VOICES OF ACADEMICALLY RESILIENT FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The rise in enrollment of non-traditional college students, specifically first-generation college students (FGS), over the last few decades has been well documented. Yet, with over 50 percent of the population with FGS, there still appears to be significant disparities between the graduation rates of FGS and their non-first generation peers (11-23 % for FGS and as much as 68% for their non-first generation peers). Utilizing an analysis of qualitative data, this interpretative phenomenological study sought to understand and explain how FGS explained their success at a career-focused institution. The research drew its data from in-depth, one-on-one interviews with Bachelor’s degree recipients at a private, non-profit institution within the southeastern part of the United States. Utilizing the theories of self-efficacy and academic resilience as the theoretical frameworks, the researcher collected thick descriptive narratives of the participants’ lived experiences. Through the analysis of this qualitative data, four emergent themes were identified to include: (1) personal and professional aspirations, (2) “you don’t know what you don’t know,” (3) it takes a village, and (4) success builds confidence. This study serves to guide institutions of higher education when determining program and services geared toward this specific population of student as well as contribute to the extant literature on first-generation college students. Based on the study’s findings, individuals in a student’s personal and professional network as well as faculty and staff from the institution are instrumental in the social integration, academic adjustment and continued persistence of first-generation college students. The study also found that acquiring a student leadership position on campus helped FGS alleviate some of the barriers identified to persistence such as social integration and financial stability. Additionally, a first-generation college student’s self-efficacy is raised through the vicarious experiences of others in their peer groups. Their self-efficacy is also raised
through continued successful millstones achieved. This research suggests that first-generation college students, with the help of others, can become statistically elite, academically resilient college students just like their non-first generation college peers.

*Keywords*: interpretative phenomenological analysis, first-generation college students, self-efficacy, academic resilience, career-focused institution, student persistence
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I have lived my life over the course of the last two and a half years being reminded of a poem by William Ernest Henley titled Invictus. The last two lines of this poem, “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul” remains ingrained in me as a reminder that I must put aside my self-doubt and fears and push forward through any challenge life presents me. And with friends like S. Paul Malcolm, Dr. Paul DeVries and others too many to mention, I one day hope to realize the answer to their question, “Why do birds fly?” Because of self-doubt and fear,
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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of problem</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification for the research problem</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the research problem</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positionality statement</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research questions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical framework</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter summary</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why earn a Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First-Generation College Student</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Generation College Students and Remediation</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First-Generation College Student and Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Resilience</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Support Systems</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Design</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Access</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Storage</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Human Subjects</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Limitations</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Research Findings

Participants Profiles
Emergent Themes
Theme #1 Personal and Professional Aspirations
Theme #2 “You don’t know what you don’t know”
Theme #3 It Takes a Village
Theme #4 Success Builds Confidence
Conclusion

Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

Summary of Problem
Summary of Research Results
Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review
Study Limitations
Recommendations for Practice and Future Research
Self Reflection and Conclusion

References

Appendix A- JWU Alumni Association Recruitment Email
Appendix B- Internet Recruitment Email
Appendix C- Recruitment Response Letter
Appendix D- Informed Consent
Appendix E- Interview Protocol
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

According to Chen and Carroll (2005), college students whose parents have not completed a college degree succeed at a rate that is approximately half that of their peers. Unfortunately, the disparity between those with parents who hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher and those without is considerable (Choy, 2001). These students, formally known as first-generation college students (FGS) (Vong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010), account for between 30 and 53 percent of the enrollment at four-year institutions today (Davis, 2010; Strayhorn, 2006). Yet once enrolled, the probability that a first-generation college student will graduate from a four-year institution within six years is between 11 and 23 % (Pell Institute, 2011). In response to this alarming data, it was the intention of this study to focus on this group of first-generation college graduates. These students, who did indeed persist and graduate from a four-year, career-focused institution, told their stories of academic resilience despite the barriers which they may have faced as first-generation students.

Organization

The following thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter includes the statement of the problem, a justification for the research, deficiencies in the current research, and the theoretical framework(s) utilized. The theories of self-efficacy and academic resiliency are utilized as the theoretical framework that provided the researcher with the lens through which to frame the research. The second chapter includes the literature review. This literature review provides the reader with examples of the extant research on FGS, as well as a background of FGS and the barriers that they face. Although there is an abundant of research on FGS, only the research necessary to develop a level of understanding of the problem of practice was used. The
third chapter provides the reader with a road map and a description of the research as well as the chosen methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The third chapter also includes the research questions that guided the research, a description of the research site, and a description of how the data was collected and analyzed. Also, found in Chapter 3 are a description of the trustworthiness of the research and a discussion on the protection of human subjects. The next chapter, chapter four presents the reader with the findings of the study organized by research question. Chapter five presents the reader with a discussion of the findings shown in chapter four, a discussion of findings in relation to theoretical frameworks as well as a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

Over the past 60 years, access to the American higher educational system has increased, enrollment has become easier, and the system that controls access has become fairer (Davis, 2010). Fortunately for first-generation college students, this increase has been in their favor. According to Davis, in 1992 nearly 50% of college freshmen were first-generation college students. Davis also suggested that at the community college level this number is much higher because of changing demographic trends within the United States. Facing the real possibility that the majority of college students will be FGS, a stronger understanding of their needs and challenges is necessary (Davis, 2010).

Much of the existing literature on FGS focused on the use of quantitative methods for data analysis. These recent quantitative studies of FGS have included investigations into the FGS’ ability to persist from term to term and from year to year (Ishitani, 2006; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Warburton & Nunez, 2001). The research often compared FGS to their non-first-generation student counterparts (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager,
Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), while additional studies focused on the FGS’ efficacy and on the external challenges this population of students faced (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Extant research suggests first-generation college students are less likely to be prepared for the academic rigor and lifestyle of college (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Strayhorn, 2006). Compared with traditional college students, FGS took fewer humanities courses, studied fewer hours, took fewer credits, worked more hours, and were less likely to participate in honors programs (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation college students often judge their own abilities and potential as less than their peers, which in turn may result in lower self-efficacy and lead to attrition within the first year (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) determined that a student’s level of self-efficacy (Bandura’s 1997 concept of an individual’s belief in his or her own ability) at the beginning of the year predicted later college adjustment. They asserted that this information has implications for counseling, allowing for interventions with at-risk students who may be identified early on by assessing their level of self-efficacy. Additionally, Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols concluded that confidence in academic ability was related to better adjustment to college, supporting their argument that the higher one’s efficacy, the longer the student will stay in school (2007).

Previous research on first-generation college students also indicated that they experience difficulty prior to and during their college experience, making them subject to lower academic performance (Bui, 2002). FGS also may have difficulty integrating into the college lifestyle and have higher levels of attrition than traditional college students (Terenzini et al., 1996; Thayer, 2000). Based on FGS literature, it is evident that FGS encounter more obstacles in college than their non-first generation peers. The social and academic challenges described in the literature portray a complex set of issues that may make it more difficult for FGS to assimilate into the
academic and social areas of college life (Tinto 1993), which could potentially affect their persistence toward and successful completion of a four-year college degree.

While many first-generation college students pursue a vocational/technical career track at two-year institutions (Carroll & Chen, 2005), there appears to be no research found that specifically focuses on the persistence of FGS who have completed a four-year degree at a career-focused institution. Not only is there no research to be found that specifically focuses on the persistence of FGS who obtain a four-year degree from a career-focused institution, much of the research on FGS focuses on the failures of the population not on their successes.

Based on the extant literature on FGS, this research sought to investigate not only the barriers to success as identified by the study participants, but it also intended to identify the areas of support that FGS believe contributed to their success. Allowing the voices of these successful FGS to be heard provides a perspective that is currently missing from the available literature on FGS and their persistence.

Therefore, through a qualitative study of first-generation college students who have completed their Bachelor’s degrees at a four-year, career-focused institution, the researcher intended for the study participants to discuss their “understandings, experience, and sense-making activities” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47) and how they affected their ability to persist despite the challenges that they as a group did indeed face. By examining the phenomenon within this specific context, the research will fill a gap in the literature, adding to an understanding of persistence of FGS at four-year career institutions. The transferability of the student experiences and program usefulness was unclear prior to investigation. However, it is believed that the scope of the research findings and recommendations extend beyond the study’s setting. University administrators and policy makers can use this research in determining what programs, campus
services, and even what courses were helpful in integrating FGS into college life and towards academic persistence. In addition, identifying the programs and services FGS themselves perceive as beneficial to their integration and persistence may also be useful. Faculty who are interested in the persistence and success of this specific population of students can use this information to become aware of the barriers associated with being a first-generation student and increase the positive impact that they as faculty have on these students. Additionally, future students may benefit from the real life stories of their successful counterparts, allowing them a glimpse into the world of academically resilient peers and role models. As a result of this research, this study hopes to add to the existing literature on FGS and the understanding of their academic resilience and persistence in graduating from a four-year career institution.

Significance of the Research Problem

There have been many examples of students throughout history who were the first in their families to go to school. During the development of the American common school system in the early 1800s, hundreds of students began school for the first time (Mondale & Patten, 2001). Other eras provided examples of new students such as immigrants coming to the United States from Europe as well Native Americans who received a formal education. Other examples include newly freed slaves who at the end of the Civil War were trying to acquire a previously unattainable education (Mondale & Patten, 2001). In more recent years, the establishment of the GI Bill, post World War II, allowed for more students who were considered first-generation to begin attending college in significant numbers (Davis, 2010). These groups and populations of students are evidence that throughout history more and more Americans have taken advantage of the greater open access that has been provided for them. Through this access, these Americans
were given the opportunity to improve their lives through the benefits which education can provide (Davis, 2010).

The federal government classifies a first-generation college student as an individual “both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” … “whereas second generation and non-first-generation (traditional college students) have at least one parent who graduated from a four-year university” (Vong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010, p. 50). Strayhorn (2006) utilized a common definition found in the literature to describe FGS as those students whose parents did not attend any kind of college. For the purpose of this study, the definition of a first-generation college student is more inclusive. Building from contemporary researchers’ work (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007), FGS are those students whose parents did not attend college or finish the degree that they started. Further delimitations narrowing the definition, such as a discussion of the number of credits a parent may have obtained, are outside the scope of this research. Instead, the focus of the research proposed is to better understand how students without parental models of college completion navigate the landscape of higher education.

Davis (2010) insisted that degree-attainment for all students were contingent upon growing up in a home environment that promotes the culture of higher education. For FGS, this lack of cultural knowledge and experience is one more barrier that they as college students must face.

Having less education may prevent an individual and his or her family from reaping the benefits of “upward mobility” (Miller & Tatum, 2008). All students who obtain a college degree may receive numerous personal, economic, and social benefits for both themselves and society as a whole (Choy, 2001), but a degree is especially beneficial to FGS and their families.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.), individuals with a Bachelor’s degree were nearly twice as likely to be employed in 2012 than those individuals who only held a high
school diploma. Additionally, those individuals with a Bachelor’s degree had a lifetime earnings potential that was nearly double that of their non-college educated peers (Cheeseman & Newburger, 2002). Bachelor’s degree recipients were also a third more likely to be employed in 2012 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.p.) than those individuals with only an Associate’s degree and their lifetime earnings potential was nearly $500,000 greater (Cheeseman & Newburger, 2002). These rewards of financial gain and upward mobility may help ensure a higher social and economic position for these FGS and their families alike.

The consequences of being undereducated are not just financial. According to Davis (2010), individuals who do not possess a four-year degree are considered undereducated, regardless of how much they may have learned in the time they stayed in school. In addition to higher earnings for those who do obtain a degree, higher education customarily provides students with new topics and academic challenges. Because of these exposures, there is a probability of intellectual growth as well as career growth (Ishitani, 2006; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Without familial models of college success, once a first-generation college student is accepted into a program at a four-year college or university, it is up to university employees (i.e. faculty, administration, and support staff) to be proactive rather than reactive to the needs of this population in an effort to help them “succeed at the same rate as their non-first-generation counterparts” (Davis, 2010, p. 4). Otherwise, a cycle of lower academic persistence and a continued lower social climate for FGS may continue.

This qualitative research assessed the reasons behind the success of first-generation college students within a four-year career institution. As Davis (2010) asserted, colleges and universities must acknowledge (as we do with ethnicity) that first-generation status is a worthy demographic unit that is “intrinsically valuable” (p. 07). Unfortunately, fundamental issues
prevent FGS from successfully integrating into institutions of higher learning (Choy, 2001). Yet, unlike other demographic groups, they remain understudied.

**Positionality Statement**

As an instructor in a Culinary Arts and Food Service Management program at a four-year, career-focused institution and a first-generation student myself, my main focus has always been to assist my students in the successful completion of their chosen degrees. In the production methodology courses that I teach, it is disheartening to see so many of my students struggling with basic subject matter. One such area is basic arithmetic. Proficiency in basic arithmetic is essential for a food service professional. Statistics show that 98 percent of restaurants fail within the first year of operation (McVety, Marshall, & Ware, 2009). Though there are many reasons cited for this percentage, not being able to operate the financial end of a hospitality operation is certainly one of them (McVety, Marshall, & Ware). Due to the academic barriers many FGS encounter, barriers such as potential remedial needs and the lack of success models coupled with their status as a first-generation student, numerous challenges await these students, both professionally and personally.

My students and I share a passion and motivation for our trade and the hospitality industry. Yet, because of my own academic efficacy issues, I can relate to the personal frustrations many of my students face in both their production methodology courses, their remedial education courses (if assigned), and even in their general education courses. Early in my culinary career, my only concern was for cooking; I enjoyed being in the kitchen and producing fantastic meals while creating memories for my guests. I was eventually promoted into a leadership position where I was forced to acknowledge my own academic weaknesses, which were associated with the business functions for the operation. Although I had difficulty
performing these tasks and understanding the correlation between the industry and the need for these skills, I was eventually trained to do so. This retraining allowed me to progress further in both my culinary and my leadership careers. As a faculty member who is genuinely interested in the success of all students, first-generation students included, I often speak to them about my own humble beginnings and try to convey that through hard work and perseverance what we may see as a weakness can eventually become our strength.

While contemplating my research on FGS, I look back to my scholarly course work and remember the writings of Briscoe (2005). It is in her writings that Briscoe identified that, “some scholars argue that an oppressed group should be researched and represented exclusively by the members of that group, in particular, the privileged should be excluded from representing the oppressed” (p. 24). She goes on to argue that the voices of the other or the oppressed should indeed be heard in scholarly discourse. Although one can argue that FGS are not as much of an oppressed group as other members of our society, the literature on FGS shows that FGS as a group need to be recognized as being different from their non-first-generation peers and even from the non-first-generation faculty who teach them (Davis, 2010).

Because these students are not as prepared for college as their non-first-generation counterparts (Choy, 2001; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Strayhorn, 2006) and often judge their own abilities and potential as less than that of their peers (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007), it is often harder for a first-generation student to adapt to college life (Tinto 1993). Yet, it is these factors that many FGS do not recognize or understand about themselves (Davis, 2010). Like my students, I still face difficulties in both my academic and professional career related to my low efficacy and poor prior academic preparation. These experiences, I believe, will allow me to be a genuine advocate for FGS.
When discussing the role of the research as well as the role researcher bias plays in the writings of scholarly work, it was imperative that I controlled both my positive and negative biases concerning first-generation college students. As the researcher, I had to ensure that I did not let these biases influence the research interactions with the study participants. I had to also make certain that the interview questions were open-ended, allowing for the participants to answer “unconstrained by any perspectives” that I, as the researcher, might have had about FGS (Creswell, 2012, p. 218). As an instructor and former student of the institution where the study was conducted, these connections helped me better relate to the study participants through our common experiences and personal attachments to the institution (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). However, because I had taught some of the study participants, I had to ensure that I did not form a biased opinion based on my personal experience or attachments to them. I also had to make certain that my other responsibilities or encounters as an instructor at the institution, as well as my own experiences as a first-generation student, did not induce researcher bias. For, as stated by Machi and McEvoy (2009), “a biased researcher can only produce biased findings” (p. 19). To ensure this, I had to bracket out my own experiences and perceptions of being a first-generation college student from those of the study participants. I had to ensure that it is their story that is being written and not mine. As both an instructor at the research site and a first-generation student myself, I believe that my perspectives and biases, both positive and maybe even some negative, allowed me the opportunity to help these students articulate what it is that helped them, as well as what it was that drove them to graduate from a four-year, career-focused institution. More specifically through this research, I wanted to help the study participants identify, for themselves and for the readers, what experiences lead to their academic success despite the challenges that they as FGS may have faced. This success was based on their
academic persistence as FGS who obtained a Bachelor’s degree from a four-year, career-focused institution.

**Research Questions**

The research question that was used to guide this study was:

How do first-generation college students understand and explain their success at a four-year career university?

The sub questions that helped answer the main research question are:

1. What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college?
2. What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize?
3. What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers?
4. How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?

**Theoretical Framework**

The awareness of one’s capabilities to succeed at a given undertaking is known as self-efficacy. One’s success, despite obstacles or barriers, is known as resiliency. These two concepts have been used extensively in research associated with student persistence and success and informed the methodology, data collection, and analysis of this study.
Self-Efficacy

As a first-generation college student with low self-efficacy myself, it was only natural that as the researcher I was drawn to Bandura’s (1997) concept of self-efficacy. Through this inquiry, I was astonished by how well the theory described my own struggles with not only my academic coursework, but with my perception of my academic abilities and the psychological and somatic affects a sense of low self-efficacy can produce (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2005).

The concept of self-efficacy was developed by Albert Bandura in the late 1970s and highlighted in his 1997 book titled *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. In this work, Bandura describes individuals as “proactive, aspiring organisms who have a hand in shaping their own lives” (p. vii). It is here that Bandura is introducing his belief that all individuals, regardless of level of efficacy, have the ability to influence their own lives and control the level of success they have within their lives. Bandura also believes that shared beliefs and the aspirations of their families and communities can solve the problems they face and improve their lives through a joint effort. Much like the researcher, first-generation college students are often alone on this journey of higher education. They are brave individuals who enter the realm of higher education as the first in their families to walk down the halls of unfamiliarity, not only in the physical sense, but in an emotional and psychological sense as well. Bandura suggests that we as educators and administrators, and even as family members, can work as a group to improve countless lives of FGS. These are students who, if they are successful, may lead the way for future and even current generations of their families towards a goal that may make their lives fuller in terms of knowledge as well as financial rewards (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

Bandura (1997) asserts that what individuals do affects the well being of others, and in turn, what others do inevitably affects them. Leading future generations down the path of
successful completion from an institution of higher learning while showing others (notably their own families) that they possess the courage to shape their own destinies is indeed a powerful position to be in for a first-generation college student, let alone any student.

Self-efficacy, as described by Bandura (1997), also refers to how an individual believes in his or her ability to first organize and then execute the courses of action required to produce while involved in a specific task. The beliefs that students have about their own efficacy have immense effects on the decisions they make and the courses of actions that they choose to pursue. Self-efficacy also affects how long students choose to pursue these actions, especially in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1997).

Building on the work of Bandura, Schunk (1984) described self-efficacy as the “personal judgments of how well one can perform actions in specific situations … self-efficacy is hypothesized to influence one’s choice of activities, effort expended, perseverance when difficulties are encountered and skillful performance” (p. 29). Therefore, in an academic setting, an increase in self-efficacy results in an increased use of cognitive strategies, resulting in higher performance. To be successful in the classroom, students need to have both the ‘will’ and the ‘skill’ to perform a given academic task because they decide what activities in which they expend their efforts (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990, as cited in Pajares, 1995).

First-generation students’ level of academic self-efficacy can contribute to whether they even apply to college or if they are accepted. A lack of knowledge about the application process and the ‘skill’ necessary to complete the required entrance national exams and financial aid processes may induce unnecessary stress on a student who does not have the ‘will’ or the ‘skill’ necessary to complete these tasks. As a result, he or she may simply give up. For students with low efficacy, this is associated with their own personal belief that they cannot perform.
Bandura (1977) described this condition as the “Nature of the Human Agency” (p. 3). He posits that human behavior is determined by many different interacting factors, and that we, as humans, contribute to what happens to us. Our own personal beliefs in our self-efficacy constitute the “key factor of human agency” (p. 03).

Bandura’s (1997) construct of self-efficacy has many layers. Most notable to the researcher are three of Bandura’s five sources of self-efficacy and the relationship these layers may have with FGS in a four-year, career-focused institution. These sources include enactive mastery experiences (building on successes), vicarious experiences (observation of the success of others in a representative group), and verbal persuasion (the affirmation of significant others’ expression of faith in one’s capabilities). These three sources of self-efficacy are described in greater context below and are shown in Figure 1 below as a cyclical process whereby a student can be affected continually.

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Enactive mastery experiences.** According to Bandura (1997), enactive mastery experiences are those experiences in which we as humans make decisions based on our successes. An enactive mastery experience is considered to be the most influential source of
information we receive concerning our personal efficacy. It is here during this action that we are provided with the most authentic evidence to determine if we have what it takes to succeed at a given task. Bandura adds that success builds confidence and failure undermines it. However, with quick positive results we are presented with easy successes and an increase in our efficacy, if we fail, then we are easily discouraged, leading to a lowered sense of efficacy. It is Bandura’s belief that some difficulties provide an opportunity for learning. He posited that failures could lead to a resilient sense of efficacy, which requires an individual to be persistent to overcome the obstacles. He also speculated that setbacks help teach that success requires continual effort. This continual effort helps an individual learn how to turn failure into success by teaching an individual how to turn effort into success. Once individuals are convinced that they have what it takes to face adversity, they will then quickly be able to rebound from adversity and setbacks (Bandura, 1997).

**Vicarious experience.** The second source of self-efficacy is that of vicarious experience. Vicarious experiences are those experiences that are built from observing the success of others in a representative group, or as Bandura defined them, as “experiences mediated through modeled attainments” (p. 86). Bandura stressed the need for the use of vicarious experiences because there are no clear measures for all activities with which we as humans can use to assess our skill attainment and in turn promote our sense of personal efficacy. Bandura believes that students could not gauge for themselves how well they did on a certain exam without knowing how others in their group performed on the same test. It was posited by Weinberg et al. (1979) “surpassing associates or competitors raises efficacy beliefs, whereas being outperformed lowers them” (as cited in Bandura, 1997, p. 87). In a classroom setting, students need only look to their left and to
their right to see their associates, and the more similar the associates, the more persuasive the
success and failures have on the student’s personal efficacy.

Verbal persuasion. The third source of self-efficacy is that of verbal persuasion
(Bandura, 1997). Verbal persuasion was described by Bandura as a source of social persuasion
that helps individuals strengthen their efficacy beliefs by affirming that they possess the means to
achieve what they seek. Bandura posited that it is easier for individuals to sustain their efficacy
when they are struggling if a significant other expresses confidence in them. Although verbal
persuasion alone cannot repeatedly increase one’s perceived efficacy, it can support self-change
if the support given is within realistic limits (Bandura, 1997). Bandura presumed that individuals
who were encouraged to believe that they have the capabilities to perform and even master a
given task are likely to perform with greater effort and to sustain the effort despite lingering
doubts about their skills. Persuasive activities have their greatest affect on those individuals who
already maintain the belief that they can succeed at a give task.

Contextualizing self-efficacy in the study setting. Putting the aforementioned sources
into context as we look into the nature of the environment, the instructional design, and an
evaluation of the culinary laboratory classrooms at Johnson & Wales University (the site where
the study will take place), first-generation students’ self-efficacy can be further strengthened by
the interactions they have throughout their academic careers. For example, in the typical
classroom where students utilize group work and projects, a student must interact with and
receive feedback from peers and instructors. Specifically, in the culinary laboratories at Johnson
& Wales students are normally arranged into teams of three to four and given food production
tasks using culinary techniques designed within the specific course content. During the
production of these food products and the evaluation that follows, a student’s group members
and instructor’s affirmation of their production skills can have a lasting positive effect on their self-efficacy.

