Understanding the Persistence of Low-Income Students in Postsecondary Education:

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

A dissertation presented

By

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Abstract

In contemporary America, postsecondary education has now become almost a prerequisite for anyone wishing to matriculate into a higher socioeconomic class. Over the last five decades there has been a steady increase in the number of high school students entering college and university, with now over 75% of high school graduates enrolling in some form of postsecondary education. Unfortunately, extensive research indicates a student’s chances of persistence in postsecondary education are far from equitable, a construct that is largely delineated by socioeconomic status. Current graduation rates of colleges and universities in the United States indicate that low-socioeconomic status students are far less likely to be retained in postsecondary education when compared to students in higher socioeconomic classes. This is the problem of practice addressed within this study. The researcher conducted a qualitative, interview based study that sought to gain a greater understanding of the low graduation and persistence rates among low-income students. The two primary questions guiding this study were: (1) How do low-income students understand their socioeconomic status as being a factor in their ability to persist in postsecondary education? (2) How do low-income students understand their prior educational experiences and their ability to persist in postsecondary education? The theoretical framework for this study was centered on the social and academic relationships that a student formed during their enrollment in postsecondary education. As this study sought to understand the lived experiences of students, data was collected and analyzed using an interpretive phenomenological methodology. The findings from the study indicate that low-income students are able to overcome the numerous hurdles inherent within their SES. Consistent with extant research, the participants appeared in many regards to personify the
typical characteristics of low-income students in higher education. The majority of participant families were headed by parents without a postsecondary credential, and all had experienced significant adversity due to their low-income status both in secondary and postsecondary education. However, with the support from numerous ancillary groups and their own innate desire to succeed they were all able to persist.

*Keywords:* low-income, persistence in postsecondary education, socioeconomic-status, retention, lived experiences.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................2
Acknowledgements .....................................................................................................................4
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................6
Chapter I: Introduction ................................................................................................................7
Chapter II: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review ..........................................................13
  Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................13
  Literature Review ..................................................................................................................22
Chapter III: Research Design ....................................................................................................45
  Methodology ..........................................................................................................................46
  Site and Participants ..............................................................................................................49
  Data Collection and Analysis ..............................................................................................55
  Validity, Limitations, and Protection of Human Subjects .....................................................58
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings ...................................................................................64
  Section One: Participants Experiences Prior to entrance to Postsecondary Education ..........64
  Section Two: Experiences Post Entrance .............................................................................79
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings ..............................................................................94
  Parental Support of Postsecondary Education ......................................................................95
  Pre-College Skills Levels .......................................................................................................97
  On-Campus Employment .....................................................................................................103
  Institutional Life ....................................................................................................................105
  Implications for Future Research .......................................................................................109
  Conclusion ..............................................................................................................................115
Appendix A: Interview Protocol ..............................................................................................116
Appendix B: Unsigned Consent Form-Northeastern University ...............................................120
References ....................................................................................................................................124
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem of Practice

It has long been accepted that tertiary education is a necessary endeavor for both students and society (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Ou & Reynolds, 2008), and though tuition is increasingly becoming more expensive (Noland, 2006); remuneration and life opportunities continue to outweigh the initial fiscal investment (Cragg, 2009). In contemporary society, one that has shifted from a production to knowledge based construct, postsecondary education and degree attainment is now almost requisite for matriculation from lower to upper-socioeconomic classes (Webber & Boehmer, 2008). This is a sentiment supported by President Barack Obama, who through the Graduation Initiative 2020 sought to increase college graduation by 50 percent by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Unfortunately, according to Carnevale and Rose (2003) the current postsecondary framework prohibits open and equitable access, and one that is largely delineated by socioeconomic class.

The problem of practice for this study was to address low graduation and persistence rates among low-income students. This was not to suggest that students failed to persist based exclusively on socioeconomic and pecuniary reasons, but research suggests that socioeconomic status is a primary metric that leads to programmatic cessation (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006). Nationally, fewer than 50 percent of those students who begin their postsecondary education graduate within six-years (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This number; however, belies the endemic reality that low-socioeconomic status (SES) students are more prone to programmatic cessation when compared to any other social group (Barth &
Education Trust, 2001; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Dervarics & Roach, 2000; Miller, Taylor, Smith, Nichols, & Pell Institute, 2011). In a 2006 study using national statistics, of 15,000 students who were monitored over a four-year period the most common reason for programmatic cessation was fiscal (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006). In fact of all the students who dropped, 37.1% were for financial reasons, compared to just 12% that dropped for academic reasons.

From a family income perspective it has been determined that 56% of students from upper-SES classes who entered postsecondary education (dependent families with incomes exceeding $70,000) graduated with a bachelor’s degree within six-years, compared to 26% of students from families from low-SES (dependent families with incomes below $25,000) classes (NCES, 2006). When independent status was included in this analysis the chances of a low-SES student graduating with a four-year degree was even lower at just 15%.

Significance

This problem is significant at both a broader general community level and at a micro-institutional level. From a broad perspective, longitudinal analysis from a report released in 2010 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010) makes explicit that despite a substantial increase in financial assistance (College Board, 2010), retention of low-SES students has yet to show positive gains. As stated by Cragg (2009) federal financial aid programs have increased access to higher education, especially for low-income and traditionally marginalized groups; however, access does not necessarily guarantee completion.

When comparing the completion rates of SES groups, 20% of low-SES students attained an associate’s degree, 14% attained a bachelor’s degree, and 9% attained a graduate degree
(Carnevale et al., 2010). In comparison, 35% of upper-SES students attained an associate’s degree, 48% attained a bachelor’s degree, and 61% attained a graduate degree (Carnevale et al., 2010). By extrapolating these data it was found that over a 37 year period from 1970-2007 the number of low-SES students attaining a postsecondary degree actually dropped by 5%, in contrast the number of upper-SES students that graduated had increased by 38% (Carnevale et al., 2010).

When analyzing data at an institutional level is appears that college choice can also play an important role in persistence and graduation (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Of the students who attended the same institution during the completion of all course requirements graduated at an average rate of 69%, compared with 47% of students who transferred prior to graduation (College Completion, 2003). When factoring in community colleges and less selective institutions, or those institutions most likely attended by low-SES students’ graduation rates continued to fall (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Miller et al., 2011). According to Carnevale and Strohl (2010) students who transferred from less-selective two-year institutions to more selective four-year institutions were almost half (approximately 35%) as likely to graduate in comparison to a student who had persisted at the same institution.

From a micro-institutional or local level, the need to increase the retention of students, specifically low-income students is a salience highlighted by a report known colloquially within the researcher’s university as FOCUS 2011 (Anonymous, 2008; Anonymous, 2010). FOCUS 2011 was a campus wide report first published in 2008, acknowledging amongst other things that social accountability required the university to seek out new processes and procedures that would lead to an increase in student retention. Though FOCUS 2011 was not specific to low-income
students, it did include content aimed at increasing retention through pecuniary measures such as tuition reduction and the augmentation of financial assistance programs (Anonymous, 2008; Anonymous, 2010). In addition to FOCUS 2011, the researcher’s university implemented a subsequent retention plan in the fall of 2011. This initiative encompassed a variety of retention metrics, though unlike FOCUS 2011 it focused on those students the institution considered at-risk of programmatic cessation due to either fiscal or academic deficits.

**Research Questions and Goals (Practical and Intellectual)**

The two primary guiding questions for this study were: (1) How do low-income students understand their socioeconomic status as being a factor in their ability to persist in postsecondary education? (2) How do low-income students understand their prior educational experiences and their ability to persist in postsecondary education? For contextualization purposes low-income is defined as those students who are eligible for financial assistance through the federal Pell grant program. Persistence in postsecondary education refers to those students who have continued anywhere in tertiary education, including those who have transferred from one institution to another.

From a practical goal perspective, the researcher hoped to establish institutional recommendations that might enable the institution (specific to the Charlotte campus) to abrogate some of the barriers that inhibited the matriculation of low-SES students. As stated prior, the university was funding a holistic student retention plan that sought to increase the graduation rates of students’ campus wide. During preliminary analysis of student retention data it was determined that students who were completing vocationally based programs tended to most at risk of programmatic cessation during their academic classes. This introductory finding is
congruent with Conley’s (2009) college readiness framework which aligns a student’s K-12 experience (aggregate of cognitive and content knowledge skills) with postsecondary persistence. By focusing on precollege student attainment and low-income barrier reduction it was hoped that low-income students attending the university would have a greater chance of persisting.

The primary intellectual goal of this study was to understand how low-income students perceived their socioeconomic status and their ability to persist in a four-year undergraduate degree program. One of the foundational perspectives of this goal was that a large majority of student retention research had focused primarily on demographical traits (race, SES, age, income) and their correlation to postsecondary retention (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). The goal of this study was to determine how a student understands his/her socioeconomic status and if this understanding was congruent with contemporary data.

An additional intellectual goal seeks to understand the perceived barriers that are experienced by low-SES students specific to socioeconomic status. Current research indicates that low-SES students are more likely to bring with them academic deficits that place them at a higher risk of programmatic cessation when compared to middle-upper-SES students (Swail, 2000). By making explicit these perceptions it was hoped that tangible solutions (practical goals) could be implemented, aimed at increasing low-SES student graduation rates.

**Organization of this Document**

The following document consists of five principal chapters: theoretical framework, literature review, research design, study findings, and a discussion of study findings in context of the literature review and theoretical lens. The subsequent chapter is a critical review of the
theoretical framework that will be utilized to inform this study. The framework, known as the model of college student attrition was first proposed by Tinto (1975) who argued that “the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems…which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout [behavior]” (p. 94). Additionally, Tinto (1975) posited that students matriculate into postsecondary education with a plethora of attributes (gender, ethnicity, and personal skill sets), precollege educational attainment, and family demographics (social status etc.). It is these characteristics that have either a “direct or indirect” influence upon a student’s educational attainment (persistence, degree attainment) in college (Tinto, 1975, p. 94).

In the literature review chapter the researcher examined three distinct strands of contemporary research. The first string included an examination of literature that made explicit the relationship between socioeconomic status and precollege educational attainment. The second string sought to examine the relationship between family demographics (specifically low-socioeconomic) and postsecondary persistence. Family demographics included, but were not limited to, the educational attainment of parents, single v. married parents within the family unit, and employment prestige of the parents within the family unit (career attainment). The third string examined literature that highlighted the relationship between students’ college attributes and their persistence in postsecondary educational institutions. Though college attributes could be considered both implicit and explicit, the researcher focused primarily on explicit characteristics that included dependent v. non-dependent status and employment history during college matriculation (includes federal work study).
The third chapter of this proposal includes an in-depth explanation of the methodology that was used to drive the study. For this study interpretive phenomenological analysis was used. This method as acknowledged by Lindseth and Norberg (2004) is founded on the contextualized interpretation of text as it relates to the lived experiences of people. An additional component within this section identified the studies participants, research site, and data/collection analysis. The third section of this study also included an overview of ethical challenges that were faced by the researcher (implicit and explicit relationships to either the problem or participants), possible risks imposed upon study participants, and an IRB approval from Northeastern’s IRB Office.

The fourth chapter of this document is an extensive review of research findings. Findings were broken into two main sections: (1) Participant experiences prior to postsecondary education; (2) Experiences post entrance. The fifth and final chapter of this document discussed the findings in relation to the literature review and theoretical lens, in addition to implications for future research.

Chapter II: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how low-SES students perceived their socioeconomic status as being a factor in their persistence and attainment of educational qualifications in tertiary education. In order to better appreciate the complex and dynamic relationships that lead to persistence a theoretical lens based on Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure was chosen. It should be noted prior to an introduction of Tinto’s (1993) model, that despite significant gains in understanding postsecondary persistence, theoretical models serve to make explicit “only a portion
of...behaviors that constitute the universe of social interactions” (Tinto, 1982, p. 688). This is to state that it is unlikely that any singular model can explain the myriad reasons why students leave postsecondary education; rather they illuminate specific domains, creating more of a provincial than complete understanding (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 1982).

From a broad perspective, Tinto’s (1993) model views the process of programmatic cessation as a longitudinal, temporal progression of interactions and experiences between the student and the social and academic systems of the institution (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1988). It is these interactions that amend a student’s educational goals and (institutional) commitments which lead to either institutional persistence of dropout behavior (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Tinto, 1975). Tinto’s model is illustrated in figure 1.
The model argues that college and university (hereinafter college) persistence is a longitudinal process where students separate themselves from past relationships and communities (high school, family, peers etc.), generating new associations as they matriculate into a college’s social and academic communities (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) posits that persistence requires students to integrate and become proficient members of the college’s social and academic communities, and the level of integration within those communities largely determines persistence behavior. Within this argument lies an implied understanding that integration is as much a reflection upon the institution (pertaining to the institution’s ability to support and inculcate new students), as it is the student (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993). Integration, though essential, does not guarantee persistence. As stated by Tinto (1993), high or low levels of integration do not necessarily culminate in persistence; however, the absence of integration appears to dramatically increase the chances of dropout behavior.

At the foundation of the model lies the affirmation that college persistence is comparable to a human subject’s assimilation into community life, a linear process marked by the transition through two key phases (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) suggests that integration and withdrawal from a traditional community; ergo college life, makes overt the latent problems experienced by students during the initial stages of entrance into postsecondary education. The first phase originates during the transition from the family unit, which is inclusive of all prior relationships, to the new college community. This transition requires students to modify their behavior in order to fully assimilate to this new and often intimidating lifestyle. It could be argued that all
students encounter at least some difficulty during the early periods of college life; however, some students may experience more or less difficulties dependent on their proximity to the campus (Tinto, 1993). Those students who travel a non-commutable distance from the college often experience significant pressures due to increased detachment from prior communities. Despite this added stress, non-commuter status has within it an implicit advantage. It almost compels students to start the process of community integration as they seek to moderate their feelings of self-disassociation. Conversely, commuter students do not necessarily experience the same feelings of disassociation as they are able to reintegrate into past communities at will. Election to remain within the home community does contain certain inherent disadvantages. As stated by Tinto (1993), students from “disadvantaged backgrounds and/or from families whose members have not attended college may…find separation more painful” (p. 96). This extends to students that originate from distinctive social groups and families/communities who do not perceive college attendance as a meaningful endeavor. It should be noted low-SES has been correlated to commuter status. According to Paulsen and St. John (2002) 54% of low-SES students enroll in a college specifically for its proximity to work and home communities.

The second principle phase occurs simultaneously with the first, and incorporates the attributes and deficits accrued during a student’s precollege career. This stage, or what Tinto refers to as “transition”, is the time frame between which past normative behaviors are being revised in order to integrate the contemporary habits required for successful inculcation (p. 97). A significant aspect of this inclusion and one relevant to the study is Tinto (1993) considers precollege characteristics as those associated, but not limited to past membership in disadvantaged groups, positing higher degrees of congruency between past and future behaviors
correlate to increased student persistence. The acknowledgement of skill deficits and by extension persistence within disadvantaged groups (inclusive of low-SES) is supported by prior research. Kahlenberg (2010) concluded that students from wealthier and more educated families are “seven times as likely to get a bachelor’s degree” when compared to students from low-SES and less-educated families (p. 4).

Beyond the fundamental, the model also incorporates an “ethnomethodological proposition” which submits it is not simply the occurrence of interactions (between student and social and academic communities) that is important, but rather how the student perceives those interactions (Tinto, 1993, p. 136). This inclusion to the model accepts the notion that what is observed, or perceived by the student, is to them reality. In addition, the model assumes perception of a singular event, when observed by multiple participants, can and often is perceived in different ways (Tinto, 1973, Tinto, 1993). It is also understood that perceptions are influenced by personal characteristics (cultural/ethnic background, social status, educational attainment etc.) and institutional attributes (demographic makeup, size of student cohort, institutional quality etc.). Thus, in order to fully appreciate the fluid and dynamic interactions that occur during a student’s college matriculation, it is vital that any model of student persistence take into consideration these influences.

What is significant about this model is it incorporates and acknowledges precollege student characteristics as factors of programmatic cessation, an element central to this study (primary literature string). Precollege attributes such as low-SES, lower levels of academic preparation and fiscal resources have long been associated with an increase in dropout behavior (Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010; Tinto, 1975; Walpole, 2003; Wells, 2008). As stated
by Mannan (2007), students enter into postsecondary education with a variety of mutable and immutable characteristics that include educational attainment, personal goals and commitments, cultural, and community experiences. It is these traits, which occur in varying degrees that pool to hinder a student’s progress in postsecondary education. This is a perspective supported by Walpole (2003) and Porchea et al. (2010) who concluded that lower levels of capital (combination of SES, educational attainment etc.) were negatively associated with student persistence.

Tinto (1993) also makes explicit that precollege characteristics are influential from both a direct and indirect perspective. Directly, they continuously revise a student’s goals and commitments relating to future educational attainment and vocational aspirations. Indirectly, these elements, when combined with external responsibilities (employment, fiscal, family, and community etc.) can impede the foundational relationships (integration) between the student and college communities (Tinto, 1993). As acknowledged earlier, positive integration increases the chances of persistence; however, indirect influences can simultaneously modify a student’s goals and institutional commitments, which longitudinally can increase the probability of programmatic cessation (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993).

Student persistence, it has been contended, is heavily correlated with external forces (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2011), an element incorporated into Tinto’s model, and one supported by the study’s literature review. Typically, the forces that transcend a student’s immediate college environment include, but are not limited to; family demographics (parental education, SES etc.), non-residential status (commonly associated with low-SES), work commitments, dependent v. non-dependent status, and fiscal
obligations. From an SES perspective, Chen and DesJardins (2008) determined in a longitudinal study that there were “consistently higher dropout risks for low-income students…compared to their upper-income counterparts” (p. 14). With less fiscal resources it would seem intuitive to assume that low-SES students experienced greater strains, or from another semantic perspective, more “pulling away” from the institution. Therefore, with increased external pressure, a student’s perception of the cost to benefit ratio of institutional attendance might change to a point where the student believes that the benefits of educational attainment are outweighed by programmatic continuation (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1982; Tinto, 1993).

If we are to recognize the effects of external forces, then it becomes incumbent to also posit that these forces might indirectly modify a student’s institutional relationships, ergo integration. In order to fully assimilate into college life, significant investments of time need to be made. Inculcation can manifest in myriad forms, though as stipulated by Tinto (1993) contact with peers, student life (extracurricular activities, work study etc.), and faculty constitute the majority of institutional experiences, or those that markedly increase the probability of persistence. Consequently, if students are constantly being pulled from the institution it is unlikely that foundational relationships will be established and further developed (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993).

