PERSISTENCE AND GRADUATION: FIRST-GENERATION LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS STUDENTS CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

A thesis presented

by

Gregory Karas

to the

Graduate School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education at Northeastern University

in the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

26 May 2016
Abstract

Shared experiences of academically successful first-generation, low-socioeconomic college students were examined using narrative inquiry. All participants were single females. All participants attended college immediately after high school but dropped out. They all returned and became the first in their family to complete a college degree. One was traditional age while all other study participants were single mothers over the age of thirty with two or more children. Participants self-identified as White, Asian-American and Haitian-American. The study uncovered that support from family, financially or emotionally, was mostly non-existent. However, all participants wanted the ability to offer their children the educational opportunities their parents were unable to provide them. The findings validated the importance of social programs, from childcare vouchers to tuition free classes, for the participants. Additionally, all participants intentionally and creatively balanced time and resources to manage childcare and to provide time for work. Implementing a program into the public school curriculum, as early as elementary school, that exposes students to college life may lay the foundation for conversations regarding college academic expectations. Providing information regarding federal, state and local social programs conveys awareness to students on where to look for assistance beyond the institution.

*Keywords:* academic achievement; first-generation; low-socioeconomic status; low income
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................... 9

Context and Background ............................................................................................................ 9

Rationale and Significance ....................................................................................................... 11

Research Problem and Research Question ............................................................................... 13

Definition of Key Terminology ................................................................................................ 14

Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................................. 15

Theoretical framework: Bourdieu’s Habitus Theory ............................................................... 17

Origins of Bourdieu’s Theory ............................................................................................... 18

Critics of Bourdieu’s Habitus Theory ................................................................................... 19

Rationale ............................................................................................................................... 20

Application of Theory ........................................................................................................... 23

Chapter Two: Literature Review .................................................................................................. 25

First Generation Students Characteristics ................................................................................. 26

First-generation Students, Who They Are ............................................................................ 26

Low-Socioeconomic Students .................................................................................................. 33

Characteristics of Low-Socioeconomic Students .................................................................. 34

Is a College Degree Worth the Investment ........................................................................... 36

Students Resiliency ................................................................................................................... 39
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support from Family</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of their Children</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of Second Attempt at Postsecondary Education</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Programs for Education</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing Commitments</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Practice</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

There are many individuals that provided valuable input in the completion of this thesis and their efforts are appreciated. I would like to thank Dr. McNabb for his never ending guidance in this endeavor. From my initial acceptance into the doctoral program, which would not have been possible without Dr. McNabb’s support, to his blunt feedback in class and his warp speed responses to chapter submissions, regardless of time of day, his tireless efforts were no doubt fueled by Starbucks. To Dr. Nolan for her advice and input as second reader. To Dr. Cidhinnia Torres Campos for her direct, frank and non-sugar coated feedback as my external reader.

I would like to thank the institution my study participants attended for allowing me to reach out and interview members of their student body. To the students, a very special thank you for participating in this study. Their lives, already full with school, work and life commitments, left little room for participation in a study. Yet they managed to carve out several hours from their busy schedule to tell their story to a complete stranger. I applaud them for overcoming obstacles they encountered and completing their college degree. I wish them great success.

To my family and friends, for their support and understanding during these past several years - thank you. I would also like to extend my appreciation and gratitude to every person who provided input, support or encouragement in this endeavor. Your understanding and efforts are truly appreciated.
Dedication Page

To my father, Edward, who left high school and served in the US Navy during the Korean conflict. Although you did not have the opportunity to go to college, you knew the value of an education. So much so that two days after your 78th birthday you attended a special commencement ceremony at your former high school and received your diploma. Dad, I dedicate my dissertation to you and hope that I obtain half the wisdom in my lifetime that you have displayed in yours.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to investigate shared experiences of academically successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students. What experiences do successful first-generation college students (seniors) share? Knowledge generated is expected to inform college enrollment management and retention departments about the experiences which positively impact the academic success of first-generation low-socioeconomic students. This study employed a narrative inquiry methodology to qualify student perceptions of these life experiences in the pursuit of their college degree.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to first-generation low-socioeconomic students and reasons they are successful in earning a college degree to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

