and we always knew he was the most knowledgeable person. It just reminded me, if I want to get to that level of knowledge, I'll have to always ask questions and not be afraid to. … Another friend, he was bold in his honesty and his … integrity, yes. He grew up in a situation where his father wasn't there, and just everything was a bad influence around him. … He always knew that he was going to make it, and nobody was going to stop him then. I always looked up to him for his boldness, because I knew there were times where I was weak, but he was always like, "Hey, we're going to do this, that, that, and we're going to make something out of our lives." He always kept me looking at a goal, instead of everything messy around me.

Duke remembers another friend in particular as a positive influence, reflecting that their friendship contributed to his drive to achieve; Duke says, of their friendship:

It actually gave more purpose to my life in a sense. Now I have another person to not let down, and not like I was a weight on my chest, but just a reminder, "Hey, you can't stop now, you've got to keep going, and you've got to make him proud."

Perhaps even more notably, all participants indicated the significance of peers in supporting first-year success once they arrived at LPU. Peer support at LPU came to participants at a time when they needed social integration, encouragement, and assistance in
their new college environment that only other students could provide. Though all participants had varying experiences in meeting other students and becoming socially adjusted to college, by the end of their first year each had at least one close relationship with another student who offered guidance through unfamiliar aspects of college life, help with academic challenges, emotional support, and friendship. Velma, Rachel, Duke, and Agustín indicated that those peer relationships were the most important source of support they had had once they reached LPU. For Velma, this was her first-year roommate who quickly became her best friend. Velma explains what having such a close friend during her first year meant to her:

> It was wonderful, because not having any siblings I didn't really have that growing up; I didn’t have someone that could experience things through the same eyes. So experiencing LPU with someone who is also experiencing it for the first time was awesome because we always had the same sort of thoughts and we're very similar people so we always thought the same things and could just talk about it for hours. … I became much more comfortable here.

Velma also learned how to study in new ways from watching her roommate’s habits, a skill that was critical in her ability to adjust quickly to the rigor of courses at LPU; she explains:

> My first test, bombed it. Oh, I failed so badly and then I realized, “Okay, so I need to really actually read the book and actually go back and re-read the book and then take my notes and re-read my notes and rewrite my notes.” So I changed everything about my habits for school. … [My roommate], in high school had to study a lot. She had to work hard to get her grades and it showed because she works hard in everything. She
motivated me and helped me learn how to because I wouldn't ask her for help. I'm not that kind of person. I would just watch what she was doing and see that she was getting good grades and so I would do those things and sort of modify them to my own style. But definitely having her in the room studying showed me that I needed to be studying at the same time.

Rachel speaks similarly of how important her circle of friends became as she progressed through her first year, calling them “basically my psychiatrists” because of how much emotional support they provided for her; she describes:

My friend support group definitely carried me through. Starting here, even though it's in my hometown, there were a ton of people. Being an introvert at a thirty-four thousand people institute isn't exactly the best. Having my friend group there and just talking to me and just having someone to fall back on when I'm in need of help and support was definitely really, really helpful. … I know a lot of people, I'm friends with a lot of people, but having that close-knit group where I can just, at the end of the day I can go to them and cry or just tell them what's worrying me and feel that they won't judge is very important.

Between mentors, educators, and peers, all participants built relationships throughout their experiences that served to encourage, support, guide, and direct them towards educational success. Drawing on different sources of support as their needs changed, participants gained resources from their social networks that helped them accrue the social capital they needed to successfully progress through their educational paths. From these
relationships, students gained invaluable knowledge, access to opportunities, college-related information, and assistance with educational processes that complemented what participants’ families were able to provide, contributing to students’ abilities to achieve positive educational outcomes culminating in first-year success.

**Programs and opportunities facilitated experiences that increased motivation, shaped aspirations, and imparted information.** In addition to individuals who offered resources and support beyond what their families could provide, participants were often involved in particular programs that provided information and fostered development of motivation and aspirations that contributed to educational success.

**Precollege programs.** Duke, Rachel, Alexa, Victoria, and Velma each participated in extracurricular programs while in middle or high school that offered academic enrichment and college-readiness development. Alexa, for example, spent most of her Saturdays growing up participating in a science-focused program on a local college campus that offered an opportunity to experience advanced science courses and realize how much she enjoyed the material she was learning. As she remembers, “I found out that I really do like science. Because I've always hated history, and I was always ‘Eh’ about science, but going into it, higher levels of science, I found that I really like it.” This interest helped her start to form career aspirations in middle and high school, which led to the idea of college turning into a concrete necessity through which she could reach her goal of becoming a pediatrician; she explains:
It was like, "I'm really into science. I really love kids. I really want to help people. …Pediatrician, I need to go to undergrad. I need to go to medical school." … I felt like [the Saturday enrichment program] got me more invested in the science classes that I was actually taking in school because I got there and I was like, “I love these science classes. Well, what am I missing in the science classes I'm taking at school?” and I got more invested in them, I think, because of that.

One of Velma’s most significant precollege experiences was a summer camp where she was able to explore career paths in science and math fields and spend time on a college campus. This opportunity fueled her desire to seek postsecondary education; she says:

I already wanted to go to college, I knew I was going to, but that made me ready to be there. I was so excited to be on my own and be able to take higher-level classes that I couldn't take in high school and to really just blossom out of my experiences there. We even did our own research project there and I’d never done anything of that caliber before.

This program also helped her begin to think concretely about what her options were for college and how she was going to make decisions about applying and enrolling.

Similarly, Victoria attended a summer camp at LPU while she was in high school. This was Victoria’s first experience being on a college campus, and it was an opportunity to, as she remembers, “get to be with other students and talk more about science and engineering and all the positions and jobs.” Even more influential, Victoria was fortunate enough to participate in a second college-oriented program, this one specifically geared towards
Hispanic high school students. Hosted by another local university, this program provided Victoria with mentorship to support her in the college-going process, college admission test preparation, and guidance for completing the FAFSA application. In particular, she fondly remembers how helpful it was to hear from current college students who spoke to the participants:

> It was really cool hearing from them with their experiences in school. I'm like, "Okay, that's what I'm going to do. That's what I'm going to do. That's not what I'm going to do." I started seeing a mental thing going on, like I was depicting myself in college because it was inspiring to hear that people were actually going. Their parents were similar to my parents and it didn't stop them from going and they had opportunities like scholarships. I didn't think that I could afford it until they told me there are a lot of scholarships available. That was a good experience.

This program was especially valuable to Victoria because it also included her parents by providing information sessions held in Spanish, which was an element that helped them become more involved with her college plans. She came out of this experience feeling like she could find a way to afford college, her parents better understood what she was going through to apply to college, and she was more motivated than ever to make it into college.

**Transition and first-year programs.** Programs aimed at facilitating introduction to LPU through summer transition during the months prior to the beginning of students’ first year and those intended to support first-year students through extra guidance with college information and planning were also incredibly beneficial for Alexa, Duke, Victoria, Agustín,
Carmen, and Gabriela. Before Alexa began her first fall semester at LPU, she participated in a summer transition program open to all LPU entering freshmen. She spent two months living in a residence hall, made numerous friends, started her coursework, became familiar with finding her way around campus, and was even able to register early for fall semester classes, which allowed her to create her first choice of a fall course schedule. This experience provided a gradual transition to college and helped her feel much more prepared for life at LPU once the fall began, both of which contributed to this opportunity standing out as one of the most important factors in Alexa’s experience of first-year success.

Duke and Victoria participated in a six-week residential summer program for incoming students of color interested in engineering at LPU. Geared towards providing acclimation to LPU and fostering a community of students with similar interests and backgrounds, this experience provided both students with a tremendous amount of confidence as they entered their first year at LPU having already made friends, started acclimating to college-level course rigor, and become familiar with many aspects of the campus. For Duke, the opportunity to meet other students of color during this experience was particularly meaningful:

I could easily feel like I was a minority, here in college, but the summer transition program, it was pretty much a group of all minorities. So, before I really came into college feeling like I'm by myself and having that self doubt … I had people who I could talk to about different social issues, as well as just having friends going into college.
Meeting people with whom he had much in common within a small setting before joining the larger LPU campus community made Duke’s social transition to LPU much smoother during his first year. All three students who attended transition programs before beginning their first year cited the things they learned about managing college life and the relationships they built during these programs as some of the most important reasons they ended up feeling like their first year of college was a success.

Similarly, Agustín, Carmen, Victoria, and Gabriela all enrolled at LPU without declaring a major and were required to take a specialized course for undeclared first-year students. Taught by their academic advisors, these classes provided guidance through the academic expectations of the university, assessment of students’ personal goals, help in formulating academic plans, and exploration of the career and major opportunities available at LPU. Not only did participants benefit from the extra time spent with their academic advisors, but they all described how useful it was to have time allocated towards asking questions about college, getting support through common challenges of first-year students, and deciding what their academic paths should be. For Gabriela, this opportunity was especially helpful for exploring her academic options, and she was grateful not to have to learn about university resources in isolation. Carmen also appreciated that taking this class helped in “getting acclimated to college,” especially the academic environment of LPU. Through class, her advisor also directed her to new resources on campus to help with various problems she encountered during her first year; as Carmen describes, “I would tell her what areas I was having trouble with. She’d say, ‘Oh. Well, there's this tutoring center, or these
resources, or there's this seminar where you could learn how to study.’ … Those were really helpful.” All of the students who participated in this class described how beneficial it was in helping them make decisions, find information, and access resources that contributed positively to their first-year success.

*Other opportunities at LPU.* Students continued to experience the benefits of programs directed at facilitating student success once they joined the community of LPU. In addition to benefiting from participation in programs designed to support college-bound and first-year students in achieving academic success, most participants also described other opportunities they became involved with during their first year that had positive impacts on their first-year experiences. Because of their FGL backgrounds, all participants qualified to receive services from LPU’s TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO SSS) office. Though they were involved with TRIO SSS at varying levels, they all appreciated the extra advising they received and the workshops and events offered through this opportunity. In particular, participants described their interactions with TRIO SSS programs and advisors as meaningful because they came from an underlying foundation of understanding and supporting the unique backgrounds of FGL students. For Alexa, this meant offering workshops that were focused on practical skills beyond just academic support. As she says, “They focused on workshops that helped you become a better person, like budgeting and just personal aspects like stress busters.” Victoria appreciated receiving extra guidance through the financial aspects of attending college from a TRIO SSS workshop; she describes her experience trying to renew her FAFSA application during her first year:
I tried going to my financial aid counselor. The one they assign you based on your last name. Although she was helpful, I didn't really feel like she understood, like, when I was asking questions, she wouldn't quite respond as well as I'd hoped for. Again, TRIO came in to my rescue. They had two ladies who came in specifically for financial aid that anyone could ask for their help. They helped me fill out my FAFSA again and answered all of my financial aid questions. It was really great. ... I felt they were more helpful than my actual financial aid counselor assigned to me.

Agustín summarizes how TRIO SSS impacted all eight participants by describing his involvement as providing “a bountiful amount of resources geared towards helping students from low-income families keep up with students who have a head start in college.”