It is understood that Tinto’s model, as stated by McCubbin (2003) encompasses an extensive selection of persistence factors, possibly one that due to its scope fails to encapsulate dropout behaviors of all student groups. However, in spite of this arguable limitation many prior studies have supported Tinto’s findings. Mannan (2007), McCubbin (2003), Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) have all validated (to varying degrees) Tinto’s attrition model. Terenzini and
Pascarella (1980) recognized the importance of the model, stating “Tinto’s…model of college student attrition appears to be a conceptually useful framework for thinking about the dynamics of dropping out” (p. 279).

Notwithstanding the obvious advantages of the model, it does contain within it a number of limitations which need to be made clear prior to any application. First of all Tinto (1982) acknowledged that his model was chiefly concerned with behaviors which occur within the institutions “formal and informal academic and social systems” (p. 688). Furthermore, he postulated that although the model incorporated precollege attributes, the focus was explicit to how those characteristics “interfaced” with the combined elements of the college’s academic and social systems, and not necessarily how they might dictate or limit the (voluntary) options of students (Tinto, 1982, p. 688). Additional limitations as suggested by McCubbin (2003) include the models lack of focus on financial concerns (specific to a student’s decision to dropout), institutional transfer, and finally the educational experiences of students from different ethnic/racial groups. One final note on Tinto’s model is that it seeks to explain the voluntary (dropout v. persistence) behavior of students and not involuntary actions caused by academic dismissal and other influences outside of a student’s control (financial dismissal etc.)

In terms of research organization Tinto’s model does not fundamentally alter how the phenomena (how low-SES students understand their SES and persistence), and by protraction research is to be viewed, rather it delineates and supports the principal components. From an evaluation of prior literature, multiple reasons have been identified as contributing to programmatic cessation in postsecondary education. Socioeconomic and the inherent consequences of membership in the lower social classes are but a peripheral acknowledgement
of the problems experienced by students as they matriculate through American colleges (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). Tinto’s model helps to identify these attributes and how they influence both persistence and dropout behavior. It goes beyond a parochial analysis, seeking to encapsulate and distil the esoteric nature of this topic.

Tinto’s (1993) model is a particularly useful framework when considering analysis of the proposed participant cohort. The research site is a four-year institution; however, unlike more traditional academically focused institutions, it is founded on vocationally centered degree programs. From an admission and enrollment perspective, a large percentage of students at the research site enroll in at least one federal student financial aid program; of this number 45% receive federal Pell grant support (NCES, 2010). As stated previously, Pell grant eligibility is typically associated with low-SES, meaning nearly half of the students at the institution are theoretically from low-income families. This implies that 45% of the students, due to their potential low-income status, are statistically at greater risk of programmatic cessation when compared to all other social groups within the university (Barth & Education Trust, 2001; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Miller, Taylor Smith, Nichols, & Pell Institute, 2011). Based on the amalgam of academic and social deficits that accompany low-SES status (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010), and their congruency to Tinto’s model it would appear each is mutually supportive of the other, and by extension a cohesive fit.

Pertaining to the formulation of research questions, the model does not exclusively limit the scope of questioning. Instead it will be utilized to guide the overarching viewpoint that low-SES students experience more difficulty (when compared to higher-SES groups) during the attainment of postsecondary credentials. Additionally, the model’s framework will assist in the
augmentation of questioning that seeks to understand a student’s perception of the problem, as opposed to the shared reality of principal participants.

For this study a hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology was used. Phenomenology, or as detailed by LeVasseur (2003) is the holistic questioning of meaning that arises from the lived experiences (phenomena) of human participants. Hermeneutics moves phenomenology one step forward by seeking to interpret those experiences as explicit representations of a participants understanding or perceptions (Creswell, 2007). As stated before the objective of this study was to understand the (abstract) perceptions of student experiences, an element that Tinto highlights in his model. Thus, in order to apply Tinto’s model as a framework, it seemed pertinent to incorporate a methodology that was inclusive of these types of experiences.

In summary, the framework that was chosen for this study incorporates a holistic view of student interactions as they relate to either persistence or dropout behavior in postsecondary education. The model was utilized to guide not only the literature review, but also research methodology and questioning. Finally the model also delineated what the study was not. Due to the inherent limitations of the model, those acknowledged by Tinto and other researchers, race, gender, and the involuntary cessation of students was excluded from any research.

**Literature Review**

The intent of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how low-SES students perceive their socioeconomic class in relation to persistence in tertiary education. As stated previously, this is not to postulate students’ dropout due exclusively for socioeconomic reasons,
but prior findings do indicate “that significant inequities remain, particularly for low-
socioeconomic-status students” (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001, p. v).

Over the last five decades there has been a steady increase in college admissions, with
over 75% of high school graduates now enrolling in postsecondary education (Carnevale &
Strohl, 2010). Unfortunately, access doesn’t necessarily guarantee program or degree
completion. According to the Department of Education less than 50% of students who enroll in
postsecondary certificate and degree programs are able to complete them within a six-year period
(College Completion, 2003). This failure of attainment, as posited by Carnevale et al. (2010) is
inherently problematic for those students who are unable to graduate, especially considering that
education has become vital to employability and membership in the middle class. Compared to
non-degree recipients, a postsecondary credential supports higher lifetime fiscal earnings, social
mobility, workplace flexibility, and an increase in formal employer training (Carnevale et al.,
2010; College Completion, 2003). Beyond the individual benefits, college credentialing also
increases institutional stability via tuition payments, reduces the financial stress experienced by
the federal government due to student loan defaults, and improves the country’s ability to
compete within the global marketplace (College Completion, 2003; Fike & Fike, 2008; U.S.

When examining the graduation rates of colleges in United States, it soon becomes
apparent that a significant social disparity exists within these data. Swail (2000) argued that a
large percentage of students, specifically those from low-income families are either unable to
enter, or be retained in postsecondary institutions. Corrigan (2003), in a similar vein
acknowledged that once enrolled low-income students “often face the severest challenges on the
path to degree attainment” (p. 25). From a general standpoint low-SES students, even those who do graduate high school are far less likely to complete postsecondary education when compared to higher-SES students (Barth, P., & Education Trust, W., DC. 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003; Swail, 2000; Titus, 2006; Wang, 2009). In fact low-income students are less likely to graduate or be retained in tertiary education when compared to almost any other social group (Bergerson, 2007; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Dervarics & Roach, 2000; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Vignoles & Powdthavee, 2009).

Statistically, the persistence and graduation rate of low-income students continues to support the argument that socioeconomic inequity remains prevalent within higher education. In an analysis of the 1996 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), Bozick (2007) determined that 77.4% of high-income students ($80,001+) persisted into their sophomore year, compared to 55.9% of low-income students (0-$21,032). These findings are consistent with Chen and DesJardins’s (2008) analysis of the same data over a six-year period. Their study indicated that almost 38% of low-income students dropped out without returning, compared to 31% of middle-income and 22% of high-income students. In a continuation of analysis with the BPS, Engle and Tinto (2008) found that 26% of low-income students had attained a bachelor’s degree, compared to 55% of students from higher-income quartiles. When factoring in low-income students whose parents had not completed a postsecondary qualification, that number dropped from 26% to just 11%. These results support Carnevale and Strohl’s (2010) examination of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS) in which they determined that “only 7% of high school youth from the bottom quartile of SES, as measured by parental income, education, and occupational status” had attained a bachelor’s degree over a six-year
When measuring the level of education attempted, students from families with an income exceeding $100,001 were over 3.1 times as likely to attempt a bachelor’s degree when compared to students from families earning less than $20,000 (Bozick, Lauff, Wirt, & Institute of Education Science, 2007).

When comparing longitudinal data, the correlation between poor graduation rates and low-SES students becomes even more explicit. Utilizing Current Population Survey (CPS) data from 1970 to 2007 Carnevale et al. (2010) determined that during this time period, bachelor’s degree attainment of upper-income (upper 3 deciles) students rose from 37% in 1970 to 48 % in 2007. In comparison, bachelor’s attainment of lower-income (lower 3 deciles) students actually dropped by 2% from 16% in 1970 to 14% in 2007. During that same period, high school dropout rates for low-income students increased from 39% in 1970 to 59% in 2007. Conversely, dropout rates for upper-income students decreased from 15% in 1970 to just 7% in 2007. Thus, from these data it appears that social status remains a central characteristic in the matriculation and persistence of low-income students in contemporary education (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Walpole, 2003). Despite this dystopian perspective, it is worth noting after controlling for factors endemic to low-SES students “disadvantaged students were no less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree than other students” (College Completion, 2003, p. 3).

This literature review presented three distinct sections. The first section sought to examine current research that makes explicit the pre-college attributes of low-SES students. Specifically, the characteristics of high schools attended by predominantly low-SES students, educational achievements, high stakes testing, and college preparation courses. The first section also looked at the relationship between academic achievement of low-SES students during high
school and their parent’s highest level of scholastic attainment. The second section highlighted the attributes of low-SES students attending an institution of higher education. These attributes include student employment history during matriculation, and commuter v. non-commuter status. The final section considered the effects of student integration into the social and academic communities found on a typical college campus. Social communities include both extra-curricular activities and non-formal peer/faculty relationships, whereas the academic community incorporates the activities and relationships that occur within the realm of formal education (Tinto, 1993).

**Pre-College Attributes**

When examining the profile of low-SES students a number of pervasive attributes quickly become explicit. Most low-SES students are between 18-24 years old, members of traditionally marginalized ethnic groups, and are the first in their family to attend college (Corrigan, 2003). For those students enrolling in a four-year institution, a large percentage will have attended lower quality elementary and secondary schools, are more likely to have dropped out of high school, received less educational encouragement from family members both prior to, and during college, have a lower GPA during their college freshman year, and have parents without postsecondary qualifications (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Sandy & Duncan, 2010; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003; Terenzini et al., 2001).

Additionally, low-SES students attending college when compared to higher-SES students have “lower levels of educational attainment…and educational aspirations”, spend more hours working outside the institution, study less, and are less likely to be involved with on-campus activities (Walpole, 2003, p. 63). When combined, the convergence of characteristics endemic to
low-SES students puts them at a much higher risk of programmatic cessation (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). It is the profile of low-SES students that lays the foundation for this particular research.

Whilst profiling low-SES students it is almost impossible to escape the correlation between race and socioeconomic class (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Underrepresented students (primarily African American and Latino) are much more likely to live in high poverty neighborhoods, come from families with low salaries, and high unemployment (Carnevale et al., 2010 Kahlenberg, 2010). Furthermore, when compared to high-SES students, low-SES students are statistically more likely to be from a traditionally underrepresented minority group (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001).

As stated earlier, low-SES students are much more likely to dropout of postsecondary education when compared to higher-SES students (Bozick, 2007). Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2003) posit a number of explanations, ranging from pre-college educational attainment to a student’s family environment, noting these characteristics “would exist even if the direct costs of college were zero” (p. 593). Pre-college educational attainment in context of this study looks specifically at scholastic achievement relative to a high school’s socioeconomic class, whereas family environment seeks to correlate parental attributes on a micro-level with a student’s academic attainment.

Numerous studies have argued a student’s high school experience is heavily interconnected with educational success (Balfanz, 2009; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Swail, 2000; Where We Have Been, 2006), indicating secondary school settings are not homogenous for all students but are deeply stratified along socioeconomic lines (Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). Lewis
(2007) stated “poor children attend poor schools” (p. 330). When reviewing SES, Wolniak and Engberg (2010) determined those students in the highest income range attended the best quality high schools with the highest rating of teacher quality; attributes which have been positively associated with college grades. On the other hand, low-SES schools are typically associated with less qualified teachers, and classrooms that are poorly equipped with scholastic equipment (Baker & Johnston, 2010).

In a survey conducted by Balfanz (2009) of 100 wealthy and poor school districts they determined the wealthiest school districts were located entirely in suburban neighborhoods where the median family income was $120,000, with minority groups making up just 16% of the student cohort. Conversely, the poorest school districts were located in urban areas with a median income of $19,000, and 90% of the student cohort being populated by minority groups. The survey also found that students in urban areas were more likely to attend larger schools, have higher student-teacher ratios, an increased number of at-need students, and have a 1 in 3 chance of graduating on time.

These findings were consistent with a previous study which found 47% of students who attended urban schools received free or reduced lunches (Where We Have Been, 2006). Free or reduced lunches have long been associated with low-income students. Urban schools have also been correlated with parental involvement, which has been shown to increase a student’s college aspirations (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Sandy and Duncan (2010) posited the parents of students who attended urban schools were less likely to have interacted with their child’s teachers, effectively leaving a void between the school and family unit, concluding the
educational attainment gap of urban students could be almost entirely explained (75%) by their SES.

**Scholastic achievement relative to SES**

If we are to assume a student’s postsecondary achievements begin with appropriate exposure to necessary skills during high school (Choy, 2001), then it becomes incumbent to include an analysis of contemporary inquiry within this study. As stated by Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2003), the academic deficits experienced by low-SES students during college is due, at least in part to “their educational backgrounds” (p. 609). This would indicate when combined with other research that the scholastic achievement of students is positively related to SES (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010; Grogan-Kaylor & Woolley, 2010; Sackett, Kuncel, Arneson, Cooper, & Waters, 2009). Using national data, Albrecht and Albrecht (2010) found support for their hypothesis which sought to link social advantages with educational attainment. They determined students from families in the highest income quartile not only achieved higher levels of scholastic attainment, but also completed an average of 1.9 more years of schooling than their lower income counterparts. Furthermore, Albrecht and Albrecht (2010) contended that “socially advantaged” students routinely earned higher grades (GPA) and higher test scores (p. 132). It is worth highlighting that GPA and test scores have been correlated with both student persistence and an increase in overall years of schooling (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010; Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003).

When considering the overarching theme of persistence relative to SES, research has indicated that low-SES students are more often exposed to a less demanding curriculum (Corrigan, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Qiu & Wu, 2011), which as identified by Johnson (2008) reduces
the likelihood that a student will be retained within the institution. According to a study conducted by Wang (2009), students who completed an academic based curriculum were 3.238 times as likely to persist to graduation (four-year degree) when compared to students who completed a vocational track curriculum. Choy (2002), who analyzed BPS data, came to similar findings. She determined that after three years in postsecondary education 87% of students who had completed a “rigorous” high school curriculum remained within the institution, compared to 62% who had not advanced past a more rudimentary curriculum (p. 20).

One could posit that rigorous, or more advanced high school programs commonly expose students to college preparatory, or those colloquially known as advanced placement (AP) classes, which as stated by Johnson (2008) increases a student’s chances of tertiary graduation. When examining the relationship between SES and the quality of a high school’s curriculum relative to the offering of AP classes, there does appear to be a positive correlation. A study of NELS data showed 16.9% of students in schools populated principally by low-SES students took one of more AP classes; in contrast 26.2% of students in higher-SES schools were taking similar classes (Rouse & Barrow, 2006). A salient fact worth noting, of the students attending low-SES schools only 56% matriculate into postsecondary institutions, compared to 75% of students in higher-SES schools (Rouse & Barrow, 2006).

Before proceeding, a number of important caveats should be made explicit regarding the persistence of students at postsecondary levels. First, the researcher is cognizant that college is but one juncture in the longitudinal and temporal journey taken by most students. Success at this stage is highly dependent on the development of necessary skills during matriculation through elementary, middle, and high schools. This was highlighted in a recent report which identified in
“high-poverty, non-selective…high schools” less than 20% of entering students had attained proficiency on the state’s eighth-grade examinations (Balfanz, 2009, p. 22). In comparison, upwards of 95% of the students attending many of the higher-SES schools entered having attained proficient standing on the same exams (Balfanz, 2009). Additionally, research has shown that delayed entry into postsecondary education and attainment of non-traditional high school diploma’s also negatively impacts student persistence, attributes typically associated with low-SES students (Corrigan, 2003). Secondly, the endogenous success of educational institutions and their students are formed by the conflation of multiple disparate streams, many of which cannot be easily quantified. Thus, care should be taken when trying to draw a direct parallel of causation between these data and persistence; there are just simply too many variants.

**Parental attributes**

Literature suggests the educational attainment of students during their matriculation through K-12 and postsecondary is highly correlated with family characteristics, specifically those associated with socioeconomic factors (Rouse & Barrow, 2006; Swail, 2000; The Foundation for Student Success, 2007; Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005). In the context of a low-SES family, one prominent characteristic that stands out is the lack of parental education and its influences on a student’s educational outcomes. According to Ballinger (2007) “low-income families are more likely to be headed by parents with relatively poor education”, a distinction often associated with lower-rates of college enrollment and persistence for their children (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Choy, 2002).

Parental education holds within it a number of ambient qualities; ones which commonly guide and mediate family members (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). At
a foundational level “parents are the most important socialization agent in a child’s life”, a provincial influence that extends to modify a child’s future actions and aspirations (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010, p. 120). This parallels with research findings that correlated a parent’s education level with a student’s likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education, indicating, as a parent’s educational level increases, so do the college aspirations of immediate family members (Choy, 2002; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). The residual effects of parental education extend not only to immediate family members, but also encompass those who are in close proximity such as family friends and relatives (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010).

In addition to student aspirations, the influence of parental education appears to create a form of scholastic currency; a capital advantage (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Walpole, 2003) that is positively related to both college persistence and graduation levels (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Porchea et al., 2010). Chen and DesJardins (2008) acknowledged poor parental education as a significant factor associated with high programmatic cessation rates. Their research indicated students with parents who completed at least a bachelor’s degree had a 64.3% chance of dropping out when compared to students without postsecondary credentialed parents. These findings are consistent with Porchea et al. (2010) and U.S. General Accounting Office (College Completion, 2003) reports which showed low-levels of bachelor degree attainment, and transfer rates were positively linked with parental education.

The holistic effects of parental education are not limited to persistence, but protract beyond the periphery to that of institutional test scores, or commutatively GPA’s, and the quality of curricular exposure (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010; Choy et al., 2000; Sandy & Duncan, 2010;
Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005). Though specific causation is difficult to define, preliminary research does indicate a positive association between parental education and student test scores. In a study conducted by Toutkoushian and Curtis (2005), parental education was one of three principle factors that accounted for over 50% of the variation in a student’s homogenous test scores. By extension, test scores coalesce to create a student’s GPA, which again is heavily correlated with parental education (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010).

From a curricular perspective, students from poorly educated parents are far less likely to participate in advanced math classes (Choy et al., 2000; Choy, 2001). Advanced classes, it should be noted significantly increase the chances of postsecondary persistence and enrollment (Choy, 2001; Choy, 2002; Johnson, 2008). In a review of NELS data, Choy (2001) determined those students of non-postsecondary credentialed parents completed rigorous math courses at a rate of 63%, compared to 83% of students with parents who had attained at least a bachelor’s degree. Moreover, these students were also less likely to have participated in algebra intensive courses, prior to and during high school (Choy et al., 2000; Choy, 2002). Upon deeper analysis, Choy (2002) concluded that one in five eighth-grade students with poorly educated parents attended a school that didn’t even offer an algebra curriculum. In contrast, only one in ten students of college educated parents experienced a similar scholastic deficit (Choy, 2002).