Context and Background

Shifting from an industrial economy to one of knowledge has placed considerable importance on obtaining a college degree. Adding to that economic shift is the increased earnings gap between a person with a high school diploma and a college graduate (Yeh, Spring 2010). A person with a bachelor’s degree as compared to a high school graduate earned 89% more during their lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Although enrollments in institutions of higher learning continue to increase, completion rates during the past thirty years have remained steady (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009).
The persistence and graduation rates for first-generation low-socioeconomic college students, compared to students whose parents or family member(s) attended college or completed a college degree, are lower (Aronson, 2008). A majority of first-generation low-socioeconomic college students attempting college leave before completing their first year. Although there are many first-generation low-socioeconomic students who begin the journey and leave before completion, roughly 24% of students in this group persevere and attain a four-year or higher degree (Aronson, 2008).

For students who begin the journey of a college education, what are the shared experiences of first-generation low-socioeconomic students who persist and complete their degree? Are those shared experiences encouragement from family members or mentors that provides stability and the drive to continue? Is the realization that a college education elevates them into a higher socio-economic bracket? Are the shared experiences of total immersion into the college culture responsible for continued forward momentum toward degree completion?

Studies on why first-generation low-socioeconomic college students fail to persist are aplenty compared to studies highlighting success (Aronson, 2008; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Wiggins, 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Earlier studies employed a model of prediction instead of description to identify background characteristics of students who may drop out (Astin, 1972; Cope, 1969; De Vecchio, 1972; Summerskill, 1962). Therefore, this study seeks to elucidate the common lifestyle choices that have influenced first-generation, low-socioeconomic students who obtain a college degree.
**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study is the researcher’s interest in the shared experiences of certain first-generation low-socioeconomic students who persist and graduate with a college degree. Working in higher education for over twelve years, mostly at institutions that have a large student population fitting the criteria, all too often the researcher has witnessed many of these students departing college with no degree and a large amount of student loan debt. The researcher himself closely fits this profile and successfully began his educational journey at a later age than most traditional college age students.

The researcher’s employment position at institutions allows him to speak candidly with all students, regardless of their social or economic status, upon their exit from the institution. Over the years, the researcher began to notice anecdotal trends from his exit interview conversations with students. Compiling data from exit interviews began to reveal similarities among first-generation low-socioeconomic students and the reasons they abandon their educational journey.

What was absent was supporting data from successful students representing this group. Mechanisms in place to capture data from first-generation low-socioeconomic students who persisted and graduated from college were nonexistent. A 48.2% attrition rate at two-year public institutions compared to 31.9% at four-year public institutions (Walters & McKay, 2005) shows institutions must aggressively recruit to maintain and grow student enrollment. Institutions may experience a year-over-year increase in enrollment with the associated cost of that percentage increase (in student enrollment) being less; this results in a net increase of discretionary funds (Astin, 1975). However, a 15% decline in student enrollment usually results in an equal decline in revenue that is not associated with an equal decline in associated costs (Astin, 1975).
Institutions must react appropriately to the ebb and flow of student enrollment. Institutional enrollment management and retention committees may use supporting data to develop recruiting models and assist in maintaining and growing student enrollment. Three groups of decisions makers - administrators, policy makers and students – may potentially use this data for the benefit of the institution or themselves.

Studies conclude a high dropout rate during the first year of college or between the first and second year, especially among students who are first in their family to attend college (Aronson, 2008; Fischer, 2007; Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Students who have positive experiences with the institution have a greater commitment that influences their goals (Walters & McKay, 2005). Experiences in interacting with administrative processes, levels of bureaucracy, support from faculty, administrators and staff all play a role in the students’ integration into college (Siegel, 2011; Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012; Walters & McKay, 2005).

Students who have an understanding of the culture at the institution and feel they are engaged in the community on campus tend to be successful in college (Siegel, 2011). The greater a student integrates into college life, the better their chances are at succeeding (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). What are those shared experiences among first-generation low-socioeconomic students who successfully integrate into college life and complete their educational journey? What factors impact those shared experiences?