Other programs that benefited students’ first-year success experiences included part-time jobs, involvement in student organizations, and residential living-learning communities. Duke participated in two of these, crediting both a student organization for minority engineering students and his involvement with a student affairs office through his part-time job as helping him stay motivated during his first year. In particular, Duke’s job helped him combat the feelings of disconnection with the campus culture he experienced at LPU. Duke built valuable relationships with students and staff involved in the office he worked for, who as he explains, were “basically all about supporting students.” They made efforts to check on his academic progress, as well as how he was doing at LPU on a personal level, and became an important source of support when he was struggling with the challenges of adjusting to LPU.
Velma and Agustín lived in a residential living community on campus focused on creative expression and arts appreciation during their first year, and both of them described positive aspects of being surrounded by other first-year students with similar interests immediately upon arriving at LPU. Agustín explains, “I find it very important to have a community of people that you can grow with and help, and contribute from.” From Velma’s perspective, living nearby others with similar interests allowed her to bond more quickly with fellow students. She also appreciated the programs coordinated by the community, which offered guidance for common first-year issues; she describes:

[Living in that community], that was a huge step to feeling like I belonged. It helped me to become comfortable on the campus. With being in the community, we have a lot of these little, a lot like mini-seminars … about, this is a way to study, or if you're having this issue you should go here, sort of thing. Doing those helped me to navigate the campus a lot easier. I think just having this group of people that I could pull from to learn new things and to help me with different classes was integral to making it through my freshman year.

Participants described numerous clubs that offered similar communities of students with common interests, all of which helped participants become comfortable at LPU and feel like it was a place where they could enjoy supportive bonds with peers. Victoria joined several campus organizations that helped her feel like she “fit in” at LPU, obtaining a peer mentor through one of them and making contacts who would help her find useful university resources through another. These connections especially helped her navigate the logistical
aspects of college, providing guidance for processes and procedures that were unique to LPU. Rachel’s involvement with LPU’s Social Justice Committee empowered her to begin developing leadership skills, particularly through participation with the group’s efforts to coordinate a university-wide event of which she is extremely proud. Even Gabriela, despite the challenges of being a commuter student, found a supportive group within LPU’s pre-health club that offered her chances to volunteer in her hometown community around the university while also building relationships with “a group of students that I could relate to.”

All of these individuals, programs, and opportunities throughout participants’ educational paths provided them with social capital that was supplemental to what their families provided and what they developed for themselves to contribute to their educational success. Through information, relationships, and experiences, these resources strengthened participants’ collection of skills, knowledge, and support necessary to excel in both K-12 and higher education.

**Students Developed Protective Dispositional Characteristics**

While resources and support from familial and environmental sources provided numerous benefits to participants, the importance of internal traits students developed that facilitated their success cannot be overlooked. These protective dispositional characteristics were those that participants identified as emerging during the course of their educational paths, often with influence from external sources. Participants’ stories emphasized the learned nature of the personal characteristics most beneficial to them on their paths towards success. Across their stories, traits and behaviors that students learned at different points
throughout their experiences had significant impacts on their abilities to achieve educational excellence culminating in first-year success at LPU. Further, these dispositional qualities served as strengths for each student in the face of particular challenges they encountered, protecting participants from potential negative effects of experiences of failure, difficulty, and additional risks that arose as they worked towards achieving their success.

Students acquired beneficial traits from familial, environmental, and personal sources throughout their educational paths. Though each participant possessed an individual mix of traits that facilitated a unique path to first-year success, there were some characteristics that stood out as shared among participants’ stories. As mentioned in a previous section of this chapter, valuing education, developing independence, cultivating a strong work ethic, becoming extremely motivated, building self-efficacy, and being determined to achieve academic excellence were common qualities students’ internalized as a result of growing up in families that emphasized education. The following section elaborates on four additional beneficial traits that emerged from students’ stories including the ability to demonstrate self-directed learning, proactive behavior, desire to prove oneself, and positivity.

Self-directed learning. Some participants demonstrated a deep sense of curiosity about learning that led them to become self-directed in many aspects of their education. Alexa, Carmen, Gabriela, Rachel, Velma, and Victoria each spoke of taking initiative within their own education in order to seek knowledge and learning they desired beyond that of
what was provided for them in school. For Gabriela, a love of learning began as soon as she became comfortable with elementary school; she describes:

I would say around second, third grade, that's when I really developed my interest in my education. That's when I really, really began to love learning and that's when I began to read books and I've always been a very creative kid so I did a lot of my own experiments, my own little creations. I just associated learning with fun. I guess again that stuck with me a lot, because today we're in genetics, we're looking at a video about DNA. I was like “Ooooh it's so beautiful,” it just made me so happy.

Victoria remembers a similar experience in middle school, when she discovered how much she could learn on her own from the school library. The library became “her place” at school, and she quickly discovered it came easy to her to pick up math and science books instead of fiction. She recalls thinking these books were, “more interesting than fiction stories because they’re actually facts … the stuff that I could actually use and would help me in school.”

Velma also felt the need to supplement what she was learning in school, citing her high school’s lack of rigorous courses as a drawback to her precollege experience. She describes how her naturally inquisitive nature evolved into an ability to seek additional knowledge as she progressed through school:

I've just always been really curious. I want to learn new things. I want to know why that does that and if you can't tell me, I'm going to find out. ... Wanting to learn new things impacts everything I do. If I see someone doing something and I can put my
head around why they're doing it, I'll go and ask them, "Why are you doing that? Why would you need to do that?" Then when I find out, it's something new about the world that I didn't know before. … [In high school] they would touch on subjects, but not go into complete detail … I'd be like, "Oh, well, I wanna know how that really works. I wanna see more in-depth about that particular thing." Then I'd go and look it up on my own and figure it out.

Proactive behavior. Behaviorally, being proactive about obtaining what they needed to succeed was another characteristic that participants shared. For Carmen, this manifested in a help-seeking behavior that developed in high school when she experienced significant stress from increasingly difficult schoolwork. She realized she would need help from someone in order to continue excelling; she describes:

I feel like I was really overwhelmed. At the moment you just feel like, "I don't know how I can do this." … I learned the hard way that you just really have to reach out to teachers and peers for help. You don't have to feel like you're doing it on your own. I wish I would have realized that sooner. When I did realize it, it did make high school easier for me.

Rachel describes her proactive habits as a reaction to realizing that her parents were rarely able to help her in school because of their limited education; she says, “When I realized I needed other people that have that experience to help me, then I started seeking other people and asking them for their advice.” She also describes how she learned to seek help as she
encountered challenges in school, which eventually became an important part of the way she knows how to succeed:

I think that knowing that it's okay [to ask for help], I need to reach out and I need to grab support when I need it, is also really helpful. … I think I learned to find people when I was struggling with schoolwork and because I was struggling with school stuff I needed to ask my teacher. I started developing that habit of when I need help, I need to go talk to someone. That eventually stemmed not only from an academic thing but also with just an emotional point, too. Needing that kind of mentorship from others.

Agustín describes his proactivity as a reaction to experiences with his parents, explaining that he learned to be proactive largely because his mother was not:

I don't like to be reactive. I like to be proactive... If there is a way for me to learn more about the situation before I get into it, I will look it up. … I would say it developed from seeing that my mom is not proactive. She would not look up things before ... If we were going to a museum, she would wait until we were at the museum to figure out how parking worked. What I would like to do is know the exact location of the museum, know where the nearest parking lot is, know how much it costs, if it costs anything, and how much admission costs, and a map, and figure out what places I would like to be at most.

Calling himself a “planner,” Agustín does not like to avoid things just because he does not know what to expect or how exactly to get them done. Instead, he prefers to find out as much
as he can about opportunities, look for resources to help him navigate new experiences, and use that information to be prepared for what lies ahead. He gives an example of this from an experience preparing for a career fair during his first year, saying he did not want to fall into the mindset of making excuses, such as “Why didn't you go to the career fair? Because I didn't know about it. Because I had no clothes for it. Because I just wasn't ready.” As he describes:

So instead of making up those excuses after, I prepared for it in advance. I went to this place that offers free clothing on campus. With suits and suit pants. I found out information as much as I could, like dates and times. I went to some workshops for it, to build up my resume. That's the opposite of making excuses.

**Desire to prove oneself.** Some participants’ determination and strong motivation for success was drawn from a place of wanting to prove themselves to others who had imposed limitations on them at some point during their educational paths. Duke, Rachel, and Gabriela each spoke of an internal desire to prove their “doubters” wrong as an important quality that influenced their success. For each of them, this was related to prejudice they experienced as students of color during their K-12 experiences and carried through to LPU. Duke says that a prevalent part of his mindset driving him towards success is a deep commitment to avoiding stereotypes of his race; he explains:

I didn't want to be the stereotypical Black person in America, who doesn't do any good. … I'm always trying to fight that image out, while I'm here. I try to stay as presentable as I could be here, as well as keeping my grades up, and trying to combat
people who may have had more opportunities than me, for certain classes, and stuff like that. … I try to work twice as hard … twice as much, to make sure that I have something that is at least equal to my peers, if not twice as good.

Gabriela found herself similarly battling stereotypes, as she was one of the only Hispanic students in most of her classes during high school. She describes how this impacted her commitment to achieving educational excellence:

One more general factor that really impacted my success was the fact that I was Hispanic. Throughout school, my peers would always say Hispanics, mainly Mexicans, are dumb, can’t speak English, are all illegal, can’t read, etc. … Those words really hurt me and angered me. I was furious that because I was Mexican, I was stereotyped as being dumb and probably would end up dropping out of school and become pregnant. This also fueled my passion for becoming successful. I wanted to prove those people wrong and show them that not all Hispanics are the same. I have gained a lot of respect for my hard work throughout my educational career. I have been often commented, “You’re so smart, wow you are different from the others, I have never met a Hispanic who was so smart, etc.” Although some seem a bit ignorant and borderline racist, those comments made me feel proud of myself. … I am just happy that I turned what seems to be a negative factor and perhaps a thing that may have made me felt undermined as a positive thing. It makes me really proud that I am able to prove a point and I always try to encourage other fellow Hispanics to achieve their dreams.
Rachel experienced several memorable instances of educators imposing low expectations on her as she progressed through her K-12 experiences, which she says only served to fuel her desire to succeed and show them they were wrong. She gives an example of a particular teacher from her Chinese school who treated her poorly based on her Chinese dialect:

Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese Chinese is a little different, and so I had a Cantonese accent going to Mandarin school because that's my first native tongue, so of course I'm going to have that. Personally I think it's a lot better than having an English accent when I'm trying to speak Mandarin Chinese, because it's at least a lot more similar, but I had one teacher that walked up to me and was just like, "I don't think you should even be here. You're not really Chinese because you don't even know your own mother tongue." She straight up told me that I was going to fail my AP exam when I do end up taking it, which I did not. I got a five on it, and I went up to her, and I was just like, "Guess what? I actually passed my AP exam and not with just a three. I got a five on it."

As Rachel found herself in similar situations in other contexts, she realized what a strong impact these experiences had on her motivation, confidence, and work ethic; she explains:

I don't like people telling me no. … I personally don't like people telling me what I'm able to do and what I'm not able to be capable of, because I think I am capable of anything as long as I try. For a majority of the time, I'm like, "Oh, I can't make this A? I will make this A. I can't get into this research opportunity? I will get into this
research opportunity." I will do everything that I can possibly do to get myself there because I know I can do it.

**Positivity.** Keeping positive, optimistic perspectives throughout their educational paths was a characteristic that permeated the stories of all eight participants. Having a positive mindset impacted the ability for each of them to manage challenges, succeed despite risk factors, and reach a point in their education where they feel proud of what they have achieved. For Carmen, attending her “dream school” helped solidify the value of her optimistic nature, after she worked hard to prepare herself to attend a school like LPU and believed in her ability to make it there. Duke summarized his first-year experience metaphorically with a tellingly positive perspective; he says:

> The difference between the master and fool, is that the fool has made 50,000 same mistakes, but the master has made 50,000 different mistakes and learned from them. … Pretty much if I never made the mistakes [during my first year], I wouldn't have the experience or the knowledge to do something differently, and to go further in life without making those mistakes.