By combining existing discourse, there does appear to be a strong relationship between socioeconomic factors and a student’s educational outcomes. As acknowledged by Albrecht and Albrecht (2010), “children from socially advantaged backgrounds tend to achieve higher educational outcomes….A superior education is then strongly related to socioeconomic status” (p. 132). Thus, socioeconomic advantages inherent to the family unit extend to higher grades,
greater exposure to a more rigorous curriculum, and higher rates of both college enrollment and persistence. That being stated, there are a number of implicit caveats. First, research has revealed when taking into account many of the difficulties experienced by students of poorly educated parents, those same students were able to attain college outcomes comparable to students from highly educated parents (Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terenzini, 2003). Though this study was specific to community colleges, it does demonstrate that when given equity, even socially disadvantaged students are able to persist and successfully navigate postsecondary education. As posited by Baker and Johnston (2010), poor low-SES attainment cannot be answered simply through the consideration of fiscal influences.

College Attributes

As students’ complete their linear passage through postsecondary education, they effectively become conduits through which pre-college attributes either inhibit, or promote successful transition. For this section of the review, college characteristics (employment and campus living) that combine with, and often compound pre-existing deficits will be discussed. These shortfalls often manifest as activities that preclude, or at least limit the ability of students to fully assimilate into college life. It is this integration, or membership as hypothesized by Tinto (1993) which supports the persistence of students as they transition from old to new communities.

Employment is an activity pursued by many students during college, sometimes as a rite of passage rather than a pecuniary necessity, and though working during college is pervasive, there lies a socioeconomic disparity within employment statistics (Bozick, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Corrigan (2003) stated “low-income students…are no more likely to work than their
middle-and-upper-income peers” (p. 31). However, research conducted by Bozick (2007) using data from the BPS found that work habits (number of hours worked) were not consistent throughout different income groups. Of the students surveyed, 60.1% of students in the highest income quintile reported worked during their first year of college. Interestingly, the lowest rates of employment during college were in the bottommost income quintile at 66.8%. This suggests these students were either unable to find employment due to labor markets within their communities, or because of need-based financial aid, a greater portion of college costs were covered (Bozick, 2007). The highest rates of college employment were found in the three middle income quintiles, averaging at 73.1% for each group (Bozick, 2007). Walpole (2003) had similar findings in her research, indicating, of the students who worked during college; low-income students were more likely to be employed and work more hours. Over 52% of low-SES students reported working full-time, or over 16 hours per week, compared to 37% of high-SES students (Walpole, 2003).

From a holistic perspective, in the school year 2003-04, about one-third of all undergraduates worked full-time during college, 41% part-time, averaging 29 hours per week for the entire population (Horn & Nevil, 2006). Of those students who worked full-time a greater proportion attended a community college (Horn & Nevil, 2006). Community colleges, it should be noted historically represent an institutional segment that is disproportionately populated by low-SES students (Fike & Fike, 2008; Mendez, Mendoza, & Malcolm, 2009; Mendoza, Mendez, & Malcolm, 2011), and due to non-traditional requirements, graduation rates at community colleges are inherently lower than almost all other postsecondary institutions (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010).
Employment during tertiary degree matriculation has often been associated with programmatic cessation (Choy, 2001; Choy, 2002; College Completion, 2003, Corrigan, 2003), and has been shown to significantly impact a student’s level of scholastic attainment (Bradley & Mather, 2009). Corrigan (2003) stated that although working during college completion is pervasive amongst all student income groups; the excessive hours worked by low-income student’s increases the “challenges they face” (p. 31). This supposition is congruent with GAO analysis of BPS data which compared four-year graduation rates with number of hours worked (College Completion, 2003). Findings indicated that students who worked 20 hours or more per week were significantly less likely to graduate when compared to students who worked less than 19 hours per week.

Research has also indicated the effects of vocational undertakings during college are not homogenous amongst undergraduate students. For example, Bozick (2007) determined those students who worked over 20 hours per week during their freshman year, and who lived with their parents were far less likely to persist when compared to students who worked at same level of intensity, but lived on campus. Indicating, that on campus living provided at least a modicum of protection, or counter support for the time taken away by working (Bozick, 2007).

An interesting caveat to the negative effects of college employment was highlighted in a study conducted by Mamiseishvili (2010) who found a thread that connected a student’s perception of their primary role, employment, and first-year persistence. Mamiseishvili (2010) suggested:

Working students who perceive college as their priority and their primary role are more likely to persist, no matter how much time and energy they devote to working, or how
many or what kinds of jobs they hold. This finding indicates that the negative effects of employment disappear when students consider academics as their most significant responsibility and place school at the top of their priority list (p. 72).

It is important to note of the students who attended a community college 35% identified themselves as an employee who attended college, compared to 16% of four-year students (Horn & Nevil, 2006). Of those students who attended a four-year institution 54% identified as students who were employed, compared to 44% of students attending a community college (Horn & Nevil, 2006). As stated beforehand, the majority of students who attend community colleges, or less selective institutions are from low-income and traditionally underrepresented social groups (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Miller, Taylor Smith, Nichols, & Pell Institute, 2011).

The intent of this section is not to over simplify a very complex topic, as research does show there are positive residual influences of working during college (DesJardins et al., 2002; Staff & Mortimer, 2007). However, of the data corpus available low-income students not only work more hours, they are also at a greater risk of programmatic cessation because of these employment schedules when compared to practically all other income groups. Thus, adding additional support for the practicality and necessity of this study.

**On-campus v. off-campus living**

According to Tinto (1993) the interaction between students and their social and academic communities during college protracts to support either persistence, or dropout behaviors. It is not simply the interaction between persons that leads to persistence, but rather an interaction deemed gratifying, a contact which expands into a form of membership, cementing the acuity of
fitting in (Tinto, 1993). Contemporary research has shown that a student’s living arrangements often have a substantial effect on how they perceive their place within the college community, vis-a-vis, their perception of belonging (Bradley & Mather, 2009). Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) acknowledged, during the initial and subsequent transition into college life, peer and social support came primarily from friends within on-campus housing. These friends, or as Wilcox et al. (2005) stated “surrogate family members” become principle forms of support who augment a student’s “sense of well-being and belonging” (p. 716). Statistically, findings do support a relationship between an increased sense of belonging, forged by on-campus living and persistence. On-campus housing, according to Mamiseishvili (2010) increased a student’s likelihood of persistence by 1.548 times. This was congruent with Johnson (2008) who determined the odds of student persistence increased by 1.26 times for those who lived in on-campus housing.

Unfortunately, the apparent benefits of on-campus living do not extend to all students. An analysis of BPS data showed 53.6% of high-income (family income $80,000+) students choose on-campus housing, compared to an average of 27.7% for those students in the bottom three income (family income $0 to $55,640) quintiles (Bozick, 2007). Bozick (2007) asserts, compared to low-income students, their more wealthy peers are more likely to live on-campus, suggesting that “low-income youths…often lack the resources and support to take advantage of this opportunity” (p. 265).

Though beneficial for many, on-campus living is sometimes perceived as negative, or lacking in crucial support (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Wilcox et al., 2005). For example, students are frequently housed with other students in dormitory style accommodation; young
adults who are not necessarily chosen for compatibility within their immediate social group. This lack of compatibility can lead to high levels of student dissatisfaction within the institution (Wilcox et al., 2005); a dominant element in college persistence (Tinto, 1993). Additionally, on-campus housing effectively eliminates past community ties, which many students view as “beneficial” (Bradley & Mather, 2009, p. 272) to the assimilation into the campus community; a critical element in supporting long-term persistence (Tinto, 1993).

**Student Integration**

The path to postsecondary degree completion is frequently hindered by myriad personal, environmental, and institutional reasons, many of which have been previously discussed and made explicit. One component of persistence that remains partly elusive and esoteric is student integration, or more specifically membership into the social and academic communities within a college campus (Elkins et al., 2000). Integration as posited by Tinto (1993) is enhanced through a student’s ability to develop and foster meaningful relationships within the college community. These relationships generally encompass those participants that are directly related to the college campus, including faculty, student peers, and ancillary staff members (Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 1993).

Though integration is somewhat abstract and thus difficult to accurately measure, research does support its importance and centrality to long-term student persistence (Bitzer, 2009; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 1993; Wang, 2009; Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). As proposed by Johnson (1997), integration and a “sense of community” are essential for student retention (p. 329). This supposition is reinforced by Bitzer (2009) and Wolniak and Engberg (2010) who acknowledged that academic and social integration are key
components necessary for educational attainment and reducing dropout behavior. Elkins et al. (2000) further suggested “support had the greatest influence on the persistence/departure decision” of students in college (p. 263).

Positive integration could be considered synonymous to the support obtained (emotionally or scholastically) from the relationships formed prior to, and during college matriculation. Support, as posited by Choy (2002) can come from family, student peers, and school personnel; all of which combine to increase a student’s likelihood of persistence. Research has determined that the ability level of a student’s peer group has been found to positively influence dropout behavior (Titus, 2006a), a phenomena similar to the benefits obtained through the association with socially supportive relationships (Goddard, 2003). Though not all relationships could be considered functional, many act as conduits through which students are able to acquire scholastic assets, or in academic vernacular social capital (Goddard, 2003; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). This capital can lead to increased rates of participation in college activities (Holland and Farmer-Hinton, 2009), further reinforcing a student’s commitment to the institution, and by extension integration (Tinto, 1993).

It is interesting to note that a correlate has been found between the level of student support and parental income. In their study Elkins et al. (2000) determined as parental income increased so did student support. This salient fact gives further credibility to the belief that low-SES students are at a significant disadvantage during postsecondary matriculation when compared to their more affluent peers.
Academic Integration and Social Integration

When examining Tinto’s (1993) model of departure, academic integration was theorized as being one of the two principal environments that supported positive student integration. Though academic integration is loosely defined, it does encompass activities that involve faculty, peers, and other forms of scholastic engagement within, and outside of the classroom (Deil-Amen, 2011; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Tinto, 1993). As posited by Tinto (1993) “nowhere is the importance of student involvement more evident in and around the classrooms of the college” (p. 132). Engagement in scholastically directed activities has been found to be positively associated with both persistence and academic attainment, especially for those students in traditionally marginalized and low-income groups (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Kuh et al., 2008; Walpole, 2003).

Holistically, integration from a student perspective is heavily correlated with institutional faculty, staff, and peers (Deil-Amen, 2011). In a study of two-year college students conducted by Deil-Amen (2011) 92% specified that college “agents…were instrumental to their sense of…belonging” and well-being (p. 61). In context, two-year college students often differ in many ways from traditional four-year students (St. John & Indiana University, 2002); thus protraction of findings is used with caution. Regardless of college type, academic integration can form a positive cohesive relationship between the institution and the student (Johnson, 1997; Walpole, 2003). This link can be formed through activities both inside, and outside of the classroom. In-class activities can manifest as peer/faculty discussions, pedagogical practices, or simply participating and taking notes; outside activities included contact with faculty, fellow students, and even on-line based class interaction (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Deil-Amen, 2011).
As stated by Deil-Amen (2011) contact outside of class “served the same academic support” or utility as in-class interactions (p. 82). Despite the subjective nature of many of these activities, each was acknowledged as contributing to a student’s feeling of membership and comfort within the institution (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Deil-Amen, 2011).

An important point to mention regarding academic interaction, and one highlighted by research (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Deil-Amen, 2011) was the importance of faculty approachability, and their ability to create an open and supportive classroom environment. Of students surveyed, nearly 75% identified faculty accessibility as being central to integration (Deil-Amen, 2011). This finding was supported by Bradley and Mather (2009) who detailed that approachable “faculty…fostered classroom environments in which [positive] student perspectives were validated and affirmed” (p. 275). In taking these findings literally, one could postulate the opposite to be true then for faculty members who are unable, or unwilling to foster these positive classroom environments. Thus, initial student feelings of belonging upon entrance into an institution or course can become subordinate when faced with faculty or staff members who portray undesirable behavior.

The second environment acknowledged as being fundamental to postsecondary integration is formed within the social context of the college community (Tinto, 1993). This predominantly extra-curricular domain was identified as decisive by students during their transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Wilcox et al., 2005). As detailed by Wilcox et al. (2005) “students made clear their urgent need for both physical and social opportunities, and spaces for making contact with others”, vis-a-vis social integration (p. 720). These exchanges, it was determined need not be formal in nature, but rather any interaction that
allowed for an trading of “shared experiences and challenges” was seen as contributing to a student’s “sense of connection” (Deli-Amen, 2011, p. 83). Exchanges were made in both formal and non-formal social domains. Formal exchanges took place in areas such as student government, student publications, and work-study; whereas, non-formal manifested during Greek life, college clubs, residence halls, and recreational and sporting activities (Hall, 2006; Stuber, 2009; Tinto, 1993).

The benefits of social interaction and by extension greater integration within the social community cannot be easily quantified, as students perceive the utility of each exchange differently. However, despite this subjectivity research does support its value. Hall (2006) acknowledged that recreational activities assisted students in their development of positive feelings towards the institution and other students. This in turn led to an overarching sense of community, and belonging (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Hall, 2006).

Unfortunately, it would seem that not all students are able to participate equally, and thus benefit from the apparent advantages granted by time spent integrating into the social community. This is not to posit that all students even wish to socially integrate, but research does indicate social integration to be delineated to some degree along socioeconomic lines (Corrigan, 2003; Deli-Amen, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2003; Rubin, 2012; Stuber, 2009; Walpole, 2003). Rubin (2012) identified a substantial positive association between SES and social integration. Compared to higher-SES students, lower-SES students “participated in fewer formal and informal social activities and felt less integrated in their institutions” (Rubin, 2012, p. 28). These findings are supported by alternate research which indicated that low-SES students spent
less time participating in student clubs (Walpole, 2003), Greek life, student government, and the organization of college activities (Stuber, 2009).

Student integration, though an important aspect of persistence for many is not homogenous amongst all student groups, especially those from racial and ethnic minority groups (McCubbin, 2003; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1982). In context, this characteristic needs to be made explicit, as no panacea model exists when attempting to explain the problem of persistence. Integration assumes, though somewhat indirectly that each student views and identifies this element in the same way; however, as acknowledged by Tierney (1992) integration is not usually a personal position, but one based on cultural and demographical differences. From an ethnic standpoint many postsecondary institutions are founded on social and cultural norms unfamiliar to traditionally marginalized groups (Tierney, 1992). All too often though, due to cultural differences, minority students are unable to fully acculturate into this new and largely unfamiliar community (McCubbin, 2003; Tierney, 1992; Why students Leave College, 2003).

It would be challenging for any researcher to hypothesize all the reasons why students fail to participate equally within the college social community. A cursory examination; however, has determined that many low-SES students are unable to participate simply because of external obligations (Corrigan, 2003; Walpole, 2003). As specified earlier, many low-SES students have full-time employment commitments, and work not for experience, but due to fiscal obligations (Walpole, 2003). Regardless of reasoning, less time spent creating connections within the institution leaves a student at greater risk of dropping out (Tinto, 1993). An attribute all too often correlated with a student’s SES.
Based on the results of the reviewed literature, low-SES students are at a much higher risk of programmatic cessation during postsecondary degree completion when compared to students from higher-SES groups. They suffer from increased academic deficiencies, and are less likely to be prepared financially or scholastically for matriculation into higher education. Additionally, low-SES students appear to characterize, at least to some degree the attributes of their parents and outlying environments. This was represented in the correlation between a student’s educational accomplishments and parental/school characteristics. Contemporary research also indicated that postsecondary enrollment didn’t necessarily translate into continued persistence for low-SES students. Post-enrollment, low-SES students tended to work more hours outside of the institution, spend less time integrating, and have significant trouble over coming past deficits. Tertiary degree or certificate attainment has become a conduit that provides a gateway to increased societal and pecuniary success (Carnevale et al., 2010; College Completion, 2003). Unfortunately, this access appears to be heavily correlated with one’s socioeconomic profile, a form of capital that has shown to both augment and hinder college degree completion.

Chapter III: Research Design

Research Questions

The problem of practice for this study was to address the low graduation and persistence rates among low-income students in tertiary education. To respond to this problem, the researcher investigated the experiences of low-income students who have successfully navigated at least three years of postsecondary education. The primary research question was: How do low-income students persist in postsecondary education? A secondary question that augmented
and contributed to the rich and thorough understanding of the student experience was: What prior experiences do low-income students attribute to their persistence in postsecondary education?

The overarching purpose of the two research questions was to gain a much deeper understanding of the experiences of low-SES students and how they perceived their SES as influencing their ability to persist in college. There is substantial research to show that low-income students are at much greater risk of programmatic cessation when compared to students in higher income quintiles (Barth, P., & Education Trust, W., DC. 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003; Swail, 2000; Titus, 2006; Wang, 2009). However, little research existed that examined the experiences of low-SES students who, despite research to the contrary, are able to successfully persist in higher education. Additionally, many low-income students are exposed to an inferior quality high school curriculum, a factor contributing to poor college preparation and increased rates of departure (Corrigan, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Qiu & Wu, 2011; Stinebrickner, 2003). This study contributed to the existing literature by providing examples of the lived experiences of low-income students. It may also have had implications for how to better support low-income student persistence in higher education

**Methodology**

A qualitative design was proposed for this study. The purpose of this study was to seek an understanding of how low-income students perceived their experiences in postsecondary education. These experiences, though interpreted by the researcher, sought to make explicit the approaches utilized by these students to successfully persist, where many other marginalized students have failed. A qualitative framework was chosen for a number of key reasons. Qualitative research as acknowledged by Creswell (2009) is a construct for understanding the
importance and meaning that individuals attribute to a specific, or shared social problem. This element was critical to the study, as it is founded on the collection of data through contextually based face-to-face interviews (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). These data or narrative were inductively analyzed with the goal of constructing an accurate picture of how the participants understood their experiences, specific to a certain phenomenon (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Another element of qualitative research that was particularly important for this study was its emergent progression where questioning, analysis, and procedures could evolve as the research developed (Creswell, 2009). It was understood that participant responses might reveal areas of questioning outside of the researchers original prospectus. By utilizing a qualitative design, the research structure was fluid dependent upon findings, a component not typically present within a quantitative framework.