If the instructor provides constructive feedback meant to encourage success, then a student could see this as a positive verbal persuasion by a significant other (Bandura, 1997). If this experience is also coupled with observations of success from other group members, then this vicarious experience may also increase his or her efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Ultimately, these two examples could in fact help a student develop enactive mastery experiences that may well increase the student’s level of efficacy to a point where future positive academic experiences may be easier to replicate. These types of positive experiences in the everyday classroom can shape and mold a first-generation student’s career choices and development and lead to academic resiliency (Morales & Trotman, 2004).

Based on this look into the environment in which the study will take place, it is the author’s belief that through this cycle students can build on their positive efficacy and become academically resilient, which may lead to academic persistence and eventually graduation. Conversely, a student’s academic experience can be negatively affected over time, which can lower their self-efficacy, and eventually, lead to some students leaving school without completing their degrees.

**Resiliency Theory**

In connection to the concept of self-efficacy, the theory of resiliency, specifically academic resilience, will be utilized as an additional lens through which to help explain the success of first-generation college students who earn a Bachelor’s degree from a four-year, career-focused institution. There is not one common definition of resiliency. Masten and Powell (2003) defined resiliency as “patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or
adversity” (p. 4). They cite Masten’s early work in defining resiliency as an “inference about a person’s life that requires two fundamental judgments: (1) that a person is “doing okay” and (2) that there is now or has been significant risk or adversity to overcome” (p. 04).

Resiliency research has shown that the connection that one makes with others plays a large part in the resilience puzzle (McMurtrie, 2013). This connection with the larger community includes “neighborhoods, civic organizations and government agencies” (McMurtrie, 2013, para. 5). In addition to these environmental factors, Benard (2004) posited that all humans have inherent self-righting tendencies and personal strengths. These account for the resiliency of individuals facing adversity and lead to healthy development and successful learning. These personal strengths include social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose.

Social competence was described by Benard (2004) as a tendency that includes those skills and attitudes necessary in forming relationships and positive attachments to others. Problem solving is when the individual has the ability to “figure things out” (p. 17). This all-inclusive skill includes planning skills, flexibility through resourcefulness, critical thinking, and insight (Benard, 2004). Autonomy, as described by Benard, is an “inter-related and overlapping sub-categories of attributes revolving around the development of one’s sense of self, of identity and of power” (p. 20). A sense of purpose deals with one’s optimism and a deep belief that one’s life has meaning and a place within the universe. Benard described this quality as the most influential in driving young people to healthy conclusions in the face of hardship.

**Academic Resilience**

Academic resilience was conceptualized by Morales and Trotman (2004) as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been successful despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (p. 8).
Morales and Trotman contended that academic resilience “refers specifically to academic achievement in the classroom by students who fit the ‘vulnerable’ criteria… in other words, students are deemed to have achieved academically if they have demonstrated significantly superior performance as compared to those coming from the same general background” (p. 09).

For this research, being the first in a family to obtain a Bachelor’s degree while facing and overcoming the barriers many FGS encounter is considered the ‘vulnerable’ criteria necessary to become academically resilient (Morales & Trotman, 2004).

This positive academic outcome, the successful completion of a Bachelor’s degree as a first-generation college student, is an outcome that Morales and Trotman (2004) recognized as an area in which very little research has been completed. They believed that this type of success, and the stories behind it, could serve as an inspiration for others who come from similar backgrounds. Morales and Trotman (2004) also speculated that this inspiration could be established as a vital element for educational success, namely a belief in one’s own capability to influence the future and accomplish a desired goal. This theory of positive influence, as described by Morales and Trotman (2004), is similar to the theoretical underpinnings of self-efficacy, specifically the nature and structure of self-efficacy and one’s perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Perceived self-efficacy is described by Bandura as being “concerned not with the number of skills you have, but with what you believe you can do with what you have under a variety of circumstances” (p. 37).

Taking the two theories together as outlined above, it seems apparent that by linking the theory of resilience, specifically academic resilience (Morales & Trotman, 2004), to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), we can presume that successful FGS with high levels of personal efficacy can attain their personal academic goals despite their enrollment status as a first-generation college
student. It would also seem that an examination of these stories of success and the circumstances surrounding them, including the personal connections one makes on the road toward success, could contribute to the overall research on persistence as well as on FGS. A convergence of these two theories is shown below in Figure 2. The figure shows that academic success is determined by both the sources of self-efficacy and the impact of personal connections on the road to academic success.

The study findings will bring attention to the positive outcomes of FGS, potentially resulting in systematic and programmatic outcome changes as they relate to first-generation students at career-focused institutions. A study of what works can help refine theories and develop models of competence, and in turn, they may help future FGS succeed at a career-focused institution (Masten & Powell, 2003).

Figure 2

Chapter summary

As this chapter has acknowledged, simply being classified as a first-generation college student can be seen, and may even be defined, as a barrier to academic persistence for a significant number of today’s college students. Research has shown that the benefits of a college
degree may significantly decrease the need for public assistance, therefore, enabling society as a whole to benefit from having more individuals earning college degrees at the Bachelor’s level. Research also shows that FGS have barriers to success that leave them less prepared for the college lifestyle, both in academic and social terms. Because of these barriers, FGS are graduating from institutions of higher learning in significantly smaller numbers than their peers.

First-generation college students, when they face barriers and do indeed persist, may be considered academically resilient individuals. In contrast to studies that simply review the demographic failures of the population, research utilizing a qualitative research method that highlights these positive examples of success is necessary. This research is needed not only to document and showcase these students’ experiences, but also to help institutions of higher education design, implement, and provide other first-generation students with the same opportunities for social mobility and success as their non-first-generation peers. Beyond this, questions that ask how FGS perceive this success as well as how self-efficacy played a role in their success are necessary.

In the chapters that follow, a review of the current literature on first-generation college students will help provide a clearer picture of the profile of this population of students. Programs and services that aid in academic integration and persistence for FGS will be highlighted. Additional research into the theories of self-efficacy and resiliency, as they pertain to FGS, will also be discussed. In the third chapter, the chosen methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), will be introduced. In addition to a discussion on IPA, chapter three will also highlight the demographics of the study participant pool, a description of the research site, and a description of how the data was collected and analyzed.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Much of the current literature on first-generation college students (FGS) is quantitative in methodology. It is generally organized into events that affect students prior to entering college and events that affect students’ persistence during college. Recent studies have included investigations into FGS’ ability to persist from term to term and from year to year (Ishitani, 2006; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Warburton & Nunez, 2001). The research often compares FGS to their non-first-generation student counterparts (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), while additional studies focus on the first-generation college student’s efficacy and the external barriers this population of student faces (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). The literature also compares FGS to other populations of students based on characteristics such as race, socioeconomic status, and precollege expectations (Choy, 2001).

Utilizing the structure outlined by Machi and McEvoy (2009), this literature review will look at the profile of FGS both in terms of academic and emotional preparation. This review will also provide insight into techniques used by faculty, administrators, and support services when working with special populations of students, including FGS, both inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, this review will provide a brief description of the current status of remedial education within our nation as it pertains to first-generation students. Finally, the review will take a further look at the two theories utilized to frame this research.

Why earn a Bachelor’s degree?

The benefits of a post secondary education to both an individual and the society as a whole are enormous. According to the College Board (2010) Trends in Higher Education Series,
written by Baum, Ma, and Payea, the advantages for both the individual and society are not only financial, but both social and intellectual as well. In 2008, the median earnings of an individual with a Bachelor’s degree working full-time was $55,700, or $21,000 more than an individual with only a high school diploma (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). According to the July 2002, U.S. Census Bureau Report, an individual with a Bachelor’s degree will earn an average of $2.1 million over the course of a 40-year work life (age 25-65), or more than $900,000 more than individuals with only a high school diploma. For those individuals who progress further than a Bachelor’s degree, there is a continued monetary increase up to $4.4 million for professional degree holders and $3.4 million for individuals who hold a doctoral degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Comparatively, the unemployment rate in 2009 for an individual with only a high school diploma was 2.6 times higher than that for those with a Bachelor’s degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, Baum, Ma, and Payea identify college-educated individuals to be healthier, receive better employment benefits, and engage in activities that promote better learning habits for their children, which in turn, make their children more prepared for their own schooling.

These aforementioned benefits, as wonderful as they seem, do not show the numerous disparities of race, socioeconomic status and parental educational levels (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Despite the fact that there has been an increase in the number of lower income students who enroll in higher education, there has been a steady decrease in the proportions of African American and Hispanic high school graduates entering college compared to their white middle class counterparts (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Recent research has shown that the children of college-educated parents are more prepared to enter school as well as participate in community, art, and religious activities (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Students of parents who have a
Bachelor’s degree are 10% more likely to graduate from a state flagship university within six years, compared to their peers whose parents do not have a Bachelor’s degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

In the sections that follow, the author will provide the reader with a more in-depth profile of the first-generation college student. This review will focus on the persistence of these FGS, as well as the theory of self-efficacy as it relates to a first-generation college student’s academic persistence. The review will also speak to the research on the theory of academic resilience. Additionally, the review of the literature to follow will highlight the use of student support programs such as living-learning programs and their effectiveness in aiding special populations of students.

**The First-Generation College Student**

First-generation college students, in general, are less prepared for college than their peers whose parent(s) attended college (Bui, 2005; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). According to Choy (2001), 49 percent of FGS are considered marginally or not qualified for admission to a four-year institution. Of those students who did enroll in a four-year institution by the second year following high school graduation, 76 percent were children of parents who had no college education (Choy, 2001). Unfortunately, if a student does successfully meet the enrollment requirements and enters a four-year institution, FGS are more likely to drop out after their first semester (Strayhorn, 2006). First-generation college students are less likely to graduate from college within five years of enrolling (Choy, 2001), with as few as 13 percent earning a degree over the same period of time (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009). Even more surprising is as few as 11 percent of FGS will graduate with their Bachelor’s degree within six years of enrollment (Pell Institute, 2011). While enrolled, FGS study fewer hours, take fewer humanities and fine arts
courses, and are less likely to be honors students (Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). First-generation students often enter college with lower reading, math skills, and critical thinking skills as well (Davis, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996).

First-generation college students often encounter more challenges than do their peers both inside and outside of the classroom. These challenges include being poorly prepared academically and being unfamiliar with how college works (Davis, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996). In addition, these students often have family responsibilities outside of school. These responsibilities may include helping to take care of sick family members, as well as assisting in the financial well being of the family (Caporrimo, 2008). Because of these financial obligations, FGS often have to work more hours in blue-collar jobs (Caporrimo, 2008). These challenges make FGS more vulnerable to lower academic performance and decrease their overall chances of obtaining college degrees (Davis, 2010; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Jean, 2010). Unfortunately, FGS also have lower degree attainment aspirations (Choy, 2001; Martinez, Sher, Krull & Wood, 2009) and lower overall grade point averages (Martinez et al., 2009).

Compared to their non-first generation peers, first-generation college students’ perception of their institutions and of their faculty differs greatly. According to Terenzini et al. (1996), FGS reported to their institutions that they had more incidents of racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination. They did, however, perceive the faculty members at their institutions to be concerned for both the students and their teaching (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Non-first generation college students, better known as traditional college students, are quite different from their first-generation peers. According to Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007), traditional college students are likely to have taken more rigorous high school courses than FGS, are more likely to have higher GPAs, to have higher entrance exam scores, and to have taken
fewer remedial college courses. Traditional college students also tend to be white and to have higher family incomes (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Choy (2001) characterizes traditional college students as 93 percent more likely to enroll in some form of postsecondary education, with 85 percent of these students considered academically prepared to do so (compared to 49 percent of first-generation students). Unfortunately for first-generation college students, some researchers believe the barriers to persistence identified above are not their greatest challenge. Choy (2001) indicated that even after controlling for other related factors such as high school rigor, educational expectations, academic support, and family income, these students are at the greatest risk for low academic persistence and college degree attainment because their parents did not go to college. However, those parents who have completed a college degree are able to help their students manage the complicated enrollment process.

Choy (2001) acknowledged five sequential steps, identified by Berkner and Chavez (1997), as a path to college enrollment that are essential to all high school students. These steps are: managing academic expectations, attaining academic preparation, taking the academic admissions exams (ACT/SAT), deciding what institutional level to apply to and completing the application for each school, as well as determining what financial and other preparations are necessary to enroll in college. Utilizing the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Choy (2001) compared the statistics of high school students whose parents attended college and their choices versus those high school students whose parents did not attend college. With a focus on students’ academic aspirations, Choy found that those students whose parents had a Bachelor’s degree or higher (86 percent compared to 46 percent without) believed that they would go on to college and obtain at least a Bachelor’s degree. Choy’s analysis indicated that not only did those students whose parents did not go to college report lower expectations for
going to college, but they also were less prepared academically and received less family support for both their college preparation and planning. Choy’s (2001) assessment of these pre-college expectations indicated that in the eighth grade, 55 percent of students whose parents did not have a college degree indicated that they did not expect to go to college, while 91 percent of their peers whose parents had at least a Bachelor’s degree expected to do so. Choy later compared these aspirations for the same population of students in their senior year of high school and found that the college aspirations by group (first-generation and non-first-generation) did not change. However, for those students whose parents had some college experience, Choy highlighted that there was a slight increase in their aspirations to someday attend college.

In terms of academic preparation, several researchers have indicated that the strongest correlation between parental support and college enrollment is in the effect the parents’ education has on the precollege math courses taken by students (Bui, 2005; Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996). Davis (2010) indicated that good academic performance in math during their middle and high school years is strongly correlated to overall math performance in college, as well as college performance in general. Davis speculates that because math is a linear progression of skills and instruction, those students who fall behind in math generally stay behind, therefore, making the possibility of college completion less likely. Because of their own lack of experience with college, their parents are unable to navigate the “bureaucratic structure” of schooling and help their students navigate the choices concerning public school education, especially in the crucial middle school years where math preparedness has a large impact on whether a student is prepared for college (Davis, 2010, p. 37).

Despite the fact that first-generation college students do start their college careers less prepared academically than their peers, especially in regards to mathematics, Terenzini et al.
(1996) indicated that FGS gained in comparative ratios to their non-first-generation peers in math, reading, and critical thinking skills in their first year of college. This suggests that even though FGS may not begin their college careers at the same academic preparedness level as their non-first-generation student peers, FGS who have the passion, drive, and ability to improve their academic skills may indeed persist and become what has been described previously as academically resilient individuals (Morales & Trotman, 2004).

First-Generation College Students and Remediation

Research has shown that poor high school preparation and the need for remediation is a large predictor of poor performance at the college level. Warburton et al. (2001) indicated that 40 percent of FGS completed a non-rigorous high school academic curriculum, compared to 28 percent of their non-first-generation peers. Attewell et al., (2006) hypothesized that poor academic preparation by high school students is what reduces their chances of graduating from college.

For the first-generation college student, the gains identified above by Terenzini et al. (1996) that guided them toward academic resilience may have come at the hands of hard work in the form of college level remediation. According to Carroll and Chen (2005), nearly 55 percent of FGS are assigned to a remedial course during their college career, while 21 percent take at least one remediation course during their first academic year (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001).

Remedial education in this country has either been vilified as a national epidemic or hailed as the gateway to the American dream (Bettinger & Long 2008; Goen-Salter, 2008; Levin & Calcagno, 2008). It has been defined by some as a crisis, a hoax, and one of the most controversial issues in higher education (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). Remedial
education is not just about access to college, it is about our students’ preparedness to complete their degrees and compete in a global economy (Stuart, 2009). For institutions of higher learning, remedial education is about retention and persistence and a way to fix the American educational system (Stuart, 2009), which scholars have argued is broken below the college level (Ignash, 1997).

Like first-generation college students, remedial education students are more than those who are deficient in the skills taught within the remedial courses they are enrolled. They are students who require additional assistance with study skills, note taking, and understanding what it means to be a college student (Merisotis & Phipps, 2000; Stuart, 2009). Merisotis and Phipps (2000) indicated that even those students who seem to be academically prepared for college might also require some form of remediation. Their study showed that even students who completed advance placement (AP) courses in high school might be in need of remediation. According to their results, Merisotis and Phipps’s research showed that 40 percent of AP high school graduates who enrolled in a community college needed math remediation. Additionally, 20 percent of these students needed English remediation and 25 percent required reading remediation (Merisotis and Phipps, 2000).

The First-Generation Student and Self-Efficacy

Without having parents who has attended college, first-generation college students often do not receive any family support with the college decision-making process (Strayhorn, 2006). Lacking college experience of their own, parents of FGS are often unable to provide support for their children with the decisions they have to make throughout the pre-college process (Davis, 2010; Strayhorn, 2006). Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) indicated that without their parents to fall back on as confidants or as someone to talk to about the transitions they are going through,
FGS face not only academic challenges, but emotional challenges as well. Consequently, these students lack confidence and predict that they will receive lower grades than their peers (Davis, 2010). This lack of confidence, which results in lower academic abilities, is referred to as a student’s self-efficacy (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as one’s belief about one’s ability to perform a behavior required to produce an outcome. In his 1997 book titled *Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Bandura described the role of schools in cultivating self-efficacy in students. Bandura (1997) maintained that a school’s goal is to equip students with the ability to self-regulate and educate themselves. Bandura concluded that self-regulation includes those skills that “encompass skills for planning, organizing and managing instructional activities, enlisting resources, regulating one’s own motivation and applying metacognitive skills to evaluate the adequacy of one’s knowledge” (pp. 174-175). Unfortunately for most students, our schools may not prepare them adequately for their own future. In fact, Bandura (1997) believes that a school “undermines the very sense of personal efficacy needed for continued self-development” (p. 175).

Beginning any task with self-doubt may sabotage a first-generation college student. Fostering a belief that such tasks are too difficult to perform often may cause more stress, and eventually, depression (Barry, Cho, Hudley, & Kelly 2009; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Vong et al., 2010). As a consequence, a students’ belief about their own abilities can negatively lead to the level of academic performance a student ultimately realizes (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). For FGS, this equates to not only lower self-confidence in a cycle that perpetuates upon itself, but an overall lower grade point average (GPA). Ultimately, lower self-efficacy in FGS may negatively affect their ability to persist towards graduation (Vong et al., 2010).
Utilizing a Likert scale, Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) tested 192 first-generation college freshmen to observe the relationship between social cognitive theory and self-efficacy in terms of academic outcomes (GPA) and college adjustment. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols tested these students on their course efficacy, social efficacy, and roommate efficacy. Their findings suggest that self-efficacy itself “did not contribute unique variances over and above generational status for GPA” (p. 13). These results show that the status of being a first-generation college student in of itself was the major contributor to the student’s lower GPA. The authors acknowledged previous studies that FGS generally perform worse academically than their non-first generation peers, and yet, self-efficacy did not mediate the “association between generation status and GPA” (p. 13). Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) believe their findings suggested that due to the lack of self-efficacy in first-generation college students, their efforts to persist would be less enthusiastic than those of their non-first-generation peers. “Clearly, it is not simply a matter of how capable one is, but of how capable one believes oneself to be” (Pajares & Schunk, 2001).

**Academic Resilience**

Although there is an abundant amount of literature on first-generation college students, none has been found that directly links FGS with academic resilience. However, as one looks at the profile of the academically resilient students within the research, many similarities between color, race, and socioeconomic status exist that are similar to the profile of FGS. Therefore, the following literature highlights the use of academic resilience in populations of students that are similar in demographics, and indeed may be FGS, yet are not specifically identified as such in the research presented.
The research gathered on academic resilience for this review highlights specific populations of students rather than students in general. These populations include students from ethnic minority groups, students from low socioeconomic status, as well as students that are otherwise considered disadvantaged (Gonzales & Padilla, 1997; Morales, 2000, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2010; Novotny, 2011; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado & Cortes, 2009).

In his work on academic resilience, Morales (2008b) focuses on the use of an original resilience construct named the Resilience Cycle. Morales used this construct to study at risk minority students to assess their academic achievement, as well as the processes and nuances of students’ journeys as they progress toward academic resilience. Morales (2008b) defined academic resilience as the “phenomenon of statistically unlikely academic achievement among marginalized and disenfranchised students” (p. 23). As noted in Chapter One, Morales and Trotman (2004) define academic resilience as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been successful despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (p. 8). Unlike psychosocial resilience (the study of how well-adjusted or emotionally healthy one may be), academic resilience “is defined solely by exceptional academic achievement in the face of adversity” (Morales, 2008a).

In Morales’ 2008 study of 50 diverse college students, he highlights the weight that stress and resilience can have on a student. Morales concluded there were three major categories that arose which affected a student’s academic resilience. These included “the stressors the students faced and their responses to them; discontinuity between the student and the school environment, as well as approaches to bridging that chasm” (Morales, 2008a, p. 155). In this study, Morales described the process in which marginalized students (students of color and low socioeconomic status) dealt with the stress associated with being academically resilient students.
Specific to the stress of cultural discontinuity for the students in his study, Morales (2008a) stressed the need for minority students to become “bicultural” as a necessity of their academic success (p. 156). Morales explained how students of color must live in two different realities to become bicultural. One reality is the one that “requires little conscious thought or strain” (p. 156) because this is the environment in which the student is at ease within his or her community. The second environment Morales spoke of is the one that requires the students to live in “the often exotic world of academic culture, which essentially is an extension of white middle-class culture” (p. 157).

To be academically resilient, students must live with the stress of isolation. Morales (2008a) described academically resilient students as individuals who have become successful in spite of the fact that they are the only individuals “from their specific group or origin” (p. 158), thus, making them similar to, yet not specifically identified as, first-generation college students. The academically resilient college student must manage this feeling of isolation. Morales’ research shows that students who live in a bicultural environment may try to sabotage their own academic success and relieve their feelings of isolation by returning home to their peers or back to their cultural norms. Morales suggested that these students might do this consciously or subconsciously. Yet, by doing so, they destroy their own attempt to become academically resilient individuals (Morales, 2008a).

In addition to dealing with isolation, academically resilient students of color must contend with the concept of constant discontinuity. Morales (2008a) highlighted discontinuity as a process with which students are separated from their culture of origin for a long period of time, which in turn may result in their becoming disidentified with their culture (p. 159). According to Nelson et al. (2006), disidentification is the process where individuals completely disassociate
themselves from their culture of origin (as cited in Morales, 2008a). Fortunately, Morales reported nearly all the students in his study were able to maintain as members of their community while also continuing on with their education.

Another factor associated with being an academically resilient student is to create a positive image of self (Morales, 2008a). To do this, students must convince themselves that they can indeed compete in the world of academics (Morales, 2008a). Morales described a world in which society ascribes negative cognitive characteristics to students of color and lower socioeconomic classes. This world, as described by Morales, is one in which society institutes a hidden curriculum and disproportionately places African Americans and Hispanics into remedial education to deliver messages of academic inferiority. Morales argued that these messages of inferiority could easily lead to a negative self-image. To deal with these negative stereotypes and increase their own perception of intelligence, students must deal with this stress and create a positive self-image. Morales posits that students are fueled to work harder by the stress created by this message and are also further fueled by the academic success that they achieve.

However, like most things for these students, building a positive self-image does not come easily (Morales, 2008). Many academically resilient students must wrestle with the realization that their schooling prior to college was inadequate or subpar (Morales, 2008). These students understand that it is up to them to take steps to meet their own academic needs. Morales cited Mickelson’s (1990) work on the attitude achievement paradox. It is this paradox to which many students subscribe. According to Morales (2008), many students with high aspirations, yet, low experience and understanding, often become discouraged. However, it is the resilient students who exhibit a “remarkably realistic and practical view of themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, and their academic and career goals” (p. 163). Additionally, academically resilient
students have a sense of pride in their academic accomplishments, which improves their self-images, resulting in self views of leadership; that, in turn, is a direct result of their new membership in what Morales contends to be the statistical elite.

Similarly, Gonzales and Padilla (1997) identify several risk factors associated with the academically resilient college student. These risk factors include the following: a student’s minority status, discrimination, alienating schools, economic hardship, difficulty understanding the English language, and much like FGS, parents who are unfamiliar with the education system. Of noteworthy importance, Gonzales and Padilla highlight low socioeconomic status and poverty to be the (emphasis mine) significant risk factor for the Mexican Americans in their study.