Similarly, Alexa reflects on her first-year success by recognizing the positive that emerged from the difficulties she experienced throughout her educational path:

I came out and I was like, "Okay. I completed my freshman year in college. I'm one step closer to doing what I want to do." Even with all of the hard times, even with pretty much everything that was going on, I came out stronger. I came out as a better person.
For Gabriela and Velma, positivity manifested particularly strongly in their discussions of the challenges they’ve faced throughout their lives as a result of their families’ educational backgrounds and financial struggles. Rather than discuss obstacles negatively, both participants emphasized their appreciation for what they’ve learned from the entirety of their experiences, and described viewing their challenges as character-building in ways that made them even more successful individuals. As Velma says:

I kind of saw everything as a positive, if that makes sense. Even if it should have hindered me, it turned out to make me work harder. Like with my parents not having as much of an education. It made me want to learn more because they wanted to have learned more.

From Gabriela’s perspective, staying positive helped her avoid succumbing to what might have been expected barriers to her education:

The way you think about it … the factors you live through, is something that would affect your academic success. For me personally I don't think of those factors as something that prevented me to being where I want to be. So I guess it's just the mindset of whether you think of them as positive or as negative. … If I think about it negatively I could say, “Well, yeah, I've gone through so many things. I'm so behind everyone and oh, I didn't have these privileges, all of this affected me so much.” But if I think of it in a positive way I could think, “Well, yes I went through all of these things, but they made me stronger and I'm here.” I've gone through it all and I hope to be an example.
Overall, internalizing positive dispositional characteristics from their educational experiences carried participants through difficult times and helped them maintain their aspirations for future success as they navigated their educational paths.

Dispositional protective factors mitigated postsecondary challenges. An important aspect of dispositional characteristics for all participants was their role in supporting students through specific failures, difficulties, and additional risks that could have had negative influences on their educational success in the first year of college. While ultimately they all view their educational experiences as successful, they each went through periods during which they experienced challenges that threatened that success. Particularly once they reached LPU, the beneficial traits they developed along their educational paths helped them respond to challenges in ways that contributed to their first-year success.

Victoria, for example, had to overcome withdrawing from a physics class due to a failing grade during her first semester at LPU. While failing a class often derails students’ confidence, Victoria’s motivation to succeed in order to make her family proud helped her move past the initial failure and manage to still have an excellent GPA at the end of the year. As she remembers, “I don't want to fail my parents, especially since this class is the only one keeping me from engineering.” Her determination and work ethic helped her raise her grades in all of her other courses, and her ability to prioritize her education helped her reduce obstacles to study time that might have contributed to her first poor performance. Alexa, though not failing any classes, also used her ability to prioritize education and her experience
with self-directed learning to improve her academic habits while getting through a difficult period of adjustment to coursework at LPU.

Agustín’s habit of proactively preparing for experiences contributed to his success transitioning to college in many ways; he explains how he sought help preparing before arriving on campus:

I basically just looked up “What do people need in college?” in Google, like for a dorm. … I really just looked up a lot of college stories online, I think. It was just people sharing their experiences at LPU or different colleges around the U.S., the different aspects, like relationships, social, educational aspects of it. They were helpful with knowing that there's not just one single experience that can be had in college, that my experience is its own.

Once his first year began, he realized he needed to continue seeking information about how to manage his college experience. He became so accustomed to seeking resources on his own and understanding what LPU had to offer that he earned a reputation among his peers as someone who would know exactly how to help find what they needed:

There is a lot of knowledge at LPU that is not universal to all colleges just like any other college. I wasn’t able to ask my parents let alone the extent of my family about this process. … At many points I was known as the friend who knew how specific parts of a college experience operated and what opportunities there are. 

For Rachel, Duke, and Carmen, dispositional characteristics were critical in helping them get through an initial feeling of insecurity upon beginning courses in college. Each of
them describes feeling like they were less prepared than their peers to do well because of their backgrounds. Rachel relates this to a lack of confidence as she recalls feeling that she had to work harder than other students to succeed academically:

When people that do not have to try as much and they're already getting it and they can get the same grade I'm getting when I spent six hours cramming and studying and relearning material and they only spent forty-five minutes right before a test and still made the same grade as me. I feel like we're like, "Oh yeah, we're all so smart at this." I'm just like, "No, I'm faking this because I've done extra, even more work in order to get there. You guys just got it because you guys are meant for this." That's definitely a big challenge that ties into that self-esteem.

In order to balance this experience, Rachel sought support from her friends and advisor, who were very good at helping her look at her own accomplishments in a more confident light. Her awareness that she needed to build relationships at LPU to maintain the emotional support she received from teachers and friends in high school and her ability to seek direct support from them when she realized she was struggling exemplified her proactive help-seeking ability.

Duke describes feeling that many of his engineering classmates had received more advanced training in the field than he could have possibly had before they entered college. However, he also drew on his ability to keep things in perspective, work hard, and think positively to help get past this feeling; he explains:
I don't feel that way anymore because I understand that at the end of my life, it won't matter if they graduated first, or if I graduated first, or if something else happened because I'll still get to where I need to be later down the line, and I'll have my diploma. No matter if I get my diploma in eight years or four years, a diploma is a diploma.

Carmen reflects similarly on feelings of insecurity in her preparation for college-level academics, explaining that she got through them by realizing “it doesn't really matter what people came in with, because you guys are all studying different things, you're all here for different reasons.”

For Carmen, Velma, and Gabriela, dispositional characteristics were extremely important in coping with particularly traumatic experiences that coincided with their first year at LPU. Leaving home to attend college was unusually trying for Carmen because of her father’s ALS. Being geographically distant from her family added to the difficulty of coping with his ongoing medical challenges; Carmen recalls, “It was a difficult adjustment. …I was pretty sad. I really took it to heart when I first got here and I realized how sad I would be.” However, she was able to draw on the independence she had developed throughout high school, the positivity with which she looked at challenges, and the deep motivation to succeed she embodied to find ways to manage her sadness at LPU.

Velma experienced two deaths in the family during exams of her first year, causing significant grief and stress while she was trying to finish her coursework; Velma explains:
Getting through that, and still doing most of my finals that week, was rough, but I did it anyways because I knew I had to and I couldn't fail my classes. Especially thinking about [the family members I lost] during that time, I just had to tough it out and get it done. … I wouldn’t call it a burden, but it's definitely a motivator. If things get hard and I want to give up, then I can't. So it's kind of a driving force, along with my parents' ambitions for me, to keep going.

Her determination to succeed in college propelled her through this extremely challenging experience, and she drew on the motivation she developed from the encouragement she received from her family to see her through the stress and grief.

Gabriela’s experience interfered directly with her ability to attend LPU, when her mother, who was her transportation to campus every day, was in a car accident the same week that they also had a death in the family. In addition to the shock she experienced from these events, Gabriela had to rely on taxis to take her to and from campus while her mother recovered, which was both an unforeseen cost and logistical challenge. However, Gabriela’s sense of responsibility to succeed, motivation from her family, and resolve to do well despite difficulties enabled her to push through this period of time; as she recalls:

Our car was wrecked and [my parents] were forced to pay for a new car. They also had to cover funeral expenses. … The day before summer dues were due, they did not have the amount of money I needed to pay for my summer classes. So, I was unable to take summer classes. But I am not mad, rather I am thankful that my extra grant money allowed me to help them during a time of hardship. I would not say it affected
me negatively. Yes, I am a bit behind with my classes, but it made me realize that despite hardships, I can still be successful. I did not let my financial situation or personal issues affect my education.

From the positive perspectives participants kept through stressful situations, to the role self-discipline played to keep participants on-track academically despite difficult and at times traumatic life events, the protective dispositional characteristics participants internalized throughout their lives were invaluable in mitigating the challenges they encountered as they transitioned into college and experienced first-year success.

**Chapter Summary**

The eight FGL students who participated in this study each experienced unique educational paths that led to success in the first year of college. Their educational stories highlight many factors that contributed to their success from within their families, their environments, and their own personal characteristics. This chapter focused on synthesizing similarities among participants’ experiences, and when considered together, three main themes emerged from common elements of their narratives. That families emphasized education, students accrued educational resources and opportunities, and students developed protective dispositional characteristics were all important components of participants’ experiences that contributed to their abilities to demonstrate high academic achievement, navigate educational processes, and cultivate success despite potential barriers throughout their educational paths. The final chapter, chapter six, will provide conclusions related to
these findings and elaborate on the study’s implications for theory, research, practice, and policy.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This narrative study explores the educational experiences of first-generation, low-income (FGL) students who demonstrated success in the first year of college. For this study, I examined eight students’ experiences of educational success using thematic narrative analysis. Though each participant had a unique path to success in the first year of college, together their stories illuminated themes that characterized similarities in their educational experiences.

The following chapter will begin with a review of the study and an overview of the themes that emerged from data analysis. Based upon these findings, I will explore several key conclusions and situate them within relevant literature. These conclusions suggest that for participants in this study, collaborative accumulation of educational resources led to success, variations in social support adapted to facilitate success, and academic resilience effectively explained experiences of success. The chapter concludes with implications for theory, future research, practice, and policy, and a final chapter summary.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study is to understand the precollege and postsecondary educational experiences of FGL students who experience success during the first year of college. Because much of the existing research regarding FGL students focuses on barriers and obstacles to their success, this study instead focuses on aspects of these students’ experiences that have contributed to academic excellence and high educational achievement.
Eight undergraduate first-generation college students participated in this study. All students self-identified as coming from low-income family backgrounds and characterized their first year at LPU as successful. Participants identified with a variety of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and included six females and two males. All participants came from hometowns in the same state where LPU is located.

After agreeing to join the study, each student participated in two in-depth interviews, wrote a journal reflection, and provided feedback to complete member checks. Information from the first interview contributed to construction of an extended educational narrative that each participant reviewed, edited, and discussed in detail at the second interview. A third party service transcribed audio data from the interviews and I reviewed these transcripts multiple times before providing them to participants for final editing and clarification. I analyzed interview transcripts, together with journal reflections and extended narratives, using thematic narrative analysis. This involved open coding and thematic coding within each narrative, and thematic coding and theory-driven coding across all narratives. From this analysis of students’ stories, three main themes emerged within the findings: families emphasized education, students accrued educational resources and opportunities, and students developed protective dispositional characteristics.

The first theme describes how each participant’s family placed strong emphasis on education. This often involved prioritizing education through family sacrifices for the sake of education and putting a participant’s educational needs ahead of other obligations. Students internalized their families’ priorities by placing value on their own educations and adopting
behaviors and traits that reflected emphasis on education, such as strong work ethics and
determination to succeed. Families also held high educational expectations for their students,
which often manifested in expecting students to attend college from an early age and
contributed to students’ development of strong educational aspirations and motivation.
Further, families’ focus on education often actively protected students from the potentially
negative effects of limited family educational background and financial struggles.

The second theme illustrates the finding that educational programs and opportunities
in students’ environments often supplemented families’ resources and provided additional
access to educational support, information, and preparation. All participants had relationships
with various combinations of mentors, educators, and peers throughout their educational
paths who provided social support and resources that fostered students’ success. Similarly,
participants engaged with specific programs and opportunities both before and during college
that served to increase their motivation, shape their educational aspirations, and provide
information that facilitated success during the first year of college. These resources and
opportunities strengthened students’ college readiness, supported them through transitional
periods, and provided guidance as students navigated unfamiliar educational experiences.