It was understood that qualitative research encompasses a wide variety of different approaches. As this study sought to understand the lived experiences of participants, an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was proposed. There are two distinct and fundamental characteristics of IPA. To begin with IPA is grounded in the natural sciences (LeVasseur, 2003), a method that uses a philosophical approach to study the lived experiences of individuals (Giorgi, 1997; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). IPA conceives humans as existing in a world made up of semantics, culture, and connections, all situated within a temporal and perception based construct (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, human experience, and the perception thereof are centered and inseparable from these relationships (Smith et al., 2009). It is from these relationships that people construct meaning, a fundamental aspect of phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009).
A second and equally important feature of IPA is hermeneutics, or simply put the interpretation of data (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretation in IPA is concentrated on the meaning of data, and that significance of meaning is inherently temporal (Smith et al., 2009). A central component of IPA is its double hermeneutic perspective (Smith et al., 2009). This is where the researcher attempts to make meaning of a participant’s experience, who is at the same time trying to make sense of that experience (Smith et al., 2009). Because IPA is relation bound, data is interpreted using an iterative process (Smith et al., 2009). This means data is analyzed by looking at the relationships between the data corpus and individual lines of data, moving back and forth around each part in a somewhat cyclical process using different perspectives (Smith et al., 2009). An additional and salient aspect of IPA is its belief that presuppositions or forestructure cannot be completely eliminated (Connelly, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). Rather, the researcher remains acutely aware of these assumptions (in context) and how they might affect the study (Connelly, 2010; Flood, 2010).

In regard to data collection, IPA as acknowledged by Smith et al. (2009) necessitates the use of methods that permit participants to share rich narrative accounts of their experiences. To incorporate this salient element, a semi-structured interview protocol was proposed. Interviews provide an opportunity for participants to explore in detail their experiences specific to a certain phenomenon, whilst at the same time generating sufficient amounts of data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As detailed earlier, IPA uses an iterative approach to data analysis, though unlike many other research paradigms, is not necessarily concerned with an explanation of causation, but instead attempts to elucidate the meanings of phenomena as perceived by individuals (Penner & McClement, 2008).
Site and participants

The study site was a four-year, private, non-profit institution of higher education which was located in Charlotte, North Carolina. To assist in anonymity, no reference to the universities actual name will be used, and will simply be referred to as the institution. The institution is nationally and regionally accredited, and currently supports over 16,000 students at a main campus and three regional campuses (Anonymous, 2008). The institution offers a variety of degree programs including undergraduate and graduate level and since 1914 has graduated more than 80,000 students (Anonymous, 2008). This site was chosen for a number of reasons. First, access to both research participants and protected data can be extremely difficult, especially for novice researchers. Due to a professional link between the researcher and the institution, access to the required data was permitted subsequent to an institutional review board application. Secondly, the university provides degree programs to a diverse student cohort, in particular those students who are considered low-income due to Pell grant eligibility. It was this cohort that aided the researcher in completion of this study.

In order to select a representative group of participants for this study, purposeful sampling was used. Purposeful sampling is a method that allows the researcher to select a sample population based on prior information (Fraenkel et al., 2012). This prior knowledge means that participants are selected based on their representativeness of traits able to purposefully inform the central research theme (Creswell, 2007; Fraenkel et al., 2012; Maxwell, 2005). The obvious advantage of this method is that it increases the confidence for which conclusions can be made, representative of typical members of this particular group (Maxwell, 2005).
The sample consisted of bachelor degree students attending the Charlotte campus. Beginning with a campus population of nearly 2,500, participants were delineated using two overarching characteristics: (1) Pell grant status (fundamental to identifying low-income students) as determined using pre-assigned government metrics; (2) senior status within the institution, or those students who have achieved sufficient credit hours to be regarded as seniors. Pell grant status mandates a student’s total family income cannot exceed $50,000 per year, though the majority of Pell grant funding is awarded to families with a total family income of less than $20,000 (The Pell Grant, n.d.). According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2012) for a family of three, $19,090 is considered living at, or below the poverty guideline. These participants, based on sampling criteria, have been determined to be representative of typicality of the larger group, that of low-income students in higher education. In order to gain sufficient data for analysis a sample size of four was used. This size, as stated by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) is sufficient for the development of meaningful data that highlights the similarities and differences between participants.

Upon university IRB approval, a list of 183 Pell grants recipient, senior ranked students was received. Student’s names were randomized using a numerical algorithm. Students were then segmented into groups of ten. Once randomized and segmented, students were contacted in numerical order. Upon the acceptance into the study of four participants (and one alternate) no further contact was made to any other students on this list. By using a randomizing algorithm to filter the original list of 183 students, no attention was paid to any other variable such as race, gender, or age.
In order to gain greater contextual understanding of the participant findings presented in chapter four, a fundamental element of phenomenological research, an introduction to each participant is presented. In adherence to Informed Consent IRB guidelines, all participant names were changed to culturally germane pseudonyms. Additionally, any names or titles proffered by participants that detailed identifiable information were removed to protect third parties.

**Karen.** Karen is a single, 20-year-old Caucasian female who lived in a predominantly low-income (African American) rural community in South Carolina. She lived with her sister and divorced mother on a 104-acre family-owned property. Karen’s father completed high school, graduating with a General Educational Development test (GED). Post high school he worked for a company installing wireless copier systems. Karen’s mother graduated high school and matriculated into postsecondary education, though due to employment obligations she did not complete all the requisite classes needed to graduate. Karen’s mother worked in the insurance sector during the early part of her K-12 experience, but resigned to spend more time at home supporting her family when Karen’s sister began school. Karen attended a private college preparation school paid for by her family. She did not attend the zoned public high school as it had a history of violence and low-academic standards.

**Sam.** Sam is a single, 30-year-old Caucasian female who grew up in a small low-income community in North Carolina, living most of her life in mobile parks prior to commencing postsecondary education. Sam stated that for “monetary reasons” she frequently moved from one mobile home to another. Sam lived with her married parents and younger sister. Her father did not graduate from high school, but after entering the Marine Corp he obtained his GED and a technical degree in engineering. Upon leaving the Corp, he obtained employment in the trucking
sector, though due to health reasons has been unable to maintain any form of employment since. Sam’s mother graduated with a high school diploma, and obtained a technical degree in cosmetology. In order to support the family financially, she regularly worked multiple jobs, often in entry and low-wage positions. Sam attended a suburban high school located in South Carolina. The school was attended by a largely Caucasian student body, sourced from middle- and-upper-class neighborhoods.

**Erika.** Erika is a single, 21-year-old African American female who resided in a predominantly Black low-income urban housing estate in D.C. Erika lived with her divorced mother and half-sister. It is unknown if Erika’s mother graduated with a diploma from high school or a GED; however, she did complete at least three-years of postsecondary education, though for unspecified reasons she was unable to graduate. Erika did not have positive relationship with her father; as such she did not have knowledge of his educational or employment history. Erika’s mother was employed in the communication sector, working for a large telecommunication company. An important aspect of Erika’s immediate community was the epidemic of teenage pregnancy, which forced young girls into vocational, rather than educational careers, as she stated “they’re just basically living an adult life, but making teenagers wage[s]”. Erika attended a public inner-city vocational high school for the first three years, and then due to its closure, spent her senior year at much larger non-vocational public school.

**Roland.** Roland is a single, 21-year-old Black male (Roland identified himself as Black, not African American) who lived in a secluded wooded rural community in South Carolina, which was described as middle-income. Roland lived with his married parents and younger sister. He did have an older brother, but it was unknown whether his brother resided in the
family home. Roland’s parents both graduated high school, with his father obtaining a bachelor’s degree in business administration, and his mother graduating with an associate’s degree. His parents were employed in numerous occupations, including government and private sector positions. Roland did state that his parents experienced a “significant” drop in family income, almost half, when moving from the government to private sector positions. This occurred during Roland’s freshman year at university. Roland attended two high schools. The first was a “very” low-income inner-city school in South Carolina attended by a primarily African American student cohort. The second high school was located in a more suburban district, described by Roland as “predominantly White.” The high school district also encompassed a much greater socioeconomic spectrum.

To facilitate clarity and understanding of participant dialog, a table representing important characteristics that delineate each participant is presented. Participant characteristics are illustrated in figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Erika</th>
<th>Roland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s highest Education</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>GED</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4 YR Bachelors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s highest Education</td>
<td>HS Diploma Associates HS Diploma Associates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Type</td>
<td>Private HS Public HS Public HS Public HS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP/Honors Classes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Involvement</td>
<td>Yes/Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Involvement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes/Limited</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Living</td>
<td>On-Campus 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Year</td>
<td>On-Campus 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; and 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Year</td>
<td>On-Campus all Four Years</td>
<td>On-Campus all Four Years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. A table representing the primary characteristics delineating study participants

As stated earlier, low-SES students are much more likely to display dropout behavior when compared to higher income quintile groups (Barth, P., & Education Trust, W., DC. 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003; Swail, 2000; Titus, 2006; Wang, 2009). This salient fact supports the reasoning behind the selection of senior status, Pell grant eligible students for this study. Not only are they representative of the larger group of low-SES students, but due to their senior status, are able to share the unique perspective in that, despite the apparent constraints imposed by low-SES, they have persisted within the institution.

Students involved in this study were asked to participate in two 90 minute interviews, and a third session aimed at member or participant response checking. During each interview they were asked a series of open ended questions (see appendix A), designed within a semi-structured format. Information obtained from the participants was broken into three main categories. The first category involved information relevant to a student’s educational experiences prior to enrolling in postsecondary education. At this stage students were also asked to share how they understood the contextual nature of their community/family unit specific to SES, including
parental attributes such as educational history. The second category included information
specific to work and living arrangements during their enrollment within the institution. The final
category sought to obtain information pertinent to how participants understood their integration
within the social and academic communities at the institution. No specific motivator was
proposed regarding student participation in this study, outside of a shared desire to increase the
persistence of low-SES students in postsecondary education. That being said, a small token of
appreciation was given at the end of the interview process.

During the study the researcher expected to develop a relationship based on formality
rather than familiarity, and though rapport was important when interviewing participants, too
much or too little was deemed potentially problematic (Seidman, 2006). In order to achieve a
balance between the two extremes, steps were taken early in the interview process to ensure
appropriateness within the researcher/participant relationship (Seidman, 2006). This included
common civilities such as by what name the participant wished to be called, maintaining time
frames and meeting arrangements, and awareness of any cultural or communicative
idiosyncrasies. These small accommodations created a foundation of respect and trust that was
essential to the researcher/participant relationship. Due to the sensitivity of class and status as a
central research theme, specific attention was paid aimed at reducing any tension or anxiety felt
by the participants. As stated by Seidman (2006) researchers must remain cognizant of prior
experiences relating to class and how these issues might impact the participants.

**Data collection.**

The study’s central questions were answered through the use of semi-structured
interviews. Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series model was be used as a framework to
collect data (Schuman, 1982). This model features an interview protocol that seeks to gather data in context, allowing participant behavior to become “meaningful and understandable” (p. 16). Seidman (2006) indicated that context was essential to the interpretation of a participant’s life experiences. The first interview focused on collecting information about the participant’s personal and academic life prior to entering postsecondary education. This interview created context, and included questions relating to family/peer attributes, prior educational experiences, and socioeconomic environment. The second interview was dedicated to gathering information about the participant’s experiences during matriculation in postsecondary specific to SES and how they made meaning of those experiences. Meaning is defined as how socioeconomic factors interacted to bring them to their present position. The third session focused on the accuracy of findings by allowing participants to comment and provide feedback on the researcher’s preliminary analysis. Each interview followed a semi-structured protocol, designed around a set of predetermined open-ended questions (DiCicco & Crabtree, 2006). The utilization of a semi-structured format allowed new questions to emerge as dialogue flowed between the researcher and participant (DiCicco & Crabtree, 2006).

The researcher used multiple digital recorders during the interviews. Reflective handwritten notes were also taken after the interview process, consisting of personal thoughts, such as feelings, impressions, and additional questions brought about by participant discourse (Creswell, 2009). Interview and participant data was collected and kept on a secure, password-encrypted computer. All efforts were made to ensure that participant anonymity and data remained secure throughout the research process. To protect anonymity, all participant names were changed to a neutral and culturally germane pseudonym.
Data analysis.

In order to analyze the verbalized experiences of participants the researcher used a series of phases aimed at organizing and interpreting these data. From a holistic perspective this is commonly referred to as content analysis, or more specifically the analysis of human experiences through various forms of communication (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The first stage of analysis involved the reading and rereading of interview transcripts, in addition to a review of audio recordings (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). This stage, as acknowledged by Smith et al. (2009) is important in order to gain a better understanding of the participant’s perspective and how discreet narratives form a cohesive bond within the discourse. During this stage of analysis data was coded using simple terms and phrases generated from the participants own words; this allowed the researcher to remain as close to the participants actual interpreted experience as possible.

The second stage of analysis was the most detailed and labor intensive, comprising the semantic examination of the participant’s language (Saldana, 2009; Smith et al., 2009). The objective of stage two was to create an inclusive and thorough series of notes that describe principal objects within the participant’s experiences, examples include relationships, processes, values, and events (Smith et al., 2009).

The third stage of analysis sought to develop emergent themes within the data set produced during stage two. These themes were produced from the breakdown of discrete data chunks drawn from the original transcripted interviews, and though isolated, these data were analyzed in context of the whole (Maxwell, 2005; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). The extrapolation of emergent themes are an important part of the hermeneutic process, one that
represents the researcher’s clear understanding and interpretation of the participant’s original words and experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The penultimate and final stages involved the inclusive mapping, or clustering of emergent themes and how they related and interacted with each other. This was accomplished by analyzing individual participant data sets, and then through an examination of data in context of the whole group of participants. The result of this is a data structure depicting how subordinate themes interconnect and work within the superordinate themes of the data corpus.

**Validity and Credibility**

As with any type of study, limitations, reliability, and generalizability are always key points of concern. An argument against phenomenological research, and one taken into consideration prior to the start of this study, is that of reliability. An issue, as detailed by Smith et al. (2009) that has become increasingly controversial due to the use of quantitative validity measures being applied in qualitative research studies. In direct response to these concerns a number of qualitative trustworthiness techniques ascribed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) were employed: (1) prolonged engagement and contact with participants in the field/institution; (2) peer debriefing/audit through the exposure of research to a third party; (3) checking of information through the continuous process of participant reaction to the researcher’s written reconstruction of their verbalized experiences. Reliability is central to any research study, and while these criteria do not represent a complete solution to the problem they are, as acknowledged by Lincoln and Guba (1986) a significant step forward.

In relation to interpretation of data, one primary concern is researcher bias, specifically how a researcher’s values, expectations, and perceptions might influence the studies analysis and
conclusions (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) postulates, qualitative research is not necessarily concerned with bias elimination, but with awareness. As stated previously, objective steps were taken to enhance interpretation (Lincoln and Guba, 1986); however, researcher integrity, not indifference to prior experiences became the foundation for data interpretation and conclusions (Maxwell, 2005). Another concern is referred to as reactivity, the influence of the researcher on study participants (Maxwell, 2005). It is not expected, or even possible to completely eliminate reactivity, the goal instead is to understand how participant discourse is influenced by the researcher (Maxwell, 2005). By utilizing trustworthiness techniques and interview protocol, researcher influence was, to the researcher best ability accounted for, thereby reducing the overall effect on study participants (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

**Limitations**

Despite all efforts to institute validity within this study, some limitations still remain. One particular limitation is the type of institution selected for this study. The institution, though accredited as a four-year institution, is unlike many other traditional campuses. The institution does not offer a traditional academic degree; rather, it is focused on providing vocationally specific programs. This exclusivity attracts a certain type of student; including many that feel a more academically focused degree program is unsuitable for either their career aspirations, or educational needs. Outside of programmatic constraints, the campus, congruent with many other four-year universities, is populated by a student cohort delineated by myriad characteristics. Therefore, the specificity of both the student cohort and institution makes generalization of findings outside of the institution inherently problematic.
A second limitation references the participants themselves, especially since they are being viewed as one homogenous cohort (low-SES, senior ranked students). This is particularly problematical as individual attributes such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, family marital status, age upon entrance, among other aspects, can significantly affect a student’s experiences and perceptions thereof. Moreover, these attributes can both exacerbate and reduce the influences of low-SES. These limitations should not necessarily be viewed as damaging to the study. As acknowledged by Creswell (2009), the value inherent in qualitative research comes not from generalizability, but from its ability to derive contextual themes from specific institutions.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

After review, as expected participants were not exposed to any significant risk. Nevertheless, as the research involved the collection of data from people it was guided by a set of ethical principles (Moustakas, 1994). The collection of data through interviews, which is effectively a process of listening and encouragement, can lead to the development of unexpected harm (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Warren, 2002). This can be especially pertinent when interviewing vulnerable populations, for example minority and low-SES students (Creswell, 2009). In order to reduce the risk of unexpected harm, participants were asked to complete an informed consent form prior to the commencement of the first interview, and again prior to the final meeting. Participants were also given access to the researcher before, during, and after each interview was completed (Seidman, 2006). This allowed participants to ask questions, voice concerns, and most importantly end their involvement, for whatever reason, without recourse if
they so desired. All the participants that were involved with this study completed both interviews and the final member checking.

A second area of concern was that of participant anonymity and the sharing of information gained during the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As projected sensitive information was collected during participant interviews, and though voluntarily given; all such information needed to remain anonymous and protected from any third party who might have conflicting interests (Creswell, 2009; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In response to this concern all participant names were changed to a neutral and culturally germane pseudonym, whilst audio and transcribed data was kept on a password encrypted computer. At the termination of this study, data remained secure and available for a reasonable period of time, after which all audio and transcribed data was deleted and overwritten to eliminate any chance of recovery.

A third issue surrounding the use of human participants is the effective communication of study objectives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). All efforts were made to ensure complete transparency throughout the entire data collection and analysis period. Again, participants were required to consent prior to their involvement in the study, and before the commencement of the final member check. This allowed participants to voluntarily disengage from the study at any time (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Finally, the researcher attempted to reduce any risk of participant exploitation, whether intentional or unintentional. Although there was explicit personal gain for participant involvement, the researcher made certain that the contribution of participants was acknowledged
within the final submission. Additionally a small numerical reimbursement was given at the conclusion of the interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

**Conclusion**

The goal of this phenomenological research study was to better understand the experiences of low-SES students as they matriculate through postsecondary education. At present a wealth of quantitative information exists making explicit the low-graduation rates of low-SES students. However, this fails to some degree to answer the cogent question of why. It was hoped that by conducting this study a clearer and richer understanding of the apparent difficulties experienced by low-SES students during college enrollment could be attained.