Implementing protocols or procedures to capture data identifying shared experiences within this population group may positively influence the low persistence and graduation rate. First-generation low-socioeconomic students, as well as all students and institutions could benefit from this study. Armed with empirical data, institutions can begin to implement protocol
while measuring results. Policies and procedures can be slightly modified to fit within the individual institutions culture to determine what produces positive results. Results from studies of this type can be examined and built upon to continually improve the attrition rate across the entire higher education spectrum.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

First-generation, low-socioeconomic college students leave college without a degree at a higher rate than students from any other classification (Wiggins, 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Approximately 24% of students who enroll in college and are classified as first-generation, low-socioeconomic persist and graduate with a college degree (Aronson, 2008). Providing every student with at least the opportunity to not only attend, but to succeed in obtaining a college degree should be a priority in the American education system. The education process should not stop when a student graduates from high school.

The growing gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-not’s’ results in a loss of talent that remains in today’s society and it continues the cycle of social inequality (Engberg & Allen, 2011). This disturbing trend among higher education institutions, as posited by Engberg & Allen (2011) perpetuates the social inequality that “translates into social and economic losses at both the individual and societal level” (p. 786). The purpose of this study is to investigate shared experiences of academically successful, first-generation low-socioeconomic college students. The overarching research question is:

What are the life stories of first-generation low-socioeconomic students attending a four-year public university who have succeeded academically?
This investigation will seek to uncover what these stories reveal about overcoming adversity and persistence. How have the shared life experiences of academically successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students, in their senior year, prepared them for persistence in completing their undergraduate degree? What are the shared experiences of successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students (seniors) who are in their final semester of obtaining their baccalaureate degree? How has their life experiences prepared them socially, emotionally and educationally? To what do first-generation low-socioeconomic students attending a four-year public university attribute to their successful completion of a baccalaureate degree? Conducting a research study to determine why some students in this classification overcome adversity and persist in their educational journey could bring to the forefront solutions that can be adopted industry wide.

Definition of Key Terminology

Academically successful: Academically successful students are those students who meet the institutions expectations for remaining in good academic standing and achieving satisfactory academic progress toward a degree.

Cultural Capital: Cultural capital is the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. Examples of social capital may include education, intellect, and style of speech, dress or physical appearance.

Cultural Relationship: Cultural relationships are direct and indirect interactions among two or more cultures. Direct interactions may include physical encounters while indirect relations are more subtle involving a person’s ideas or prejudices about another people or culture.
Economic Capital: Economic capital is a form of capital that can be immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights.

First-generation students: First-generation students are students who are the first in their family to obtain a college degree.

Habitus: Habitus is socialized norms or tendencies that guide behavior and thinking. Habitus is a structured propensity that guides a person to think, feel and act in determinant ways.

Low-socioeconomic students: Low-socioeconomic students are students who have a total family household income up to the federal standard of $50,000 making them eligible for need base funding (Pell grants).

Social Capital: Social capital is the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively.

Theoretical Framework

All around us, our world is made up of capital that comes in many forms. Depending on its function, capital may present itself in three forms: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital. Social capital, as defined by Bourdieu, can be comprised of social obligations or a connection that is converted into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is instantly transformed and converted into money (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu (1986) continues with “external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus, cannot be transmitted instantaneously (unlike money, property rights, or even titles of nobility) by gift or bequest, purchase or exchange.” (pp. 244-245). Bourdieu theorizes that an educational inequality exists between students who possess more valuable
social and cultural capital and fare better in school against their peers whose social and cultural capital contains less value (Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

For first-generation low-socioeconomic students, their low value social capital, or habitus, may be stifling their ability to persist and graduate with a college degree. Habitus is an individual process, although it is created through a social process, which leads to enduring patterns and can be transferrable between contexts (Navarro, 2006). However, habitus is not static or eternal; it can be altered or changed with unexpected situations or over a long period of time (Navarro, 2006).

For first-generation low-socioeconomic students, Navarro (2006) speculates their habitus has created a lasting impression causing them to think, feel and act within defined limits that guides their responses to situations. Despite these defined limits, there are a percentage of students in this classification that find a way to persist and graduate college. What are those shared experiences among this group of students? How do they increase the value of their social capital or break the pattern of believing their habitus is a destiny that cannot be altered?