The third theme emphasizes the importance of participants’ development of
protective dispositional characteristics throughout their lives that contributed in meaningful
ways to their educational success. Students’ educational stories highlighted many ways in
which they learned traits that supported their success throughout their educational paths.
These included a strong work ethic and focus on education, determination to succeed and
self-efficacy, a love of learning and sense of curiosity, being proactive and seeking help, wanting to prove others’ negative expectations wrong, and maintaining optimism and positivity. These dispositional characteristics were especially important within students’ experiences of challenges during the transition to and first year of college. Students consistently drew on these traits as strengths to manage problematic situations and achieve success despite difficulties.

**Key Conclusions**

From participants’ educational narratives and the emergent themes across them, I have drawn several key conclusions that elaborate on this study’s findings and connect them to relevant literature. Each conclusion developed from overlaps among participants’ stories and the resulting themes, and serves to provide a cohesive synthesis of the most central aspects of this study’s findings. The following sections discuss each conclusion in detail and draw comparisons and contrasts to literature and theory.

**Collaborative Accumulation of Educational Resources Led to Success**

Participants in this study accumulated the experiences, relationships, and information they needed to excel educationally throughout their lives and reach success across the transition to college and through their first year at LPU. Within their stories, and across all three emergent themes, it became apparent that participants gained the social capital they needed to navigate their educational processes with the help of their social networks, opportunities, and experiences. This conclusion is especially important because it exemplifies how some FGL students do find avenues to accumulate relevant educational resources,
suggesting access to social capital is a complex process that is not necessarily prohibitive for FGL students.

Social capital, defined as the resources through which social networks impact individuals’ capacity for success (Coleman, 1988; Croninger & Lee, 2001), is an important component of educational attainment. Students gather social capital, with the help of their social network, through the accumulation of resources such as information, norms, and support (Bryan et al., 2011; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2000a, 2000b). For participants in this study, many social capital resources were derived from significant other individuals and from the programs and opportunities of which they took advantage as they progressed towards and into college. Examples of how participants gained these resources included teachers and counselors supporting them through college decision-making, families making connections to extend support networks, mentors providing information about paths to potential career fields, precollege preparation programs guiding them through enrollment and financial aid processes, enrichment programs deepening their academic experiences, and advisors enhancing their knowledge of how to navigate the college environment. Though prior research suggests FGL students may be unable to access adequate support and information that will prepare them for success in college (Bergerson, 2009; Bryan et al., 2011; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Freeman, 1999; Perna, 2000a), all of the students in this study gained many resources that reinforced their aspirations for academic excellence, increased their college readiness, and supported them during their first year.
Within participants’ stories of preparation for success in college, all of them found resources in supplemental ways when their families did not have quite what they needed. In many cases, families were well aware of what they were missing in terms of educational information and actively sought experiences and relationships for their students that they felt would facilitate achievement and push their students towards success. Through getting advice from college-educated friends and colleagues, like Agustín’s mother, finding mentors with insight into professional career paths, like Duke’s parents, or signing students up for precollege camps and programs, like Alexa’s and Velma’s parents, families played an active role in helping students acquire educational resources beyond the scope of what they had to offer from their own experiences. Continuing-generation students and those from higher-income backgrounds often depend on the postsecondary experiences of their families for college information and preparation (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008). In this study, however, families focused on instilling the value of education, insisting that participants prioritize their own education, and modeling characteristics like work ethic to emphasize their importance in reaching success. Participants depended on their families for support, encouragement, and educational expectations, and for making connections with other individuals who could provide the information and preparation that families themselves could not. Aligned with what Ceja (2004) describes as a unique contribution of first-generation students’ families, familial support for participant’s education relied not on personal experience with educational processes and systems, but rather on families’ own experiences of obstacles to success and desires to support students beyond their own limitations. Though this suggests
families played a slightly different role for participants than they might have played for participants’ peers, families were still extremely important to participants’ accumulation of social capital resources.

Further, participants developed traits that led them to be self-directed enough to pursue educational resources for themselves once they reached high school and college. Their help-seeking behavior, proactive natures, work ethics, and autonomy directed them towards meeting their own needs as they prepared for and transitioned to college. They sought relationships with adults who had more knowledge about educational processes than their families, like Velma and Rachel, they formed bonds with supportive peers when their families became more distant sources of support, like Alexa, Carmen, Rachel, and Agustín, and they actively familiarized themselves with high school and college resources to answer their questions and find what they needed, like Agustín, Victoria, and Gabriela. At LPU, these traits helped participants through challenging periods of personal development, social, and academic integration, all of which are critical elements of first-year success (Upcraft et al., 2005). Because internal characteristics are often correlated with positive educational outcomes (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013), they can contribute significantly to students’ academic resilience (Morales, 2010). For participants in this study, these dispositional traits were integral in helping them cultivate social capital and success despite challenges they experienced.

In many instances, participants also gained resources through participating in programs or opportunities specifically designed to help students achieve educational
excellence and pursue college success. Some of these programs were open to all students, such as Velma’s summer enrichment program aimed at any student with interest in pursuing a career in a STEM discipline. Yet many other programs, such as Alexa’s Saturday school program, Victoria’s precollege preparation summer camps, and Duke’s involvement with 100 Black Men, were specifically designed for students with educational risk factors. LPU’s TRIO SSS program, in which all participants participated, was even more specific to FGL students. Because many of these opportunities were only available to specific groups of students, they are sources of social capital unique to students without the resources often held by majority groups. While participants participated in these programs because of a wide variety of their risk factors, not just their families’ financial or educational backgrounds, the importance of participation in these opportunities demonstrates that participants did not reach success by behaving exactly like their continuing-generation and higher-income peers. This emphasizes the value of looking at their experiences as unique rather than deficient or different from the majority norm (Kezar et al., 2014). Programs specifically offered to students with risk factors serve a valuable purpose in enhancing experiences, knowledge, and support for students whose educational experiences may differ from the majority norm for various reasons. For participants, these opportunities acted as supplemental sources of resources that enhanced what they accumulated from families, themselves, and their environments, and combined to fill students’ repertoires with ample social capital to achieve success throughout their educational paths and into the first year of college.
When critical educational resources are present, academic outcomes are generally more positive (Perez et al., 2009). Though the social networks to which they belong and the opportunities to which they have access may have different things to offer than those of their peers (Bryan et al., 2011), participants’ relationships and experiences—and the ways those components worked together—provided sufficient information, support, and preparation for the achievement of first-year success. Thus, despite previous research suggesting students whose parents have no college degrees and whose families are financially limited may not be able to access the social capital that is necessary to succeed in higher education (Walpole, 2003), the experiences of participants in this study highlight possible pathways for FGL students to overcome this potential barrier. Participants’ abilities to gather these resources, with the support of their families and environments, demonstrated the possibility that students with low-income backgrounds and those whose parents do not have postsecondary degrees are capable of having enough resources to achieve success in college.

**Social Support Networks Adapted to Facilitate Success**

Previous research suggests that social support is an exceedingly valuable element of students’ educational paths, and that it plays a particularly important role in students’ ability to achieve educational success and attain postsecondary degrees (Nora, 2001). Though some research suggests FGL students lack social support (Bryan et al., 2011; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005; Wolf et al., 2009), other scholars argue that social support may be just as important for students with this background as it is for any other student (Ceja, 2004; Nuñez, 2005; Palmer et al., 2011). In this study, participants’ experiences reiterate
findings that social support is extremely valuable for FGL students, indicating that social support from families, mentors, educators, and peers is a critical element of students’ paths towards achievement. Even the most independent participants, such as Gabriela and Alexa, emphasized the role supportive individuals played in helping them succeed throughout their entire stories. Some participants actively sought support more than others, while some relied on families to provide or seek support, and some recognized more support that had been provided to them upon reflection than they were aware of while they were experiencing it. Yet social support was an important component of achieving success at every point in time for each student in this study. This is congruent with literature suggesting social support is valuable at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels (Nora, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011), and emphasizes the longitudinal nature of the role of social support.

What participants’ stories add to previous research is the suggestion that, though social support remains important throughout students’ K-12 experiences, college exploration and transition, and first year of college, the nature and source of this support change over time and adapt to meet student needs. Two themes in particular—that families emphasized education and students accrued educational resources and opportunities—highlighted ways in which social support played important, but varying roles for students at different points in their educational paths. In general, families’ support was most important during participants’ early stages of education while their emphasis on education protected students from the effects of financial limitations and established participants’ foundations for educational motivation, achievement of success, and development of protective dispositional
characteristics. As students progressed through their education they often needed more resources and support than what their families could provide, and their social networks expanded to include educators, mentors, and peers who could supplement familial support. This occurred as a result of both efforts from families and educators to help students expand their social networks and students’ own emerging recognition of how to meet their own educational needs. As students transitioned into college, educators, mentors, and peers often became equally as important as families, if not more important, because of the wealth of resources these sources of support provided to expand participants’ college readiness.

Participants often recognized that the protective factors most beneficial in their experiences at LPU were specific to the postsecondary context, and actively sought to prioritize those relationships. During their first year of college, most participants credited educators and peers with more prominent supportive roles than families, largely due to the nature of support that became needed; because participants needed support in the college environment that was directly related to institutional practices and academic experiences, educators and peers were more able to provide what participants needed than were families. Encouragement and emotional support was still often available from families, and remained an important component of support, but played a less prominent role during the later periods of participants’ educational paths.

Rachel’s narrative exemplifies the ways in which social support changed to meet students’ needs particularly well. She began her educational path with her parents’ active encouragement of her academic interests. As she progressed, she continued to feel their
encouragement and expectations, but experienced less emotional support from them than she needed to manage the stress of high achievement in school. As she recognized this during her college exploration, she sought teachers and other adults who could supplement her parent’s support and help her through her college transition. Once at LPU, she continued to depend on educators for support, and parents for encouragement, but realized more than ever the role her peers could play in facilitating her success. Her story illustrates how she filled her need for various types of support as the dimensions of her need changed while she moved through her educational path.

Duke’s experience, while similar, displays less active seeking of social support for areas needing to be enhanced and more nuanced changes that helped him learn what he needed as he progressed through his educational path. His mother provided the greatest support to him from elementary school through college, but his other avenues of support shifted from his K-12 peers, to his mentor, to his college educators. From his K-12 peers he learned many skills and internalized traits to help him succeed. Next, from his mentor he received the guidance he needed to navigate the college access process and develop aspirations for his future. Finally, from his college educators he received help adapting to an unfamiliar college environment and culture. As what he needed from his social relationships changed, those with whom he had supportive relationships also changed.

These patterns of shifting social support are important to consider because much research about the role of social support in education highlights how important it is without recognizing the nuances of how it changes as students’ needs change and how students are
able to manage their networks to meet those needs. One source of social support may be important at a particular point in a students’ educational path, while any number of other sources may be more or less important at other points. It was not the presence of social support alone, but also the adaptation of social networks to meet participants’ evolving needs and participants’ abilities to learn how to shape their social networks based on those needs that contributed to participants’ success. Participants’ experiences emphasized that they benefitted both from social support itself and from the ways in which the nature and source of their social support changed as they progressed through their educational paths.