In their research, Gonzales and Padilla (1997) desired to identify the factors that account for student success and not to spend time focusing on the shortcomings or academic failures of their students. To do this, they compared high and low achievers utilizing a resilience framework in order to help understand and identify the protective factors that lead to academic success among Mexican American students. The study was designed to examine three principal variables that they constructed into a 314-item questionnaire given to 7,140 students in three high schools in California. Of the 7,140 surveys given, 2,169 of the surveys were given to Mexican American students. The variables identified were “supportive academic environment, sense of belonging to school, and cultural loyalty” (p. 304). These variables were used to “examine the roles of peers, family, teachers, cultural identity, and the school environment as sources of support that can enhance resilience” (p. 304).

The statistical results of the study concluded that for a student to be academically resilient, “a supportive academic environment and a sense of belonging were significant predictors of resilience status” (p. 313), making the combination of these variables “an important
factor that influences achievement outcomes” (p. 314). Additionally, Gonzales and Padilla’s work affirmed that family and peer support, as well as the value the individual places on school, are consistent predictors of academic resilience. In terms of the role family plays in the status of resilience, Gonzales and Padilla acknowledge the integral role that both family and community play within the Hispanic population and identify cultural influences as contributing to resilient outcomes.

Gonzales and Padilla (1997) are careful to point out that the cultural influences identified as contributing to resilient outcomes may “vary as a function of a school’s ethnic density” (p. 314). This variance includes examples of students living in and going to school in the same community that helps foster a socially supportive climate. Those students who feel that they have access to support and resources in their communities “may be the ones who exhibit academic resilience” (p. 314). Gonzales and Padilla concluded their study by reemphasizing that a student’s sense of belonging to their school, as well as what types of support systems are in place, can have a significant effect on academic achievement, reinforcing that resilience is not a trait, but a capacity that develops over time depending on the context of the environmental support systems available.

**Student Support Systems**

Thus far, this literature review has shown that first-generation college students may be different from their traditional college student peers in many ways. As the research demonstrates, simply not having a parent who attended college and/or completed a Bachelor’s degree may negatively affect a college student’s ability to persist and graduate (Choy, 2001). The research has also shown that FGS are less prepared, have lower incomes, have a lower self-
worth, and have a family that may not relate to the struggles they face daily (Davis, 2010; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Tinto (1998) posited that what colleges and universities do within the first year, and even the first semester, can help determine if a first-generation college student will continue and complete their college degree. Davis (2010) indicated that even though most FGS are deficient in academic preparedness, they do tend to study harder at the beginning of their college career. When the effort of a first-generation student is not rewarded by high grades, they may become discouraged. Once this happens, the student’s low self-efficacy materializes, and they can become unclear about their purpose for being in college (Vohra-Gupta & Prospero, 2007). When a student questions his or her purpose, this eventually can result in problems with integrating into the college environment, which can lead to feelings of isolation. This may further add to the reason why some FGS abandon their pursuit of a college education (Vohra-Gupta & Prospero, 2007). Therefore, it is up to the institution to aid FGS in raising their self-efficacy by providing them with the environment and structure needed to be successful.

Along with raising a student’s efficacy, a student’s personal and social integration into college could have significant influence on their overall academic achievement (Inkelas et al., 2007; Vohra-Gupta & Prospero, 2007). If a student is well integrated, both academically and socially, the benefits are enormous, for academic and social integration have been correlated positively to academic achievement and persistence (Inkelas et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2006). To aid students in their integration, living-learning programs or centers have proven to be successful in aiding FGS in their adjustment to college life (Inkelas et al., 2007). Living-learning programs are defined as carefully calculated “residential communities [sic] with a shared academic or thematic focus” (Shapiro & Levine, 1999, as cited in Inkelas, et al., 2007, p. 405). Living-
learning programs may vary in programmatic structure. For example, learning communities may provide shared or collaborative learning or that which is identified as connected learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Living-learning communities may vary in focus, structure and activity. However, the “underlying thesis was that academically rich residential settings that included faculty participation, and academic cultural programs … would be more educationally potent environments than the environments found in conventional residence halls” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 421).

One such notable living-learning program for FGS was highlighted in the March 30, 2010, issue of USA Today. This article, written by Peal & Ramsey, described a University of Cincinnati special housing project aimed at helping 24 first-generation college students who were supervised by a program coordinator. The program coordinator is tasked with ensuring the students wake up on time for classes, as well as checking in with the students’ instructors to make sure they are keeping their grades up and are fitting into college life (Peale & Ramsey, 2010). The facility, called the Gen-1 House, has been shown to be successful thus far. According to Peale and Ramsey (2010), 35 of the 38 students who resided in the house were still enrolled at the school during their second academic year. This success may not be by chance. The FGS who live in this housing program are given a lot more support, attention, and structure than traditional college students (Peale & Ramsey, 2010).

In their compiled works on How College Affects Students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) highlight the benefits of on-campus residencies and the use of learning communities such as the one described by Peale and Ramsey (2010). Pascarella and Terenzini emphasize that students who live in on-campus housing are more likely to persist and graduate than those
students who commute. Unfortunately, because of the need to assist with the financial needs of the family, living on campus is not often an option for FGS (Caporrimo, 2008).

Courses such as first-year seminars may also be beneficial to underserved populations of students including first-generation college students (Swaner & Brownell, 2008). First-year seminars, which are programs instituted to enhance the first year experience for students (Barefoot, 2000), come in many forms. According to the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, there are five main types of first-year seminars: extended orientation seminars, academic seminars with uniform content across sections, academic seminars with variable content, pre-professional or discipline-linked seminars, and basic study skill seminars (Swaner & Brownell, 2008).

According to the 2006 survey conducted by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, of the 821 colleges and universities that responded, 57.9 percent of them reported that they offered extended orientation seminars that are often called “University 101” courses (Swaner & Brownell, 2008). These first-year seminar courses help provide transitional assistance to new college students and include topics such as the purpose of higher education, campus history, campus resources, as well as study skills, and time management techniques (Swaner & Brownell). Extended orientation seminars also may include instruction on academic and career planning, as well as instruction on health and wellness (Swaner & Brownell, 2008).

The research presented to the Association of American Colleges and Universities by Swaner and Brownell (2008) highlights what can be constituted as “best practices” for first-year seminars (FYS) (p. 99). In this report, Swaner and Brownell present outcomes of first-year seminars in areas related to academic performance, grade point average, and persistence. As
noted, “The overwhelming consensus in the literature is that FYSs have a positive impact on student persistence” (p. 100).

One such FYS program was conducted by Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada. Browne and Doyle (2010) reported that this FYS program was designed to test the academic effectiveness of a FYS program for non-traditional students at Lakehead. The authors indicated that non-traditional students include “first generation students, students with disabilities, visible minorities and mature students” (p. 2). For the study years, Brown and Doyle’s research indicated that over 50% of the students involved in their program were FGS. The authors concluded that the FYS program at Lakehead provided the participants with a successful “intrusive advising” intervention (p. 21). This advising relationship was one where students believed they were provided with the opportunity to build a relationship with an individual within the university environment, and for some, a relationship that they considered to be stronger than that of just an advisor. Brown and Doyle indicated that the relationship for “non-traditional students” was believed by the students to be successful because they appreciated “having someone on campus with whom they connected and who cared about their overall academic success” which enabled the students “to be more involved with their role as a student” (p. 21).

Based on the information provided by Swaner and Bownell (2008) and Browne and Doyle (2010), FYS have been shown to have a positive effect on student persistence and FGS may benefit at the same rate as other first year students when provided instruction in University 101 courses. According to Swaner and Brownell, considering most college attrition happens between the first and second years, front-loading services to help students acclimate to college and making their transition easier may increase the chances that they will persist.
Chapter Summary

This literature review has shown that first-generation college students are academically, socially, and even emotionally less prepared than traditional college students (Bui, 2005; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Overall, they have lower self-efficacy and lower aspirations to receive a college degree (Choy, 2001; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). They have less family support (Davis, 2010), and often, more family obligations (Caporrimo, 2008). First-generation college students may also have more social pressures than their non-first generation peers (Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols, 2007). First-generation college students may be remedial students or students who require additional help with their college level courses (Carroll & Chen, 2005). The research also has shown that instruction geared at increasing students’ rigor, self-worth, and socialization through the use of living-learning programs and first year seminars may help raise their efficacy and help them persist toward graduation, proving them to be academically resilient individuals (Morales & Trotman, 2004).

Chapter 3

Research Design

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore what first-generation college students perceived as the factors that contributed to their success and eventual persistence in graduating from a four-year, career-focused institution. Building from the work of Bandura (1997) and Morales and Trotman (2004), this study defines ‘success’ as a student who is academically resilient and demonstrates high levels of self-efficacy towards degree completion. The participants of this study were FGS who completed their Bachelor’s degrees from a four-year, career-focused institution. The research was built on the assumption that by studying those who succeed despite
the demonstrated difficulties of the demographic it has the potential to inform how to better serve all FGS in higher education. This outlook, along with the theoretical frameworks and careful review of the literature, led to the following research questions that will guide the study:

How do first-generation college students understand and explain their success at a four-year career university?

The sub questions that helped answer the main research question are:

1. What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college?

2. What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize?

3. What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers?

4. How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?

To answer the proposed research questions, this study utilized a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative research is utilized when trying to determine and understand a research problem from the perspective of the individuals directly associated with the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007). The specific qualitative methodology chosen is known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was chosen because, as a qualitative methodology, IPA aligns with the researcher’s own paradigm or worldview of constructivism. Constructivism is an inductive qualitative research approach in which the researcher seeks to understand the worldview in which the research subjects live and
work (Creswell, 2007). In essence, constructivists believe that there is no single interpretation of reality, that each individual constructs his or her reality through his or her own perception of it (Creswell). A central attribute of constructivism is the interaction between the researcher and the participant (Ponterotto, 2005), as well as the interpretations that are formed through this interaction (Creswell, 2007). In essence, the researcher in a qualitative study utilizing a constructivist approach is the research tool through which meaning is constructed in an interpretive manner, which aligns well with the tenets of IPA.

**Research Design**

In Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher designs a study around research that asks *how* and *what* questions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The research questions utilized center on the ‘how’ of student success and persistence. They build from the big picture of the central research question and are explored through ‘what’ and ‘how’ sub questions. These sub questions seek to highlight participants’ “understandings, experience, and sense-making activities” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47) within the context of being successful FGS who have completed their study at a four-year, career-focused institution. These questions aid in the research goal of ensuring that viewpoints presented are from the perspectives of the participants in both social and historical contexts (Creswell, 2007).

Through the social interactions in the form of an open-ended interview between researcher and participant, the researcher will “generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). In IPA research, in addition to generating a pattern of meaning, the research questions attempt to gain insights into a particular phenomenon. The data collection process involves recruiting a small number of participants that have experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). As Creswell (2012) further describes the process, the
data is then analyzed to develop descriptive themes, and the analysis is presented to the reader as a detailed account of the lived experiences of the participants in a clear and engaging manner.

**Interpretive phenomenological analysis**

As a methodology, IPA is similar to traditional phenomenology in that it seeks to understand the lived experiences of human phenomena. However, IPA is also concerned with the principles of hermeneutics and idiography, which, according to Smith et al. (2009), are utilized to help better understand the *how* and *what* of the phenomenon under investigation. In their description of the theoretical underpinnings of IPA as a combination of phenomenology and a double hermeneutic insight, Smith et al. (2009) explained:

> It is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experiences of the participant, but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretative endeavor for both participant and researcher. Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen (p. 37).

The three foundations of IPA, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, are described in more detail below (Smith, et al., 2009).

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is the study of experience and is filled with a structure to provide a researcher with rich sources and ideas “about how to examine and comprehend lived experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 11). IPA enables the researcher to observe the point of view and meanings of a phenomenon, as expressed by the participants, which are unique to the participants and their relationship to the world in which they live (Smith, et al., 2009).

**Hermeneutics.** In addition to a foundation in traditional phenomenology, IPA also consists of the philosophy of hermeneutics, a philosophy that focuses on interpretation (Smith et
al., 2009). However, as Smith et al. posit, IPA involves a double hermeneutic state. This occurs when “the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). This double hermeneutic state introduces a dual role for the researcher; the researcher is like the participant where he or she can draw on his or her resources to make sense of the world. Yet, because the researcher is not the participant, he or she can only access the experiences of the participant through what the participant reports it to be (Smith et al., 2009). As Smith and colleagues (2009) asserted, “So, in that sense, the participant’s meaning-making is first order, while the researcher’s sense-making is second-order” (p. 36).

**Idiography.** The final piece of IPA is idiography, a term that describes “the sense of detail” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). Idiography helps IPA researchers tie together and understand how a particular phenomenon is understood from the perspective of the study participants within the context of their world (Smith et al., 2009).

The participants within this study all shared the experience of being a first-generation student who graduated from a four-year, career-focused institution. While their lived experiences leading to that outcome have taken place in the recent past, the researcher used a double hermeneutic interpretation of the lived experience. The use of IPA as a methodology is appropriate to collect those personal perspectives while acknowledging the individual experiences of participants and the meanings they attach to those experiences. Utilizing IPA to have successful FGS convey the stories of how they were successful and what meaning they attach to these stories is an appropriate use of a qualitative research study. These stories, and the meanings attached, may be helpful to other FGS who wish to seek role models that they can emulate, because by definition, FGS lack these role models in their immediate family.
Participants

The participants recruited for this study were graduates from the researcher’s own institution: the Charlotte, NC, campus of Johnson & Wales University (JWU), which is considered by Creswell (2007) as a site of convenience. Johnson & Wales University is a multi-campus, private, not-for-profit institution accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). University-wide, JWU has some 17,000 plus students from 100 countries, with campuses located in Providence, RI; North Miami, FL; Denver, CO; and Charlotte, NC. Johnson & Wales University offers over “40+ undergraduate, graduate, online, continuing education and accelerated programs in arts & sciences, business, culinary arts, hospitality, technology and education” (Johnson & Wales University, n.d.) and has a stated mission to provide its student population with “… an exceptional education that inspires professional success and lifelong personal and intellectual growth” (Johnson & Wales University, n.d.).

At the beginning of the 2011-2012 academic school year the Charlotte campus consisted of 2,536 students (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], n.d.). It had a diverse student body with 39% identifying as White, 28% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 25% race unknown and with 98% of students classified as full-time (IPEDS, n.d.). Eighty-eight percent of the students are less than 25 years of age and the campus had a reported retention rate of 73% (IPEDS, n.d.). Like most institutions of higher learning, JWU does not know for sure how many of the enrolled students are in fact FGS (Davis, 2010). Of the 858 new students who entered the Charlotte campus at the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year (Joe Campos, personal communication, March 2014), 282 self-identified as first-year, first-generation college students (Cindy Parker, personal communication, September 2012). This 2012 enrollment of
FGS is historically typical of FGS annual enrollment at this campus of Johnson & Wales University for the previous three years (Cindy Parker, personal communication, September 2012).

In addition to being at a site of convenience, the individuals who were recruited to take part in this study were from a criterion sampling of FGS who have recently completed their Bachelor’s degrees (Creswell, 2007). No other criteria such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status was used in the selection process for this sampling, thereby allowing for the similarities of participants to be only that they are FGS who have completed their Bachelor’s degrees from a four-year, career-focused institution.

**Recruitment and Access**

No research was conducted until final institutional review board approval had been granted by both Johnson & Wales University and Northeastern University. Once the institutional review board requirements were met, the JWU Alumni office made contact with recent graduates to introduce the research proposal utilizing the information contained in Appendix A, the recruitment letter. The letter summarized the purpose of the study and invited those that met participation criteria to join the study. In addition to recruitment via JWU’s Alumni Association, recruitment was solicited through the use of the social networking site Facebook utilizing the letter shown in Appendix B.

This study interviewed five individuals who experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Although five participants may seem to be a small sample, Smith (2008) identified that “for students utilizing IPA for the first time, three is an extremely useful number for the sample” (Chapter 4, section 2, para. 3). Additionally, Giorgi (2008) identified that in phenomenology the researcher “asks a few individuals from the life-world to describe an
experience of the phenomenon that the researcher is interested in” (p. 6). Therefore, from those students who elected to participate in this study (a potential limitation), seven individuals were interviewed utilizing the interview techniques described below in the Data Collection section of this chapter. Of those seven interviewed, one was used as a practice interview and one more disqualified herself when she informed the researcher that her father had a Master’s degree from England in the 1980’s. However, she did self identify as a first-generation student.

No incentives were offered to the study participants beyond those outlined in the recruitment letter (Appendix B) which states that those students who did participate may aid future FGS in their desire to persist and graduate from a Bachelor’s degree granting institution. For a review of how the participants were protected in regard to human subject research, please refer to the section below.

Data Collection

Seidman (2006) wrote, “social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people” (p. 07). In other words, if a researcher is interested in the meaning that individuals make of their experiences, which as noted above is a tenet of IPA, than interviewing may be the best approach of inquiry (Smith et al., 2009). Based on this assumption and the phenomenological underpinnings of the study, the use of semi-structured personal interviews were used to collect data, which captured the participants’ understandings of their experiences of being the first in their families to graduate from college.

Semi-structured interviews are those interviews where a limited number of questions are prepared by an interviewer ahead of time (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). As this study shows, the research questions were built around what and how questions (Smith et al., 2006). Based on the study participants’ answers to the initial interview questions, additional open-ended probing
questions were asked. These probing questions were used to gather additional detail, depth, richness, and nuances in the participants’ answers, allowing the study participants to further explain the phenomenon in question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Smith et al. (2009) recommended that an interview that utilizes an IPA framework be developed so that it has several stages to help the interview flow. This flow should shape the tone of the interview, and therefore, the transcripts as well. The flow of questions should take the individuals (or participants) from broad and general concepts at the beginning of the interview, allowing them to describe events more specifically in the middle, and close with a synthesis or wrapping up at the end (Smith et al., 2009).

The researcher is the primary tool of research in qualitative research. Therefore, utilizing the protocol outlined in Appendix D, the researcher himself conducted one, approximately 90-minute, in-depth interview with each study participant to help them “develop the meaning their experiences had for them” (Seidman, 2006, p. 16). Due to the belief that returning to expand on the research can influence the participants’ original responses to the research questions as well as influence how they originally described their account of the phenomenon in question (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011), only one interview was conducted to prevent multiple interviews from diluting “the true essences of the experiences” for the study participants (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011, p. 31).

Because many of the research participants have left the Charlotte area, multiple types of interviews were conducted. Two of the five interviews were conducted on the phone and recorded with a digital recording device. Two more interviews were completed using the Apple Facetime application and recorded using an Iphone and a digital recorder. The final participant interview was conducted at the Charlotte campus of Johnson & Wales University, a site that is
familiar to the research participants, allowing for a level of comfort in the data collection process (Smith, 2008). All interviews, regardless of where they were conducted, were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim by a company with confidentiality protocols. To ensure additional protections of human subjects, the individuals in the study were assigned pseudonyms that are only known by the researcher. The data files associated with these pseudonyms were also labeled as such. This list of pseudonyms is secured in the researcher’s locked home safe.

The participants each received a copy of their own transcript to ensure the proper transcription of the interview, giving them the opportunity to clarify their answers to the research questions. This process of allowing the participants to review the transcripts and adjust for meaning or clarity is referred to as member checking (Creswell, 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify member checking as “the most critical technique for establishing creditability” in qualitative research studies (p. 314). They, along with Thomas (2006), explained that member checking allows the study participants to correct errors of fact, as well as allows the researcher an opportunity to summarize and assess the intentionality of the research participants’ responses to the interview protocol. Of the five interviews, three of the participants responded to multiple requests for further input. One replied that all was fine, while two sent a list of clarifying points.

Data Storage

As noted above, to ensure the protection of human subjects and provide confidentiality, the research participants were assigned pseudonyms that are known only to the researcher. This list of pseudonyms is kept in the researcher’s locked home safe along with a back-up copy of the originally coded transcriptions and a copy of the audio recordings. The original audio recordings are stored on the interviewer’s personal laptop computer which is password protected. All data (recordings and transcripts) will be destroyed upon successful completion of the thesis process.
However, the informed consent documents will be kept for three years as required by law (National Institute of Health, n.d.).

**Data Analysis**

Although Smith et al. (2009) are explicit that IPA does not have a single prescribed method for working with data, the data analysis process in IPA is much like that of traditional phenomenology: interviews are conducted, transcribed, and coded utilizing common coding techniques. Once each interview is individually coded, a cross comparison is completed to identify themes across the spectrum of study participants.

Smith et al. (2009) provided an outline that describes suggested steps of analysis that they see as being common process, yet, ones that should be considered complex. They also identified the analysis process of IPA as one designed to promote thoughtful engagement with the research participants’ experiences. They posited that this reflective engagement is part of the product developed by research participant and analyst. As with traditional phenomenology, the primary concern of IPA is the lived experiences of the participant, as well as the meaning the participant assigns to these lived experiences. The end result of an IPA analysis is a summary of what the analyst interprets as the participant’s meaning (Smith et al., 2009). This analysis is what Smith et al. describe as ‘the double hermeneutic’ aspect of IPA.

For the novice researcher, Smith et al. (2009) presented what they identify as a “step by step, somewhat unidirectional guide to conducting IPA analysis” (p. 81). Although these researchers concede that “IPA has not prescribed a single ‘method’ for working with data” (p. 79), this step-by-step guide was given by Smith et al. to help “minimize the potential for the novice analyst’s anxiety and confusion and reduce the risk of feeling overwhelmed by the process of analysis” (p. 81). According to this protocol, the IPA data analysis begins with the
researcher reading the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings to a point where he or she has become immersed in them. It is here, at the beginning of the analysis process, that they recommend keeping an analysis journal. In the second step of the analysis, they recommend that the “analyst maintains an open mind and notes anything of interest within the transcript” (p. 83). Smith et al. suggest that this second step of analysis happens concurrently with the first readings, as well as subsequent readings of the transcripts so as to begin immediately to identify the ways in which the participants talk and think about specific issues.

Next, Smith et al. (2009) suggest beginning to develop emergent themes. Here Smith et al. describe the process the researcher follows as leaving the original transcript and shifting to looking at the initial notes he or she developed. In step four of the process Smith et al. suggest that the researcher then begin searching for connections that emerge from the themes developed.

Because IPA research commonly uses multiple cases (Smith et al., 2009), once the previous emergent themes process has been completed, it is time to move onto the next participant’s transcript. However, it is imperative that the researcher remembers that each participant’s interview is seen as an individual case and that group analysis must only be completed once all individual analyses have been completed. To accomplish this, the analyst must bracket (Turrord & Newman, 2011) the ideas that emerged from the participant’s case (Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing is described in detail below in the trustworthiness section of this proposal.

Once all the individual cases have been analyzed and the themes have been recorded, Smith et al. (2009) suggest that the next step for the researcher is to look for patterns across all cases. Here, the analyst is looking for connections and trying to identify what themes are most
prevalent. However, if themes do emerge that are relevant only in individual cases, they should not be ignored.

Taking Smith et al.’s (2009) direction into account, the researcher had the interviews transcribed professionally. Then, he reviewed the interview and audio transcripts to ensure the correctness of the written transcripts. It was here that the researcher started to become one with the transcripts and began his journal, otherwise known as analytic memos (Saldana, 2009). The researcher used the analytic memos to reflect on anything that he believed to be important throughout the analysis process, as well as to record any specific themes or patterns that began to emerge within the transcripts (Saldana, 2009).

For the coding of the transcripts, the researcher utilized a qualitative computer program known as MAXQDA to assist with the myriad amount of written data. The first level coding conducted was what Saldana describes as In Vivo coding. Saldana suggests that In Vivo coding be used in studies that “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 77), a tenant of IPA. When using In Vivo coding, the researcher develops codes that come directly from the study participant’s own words (Saldana, 2009). From the In Vivo codes that are identified, the researcher followed the suggestions by Smith et al. (2009) and coded each study participant’s transcript individually and then reduced these codes down to specific themes (Creswell, 2007). The researcher repeated this process for each individual participant and then he looked at the themes across all cases and developed the categories that were related across all participants (Creswell, 2007).

**Trustworthiness**

For this research project, the use of transferability and member checking were utilized to aid in the trustworthiness of the study. In IPA, given that multiple semi-structured interviews are
used to obtain participants’ in-depth and detailed descriptions of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009) thick, narrative data was collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited that the use of such thick description aids in the transferability, otherwise known as the use of the findings in other settings of a research study.