Tinto (1975) developed a model detailing the process in which the persistence and withdrawal rate of freshman could be determined. Tinto’s model provides a detail view of the process regarding how students fitting into an institution play a role in the withdrawal behavior (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983). While this model provides an understanding of attrition, it fails to provide an algorithm for predicting attrition (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983).

Tinto’s (1993) theory is an often-cited theory regarding and explaining the departure of students from college (Guiffrida, 2006). Although it is a widely cited theory, empirical research offers little support for its proposals (Guiffrida, 2006). Some critics of Tinto’s model point out
the model fails to recognize cultural variables (Guiffrida, 2006). Bourdieu (1977) posits the habitus is a product of the social and cultural history, a system of dispositions created from the past “which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future” (p. 82).

Does the habitus of a person relegate them to a predisposed life outcome, an outcome accepted by first-generation low-socioeconomic students who may believe their social and cultural class provides little opportunity for them to succeed in college? Interpreting Navarro (2006), that history has created an impression that guides situational responses according to habitus.

**Theoretical framework: Bourdieu’s Habitus Theory**

Research regarding college retention stretches back 70 years (Reason, 2009). Two prominent seminal authors who published theoretical works, Tinto (1975; 2013-2014) and Astin (1975), their theories have been used and cited as the footings relating to higher education retention (Reason, 2009). Astin’s study examined student characteristics - age, gender and place of residency – as well as characteristics of the institution such as type and location, as predictors of student retention (Astin, 1975). Tinto’s theory utilized the students commitment to the school, how the student integrated into the campus social & academic life as well as their aspirations for a college degree (Tinto, 1975). Bourdieu examined the student’s social and cultural capital past, the knowledge and value associated with that capital, and how it shaped a student’s habitus as they enroll in college (Bourdieu, 1977).

Bourdieu suggests, “the economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital” that is inherited and used as back up to support invested cultural capital by the family (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). First-generation low-socioeconomic students who hail from communities and schools which are ranked poor, enrolling in college is not an easy
Many students, in particular commuters, are plagued with fiscal challenges, family as well as employment obligations, which compound difficulties in college enrollment (Walters & McKay, 2005). These social and cultural experiences are what Bourdieu (1977) states shape a student’s habitus. Bourdieu (1977) defines habitus as a system of combined past experiences that influences future decisions.

**Origins of Bourdieu’s Theory**

Bourdieu’s work stems from traditional anthropological and sociological fields. One factor prompting Bourdieu to move into the field of sociology was work conducted in the city of Kabylia in Algeria stemming from the Algerian war (Bourdieu, 1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice* attempts to capture the fundamentals of scientific discourse regarding human behavior. Bourdieu (1977) highlights that “linguistic research takes on different directions according to whether it deals with the researcher’s mother tongue or with a foreign language” (p. 1). In this scenario, the researcher is interpreting speech instead of language.

The lens of the researcher can play a significant role in discerning a cultural ‘truth’. Bourdieu (1977) posits the phenomenological knowledge collected attempts to make the truth regarding primary experiences in the social world unambiguous. He continues that analyzing practical anxiety of a familiar world is not new in exploring the limits of independence. Instead, it teaches there is an escape from both the ritual and choice of objectivism and subjectivism (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu suggests there is a cultural relationship among groups (Bourdieu, 1979).

The cultural relationship is dependent upon the conditions in which one acquired their social and/or cultural capital and how that capital may be ‘spent’ to achieve maximum profit. To escape the cultural game, as Bourdieu describes it, one has to objectify the true nature of the
game (Bourdieu, 1979). For first-generation low-socioeconomic students, their social/cultural capital, as shaped by their habitus, provides measured competency recognized by school systems. The role habitus plays pertaining to the completion of a college degree appears to be an important feature in students’ persistence to and graduation from college.

Within the framework of other theories, habitus as a potential key factor in this study examines how, through the lens of shared experiences, it (habitus) provides motivation for first-generation low-socioeconomic students to persist and graduate. This study will examine the shared experiences of students who are in their last semester and are reasonably expected to complete their college degree.