**Academic Resilience Effectively Explained Experiences of Success**

The concept of academic resilience encompasses the processes and outcomes students experience when they demonstrate educational success despite also experiencing barriers that often prevent others from succeeding (Morales, 2008). It is a manifestation of the interaction between risk factors, those obstacles that often prevent success, and protective factors, or positive influences that mitigate the potential negative impact of risk factors (Noltemeyer & Bush, 2013). In this study, participants experienced the types of risk factors Morales (2008) describes as social and environmental conditions that often place students in danger of low achievement. They came from low-income backgrounds, did not have parents who had attained higher education, attended K-12 schools with few resources, experienced prejudice based on their backgrounds, had few role models from similar backgrounds, and were almost all students of color. Previous research has cited all of these characteristics as potential
barriers to educational success that negatively impact many students (Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Masten, 1994; Morales, 2008a, 2014; Padilla et al., 1997; Williams & Portman, 2014).

Yet all eight participants in this study far exceeded average educational achievements, demonstrating excellence despite these risk factors. Participants achieved success throughout their educational paths as a result of many combinations of factors that positively contributed to their experiences, as exemplified by the emphasis of this study’s emergent themes on the role of families, environments, and personal characteristics. In strong portrayals of academic resilience, each participant’s story reflected experiences that involved interactions between risk and protective factors resulting in participants’ successful educational outcomes. The following sections will highlight important characteristics of the processes of academic resilience participants experienced.

The protective factor triad was a key component in participants’ stories. Participants possessed many protective factors within their families, in their environments, and in themselves dispositionally that served as buffers to the potential negative effects of the risk factors in their lives. This protective factor triad—familial, environmental, and dispositional (Garmezy, 1991; Morales, 2000)—acted as a powerful force in helping students develop strengths, gain resources, and navigate success along their educational paths. Protective factors increased motivation, shaped strong educational aspirations, encouraged through challenging times, helped overcome difficulties, provided information and guidance, and otherwise supported participants in achieving outstanding educational outcomes. From the active work of these protective factors, participants experienced and developed
compensatory strategies that demonstrated how risk factors could be negated (Morales, 2014). For example, many families actively sought environmental resources when they felt students needed supplemental learning experiences. Participants developed strong tendencies towards determination to achieve success in reaction to encountering individuals who projected low expectations onto their futures. Programs in which students participated helped strengthen students’ knowledge about educational processes, which students could then use to navigate college access. In all of these ways and more, protective factors of each type worked together directly balancing or preventing the influence of risk factors.

That each participant’s story, as well as the themes that emerged from across their stories, highlighted all three types of protective factors supports Morales’ (2000) assertion that protective factors are complementary because students, their families, and their environments adapt to one another in seeking to meet students’ needs. Participants’ protective factors originated from internal and external sources that collaborated to develop resources for students based on students’ existing resources and what were perceived to be resources that would help further students’ success. Participants’ illustrations of this process within their stories precisely reflected the definition of academic resilience and demonstrated the effectiveness of this theoretical lens in understanding how these eight FGL students cultivated success in the face of risk factors and obstacles.

**Experiences of academic resilience reflected a cumulative process in which participants’ agency developed over time.** One of the areas in which the applicability of academic resilience theory to student success needs more exploration is in understanding
how factors and processes involved with academic resilience change as students progress through their education. Much existing research focuses on identifying protective factors and looking at how protective factors help students (Williams & Portman, 2014), but far fewer studies focus on how those protective factors interact with one another across time (Morales, 2000). Findings in this study provided some insight into how academic resilience processes occurred for participants and the ways in which they changed throughout participants’ educational paths.

For participants in this study, academic resilience manifested as a cumulative process wherein protective factors gradually added up, built upon one another, and contributed to students’ educational success. All participants drew on protective factors from each component of Garmezy’s (1991) protective factor triad at various points in their educational paths. Within their early educational experiences, most participants relied primarily on external protective factors, both familial and environmental, that began priming students for paths of excellent academic achievement. These protective factors often worked together, demonstrating compensatory strategies that met particular student needs. Families sought resources from environmental sources, such as when parents connected students with mentors, signed students up for supplemental educational programs, or sought guidance from others to help their students. Environmental factors enhanced the effects of family values, support, expectations, and encouragement, such as when a precollege preparation program included parents in its efforts, or when educators worked together with families to find additional resources for students. Together, familial and environmental protective factors
worked to strengthen students’ educational resources and make it easier for students to achieve academic success at an early age.

At first, students were mostly passive participants in the academic resilience process, inadvertently receiving support and resources from protective factors that negated the potential negative effects of their risk factors. While this occurred, participants were often unaware of risk factors or protective factors and did not play an active role in seeking to balance the two. However, these early familial and environmental protective factors not only interacted with one another, but also began contributing to participants’ development of dispositional protective factors. Families impacted students’ educational habits, behaviors, and motivations. Environmental influences further taught students how to navigate educational experiences and develop high achievement. Throughout these experiences students began internalizing the importance of working hard, being determined, thinking positively, maintaining interest in learning, and numerous other beneficial traits that became protective factors themselves.

As participants entered the college exploration and access phase of their paths they began to actively take control of their academic resilience, recognizing how they could influence their own educational success with the support of their protective factors. Through patterns of scaffolding, wherein participants observed how protective factors supported their success and adopted behavioral patterns that encompassed similar strategies, they all sought more resources, made new connections, and maintained support from previous protective factors in combinations that worked for them, reflecting active management of their own
academic resilience processes. Participants became more aware of their educational needs and more aware of how to meet them. Their agency in their own academic resilience processes increased as they accumulated resources, acknowledged risk and protective factors for what they were, and developed skills to use in facilitating their own success. When they entered college, they started recognizing where they needed resources and support and becoming proactive about finding the protective factors they needed to continue their educational success. Once participants were largely in control of their own academic resilience during their first year, they demonstrated strong abilities to seek, maintain, and balance their own protective factors. They had already developed many dispositional protective factors, and their familial and early environmental protective factors had helped them arrive in a new environment where they were able to cultivate additional protective factors. This shift in agency allowed participants to continue achieving success and prevented them from succumbing to negative influences of risks, even when college removed them from some protective factors and brought new risk factors such as challenging academic and cultural transitions, social difficulties, or grief and loss.

Just as precollege characteristics play an important role in many aspects of postsecondary success (Kuh et al., 2006; Nora, 2004; Perna & Kurban, 2013), so too does it appear that precollege academic resilience processes are integrally connected to those experienced in the first year of college. Participants’ stories offered depictions of academic resilience that spanned the course of their K-12 and postsecondary experiences. Their narratives emphasized how protective factors worked together, amassed, and led to additional
protective factors as students progressed through their educational paths, empowering students to gradually learn to actively manage their own educational success. In this way, their academic resilience processes emerged as cumulative and long-term, which is something previous research has not often considered and is an important aspect of fully understanding the holistic process involved in academic resilience.

**Implications**

The results of this study have implications for the development of academic resilience theory, future research exploring similar research problems, educational practice, and related policy issues. Because this study employed a strengths-based perspective to understand eight FGL students’ educational paths to first year success, the findings highlighted many components of their experiences that positively contributed to their academic resilience. The implications presented below are based on suggestions regarding ways in which educational success can be further understood or supported for other FGL students who have as much potential to succeed despite barriers to their success as did participants.

**Implications for Theory**

As reviewed above, this study was framed through the lens of academic resilience theory. Academic resilience theory provides a means through which to explore the success of students with backgrounds characterized by risk factors that often inhibit educational attainment. This study extends the existing understanding of academic resilience as it relates to student success in two significant ways: it considers the long-term, cumulative nature of academic resilience processes, and it applies an academic resilience framework to a unique
group, FGL students. The following section will elaborate on why these are important expansions to the existing components of academic resilience theory.

**Need for an updated academic resilience model.** In this study, participants’ educational experiences highlighted the ways in which familial, environmental, and personal academic resilience processes functioned cumulatively and collaboratively across time to impact students’ success. The changes apparent in participants’ roles in these processes suggest that students moved from passive to active contributors to their own academic resilience as they progressed through their educational paths. While the Resilience Cycle model (Morales & Trotman, 2004, 2010) depicts participants’ active cultivation and balance of protective factors once the developmentally appropriate expression of autonomy that often manifests when students transition to college occurred (Bowman 2010), it does not acknowledge the prior cumulative processes of familial and environmental factors that contributed to success before participants shifted to actively managing their own resilience. At early stages of their education, participants were not actively in control of their academic resilience. On the contrary, familial and environmental protective factors played the most prominent roles in mitigating risk factors and bolstering students’ academic resilience. Students themselves were recipients of these processes before they shifted to becoming managers. If inclusive of both K-12 and higher education experiences, a model of academic resilience must reflect the shift of the student from passive to active participant in academic resilience processes.
Further, while the components of each “spoke” of Morales and Trotman’s (2010) Resilience Cycle model occurred within participants’ experiences of academic resilience, they did not unfold in the distinct stepwise order that the Resilience Cycle model illustrates. Rather, these elements of academic resilience occurred within participants’ experiences in a different order and a more continuous manner. As detailed below, most of these components commenced prior to students managing their own academic resilience processes and continued concurrently once students began playing a more active role in the processes. A model that truly illustrates academic resilience must consider the entire span of students’ educational experiences and the processes involved in their success. In order to fully encompass participants’ academic resilience experiences, I present an updated academic resilience model in Figure 4.
Figure 4. A model of academic resilience as updated to reflect participants' experiences.

Components of the original Resilience Cycle model are indicated in italics (based on Morales & Trotman, 2010).

The updated academic resilience model incorporates the components of Morales and Trotman’s (2010) Resilience Cycle within the broader context of the longitudinal accumulation of protective factors and the shift from passive to active role in the process participants in this study experienced. It illustrates that familial and environmental protective factors comprised the most prominent element of academic resilience during the beginning of
participants’ educational paths. This is where students began acquiring protective factors that worked together in concert, steps that were previously conceived as spokes two and three of the Resilience Cycle. The updated model then includes the development of dispositional protective factors in the next element, as students continue through their education. This element encompasses the learning of traits participants described as integral in their experiences of success, which occurred within the context of familial and environmental protective factors as emphasized by the concentric nature of the elements. This part of the process includes the building of self-efficacy and enduring motivation that represent spokes four and five of the Resilience Cycle, as well as the development of emotional strengths that served as the hub of Morales and Trotman’s model. Rather than comprising the central focus around which students’ academic resilience centered, characteristics that Morales and Trotman describe as emotional intelligence emerged within the context of students’ numerous beneficial dispositional traits and worked together with familial, environmental, and other dispositional protective factors to support students’ shift in agency within the process. The element in which students become active managers of their own academic resilience processes is then encompassed by both the familial and environmental protective factors and the dispositional protective factors, as students did not cultivate academic resilience in isolation without continued influence from familial, environmental, and dispositional factors. Within this element, students actively identified their own needs and challenges, spoke one of the Resilience Cycle, while also playing more of a role in fostering
their protective dispositional characteristics and intentionally coordinating their protective factors.

This updated academic resilience model represents a more complete depiction of participants’ experiences of academic resilience than the Resilience Cycle model (Morales & Trotman, 2010). It highlights connections between different types of protective factors and their continued importance, while also encompassing the shifting nature of participants’ role in the process. The incorporation of participants’ move from passive to active managers of the process is particularly important, as it emphasizes that students’ emerging agency is an important aspect of connecting academic resilience experiences across their educational paths, and is an area into which future studies should delve more deeply through frameworks that combine academic resilience and agency theory. Overall, through illustration of students’ shift in agency and an emphasis on the cumulative nature of academic resilience elements, the updated academic resilience model more successfully demonstrates participants’ experiences throughout their educational paths.