**Limitations of transferability.** Because this research is site specific to JWU and to the research participants whose feelings and experiences were expressed in this institution within the time of their experience, the readers of this study will have to judge for themselves and to make a decision regarding the transferability of the research data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that it is not the researcher’s responsibility to provide an index of transferability, but for him or her to provide a “database that makes transferability judgments possible” (p. 316). For that reason, readers of this study will have to compare their own population of students to the specific population of first-generation college students being studied in this research and make the final decision regarding the transferability as well as the generalizability of the findings contained within.

**Member checking.** In addition to thick narratives, member checking was utilized both during the interview process and post interview. As previously mentioned, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is considered to be “the most critical technique for establishing creditability” in qualitative research studies (p. 314). Member checking allows the study participants to correct errors of fact or challenge the researcher’s interpretations (Thomas, 2006). Member checking was used during conversations with the study participants whereby the participants were asked to verify the transcripts as well as any initial interpretations of the data gathered in the interviews (Thomas, 2006). However, as mentioned previously, only three of the five participants responded to multiple communications to perform this check.
**Triangulation.** The study will also employ the use of triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight Denzin’s (1978) work where it is suggested that the use of multiple sources, or “*multiple copies of one type* of source (such as interview respondents)” (p. 305), may serve as a source of triangulation. For this study, several individuals who experienced the same phenomenon were used as the multiple sources needed for triangulation.

**Bracketing.** In phenomenological research, it is necessary for a researcher to bracket his or her understanding of the phenomenon. Giorgi (2008) described bracketing as when the researcher “puts aside his or her understanding of the phenomenon.” (p. 08). Bracketing allows the researcher to experience the phenomenon as if it was for the first time. The researcher, a first-generation college student and a graduate with a Bachelor’s degree from the same institution, had to bracket his understanding of his own experience with the phenomenon and allow the participants to describe *their* own meaning of *their* experiences of being first-generation college students. This was an extremely difficult challenge for the researcher because each story and explanations of the experiences that were developing in the interviews brought back strong feelings of familiarity to the researcher’s own experience as a first-generation student.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) regulations, research that includes the use of human subjects must obtain internal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval by submitting a report containing the following four components for evaluation: 1) risks of the subjects must be identified, 2) adequacy of protection against these risks, 3) potential benefits of the research to the subjects and others, and 4) importance of the knowledge gained or to be gained (NIH office of Extramural Research, n.d.).
In an effort to obtain Institutional Review Board approval, Northeastern University’s IRB was provided with a completed IRB application outlining these aforementioned components. It will be necessary to ensure that the individuals in the study are respected as autonomous agents, thus, ensuring that the research participants will have the absolute authority to examine the potential risks and benefits of the study. The participants were able to analyze these risks and benefits and take action up to and as far as removing themselves from the research at any time. No data was collected before Northeastern Universities IRB had given written approval to proceed with the study.

The aforementioned mandatory IRB components were presented to the research participants in the form of a participant recruitment letter (Appendix C). This letter was sent to them via email once they responded to either the initial invitation from JWU’s Alumni Association to participate in the study (Appendix A) or through other recruitment efforts utilizing social networking site (Appendix B). Snowballing was also utilized as a method of recruiting potential candidates. However, none of the participants who were interviewed came from these snowballing efforts. In addition to the participant recruitment letter, the individuals were also sent the informed consent document to review prior to participating in an interview (Appendix D). These documents were utilized in coordination with HHS and IRB regulations to inform the participants of their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study, the central purpose of the study, and the procedures used in the data collection. These documents also contained information pertaining to protecting the anonymity of the participants, such as the use of a pseudonym to protect his or her confidentiality, as well as the risks and benefits of the study. Additionally, they were notified that all data for the thesis would be secured on a password-protected computer. The original copies of the participant consent forms and a copy of the
original transcripts are kept in a locked safe in the researcher’s home. These transcripts were professionally transcribed, yet, only the researcher will know the original identity of the participants.

This study presented no known risks to these graduates because the population to be studied is not a vulnerable population and consists only of students who self-identify as first-generation college students that have completed their Bachelor’s degrees. Yet, understanding this population’s lived experiences is and was identified in the recruitment documentation as the true benefit of this research. The informed consent document also solicited a signature from each participant prior to beginning the interview affirming they understood the aforementioned and was willing to continue in the study.

**Study Limitations**

The following study limitations were identified:

- The study was conducted at a single campus of a multi-campus institution.
- Participants self selected to be part of research.
- All participants in the study were from the same program of study within the institution.
- Because the study site limited the participant sample to the graduating classes of 2011 through 2013, not all first-generation graduates from the campus were contacted to participate in the study.
- It is possible that not all members of each graduating class were members of the institution’s Facebook page. Therefore, they may not have been invited to participate in the study.
- Although the sample size was acceptable for an Interpretative Phenomenological
Analysis (a minimum of three), the sample was still small in relation to the total number of eligible FGS.

• Only one non-traditional college student participated in the study (25 years of age).

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlighted a constructivist’s use of a qualitative methodology to study the success of first-generation college students (FGS) utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis as the method of collecting and interpreting the study participants’ understandings of their lived experiences. These FGS were former students who completed their course work and received a Bachelor’s degree from a career institution, specifically the Charlotte, NC, campus of Johnson & Wales University.

IPA is a methodology that combines traditional phenomenology with a double hermeneutic interpretation, as well as idiography. IPA users utilize semi-structured interviews with a small group of study participants who have experienced the same phenomenon to gather rich, thick narratives. The researcher had the interviews professionally transcribed and individually interpreted each participant’s transcript to begin building themes that may or may not cross over into other participant’s understanding of the phenomenon being investigated.

This study utilized member checking to provide credibility, authenticity, and potential transferability of the research conducted. The study participants were asked to sign an informed consent document that explained the purpose of the study and explained their right as voluntary participants to withdraw from the study as they see fit. This document also informed the participants that they would be given pseudonyms that are only known by the researcher. Additionally, the informed consent document highlighted that there is no potential risk for
participating in the study. However, there are potential benefits to the institution as well as to future FGS who may attend the study institution.

Recruitment for the study began through The Office of Institutional Review at Johnson & Wales University. Contact was made through the University Alumni Association who emailed the graduating classes of 2010 thorough 2013 from the Charlotte campus and presented the research to them, asking them to contact the researcher if interested in participating. No research was conducted until final IRB approval had been given by Northeastern University. All original data and transcripts, as well as a copy of the pseudonyms, will be kept in the researcher’s locked home safe. All computer data will be password protected and sorted by the pseudonym.

The voices of these academically resilient students are a powerful tool for present and future students as well as institutions. The success of these individuals is indeed a fantastic accomplishment in its own right. These students have completed a task that other FGS were unable to despite the barriers and statistics that highlight the astonishing number of those that have failed. Their stories of success should be celebrated and documented. It is the ambition of the researcher to do just that.

**Chapter 4: Research Findings**

This chapter presents the findings of the research conducted, exploring first-generation college students’ (FGS) perceptions of the factors contributing to their success and eventual persistence at a four-year, career-focused institution. The research question that guided this study was: *How do first-generation college students understand and explain their success at a four-year career university?* Four sub questions were used to gain further insights in relation to the main threads from the literature and the theoretical frameworks. Theses sub questions were:

1. *What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college?*
2. What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize?

3. What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers?

4. How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?

The chapter begins with an overview of the interviews of five academically resilient first-generation college students, followed by the analysis of those interviews. The analysis utilized what Smith et al. (2009) describe as ‘contextualization.’ Contextualization allows the researcher to present “emergent themes” that are dispersed throughout an interview transcript, as well as look at and present the connections between these themes as presented and shaped by the participant’s narrative (Smith et al., 2009, p. 98). Contextualization is tied to step four of the seven steps recommended by Smith and colleagues to search for connections across themes when using an interpretive phenomenological approach. The seven steps of data analysis in IPA include reading and re-reading the interviews, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, looking for patterns across cases, and writing the analysis (Smith et. al, 2009). This analysis process was instrumental to this study and also was instrumental in the development and construction of this chapter.

The narrative analysis for each participant includes a profile of who the participants believe they were before they started their journeys, a discussion of the participants’ families, their families’ education levels, and who the participants talked to regarding furthering their education past high school. The participant profiles also present their reasons for attending
college and how they paid for school while enrolled. The narratives also contain representative statements from the participants in their own words.

**Participant Profiles**

**Monica.** Monica is a 2009 graduate of the study institution and is the daughter of divorced parents. She grew up in a family where education and academics were not a strong focus. Her mother was the only family member to finish high school in a traditional manner, while her father finished high school during the Vietnam War while serving in the Marines. Monica’s siblings include a brother (who died when Monica was in middle school) and a sister; neither graduated from high school. Monica’s estranged father had received some additional post-secondary vocational training while in the Marines, and has been a career truck driver since leaving the Marines with a medical discharge. Prior to being put on medical disability herself, Monica's mother remarried and the couple lived off of her new husband’s military medical disability. Monica’s mother supplemented her income by working as a waitress in various restaurants while the family was living in the mountains of western North Carolina.

Monica is a self-described “black sheep nerd of the family” who “really enjoyed academics” when she was growing up. At an early age, Monica realized “that education was something that I really enjoyed and I am very much a learner.” When discussing her educational role models, Monica credited teachers and mentors for pushing her in her pursuit of knowledge. Monica said these individuals knew her background and still invested “that little bit of extra time” in her, acknowledging that she needed a push and they encouraged her to do well academically despite her upbringing.

Conversations surrounding academics and college were not a part of Monica's home life. In fact, one of the earliest conversations that Monica can remember concerning college was one
that she had with her dad, which she felt, did not go very well. As she recalls, her dad was very condescending when the conversation about college first came up. He told Monica and her siblings, "Well, if any of you ever even make it to college, but let's work on that first." These remarks had a daunting affect on Monica, as she recalls, explaining:

I was just like whoa, like I mean I was, I don’t know, 10, maybe 11 at that point, and was just blown away that like who says that to their child, like, “Well, if you even make it to college.”

Similar to their deficiencies in education, Monica's family was also lacking in finances. Monica declared that she knew "from a fairly early age that we were not a well off family."

Unfortunately for Monica, individuals outside of her family reinforced this reality. As Monica put it, "Children have a wonderful way of letting other children know when there's poor kids in school."

Beyond a lack of support from her family, paying for school was something Monica, much like other FGS, had a difficult time doing. While enrolled in her baccalaureate program, Monica worked full-time at several different jobs, worked for the school as a resident assistant (RA), and also participated in the Federal Work-Study (FWS) Program. Monica earned her Bachelor's degree in Culinary Arts and Food Service Management, though she now works in higher education in student services. Since leaving the study site, Monica has also pursued and earned a Master's degree.

**JBob.** JBob is 35 and a 2008 graduate from the study institution. He is the second son of a military service dad who served in the US Air Force and worked as a trade electrician. JBob's mom was a former secretary and homemaker who raised her children in the northwestern area of South Carolina. JBob was not only a first-generation student when he started college, but he was
also an older student returning to school at the age of 26. During high school, JBob spent time at his school's career center taking culinary classes. JBob explains that at that time “it was called the Career Center” and that is was for “people who couldn’t get into college,” specifically, “those that needed a skill-set.”

To JBob, the career center was not only a place for him to acquire this skill set, but also a place where he thought he was supposed to go. During his sophomore year of high school, his guidance counselor told him college was "not for you." When asked how he took that message, JBob responded that, "it's not as personal today as it was back then." This was, however, something that motivated him to not only enroll, but also complete his Bachelor’s degree. When asked whether or not he mentioned this conversation to his parents, JBob was emphatic, "absolutely not, we didn't talk, I didn't ... never talked to my parents"... "Never"... "We didn't talk. You didn't talk to my father." In fact, JBob stated that he did not talk to anyone about going to college. JBob believed that because no one in his family ever went to college, they did not have the insight necessary for the conversation.

Much like many other college students, JBob also had a difficult time paying for college. As an older student living on his own prior to starting college, JBob found supplementary ways to support himself and pay for school besides the student loans he received. Once accepted to Johnson & Wales, JBob acquired a position as a student assistant in the Culinary Arts Department on the campus opening team. This position helped JBob obtain future positions within the department as both a teaching assistant (TA) and a fellow later in his college career. Working on campus provided JBob with both an hourly rate job and a scholarship, which aided JBob in paying for school. In addition to his job with the university, JBob also held other part-time jobs; at one point, he found himself working up to four jobs at once.
JBob was very upset with his father for telling him during high school that if he wanted to go to college that he would have to pay for it on his own. However, he now appreciates the fact that his parents did not pay for school. He believes that if he had attended college right out of high school he would have been less successful. Today, JBob is working as a restaurant training manager for a large corporate restaurant group in his home state of South Carolina.

Etna. Etna is a 2013 graduate of the university. She is the only daughter of a career construction worker father and a mother who works as both a seamstress and a secretary in South Carolina. Etna grew up in a very Christian family, where her grandparents on her dad's side were missionaries and many of her family members work as pastors. Neither of Etna's parents attended a four-year university, in fact "they didn’t try to go to college," although her dad did take a few business courses at the community college level. When asked about her mom's reason for not going to college, Etna did not know why, but explained, "She was pretty smart too which is surprising, like she was salutatorian of her high school class."

Growing up, Etna was educated in private Christian schools. Halfway through eleventh grade in high school, she decided that she wanted to go to public school and attend the career technical center majoring in culinary arts. Unfortunately for Etna, she was not able to attend the high school's career center because she was too far along in her high school career. Upon hearing this news, Etna applied and was accepted into the early enrollment program at Johnson & Wales, where she was able to finish her senior year of high school and her freshman year of college at the same time. Not only was she able to excel in this dual-enrollment setting, but Etna also completed her Bachelor's degree in three years by taking extra classes each quarter. This saved an entire year's tuition.
Etna considered her family to be secure financially when she was growing up. She believed that the only reason her mom began working was to help pay for her private Christian education, as well as her college expenses. Although Etna believed that her family did not live above their means, she was taught to use money wisely. If fact, Etna maintains that the only reason that her parents got a credit card was to help her with college, and she joked, also for the frequent flyer miles. During her sophomore year of college, Etna became a resident assistant to help pay for her education. In addition to the scholarship for being a resident assistant (free room and board), Etna was paid an hourly wage. Etna also worked off campus at several different jobs to help pay for her education. During her junior/senior year at school, Etna started to look more seriously at her career post graduation. Through this self-reflection, her priorities concerning her career shifted from employment that simply brought in spending money to finding employment that would be more beneficial to her future career.

When asked about conversations she had prior to attending college concerning her education and who she had these conversations with, Etna shared that she engaged in those conversations, not with her parents, but instead with her employer. Etna referred to this employer, whom she worked for at a small catering company, as an individual that she felt was "like a second grandma." It was this woman that helped push Etna "to get some kind of a degree." Although these conversations were brief, Etna believed because this woman had seen a lot of different things in her life, she was pushing Etna to do the same. Today, Etna is working for a small restaurant in the mountains of North Carolina in a mid-level management position.

David. David is a 2011 graduate. He is the son of divorced Jamaican immigrants from an urban center in Virginia. David has two brothers and two sisters. One brother and one sister are half-siblings on his father's side from a second marriage. These siblings were raised in
Connecticut, with David's dad, after David and the rest of his family relocated to Virginia. Neither of David's parents ever attended a four-year university. David's mother attended a community college where she received a certificate, helping her secure a position in medical billing. David's father never finished high school and works in janitorial services within the hotel industry.

David described his family’s financial situation and the environment that he was brought up in as “hell.” He said, “It was tough, it was terrible.” David recalls moving from the “roughest neighborhood in the heart of Connecticut” to his aunt's house in Richmond during middle school, with a "car full of clothes and that's pretty much it." David explained that he and his family lived in "gang infested" neighborhoods, where at a young age he recalls having to "escape gun fire a couple of times." As David put it, "You know, it was bad, it was really bad."

Prior to moving to Charlotte for school, things seemed to get worse for David and his family. David described a life where there were no Christmas presents, where at times he came home to no lights or heat. In fact, David explained that he and his family went without gas in their home for over a year. However, despite this “hell,” he was very sympathetic to his parents and their family’s situation. David explained:

It was rough, but that’s where we were at and lived, you know. My parents couldn’t afford to put us nowhere else, you know? I mean, I don’t know if they tried hard enough or not but I mean, it’s like I can’t really blame them, I mean, it’s like that’s what we had to endure.

David’s rough upbringing required that he and his family moved around and they were often subjected to living in gang-infested areas. David is the unmarried father of a daughter who was born while David was pursuing his Bachelor’s degree. Overcoming these environments has
helped David to handle a lot of change and difficulty in his life. He feels that he is now able to adapt better to changes in his own life, and even though his upbringing was difficult, he feels that he is a better person today because of it.

Like many students attending Johnson & Wales University, David’s culinary career started at a high school career technical center. It was here that David believed he found his ability to focus on his schooling and also found what pushed him to pursue a career in culinary arts. David was involved in a program called Skills USA while enrolled in this high school culinary program. Skills USA allowed David the opportunity to compete in culinary competitions where he won first and second place awards. Shortly after his success in these competitions, David submitted his application and was accepted into Johnson & Wales University in Charlotte.

While enrolled in college, David worked tirelessly to help provide financially for his education and his family; both at school and at home in Virginia. To help pay for school, David worked in the Federal Work-Study (FWS) Program each year, except for his senior year. His senior year, he explained, “I was too busy, just too busy. It was too much.” In addition to participating in work-study, David was also employed at various restaurants, working between 30-60 hours a week. It is here that David was able to build up the ‘sweat equity’ that helped him move up into a management position during his last two years of college. Working 60-hour workweeks as a college student, David described the responsibilities of a new father as “crazy.” Along with these work-based sources of income, David, like many college students, received scholarships as well as loans to help pay for school.

Discussing conversations concerning attending college, David mentioned that he did not have these conversations with anyone when he was younger. He did feel that his mother was
supportive when the time came. Today, David is working as a kitchen manager for a large restaurant chain in one of the nation’s busiest stores. David hopes to eventually go back to school and one day completes his Master’s degree.

**Tramayne.** Tramayne is a 2012 graduate of Johnson & Wales. She is an African American and the oldest child of six children. Her parents are divorced. Her biological father spent nine years in prison. Tramayne’s mother eventually remarried, and Tramayne was raised by a step-dad. However, Tramayne did not consider her stepfather “a father figure.” Tramayne lived half of her life in Pennsylvania and the other half in North Carolina, before moving to Charlotte to attend school.

Tramayne’s mother obtained a GED and went to a couple of different “community schools, but never graduated.” However, her mother does aspire to go back. Tramayne’s stepfather also attended a community college, but Tramayne believes that it was “not for long.” Tramayne had little to no contact with her biological father while he was in prison; yet, he is now currently part of her life. Her biological father earned his GED while in prison, and soon after Tramayne started her college studies, he was released from prison and he too went back to school, earning a Bachelor’s degree at a school “in Virginia somewhere.” He is currently working on his Master’s degree in ministry.

Growing up, the financial situation for Tramayne and her family was difficult. “Being the oldest I was very aware,” she explained. Tramayne recalled that there were “plenty of times where we had to go days without electricity or running water and we had to move a lot because of financial situations and not being able to keep houses.” Tramayne described a life where she was made aware at an early age of how to stretch a dollar, a lesson that she believes helped her
get through college. Tramayne credits those hard financial times as making her stronger today. She believes that those times in her life taught her a lot, “especially the value of money.”

Growing up, college was something that Tramayne never thought about. Tramayne reflected on a time when she moved to North Carolina and felt negativity from her teachers. She remembers her teachers being prejudice and making negative remarks concerning her future. She explained that the “seed” was never planted in her mind that she “would make it that far.” She remembers hearing the teachers tell her:

You will never amount to anything… they knew that my mom was young and they would look at me and say; you’re going to be nothing like… you’re going to be nothing. You’re going to be just like your mom. You’re going to, you know, be a statistic. You’re not going to make it.

Tramayne was very angry after hearing this from her teachers, and believed that because she was African American she was being pushed down. As a result, Tramayne started acting out in school and was often suspended. Unfortunately, being the oldest of her then four siblings, Tramayne soon found that her siblings were modeling her behavior. This modeling of her behavior resulted in Tramayne’s siblings also acting out in school and getting suspended.

Recognizing the developing patterns of her children, Tramayne’s mother asked her why she was acting this way and Tramayne explained “they told me that I wouldn’t be nothing so I’m going to act like nothing.” Tramayne remembers her mother explaining:

As the oldest child you should not set these kinds of standards… you’re letting yourself be defeated, your siblings who are watching you, who are following you, they’re letting themselves be defeated. Show them that you can be somebody, show them that you can be something.
It was soon after this conversation that Tramayne started to make good grades. She started to make honor roll and received all sorts of academic awards. She even began to receive financial rewards from her mother and used the money to buy her sibling’s presents such as candy. Tramayne recalls, “The feeling of being an African American and being noticed, I was, you know, I can do this. My siblings are following after me; they’re doing the same thing. It was a rush.”

During her senior year in high school, Tramayne and her family moved back to Pennsylvania. Tramayne was frustrated and defeated, moving from a small high school in North Carolina to a large rural high school in Pennsylvania. Because of this move and feelings of frustration, Tramayne felt as though she did not have the drive to succeed anymore and lost her desire to go to college. Instead, Tramayne changed her focus and decided to go into the military, “just because, to do something.”

Soon after entering into a high school co-op program her senior year, Tramayne’s drive returned. She had the opportunity to work in a clerical office where she “was accepted as one of them.” When the co-op was over, Tramayne continued working in the office and they helped her obtain clerical office certifications. This is where Tramayne was fortunate enough to meet a woman who became her role model and mentor.

This mentor’s impact on Tramayne’s life was remarkable. Tramayne credited her for pushing her to apply for college; she even drove Tramayne from Pennsylvania to North Carolina for school. In addition to being an internal drive for her, her mentor helped her with her financial aid paperwork, loan and scholarship applications, and even co-signed a private loan for Tramayne. Tramayne speaks of this woman with joy and passion in her voice:
That’s the only way I got in freshman year is her taking me down there, her co-signing. She pushed. She helped me find schools. She helped me research… I never even would have thought I would have made it in school until I met her and she worked with my mother and she worked with me to get into school and get me ready.

Like the other students in the study, Tramayne found it difficult to finance her education.

Once in school, Tramayne once again found herself in need of her mentor’s help. She did not have the $475.00 to purchase textbooks. So she contacted her mentor who collected an office pool and sent it to her. To help fund her education, Tramayne was employed by the Federal Work-Study (FWS) Program and was a resident assistant. In addition to these positions, Tramayne found a third job working off-campus to help pay for school, cover living expenses, and buy clothes so she could abide by the school’s business casual dress code. Today, Tramayne is working in Maryland as a Business Operations Associate.

**Emergent Themes**

As discussed in the earlier review of the methodology, this research study was built on the assumption that studying first-generation college students at a career-focused institution, who succeeded despite their demonstrated difficulties, had the potential to inform best practices to serve other FGS in higher education. Smith et al. (2009) remind their readers that while an IPA’s study’s aim is to find a homogeneous sample and present immediate claims that are bounded by the group studied, the generalizability of the study lies in the hands of the readers of the report and their ability to assess the evidence in the report with their “existing professional and experiential knowledge” (p. 4). Lincoln and Guba (1985) too caution the transferability and generalizability of research stating, “at best the investigator can supply only that information
about the studied site that may make possible a judgment of transferability” (p. 217). With this understanding of the generalizability to other settings, a number of themes emerged.