As stated earlier, low-SES students are statistically less likely to persist in postsecondary education when compared to almost any other social group (Barth & Education Trust, 2001; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Dervarics & Roach, 2000; Miller, Taylor, Smith, Nichols, & Pell Institute, 2011). And although socioeconomic characteristics do not fully explain this phenomenon, they are central to understanding the low graduation rates of low-SES students.

The problem of low graduation is significant from multiple societal levels, including national/community, institutional, and individual. From a broad perspective increased graduation rates reduce the financial burden experienced by the federal government due to student loan defaults, whilst enhancing the nation’s capacity to compete within the global marketplace (College Completion, 2003; Fike & Fike, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). At an institutional level, graduation rates improve a college’s prestige and reputation, leading to a more stable induction of students and the ability to combat organizational entropy
(Bowen, Kurzwell, & Tobin, 2005; Hacker & Dreifus, 2010). Finally, students who successfully complete a postsecondary degree when compared to non-degree recipients can expect higher lifetime earnings, increased social mobility, and workplace flexibility (Carnevale et al., 2010: College Completion, 2003).

Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure was as a framework for this study. A framework as posited by Creswell (2009) is a proposition or argument that assists with the explanation of a specific phenomenon. Tinto (1993) perceived the process of persistence as temporal, highlighting a series of stages experienced by students during college enrollment. From a broad perspective, Tinto (1993) argued that college departure is an interactive process where factors derived from prior educational attainment, financial resources, academic/social systems, personal skills, and most importantly family background (SES), combine to create either successful or unsuccessful college matriculation. This model allowed the researcher to look how low-SES students understand their ability to interact specific to socioeconomic factors, thereby assisting in the attainment of research goals.

Finally, an IPA methodology was proposed for this study. IPA aligns with the studies central question as it seeks to understand, not find causation for, the lived experiences of individuals (Giorgi, 1997; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). IPA also supports holistic questioning, an element central to the study (LeVasseur, 2003). Data collection and analysis involved methods characteristic of qualitative research, one’s that support an IPA methodology. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview protocol, whilst analysis involved the interpretation and coding of transcribed participant dialog.
Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of low-income students as they matriculate through an institute of higher education. The participants involved in this study each provided rich descriptions of their experiences, specifically how they were able to negotiate and overcome the inherent difficulties commonly associated with low-SES. Two distinct overarching themes are presented in this section: participant experiences prior to postsecondary education and participant experiences post entrance. Within these two principal themes an additional four sub-themes were identified that represented the essence of the participants’ mutual of shared experiences. The four principle themes are: (1) Family Support and Perspective; (2) High School Preparation and Culture; (3) Fiscal Influences (4) Interactions and Extracurricular activities (formal and non-formal).

Section One: Participant Experiences Prior to Postsecondary Education

Family support and perspective. When participants were asked to describe the principle experiences that supported their decision to attend an institute of higher education each indicated the presence of multiple factors. First was the strong parental support for postsecondary education. Second was a positive high school stimulus, and although reasoning differed slightly, faculty interactions were perceived as central. A third factor was the influence created by extended family members and friends whom achieved success through college attendance. And finally, participant exposure to the deficits experienced by low-income populations who had not attended college.

Parental support of postsecondary education. From a macro standpoint all the participants had at least one parental figure that was supportive of postsecondary education. The
participants indicated parental support was important, but not exclusive to their perception of college attendance. It appeared from participant dialog that parental support for college was not solely centered on the educational background of the parents, as not all parents had attended college.

Participants indicated a number of different reasons for parental support. Regret of not completing, or attending a college seemed to be a pivotal element within the parental perspective. Participants often shared how parents frequently reflected on life accomplishments, indicating a relationship between their perceived lack of attainment and their regret at not having attended or finished college. This lead some parents to believe that college attendance would lessen the likelihood of their children experiencing the same lives that they had. A life partly defined by their low-income status. Additional reasons for support included an assumed natural progression due to a child’s high academic standing during high school, a conduit to increase vocational prospects post-graduation, and simply the lack of meaningful alternatives.

It became apparent that low-income status was an underlying element central to a parent’s perspective of college matriculation. Each participant at one point or another indicated their parents had experienced hardships due to their SES, experiences which they often correlated with a lack of college attendance. Sam’s experiences appeared to represent many of the sentiments expressed by participants: “my mum always told me ‘don’t live the life that I have lived. I wish I would have gone to college.” Sam also explained how her father had turned down an offer to attend a vocational college due to the anticipated career progression in his job. Unfortunately, job opportunities did not materialize and he ended up delivering food products for a low-end restaurant chain. Sam encapsulated her parents’ feelings when she stated:
So [I] assumed that from their mistakes they wanted me to just live a better life, and they felt like the only way I was going to live a better life was to make sure I went to college, and it was really important for them to instill that in me.

Though marital status was not a primary line of questioning it did appear to be connected in some manner to a participant’s college support group. Roland and Sam’s parents were both married. Roland and Sam indicated that their parents were fundamental in shaping their positive perception of college. Roland for example acknowledged his parents were extremely supportive of college attendance, something that he associated with their vocational and fiscal success. Roland explained their support for college came in the form of a “partner process.” Rather than dictate, Roland described how they assisted him as a team, “ok we’re going to help our son move on, we’re going to be standing right beside him instead of talking down to him.” Based on Roland’s responses it became evident that a special bond existed in his family unit, with each member being co-supportive of the other.

Erika and Karen both had divorced parents. In the absence of an active father, support for college came from multiple sources. Karen stated for example that although her mother was influential in her desire to attend college, it was a “life style” of college matriculation that ultimately confirmed her decision. She explained this life style or culture of college progression as a union between her mother, extended family members, and her high school. College progression permeated throughout her life, as Karen stated, “At school and just at home…I didn’t see any other option, like I didn’t think there was anything else to do other than that.”

Erika explained a similar culture, though in lieu of an active father it was her mother and grandmother who created an environment favorable of college attendance. As she shared, the
verbal support of college matriculation was an everyday occurrence. This was a pattern that began when she was much younger. Erika also indicated that her family just assumed that she was going to college because of the academic awards she had received during high school.

Positive perspective of faculty and staff interaction. Participants had mixed feelings about their experiences with high school faculty and staff, ranging from dissatisfaction to overwhelming appreciation. However, most of the participants had positive perceptions of their high school teachers and administrators. It became evident that school personnel were able to dramatically affect a student’s perception, often transcending the harsh environments typical in low-income and under-funded schools. Faculty and staff were able to create a culture of support, increased academic interest, and college matriculation, especially apparent in the schools attended by Roland and Sam.

Roland was the most vocal of the participants, describing in detail the faculty and staff interactions that he had experienced throughout high school. For contextualization purposes it is important to understand the high school environment experienced by Roland during his freshman and sophomore year. Roland attended, as he described a “predominantly Black…very low-income” inner-city high school, where many students attended simply to acquire and sell illegal narcotics. The school also had an extremely high drop-out rate, as reported by Roland; student attrition reached 50% by the end of his 11th grade year. This high attrition rate is emblematic of low-income schools, especially those located in inner-city neighborhoods.

Roland repeatedly stated how the faculty and staff at his high school had been supportive of both his academic and vocational interests. Faculty influence was such that Roland chose many of his extra-curricular activities and course schedules based, in part on which faculty
member was involved. This included his participation in advanced placement and honors type courses. To illustrate the point, as an avid member of the high school band, Roland had competed in both county and state competitions. Unfortunately, the band director left mid-semester, effectively pulling Roland emotionally from the band. When asked to describe this experience Roland responded:

It was never that connection there anymore…I think the band director leaving, that really influenced me to do other things and it really wasn’t that I lost the passion to play, but I guess the impact of him leaving and no connection being there anymore.

Academically, it didn’t appear that Roland was representative of the larger student body. In spite of the high attrition rate and general apathy of his peers, Roland remained faithful to his educational goals. To compensate for the deleterious classroom environment Roland stayed close to faculty, often physically distancing himself from other students, as he stated “at the back of the classroom it was just people that didn’t want to be there”. He also participated extensively in extracurricular activities, and regularly reached out to faculty and staff. This “reaching out” in Roland’s opinion almost certainly influenced how the high school personnel interacted with him. It is unknown where Roland accumulated the skills necessary to combat the harsh environment of his high school, but it is apparent that utilization dramatically improved his chances of graduation.

Analogous to Roland, Sam also experienced positive support from school personnel, which to some degree became a central element in her life. Sam described her support system as a comparison between her home and school. Due to the employment obligations of her mother
and the deteriorating health of her father there was little time for family support. The majority of support experienced by Sam emanated from her connections and relationships with faculty. Like Roland, Sam completed advanced type high school courses. Though she was not explicit whether faculty assignment was a mitigating factor in her course choices. She did state; however, that a bond existed between her and the honors faculty: “I connected really well with my teachers, and I communicated with them even after I graduated.” It should be noted that Sam contributed extensively to her high school. This involved participating in numerous clubs and even teaching fundamental music classes to other less experienced students.

Interestingly, Erika who also completed advanced placement courses had similar experiences with her honors faculty. Faculty accolades ranged from good to excellent. Erika was especially favorable of her AP English teacher: “AP English [name removed] was excellent, she really pushed the writing which was good and bad, because when I got here [college] I had to tone it back down.” In toning down, Erika was referring to how her high school English class was more academically challenging than the one she had experienced during college. Congruent with the majority of other participants, Erika was very active within the high school, spending a great deal of time contributing outside of normal class mandates. When asked whether this interest might have influenced her interactions with faculty, Erika responded unequivocally that it had.

**High school preparation and culture.** A commonality that connected all the participants was the completion of advanced or honors type courses during high school. Though each student completed classes in various disciplines, ranging from math to history, all were exposed to at least one English intensive course. When questioned, participants expressed
multiple reasons for completing advanced high school courses. These included environmental issues such as classroom culture, faculty assignment, lack of rigor in the standard curriculum, and mandated progression. All participants expressed positive outcomes as a result of their exposure to these advanced courses. Specifically, participants noted that the completion of advanced and honors courses had positively impacted their persistence at college.

From a cultural perspective, participant dialog indicated that the majority of their high schools promoted a culture where college matriculation was a natural progression; a universal “next step” made by students after the completion of their senior year. Upon questioning it became evident that no singular element was responsible for an overarching philosophy of college matriculation. Rather participants stressed a culture of college progression was driven by a confluence of faculty, staff, and students alike. According to participants, one of the most prevalent effects of this culture was an increased desire to attend a college post high school.

Involvement was a third common thread which connected the participants. Involvement, as described by participants was the association in either a formal and/or non-formal on-campus organization. Organizational membership had myriad participant outcomes; though congruent within each transcript were the positive and linear effects of such involvement.

**Advanced and honors exposure.** Karen’s high school experience was unique among the participants as her school district mandated the completion of high school freshman classes during a student’s final year at middle school (8th grade). This allowed students to complete college level courses during their senior year at high school (12th grade). As Karen explained:
So the way the school does it like that is so like senior year you can do some college courses, so they have [university faculty] come on campus and teach college classes, which is just how the school was, it’s a whole going to university, go to college thing.

Though Karen did not complete any honors classes, she was exposed to college preparatory classes almost her entire high school career. When asked how these classes had impacted her persistence at college, she responded that her fundamental understanding of writing and grammar had assisted in the completion of multiple college courses. Karen also mentioned how she perceived her college preparation in relation to other students whom she met during her freshman year at college: “it kind of amazed me how much people didn’t, [or] couldn’t formulate a paper, like a basic MLA [Modern Language Association] paper, like something I could do.”

Interestingly, during preliminary questioning Karen indicated that she didn’t believe her high school had academically prepared her for university. However, in reflecting Karen did acknowledge that because of the lack of academic challenges during college she had initially overlooked the effects of high school.

Advanced English courses and their effects on university persistence were not insular to a singular participant; Sam also expressed how prior classes had assisted with her matriculation in postsecondary education. It should be noted that Sam completed the majority of her classes during high school at either advanced placement or honors level. In questioning Sam about what particular skills had assisted with her persistence, she retorted that the ability to format and write papers was a foundational element conducive for matriculation. Unlike other participants, Sam also expressed how supplementary advanced high school courses had affected her progression at college. Specifically, Sam pointed out the completion of advanced math classes during high
school had allowed her to progress quickly through her math classes at college. Sam believed the general academic preparation she had received during high school had undoubtedly contributed to her overall success as a college student.

An important aspect of high school is how it prepares students academically for the rigors of postsecondary education. Participants were asked whether they perceived their high school as adequately preparing them for the academic challenges they might face during college matriculation. In responding, all participants believed that their high schools had sufficiently equipped them with the requisite skills needed to overcome the academic challenges that they had faced. Of the participants, Sam and Erika both indicated a correlation between their academic success at college and the completion of AP classes during high school. As stated by Sam, “It’s just maybe because I took honors level classes, but I feel I was well prepared.” Karen alluded to a similar experience, explaining how she associated the limited academic challenges at college and her high school preparation: “it’s because of how much [high] school prepared me for academics; I didn’t really have much of a challenge.” Roland also believed he was sufficiently prepared.

Culture. Although culture was not a principal line of inquiry, it was an experience shared by multiple participants. The culture expressed during the interview process was specific to how the participants’ high schools manifested an environment conducive of college matriculation. There was no singular element that suggested college as a natural progression post high school; rather it was established through the use of verbal and non-verbal conveyance. The most common experience reported by participants was of faculty and staff emphasizing the criticality of college attendance. The perception of the importance of college attendance, as
described by participants, was not parochial to individual faculty and staff, but was a result of deliberate praxis. As stated by Karen:

It was just the whole, it [was] just drilled into my head, you finish college, it’s still in my head that you finish college, like that’s just how school was over after college. So I think just the teachers instilling that and keep pushing that forward, that this is going to happen in college and your graduate college, and you’re going to get a job, it was just the whole American, how life works kind of thing.

A culture of college matriculation was so pervasive during Karen’s high school career that as a teen she didn’t even realize that not all students attended postsecondary education. In fact of the members in her immediate social group all attended college.

Faculty influence permeated much of the participant dialog, effectively creating a construct where college participation was the norm, as opposed to the exception. Participants recalled numerous experiences where faculty and staff proffered advice regarding college attendance. Sam detailed, “I can remember from a really young age my teachers were always telling me, ‘you definitely need to make sure that you go to college.” It is important to note that Sam’s high school was located in a region of high unemployment. Due to this, faculties actively promoted college matriculation as one alternative to an uncertain future should students decide not to secure a postsecondary credential. College advice was not limited to merely a pedestrian understanding, faculty and staff also proactively instructed students with regard to college applications and entrance requirements. Sam described how teachers assisted in preparing her for college: “so the teachers would be really proactive in trying to get you to apply for school in
your junior and senior year…to push you towards doing PSAT [Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test] and SAT’s [Scholastic Assessment Test], and getting ready for college.”

The non-verbal promotion of college matriculation was explicit in conversations with both Roland and Karen. Roland for example explained that although his high school fostered a mentality of postsecondary continuation, it was a visit to college in his 11\(^{th}\) grade year that galvanized his intent to enroll. As Roland posits “to see those schools, and I guess to experience that…it was more of a push to say ‘I definitely have to do this.” In discussing culture with participants, Karen was able to share a unique experience. At her high school it was customary to celebrate a student’s acceptance into college, as such a faux graduation was held every year involving the naming of each student’s projected college. Karen described this as being a positive experience; however, for those students who were not intending, or able to matriculate, the experience was less than favorable.

A positive classroom culture was an experience congruent to two or more of the participants. Both Erika and Roland shared they had chosen specific courses due to the academic culture present in those classes. Meaning, they both preferred a class culture that was more academically challenging and populated with other students who had similar educational goals. Roland explained, “So I liked that set-up better, and in those classes seemed like my peers were eager to learn, they were eager to learn more. So that environment…it really influenced me to do more classes like that.” When asked to describe what type of set-up existed in the honors classes, Roland responded that they were driven by competitiveness and students motivated by passion. It was this culture that Roland detailed as the reasoning behind his initial desire to attend. Erika described a similar culture in some of her classes, though for her involvement
meant associating with students of a different caliber. Erika did not, as she stated, want to be in class with just “regular people,” but preferred students whom she perceived as having the same intrinsic academic motivation.

**Involvement in high school.** The focus of involvement was to determine what affect, if any, this had on a participant’s high school experience. Despite incongruent reasoning for involvement, all participants believed active membership positively impacted their overall experience of high school. During questioning, all participants indicated involvement in at least one extracurricular activity. In general a common thread linked the four participants, that of membership in one of two types of high school organization: (1) membership to one or more social groups outside of the formal academic memberships normally associated with high school; (2) membership within a formal group, established by high school administrators or faculty.

It should be noted that membership within a formal group was consistent to three of the four participants, the same participants who became heavily involved in extra-curricular activities during college. Of the participants engaged in this study only Karen stated minimal involvement; this was due as she shared, “[to] just being so far from school…it was a hassle to do extra-curricular activities, I think if I’d lived closer to school it might have been different.” Ironically, Karen became heavily involved whilst attending college.

During questioning, participants acknowledged membership in a wide variety of high school organizations. Sam’s involvement was the most intense with membership in the school’s marching band, wind ensemble, and two language clubs. She also volunteered for various school charity events and taught music classes to younger students in her senior year. Roland was similarly involved with his school’s band, an activity he participated in for most of high school
career. Roland also took part in numerous sporting clubs including football and wrestling. Karen’s involvement consisted of participation in her school’s junior varsity tennis club, and membership in Anchor club. Anchor club is an all-girls service organization that provides support for local organizations and charities. Finally, Erika participated in a vocational competition team and also completed community service. The vocational team consisted of a small group of students who competed at both local and national competitions.

**Informal group membership (friends).** The focus of involvement was to determine what affect, if any, this had on a participant’s high school experience. Sam and Karen stated that high school had been a positive experience, due in part to their membership within these informal groups. As indicated by Sam: “I think it ended up making me have a lot of acquaintances, and a lot of friends that maybe I wouldn’t have had before.” Interestingly, Karen perceived both her social experience and academic experience to be positive. This perception, unique amongst the participants might have been due to the fact that Karen did not experience any obvious academic challenges during her high school career. This was apparent as Karen accrued sufficient course credits to graduate a year early. This accelerated departure was not exclusively based on academic ability, but was influenced also by Karen’s strong bond with her friends. Karen shared that rather than stay an extra year at high school, she wanted to graduate early to remain with her close friends. This was because Karen’s friends were all a year older and they would be leaving at the end of her junior year. As she stated “the whole social would be totally gone. The social aspect of…high school would be totally gone, because everyone that I knew, had any form of friendship with would be gone that next year.”
**Formal group membership.** Formal membership seemed to supersede the involvement between participants and non-formal groups. It should be noted; however, that the membership within a formal group provided participants with non-formal social interaction. This was clarified by Karen who stated the primary reason for joining a formal group was to be with her close friends.