Applicability to a broader group of students. Previous research applies academic resilience to specific groups of students, primarily based on racial or ethnic identity (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Morales, 2000, 2008a, 2010; Morales & Trotman, 2004, 2010; Perez et al., 2009; Plunkett et al., 2008; Williams & Bryan, 2013; Williams et al., 2014; Williams & Portman, 2014). While the components of the theory are designed so as to potentially apply to diverse groups of students, the theory has not been widely applied to many different groups or those based on
characteristics other than race and ethnicity. This study broadens the applicability of academic resilience theory to a group of students identified based on different background characteristics than in previous research. The experiences of participants in this study demonstrate that the core components of academic resilience accurately fit the educational stories of these eight FGL students. All participants benefited from dynamic interactions between familial, environmental, and dispositional protective factors that worked to reduce the impact of potential risk factors and help produce positive outcomes throughout their educational paths. The risk factors of this group of students may overlap with those in previous applications of the theory, but some are specific to FGL student experiences. That the primary elements of the theory apply well to these unique students expands the theory’s capacity to frame distinctive types of students’ experiences. Future exploration of the educational success of students with other types of unique risk factors, such as living with disabilities or pursuing higher education while caring for dependent children, will continue to help specify the ways in which diverse groups of students with varied educational risk factors may experience academic resilience.

Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study simultaneously add to existing bodies of literature and emphasize areas in need of additional research with future studies. All research requires scholars to make practical choices about narrowing studies, which create limitations in the scope of the research. This study was no exception and as a result there are several ways in which future research could expand upon my findings.
Regarding FGL students’ postsecondary success, this study’s themes and conclusions contribute to the growing research emphasis on the importance of looking at marginalized students’ strengths rather than deficits. Using a lens of academic resilience to understand FGL students’ educational paths provided a positive perspective that avoided deficit-based consideration of these students’ experiences. This approach yielded valuable details about the ways in which these eight FGL student participants cultivated resources that were unique to their experiences while also fueling academic success throughout their K-12 and first-year experiences. However, future studies considering the positive experiences of successful FGL students that stem from different theoretical perspectives would further emphasize the value of strengths-based research with this group of students. The more theoretical lenses through which research emphasizes the strengths of these students, the greater impact strengths-based, anti-deficit perspectives can have on facilitating increases in their educational achievement.

Future studies considering longitudinal patterns of achievement among FGL students that continue past the first year of college would also add to the benefits of looking at educational success holistically across K-12 and higher education experiences. This study highlighted many ways in which participants’ experiences were connected throughout their educational paths, cumulatively building upon one another to contribute to success in the first year of college. Creating a bridge in research across the often-divided study of K-12 and higher education allows illumination of ways in which these two domains of education are vitally interrelated in students’ experiences. More studies that consider the long-term nature
of educational success and are able to continue making connections beyond first-year success—through college graduation and even graduate education or professional success—would enhance what is gained from this perspective. Further, it would also be beneficial to create more ways for researchers to conduct various types of studies across K-12 and into higher education. Though some sources of data that connect students’ paths in this way do exist, their applicability to studies of student success are limited. Expanding this capability for future research would call for an increase in ways of both qualitatively and quantitatively tracking students’ success throughout their educational paths.

Additionally, comparative studies exploring the experiences of other FGL students may provide more insights into academic resilience and success among this group of students. The findings of this study are limited to eight FGL students who self-reported experiencing success in the first year of college at LPU. Similar studies exploring the experiences of different individuals may add to what I have learned from this particular group of students. Similarly, studying the experiences of successful FGL students in different institutional environments may yield more information about academic resilience processes for this group of students across multiple contexts. Studies of FGL student experiences in community colleges, private universities, or very selective elite environments may highlight students’ experiences of success in different ways.

**Implications for Practice**

The experiences participants’ shared for this study also have implications for everyone actively working to facilitate FGL students’ success. The following sections outline
how those implications relate to the practice of supporting FGL students at home, within educational practices, and through environmental resources.

**Families emphasizing education.** Findings from this study suggested that families played a critical role in the academic resilience of all participants. In particular, families’ emphasis on education at home and the ways in which they were able to connect students with valuable educational resources were imperative to students’ success. Families provided encouragement, high expectations, modeling of educational values, and active connection with educational resources, all of which helped participants accrue the social capital that research suggests has especially significant influence on students’ preparation for success in college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006). Therefore, a family looking to foster the success of their FGL student should work to emphasize education at home in a way that provides these resources. Families can do this by structuring their priorities so as to place their students’ education at the forefront of importance, emphasizing that educational responsibilities take precedence over extracurricular activities, clearly conveying educational expectations from an early age, and providing emotional support and encouragement for students’ academic interests. When participants in this study received this type of familial support, they internalized the importance of focusing on their education and strongly felt the support of their families, both of which positively impacted their academic resilience and success.

Beyond conveying an emphasis on education at home, families should also make connections between students and educational resources in their communities that can
supplement how they are able to support students’ educational success. In many cases, participants’ families became aware of educational needs their students had that they were unable to meet at home and actively sought ways of providing their students with support from other sources. This type of connection between protective factors played a critical role in supporting students’ academic resilience. Families can expand students’ social networks by asking questions of friends and neighbors when navigating unfamiliar educational processes, actively discussing opportunities available to enhance their students’ educational experiences with educators, and signing their students up for programs that offer educationally enriching experiences to meet their student’s specific needs. Duke’s family provided an excellent example of this by joining him with the 100 Black Men mentoring program and actively discussing his needs with his formal mentor. Families’ efforts to focus on communication, role modeling, and connection building can all be extremely beneficial to students’ paths towards success.

Facilitating enrichment opportunities. Another element of this study’s themes and conclusions that is relevant for educational practice is the value of enriching programs and opportunities FGL students experience throughout their education. All participants cultivated protective factors through participation in specific programs or experiences across their educational paths that were aimed at providing resources that could contribute to the overall educational success of students with risk factors. Both at the K-12 and postsecondary level, enrichment opportunities can be critical in helping students navigate educational processes, develop aspirations, build dispositional strengths, and continue experiencing academic
resilience. While many high school and postsecondary educators are aware of the need to talk to students about enrichment opportunities while supporting their success, educators should begin making these connections for FGL students as early as elementary and middle school. This can be done with school events themed around planning for the future, information sessions for families about community opportunities, or recruiting students individually for available opportunities for which they would be a good fit. When schools focus on college preparation for students with risk factors prior to high school, students can make more informed decisions and plans as they approach the college transition (Bell et al., 2009). In this study, the cumulative nature of protective factors within participants’ academic resilience processes highlights the importance of early support in bolstering FGL students’ abilities to overcome potential challenges their risk factors may present.

In addition, it is notable that most of the programs and opportunities in which students in this study participated were not specifically geared towards FGL students. Participants, together with the people who supported them, found opportunities to enhance their educational experiences based on various interests and demonstrated needs related to their various risk factors, not solely their low-income or first-generation student status. LPU’s TRIO SSS program was the singular exception to this, as all participants interacted with it in some capacity due to their enrollment at LPU as FGL students. Fulfilling its mission to support FGL students, TRIO SSS served as a valuable link to many campus resources at LPU, provided mentorship, and offered much college information that participants needed during their first year. The fact that all eight participants were involved to
some extent with TRIO SSS emphasizes its positive role in supporting student success. However, with the exception of TRIO SSS, the beneficial opportunities students experienced were not tailored to their FGL characteristics. Instead, the experiences in which they participated were offered to larger groups of students with interests or needs for educational enhancement that aligned with other qualities participants displayed. The participants in this study had many educational needs that were distinct from their FGL characteristics—such as their needs for enrichment in particular academic fields, culturally-specific educational guidance, transition programs that included similar communities of students, or academic exploration opportunities—all of which were supported by programs that contributed positively to their academic resilience and educational success.

For educators and families looking to support the success of FGL students, this variety in beneficial programs suggests that becoming aware of what types of programs would best supplement each individual student’s resources and experiences is essential. While scholars often suggest focusing efforts on developing opportunities for FGL students specifically (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Padgett et al., 2012; Reid & Moore, 2008), which TRIO SSS exemplifies as one way of enhancing FGL students’ experiences, FGL student-specific programs are not the only useful means through which to facilitate FGL student success. Educators and families can help FGL students take advantage of programs that already exist to improve their outcomes and which are based on factors other than parental education or family income, but that can benefit FGL students as well. Summer camps designed to encourage particular academic interests, mentoring programs
aimed at providing college or career planning, and college transition programs provided to support acclimation to postsecondary life are among many options that may benefit FGL students though they are often designed to support broader student populations or other specific groups of students. As previously suggested, families forging connections with educators is one way to become aware of existing programs that families might recognize would benefit their particular student’s needs. In addition, educators such as teachers, counselors, student affairs professionals, and faculty often learn about their students, their families, and their communities in order to help students excel academically. Taking this information and making supplemental connections between FGL students and available opportunities is another way to help students find programmatic resources. Schools and universities can emphasize the value of these connections through in-service education about how to recognize student needs, what programs and opportunities exist within their communities, and the particular importance of connecting FGL students with experiences that will enhance their educational success.

Collaborating to provide resources. In this study, one of the most important components of participants’ academic resilience was the way that protective factors worked collectively to contribute to students’ success. This suggests that it is essential for families, educators, and programs that aim to provide students with resources for educational success to maintain active collaboration with one another. Because of the critical role families played in participants’ stories of success, one way to increase collaboration between protective factors is for educational enrichment programs and opportunities to increase the level to
which families are included in their activities. One participant, Victoria, touted the benefit of including information sessions held in Spanish for parents during her precollege preparation program. This experience empowered both Victoria and her parents to feel more confident that they understood how to get her into college successfully, and is an excellent example of program and family collaboration. In K-12 school environments, fostering connections between protective factors might involve directing advertisements of enrichment opportunities specifically at parents and facilitating more discussions between educators and parents about ways of supplementing student experiences. A strategy such as community asset mapping, which provides a structure through which educators and community members can catalog available environmental resources and the types of needs they are intended to meet, would be a valuable tool for connecting schools, families, and community resources (Williams et al., 2015). Educators can also help FGL families become more aware of just how important family encouragement and expectations for students can be (Engberg & Allen, 2011) by sending home resources and providing recommendations for how to foster home environments that emphasize education in supportive ways. For parents who are not able to maintain active involvement in school or community activities, web-based information and communication might also forge manageable connections between educators, resources, and families that can help them work together towards student success.

At the postsecondary level, stronger collaboration should involve adding components to admissions recruitment efforts that include family participation, increasing the extent to which families are included in orientation activities as students transition to their first-year
experiences, or increasing collaboration between administrative units aimed at supporting FGL students, such as TRIO SSS offices and parent and family or academic advising programs. TRIO SSS offices can also utilize their communication with FGL students to facilitate connections with other types of supportive programs and opportunities institutions might offer that are not directed specifically at FGL students, but which may function as important supplemental resources. The importance of collaborative resources also supports the idea that first-year success is built upon many different factors that combine to influence students’ paths to educational achievement, not just academic performance (Upcraft et al., 2005). This emphasizes the need for college transition programs, first-year programs, and professionals working with first-year students to see beyond academic progress when defining student success and when seeking ways to support first-year FGL students.