Through a double hermeneutic analysis of the interview transcripts and the descriptions of the participants’ experiences within the phenomenon, different themes and sub-themes of experiences were identified. These themes clarify how the study participants understood and explained their success by identifying their reasons for attending, sharing what barriers they foresaw and encountered, as well as explaining what strategies they believe were effective in combating these barriers. Additional information was collected pertaining to each student’s self-efficacy and what strategies they employed to adjust to and grow their own confidence. The emergent themes include:

- **Theme #1: Personal and Professional Aspirations**
  a. Sub-theme #1: Prove others wrong
  b. Sub-theme #2: Professional growth
  c. Sub-theme #3: “I do not want that life… I can’t be a statistic”

- **Theme #2: “You don’t know what you don’t know”**
  a. Sub-theme #1: Being the first
  b. Sub-theme #2: Playing the social game
  c. Sub-theme #3: Academic weaknesses
  d. Sub-theme #4: Work/school balance

- **Theme #3: It takes a village**
  a. Sub-theme #1: It is all about your peers
  b. Sub-theme #2: Building professional relationships
  c. Sub-theme #3: The student as a leader
• Theme #4: Success Builds Confidence
  a. Sub-theme #1: Milestones achieved
  b. Sub-theme #2: Opinions of significant others
  c. Sub-theme #3: Vicarious experiences

Each theme is addressed with supporting evidence in the sections that follow.

**Theme #1: Personal and Professional Aspirations**

The first theme to develop during the interviews was formulated out of the first sub research question. That question was: *What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college?* During their interviews, study participants described their reasons for attending college as containing motivators involving personal, educational, and professional aspirations. Based on their individual stories, the pursuit of a college degree was a means to improve not only their professional lives, but their personal lives as well. Three sub-themes provide evidence for this theme.

**Sub-theme #1: Prove others wrong.** For JBob, Monica, David, and Tramayne, proving that others were wrong about them clearly was an important factor when discussing their reasons for attending college. For Tramayne, proving others wrong meant dealing with confidence issues that came from a very sad place. She explained:

> It’s been from all of the people who told me I wouldn’t make it. And because they told me I wouldn’t, I know I am capable of making it, I wanted to prove them wrong. So it’s pushed me. That’s basically like where most of my confidence came from. I know because I made it this far, that I can continue to make it. It was just proving people wrong.
For JBob, proving others wrong also fueled his pursuit of a degree. As a large man, JBob often felt he was being judged by his size, so he was compelled to prove that it was more of what was on the inside than what was on the outside when it came to his skills and personality. Until recently, JBob was uncomfortable with his size and how others perceived him. He recalls being teased in elementary and secondary school. Yet, going into college, people were different.

JBob’s desire for obtaining his Bachelor’s degree stemmed from a desire to prove his guidance counselor wrong and his passion to experience college itself. JBob recalled:

There’s no other way to put it other than I just wanted, I had this desire to go. I had this desire to go. I had this almost like a need to go, like I had, I had something to prove… like I wanted to, to prove, it was almost like I wanted to prove the people wrong.

JBob further explained that he wanted to prove to the people “that told me that I couldn’t.” Among these people was JBob’s high school guidance counselor. Because of conversations with his guidance counselor, JBob pursued culinary arts in his school’s career center, a place he explained “was for the people that couldn’t get into college.” It wasn’t until a classroom demonstrator from Johnson & Wales came to his school, and he learned the school was moving to Charlotte, that JBob decided that he “had something to prove… it was almost like I wanted to prove the people wrong.”

David, too, wanted to prove others wrong. Because the area where David grew up was one he described as “hell,” and the stereotypical assumptions others held for him and his family, he was often subjected to hurtful and angry words. David explained:

All my life they said how… I’ve always heard, hey, you know, we’re gonna get locked up, we’re gonna get thrown to jail, we’re gonna do drugs, we’re gonna do fail, and will
be a failure. All my life I’ve heard that, all my life and because we just such a bad shape, you know, financially, they just thought the worst of us, me, my brother, my sister.

Asked who ‘they’ were, David explained it was his extended family, people from his church, and the “people who knew us, they just… they just thought the worst of us. They really did.” He continued, “They thought the worst of us and I just wanna prove them wrong.”

Monica too wanted to prove her family wrong. After her father’s lack of confidence in her abilities during the car ride she described, Monica felt she had a point to prove to her father. She explained:

Just because, you know, none of my cousins on my father’s side or my mother’s side of the family had ever finished high school. None of my father’s other children has finished high school, so college just wasn’t something, I mean, was ever going to be an option I think in my family’s mind. I think at that point I was really like well, I’m going to show you. Like if you don’t think I can do it, like I know that I can do it.

**Sub-theme #2: Professional growth.** In addition to proving those wrong that doubted them, several of the participants in this study also recognized the professional growth opportunities of attending a well-respected institution for higher learning, one with a career-oriented program in culinary arts and food service management. For example, for JBob, proving people wrong was only part of his desire to attend college. He explained, “It’s not going to hurt to apply, you know, it’s not, it’s not going to hurt to at least try.” At that time, JBob was working as a manager of a large breakfast-food chain. JBob was pleased that the institution had opened a facility so close to his home, which helped him solidify his decision to apply. JBob said, “I just really wanted to do it. I wanted to go. I wanted to experience it. I didn’t know how I was going to afford it, but I just wanted to go.” Advancing his career definitely was something
he thought about and motivated him to pursue his Bachelor’s degree. Even though he does not credit the “piece of paper” for getting him further in his career than where he is today five years after graduation, he does believe that opportunities that await him in the future will not be possible without the degree.

Etna pursued her degree for professional reasons, but her pursuit at this specific institution was the key. Etna explained that she had started working in the foodservice industry already, helping out a small catering company on the weekends as well as over the summer while in high school. She enjoyed the work, yet realized it was on a small scale. Going to college would help her “…to do something a little bit bigger” and because of that she knew that she “…would have to have, to have some kind of a paper to back it up.” Etna explained that the Christian school that she attended through the eleventh grade shared a campus with a college. Being adventurous and noting her peers “…just didn’t have any motivation,” she wanted to “…push the boundaries of what everybody else was doing.” Etna believed that her high school peers were staying comfortable going to school close to home and she wanted to do “something that was like a little bit more, a little bit crazier than everybody else.” She realized that “to be in this industry, to like want to do something more than just work, say at fast food or something, that you would need something else besides just the work.” She explained that her parents understood that she was taking this incredible risk to leave home at 17, to finish high school and start college at the same time because they “understood that I needed of [sic] something more.” For her, that “something more” was Johnson & Wales University. As she explained:

I think that’s a difference between a regular university and Johnson & Wales, is like most of the kids going there have an end goal in what they wanted to do or who they want to
be when they get out, and that’s why I think I went so fast through it cause I knew what I want to do so quickly.

**Sub-theme #3: “I do not want that life”… “I can’t be a statistic”.** – *David.* Beyond the personal and professional growth opportunities, and the need to prove something to those who doubted them, the participants in this study seemed to understand the conflict between their backgrounds and their goals. Yet, they knew that they were in control of their own destinies. If they wanted their path to change, it was up to them to change it.

Growing up in gang infested areas of Virginia and Connecticut were devastating to David as a young man. Yet, the culinary skills he acquired in high school gave him the opportunity to leave that life behind. He attended an accredited four-year university that allowed him to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree and start his life anew. David considered this as an incredible opportunity. He described how he felt the first night on campus, “I’m brand new and it’s time to build up my legacy, that’s what I did.” He continued, “Charlotte, a brand new city, where in the beginning, I saw it as a fresh start, and it was.” For David, this fresh start was one that was incredibly necessary. David explained that being a black man, he knew the statistics for black males were not good, and added, “It’s getting’ worse and worse every single day.” When He described his life, David said:

Most of my friends who I graduated from high school are either in jail, some have died, some of them have kids, most of them don’t have a job, most of them’s not goin’ anywhere with life and that’s just reality. I don’t want to be part of that… I couldn’t be part of it… you know, that’s why I made a decision, come to college and … coz I wanted to be different, I didn’t want to be a statistic.
This was a huge motivator throughout college, and he knew that he could not lose focus. He did live life in college as many other students did, enjoying his time as a student, but as he explained, “I never lost sight of finishing my education. That was top priority because it was something that I had to do and I owed it to myself and my family.” For some, the pressure may have been too great, but David said it drove him to keep going. “That’s the way I looked at it because I looked at it as… somebody has to be the role model… it has to start somewhere.” Asked about the pressure, David believed that dealing with change “…comes down to the individual. It comes down to how much you want, and how much you want to change, how much you want to change your life.”

Monica indicated that being the black sheep of the family meant being different. Not just from her family, but from those around her as well. Monica’s desire to acquire a college degree stemmed from her poor financial upbringing. Monica explained that at a young age she recognized and understood the cycle of poverty that she was exposed to. Monica recalled:

I can remember being in like third and fourth grade when we first moved to the mountains of North Carolina and just being like man, I see the life that they have and I do not want that life.

She credited her ability to “recognize that it was because of education, like people didn’t have good jobs because they weren’t educated.” Combining this awareness of her situation, her passion for education, and the push she received from her teachers and mentors, Monica realized that education “can get you elsewhere” in life. ‘Elsewhere’ was away from the cycle of drugs that others in her life fell into. She explained that the cycle began “because they quit school, and you know, started doing this and it led to that or got into a life of crime.” Fortunately, Monica’s
ability to recognize that cycle at such an early age helped propel her out of that life and on to something different.

Tramayne’s siblings were her motivation for her journey to a better life. She recalled the only reason for leaving Pennsylvania and going to college was, “to go to school to show them that they could, you know, amount to something. So that I could put myself in a better position to help them.” Unfortunately, Tramayne’s siblings now resent her for leaving them while going to try to better her own life. She hoped that she would be helping them by giving them a role model to look up to, and hopefully, one day emulate.

The benefits of a college education have been reported as being both financially and socially beneficial (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). For the first-generation college students within this study, their reasons are both professional and personal in nature. As the sub-themes have indicated, first-generation students’ passion to better their lives and create opportunities for professional growth are plagued with personal experiences and life examples that too have motivated them to change their future by accessing and completing a Bachelor’s degree at a career-focused institution.

**Theme #2: “You don’t know what you don’t know” - Monica**

The second theme was developed from the sub research question: *What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize?* In answering this question, the first-generation college student graduates in this study recognized that they had faced many barriers. The most powerful observation they made was how difficult it was to navigate everything necessary to actually attend college. For many of the participants, they were not only the first in their families to obtain a college degree, but in many cases, they were the first to ever attend a college.
**Sub-theme #1: Being the first.** Monica’s message of unfamiliarity was the loudest. Early in the interview when asked about barriers to college completion, Monica quickly proclaimed, “I think the biggest thing for me, I’m certain and it--and it absolutely was a barrier--is I had no concept for how the university functioned as a whole.” Because she was independent and did not have any family members to rely on, Monica’s transition into college was masked with questions. She had no answers, and neither did anyone else in her life. She recalled:

I had no idea how to pay tuition. I didn’t know, like do you do it online? Do you just go to the office? Is it all at once? Is it a system? I had no clue how any of that worked. I didn’t know about registering for classes. If they hadn’t sent the sign up for housing with, with my acceptance letter, I wouldn’t have known that, like you sign up for housing, and that there’s a housing deposit, or just anything about how the university functioned.

Monica further confided that these were just some of the things that became a huge barrier for her because, “I didn’t have anybody that I could ask.” Monica arrived on campus not knowing how much of anything worked. She thought having parents who should “at least have a concept of things you should be concerned about” would have made things much easier for her. For Monica, being the first meant not even knowing the questions to ask. She shared:

So it was kind of being thrown (laughs) into the fire if you will, of trying to learn like okay, what is this process and what are the questions that I should be asking? And okay, where do I go to ask those questions and who can help you with that?

JBob, being older, recognized that he was on his own when it came to whom he talked to and what he talked to them about concerning going to college. He did not talk to his parents because, as he explained, “If you don’t have anybody that’s experienced it, and they think that
they can, do it without it, you know, be successful without it” then there was no reason to talk to them about it. Asked if he had spoken to his older brother, JBob said he had not, that he “never had that conversation with my brother because, again, he never went so he didn’t have any insight that anybody else around me, obviously, didn’t have either because no one in my family went, so.”

David’s problems extended beyond not knowing how to register for classes and who to talk to concerning questions about school. They were financial, specifically, financial literacy. Although David was the first in his family to earn a Bachelor’s degree, he was also the first in his family to attend college. Coming from a poor family, David had a difficult time adjusting to college because he was unfamiliar with how to properly handle his personal finances. David explained, “We was always poor and we stayed poor and we stayed poor, and that’s probably why, what led to my bad financial habits (laughs).” David shared:

I didn’t know how to save money and that’s something I do regret, not because my parents, both my parents, never actually sat us down and told us how to save money. They didn’t teach us anything about money… I did everything myself… all they said, was okay, don’t mess with credit, I said, oh, okay. I didn’t know what credit was.

Being the first to go through this process alone is something that still upsets David. His tone was angry when discussing all of the things related to his financial struggles. He believed that his parents should have educated him on these matters. He discussed how he is not alone, that both his siblings struggle with a lack of financial knowledge, and he has had to help them. David said, “I shouldn’t be teaching this stuff. I shouldn’t sourcing books online and source that information from people I don’t know. I should… my own parents should be teaching me… but it didn’t happen like that so.”
**Sub-theme #2: Playing the social game.** For most of the first-generation college students in this study, the social aspect of being a college student was extremely difficult. For Etna, going to college at the age of 17, finishing her freshman year and her high school senior year simultaneously, and being an only child away from her Christian community made the social element much more difficult. Etna explained, “I was a little sheltered when I was a kid, going to Christian school and stuff, that I wasn’t necessarily prepared to be with all of those kids doing crazy things in the dorms.” Even though Etna considered herself an extroverted person, she became very introverted and that scared her. She even had to force herself to get out of her dorm room and socialize. She explained:

> I was scared of being there and being alone at 17… I was so afraid to be introverted my freshmen year, like it scared me to be stuck inside all the time, so I pushed myself to get out… to like kinda back to my regular self.

David explained that being social was difficult in secondary school because he was the poor kid, the shy kid who “didn’t really know how to meet people,” and the kid that was always being picked on. Going to college was a new beginning for him. David explained that his first night at college he was all by himself as he hadn’t been assigned a roommate. He made a decision then, as previously noted, to use it as a fresh start:

> I came out. I was like okay, this is brand new, this is brand new city, brand new… nobody knows me and that’s where I went, I looked at it as I’m leaving Richmond for good… It’s over and to this day I won’t move back, I, I won’t because too many memories. It’s some good, most bad. So I left that life alone… I’m brand new and it’s time to build up my legacy and, that’s what I did.
David explained that this is when he became very popular with his classmates. He started working a lot of on- and off-campus events. Reflecting on this new life, David was elated as he described a life that was so new for him, a life he “never experienced.” Hearing him tell this story of change and the beginning of his legacy points to clear evidence of transformational change for a first-generation college student.

While David’s dad and family came and spent the first day with him, Monica was “literally dropped” off by her sister on the first day. Monica recalled her first night in the dorms as a time where she “just bawled my eyes out because I was completely alone in this huge city.” She said she was too poor to afford a cell phone and she had no way of calling anybody to talk to. To make matters worse, she did not have a roommate until halfway through the first quarter. Monica explained, “I was terrified to leave my room for days. So probably the first week and a half I was on campus the only time I left my room was to go to class or go to the library.” For Monica, the transition “was terrifying” because she was from a really small town, and like David, she was not one of the popular kids in high school. It was not easy for Monica to just walk up to someone and start talking—“like I just wasn’t that person yet.” As a faculty member at this institution, the feelings Monica shared made it difficult to remain an impartial observer. The heightened emotions and clear level of fear showed how deeply challenging the transition was for her and may be for other students, yet alone other first-generation students. She explained, “It was terrifying for me to feel like I was completely lost in an environment that I didn’t know, on a campus that I didn’t know… I had no, no connections at all when I first got here.” The situation was so terrifying that she had “severe anxiety in social situations and like had kind of mild forms of OCD.” She eventually sought counseling to help her overcome her fears in social situations.
Tramayne had a difficult time adjusting to the social aspects of college life as well. She described herself as being “socially awkward” and “was not used to being around people.” Coincidently, Tramayne identified this as a new problem and explained that she was never socially awkward before coming to school. Tramayne described her overall adjustment to college as difficult, which led to her social adjustment becoming harder. She also described herself as being “very homesick” because she had never been away from her siblings for that long of a time. She blames this homesickness for her mood at the time, which she described as grumpy and pushy as well as standoffish. She believes this made it harder for her to become accepted by other students who were already forming social groups. She said:

"It was hard for me to make friends because I was so emotionally distressed from being homesick and it made it very hard for me to connect socially with a lot of people. So I missed that initial hump freshmen year basically being at Johnson & Wales, it’s small and living on campus, once you miss that hump freshman year it kind of follows you for some years.

Tramayne believed her social problems also came from her own feelings of jealousy over her background. She explained that she “…was angry and I felt like the world had sent me an unfair advantage… I had started off with a crappy hand at this game already and I was jealous, I was angry… for a long time that hindered me into making friends.”

**Sub-theme #3: Academic Weaknesses.** Many of the participants in this study identified their own academic weaknesses and lack of preparedness as a difficult barrier to college completion. At 26, JBob had been out of the academic scene for quite some time. JBob proclaimed, “I didn’t feel I was prepared academically at all.” He described a time where he was “scared” to receive his first paper back. Adding to this fear was the notion that the individual
who was teaching the class was a former department chair for a well know school in South Carolina. He remembered, laughing, that the first paper he received back had an F on it and a note, “See me after class.” When he met with the instructor, her advice was for him to come and see her in the learning center, a place where, as he said, “dumb people” went. He had no desire to go there, yet he also did not want the F.

The curriculum at the college was a benefit for Tramayne. She felt very comfortable in her culinary classes, the production methodology part of the program, but admittedly struggled in her academics in the traditional university core curriculum. She explained that she struggled “a lot during the written things” of the culinary classroom, struggled with math, and that “academics were a barrier.” In this context, when a culinary student speaks of “academics” they are referring to all academic courses outside the culinary coursework. For Tramayne, financial and social problems compounded her academic problems. She explained:

I didn’t have time to study, I was working and being a RA, and just even when I wasn’t a RA, wanting to be social. I followed all of the wrong avenues. I used to go clubbing because everybody else was going clubbing. I didn’t have time to study with all the stupid classes the next morning. So academically it didn’t catch my attention and I struggled a lot.

David also struggled academically, yet, he felt that he did well in his culinary courses. David described his culinary classes as being “academically, so-so.” He knew that his peers were performing better, even though he studied hard. He said, “They still got a better grade… they must be smart, they must get it.” David believed that he was there to increase his culinary knowledge and build his culinary skills. He found that his peers were aware of those culinary skills, often picking David for leadership positions in culinary settings on campus.
Monica knew that academics were an area where she was already successful. During high school, Monica attended a program called ‘Governor’s school,’ where the top 800 academic students in the state of North Carolina were sent to a college campus and given six weeks of classes to acclimate them to college life. Monica knew “that regardless of what else was going to happen, I could succeed academically,” but it was the culinary classes that required adjustment. Unlike David and JBob, Monica’s high school did not have a career center, so she lacked exposure to a culinary curriculum. Monica did have home economics classes and a part-time job working at a both a bakery and candy shop, and gained some culinary experience.

While in school, Monica worked in restaurants for three years to increase her culinary knowledge. She believed “my work was based on what my curriculum was so there was a lot of crossover there.”

Etna identified the academic barriers she faced, directly correlating them to her decision to attend college and finish her high school senior year at the same time. Etna indicated that she “definitely felt behind for going in a year early.” She explained that she “had to study a little harder than most kids.” Despite her concerns and described struggles, it is important to note that she was assigned to honors coursework. Because she was assigned to advanced classes, the struggles she faced, feeling underprepared academically, made it difficult for her to keep up with her peers who had taken higher level math and science classes in high school prior to coming to college. She said, “It definitely was a struggle.”

**Sub-theme #4: Work/school balance.** Working while enrolled was viewed as a barrier by most of the participants. Yet, because of their resiliency and desire to succeed, they persisted throughout their undergraduate programs. David described the difficulties of working 60-hour workweeks, being a new father, and going to school full-time. “You have to be extremely
disciplined, where really want it to work and go to school and pay bills at the same time,” sharing “it was hard, it was very hard, but… especially last two years, so it was rough but I did it.” David explained that a “normal” school day was full of struggles, because of his need to work full time to support his family, as well as pay for his school. “I would get up at six o’clock in the morning… go to class at seven…. Get lunch, go to work from three to like twelve, do it all over again.” At one point, David’s schedule switched from all day classes to both day and night classes. This was because the classes available to him through the registrar did not allow for a consistent schedule. David sometimes chose classes to skip so he could work. When there was an exam during a work shift, he had a different tactic:

So I’ll leave work, go and take the test then go straight back to work… sometimes I’ll park the car like right there on that corner, run inside, take the test… and then go right to work because I was the bread winner.

Being the breadwinner meant that David felt he had to make sacrifices and for him it came in all phases of his life, work, and home balance. David mentioned, “There were some days when I wanted to give up.” But he did not, even without any sleep, doing 15-page projects and fighting with his girlfriend because he was not at home for her or the baby. He never stopped. When asked why, David explained, “Because if I stopped school, I won’t be… I’ll be stuck, and I never stopped.” David realized, looking back, that if he had stopped he would not have the great job he has now. He would not have had the opportunity to get into the management-training program that started immediately after graduation. He knew the company he now works for would not have waited for a “post May” graduate. David reiterated, “I would have never have got that opportunity if I had just taken a year off.”
Working and attending school was challenging for Tramayne. It took its toll physically, emotionally, and even financially. While she was a RA, Tramayne also needed to work outside the school, and because of the assistance, even continued working in the Federal Work-Study (FWS) Program. It began to take its toll. Tramayne recalled having to work “definitely hurt” her from achieving while in school, “it hurt a lot.” Describing this hurt, she said that while she was a RA she was responsible for forging relationships with her residents, yet, she did not have the time to accomplish this because she was working. She noted that if she was not working, she was sleeping. Because of that, she felt that her residents did not get the opportunity to get to know her as well as they could have. Beyond this impact on her relationships with her residents, Tramayne mentioned how her workload affected her in school:

My grades started dropping and some of my scholarships were lessened or taken away. It definitely caused me a lot of tired days in class where I wasn’t able to focus and I remember having hallucinations because I wasn’t getting enough sleep. It was rough. It definitely hurt me.

When asked if she sought additional help from the Center for Academic Support when her grades started to drop, Tramayne indicated that she “had no time to get there” because she always had to be at work. For Tramayne, that meant either being at her work-study or at the front desk of the resident’s hall fulfilling her RA requirements or even at her off campus job.

Tramayne believed if she were not working she would have been able to get the additional help she needed. “Yes, if I didn’t have to work so much I would have been in the classes that, after you get out at like 3:00, you can go over to the library and have study sessions.” Because she had to go straight to work, she felt that she not only missed out on the
study sessions, but also on what she called “the relationships” she could have built with other students at those study sessions.

As an older, non-traditional student, JBob’s focus was on “getting an education.” To do so, he had to work at as many as four different jobs to pay for his education and everything else he needed in life. JBob disclosed, “I didn’t really have a lot of time to do social outside because I worked a lot, always, always working.” Because students in the Culinary Arts Program at Johnson & Wales University Charlotte typically have classes only Monday through Thursday, JBob and others had the opportunity to work a three-day weekend, often in the culinary industry. JBob took advantage of that opportunity. As he recalled, he worked “12 hours at least on Saturdays and Sundays. Fridays I worked at the school, when I got done with the school I went to work.”

Discussing how his work affected his ability to persist, JBob told the story of a difficult class he had taken. He described a teacher as one that pushed students harder than most. Because of this, JBob was unable to keep up--he was working too much and he did not have time to study like he “should have.” JBob recalled:

Because I did work a lot… it definitely did affect, at times, and when it did, and I realized that, I had to cut back at one point, I had to get rid of one of those jobs because I was just, I was, all the time going something, doing something, working somewhere, trying to get some money.

JBob viewed his sacrifices as necessary to his future success, or as he explained, “sometimes in life you have to do what you have to do in order to do what you want to do later on.”
Monica, much like the other participants, worked a lot while going to school. She, too, believed that sacrifices had to be made so that she could afford to live and go to school at the same time. Her motivation to survive continued to push her:

Like if you don’t know where dinner is coming from, the last thing you’re concerned about is your sense of belonging and connection to other people… when those basic needs are met and you feel comfortable and you have a sense of security. Like, you’re not concerned about where dinner’s coming from or if the lights are going to be on so that you can do your homework.