**Critics of Bourdieu’s Habitus Theory**

Bourdieu, along with Coleman, are considered the founding theorists of social capital theory and introduced the term almost simultaneously yet independently (Hauberer, 2006). There are three types of capital – social, economic and cultural. Bourdieu branched off capital theory by introducing habitus theory. Bourdieu defines the term habitus as repeating patterns of outlook depending on class, such as values, speech, dress, beliefs and manners, which is instilled by everyday experiences. (Hauberer, 2006). Bourdieu, being a social theorists, is not without critics, especially when it comes to his theory of habitus.

Bourdieu’s habitus theory is two pronged. One side is the objectivism as a method of knowledge regarding the social world and the other side is determinism as a method of guiding principle (Peters, 2014). Critics find fault in Bourdieu for remaining objectivistic (Lau, 2004), others criticize Bourdieu for putting too much emphasis on reproduction without the possibility of creating a new and different world (Mills & Gale, 2010). Bourdieu’s social universe is one in
which things happen to people without those people being able to change their individual or collective destinies.

Within the umbrella of social capital is incorporated cultural capital. This capital belongs to one person and is part of their habitus (Hauberer, 2006). Sullivan (2002) posits that the concept of habitus, as described by Bourdieu, is theoretically incoherent and should not be used for empirical researchers. However, she continues that the concept of cultural capital is applicable to be used by empirical researchers (Sullivan, 2002). She claims that cultural capital is instilled in students from a higher social class that allows them to gain higher educational credentials than their lower class peers (Sullivan, 2002). Her criticism regarding Bourdieu’s cultural capital and habitus is Bourdieu does not adequately explain the associated resources in higher-class homes that make up cultural capital (Sullivan, 2002).

Another issue with Bourdieu’s habitus theory is it (the theory) is contradictory as Bourdieu stresses the objective conditions that influence habitus as well as rational actions having objective results (Fuchs, 2003). The contradiction is a decision must be made between objectivism and subjectivism regarding habitus in order to engage consistently with an argument. Along the same vein, Bourdieu emphasizes cultural, economic and political capital without identifying any one type of capital that would determine the others.

**Rationale**

Several theories were considered for the study. Among the theories being considered were McClelland’s (1961) motivational theory, Tinto’s (1993) student persistence theory as well as Bourdieu’s (1984) and Coleman’s (1988) social theory. Others included Massey’s (1987) capital deficiency theory and McDonough’s (1997) social/cultural capital theory.
Bourdieu’s social theory captured a subtopic of social theory he termed habitus. Habitus refers to the lifestyle, values, dispositions and expectations of particular social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life.

Habitus, as determined by Bourdieu, is an unconscious force that influences individuals to their particular social classes. (Wells & Lynch, 2012). It grants individuals with a certain type and amount of social capital that is used to take advantage of opportunities presented to them (Wells & Lynch, 2012). First-generation low-socioeconomic students can be molded by the perceived norms, rules and obligations placed on them by society according to their habitus. All students, regardless of their habitus or position on the social and/or economic ladder should have access to persist on their educational journey.

Students who are low-socioeconomic tend to be relegated to the societal expectations of their working-class status. Students appear to be challenged with reconciling any conflict regarding social mobility or class loyalty (Lehmann, 2007). Students who are less successful or unable to reconcile those conflicts are at a greater risk of leaving college before completing their degree (Lehmann, 2007). The pressure of society on these students because of their habitus, or social class contributes to a stigma or expectation that they will not prevail in college.

For example, students who are first-generation low-socioeconomic are often mocked and ridiculed by their peers because of their college aspirations (Hudley, et al., 2009). Not receiving the support of their peers can have a potential negative influence and can create a negative identity. This lack of peer support tends to lower the academic goals of first-generation low-socioeconomic students as well as school adjustment (Hudley, et al., 2009).
The concept of habits, as represented by Bourdieu, goes past biographical determination. It is realized by individuals on a conscious and unconscious level (Lehmann, 2007). A person’s cultural and social capital is determined by their cultural knowledge, skills and resources that they have access to as a member of their social network or group (Yeh, Spring 2010). Tinto’s (1993) model was based on the experiences of students who were traditional age, White, middle class and who attended private institutions. Bourdieu’s theory addresses students who fall within a marginalized population, regardless of age or ethnic origin.