Institutions can use this information to employ systems that include a “whole-student” approach to academic advising and address students’ multifaceted needs through advising interactions that include support for transition-related, personal, and social challenges. Faculty and staff who interact with first-year students should also maintain a perspective that it is the students’ holistic first-year experience that leads to success, rather than just academic performance.

Families’ efforts to gather resources, educators’ support of student achievement, and programs’ active enhancement of educational experiences were all critical in participants’ experiences of success. Increased connections and collaborations between all types of
environmental and family support would likely serve to enhance the positive influence combinations of protective factors have on FGL students’ academic resilience.

**Fostering protective dispositional characteristics.** The development of protective dispositional characteristics was another key component of all participants’ educational success in this study. Families, communities, and other elements of individuals’ social worlds can significantly influence many personal characteristics as individuals grow and learn (Lerner & Callina, 2015). Throughout participants’ stories, their familial and environmental resources helped foster in them personal qualities that both buffered against risk and helped them to overcome challenges. Because the development of dispositional protective factors was such an important aspect of participants’ academic resilience, it is important to consider how families and educators of FGL students can promote student learning of beneficial characteristics like those participants described.

The emphasis families placed on participants’ education at home nurtured students’ internalization of beneficial traits such as valuing education, developing independence, cultivating a strong work ethic, becoming extremely motivated, and being determined to achieve academic excellence. Families should discuss these characteristics with students as they move through their educational paths, model similar traits in their professional roles, and encourage students as they display behaviors that show development of these traits. Dispositional characteristics can also be fostered through the strength of supportive relationships with family, community members, and educators. As evidenced by participants’ experiences learning from individuals in their networks of social support including families,
mentors, teachers, counselors, faculty, and staff, strong personal relationships are important avenues through which positive dispositional traits can be modeled and encouraged. In particular, relationships between educators and students that are founded on highlighting students’ strengths can help students believe in their own achievement, creating empowering ideas about their future and promoting existing aspirations (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Educators should communicate expectations of success for all students and convey beliefs about students’ potential for achievement regardless of students’ background characteristics, actively fostering a culture of student success (Calahan & Perna, 2015). For example, school counselors in K-12 settings and advisors in postsecondary settings can foster these relationships through individual or group meetings with FGL students that focus on recognizing students’ strengths, drawing parallels between students’ skills and other beneficial traits, and helping students make connections between their characteristics and future success. Relationships with educators who operate from these strengths-based, success-oriented perspectives can contribute to students’ development of determination to succeed and strengthen their abilities to focus on positive aspects of their experiences, both of which were important in participants’ academic resilience experiences.

A focus on student strengths can carry into classroom settings as well. One strategy for emphasizing dispositional trait development within classroom curricula is through formal character development education, which can cultivate students’ dispositional protective factors by building skills into educational curricula that support student success beyond cognitive ability and academic learning (Elias, 2009). Educators should consider actively
teaching character traits like responsibility and perseverance, which contribute to students’ development of positive dispositional characteristics like work ethic, motivation to succeed, and self-directed learning. Strategies for teaching these traits include delivering character-based curricular programs, fostering school or campus climates rooted in emphasizing beneficial characteristics, and teaching explicit lessons in how to exemplify these qualities. In addition, particularly at the secondary and postsecondary levels, overtly teaching students to recognize the benefits derived from their own unique backgrounds and experiences can be effective in helping students understand how their strengths can help them overcome challenges they encounter in their educational paths (Stephens et al., 2014). Classroom activities or group advising interactions that require students with diverse backgrounds to reflect on how their unique characteristics matter within their experiences can help students identify their strengths and think critically about how to use them advantageously in educational environments.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this study emphasize the invaluable role of familial and environmental resources in FGL students’ achievement of success. As such, there are important policy implications that can positively impact the educational paths of FGL students through facilitating the types of connections and influences these resources can provide. For example, while the issue of minimum wage may not seem like an educationally relevant policy, if families of FGL students working in minimum wage jobs were able to reduce their financial limitations through increased pay, they may be able to devote more
time and effort to emphasizing education at home. Increases in policies that support low-income families in general, such as minimum wage increases, access to health care, and reducing unemployment, would alleviate burdens many FGL students’ families face and allow families to devote more resources to supporting their students in ways that lead to educational success.

Similarly, many of the educators participants in this study credited as protective factors within their experiences managed to find ways beyond their academic roles to support student success. Educational policies that allow educators the time and resources needed to focus efforts on facilitating student success not just academically, but also through making connections with families, community resources, and students themselves, would positively impact educators’ abilities to support FGL students. For example, when teachers are under extreme pressures to improve standardized test scores, the demands of meeting testing expectations force their time to be spent on achievement milestones, while time for building relationships with students, teaching character traits, assisting with college preparation processes, and helping students connect with enrichment opportunities becomes scarce. States, districts, and schools should lessen the burden of testing by limiting assessments and their consequences so that teachers are more able to put these types of efforts into bolstering student achievement through supportive, non-academic means. Further, policies that focus school counselors’ roles so as to allow greater time for student-specific support would help more counselors be able to make the connections necessary to serve as protective resources for FGL students. While some participants in this study benefited tremendously from the
relationships they built with school counselors, even school counselors who are tasked with focusing on college counseling are often not able to provide meaningful support due to constraints on their time that take them away from building relationships and making connections with their students (Perna, 2015). States and districts should pass legislation following the guidelines of the American School Counseling Association (2016) that recommend lowering counselor-to-student ratios and reducing non-counseling duties, such as scheduling and test-coordination, in order to maximize counselor availability and supportiveness. Because of the importance of educators in facilitating FGL student success, more policies should be structured so as to allow educators the time and attention necessary to support students directly.

Moreover, the evidence from this study that students’ educational experiences cumulatively contribute to success throughout K-12 and into postsecondary education emphasizes the intricate connections between all levels of education. As such, more policymakers emphasizing student persistence should unify efforts across the divide between K-12 and higher education. Implementation of initiatives such as curricular alignment between K-12 and postsecondary systems and P-16 programs that emphasize collaboration between all levels of education should become more commonplace in order to improve consistency of preparation for higher education for all students (Hearn, Jones, & Kurban, 2013). These initiatives should include joint committees across governing boards and boards of education and policy coordination groups that can focus efforts on facilitating collaboration across levels (Conley, 2013). This collaboration should also span beyond
academic and curricular alignment and include forging connections between support systems across levels. For example, administrative units at the postsecondary level that work with FGL students, such as TRIO SSS offices, could engage with K-12 educators through interagency task forces aimed at facilitating successful college preparation, transitions, and experiences. In addition, because supplemental enrichment programs and opportunities emerged as important elements of academic resilience throughout participants’ educational paths, policymakers should consider increasing the availability and affordability of such programs at all levels. Channeling funding to programs that support student success across both the K-12 and postsecondary levels—including those, like TRIO SSS programs, that directly aim to support FGL students and those that serve broader groups of students—would benefit FGL students who encounter financial barriers to accessing the resources these programs can provide.

Because this study addresses factors contributing to educational success for a group of students whose persistence is necessary for reducing background-based achievement gaps at the postsecondary level, the findings of this study are also especially relevant for general policy issues related to higher education access and persistence. Some of the most prominent items on education policy agendas in 2016 emphasize the importance of increasing the affordability of higher education, improving institutional outcomes related to graduation rates and degree production, and bolstering state economies through higher education (Harnisch & Lebioda, 2016). Each of these issues is deeply connected to FGL student success. For example, many participants in this study credited significant scholarships and financial aid
with enabling them to attend college at all. Increasing college affordability through reduction of college costs or free tuition programs, as many policymakers argue will be necessary in the coming years (Calahan & Perna, 2015), is therefore likely to help other FGL students obtain the financial means to attend college. Supporting FGL student success in many of the individual ways suggested throughout this study is likely to help institutions improve graduation rates and degree production for this group of students, and therefore may also have a meaningful impact on state economies. Overall, understanding ways in which FGL students cultivate achievement throughout their educational paths can help increase the number of FGL students who access and remain successful in college, thus positively impacting college persistence rates and closing background-based achievement gaps that negatively impact institutional and economic outcomes.

**Chapter Summary**

This narrative qualitative study described the experiences of first-generation, low-income students who experienced success in the first year of college. Through their stories, this study illustrated processes of academic resilience within their experiences that contributed to achievement of educational success throughout their educational paths. I am grateful to have been honored with participants’ narratives throughout the course of this study, and hope that the themes and conclusions drawn from their experiences make important contributions to the bodies of research regarding FGL students, academic resilience, first-year success, and the social context of education. Future theory, research,
practice, and policy efforts will help to expand the scope of this study and improve educational success and attainment for this unique group of students.
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APPENDICES
### Characteristics of the Entering First-Year Class of 2014 at LPU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Sub-measure</th>
<th>Number or Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of students</td>
<td></td>
<td>4,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of class by gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of class by race/ethnicity</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nonresident Alien</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of class considered first-generation students</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of class by geographic origin</td>
<td>In-state</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average high school GPA</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average SAT score</td>
<td></td>
<td>1248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average ACT score</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size of Family Unit</th>
<th>48 Contiguous States, D.C., and Outlying Jurisdictions</th>
<th>Alaska</th>
<th>Hawaii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$17,820</td>
<td>$22,260</td>
<td>$20,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$24,030</td>
<td>$30,030</td>
<td>$27,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>$30,240</td>
<td>$37,800</td>
<td>$34,785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>$36,450</td>
<td>$45,570</td>
<td>$41,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>$42,660</td>
<td>$53,340</td>
<td>$49,065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>$48,870</td>
<td>$61,110</td>
<td>$56,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>$55,095</td>
<td>$68,880</td>
<td>$63,345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>$61,335</td>
<td>$76,680</td>
<td>$70,515</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: For family units with more than eight members, add the following amount for each additional family member: $6,240 for the 48 contiguous states, the District of Columbia and outlying jurisdictions; $7,800 for Alaska; and $7,170 for Hawaii.

Note: The term "low-income individual" means an individual whose family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount.

Note: The figures shown under family income represent amounts equal to 150 percent of the family income levels established by the Census Bureau.

Appendix B—Pre-Participation Demographic Questionnaire

Pre-Participation Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in my research study. In order to make sure this is a good fit for you and for the research project, please complete the following short questionnaire. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact me at jvdaids@ncsu.edu.

Contact and Personal Information

Name:  
Preferred email address:  
Gender:  
Race/Ethnicity:  
Age:  
Home City/State:  

During the course of this research project, I will use a pseudonym (fake name), to keep your responses anonymous. Please indicate a first name to which you would like to be referred:

[ ]

How many semesters have you been enrolled as an undergraduate student, INCLUDING the current semester?

[ ] 1
[ ] 2
[ ] 3
4
More than 4

Have you attended any other undergraduate institutions?
Yes
No

Did you live in on-campus housing during your first year of college?
Yes
No

What was your GPA in your first year of college?
If you are a first-year student currently, please indicate your expected GPA

If you are a current first-year student, do you intend to return to NCSU for your second year of college?
Yes
No
Not-Applicable (I am not a first-year student)

Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following items describing your first year of college:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I had a successful first year.</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was happy with my social life.</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I handled academic stress well.</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed being a college student.</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was healthy.</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I enjoyed activities with other students outside of my classes.  
I felt like I belonged at this university.  
I did well academically.

What is the highest level of education completed by each of your parent(s)/guardian(s)?