That place of security allowed Monica to find herself. Working as a RA, working as a work-study student, and working off-campus at restaurants full-time helped to provide that security, and helped to pay for school. Monica recalled:

So I didn’t necessarily have the luxury of filling up my time with things for fun. I really came to school with a mission of like I have to do this, but I also have to afford it on my own. And so if that means I have to work 60 hours a week and go to school then that’s what’s going to have to happen for me to get through this.

It seems Monica’s resiliency and passion for what she was doing allowed her to see work as less of a barrier to her college completion and as more of a challenge she had to endure to get to her end goal. However, working so much did take a toll on her. Because Monica was such a strong academic student, she believed that working so much became more of a barrier to her “social and personal development” than her academic persistence. She recalled:

Because there were a ton of times where I’m like man, I would really love to go to X, Y, or Z event that’s happening on campus or you know, just go hang out with people for fun… I think it was less of a barrier to my academic completion and more of a barrier to
my social development, because it limited the amount of time that I got to spend with my peers outside of the classroom just in a general relationship building setting, which I think is important.

Although Monica was able to spend a lot of time engaged in social activities in her capacity as a RA, she still considered that time to be work.

Etna viewed working as a way that she could contribute to both her current family financial situation, and like Monica, her future career. Etna became a RA with a specific goal in mind: the room and board scholarship that came along with the position. She also worked because she had to help pay for her tuition, as she “didn’t wanna take out more loans.” Etna “helped out a little bit every once and a while. Thousand dollars here, thousand dollars there.” Etna never saw her work as a barrier to completion. She saw her work as an opportunity to enhance her culinary experience, and for her, that was the main goal for her junior and senior years. She was fortunate; she had landed a wonderful internship. This position not only gave her great experience, but also great money. This internship, she believed, forced her to find a “good job” over a well paying job when she returned to school, because she knew that the experience would help her career in the long term. Returning from her internship, she secured a position with the Ritz Carlton for her last two years. This was not only a great position, but a good paying one as well.

As the sub-themes have indicated, the barriers to completing a college degree for first-generation college students are many. Between making the social and financial adjustments necessary to survive college, to identifying and admitting academic weakness, first-generation college students too must deal with the unknown world of the college campus. The next theme,
‘It takes a village,’ helps identify what strategies first-generation college students employed to overcome these barriers to college completion.

**Theme #3: It takes a Village**

The next theme, *It takes a Village*, developed out of the sub research question: *What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers?* For the participants in this study, overcoming the barriers they identified to their college completion was not something that they were able to do on their own. For the participants, relying on others from different parts of the school community, as well as their personal lives, aided them along their journey. For them, it truly took a village. Within the third theme, three sub-themes were recognized. They included, *It’s all about your peers, building professional relationships, and the student as the leader.* These three sub-themes are described below.

**Sub-theme #1: It’s all about your peers.** The social transitions that took place were transitions built and developed throughout their college careers. Etna found that the individuals she spent time with in her culinary laboratory rotations were not just classmates, they were her “friends and family.” She also sought out individuals she identified as “similar” to her by joining one of the university clubs, RUF. RUF is the Reformed University Fellowship bible study group, a national Christian organization run by the Presbyterian Church. Etna was raised in a very Christian family, and because of that, she felt this group of individuals with similar beliefs was a great way to make new friends and to get her out of her dorm room. Etna also started to hang out and make lasting relationships with classmates outside of class who were “different” from her. She described her class friends as helpful with homework even if they “were a little bit out there.” She recalled, “What’s funny is I actually was kind of still friends
with those people up until graduation.” She seems to have found support both where she was looking for it, and outside those expectations.

Besides the RUF and classmates, Etna also made friends through joining the Student Government Association (SGA). Etna described building “networking” relationships with individuals, even if the relationship did not extend past graduation. She believed that being with the SGA helped her “branch out” as well as “kind of like shape what you think about and who you think about and stuff.”

Tramayne initially had a difficult time making friends. However, one individual who eventually became a boyfriend, was of great support to her. This young man would cook for her on the weekends because her finances were low. Tramayne credited this individual for being “the only reason why” she stayed her freshmen and sophomore years. She recalled, “I would have left if it wasn’t for him.” He was not a first-generation student and had “help” from home, as Tramayne stated. He helped her make friends in a dance group he formed which Tramayne said “brought me out of my shell a lot.” Beyond this boyfriend, Tramayne also credited:

Friends that I met in class that, when I just wanted to get away, get around people who shared the same interests as me, with me, I had made these friends in class. And because we go through the same thing, we get up at 7 a.m. and we’re all in this class from seven to twelve… or one. You travel with these people for rotations and… I built a lot of relationships there that when things got tough and I just need a shoulder to lean on, those friends would be like, well, you can come and talk to me.

Tramayne believed the rotation of culinary classes helped her develop these relationships, even though she had a difficult time socializing when she first came to college. She realized that she could not have done anything alone. Tramayne expressed it this way:
I hope people realize that they do, the little things they do for people help a lot. They help a lot. It does take a village and lot of people feel like they don’t matter. They have no hand in a person’s success. So many people have had a hand in my success, just because of the little things they did.

Tramayne felt those little things included the actions of her fellow RAs. At one point in her college career, Tramayne started to get depressed about her weight. She recalled, “The RA family was terrific… we started working out together. It’s those little things that people do that help you say, oh, well, I can make it.”

Monica credited the peer relationships that she developed as “really what got me through college.” Like Tramayne, Monica made friends in her culinary laboratory rotations. She recalled:

So many times the graduation speaker gets up and they’re like, “Thank your mom. Thank your dad.” But I’ve always been one of those like no, look to your left and look to your right because those are the people that sit up with you ‘til 2 a.m. when you had a term paper due. Those are the people that, you know, let you sit in their room and bawl your eyes out when… you know, professor ripped you to shreds… like those are the people that really get you through that experience.

JBob also discussed the impact his peers had on his college completion. Not his classmates, however, but his peers from work. He credits his friendships made in the capacity of his student work for the institution for helping him and creating “the lasting impacts” that he will cherish. JBob felt it was those relationships that were important, more so than the degree itself.

**Sub-theme #2: Building professional relationships.** For the participants in this study, building relationships with professionals within the institution, both faculty and staff, were
significant factors in their success and persistence. Tramayne’s mentor, as discussed, was a woman she met in high school who continued to be a significant individual and mentor in her life. In the classroom, Tramayne found another individual, a history teacher, who she says took the time to notice that Tramayne used art to express herself. She believed her art allowed her to stand out to this teacher, opening a line of communication that Tramayne had not had with other faculty members. Tramayne reflected:

When things got hard, and she could tell they were hard in class, she would just, you know, pat me on the shoulder. And she was one of the people that looked really, really hard and you know, not capable of sympathetic emotions, but when she pats you on the shoulder and shows that she can be sympathetic, that she could be there for me I realized that I wasn’t alone in everything. I was feeling I wasn’t alone and being overwhelmed.

Tramayne said that one sign of support from a faculty member, that one act, convinced her that if she stayed at school it would be worth it because she would have another class with that instructor.

Tramayne acknowledged others who were influential in her success. She told stories of individuals who worked in the Student Academic and Financial Services office (SAFS). She worked as a work-study student and recalled those that continually went out of their way to help her find additional scholarships and funding for school. What affected Tramayne the most was that “they listened, and sometimes that’s all you need when you’re going through, there’s some doubt that you can’t make it because nobody else made it, they listen.” Not only did they listen, but they also helped Tramayne move from one dorm to another.

Tramayne also spoke of a young woman for whom she worked at an off-school smoothie shop. Tramayne described this relationship as extremely important because this individual
“motivated” Tramayne to complete school. She allowed her to study during work hours, to leave and go to study sessions, and even covered Tramayne’s shifts herself so she could do school work, all of which she credits with helping towards raising her GPA.

Monica was able to develop professional relationships with faculty during her junior year. She recalled a situation where she had received an A in a class, though she believed she only deserved a B+. She confronted the instructor who told her that she indeed earned the A. He informed her that he could tell that she was dyslexic and was mixing the numbers up in her head. He said that being dyslexic did not mean that she was doing the work incorrectly. Monica described this incident and others like it with another teacher as connections that were “consistent.” Monica believed she was not making similar connections with the culinary faculty because the classes were too short (nine school days, six hours a day). Coupled with the fact that students were not with the instructors for a long period of time, or had them for fewer classes, they did not get to bond with them, especially compared to professors who taught for a whole quarter and in multiple classes. Monica explained that these longer class connections gave “a sense of consistency of... of something that not changing every semester, and of kind of a familiar face.”… “You just kind of develop a connection to them, that makes you feel more confident in the classroom, and they really get to know who you are as a student.” She indicated:

Johnson & Wales isn’t that big, like your chef instructors remember you long after you’ve had them. But having someone that kind of you recognize and feel comfortable with, and being able to develop that relationship with a faculty member… so when you have that sense of familiarity, like you just feel more comfortable going into the classroom.
Monica “absolutely” believed it was these types of relationships with faculty that helped her to be successful and persist with her Bachelor’s degree.

JBob indicated the professional culture at Johnson & Wales was something that he was involved in from day one. As discussed, he was a member of the campus opening team, working as a culinary assistant, as well as working as a teaching assistant, and later a fellow. Because of this, he spent a lot of time with the chef instructors, working in their element, helping with functions, as well as in the classroom during cooking laboratory classes. He felt the professional relationships he developed were a way of networking for his future. He believed that “every person I encountered at that, at that school really wanted people to be successful. I think that had the, I think that’s the biggest thing is they have a passion for people to be successful.” Asked if he felt these relationships helped him be successful, JBob responded, “Oh, yeah, absolutely…it kind of goes back to the networking thing… they wouldn’t hesitate to help me.”

JBob recalled a specific example of an economics professor, who he identified as a Democrat, made him read a book written by former President Bill Clinton. JBob acknowledged himself as a staunch Republican at the time, and was not happy, believing that the class and the instructor would not work out. But he loved the book. He loved how this instructor opened his mind, and explained, “She was one of those people that had a, a huge impact, huge impact on my success, and it wasn’t even something, it wasn’t the grade, you know, it was her passion for, for teaching and trying to see the best in people.”

Even the President of the campus had an impact on JBob. He remembered that on day one the campus President took the time to learn his name. Four years later when JBob graduated, he received a message from him through LinkedIn. JBob recalled, “If you ever need
anything, reference, letter recommendation, do not hesitate to call me,’ he says, ‘and I mean it.’”

That moment, that little piece of connection, was a “big deal” to JBob.

Like Monica, Etna believed that the culinary course structure affected her ability to make long lasting relationships with the culinary faculty. Yet, she made at least one. She recalled:

I asked a lot of questions of certain people that I knew I could trust and were trying to lead me in the right direction. But again, sometimes nine days or the amount of time we had (in the class with the instructor) just wasn’t enough.

She continued, “That nine-day segment… is just not enough to like actually make impression on somebody.” She believes that she was able to connect with a few instructors in her leadership and ethics courses, as well with an instructor she had more than once. Etna believed having an instructor for multiple courses made developing a connection with them easier.

**Sub-theme #3: Students in leadership positions.** Four out of five participants were involved as on-campus student leaders, as either resident assistants (RA) or as teaching assistants (TA). The participants used these positions as a way to earn extra money and to become more social.

Monica, Etna, and Tramayne said being a Resident Assistant (RA) was crucial in their growth and development as leaders among their peers as well as gave them the skills that helped them persist towards graduation. Etna found that the activities and duties involved in her role as a RA helped her become more social, allowing her to become a mentor to new students. Etna was also a member of the Student Government Association (SGA) on campus. Her membership allowed her to participate in student leadership seminars. She indicated that these seminars helped stretch her imagination, though time constraints limited Etna’s participation.
Monica completed similar leadership seminars. The bond she had early on with her housing team made her feel more connected with the institution, helping her become more social, and more knowledgeable about how college works. Monica reiterated, “I literally, like, I could not say enough good things about students getting involved in leadership positions across campus. Because for me, that’s really the kind of seed that grew into everything else that I became.” Monica believed that becoming a RA helped her “learn more about who I was and get comfortable with that… focusing on… learning more about yourself and what are you really confident in, and what do you feel great about, and what are you struggling with.” She believed that first-generation students who get involved in programs that “really focused on that self-development piece” would benefit greatly. She said it made “the biggest difference” in her life.

Tramayne reiterated the value of being a RA. She indicated, “I think that’s what kept me in school the rest of the years was being a RA and being able to help people.” Crediting her time as a RA for her ability to adapt socially, Tramayne pointed out:

I was just fortunate enough to become a RA so I was kind of born into a new family that that’s what helped me, being a RA, being connected to different people, that’s what helped me start building that socially, a social butterfly basically. I was able to relate to people.

JBob believed being a TA and a Culinary Fellow was an important part of his college career. Like serving as a RA, being a TA allowed JBob the full-time financial stability he required. The position allowed him to work with students on a personal level, helping them learn the specific craft of culinary arts. He felt being a TA and a Culinary Fellow helped him with his confidence as both a culinarian and as an individual. JBob also worked one quarter for the
Admissions department, traveling to high schools, giving culinary demonstrations, and recruiting for the institution, demonstrations such as the one that inspired him to apply.

The evidence presented in the three sub-themes cannot underemphasize the importance of support groups for first-generation college students. As the participants indicated, it took all aspects of their lives, both in their personal and professional contacts as well as social and professional networks, including peers, friends, faculty and staff, to aid them in their progression from pre-college through graduation.

**Theme #4: Success Builds Confidence**

The final theme, Success Builds Confidence, was developed through the interview protocol surrounding the research question: *How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?* The study participants found that their confidence in both their technical skills and academic abilities grew throughout the time they were enrolled in college. The study participants were able to build upon recent and past successes as well as to take the advice from individuals who were, to them, considered experts in their areas to aid them with their growth in confidence. They also utilized the experiences of their peers, both successes and failures, to gauge their own growth, and increase their confidence in both their academic and technical abilities.

Although the participants had followed a similar program requirement and walked down the same halls and entered the same classrooms, each described their own confidence along that track differently. There were, however, similarities that developed across the participant pool. These similarities, or sub-themes, included milestones achieved, the importance of the opinions of significant others, and the experiences obtained and evaluated through the experiences of
others, otherwise known as vicarious experiences. These three sub-themes are discussed further below.

**Sub-theme # 1: Milestones Achieved.** In their interviews, the participants shared how significant milestones throughout their college career helped raise their confidence. For the purposes of this study, the word confidence was used as a proxy for self-efficacy and explained that way in the interview protocol (Appendix E). Participants credited these milestones as something that helped them become the resilient FGS that they are today.

As Monica identified milestones through her college career, what resonated most during the interview process was her awareness of how these different milestones affected her. She mentioned that the structure of the laboratory classrooms meant daily food and beverage production, as well as evaluation. Throughout these evaluations, Monica second-guessed her efforts. She told the story of her very first class: a freshman level Principles of Beverage Service course. During her practical assessments, she lacked confidence. She shared the example of her thought process, “Maybe I’m wrong, maybe that’s not how you make a gin and tonic or maybe that not how you make X, Y, or Z.” Monica thought these experiences were “really kind of anxiety inducing.” She felt having to perform in front of others was “very nerve-wracking because, you know, you have the confidence in yourself, but it’s like when someone is standing right in front of you… like it just… you kind of have a panic attack almost.”

For Monica, finishing that first term was a fantastic accomplishment that did wonders for her self-efficacy. She recalled:

Like finishing my first trimester, I felt like a rock star because I was like… you know, at that point like I was like, “Okay, I get how this works. I kind of got my sea legs. I know kind of how the university works.” You know, you gain a little bit of that confidence,
and you’re excited and like you’re like, “Now, like I can do this,” and you... you have this sense of like achievement that comes along with it.

David identified significant milestones in both his academic and personal life. After having his daughter during his junior year, David still had to produce at a high level both academically and at his place of employment. Through difficult times, David maintained a positive attitude and remarked, “Even with something as serious as that [referring to the struggles he has encountered], it may set you back but it should never stop you from doing what you’ve gotta do.”

Etna indicated that a lot of her confidence problems came from moving away from the educational environment she was familiar with, a private Christian school, and entering a public school. She then finished her last year of high school and first year of college all at the same time. Etna explained that when she left the private school and spent time in the public school that her peers often cheated from her work. However, at college, she felt like she was finally back in a place where she was “good enough to hang out with” instead of just someone to cheat from. It was not until near the end of her sophomore year that Etna started to notice a change within herself and began to recognize her accomplishments. Etna recalled that during her sophomore year she was asked to complete a wok stir-fry practical, and she said, “Dude, I felt like I’m a bad ass.” She clarified, “Cause I’m like I got this in the hat it was just like, ‘oh, this tastes really good.’ I was like, ‘See guys?’” These examples show that the structure and nature of the classroom environment, where students have to produce a product and be evaluated on that product, when successfully done allowed first-generations students like Monica and Etna to build their confidence.
JBob indicated that his confidence problems were associated mostly with his weight. In fact, he felt it was this weight that had held him back his entire life, even while he was in school. JBob had acquired the respect of those running the school and those who that hired him, placing him in many important student leadership positions. But, he could not connect to these successes in order to increase his confidence. The external validation was hard to internalize. He said that it “probably gave me a little bit of confidence that people put so much, put so much confidence in me to me that, that job or that position, but I really don’t think I had a lot of self confidence before that.” As he looked back, JBob believed that it was other’s faith in him, expressed through repeated opportunities as milestones, that helped him progress towards graduation, building his confidence, even if at the time he did not appreciate them. JBob shared an analogy of “seeds,” describing this time in his life:

So many times the negative seed acts like a weed, and what I mean by that is the weeds strangle out the good stuff… I don’t, I think I celebrated them when they happened, you know but I didn’t really realized that all of them combined how well it was until, you know… looking at, like when I was completely done looking at my transcript, and I went “I did pretty good,” but it took four, four years for me to realized that I did that well. These “weeds,” or negative things in his life, impacted his ability to celebrate his own successes. It was only with time that he was able to see the cumulative effect of his successes and give himself credit for them.

**Sub-theme #2: The importance of the opinions of significant others.** Throughout their time in college, the participants heavily relied upon the remarks of others to help maintain and/or raise their self-efficacy. These ‘significant others’ included peers, instructors, and sometimes their bosses. Regardless of the source, participants recognized having an individual
with a working knowledge of the skills express confidence in them as a considerable determining factor in their ability to continue their education and eventually persist and obtain their degrees.

Monica described a time when she was taking one of her more intense sophomore capstone-style culinary courses, and she had to prepare a duck dish for guests in the dining room. This course was led by an instructor that she believed was very strict and of whom she said she “was terrified.” She recalled, “That was the most nerve-wracking class in my life because he did not mess around… he takes food very seriously.” At one point during the service, another instructor, also known to be tough, who had eaten the duck she prepared approached her and asked her to self-evaluate her dish. Monica explained that she felt she had not done a bad job, that she had roasted it correctly and that she thought it was okay. The instructor proceeded to tell Monica, “I would have paid good money for that duck. It was excellent.” Monica was ecstatic, and her confidence in her abilities grew just from that single incidence of feedback. She started to believe, “You can do this.” She shared that she was so excited that she literally thought that she was “going to die” with excitement. Monica indicated that it was experiences like this that helped her confidence to grow. She explained, “If you don’t have a huge amount of confidence in yourself, like, you’re looking for that kind of external confidence of other people saying, “Hey, like you’re doing a really good job, it’s going to be okay.” She continued:

Getting that confidence from other people who are professionals that you look up to that you kind of see as these mentors and these guides throughout this process. Having them really look at you and say, “You know what? Like you can do this and we believe in you and you’re doing great work”… I think really makes a difference and… and made the difference in my experience.
Tramayne, too, told a story involving the same capstone course. She was also “terrified” by the prospect of having to produce a specific dish for the course final cooking exam. She was elated when the instructor gave her that verbal push, calming her fears and telling her, “No, I believe you have it.” He told her that the product she produced was “fabulous.” It was these little bits of persuasion, these small moments that helped her believe in herself. She recalled, “I felt like the world’s best French cook! I can do this. It actually tastes good… I became very passionate about it… I did become a lot more confident.” Tramayne recalled another time when another instructor helped build her confidence. “I was scared to cook an egg over easy,” she recalled. “I remember [the instructor] telling me ‘You don’t know how great you are yet, but you will.’ And I think from that day forward I applied myself a little bit more.”

David, like Monica and Tramayne, gained confidence from individuals who contributed significantly in his academic growth. He recalled having professional tutors at the Center for Academic Support work with him during his accounting classes, as well as receiving one-on-one tutoring with his English teacher. David recalled these sessions, noting they helped boost his confidence because his instructor could tell he was serious about needing help. When he successfully applied the new skills, David indicated, “It boost my confidence. Yeah, I actually understand now… I don’t look like a dummy.” For David, the recognition he received for being “serious” allowed him to be vulnerable, by doing the work and showing that he did not want to fail, it paid off in the form of support from his instructors. The indirect benefit of confidence in his own actions was coupled with the direct attainment of the goal of graduating and achieving his dream.
**Sub-theme #3: Vicarious experiences.** The first-generation college graduates in this study often compared their academic and culinary skills against their peers. These comparisons affected their confidence for the better, and for one participant, for the worst.

Working as a teaching assistant for the College of Culinary Arts, JBob was often surrounded by individuals who, like himself, had a higher level of culinary skill than the average culinary student. In particular, JBob was often jealous of a group of students with whom he worked and attended classes. He indicated, they were individuals who he believed he was “not as good as” in terms of his culinary skills. JBob believed that his lack of confidence held him back, especially when he compared himself to others. He stated, “It did hold me back to, to being less than what I could have been.” Because he didn’t see himself as being equal to his TA peers, JBob did not attempt many student-led cooking competitions, and did not even try out for the school’s student culinary competition team, which competed both regionally as well as against the four other JWU campuses across the nation.

Monica also spent time comparing herself to her peers in the classroom. However, unlike JBob, Monica used these experiences observing her peers’ successes as a motivator, pushing her to do better. She explained:

> For me it was always like, ahh, if that person is better than me, like it wasn’t like “oh, they’re better than me”, and I’m less confident in myself, it was more of a I want to be where they are because they’re obviously successful, and so what can I do to get on that level?

Monica grouped herself with a couple of other students throughout her schooling. Even though they all came from different backgrounds, she was very close to them, which allowed her to see others’ perspectives. Grouping herself with these individuals allowed her to do what she
explained as “comparative learning.” She believed that “the company that you keep” builds an individual, and keeping the company she did in school helped her grow in her skills and eventually persist.

Unlike Monica, Tramayne did not initially connect with classmates and also did not view them as individuals who were there to help her excel. Tramayne explained that she had become bitter because she was familiar with the educational attainment level of her peers’ parents. She indicated that she had noticed that because of their level of education, they were able to provide their children with support that she had not received from her own family. She explained that because of her immaturity at the time, her mind would go straight to jealousy when she saw her peers excelling in culinary skills that she did not have initially. As she looked back, she believed that her actions were “silly.” She now knows that she could not “really understand the trouble that other people have.”

Later in her college career, Tramayne’s mindset changed and she was able to look at things and people with a different perspective. Because she was a “very competitive person,” like Monica, she began to see her peers as models for her own improvement. Tramayne indicated that when working in groups, “there were people who over-excelled and because they over-excelled in groups I wanted to match them.” Because of her competitive nature, she “didn’t want to be outshined or seem like less” than her peers.

Etna, too, noticed her fellow students and believed that when working with peers, she was a natural leader. She took over group lead projects and culinary course production. However, unlike the other participants in the study, she indicated that she was not competitive with her classmates. She preferred to be in the middle of the pack. She did not want to be the best student in the room, but she also did not want to be the worst. She explained:
I knew which ones were getting A’s because of where they were from and I knew I could just… I could be below them and be okay with that because they had… they had a different… they’re on a different level [culinary skill wise] than I was.