In respect to membership, Roland acknowledged his perception of high school was not founded on informal social interaction. Roland lived far away from his school. He spent a significant amount of time commuting between the two each day, so he was unable to develop deep and meaningful relationships with his peers. For Roland this meant joining the high school band. When asked to describe how this experience made him feel Roland responded:

So it made me want to come to school even more, it made me want to participate in more activities involved with the band, anything that involved the band I wanted to do. So if it was practicing a scale, or practicing a solo or anything like that I wanted to do [it].

Roland continued stating that high school was “all positive.” However, upon reflection Roland appeared to reevaluate his original statement, though in context with his experiences in college. In restating Roland explained, “I would say high school was good I think, but after coming to college, experiencing college, it was just, I would say mediocre.”

Sam’s involvement with her school was defined by her membership in various formal music clubs. Sam’s involvement was unique to some degree because her involvement was not entirely founded on the activity itself. Rather it was based in part on her home environment, as Sam shared “I didn’t like spending a lot of time at home because my parents weren’t really home that much.” She also stated that in order to stay out of trouble and maintain her grades it was
better to stay in school than at home. Whilst being a member of the school band Sam took numerous leadership roles. These experiences lead Sam to become a student leader during college, leadership positions that were made easier due to her prior involvement.

When asked if involvement had affected her feelings towards her high school, Sam responded:

Yes absolutely, especially since I was a low-income student, because there’s a lot of things that the students of those parents that couldn’t afford to pay for them to play ten sports, there were a lot of things at my school that you had to pay to be a part of. And I remember there were trips and things that I couldn’t go on with my classmates because my parents couldn’t afford to send me. So for me, I think I was compensating with being part of organizations that I could still be a round other people….And that made me feel like I belonged, which was really, really good for me.

Sam also stated that involvement had increased her desire to attend school (she had perfect attendance in her senior year) as well as augment her sense of belonging, an element she reiterated numerous times.

Erika was somewhat of an outlier as she didn’t necessarily begin her participation in school activities as a means to connect with her high school. For contextualization purposes it is important to note that Erika spent her freshman to junior year at a vocational high school. During this time she became profoundly involved with a vocational competition team. This interest led her to champion a team to both local and national competitions. When asked to describe how this involvement had affected her, Erika retorted, “it kind of made me feel closer because you know everyone knew me…it gave me you know something to say I did.” Though
Erika was not initially explicit, she did indicate a sense of pride when questioned regarding her legacy post-graduation. In addition to the public recognition that she received, Erika also conveyed how membership had helped her persistence and grade point average (GPA). As Erika stated, “I couldn’t go on plane or even get out of school if my grades weren’t up.” A specific GPA was needed in order to maintain membership within the group.

**Section Two: Experiences Post Entrance**

**Fiscal Influences.** Pecuniary influences permeated much of the participant dialog, often encroaching on multiple themes. During questioning the majority of the participants did not consider low-income status as being a hindrance in their ability to persist at college. However, all participants did indicate they had taken comprehensive steps to compensate for their low-income status. The list of steps taken by participants to moderate income status was extensive, and not always congruent amongst the participant cohort. Commonalities included reduction of financial obligations through the use of loans and grants/scholarships, minimal expenditure on non-essential items, employment on-and-off-campus, and modification of living arrangements.

When considering the persistence of participants relative to their low-income status, only Sam and Karen indicated that it had been difficult. The difficulty for Sam was a consequence of her inability to make timely student loan payments. This often led to holds on her student account. A hold typically means that a student has failed some form of fiscal obligation, and until removed, they are unable to attend or register for classes. This was the situation that occurred on regular basis for Sam: “so it’s sort of an ongoing situation where no matter what, I’m not getting the classes that I need…I would have to take classes in a different order, even if I could get into the classes at all.” These collective occurrences made persistence much more
difficult for her, as Sam stated there were numerous occasions where she didn’t believe that programmatic continuation was possible.

When asked how her low-income status had affected persistence Karen expressed some form of difficulty. For her the difficulty was not necessarily persistence, but rather the compounding effects of low-SES and how it suffuses into multiple facets of student life. As detailed by Karen: “[it] was, I guess a challenge, just trying to figure out what’s the best was to stay, and not have to spend any more money than I already was.” These difficulties often impeded her typical routines, creating an extremely stressful environment. It should be noted, Karen did compensate for her fiscal shortcomings by working almost her entire time at college.

Erika and Roland both conveyed a comparable viewpoint in that SES was not a primary factor influencing persistence; however, its effects did filter into myriad other facets of university life. When asked to describe his experience, Roland responded:

Well for me it’s not, it wasn’t like difficult. I mean I’ve seen people who struggled harder that I have for, are struggling harder than I am. So it’s like in a sense, it’s not too difficult, I can make it because I have, I know that I have a passion to make it, so I’m going to do what I have to do, find a job and find the things that I have to find to make sure that I can make it. So I mean it’s not in a sense difficult or hard or something like that, its [pause] I don’t know it’s more…‘ok these are the steps and everything that I have to do to make sure that I don’t stay this way.”

Roland’s final comment regarding the desire to change SES made overt his cognition of class and the importance of fiscal resources. This was an element consistent amongst participants. Though understanding manifested itself in different forms, all participants at some
point verbalized a correlation between a postsecondary qualification and increased monetary remuneration. This for many represented a conduit to the possibility of a better life.

A commonality articulated by participants were the techniques used to reduce their pecuniary expenditure during matriculation, and though it is unknown whether the participants knew each other, the similarity inherent within the discourse was sometimes striking. In particular was the participants’ ability to remain social, yet at the same time fiscally solvent. Sam and Karen both shared how they had sought activities that required little or no monetary outlay. Karen explained, “I would find either inexpensive or free things to do. So we would go to the park, or go to an event that was free, or we would just walk around or just hang out, rent a [dollar] movie.” Likewise, Sam detailed a comprehensive understanding of social activities that required nominal fiscal expenditure. She concluded that in order to remain social: “you just become more resourceful whenever you have to [laughs], have to be able to pay for things.”

When asked why these activities were important, participants acknowledged that it was a way to socialize and maintain friendships within their peer groups.

External Commitments. Participants detailed a number of different revenue sources including, vocational earnings, university grants/scholarships, parental support, and financial aid disbursements. Of these, the primary funding source for participants outside of federal Pell grant assistance was on-campus employment. From a holistic perspective participants indicated that they had limited resources, so they had to seek employment to pay for school. Karen expressed this sentiment concisely: “I didn’t choose to be employed. I wouldn’t work if I didn’t have to.”

It should be noted employment was undertaken over multiple years, with two participants working all four-years. Only Erika elected not to work full-time. In Erika’s case she supported
herself by reducing fiscal expenditure, capitalizing of small monetary gifts from family members, and most importantly through the utilization of federal financial aid. When asked what her primary revenue source was, Erika responded, “I got it from refunds.” Refunds occur when financial aid exceeds the annual cost of tuition and housing (if included). In Erika’s case she utilized the excess federal loan money to fund her expenditures during college matriculation. Roland hinted of a similar process, though he never clarified exactly what he did with his refunds.

Analysis of participant dialog revealed that employment had far reaching effects. Roland for example explained how working as a resident assistant (RA) aided in the payment of on-campus housing. These payments do not normally include expenses such as meal plans. This allowed Roland to reduce the amount of hours spent working, as he described:

I think it was a good thing because I didn’t have to worry about trying to find a full-time job to work and try and come to school. I didn’t, it’s never been ‘oh well you have to work so you can’t do your homework,’ or ‘oh you have to work today so it’s no hanging out with friends,’ or it’s not going to events at school that you want to go to, but you can’t because you have to work. So it’s never been a struggle, it’s never been I guess an inconvenience for me.

For contextualization purposes RA and sometimes teaching assistant (TA) positions are reimbursed through university scholarships/grants. In the case of the participants, both Roland and Sam received a substantial reduction in their on-campus housing costs. This led to each participant residing in on-campus housing rather than opting to live off-campus. Sam elucidated
this point: “Had I not gotten that [RA position] I would have not ever lived on-campus here because I wouldn’t have been able to go to school. Like wouldn’t have been able to afford it.” Roland described a comparable experience, although for him it meant not owing any money to the university for two years. During questioning Roland reiterated this point numerous times, indicating how proud his was of this achievement.

Karen was the outlier when it came to on-campus living. She was the only participant who chose to live off-campus for the majority of her time at college. This living arrangement necessitated a different vocational strategy. Karen started working at the end of her freshman year, as she stated, “I started working once I moved off-campus at the end of summer freshman year because I had to pay for the apartment; I had to pay for the electric bill and all that.” With limited fiscal resources Karen ended up working three different jobs, an endeavor that made persistence much more difficult. When asked to describe her experience Karen responded that due to an increase in external commitments she was frequently “exhausted and tired,” making academic participation more problematic. At the end of Karen’s sophomore year she secured a TA position, this allowed her to work on-campus and reduce her overall vocational responsibilities.

On-campus employment was an underlying factor consistent with three of the participants. It was also an element that significantly impacted their persistence. During questioning, all participants spoke positively with regard to on-campus employment. Roland shared, “I would say positive, I wouldn’t say anything negative about working [on-campus].” When asked to elaborate Roland responded that on-campus employment had galvanized his connection with the university, increasing his motivation to continue within his degree program.
Karen detailed a similar experience, though her connection was formed as result of the relationships she’d established with faculty. These relationships, as posited by Karen created a support group that assisted in her overall persistence. Sam, who had begun work for the university in her freshman year, seemed to exemplify the participant’s viewpoint when sharing her experience:

I think it’s definitely been beneficial because my freshman and sophomore year as an RA, I had really good connections with students and faculty…I learned a lot about how to deal with life situations, and that will help you in any job [laughs] that you’re ever going into. Being able to be a mentor and advisor for someone. That definitely made me want to stay here because I ended up loving the department that I worked in.

Additionally, due to Sam’s position as an RA she received a stipend towards on-campus housing; this enabled her to move from her off-campus apartment. As Sam stated, “my housing was nowhere near as expensive as it would have been…my financial aid didn’t cover it, so I could afford to live on-campus. So I mean, if you can afford to live…next to school, it’s a better idea.”

_Campus living._ Living arrangements factored heavily into how a participant viewed their university experience. Of the participants, two lived on-campus throughout their degree programs, the remaining participants lived on-campus for at least one year; moving off-campus for the balance of their four years. A participant’s choice of living arrangements were primarily motivated by fiscal resources, though others elements such as safety, proximity to campus, and employment were voiced as factors that contributed to their decision. The overall perspective of campus living was positive, with participants indicating a relationship between persistence and
their on-campus housing. Consistent among the participants was how the close proximity to campus enriched their connection with the university. Participants also indicated increased involvement in university events, and the ability to build deeper relationships with their peers, as illustrated by Erika: “it was easier because you kind of was forced into a room with open doors. So it was a lot easier to make friends.”

Persistence, according to participants was positively linked with on-campus housing. Erika stated living on-campus had increased her overall persistence. Erika first explained how proximity to campus and the cost of course enrollment made her not want to miss any classes. She continued detailing living on-campus had allowed her to attend more university events and socialize with old and new friends. Roland conveyed a similar sentiment, explaining how living on-campus had allowed him to remain more involved with school activities. This involvement in turn preserved his feelings of connection with the college. Roland also articulated in what way his living arrangements had augmented feelings of association: “so for me being on-campus knowing all the events, knowing who to ask…I guess how I can see myself being connected with the university.” Interestingly, Roland did not feel his housing or low-income status had negatively impacted his persistence. This was due, as Roland posited to the income generated from continued employment.

Contrary to Roland, Karen and Sam were able to share unique experiences as they had lived both on-and-off-campuses. As an older, more non-traditional student Sam had originally chosen to live off-campus, but after securing an RA position she moved on-campus. This resulted in a reduction in overall housing expenses, thus allowing Sam to move into on-campus
housing. Due to her unique experience, Sam was asked to compare the two types of accommodation:

Living on-campus I was definitely very, very involved in everything, especially being part of residential life, I was required to be a part of everything [laughs]. So definitely that, that was really good for my persistence for staying here because I had connections and I just felt very involved in everything that was going on. Living off-campus I felt more detached from things that were going on here, especially [the] further out you lived, but I feel that it’s a bit easier for me to be able to get my homework done as I don’t have people running up and down the [dormitory] halls all the time [laughs], but I do have to worry about bills and rent….So I think living on-campus was better for me as a student, but as an older student living off-campus is more comfortable for me….as far as being able to be studious and involved and things, it’s definitely better to be closer.

Karen had a mixed perspective when asked to define her experience, though hers was somewhat insular because of the type of activities she was involved in. Rather than a decrease in participation, Karen actually increased the amount of non-curricular involvement. Karen explained that in order to make the journey to campus it had to be important. To reduce travel she ended up staying on-campus for almost the entire school day. When referencing off-campus living and persistence, Karen shared how it had negatively impacted her academically: “I definitely skipped more classes living off-campus…academically probably wasn’t a good thing because I was less motivated to go to school.” It should be noted Karen did not arbitrarily miss classes, but picked individual days due to expected lecture material. Karen did express negative feelings towards on-campus housing, positing that even if she’d been more financially stable she
still would have moved off-campus. Karen reasoned, like most other students she didn’t appreciate the lack of privacy incurred by the weekly room inspections.

**Interactions and Extracurricular Activities (Formal and Non-Formal).** Participants developed myriad relationships during their university experiences, with the majority forming enduring friendships far outside of the prescribed connections normally associated with university attendance. Of the relationships shared by participants the most common were between faculty, social peer groups, and external support groups which included family and friends.

**Faculty Interactions.** From the participants’ perspective, interactions with faculty teaching within a participant’s core concentration were all acknowledged as positive. However, a number of participants expressed dissatisfaction with many faculty teaching non-core concentration courses. These types of foundational courses are normally required for graduation by most colleges in the U.S. When asked to elaborate participants indicated that it was not necessarily owed to faculty quality, but rather a lack of connection due to mismatched subject matter focus. Participants stated they felt a greater connection with those faculties teaching their primary core concentration classes, an association created by a mutual passion with the material. Participants also argued that large class sizes reduced the intimacy of the classroom, making it more difficult to connect with the faculty member teaching the class. Participants described how the depth of a faculty relationship was founded on the “reaching out” of both parties. As reported by Karen: “as long as I could relate to them, and connect with them, as long as they were passionate about what they were teaching, then I was absolutely onboard.”
When discussing faculty relationships, participants reported a number of different experiences. Roland for example described his professors as phenomenal, stating a parallel between the acceptance that he felt within the classroom environment and his willingness to continue at the university. He also made explicit the importance of reaching out to the faculty member: “So it’s like never been a struggle to connect with the professors, because I do all the right things I guess to make sure that the connection is there, and the connection will last.”

Relationships for Erika were not necessarily centered on students reaching out. In questioning, Erika shared her perception of faculty resulted impart from their explicit enjoyment of the class, an emotion that she linked with increased course attendance.

Karen, who expressed some of the deepest relationships with faculty, described how those relationships had influenced her perception of the institution and her program major:

I think that probably the main reason I wanted to be in this industry, and why I’m so passionate about it has to do with the mentors that I have here….So I have made very good relationships with a lot of my professors…I feel like I connect with those professors really easily. So that’s definitely a good resource to have, and as far as the [professors] you know, I’ve so much respect for them because they’ve all been in the industry and experienced so many wonderful things, and they’re one hundred percent willing to share everything they know with you. But every single one of them, they’re passionate about being here teaching, and I love that about them.

Persistence was another factor Karen linked with those faculty teaching within her core concentration courses, indicating these relationships were one of the primary reasons for her programmatic continuation: “those relationships that I built with faculty are one of the main
reasons schools so important….So it’s a major part of being in school.” Though faculty was central to persistence, Karen did remark that no singular group was responsible for her overall persistence; rather it was a combination of faculty, family, and friends.

Participants did not regard their low-income status as a subordinate modifier of faculty interactions. When participants were questioned, each conveyed a unique perspective. For example Roland expressed two separate lives; a life before and during college. Roland believed his professors and peers judged him based on his contemporary self, and not the self he associated with low-income status. In a similar example, Sam did not consider her low-income status as a deficit, in fact for her it actually morphed into a positive: “It’s made me work harder really more than anything else. Because I’m under the impression that I’m paying a lot to go to school….just made me work harder, it sort of gave me the will to go the extra mile.”

**Social peer group interaction.** The importance and centrality of social peer group interaction was another element consistent amongst the participants. However, congruent with faculty relationships, social peer groups were also considered a foundational group. These groups when coalesced with family and other secondary external relationships formed a vital element in the overall support structure detailed by participants. In dissecting participant discourse a number of mutual experiences presented themselves. Participants considered social peer group interaction as a positive factor in their persistence, indicating that although low-income status restricted involvement in some activities, it had no bearing on the inception of friendship.

Social peer group interaction and university organizations/clubs often merged into a larger, more inclusive group. Participants spoke of the two distinct groups as one, failing to
delineate a difference between the two. Thus, social peer group interaction and university involvement are presented as a single entity, maintaining faithfulness to the participant’s original dialog. Sam illustrated this point succinctly: “I think that most of my core really close friendship groups are people that have been in the same organizations as me, same majors that kind of thing.” From an employment perspective Sam details a similar experience: “I have so many friends from residential life when I was an RA. The TA’s are pretty much family because we spend so much time together.”

Participants viewed persistence as intrinsically linked with social peer group interaction. All participants voiced positive experiences when discussing either organizational involvement or university friendships. Karen shared how her social network had amplified the positive feelings that she had towards the university. She also explained how friendships with other peers had increased her motivation to attend class: “they cared about wanting to go to class, and just being around that kind of environment kind of pushes you to also care about school, not wanting to skip class.” Moreover, Karen’s peer interactions enabled her to overcome the excessive hours that she was working to maintain her enrollment, stating enjoyment in one area superseded the deficits of another.

Like Karen, Roland spoke of the positive influences of close social peer interaction and how it assisted in moderating the frequently stressful environment of college: “I found out who my true friends were who really helped me out in the bad times, who would help me in the good times…and I really, really found out what it meant to have a good relationship.” Participants also described how social peer interaction aided in connecting with the university. Both Roland
and Erika posited an intensification of positive feelings toward the university as a result of their interactions with other peers.