Please describe your family's socioeconomic status, based on income and/or social class:

Please select any of the following you are eligible to receive:

- Work Study
- Pell-Grant assistance
- TRIO / Student Support Services programs
- I do not know
- None

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Appendix C—Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Paths of academic resilience: The educational stories of first-generation, low-income students and the processes that led to their experiences of success in the first year of college.

Principal Investigator: Jenica V. Davidson          Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach

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 named above.

What is the purpose of this study?
This study will explore the educational experiences of first-generation college students from lower-income backgrounds who have had success in their first year of college. The purpose of this narrative design is to uncover the lived experiences of participants through stories of their educational paths.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete a brief digital questionnaire to evaluate your eligibility to participate in the study. These questions will include demographic information (gender, race/ethnicity, age, location of home, family educational and socioeconomic background), academic information (number of semesters enrolled, living on or off campus, freshman GPA), and information about your experience of success in the first year of college. If it is determined by the researcher that you meet the inclusion criteria, and you still wish to participate in the study, you will be invited to choose a date, time, and quiet, public location for the first interview. At the first interview, you will have an opportunity to discuss this informed consent form with the researcher, and both you and the researcher will sign it before beginning the study.

2. Participate in two interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes each. The interviews will take place at the date, time, and quiet location of your choosing. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. After completion of each interview, recorded data will be sent to a transcriptionist.

3. Complete a journal reflection during the time between the first and second interview. This reflection will include written responses to three prompts provided by the researcher, and may be completed electronically at the convenience of the participant. It will need to be provided to the researcher three days prior to the second interview.

4. Review an educational history the researcher writes based on your first interview. This will be provided to you three days prior to the second interview, and you will need to come prepared to discuss it at the second interview.

5. Review the transcripts of your interviews in order to ensure accuracy and make suggested changes to the content. The researcher will discuss these suggestions with you if necessary, and make the final decision about what changes to make.
Risks
Participants will experience minimal discomfort as a result of participation in this study. However, discussions of family background and educational history may bring up sensitive topics or experiences. The researcher will take the following steps to ensure support should discomfort arise:

1. All efforts will be made to ensure confidentiality of your personal information and stories.
2. You may elect to withdraw from the study at any time, and will be encouraged to inform the researcher at any time if you wish to withdraw from the study.
3. You may indicate if any question makes you uncomfortable, and will not be required to answer.
4. You may answer any question in whatever way you choose.

Benefits
The indirect benefit to your participation in this study is to provide a better understanding of the educational experiences of successful first-generation college students from lower-income backgrounds. The findings in this study may inform university administrators as they work to develop resources to facilitate success for similar students in the future. For some participants, a direct benefit may be that sharing their stories may offer some level of personal support or development as they reflect on their experiences and continue forward in their education.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. The following steps will be taken to secure written and digital data:

1. A roster and contact information for participants will be kept in a file separate from any written or digital data, on a password-protected flash drive stored in the home of the researcher. Care will be taken in the writing of the final report to change or eliminate all references that would allow for the identification of the participant.
2. Hard copy data (e.g. consent forms) will be stored only in a locked file in the researcher’s home office.
3. All digital data will be kept on the personal computer of the researcher and/or an external hard drive and will be kept in password-protected files. Data will be stored with filenames that do not identify the participant in any way.
4. All electronic communication, including data from the demographic questionnaire, will be password protected. This information will be deleted following the completion of the study.
5. The researcher will share digital files with you periodically throughout this research project. We will utilize Google Drive to share each digital file after all personally identifiable information has been removed. Each file will be uploaded to a shared folder that you and the researcher alone have access to, and you will be notified when the file is ready for review at an email address you provide to the researcher. You will be able to download the file, or provide edits and upload the reviewed file to the shared Google Drive folder. For the final use of this folder, you will be asked to review the transcripts of your interviews for accuracy. You will have 10 days from the time you are notified by the researcher that files are available to provide feedback. At the end of the research project, the researcher will remove all files from the shared folder and delete the shared folder.

Compensation
For participating in this study, you will receive a total of $75 in gift cards. When I communicate with you about scheduling your first interview, I will ask you what vendor they would like their gift cards to be for. At the end of the first interview, you will receive a $25 gift card to location of your choosing. After completion of both interviews, a written journal reflection, review of your educational history, and review of interview transcript data, you will receive an additional $50 gift card to the location of your choosing, mailed to you after conclusion of participation. If you withdraw from participation in the study prior to the first interview, you will not receive any compensation. If you withdraw from participation in the study prior to completion of two interviews, a written journal reflection, review of your educational history, and review of interview transcript data, you will not receive the $50 gift card.
What if you are a NCSU student?
Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at NCSU.

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, Jenni Davidson, at jvdavids@ncsu.edu, or (540) 392-9348.

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 at dapaxton@ncsu.edu or by phone at 1-919-515-4514.

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.”

Participant’s signature_________________________ Date ______________
Investigator's signature________________________ Date ______________
Appendix D—Interview Protocol: First Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant:</th>
<th>Scheduled Time:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer:</td>
<td>Start/End Time:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions:
1. What are the stories of first-generation, low-income students’ educational paths, including their experiences of college exploration, college preparation, access to college, and first-year success?
2. Academic resilience theory posits that protective factors are key elements in students’ experiences of resilience processes. What protective factors do academically resilient first-generation, low-income students experience, how do protective factors interact with each other and with risk factors, and how do these factors and processes change throughout students’ educational paths?
3. What role does social support play in students’ educational paths, and how do the nature, source, and relative importance of social support change throughout students’ educational paths?

Warm Up
1. Tell me a little about yourself.

Educational Path
2. As we talk, I’m going to call the path that led from when you started your education to your success in your first year of college your ‘educational path’. I want to invite you to start by drawing a timeline of that path, beginning as early as you’d like and leading up to the end of your first year of college.
3. Tell me about the educational path you’ve drawn.
   a. Describe to me any events that stand out as important in your educational path.
   b. Describe the greatest challenges, or challenging times, that you experienced in your educational path.

Network of Social Support
4. Think about the people you know, or have known, in your life.
   a. Who stands out as most important in your educational path?
   b. Who stands out as most helpful/supportive?
5. Describe the role that family, educators, and peers play in your educational path.

College Exploration
6. Think back to the very first time you can remember being introduced to the concept of college. Walk me through that experience.
7. How did you get from there to thinking about attending college?

College Preparation and Access
8. How did you prepare for college?
9. Getting to college includes applications, deciding where to go, enrollment, and determining how to pay. Walk me through how you experienced these processes.

First-Year Success
10. Describe how you experienced transitioning from high school to college academically, socially, and personally.
   a. How did your experiences change as the year went on?
11. What was your support from other individuals like during your first year of college?
   a. How did this differ from your experiences before getting to college?
   b. Compare the relative importance and influence of educators, family, and peers in your experiences before and in college.
12. Take me through any events/experiences that stand out as especially important in your first year of college.
13. How did you know you were having a successful first year?
   a. How did your precollege preparation influence your success in your first year?
   b. At some point during your first year, you decided to return to this school for your second year. How did you make that decision?
14. In one sentence or phrase, how would you summarize/describe your first year in college?

Conclusion
15. Is there anything you’d like to add to our conversation today as we wrap up?
16. What questions do you have for me as we end today?

Second Interview Schedule
Date: ___________________________  Scheduled Time: ___________________________
Location: _______________________ Date for document exchange: _______________________

Additional Probing Questions:
   Take me through that experience.
   Tell me why you think that stands out.
   How did that impact you/your education?
   Who or what contributed to that?
   Who else was involved?
   What did you learn from that?
   Can you tell me more about how _____ is related to _____?
Would you explain that more?
What do you mean by _____?
Can you give me a more detailed description of what happened?
Do you have any other examples of this?
What was that like for you?
What were you thinking at the time?
Appendix E—Interview Protocol: Second Interview

Participant: __________________________ Scheduled Time: __________________________
Location: __________________________ Date: __________________________
Interviewer: Jenica V. Davidson Start/End Time: __________________________

Research Questions:
1. What are the stories of first-generation, low-income students’ educational paths, including their experiences of college exploration, college preparation, access to college, and first-year success?
2. Academic resilience theory posits that protective factors are key elements in students’ experiences of resilience processes. What protective factors do academically resilient first-generation, low-income students experience, how do protective factors interact with each other and with risk factors, and how do these factors and processes change throughout students’ educational paths?
3. What role does social support play in students’ educational paths, and how do the nature, source, and relative importance of social support change throughout students’ educational paths?

Warm Up
1. First, I’d like to give you a chance today to bring up anything you’d like to add to what we talked about in our last interview.
2. As a follow-up from our last conversation, I would like to ask you more about…
   a. [Follow-up questions will be unique to particular aspects of each participant’s experience]

Academic Resilience
3. Thank you for taking the time to share your journal reflection with me. There are a few things you wrote that I would like to talk about today. Please tell me more about…
   a. [Follow-up questions will be unique to particular aspects of each participant’s written journal reflection]
4. Share with me your thoughts about academic resilience, risk, and protective factors.
   a. What was it like for you to think about your educational path in this way?
   b. How would you change the definition of academic resilience to better fit your experiences?

Narrative Educational History
5. I hope you have had time to review the story of your educational path I have written based on our first interview.
   a. What was it like for you to read your own story reflected back to you?
   b. Tell me about how accurately it reflects your experiences.
   c. What would you change/remove/add?

Conclusion
8. Going forward, tell me about where you think your educational path will take you.
9. To wrap up our conversations together, I’d like you to come up with a simile or metaphor that describes your educational path.
   a. For example, you could complete this sentence: My educational path has been like…
11. Is there anything you’d like to add to our conversation today as we wrap up?
12. What questions do you have for me as we end today?

Additional Probing Questions:
   Take me through that experience.
   Tell me why you think that stands out.
   How did that impact you/your education?
   Who or what contributed to that?
   Who else was involved?
   What did you learn from that?
   Can you tell me more about how _____ is related to _____?
   Would you explain that more?
   What do you mean by _____?
   Can you give me a more detailed description of what happened?
   Do you have any other examples of this?
   What was that like for you?
   What were you thinking at the time?
Appendix F—Journal Reflection Prompts

Your Pseudonym: __________________________
Date: __________________________

Directions: Please reflect on the following questions and provide written (or typed) responses. The greater detail you can provide, the more I can learn from your experiences. Providing examples within each answer would be very helpful.

If you have questions at any time about this exercise, you may contact me, Jenni Davidson, at jvdavids@ncsu.edu, or (540) 392-9348.

Please answer the questions below based on the following explanation of academic resilience:

**Academic resilience** is a way to describe what is happening when a student has risk factors that can be barriers to education for many students, yet he or she is still able to achieve educational success.

Typically, a student’s experience of academic resilience is made possible by protective factors that prevent the negative effects of risk factors from hurting his or her educational success. **Risk factors** are characteristics or conditions that make it more likely a student will not be successful. These are aspects of a student’s background or life experiences that could make it more difficult for the student to do well in school. **Protective factors** are the characteristics and/or resources of a student’s personal attributes, community or school environment, or family that offset the effects of risk factors.

Questions

1. What risk and protective factors can you identify in your life and how do you think each factor has influenced your educational path? Which factors have had the most influence on your success, positively or negatively?

2. Supportive individuals (family, educators, peers) are often credited with being protective factors for students with educational success. In what ways, if any, did supportive individuals affect your success throughout your educational path?
3. How have the risk and protective factors in your life changed over time (e.g. consider how they differed in K-12, while you prepared and planned for college, and in your first year of college)?