When asked why she put herself in the middle, Etna explained, “Because I knew where… I knew what I had. I knew like the skills that I had and then I knew what I learned and that’s what I was gonna get.” For Etna, even though she was aware of how the others in her groups were performing, she did not use it as a way to push herself like Tramayne, but she also did not let it lower her self-efficacy either. She attributed the success of others to advantages that she did not have.

As the sub-themes in this section have indicated, first-generation college students who participated in this study recognized that success builds future successes and that this was a necessity in aiding them in completing their college degrees. With each milestone, first-generation college students were able to store those feelings of success and skill attainment and use their previous experiences as a means to catapult them to the next successful milestone. First-generation college students rely heavily on the opinions of both their peers as well as individuals who they believe have a requisite knowledge of the task they are trying to perform. Whether it is an instructor, or a tutor, the opinions of others matter to FGS. Yet, the opinions that seem to be of the most importance and that raise confidence in FGS are those individuals who FGS believe have the technical knowledge of the task they are trying to complete.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided the essence of the lived experiences of five academically resilient first-generation college students who graduated from a four-year, career-focused institution in an effort to answer the research questions: How do first-generation college students understand and
explain their success at a four-year career-focused institution? Four sub questions were utilized to answer the research question and these sub questions were utilized as a means of constructing the outline of the chapter as well as presenting the data obtained. The four sub questions included: *What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college? What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize? What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers? And, How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?* Interviews with five academically resilient first-generation college students who attended and graduated from a four-year career-focused institution provided the following analysis of their lived experiences revealed four major themes, including Personal and Professional Aspirations, “You Don’t Know What You don’t Know,” It Takes a Village, and Success Builds Confidence. Each theme was further broken down, resulting in 13 sub-themes. These sub-themes captured the participants’ own narratives in an effort to stay as true as possible to the participants’ meaning of their experiences. The process utilized double hermeneutics where the participant made sense of their experience, while the researcher made sense of the participants’ experiences through their interpretation of it.

The next chapter discusses the meaning and significance of the findings. The discussion includes a summary of the problem of practice and a review of the research findings. The chapter also discusses the results in relation to the theoretical frameworks as well as discusses the results in relations to the extant literature presented in chapter two of this thesis. Implications for current and future research are also discussed, as well as a personal reflection from the author.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

This chapter discusses the implications of the results in Chapter 4. Five academically resilient first-generation college students were interviewed. How they made sense of their experiences as the first in their families to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree from a career-focused institution was presented in detail. This chapter begins with a summary of the problem of practice and a summary review of the results. The results reported are then discussed in relation to the theoretical frameworks, self-efficacy and academic resilience. Next, the chapter will review the broader literature used to guide this study and place the study within this literature. The limitations of the study, as well as the implications for current research and recommendations for future research, are discussed as well. The chapter closes with personal reflections from another first-generation college student, the researcher himself.

Summary of Problem

First-generation college student enrollment has risen over the last few decades, and “no one disputes there are more of such students taking classes than ever before” (Davis, 2010, p. 11). First-generation college students (FGS) represent between 30 and 53 percent of the enrollment at four-year institutions today (Davis, 2010; Strayhorn, 2006). Yet, FGS only graduate at rates between 11-23 % (Pell Institute, 2011). The large body of existing literature on the topic of FGS is mostly quantitative in nature, and a scan of the literature reveals no extant research centering specifically on the persistence of FGS who obtained a four-year degree from a career-focused institution. Accordingly, this research sought to fill this gap in the literature by presenting a qualitative study at a career-focused university.

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors FGS believed contributed to their successes at a four-year, career-focused university. The research question that guided this
study was: *How do first-generation college students understand and explain their success at a four-year career university?* Sub questions were used to gain further insights in relation to the main threads from the literature and the theoretical frameworks. These sub questions were:

1. *What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college?*
2. *What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize?*
3. *What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers?*
4. *How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?*

Data was collected through participants’ accounts of their experiences as first-generation college graduates. The analysis led to the development of the following four themes: ‘Personal and Professional Aspirations,’ ‘You don’t know what you don’t know,’ ‘It Takes a Village,’ and ‘Success Builds Confidence.’ These four themes are discussed below in a summary of the research findings that is structured based on the research questions presented above.

**Summary of the Research Results**

**Research sub-question one.** *What do first-generation college students give as their reasons for attending college?* Analysis of participants’ responses uncovered the theme of ‘personal and professional aspirations’ and three sub-themes including ‘the need to prove others wrong,’ ‘it’s about professional growth,’ and ‘I don’t want that life, I can’t be a statistic.’

Evidence from the study suggests that the reason first-generation college students attend college is to provide both themselves and their families with opportunities for personal and professional growth. The research also suggests that doubters in their immediate families and
their communities fueled the participants’ passion and desire to obtain a college degree. Finally, the evidence indicates that negative vicarious experiences, or more specifically, those experiences of their families and communities that the participants viewed and identified as negative models, such as poverty and drug addition, played an important role in the decision to seek out and complete a Bachelor’s degree.

**Research sub-question two.** *What barriers to college completion do first-generation students recognize?* This provided the theme ‘you don’t know what you don’t know.’ The sub-themes that accompanied the theme include ‘being the first,’ ‘playing the social game,’ ‘academic weaknesses as a barrier,’ and ‘the work-school balance.’ The evidence suggests that the greatest barrier for most of the participants was not having the requisite knowledge necessary to understand how the application process, and how a university as a whole, works. The participants described this knowledge as readily available to non-first generation college students because of their parents’ education level and prior experience as successful college students themselves. Another barrier was the difficulties surrounding the social environment of college. For most of the participants, being in a new city, living in a new home [student housing], and trying to develop relationships was difficult in its own right. When coupled with the financial barriers expressed as the need to work, in some cases three-to-four different jobs simultaneously to support themselves and pay for school, the social adjustment to college became that much more difficult. One participant found that being both a high school senior and college freshmen at the same time added to her difficult social adjustment to college.

**Research sub-question three.** *What do first-generation college students recognize as strategies they believe to be effective in overcoming these barriers?* This revealed the theme ‘it takes a village.’ The sub-themes included in the theme are ‘it’s all about your peers,’ ‘building
professional relationships,’ and ‘the student as a leader.’ The research suggests that for first-generation college students to overcome the barriers identified, it requires assistance from all areas of their personal and professional environment, including members of the institution’s faculty and staff.

Even though some participants identified a difficult initial social adjustment, all of the study participants identified their peers as a significant reason they were able to overcome the barriers they faced and persist through to graduation. Peer groups included classmates and those they worked with both on and off campus. One participant’s mentor from before she entered college was a significant factor, helping her manage the college application and loan process, and was influential to her throughout her college career.

Many of the first-generation college students in the study identified professional staff members throughout the institution as significant influences on their ability to overcome barriers. One participant acknowledged two different individuals who worked in Student Academic and Financial Services who even at one point were there to help her move from one housing unit to another because she had no one else who could help her.

Participants highlighted the importance of university faculty and their ability to connect with students inside and even, sometimes, outside the classroom. They credited faculty with making them more comfortable in their educational environment which aided them in overcoming the barriers identified. One finding regarding faculty was unexpected. While overall the participants found faculty extremely knowledgeable, helpful, and dedicated to their classes, some felt that they could not connect with the culinary faculty as easily as their academic classroom instructors. Participants felt that this different level of connection was because the culinary faculty was busy teaching long hours and because classes were shorter (nine days),
allowing less time to spend with them. Connections were also difficult to establish because of students’ perception of their skill levels in contrast to the culinary faculties’ skills. In fact, one participant shared that despite the time outside the classroom he spent through extracurricular events, he was unable to make personal connections with the culinary faculty.

Holding positions that were viewed as student leadership positions was another strategy participants described in overcoming their perceived barriers. All five participants held leadership positions during their time in school. Four of the five participants held on-campus leadership positions, while the fifth held several off-campus management positions in local restaurants. This finding is significant because it describes a relationship between on-campus employment and student leadership positions and its positive effect on FGS’ persistence. Not only did student employment, specifically in leadership positions, address the financial barriers participants faced by reducing their tuition through scholarships, but it also provided the individuals with monetary gains by receiving a paycheck, further offsetting the cost of college attendance. Participants credited being employed by the institution with overcoming social barriers, putting them in positions where they were required to network and socialize as part of their employment. Three of the participants also noted that being a resident assistant allowed them to participate in leadership training which they believed helped them to overcome social barriers and gain skills that could help them in their professional lives.

**Research sub-question four.** *How do first-generation students explain the role, if any, self-efficacy played in their ability to persist and successfully complete a four-year degree at a career-focused institution?* Analysis of participants’ responses uncovered the theme ‘*success builds confidence.*’ The sub-themes included in the theme are ‘*milestones,‘ the importance of the opinions of significant others,*’ and ‘*vicarious experiences.*’ For the purpose of this study, the
The term ‘confidence’ was used and defined as a proxy to the term self-efficacy during the interview process. It was evident throughout the interviews that the participants had confidence issues when it came to their social and academic lives. When dealing with these confidence issues, the participants cited specific actions presented in the findings that helped them increase their self-confidence, in turn raising their self-efficacy. The strategies for overcoming barriers and increasing efficacy included peer and faculty relationships, relationships with professional staff on and off campus as well as with mentors both on and off campus. Additionally, being put into a leadership position and having the trust and faith to accomplish the tasks and carry out these responsibilities was noted. The three sources of self-efficacy as they relate to the lived experiences of the study participants will be discussed in more detail in the section to follow.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks**

Two theories, self-efficacy and academic resilience, were used as a lens through which to interpret the study findings and frame the research design. A discussion of the findings in relation to the theories is described below.

**Self-Efficacy.** Bandura (1997) defined the theory of self-efficacy as one’s belief in their ability to organize and execute the courses of action required to complete a specific task. For the first-generation college students in this study, that specific task was the acquisition of a Bachelor’s degree. Bandura identified five sources of self-efficacy; three of which were examined specifically for this research based on the educational environment of the study. The three sources include enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997). Each of these three sources of efficacy will be discussed in greater detail below. The research site was a career-focused institution, providing individuals the opportunity to earn a degree in a field that is very much hands-on or tactile. Keeping that in mind, the
experiences lived by the first-generation college students in the study, as described in Chapter 4, were also tactile in nature, giving context to the discussion that follows concerning the three sources of self-efficacy explored in the study.

**Enactive mastery experiences.** Enactive mastery experiences are those experiences that individuals use to make decisions based on their success and or failures (Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura, an individual’s belief that they can perform a specific task (in the case of the participants, culinary tasks) leads them to better performance of those tasks. According to Kim (2005), “People come to believe that they can do a specific task better through the mastery of knowledge achieved by repeated, task-related, hands-on experiences” (p. 1103). For the participants in this study, the evidence suggests that each successful accomplishment in the pursuit of their degree in a vocational and hands-on environment increased their personal efficacy and helped them to further grow as individuals. Eventually, by building on each successive accomplishment, the participants were able to continue to persist. In fact, the successful completion of a career-focused Bachelor’s degree in four years, or in one case, three years, indicated that first-generation college students with varying levels of efficacy could indeed be academically resilient.

Participants in this study indicated that when they were introduced to negative mastery experiences, or more specifically, experiences that were not successful initially, they evaluated their environment and were able to effectively manage it based on previous successes. Bandura (1997) described this action as strategic thinking about one’s environment. He indicated that we as humans are agents of this environment who manage and later evaluate it based upon the adequacy of the knowledge we have acquired.
This finding diverges from Bandura’s (1997) theory on self-efficacy in which he explained that even though an individual’s personal efficacy is undermined by his or her own failures, that with persistence and resiliency an individual can indeed learn to turn failures into future success. The participants in this study had moments where they encountered a lack of positive efficacy, but because of their academic resilience, they were able to use their previous successes as a motivator and continued progressing towards graduation despite the negative mastery experiences they encountered.

Vicarious experiences. Vicarious experiences are those experiences individuals encounter through modeled attainments (Bandura, 1997). More specifically, they are those experiences that are lived and created by observing the successes (and in some cases, the negative examples) of individuals in a representative group. The FGS in this study explained that they were observant of their communities of origin and the negative vicarious experiences of the individuals within these communities. Participants indicated that these observations of negative vicarious experiences aided them in their decision making process to pursue and obtain a Bachelor’s degree. Bandura (1997) does not directly discuss the decision making process of individuals based on their social environment. However, he does discuss the role of intentionality. According to Bandura, individuals act “based on their understanding of what is within the power of humans to do and beliefs about their own capabilities” (p. 3). Bandura reminds us that if an individual does not believe he or she has the power to produce a result they will not attempt to make things happen. The study participants’ use of the vicarious experiences of others in their communities of origin to make decisions, based on a belief of their own capabilities, indicates that for them, the pursuit of their Bachelor’s degree was their attempt at making an intentional change in their lives based on the belief that they were capable to do so.
The study participants also indicated that throughout their enrollment they often compared themselves to their peers. Accordingly, all participants had the opportunity to be assessed by these peers as well as their instructors. In addition to being assessed by their peers and instructors, the participants also had the opportunity to assess their own skills against their peers. Several participants identified that they believed through these assessments that they were aware that their culinary skills were either less than, or even better than, other students in their classes. The participants recognized that it was okay to be at a different skill level dependant on their own background as well as that of their peers. These modeled attainments pushed the participants to work harder, with one participant describing that because she was a such a competitive person, that if her peers were getting good grades then she needed to work harder so she would not be “out shined” by them. These findings suggest that first-generation college students do indeed compare themselves to their peers when it comes to their class work and grades. The study participants recognized that as a consequence of coming from dissimilar backgrounds than their peers, who they deemed more successful in either a financially or practical skill sense, that they could still use these modeled attainments to push themselves to succeed despite their perceived skill disadvantage.

**Verbal persuasion.** Verbal persuasion is social in nature and helps individuals gain a greater sense of efficacy through expressions of confidence given by significant others (Bandura, 1997). Mellor, Barclay, Bulger and Kath (2006) refer to verbal persuasion as the act of an individual who has experience with the skill set, known as the model, providing an expression of confidence in the recipient. Based on this expression of confidence, the individual’s efficacy beliefs surrounding the skill should increase. Evidence indicates that a first-generation college student’s efficacy increases when a significant other affirms that the student is successful in the
tasks attempted, even if they feel as though they are struggling. For several of the participants in the study, much of their confirmation came from members of the faculty and the staff working at the Center for Academic Support, as well as by peers who they [the participants] believed could provide necessary feedback.

Based on the tactile nature of the skills associated with the curriculum at the study site, participants received constant feedback from instructors, peers, and even individuals dining in campus classroom facilities. Receiving praise from instructors they viewed as “tough” changed their mindset concerning their abilities and increased their perception of their own skills, and accordingly, aided in raising their self-efficacy. The findings affirm that it is easier for first-generation college students to increase their efficacy when significant others, notably faculty members, professional tutors, peers, or those outside the school structure praise the work they are producing in a career-focused institution.

**Academic resilience.** According to Morales (2008a), academic resilience “is defined solely by exceptional academic achievement in the face of adversity” (p. 152). Morales and Trotman (2004) indicated that academic resilience refers to “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been successful despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (p. 8). For first-generation college students as a population, just simply being the child of a parent who did not go to college puts them at the greatest risk for low degree attainment (Choy, 2001). For the five individuals who participated in this study, completing a Bachelor’s degree despite the low percentage of first-generation students who do graduate (Pell Institute, 2011) is an incredible accomplishment.

Morales (2008a) identified that academically resilient college students of color or low socioeconomic status need to deal with the stress associated with their status. Morales suggested
that the cultural discontinuity students faced might have caused this stress. The author defined cultural discontinuity to mean that a student of color or low socioeconomic status must face the reality that the environment they are thriving in is not one that they as students of color or low economic status are historically a good match for. Morales (2008a) cited Deschenes et al. (2001) indicating that the reason these students are not a good match for this environment is because “the academic milieu and all that it involves is drastically different from the cultures into which these student were born” (p. 156). Morales (2008a) posited that these students must change whom they are as individuals to thrive in “the often exotic world of academic culture” (p. 157). Although this study included three students of color and three students who identified themselves as poor, no evidence was collected that indicated that these students needed to adapt solely based on the color of their skin or their socioeconomic status. The study’s findings do, however, confirm that first-generation college students do indeed feel stress. This stress was highlighted by the participants to be specifically associated with their first-generation status, being home sick, and the social integration problems they were having. These social integration problems included the participant’s difficulty to initially make friends, as well as their feeling of being alone in a new environment.

Morales (2008a) also highlighted that academically resilient students often wrestle with the realization that their prior education was inadequate and did not prepare them for the rigors of college academics. Morales (2008a) indicated that this realization is due to the well documented disparities between schools attended by the wealthy and those who attended schools in lower class areas. The author posited that academically resilient students “must take steps to meet their academic needs” (p. 163). Consistent with Morales (2008a), three of the participants considered their academic preparation a barrier to their college completion, yet no mention was
made that identified that it was of their opinion that academic preparation was correlated to wealth as a metric for this preparation. Also consistent with Morales’s (2008a) study, all three of the students who believed that they lacked academic preparation prior to entering college took the necessary steps needed to correct their deficiencies. These steps included, but were not limited to, meeting with teachers in the courses they were having difficulties with, meeting with professional tutors, as well as meeting with peers for assistance.

This study’s findings are also consistent with the extant literature presented by Gonzales and Padilla (1997) who suggest that academically resilient students need to be in an academic environment that is supportive and presents a sense of belonging. As presented in Chapter 2, Gonzales and Padilla emphasize that academic resilience is not a trait, but a capacity that develops over time depending on the support systems available. The study participants identified the supportive environment fostered by the institution’s faculty and staff as an effective means to gaining self-efficacy and persisting towards graduation. This confirmation of the literature highlights that both efficacy and resiliency theories effectively underscore the importance of the overall environment.

**Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature Review**

This section discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature on first-generation college students, beginning with a profile of the FGS, followed by a discussion on FGS and remediation. Additionally, a discussion of the findings in relation to Student Support Systems will be addressed.

**The first-generation college student profile.** Congruent with the current literature on first-generation college students, the participants possessed a determined passion for obtaining a college degree. Throughout the analysis and development of themes, it became clear that the
graduates in this study were aware of the personal and professional benefits of a college degree prior to and during their college careers. Several of the emergent themes are supported by the existing literature, but several of the study’s findings present new information and a richer understanding of the experiences of the participants.

Baum, Ma, and Payea (2010) indicated that college educated individuals are healthier, receive better employment benefits, and engage in activities that promote better learning habits for their children. The findings of this study corroborates with Baum et al. (2010), as the participants describe their current situations in more favorable terms than prior to their degree attainment. David, Etna, Tramayne, and Monica indicated that their lives have changed for the better, and JBob indicated that he believed because of his degree that his future would be better as well. Because of their degree attainment, the study participants have been able to secure employment that enriches their lives both in monetary and professional terms. However, missing from the literature was a description of first-generation college student’s passionate and emotional desire to prove others in their community of origin wrong, especially those family members who doubted them or contributed to their sense of self-doubt. While these emotional responses were not unexpected to the researcher as a faculty member having encountered students with these feelings, they were certainly not indicated in the extant literature. The participants also indicated that beyond proving others wrong that they wanted to further their career in the food service industry, as well as ensure that they broke the FGS cycle, a cycle that some of the participants connected with a life of poverty and drugs. Additionally, participants indicated that they “just wanted really wanted to go… to experience it.”

Monica’s recalling of her father’s doubt in his children when she was an adolescent triggered a powerful emotional response by her in her interview. Monica was extremely
motivated to prove to her dad, and any other doubters, that she had what it took to succeed and graduate from college. David also had a powerful, emotional response when asked why he was attending college. His lack of successful role models within his immediate family, as well as his negative view of the quality of life of members of his community, affected him greatly. He was determined to not be a negative statistic. These feelings fueled his passion to pursue his degree as well as his need to leave and not return to the area where he was born and raised. David’s degree attainment broke the generational status quo, and he was intrinsically motivated to ensure that his own child would not grow up like he did. Like David, Tramayne was fueled to change not only her life, but also the lives of her siblings. She was motivated to show her family that they, too, could make something of their lives. She tried to accomplish this by being the role model for them, something that had been missing in her life.

First-generation college students’ desire to help their immediate families and provide them with a role model was not directly indicated in the literature. Caporrimo (2008) found that the role FGS have within their home is one of responsibility. Accordingly, the finding surrounding the roles FGS ascribe to themselves confirms Caporrimo’s assertion of responsibility, albeit a new type of responsibility, defined through the participants’ voices as a role model for others in both their communities of origin, as well as their families. Etna described this new role when traveling to visit her grandparents. She described coaching a young woman whom she had not met before, but indicated that she [the young woman] was already accepted to the study institution. Tramayne also identified that as the oldest sibling that she often has conversations with her siblings in the hope that her mentoring will assist them in turning their lives around and will break the generational status quo.
The study results are also consistent with the findings of Baum et al. (2010). The results indicate that first-generation college students are motivated to receive their degrees because of the potential the degree holds for future professional growth. Some of the participants attributed the possibility of future success in their professional lives with earning a Bachelor’s degree; or, as Etna put it, a degree will gave her the ability to “do something bigger.” For JBob, who was already working in a management position, earning his degree meant shaping his future growth as a professional. It might be argued that the acquisition of their degrees externally validated that which was missing in their personal lives.

This study found that there are multiple barriers to college completion that first-generation students clearly recognized. As indicated by Choy (2001), Bui (2005), and Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007), first-generation college students are less prepared academically than their non-first generation college peers. While the study corroborates this notion as to how FGS describe their academic readiness, two participants believed that their academic skills contributed to their persistence. However, these two participants also indicated that their lack of technical skills was a cause for concern, one that they viewed as a potential barrier to their academic success and persistence.

According to the literature, first-generation college students often encounter more challenges than their peers and chief among these is a lack of familiarity with how college works (Davis, 2010). The participants in this study affirmed and recognized within themselves this notion of ‘unfamiliarity’ as a significant barrier. For Monica, this notion was manifested most clearly when she did not know how to pay her tuition or even understand that she had to sign up for housing. Monica believed that once she was accepted, housing sign up was automatic. Fortunately, she received a flyer with instructions as to how to sign up. Other participants also
shared their difficulties surrounding not knowing how college worked. Unlike their non-first
generation college peers, these students could not rely on their parents for help because they too
were unfamiliar with this process (Choy, 2001). They needed to rely on others in their
community, such as mentors and friends, to help guide them through both college and student
loan applications. Once accepted and on campus, the students relied on individuals on the
professional staff and student staff for guidance.

Coupled with the notion of being unfamiliar with how college works, several participants
also indicated that their lack of social integration into college affected their initial experience.
Two participants indicated that they almost left the institution because of the difficulties
associated with fitting in. This aligns with Strayhorn’s (2006) assertion that FGS are more likely
to leave college after their first semester. The personal narratives collected are in agreement with
contemporary research on first-generation college students and their social transition (Inkelas et
al., 2007). According to Inkelas and colleagues (2007), the social transitions of first-generation
college students are unique and educators and institutions alike should consider the importance
of social integration when designing educational environments, making them conducive to the
academic success of this population of students. Although much is done already to socially
integrate students on the campus, the individuals in this study had to find the initiative to seek
out and take advantage of the existing programs that helped them adapt and integrate.

First-generation college student remediation. Several of the participants in the study
believed that their academic abilities were below the level needed for college. Because of these
feelings, they considered their academic ability a barrier to their potential and overall college
success. Three of the five participants indicated that their poor academic skills required remedial
education. At the study site, this was most often in the form of tutoring from either faculty
members or professional tutors at the Center for Academic Success on campus. Strayhorn (2006) suggested that “seminars designed to teach students study skills and good writing habits may be particularly important for first-generation college students.” During the time participants were enrolled, the institution did not have such seminars offered to the culinary population. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the impact they might have had. Participants did, however, utilize faculty office hours as well as one-on-one tutoring and group-tutoring services that were, and continue to be, offered to all students. Seminars that are designed specifically for first-generation college students may be a means to assist those first-generation students who see their academic skills as a barrier, allowing them to develop mastery experiences. These mastery experiences could raise the level of self-efficacy in this specific population of students, and therefore, could help more first-generation college students persist and earn a Bachelor’s degree. This is further explored in the recommendations section.