Students who are part of this marginalized population experience a disconnect between their values of their working class habitus and their goals of their middle class destinations (Lehmann, 2007). Essentially, these students do not possess the correct attitudes, social skills, networks and attire that are associated with the middle class. Because of the societal definitions corresponding with their working class habitus, these students may not have had the opportunity to access the tools necessary to acquire the ‘correct’ attitudes, skills and networks that would propel them into the middle class stratum.

Habitus was selected as a theoretical framework to identify shared experiences of first-generation low-socioeconomic students who persisted in their educational journey. If habitus unconsciously influences individuals to remain within their social class, then what shared experiences among these students unconsciously (or consciously) influence them to persist and graduate allowing them the opportunity to move beyond their social class expectations? Results of identifying and analyzing shared experiences among this marginalized population can be used to implement practices through activities and experiences that will have positive influences for first-generation low-socioeconomic college students to persist and graduate in greater numbers.
Application of Theory

Through the researchers own anecdotal evidence of working in higher education with student populations comprising of first-generation low-socioeconomic students, students left the institution for myriad reasons. During confidential one-on-one exit interviews, a few common reasons provided for dropping out kept occurring. Some of the most common reasons, such as financial difficulties, family issues and not feeling accepted into the culture were provided. Further discussions with the students revealed that on many occasions they felt they did not fit in socially, economically or culturally.

Applying Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of habitus will examine the social and cultural history of first-generation low-socioeconomic students who have persisted and graduated from college. This study will assist in understanding the phenomenon of habitus and offer an in depth analysis of the individual lived experiences of first-generation low-socioeconomic students who felt their lack of capital or habitus would prevent them from earning a college degree. Through an interview process, students will tell their story of overcoming the potential predetermined outcome governed by their habitus. Taking the dispositions that were created from their past experiences and not allowing them to continue or perpetuate into their future.

This study will select a sample of students from a suburban university who meet the criteria of being a first-generation low-socioeconomic student, who are in their last semester of study and are reasonably expected to graduate. With respect to the ethical and human subject of this study, IRB protocols will be followed. The selected institution, the district and study participants will be assured of anonymity in the dissertation as well as any successive publication. The central research question will focus on the shared experiences of the study participants in obtaining a college degree. Results from the study would offer insight into how
24% of this student population overcomes any predetermined disposition and graduates.

Institutions can focus on the results and establish procedures to assist in combating their low persistent rate among this student population.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Approximately 76% of first-generation low-socioeconomic college students do not finish their college degree leaving 24% of college students fitting those criteria that persist and graduate from college (Aronson, 2008). Several studies highlight reasons why first-generation low-socioeconomic college students fail to persist and graduate (Aronson, 2008; Fischer, 2007; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Wells & Lynch, 2012; Wiggins, 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). The focus is to investigate and uncover common shared experiences of academically successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students. Enrollment and retention departments may use awareness of shared experiences to increase success rates of first-generation low-socioeconomic students.

Despite increased college enrollments, completion rates have remained steady (Hossler, Ziskin, & Gross, 2009). However, completion rates for first-generation low-socioeconomic college students, compared to students whose parents or family member(s) attended college or completed a college degree, are lower (Aronson, 2008). The social inequality between first-generation low-socioeconomic college students compared to students whose parents or other family members attended college continues to be part of American society (Aronson, 2008; Engberg & Allen, 2011).

What are the shared experiences of successful first-generation college students (seniors) who are in their final semester? Conducting a research study to investigate how students in this classification explain and make sense of overcoming adversity and persist in their educational journey may provide insights for college enrollment management and retention departments and could lead to discussion on systemic changes in advising. The literature is organized into three areas: (1) characteristics of first-generation college students, who they are, risk factors and
influences from family and peer support; (2) characteristics of low-socioeconomic students and is a college degree worth the financial investment; (3) resiliency of successful students, why some with potential underachieve and the attributes of those who do achieve. The online educational database ERIC was utilized to gather information. Search words and phrases included first-generation college students, low-socioeconomic students and resiliency theory.