The concept of low-income status permeated the dialog relating to social peer interactions, with participants indicating either myriad challenges, or no challenge at all. Sam conveyed how her low-income status had moderated her ability to participate in extracurricular activities and influenced her ability to maintain friendships:

I mean there’s always people who don’t necessarily look down upon you, but they’ll like ‘I understand you can’t afford to go out and eat with us tonight,’ and sometimes you lose out on having friendships, not being able to hang out with your friends because you just, you have to work that night, or you have to do homework because you had to work the night before, or something like that. I would say that’s probably the biggest social challenge, I’ve never had time for friends [laughs] the whole time I’ve been in school.

Sam did remark that despite the challenges presented by her low-income status she was able to develop and maintain positive social peer relationships. To aid in this objective Sam would simply explain her low-income situation, whilst suggesting group activities that required minimal fiscal expenditure. Similarly, Karen described how she would abstain from certain activities due to the cost factor. She overcame these challenges by seeking alternative activities that were free or reasonably priced.

**External support groups.** The final intrinsic component of participant support groups were detailed as those persons external to any associations within the university. During questioning, the majority of participants made no distinction between immediate family members or friends; merging each discrete entity into a larger more homogenous group. As expressed by
Karen, “the relationships with faculty, the support from family and friends, and my own personal, just drive and want to finish college and get that degree.” Congruent amongst participants was the positive and vital role that external support groups played in their lives, often becoming a pervasive and daily stimulus. All participants indicated that the presence of external support assisted in their matriculation and persistence within the institution. However, personal drive was also expressed as a key element required for persistence, one that often superseded alternate areas of support.

Roland viewed his family and friends primarily in an advisory role, frequently seeking their assistance in making important decisions: “I see my close friends and my family as sort of my advisors. I run almost everything that I do by someone that I know, or someone that I trust.” Roland described how his family support had acted as a form of reassurance, both financially and emotionally. When asked to share how this support had made him feel, Roland responded, “it makes me feel more confident in anything that I do.” This was an affirmation that featured prominently throughout Roland’s interview.

It became apparent that Sam and Karen had each formed a profound emotional bond with at least one parental figure. Common to each participant was how this connection had transcended the normal precincts of separation, influencing multiple aspects of their lives. In referencing her father, Sam stated, “So I think probably he’ll call at least once a week….He’s so excited about me being here, that makes me even more excited than I am to be here, so that’s definitely been a persistence thing for me.” Sam’s mother and best friend also represented critical elements in her family support group, though it was her father who seemed to have had the greatest influence. In summarizing her feelings, Sam shared, “I think that’s definitely [the]
number one for thing for me is my parents is they’re super proud of me. So that’s definitely been a huge support for me, for sure.” Karen experienced similar feelings towards her mother, though incorporated within the typical parental bond was awareness of her mother’s pecuniary investment. When detailing how family support had assisted with her persistence, Karen shared:

Knowing my mother supports me in no matter what I do; it has a very positive influence on my life in many different aspects, and knowing that she would support me if I stayed in school or quit school, and knowing how much she’s paid for school, and how much I’ve paid for school, makes me want to finish it and make it worth everything, like I said that I owed that to her.

Erika was somewhat of an anomaly in responding to exactly how her family had impacted her persistence. Erika did indicate that she communicated on a daily basis with her mother, yet when questioned as to its effects she indicated that programmatic completion was not dependent in anyway on this support, as Erika intoned, “I wouldn’t throw away a four-year degree because my family stops supporting me.” Erika did clarify that she was from particularly strict impassive family, which might explain her response to the original question. Despite her independence, Erika did convey a sense of comfort in knowing she had someone to reach out to.

A final point shared by participants was the advice they would give to a perspective student regarding persistence. Interestingly, three participants recommended that relationships and extracurricular activities were, as Sam stated, “essential, definitely essential” to long-term persistence. The overall sentiment shared by participants was involvement increased the probability of forming positive relationships, and that by extension these relationships aided with persistence. When questioned, Sam encapsulated the feelings of participants: “definitely being a
part of the university, and being integrated, whether it’s in an organization, or being a student leader or something, definitely would keep you here for sure.”

The findings presented in this chapter attempted to make explicit the lived experiences of low-income students as they matriculate through an institute of higher education. Findings indicated that despite the uniqueness of each participant, mutual experiences still existed between them. Chapter five places the shared experiences of the participants in context with both Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of student departure, and the literature review that were utilized for this study.

**Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings**

The findings of this study attempted to shed light on the low graduation and persistence rates of low-SES students in postsecondary education. This was not to argue SES is the overarching reason that low-income students fail to persist, but contemporary research does indicate SES to be a primary metric that often leads to programmatic cessation (NCES, 2006).

The two overarching questions that guided this study were: (1) How do low-income students understand their socioeconomic status as being a factor in the ability to persist in postsecondary education? (2) How do low-income students understand their prior educational experiences and their ability to persist in postsecondary education?

To assist in the collection and examination of participant data an interpretive phenomenological analysis was utilized. IPA is founded on two discrete characteristics. First, IPA posits that humans exist in a world made up of relationships based on culture and semantics, all positioned within a temporal and perception based construct (Smith et al., 2009). It is from these relationships that people construct meaning and understanding (Smith et al., 2009).
Second, IPA is inherently interpretive. Interpretation in IPA is focused on the meaning of experiences as perceived by both the participant and researcher (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the findings of this study make explicit the meanings of phenomena as perceived by the research participants.

Research findings supported much of the contemporary literature that was used for this study; however, numerous findings did contest the current perspective of low-income student persistence. What is significant about this study is that it focused on those low-income students who, in the face of adversity were able persist in postsecondary education. The findings will add a unique perspective to contemporary research that focuses largely on those low-income students who were unable to persist. Below, I present a discussion of the findings and offer implications for future research. The recommendations are intended to be utilized by colleges to increase the persistence rates of low-income students in higher education. Four themes were created through the analysis of participant transcripts. The themes presented in this section are as follows: (1) Parental support of postsecondary education; (2) Pre-college skill levels; (3) On-campus employment; (4) Institutional life.

Parental Support of Postsecondary Education

Participants expressed numerous reasons for attending college; however, an important element common to all participants was the presence of parental support. Participants indicated parental support of postsecondary education was a fundamental reason that each had chosen to attend college. Participants shared that parental support was based on a number of different motivating factors, including a lack of life attainment which appeared to be a commonality shared by all. Of particular interest was how the participants’ parents perceived a relationship
between their lack of postsecondary education and their low-income status. This may have led many parents to believe that a postsecondary credential was a viable option for their children after high school.

Parental support continued throughout college matriculation, with participants’ detailing parental support and its influence was a critical component that assisted in their overall persistence. According to participants, parental support often came in the form of monetary gifts and regular phone conversations. Communication with a parental figure for some participants became a daily occurrence. Participants shared that parental support influenced many aspects of their lives including an increased desire to remain within their chosen degree program. Study findings indicated that most participants had open and frequently profound relationships with their parents. Participant discourse also highlighted that the majority of parental relationships were founded on mutual respect and an awareness of the pecuniary investment made by both parties.

When looking at study findings only 38% of the participants’ parents had obtained a postsecondary certificate or degree. This was consistent with extant literature which stated that low-SES families were far less likely to be headed by parents with postsecondary qualifications (Ballinger, 2007). However, in regard to parental support for education the participant responses conflicted to some degree with prior research. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2003) argued a relationship existed between a parent’s SES and the academic encouragement given to their children. They stated that low-income students are less likely to have parents who stressed the importance of attending college and less parental support during college. Participant dialog contested this statement as all the participants had parents who understood and articulated the
importance of college to their children. The participants also received support throughout their college matriculation. These findings highlight the significance of parental support during college matriculation, an element that when combined with other factors might have led to increased persistence within the participant cohort.

If research associates a lack of postsecondary encouragement with low-SES families (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003), then how does one explain the study findings? It could be argued that exposure to a postsecondary education was a contributing factor for those participants with postsecondary credentialed parents. However, this does not explain the participant experiences of those whose parents did not attend college. In analyzing participant discourse multiple participants indicated their parents encouraged postsecondary attendance due to the hardships they themselves had experienced, much of which they correlated to a lack college attendance. Therefore, a family environment devoid of postsecondary attainment might in itself produce a culture supportive of college attendance. This is dependent to a large extent on whether a parent associates college attendance as means to a better life. It is understood that myriad experiences form perspective, and no intent is being made to oversimplify a complex phenomenon. But findings do indicate that prior postsecondary experience was not a component required to understand the significance of college attendance.

**Pre-College Skill Levels**

In an examination of findings it appeared the participants had all been exposed to experiences that when combined might have increased their pre-college skill levels and by extension their ability to persist in college. Three specific experiences were generalized from the
participant discourse: (1) completion of college preparatory/AP classes; (2) positive faculty/staff interactions; (3) organizational membership vis-a-vis positive institutional integration.

In regard to the completion of college preparatory/AP classes participants indicated they had all completed either AP or college preparatory classes. Participants completed multiple classes, with one participant being exposed to preparatory classes almost her entire high school career. According to participants preparatory classes exposed them to an environment conducive of college matriculation. Participants defined this environment as one with an advanced curriculum and more academically focused student. When probed each indicated a relationship between the academic preparation they had received during high school and their college persistence. Of the myriad preparatory classes completed by participants, English intensive classes were detailed by two participants as being an important foundation to overcome the academic rigors of postsecondary education. Though not all participants specifically identified AP classes as a contributing factor to their persistence, two participants did. They recognized a distinct relationship between their AP classes and the lack of academic challenges they had faced during college, an element often linked with increased persistence.

These findings both support and contest contemporary research. Rouse and Barrow (2006) determined that low-SES students were far less likely to complete college preparatory/AP classes when compared to higher-SES students. This research conflicts with the study’s findings as all the participants had completed at least one college preparatory/AP class. It is unknown why participants choose to complete these higher level classes, but what is congruent with existing research is the possible relationship between these classes and increased student persistence. Wang (2009) and Choy (2002) detailed that students who completed a rigorous
curriculum during high school were more likely to be retained within an institute of higher education. Johnson (2008) acknowledged that college preparatory or AP classes fall into the category of increased rigor.

It could be argued that the completion of preparatory/AP classes by participants was a factor contributing to their overall persistence. This finding is consistent with existing literature which states that students who complete an academically rigorous high school curriculum are more likely to persist in postsecondary education (Choy, 2002). Preparatory/AP classes also fit within the scope of Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure. The model posits an amalgam of pre-college attributes including skills and abilities, and prior schooling pool to either inhibit or promote postsecondary persistence. Thus, it would appear that the academic preparation of a student prior to entrance into an institute of high education can have a significant impact on persistence (Choy, 2002; Wang, 2009). Obviously the level of academic rigor and preparation that a student is exposed to is both school and district specific (Wolniak & Engberg, 2010). Thus, care should be taken when extrapolating participant findings, as the academic quality of both teachers and schools was outside the purview of this study.

Another experience or pre-college skill that participants appeared to have gained was the ability to successfully integrate into high school life, a skill that might have factored into their overall persistence. This was achieved through integration into the academic and social communities within their high schools. Integration into at least one of these communities is associated with increased persistence in postsecondary education (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration as posited by Tinto (1993) encompasses the academic performance of a student
(GPA) and the depth of interactions with faculty and staff. Although GPA was not a metric that was used in sampling, faculty interactions were discussed at length by participants.

When asked to share the experiences relating to faculty and staff interactions, most participants expressed a positive perception. The depth of interactions between faculty/staff and participants ranged from cursory to a deep and meaningful connection. Participants often spoke of how faculties were integral in creating a positive experience for them during high school. One participant in particular explained how important membership and academic choices were based primarily on faculty assignment. In addition to a connection, faculty and staff were also able to create a culture of academic and emotional support, and an increased interest in college attendance.

In referencing extant literature and Tinto’s (1993) framework, no explicit relationship was made between a student’s high school culture and postsecondary persistence. And though it was not a specific line of questioning, a high school culture supportive of postsecondary matriculation was voiced by multiple participants. This culture was not provincial to specific faculty members or staff, but resulted from a measured effort by the school personnel as a whole. A shared experience expressed by multiple participants was of the repeated efforts by faculty and staff to convey the importance of college attendance. For many participants the influence created by school personnel was so pervasive that college attendance became the norm rather than the exception.

Integration or membership into a high school’s social community was another element expressed by participants. Integration ranged from limited to extensive. The types of integration varied considerably amongst the participant cohort, including membership in community service...
organizations, music, sports, language, and competitive vocational clubs. Participants conveyed numerous reasons for membership. Despite the inconsistency all agreed that active membership had positively impacted their overall experience of high school. In summarizing their experiences, participants believed that membership created a sense of belonging or connectedness, had increased their persistence, and augmented a sense of pride. These findings were consistent with Tinto’s (1993) framework and current literature which suggested a positive relationship between student integration and long-term persistence (Bitzer, 2009; Elkins, Braxton, & James, 2000; Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 1993; Wang, 2009; Wolniak & Engberg, 2010).

Comparing the pre-college attributes of the participant cohort and existing literature a striking contrast becomes apparent. According to participant dialog all participants at some point during their high school careers shared experiences contrary to extant literature. For example all participants were exposed to college preparatory classes and had parents who were supportive prior to, and during their college matriculation. Participants were also all able to successfully integrate into both the social and academic communities at their high schools. Existing literature on the other hand implies that low-income students are more likely to have experienced a less demanding high school curriculum, less parental support prior to and during college, and lower high school attainment (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010; Corrigan, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Qui & Wu, 2011 Rubin, 2012; Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). Based on these findings, one could postulate that the participants’ pre-college attributes coalesced to assist in their overall college persistence. This is not to suggest a direct relationship between these experiences and postsecondary persistence, as there are just simply too many variants. But it is possible that a
confluence of these experiences positively impacted the participants during college matriculation.

When examining Tinto’s (1993) framework of institutional departure in relation to the participants’ experiences during high school, a number of interesting points become overt. However, an important point to establish prior to a summation of findings is that Tinto (1993) is not necessarily explicit in describing what he classified as pre-entry “skills and abilities” (p. 114). Rather the narrative is left somewhat vague. This ambiguity limits to some degree the extrapolation of findings outside of the participant cohort. Tinto’s (1993) main argument within his persistence framework is that college integration leads to increased rates of persistence. Integration is augmented to a large degree by the skills possessed by students upon entry into postsecondary education. When looking holistically at the participants and their experiences during high school, it could be claimed that these combined to create a foundation of skills favorable to postsecondary integration. Specifically, those skills required to navigate the social intricacies of personal relationships and organizational membership. It is these relationships that enable integration, and by extension increased rates of persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Implied within this claim are a number of caveats. Again, the academic quality of a high school is extremely hard to gauge. Accepted metrics are used to rate them; however, there are countless intangible and endogenous factors that prevent a truly accurate measurement. Of the participants, three attended public schools with the fourth attending a private college preparatory school. One public school was described as “very” low-income with the remaining two public schools incorporating students from a wide grouping of socioeconomic backgrounds. The private school also included students from a broad socioeconomic range. The uniqueness of
each participant’s high school and their experiences limits to some degree the extrapolation of findings.

**On-campus employment**

Postsecondary persistence is affected by myriad factors including a student’s ability to moderate any pre-existing deficits related to low-income status. During questioning most participants did not believe their low-income status was an element that impacted their persistence. Nonetheless, all participants acknowledged they had taken significant steps to improve their chances of persistence. Employment during college was but one activity partaken by participants to assist with their matriculation.

Three of the four participants indicated they had been employed throughout their time at college. The forth participant detailed that she had subsidized her expenditure through the use of federal funding, an endeavor that practically eliminated the necessity to work. Interestingly of the three participants who choose to work, all were employed at the institution at some point. According to participants this specific type of employment had far reaching effects, many of them outside of the normal experiences typically associated with employment. For example, remuneration for on-campus employment often came in the form of college scholarships. This provided participants with a significant reduction in their on-campus accommodation expenses. Two participants indicated they had chosen to live on-campus primarily because of these scholarships. On-campus housing has been shown to increase a student’s likelihood of persistence (Johnson, 2008; Mamiseishvili, 2010). Participants also explained how on-campus employment had increased their sense of connection with the college, and enabled the formation
of relationships with faculty, staff and peers. These elements, as recognized by participants had a significant bearing on their persistence.

Despite the positive effects of on-campus employment, one participant did concede that due to financial obligations she had to supplement her income with employment outside of the institution. The participant indicated that the additional work commitments made persistence harder to maintain. She shared that at one point she was working three different jobs. In describing her experiences the participant explained how the additional obligations often left her tired and exhausted, making academic participation much more difficult. The difficulties of excessive employment obligations voiced by the participant did parallel with contemporary research (Bradley & Mather, 2009).

Participant findings support much of the extant literature that focuses on the employment habits of postsecondary students. Of the four participants, three opted to work during college. This supports Horn and Nevil (2006) who found that about one-third of all undergraduate students work full-time during college, with an additional 41% working part-time. Though conflicting data exists as to whether low-income students are more likely to be employed when compared to higher-SES students, extant literature does posit that increased levels of employment have been associated with programmatic cessation (Bozick, 2007; Chou, 2001; Choy 2002; College Completion, 2003; Corrigan, 2003; Walpole, 2003).

When comparing Tinto’s (1993) framework with the employment activities of participants’ a number of provoking disparities become explicit. Tinto (1993) posited that an increase in external commitments is linked with lower levels of institutional integration. It is the level of integration that leads to either persistence or dropout behavior (Tinto, 1993). The
majority of participants were employed during college, a fact consistent with current research. However, the disparity occurred when looking at the levels of integration experienced by participants. Participants acknowledged no specific deficit relating to their (on-campus) employment. In fact participants expressed increased levels of integration and persistence due to their employment. This conflicts to a marginal degree with both Tinto’s (1993) framework and current research (Chou, 2001; Choy 2002; College Completion, 2003; Corrigan, 2003).

Analyzing participant dialog makes explicit a potential relationship between on-campus employment and increased rates of integration. A caveat to this statement, and one made by participants was that the level of integration is as much a reflection upon the institution as it is the student (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, it could be argued that the type of on-campus employment might also modify integration based on whether a student actually enjoys the activity.

**Institutional life**

Campus living arrangements featured heavily into how participants perceived their college experience. The primary type of accommodation chosen by the participants was on-campus housing. All participants chose to live on-campus during their freshman year, with two participants living on-campus all four years. The other two participants elected to live off-campus, though as previously stated they did reside on-campus for at least a portion of their degree program. The general perspective of on-campus housing was positive, with participants detailing an increased desire to persist within the institution, due in part because of their choice of living arrangements. Participants attributed a number of positive outcomes to on-campus
living, including increased on-campus integration and augmented feelings of connection with both peers and the institution.