**Student support systems.** Recent research emphasizes student support systems and services in an effort to provide both social and personal integration into college (Inkelas et al., 2007; Vohra-Gupta & Prospero, 2007). Strayhorn (2006) and Inkelas et al. (2007) suggest that academic and social integration positively correlates with academic achievement and persistence. The literature also highlighted the success of living-learning programs and communities, as well as orientation courses such as first-year seminars (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Swaner and Brownell, 2008). While the research site did have a first-year seminar program in place during the time that some of the participants attended, culinary students were not required to attend. However, there were many points during the participants’ freshman year that the institution presented information pertaining to academic success expectations, the opportunity for study skill seminars, as well as what Swaner and Brownell (2008) described as pre-professional or
discipline-linked seminars. Several of the participants used study-based seminars as well as one-on-one tutoring provided by the institution in an effort to increase their academic skills. Although these services are not first-year seminars per se, they provided similar resources as those mentioned by Swaner and Brownell. Based on the participants’ discussion of these services and the benefits they gained by participating, it seems that providing these services positively impacted FGS persistence and helped them to overcome the barriers associated with their enrollment status as first-generation college students.

As the study has shown, the extant literature on FGS is filled with evidence that suggests that FGS are academically unprepared for college and are unfamiliar how college, as an institution, works (Bui, 2005, Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Strayhorn, 2006). Not indicated in the literature was the passionate and emotional desire to prove doubters in their community of origin wrong about their ability to earn a college degree. Congruent with resent research (Caporrimo, 2008), FGS identify with the role of responsibility, yet, they also identified a new role as mentor to both individuals in their own family and to others in their community. Also congruent with the extant literature, FGS identify social integration as a barrier to college completion (Inkelas et al., 2007; Vohra-Gupta & Prospero, 2007). To combat these barriers, participants utilized strategies such as remedial workshops and study sessions with both course instructors and peers. The participants also indicated that their role in a student leadership position also aided in their ability to persist and graduate. In the next section, several suggestions are made which the researcher believes, based on the literature that will also aid FGS in persisting and completing their Bachelor’s degree.

Study Limitations

As indicated in Chapter 3 of this thesis, the following study limitations were recognized:
• The study was conducted at a single campus of a multi-campus institution.

• Participants self selected to be part of research.

• All participants in the study were from the same program of study within the institution.

• Because the study site limited the participant sample to the graduating classes of 2011 through 2013, not all first-generation graduates from the campus were contacted to participate in the study.

• It is possible that not all members of each graduating class were members of the institution’s Facebook page. Therefore, they may not have been invited to participate in the study.

• Although the sample size was acceptable for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (a minimum of three), the sample was still small in relation to the total number of eligible FGS.

• Only one non-traditional college student participated in the study (25 years of age).

**Recommendations for Practice and Future Research**

The purpose of this research study was to explore what first-generation college students perceived as the factors that contributed to their success, persistence, and eventual graduation from a four-year, career-focused institution. As a result of the findings derived from the lived experiences of five academically resilient first-generation college students, the following recommendations are offered to members of the higher education community. The researcher hopes these recommendations listed below inspire institutions of higher learning, specifically those institutions that are geared towards a career-focused education, to look more closely at first-generation college students and provide them with the resources that may be allotted to other special populations of students. The recommendations are:
• Develop a Living Learning Community specifically geared to first-generation college students. This would enable FGS the opportunity to live with and socialize with others who also are FGS and share some of the challenges unique to their status. As this research has shown, one of the barriers identified by first-generation college students was their inability to adjust socially to their new environment. Empirical research on such programs has proven to be successful and provides an educational environment that is more successful than traditional college housing (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

• Develop a summer bridge program for first-generation college students that could bridge the gap between high school preparation and college. Garcia and Paz (2009) defined a summer bridge program as a transitional experience where students are required to attend writing workshops and are exposed to advisors, peer mentors, and faculty that are committed to the retention of FGS. Garcia and Paz (2009) also wrote that a summer bridge program is “designed to familiarize first generation students… with the rigors of university-level coursework” (p. 30). A summer bridge program allows students experiencing similar adjustment anxieties to be brought together and to begin forming social and academic support networks (Garcia & Paz, 2009). The FGS interviewed believed that peer networks and academic advising were helpful in establishing their eventual persistence. Garcia and Paz suggested effective summer bridge programs could also help FGS with social anxiety, an area that participants of this study identified as one of the barriers to college completion. Because FGS are less likely to be academically prepared for college, and their perception of that readiness was indeed a barrier, considerable attention and resources need to be directed towards the academic preparation of FGS (Horn & Bobbitt, 2000, as cited in Strayhorn,
The development of summer bridge programs may provide not only academic benefits, but also may ease the social transition for FGS as identified in this study.

• Develop faculty training geared to educating faculty on this special population of students. As this research has shown, when first-generation college students develop relationships with faculty, barriers to persistence are lessened. Training should be specifically geared to educate faculty about the barriers this population of student faces that prevents them from completing their degrees. The benefits of the relationships between FGS and faculty and staff have been shown to be successful. Davis (2010) wrote, “no one should be surprised that achieving a personal relationship with a faculty member is one of the strongest markers for academic success for students who are the first in their families to attend college” (p. 79).

• Additional opportunities for relationship building should be fostered between FGS and faculty. Faculty contributions to the persistence of first-generation college students were highlighted, yet, also highlighted in the discussion was the lack of relationship building identified by FGS with the culinary faculty because of the short-duration of their contact. Therefore, is suggested that the faculty-teaching schedule be adjusted to facilitate more interaction between students and culinary faculty that is more equitable when compared to that of academic faculty. If students can spend more than nine days with each faculty member, it may allow them to develop better relationships with the faculty.

• Staff training may also be beneficial. University staff members played an important role in the lives of the first-generation college students in this study. Therefore, it is suggested that in addition to training faculty, all university staff be included in training that highlights their role in the success of first-generation college students.
• Student leadership positions were cited repeatedly as the reasons for personal success among participants. They credited leadership positions as tools for overcoming their barriers to completion, specifically those held within the university, including the monetary benefits these positions provided. Institutions should look for more ways to involve and recruit first-generation college students who meet the positions’ requirements. Additionally, because FGS may also need to find additional off campus jobs to alleviate the monetary pressures of paying for school, an increase in the benefits paid to students in leadership positions should be considered.

• The final recommendation is to provide first-generation college students with appropriate academic support services specifically geared towards them as a student population. It is suggested in an effort to accomplish this that institutions develop and take advantage of the support grants available by the U.S. Federal Government and develop a TRIO program and center on their campuses. TRIO is “a set of federally-funded opportunity programs that motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds” (Council for the Opportunity in Education, n.d., n.p.). As part of former President Lyndon B. Johnson’s war on poverty, the TRIO program developed out of the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964, and as of today, there are now eight programs available which built upon the original three programs (Council for the Opportunity in Education, n.d.). Today, more than 1,000 colleges and universities, including community colleges, offer a TRIO program in the U.S. and abroad (Council for the Opportunity in Education, n.d.). Parsons (2012) described one such program in the Maine community college system that helped 93% of the students maintain a C average or better in their coursework. In addition, 96% of the 180 students enrolled in the program were in good academic standing, holding a 2.0 or higher GPA. Parson also found
that 97% of the students enrolled in the TRIO program at the Maine Community College returned for the next academic year.

Providing these types of services at institutions of higher learning to first-generation college students may aid them in acquiring their Bachelor’s degrees. This could enable them, as graduates, to eventually break the cycle of unfamiliarity with higher education that they and their families experience, and potentially, reap the financial and social benefits associated with earning a Bachelor’s degree. For future first-generation college students who enroll at the study campus, receiving these services could align with the institutional goals of investing in the students, the faculty, and the institution’s foundation (Johnson & Wales University, n.d. a).

**Recommendations for future research.** This study sought to help determine what first-generation college students perceive as the factors contributing to their successful completion of a Bachelor’s degree. The results of this study add to the existing literature on FGS and their persistence. This work is not complete, however, until more FGS can acquire what statistics prove to be a contributing factor in social mobility, a Bachelor’s degree from an institution of higher learning. As a scholar practitioner working in a career-focused institution, it is my obligation to find a way to utilize these findings in able to enact change that one day may indeed help other FGS achieve their goals. The lines of inquiry on FGS through the lenses of self-efficacy and academic resilience begin with this research. However, this is only a starting point. The recommendations that investigate several other branches of research that may lead to increasing the persistence of FGS include:

This study found that being a student leader on campus enabled four of the five participants the opportunity to participate in seminars related to leadership activities. Future research should be conducted on a larger scale to determine how being a student leader on a
college campus aids in the persistence of first-generation college graduates.

While this research did not investigate the role that family played in the experiences of first-generation college student’s persistence, three of the five participants had negative relationships with their families, which may have been exacerbated by their FGS status. Further research should be conducted in an effort to determine what role the families of first-generation college graduates played in their attempt at completion of a college degree.

As noted as a limitation to this study in chapter 3, only one non-traditional college student took part in this study. This research should be replicated to investigate the differences between older, non-traditional first-generation college students and their traditional aged first-generation peers.

Comparative studies at different institutional types may provide additional insights. Because this study was conducted at a private non-for profit career institution, more qualitative research should be conducted at traditional four-year institutions and at non-traditional institutions to determine the degree of similarity of the lived experiences of FGS.

**Self Reflection and Conclusion**

Nearly 30 years ago, I graduated from high school a month before my 18th birthday. On that day, I sat on the front porch of the mother’s rental house with my sister and asked her, “What am I going to do now?” From an early age, I had always worked in some capacity or another with or around food, and at that time, I was working as a cook at a restaurant on the south shore of Massachusetts. I figured then that working in restaurants was my destiny. I grew up in a broken family where education never seemed to be a priority. My father was a high school graduate and worked in the local ironworkers union while my mother was a high school dropout who also worked as a union laborer. My brother, sisters, and I were raised to be blue-
collar workers. Never can I recall speaking with my parents about college or higher education. Because of his success in football during high school, my older brother had attempted college. Yet, he came home after his first semester where he, too, joined the ranks of first-generation college students who left school following their first semester (Strayhorn, 2006).

After high school, I worked in several restaurants in diverse capacities, yet never quite found my niche. All the while, I watched others I knew attend a well-known hospitality and culinary school in Providence, Rhode Island, known as Johnson & Wales. Knowing I was not college material and not even giving it a second thought, I made the decision to join the U.S. Marine Corps looking for an opportunity to obtain the skills that were necessary to one day fulfill my dreams of becoming a Massachusetts State Trooper.

By the time I left the Marines, I had traveled the world and served my country during a time of war and conflict. Unfortunately, I had also suffered several physical injuries and could not fulfill my dream of becoming a State Trooper. I was once again faced with the same question I had faced 11 years earlier, “What am I going to do now?” Due to my disability status, I was fortunate enough to qualify for and be accepted into a veteran’s education program known as Vocational Rehabilitation, or Voc Rehab. As I watched my life come in full circle, I applied to what was now Johnson & Wales University, that same well-known hospitality and cooking school that friends from my not so distant past had attended.

At 28 years of age, I found myself in a place where I had never been before, a university campus. I recall walking the campus with a sense of insecurity and feelings of unfamiliarity. Luckily for me, I was assigned a case advisor in the Veteran’s Affairs Office in Providence, Rhode Island, who continually walked me through the processes associated with entering school,
and in reality, took care of almost everything. Like the students in my study, I was dropped into a world that no one in my family before me had really experienced. The one trait that I did have was the ability to ask a lot of questions and the capacity to understand that I needed to rely on others in the university and veterans community to help me adapt. As a Marine, that was something I was used to doing.

Although I found myself in an unfamiliar environment when I started school, I had life experience and the financial support from my time in the Marines. As this research has shown, for the first-generation college students who enter higher education today without similar support systems and life experiences, it is a difficult task to have to manage alone. There is a rise in the number of first-generation college students attending our universities and colleges today. However, the probability that only 11-23% (Pell institute, 2011) of FGS who enroll will graduate with a Bachelor’s degree within six years is difficult to reconcile. This study suggests that the reason first-generation college students attend college is to provide themselves and their families with opportunities for both personal and professional growth. The evidence shows that ‘doubters’ in both their immediate families and communities fueled the participants’ emotions and desires to obtain their Bachelor’s degrees. The evidence suggests that self-efficacy, more specifically the vicarious experiences of first-generation college students prior to attending college, also played an important role in the decision making process of first-generation college students (Bandura, 1997).

This study found that first-generation students identify and experience many barriers to college completion, including a lack of familiarity with how a university works and the lack of requisite knowledge within their families regarding the university systems. The FGS in the study also identified difficulties in their social adjustment to college as a barrier to college completion.
Self-perceptions of poor academic preparation and a lack of finances also were identified as barriers to college completion.

Study participants recognized several strategies to overcome these barriers. These included building personal and professional relationships with peers, faculty, and university staff. First-generation college students also indicated that acquiring student leadership positions greatly contributed to their ability to overcome the barriers they identified. These positions not only provided them with financial stability, but also increased their confidence, in part because of the leadership training they received. These students were successful because they were able to combine hard work and determination with a range of strategies to overcome barriers common to first-generation college students, and therefore, becoming part of what Morales (2008) called the academically resilient statically elite.
References:


Johnson & Wales University (n.d.) Retrieved from:  
http://www.jwu.edu/departments.aspx?id=862

Johnson & Wales University (n.d.a) Retrieved from http://www.jwu.edu/2017Plan/


Appendix A – JWU Alumni Association Recruitment Email

Dear <Alumni>,

Alumni of Johnson & Wales University are a part of the university family forever, and as a family, we do our best to support one another. As a recent graduate, you can help do just that by sharing how your educational experiences at JWU impacted you and may influence your future career progress with Associate Professor of Food Service Management and Culinary Arts, Ted McCall ’00, ’04 M.A.T.

Mr. McCall is conducting a research study as a requirement for his doctoral degree from Northeastern University that investigates the experiences of first generation college students who have completed their Bachelor’s degrees. As you recently earned your Bachelor’s, you may be a candidate for Mr. McCall’s research study.

Participation in the research study will require you to be the first in your immediate family to have completed a Bachelor’s degree and that you attended the Charlotte Campus. You will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interview may be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through Internet conferencing. Your participation in this study will be kept strictly confidential and is completely voluntary; there are no direct benefits or any foreseeable risks to you as a result of participating. Mr. McCall would be happy to share his results with you when the research is complete.

If you are interested in being considered as a possible participant in this research study or want to know more about the study, please contact Mr. McCall at mccall.t@husky.neu.edu or (704) 526-6540 by November 24, 2013.

Congratulations on your accomplishment of completing your Bachelor’s degree at Johnson & Wales University, and thank you in advance for supporting your fellow alumni.
Sincerely,

Terrence Williams, MSM,’89

Executive Director, Alumni Relations

Johnson & Wales University
Appendix B – Internet Recruitment Email

Dear <Alumni>,

Alumni of Johnson & Wales University are a part of the university family forever, and as a family, we do our best to support one another, as well as future students. As a recent graduate of Johnson & Wales University, Charlotte Campus you can help do just that by sharing how your educational experiences at JWU impacted you with me, Ted McCall a fellow alumnus of ’00, ’04 M.A.T, and Associate Professor of Food Service Management and Culinary Arts Charlotte Campus.

I am conducting a research study as a requirement for my doctoral degree from Northeastern University that investigates the experiences of first generation college students who have completed their Bachelor’s degree at a career focused institution. As you recently earned your Bachelor’s, you may be a candidate for this research study.

Participation in the research study will require you to be the first in your immediate family to have completed a Bachelor’s degree and that you attended the Charlotte Campus. You will be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interview may be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through Internet conferencing. Your participation in this study will be kept strictly confidential and is completely voluntary; there are no direct benefits or any foreseeable risks to you as a result of participating. Mr. McCall would be happy to share his results with you when the research is complete.

If you are interested in being considered as a possible participant in this research study or want to know more about the study, please contact Ted McCall at mccall.t@husky.neu.edu or (704) 526-6540 by November 24, 2013.
Congratulations on your accomplishment of completing your Bachelor’s degree at Johnson & Wales University, and thank you in advance for supporting your fellow alumni.

Sincerely,

Ted McCall
Appendix C - Recruitment Response Letter

Dear Bachelor’s Degree Recipient and First-Generation College Student,

My name is Ted McCall. I am a Food Service Management and Culinary Arts Instructor at the Charlotte campus of Johnson & Wales University and a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. Thank you for responding to announcement looking for individuals to interview for my dissertation. My research is looking at the lived experiences of first-generation college students who have completed their Bachelor’s degrees at a career-focused institution. I am very interested in hearing your story of success.

Should you decide to participate, my research study will consist of one 90-minute interview. This interview may be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. It will also be possible to have this interview over the phone or to utilize Skype, or other equivalent online programs, as a mode of communication for conducting the interview. Your participation in this investigation will be kept confidential, and I would be happy to share my results with you once the project is complete.

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research, nor are there any foreseeable risks. By volunteering to participate, you will be contributing to an understanding of how first-generation college students have successfully completed a Bachelor’s degree at a career-focused institution. This contribution may aid future students in their quest to obtain a four-year degree.

Please contact me via email (mccall.t@husky.neu.edu) if you are interested in participating or want to know more about the study. Also, please let me know a date, time, and place (or online) which would be convenient for you to meet. It would be ideal if we could agree on a time during
the next two weeks. I have attached an informed consent form for you to review before our meeting time. Thank you again for your time and willingness to volunteer for this project. Please contact me by 11/24/13.

I can also be contacted by phone for any questions or clarifications on the project at 704-526-6540. You may also contact the principal investigator, my advisor for this research, Dr. Karen Harbeck at 781-321-3569 or mailto:k.harbeck@neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Ted McCall
Appendix D - Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigators:  Ted McCall, Doctoral Student

Principal Investigator:  Dr. Karen Harbeck

Title of Project:  Voices of Academically Resilient First-Generation College Students: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Request for Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project focusing on the persistence of first-generation college students who recently have completed a Bachelor’s degree at a career-focused institution. This investigation is being completed to better understand how, despite the national average of success for first-generation college students being between 11 and 23 percent, you were able to overcome these odds and complete your Bachelor’s degree.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You have been selected because you are a recent first-generation college student who has completed a Bachelor’s degree from a career-focused institution.

Why is this research study being done?

This research has been developed to understand, from the perspective of the academically resilient, how, despite incredible odds, first-generation college students understand and explain their success at a four-year career-focused institution.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview. The interview will focus on your experience as a first-generation college student at a career-focused institution.

*Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?*

The interview will take place at a time and place that is convenient for you. It may also be possible to utilize Skype, or other equivalent online programs, as a mode of communication for conducting the interview. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes.

*Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?*

There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort to you by participating in this study. However, if you wish to stop the interview for any reason, let the researcher know and it will end immediately. You also have the ability to refuse to answer any questions during the interview.

*Will I benefit by being in this research?*

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about what programs and/or services were helpful in your successful completion of your degree. This information may also be helpful to future first-generation college students who attend the institution.

*Who will see the information about me?*

A pseudonym will be assigned to you before your interview. Your pseudonym will correspond to all data including, but not limited to, the transcript of your interview, your demographic information, and audio record of the interview. All of your demographic information, including the document that matches your real name to your pseudonym, will be kept in a locked safe with access limited solely to the researcher. Any audio recordings will be destroyed after the transcription of the interview. The transcriptions will be kept in a password-protected file until
the end of the research project. They will be destroyed with the demographic information at that time.

*Can I stop my participation in this study?*

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time during the investigation. Stopping participation will not result in the loss of any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

*Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?*

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Ted McCall at 704-526-6540 or mccall.t@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact the research advisor, Dr. Karen Harbeck, at 781-321-3569 or mailto:k.harbeck@neu.edu.

*Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?*

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, 02115; tel: 617.373.4588; or email: irb@neu.edu. You may also anonymously call if you wish. You may also keep this form for yourself.

*Will I be paid for my participation?* No.

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  Date
to the participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E - Interview Protocol

Pseudonym:

Introductory Protocol:

You have been asked to speak with me today because you have proven to be an academically resilient first-generation college student who has completed a Bachelor’s degree at a four-year career-focused institution. This is an accomplishment that you should be extremely proud of. Because of your status as a first-generation college student who has a four-year degree from a career-focused institution, this makes you an expert in this area and an excellent candidate who has a great deal of information and experience to share. This research is focused on the experiences of academically resilient first-generation college students from a career institution, and I hope to gain information on how you were able to persist.

To begin the process, I would like to record the audio from our discussion to ensure accuracy. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant and turn on the recording equipment.] I will also be taking written notes during this interview. Your confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a pseudonym. Additionally, the recordings will be professionally transcribed, yet, I will be the only individual who will know your identity and that information will be secured in my home locked safe.

To meet the requirements of Northeastern University, I have a form for you to read through and sign. [Give them a copy of informed consent form to read and sign.] Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form?
This interview will last between 60 to 90 minutes. During this time, I will be asking several questions on your lived experiences as an academically resilient first-generation college student. It is important that you provide any information that you feel is important regarding your experience. If we start to run out of time, it may be necessary to interrupt you to make sure we cover all of the questions. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part I: Background Questions (5-10 min.)

• Can you please tell me about yourself?
  • Where are you from?
  • What is the make up of your family?

• Have your parents ever attended college?
  • If so, did they complete a degree or certificate?

• Can you tell me about the financial background of your family?
  • Did you consider your family financially secure when you were growing up?

Transitional Questions (55-85 min.)

Introductory Statement: I would like to hear about your experience transitioning into college in your own words. I will be asking you to express experiences that you have encountered. Your responses can include academic, social, or personal experiences. I am going to start with experiences that you had prior to attending college.
• What motivated you to attend college and obtain your bachelor’s degree?

• Can you recall talking about attending college when you were younger?
  
  • If so, whom did you have these conversations with?
  
  • Do you have siblings? If so, do/did they attend college? Has your success helped them in their decision making process about attending college?

Great, thank you. I am now going to move onto questions regarding your transition into becoming a college student and events that took place while you were enrolled. Again, feel free to express any academic, social, or personal experiences.

• As you think back to when you first started school, did you have any barriers that you believed would make it difficult for you to complete your degree?
  
  • How did you overcome these barriers?
  
  • Who or what helped you during this process?

• Were you involved in any social or academic organizations while you were in school?
  
  • If yes, can you tell me why you were involved in them? Did you believe that these organizations would help you succeed and persist?
  
  • How was your relationship with faculty while enrolled?
  
  • Did this/these relationship(s) help you to be a successful student?
  
  • If so, how? If not, why?
  
  • Did you work while you were in school? If so, how often?
  
  • Do you believe that working while in school helped you be successful? If so, how, and if not, why? Did being employed seem to be a barrier towards your success?
Part II: Self-Efficacy

Completing a Bachelor’s degree is a great accomplishment, and for a first-generation student, it is especially so. One of the things I am interested in learning about is the development of your sense of self-efficacy as you have progressed through your degree. In this context, self-efficacy is the awareness of one’s capabilities to succeed at a given undertaking. This awareness can also be referred to one’s confidence. The questions that follow reference your understanding of your confidence and what role it may have played in completing your degree.

• Were you financially responsible for anyone else besides yourself while in school?

• Can you tell me about your confidence as a student before you were enrolled at JWU?

• Do you believe your confidence affected your ability to persist and obtain your degree?

• Can you give me any specific examples?

• Did your confidence as a college student change while you were enrolled? If so, then how?

• What experiences helped/hindered your confidence as a college student?

• How did these experiences make you feel?

• Did you gain more confidence with each success or milestone while you were enrolled (a milestone may be the completion of a project, a course or even a quarter, etc.)

• Did the success of your peers push you to work harder?

• How did interacting with your faculty or other significant others on campus help your confidence? Can you give me any examples of these interactions?

• Do you believe that these experiences helped you complete your degree?
• If so, how?

• If I were a first-generation student entering a four-year career institution, is there any advice you would give me?

Those are all the questions that I have today. Again, I would like to congratulate you on your success as a first-generation college student and the level of resilience you have displayed. Is there anything that you would like to share that we didn’t have a chance to discuss?