First Generation Students Characteristics

The United States has made tremendous strides in access to postsecondary education for all students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). However, despite having the world’s highest college participation rate, there are large holes in higher education success for first-generation, low-socioeconomic students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation low-socioeconomic students who enter college have a high attrition rate and are less likely to complete a four year degree (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Gibbons, Pelchar, & Cochran, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Students classified as first-generation college students share several characteristics in their social backgrounds, level of college preparation and overall ‘college knowledge’ in pursuit of a college degree. Several of these common characteristics and their impact on a student’s persistence will be highlighted. Despite these shared characteristics among this population of students, a subset of this population manages to overcome obstacles, remain on track and complete their college degree.

First-generation Students, Who They Are

First-generation students are students who are the first in their family to earn a college degree. First-generation students comprise one third to one-half of all undergraduate college students in the United States (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Ting, 2003). This group of students is typically at a higher risk for leaving the
college environment without completing a degree as compared to second-generation students (Pratt & Skaggs, 1989). First-generation students are least likely to endure the demands of college in pursuit of a degree (Thayer, 2000; Williams & Butler, 2010).

Entering college can create a host of issues for any student. First-generation students, as well as any college student, contend with being dislocated and the associated anxieties (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). However, the experiences of first-generation students are cultural along with social and academic transitions (London, 1989). Without their parents’ social capital, first-generation college students tend to lack the ‘college knowledge’ of how to apply for college as well as apply for financial assistance (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004).

Research indicates that first-generation students encounter transitional issues upon arriving and entering college (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). These transitional issues manifest themselves, which then pushes first-generation students to be less involved in campus life or student activities (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Problems that first-generation students encounter at college are based on their experiences during college as well as their experiences prior to enrolling in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The lack of family and peer support places first-generation students at a disadvantage before they set one foot on campus (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

**Risk factors of first-generation students.** First-generation college students share similar attributes. Archetypally, first-generation students are less likely to complete a college degree (U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; Ting, 2003; Williams & Butler, 2010). Academically, first-generation students characteristically do not engage in a rigorous high school curriculum (U.S. Department of Education. National Center
for Education Statistics, 2001; Williams & Butler, 2010). Limiting the opportunity of first-
generation students to engage in rigorous courses keeps them unprepared to enter the college
arena as compared to other matriculated students (Hao, 2011). First-generation students who
engaged in a rigorous high school curriculum increase their chances of completing their degree at
their initial 4-year institution (U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education

First-generation students are less likely to be enrolled full time and tend to work more
hours off campus then their traditional student peers (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012;
Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004; U.S. Department of
Education. National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Not only do first-generation students
tend to work more hours off campus, they are also more likely to live at home (Engle & Tinto,
2008; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004). The link between social integration and
persistence has a positive effect on degree attainment for students who live on campus (O'Brien
& Shedd, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). It is not unusual for first-generation
students to be financial contributors to the household income that prevents them from attending
college full time (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Hao, 2011) and living on campus. First-generation
students struggle with guilt, stress and contradictory relationships with their family and friends
(Williams & Butler, 2010). First-generation students balance a distinctive, sometimes cultural
dynamic with these issues as they progress toward degree completion.

First-generation students whose parents have not completed a college degree are faced
with obstacles which other students do not encounter (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). First-
generation students tend to have feelings of inner conflict, betrayal and guilt as they attempt to
balance the demands of college culture and their culture of origin (Logan, 2007). There are
difficulties and anxieties that any college student experiences as they begin their college journey. First-generation students share those difficulties and anxieties plus they add a layer as they make the cultural transition (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Parents of first-generation students fail to recognize the need for a degree and they lack an understanding of the process in applying for financial aid among other processes (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

A lack of college knowledge prevents first-generation students from successfully handling the secondary to post-secondary school transition (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009). For many, obtaining the necessary knowledge and information to successfully navigate the myriad college processes can be intimidating (Engberg & Allen, 2011). Not only is there a lack of parental support, there is also a lack of community support and role models to assist in navigating these processes (Ting, 2003). In order to increase their chances of success, Hooker & Brand (2010) theorize that first-generation students need a level of ‘college knowledge’. The lack of social and cultural capital, or habitus, to pass on from parents, family and friends regarding higher education places first-generation students at a college knowledge deficit.