Participant findings conflict to a certain extent with current research which stated that higher-income students are twice as likely to live on-campus when compared to low-income students (Bozick, 2007). One possibility for this incongruity could be that Bozick’s (2007) research did not encompass those low-income students who received institutional scholarships specific to on-campus housing. When examining study findings all participants indicated increased feelings of connection when referencing on-campus housing. This was consistent with Bradley and Mather’s (2009) who posited a student’s living arrangements can significantly affect their sense of institutional belonging. Participant dialog also supports Tinto’s (1993) supposition that the level of integration, ergo feelings of belonging, often lead to an increase in institutional persistence.

For those participants who chose at one point or another to live off-campus, findings indicated a distinct correlation with both Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal framework and extant literature (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Mamiseishvili, 2010). According to participants, living off-campus intensified feelings of institutional detachment, whilst making it more difficult to complete scholarly obligations. In fact the further away participants were from campus the more likely they were to miss classes. It should be noted; however, that off-campus living did provide participants with a greater sense of privacy, especially important for those participants considered non-traditional.

In regards to integration into the institutions academic community, participants detailed mainly positive and sometimes deep relationships with faculty. Consistent with research,
participants shared that positive faculty relationships not only increased their desire to persist, it also augmented feelings of acceptance within the classroom environment (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Deli-Amen, 2011; Johnson, 1997; Walpole, 2003). In comparing faculty relationships with persistence, an important distinction was made by one participant. She stated, in spite of the importance of faculty they were but one group responsible for her persistence. Rather than a singular entity, a combination of faculty, family, and friends assisted with her persistence. It should be noted many participants indicated that faculty relationships were based on some form of mutual connection. Participants articulated that these connections were reliant on a number of different factors including, faculty demeanor, prior faculty industry experience, and a joint passion for the subject matter. Interestingly, the majority of participants expressed a greater connection with those faculties teaching their core concentration classes. Participants acknowledged that it wasn’t necessarily due to faculty quality, but rather an incongruity between subject matter focus.

When considering social integration participants frequently incorporated peer group interaction and university club/organizational membership as one inclusive group. This was because participants formed many of their social relationships through membership in various clubs and activities. Similar to faculty relationships, social peer groups were also considered a vital element to persistence. Specifically, participants spoke of how their friends assisted with class attendance and an intensification of positive feelings towards the institution. Club and organizational membership were also factors that participants associated with increased rates of persistence. As stated prior, it was not simply membership that increased persistence, but rather an amalgam of membership and the interaction with friends during organizational participation.
Extrapolating these findings, one could postulate that organizational membership does not necessarily protract to increased levels of persistence. Positive social interaction within the organization would appear to be just as important as the membership itself.

Participants indicated an association between their low-income status and the ability to maintain positive social peer interactions. Though some participants did not believe their low-income status had impacted their relationships with friends, two participants did verbalize a number of deficits. For example, limited fiscal resources often precluded participation in extracurricular activities with friends. This mandated that participants seek alternative options that required little or no expenditure. Participants also detailed that external commitments (employment) often moderated their ability to spend time with friends. Despite the apparent social challenges caused by their low-income status, participants were still able to maintain peer relationships throughout their matriculation.

The participants’ social experiences relative to their low-income status was reasonably consistent with existing literature. Research postulates that social integration is partly delineated along socioeconomic lines (Corrigan, 2003; Deli-Amen, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2003; Rubin, 2012; Stuber, 2009; Walpole, 2003). When compared to higher-SES students, low-SES students spend less time participating in extracurricular activities (Corrigan, 2003; Rubin, 2012; Stuber, 2009; Walpole, 2003). As stated prior participants articulated that their low-SES did reduce the amount of time they could spend socializing. This shortfall, as stated by Tinto (1993) leaves a student at a much greater risk of programmatic cessation.

A final area of concern expressed by participants was the residual impact of external commitments. External commitments include activities outside of a student’s normal academic
obligations. These often include employment and family responsibilities (Tinto, 1993).

Holistically, participants were all able to limit the external commitments that they faced through on-campus employment and by reducing their overall fiscal expenditure. They were also all residential students which effectively restricted their ability to assist with any family issues that might arise. On-campus employment and organizational membership also assisted participants by providing a foundation of peer and faculty support, which participants associated with their overall persistence. According to Bozick (2007) and Walpole (2003) low-income students typically have more external obligations when compared to their higher-income peers. External commitments coalesce to limit a student’s ability to persist (Tinto, 1993). When looking at the low levels of external commitments experienced by participants they appear to contradict the typical low-income profile. By extrapolating these findings, one could argue that a reduction of external commitments almost certainly impacted their persistence.

**Implications for future research**

The overarching aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of low-income students as they relate to persistence in postsecondary education. Considering the social and educational experiences of participants, the following recommendations and suggestions are offered with the hope of increasing the college persistence of low-income students.

Recommendations for policy change were initially focused on augmenting practices in postsecondary education; however, based on participant dialog a number of recommendations have been also made relevant to students in secondary education.

It is recommended that secondary schools seek out ways to increase a student’s exposure to college preparatory classes, which as stated by Johnson increase a student’s chances of tertiary
graduation (2008). It is understood that not all students are willing or able to complete preparatory classes; however, schools still have an obligation to expose students to academic skills required for successful persistence during college matriculation. Participants indicated college preparatory classes were an important factor that assisted in their overall persistence.

When evaluating the experiences of participants during high school it did seem that school personnel and parents were able to significantly impact their perception of college. Therefore, it is recommended that school administrators seek to create a unified approach to successful college enrollment. This could be achieved by reaching out to school personnel and parents with the goal of educating and changing perspectives. Research indicates that both parents and institutional personnel can significantly impact a student’s future aspirations and educational perspective (Albrecht & Albrecht, 2010; Bradley & Mather, 2009; Deil-Amen, 2011). This may seem somewhat of a simplistic approach, but by creating a unified approach schools are more likely to establish a natural culture of college progression. This was an element that participants positively linked with their postsecondary persistence.

Participant dialog indicated a connection between the positive actions taken by the institution and their persistence. As a result, it would appear that college persistence is as much associated with the actions of the institution as it is the student (Tinto, 1993). This is an element consistent with Tinto’s (1993) longitudinal model of institutional departure. Therefore, the following recommendations relate to postsecondary institutional policy changes aimed at increasing a student’s likelihood of persistence. First, colleges should implement a mandated first-year seminar for freshman students. First-year seminars have been shown to improve student performance, especially in areas such as persistence and academic attainment (Clark &
Cundiff, 2011; Montgomery, Jeffs, Schlegel, & Jones, 2009; Potts & Schultz, 2008). It is understood that many institutions already offer such a course; however, it is not so much the course that is important but rather the content. First year seminar courses should proffer information appropriate to persistence, including: (1) introduction to extracurricular activities that have little or no fiscal expenditure; (2) overview of the importance of institutional club and organizational membership; (3) assistance with employment, especially pertinent for low-income students; (4) introduction to money management during college. Participants acknowledged these factors as positively influencing their overall persistence. The first year seminar course should run in conjunction with activities that expose the freshman students to their peers and school personnel. This will enable students to begin the formation of relationships that might assist in their persistence (Tinto, 1993).

Study findings indicated that social peer group (organizational involvement) interaction was intrinsically linked with persistence. Participants shared that social peer interaction both moderated the often stressful environment of college and intensified the positive feelings they had towards the institution. These findings support Tinto’s (1993) argument that institutional integration increases a student’s chances of persistence. Therefore, institutions need to provide access points that allow students to better integrate into the institutions social communities. This could come in the form of activities that assist with exposure to peers. These activities should occur both on-and-off campus in areas like student housing. This might provide an environment that feels less artificial and more relaxed. Activities can be broken into two distinct sections; formal and non-formal. Formal activities would include institutional clubs and organizations. As stated earlier, exposure to these activities has shown to increase a student’s likelihood of
persistence (Tinto, 1993). Non-formal activities could include off-campus excursions, movie night, celebratory dances, Greek life etc. It should be restated that participants formed many of their long-term peer relationships through involvement in the institutions clubs and organizations, a factor they associated with persistence.

Participants also detailed that Faculty and institutional personnel played a significant role in their overall persistence. Therefore, it is important to involve institutional personnel in some of these activities as well. This is supported by contemporary research that identifies a distinct relationship between institutional personnel and increased student persistence (Bradley & Mather, 2009; Deli-Amen, 2011). Considering the effect of parental support during college (as expressed by participants), it would also be prudent to include parents in on-campus activities. Though not always logistically possible, involving parents during the college year would almost certainly be beneficial. This involvement could include a first year seminar type class. Parents normally visit colleges during an orientation for their child, or on the first day when students move into dormitories etc. This would be ideal time to introduce them to techniques that can used to support their child whilst in college, an element participants linked with their persistence.

Participants detailed that monetary support was a primary element that assisted with overall persistence. Participants specifically identified those monies that originated from institutional scholarships and on-campus employment. In order to provide more student support it is recommended institutions look at developing policies that open access to greater fiscal resources, though not necessarily more loans. It was evident that on-campus employment played a major part in participant persistence. Therefore, institutions should look to increase the availability of on-campus jobs to those students most in need. Employment opportunities could
be offered based in-part on financial metrics. Though federal work-study positions already provide such opportunities, they rarely provide remuneration specific to on-campus housing. This was an element that factored heavily into the participants ability to persist. Another way to reduce fiscal expenditure might be to offer reduced housing costs, or greater access to institutional scholarships specific to low-income students. These recommendations mirror Carson (2010) who posited that institutional scholarships allow students to work less, providing more time for academic engagement. This was also consistent with Aitken, Skuja, and Schapper (2004) who detailed a positive link between merit scholarships and a student’s self-confidence and academic attainment.

Future research should focus on three key strings. An investigation to answer the question, how do parents without a college education foster a home environment conducive of postsecondary attendance and persistence? This question was raised as a result of the study’s limitations. Due to limited questioning, participants were not asked to explain why they believed their parents were supportive of postsecondary education. Parental support of postsecondary education was an area of interest highlighted during the analysis of the participant dialog. If the majority of the participant’s parents only attained a high school GED or diploma, how does one explain that all participants had parents supportive of a postsecondary education? This becomes especially pertinent when considering current research postulates that a parent’s education level is positively linked with a student’s likelihood of college enrollment (Choy, 2002; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Research also showed a positive link between parental education and
student persistence (Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Choy, 2002; College Completion, 2003; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Porchea et al., 2010; Walpole, 2003).

The second recommendation for future research was founded on the high school experiences of one participant. Specifically, in a low-income inner-city high school environment where over 50% of students dropped out prior to graduation, the participant was still able to persist. This solicits the question, what skills or experiences assist in the persistence of low-income students in K-12 education? High school persistence is a critical element, especially as it relates to postsecondary matriculation. As stated by Choy (2001) and Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2003), the academic skills attained by a student during high school can dramatically impact their ability to persist in postsecondary education. Thus, it would seem prudent to explore a student’s K-12 experiences as they relate to college persistence.

The final recommendation is based in part on the experiences of those participants whose vocational activities included on-campus employment. Participants indicated a positive relationship between their on-campus employment and persistence. This finding contradicts to some degree extant literature which associates employment during college with programmatic cessation (Choy, 2001; Choy, 2002; College Completion, 2003, Corrigan, 2003). As stated prior reimbursement for on-campus employment often came in the form of institutional scholarships. These scholarships in turn assisted with on-campus housing and reduction in their overall external obligations, which participants positively associated with their persistence. This finding protracts to the question, is there a relationship between institutional scholarships and the persistence of low-income students?
Conclusion

In a culture that has shifted from a production to knowledge based construct, a postsecondary credential is now almost requisite for socioeconomic matriculation (Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Cragg, 2009; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Webber & Boehmer, 2008). The benefits of postsecondary credentials have been shown to encapsulate not only the individual student, but also the nation at large (Carnevale et al., 2010; College Completion, 2003; Fike & Fike, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Given this statement it then becomes incumbent upon both secondary and postsecondary institutions to provide opportunities for unfettered and equal access to the support and skills necessary for successful college graduation. Unfortunately, contemporary research indicates that the pathway to graduation is often delineated along socioeconomic lines (NCES, 2006). Considering SES, low-SES students are more likely dropout of postsecondary education when compared to almost any other social group (Barth & Education Trust, 2001; Chen & DesJardins, 2008; Chen & DesJardins, 2010; Dervarics & Roach, 2000; Miller, Taylor, Smith, Nichols, & Pell Institute, 2011).

The findings from the study to some extent indicated that low-income students are able to overcome the numerous hurdles inherent within their SES. Consistent with extant research, the participants appeared in many regards to personify the typical characteristics of low-income students in higher education. The majority of participant families were headed by parents without a postsecondary credential, and all had experienced significant hardships due to their low-income status both in secondary and postsecondary education. Yet, in the face of adversity and with the support from parents, faculty, college administrators, federal assistance, and their own innate desire they were able to persist.
Appendix A

Students Questions for Study of the Experiences of Low-Income Students in Postsecondary Education
Interview One

Study Question: How do low-income students understand their prior educational experiences and their ability to persist in postsecondary education?

Tour questions to gain context: For this interview, participants will be asked only to share personal experiences prior to attending the university.

1. Please describe the community where you lived during high school.
   Sub Q: How would you describe your community from a socioeconomic point of view?
   Sub Q: How would you describe your community from an ethnic/cultural perspective?

2. Please describe your family environment/unit.
   Sub Q: Please describe the types of jobs your parents are involved in.
   Sub Q: Please describe your parent’s educational backgrounds.

Main study questions:

3. Do you regard college as being an important element in your future success? If yes, what prior experiences made you think this way?
   Sub Q: What impact, if any did your parents have on your feelings towards the importance of college?
   Sub Q: Please describe any social experiences that helped you to decide to attend college? This could be interactions with family members, friends, or high school personnel.

4. How would you describe you high school experience?

5. Please describe any experiences that you had during high school that have helped you persistence at the university?
   Sub Q: How would you describe your high school classes/curriculum/technology and how they have helped you at the university?
   Sub Q: How would you describe your high school teachers/personnel and how they have helped you at the university?
   Sub Q: Were you involved in any non-curricular school clubs/activities? If so, how do you think these activities have helped you at the university?

6. Please describe any experiences outside of high school that have helped your persistence at the university.
   Sub Q: Were you involved in any clubs or organized social activities outside of high school? If so, how do you think these activities have helped you at the university?

7. That is all the questions that I have today. Is there anything that you would like to share that you didn’t have chance to speak about?
Interview Two

Study Question: How do low-income students understand their socioeconomic status as being a factor in their ability to persist in postsecondary education?

This session is also looking at the relationships that students establish during college and how they might impact persistence. Relationships are those established in either the social or academic communities. Participants will be asked only to share experiences post-enrollment at the university.

Tour question to gain context

1. How has being a low-income student affected your ability to persist at the university?

Main study questions:

2. How would you describe your social relationships (Greek life, friends, clubs, etc.) at the university and how have these relationships impacted your persistence?
   Sub Q: How would you describe your low-income status as being a factor in the social relationships you have made during your time at the university?
   Sub Q: Please describe your living arrangements during your time at the university.
   Sub Q: How did your low-income status impact your living arrangements?
   Sub Q: Please describe how your living arrangements have affected your persistence at the university?

3. How would you describe your academic relationships (faculty, course success, study groups, etc.) at the university and how have these relationships impacted your persistence?
   Sub Q: How would you describe your low-income status as being a factor in the academic relationships you have made during your time at the university?

4. Please describe the academic challenges that you have faced as a low-income student at the university.
   Sub Q: How were you able to overcome these challenges?

5. Please describe the social challenges that you have faced as a low-income student at the university.
   Sub Q: How were you able to overcome these challenges?

6. Please describe how you were able to successfully navigate through your first three years at the university.
   Sub Q: Were you employed during your time at the university? If yes, why did you choose to work and how did this employment impact your persistence?
7. Please describe the types of support you have had during your time at the university. Sub Q: How have the people in, or outside of the university helped your persistence?

8. Suppose I was a low-income student entering the university, what advice would you give me that might increase my chance of persistence?

9. That is all the questions I have for you today. Is there anything that you would like to share that you didn’t have chance to speak about?
Appendix B

Unsigned Consent Document

Northeastern University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators: Dr. Kimberly Truong, Principle Investigator, Paul DeVries, Student Researcher

Title of Project: Understanding the Persistence of Low-Income Students in Postsecondary Education

REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of low-income senior ranked students as it relates to persistence in postsecondary education. Low-income senior ranked students are defined as those students who qualify for federal Pell grant assistance, and who have achieved sufficient credit hours to be classified as a senior within an institution of higher education.

The research will explore the following questions: (1) How do low-income students understand their socioeconomic status as being a factor in their ability to persist in postsecondary education?; and (2) How do low-income students understand their prior educational experiences and their ability to persist in postsecondary education? Persistence in postsecondary education refers to those students who have continued anywhere in higher education, including those who have transferred from one institution to another.

WHY WERE YOU ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you qualify as both a federal Pell grant eligible and senior ranked student. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you would be asked to do the following things:

You will be asked to participate in two face to face interviews, and a final review session between the months of ______________ and ______________. Interviews will be held in a conference room on your University's campus, at a date and time that is convenient for you so it does not conflict with you other time commitments. During the interviews you will be asked questions about your experiences before and during your time at your University. Interviews can range from 1 hour to 90 minutes. The interviews will be digitally recorded and then transcribed to
written form. All transcripts will be confidential, meaning that your real name will not appear anywhere in the study.

For the third session, you will be given the opportunity to read over the written descriptions of your experiences at, and prior to enrolling in the University. This will provide you with the opportunity to make changes so you feel it truly captures your experiences. A final copy of the study will also be made available to you if you are interested in receiving it.

**POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no known risks or discomforts to persons participating in this research.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help the researcher better understand how students who qualify for federal Pell grant assistance perceive their academic and social experiences within universities and colleges the institution and what factors play a role in successfully complete a four-year degree program. It is hoped that in the future this information may assist universities in helping students to successfully persist.

**PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

Each participant will receive a $20 cash card at the end of the second session.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you, the University or any individual as being of this project.

Any documents that indicate your name will be located in a secure and locked area. The interview transcripts will be coded so that your real name does not appear on the document. Electronic data will be kept on a password protected computer to which the researcher has the only access. All audiotapes of interviews will be destroyed after the researcher finalizes analysis and transcription.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time if you do not want to continue and you may exercise the option of removing your data from the study. Your decision to participate or not will have no effect on your standing at the University. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit anytime, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student. The researchers may withdraw you from the study if circumstances arise that warrant that action.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact (Name) Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: ---,---,----, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions or concerns please contact:

**Student Researcher:** (Name)

**Principle Investigator:** (Name)

**I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH.**

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part
Date
______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent
Date
______________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
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