Influence of family and peer support. For any potential college student who wishes to attend college and obtain their degree, there is a process to follow. Because first-generation students appear to begin less academically prepared than other college students (Williams & Butler, 2010), it is important that they check off all items on the list. A five-step process to enter the collegiate level must be completed by high school students. First, students must decide early in their high school years that they want to enter college, this decision usually occurs in tenth grade (Choy S., 2001; Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Williams & Butler, 2010). Second, prepare themselves academically for the rigor of college work (Choy S., 2001; Choy, Horn,
Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Williams & Butler, 2010). Third, take the SAT or ACT college entrance exams (Choy S., 2001; Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Williams & Butler, 2010). Fourth, they must apply to 4-year institutions and finally, they must be accepted to a college (Choy S., 2001; Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Williams & Butler, 2010).

Educational expectations of first-generation students become formalized early, usually between 8th and 10th grade (Choy S., 2001). College goals and attaining a degree are greatly influenced not only by parental education (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004) but also parental involvement (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). There is a greater expectation (more than twice) of a high school student to earn a bachelor’s degree if their parents earned a bachelor’s degree over the expectation of a first-generation student (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004).

Families of first-generation students are able to influence the success of their children’s college endeavor by promoting a positive education environment in the home. Introducing and engaging their children in day-to-day conversations about higher education can be instrumental in breaking the education cycle (Gofen, 2009). Support from family can have a profound effect on the academic aspirations of a student. Often the family becomes the architect of the student’s success (Gofen, 2009).

First-generation students who are in high school are often mocked and ridiculed by their peers because of their college aspirations (Hudley, et al., College freshmen's perceptions of their high school experiences, 2009). The potential negative influence of not receiving peer support during high school can create a negative identity. Lack of support tends to lower a student’s academic goals as well as school adjustment (Hudley, et al., College freshmen's perceptions of their high school experiences, 2009). This lack of peer support may contribute to the delay of first-generation student’s entrance into college (McKay & Estrella, 2008).
Peer groups can have a strong effect on students enrolling in college. Moderate and high-risk high school students increase their odds of college enrollment if most or all of their friends plan to enroll in college (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Yeh (2010) posits that first-generation students who engage in peer interactions inside and outside of the classroom environment benefit from those encounters. The benefits experienced come in the form of critical thinking skills, degree plans and academic success (Yeh, 2010).

Any student wanting to increase their college success, preparation begins in high school and continues into college. Gofen (2009) indicates that first-generation students are disadvantaged due to lack of academic preparation in high school. Enrolling students in an all-inclusive college preparation program increases students’ cognitive strategies, skills in self-management and knowledge regarding the higher education environment (Morrow & Torrez, 2012). High schools with college preparation programs benefited first-generation students with social strategies and academic skills that eased adjustment into the college culture (Hudley, et al., College freshmen's perceptions of their high school experiences, 2009). First-generation students and all students contend with integration – socially and academically – in a college setting (Graham, 2011). Having appropriate capital or college knowledge may ease the integration process, not only for first-generation students but also for all students entering college.

**Conclusion**

First-generation students have a higher attrition rate than their peers and are less likely to earn a four-year degree. For first-generation college students, it is important they are able to meet the demands of college rigor to be successful. Enrolling in the proper high school curriculum prepares first-generation students with the knowledge and skills to successfully navigate the rigor
of college. Without proper preparation in high school, first-generation students may be setting themselves up for failure.

First-generation students who successfully follow these five steps increase their chances of completing a college degree.

- Students must decide early in their high school years that they want to enter college, this decision usually occurs in tenth grade.
- Students must prepare themselves academically for the rigor of college work.
- Students must take the SAT or ACT college entrance exams.
- Students must apply to 4-year colleges and universities.
- Students must be accepted to a college or university.

First generation college students enter institutions without the college knowledge their peers have obtained from their parents or siblings who attended college. The lack of parental college knowledge places a first-generation student at a distinct disadvantage when navigating the many institutional processes and departments. The difficulty begins with the application process, carries over into the financial aid process and continues after their arrival on campus. Each barrier provides another opportunity for first generation college students to abandon their education journey. The abandonment of their educational journey perpetuates the cycle for this classification of students.
Low-Socioeconomic Students

Providing every student at least the opportunity to attend and succeed in obtaining a college degree should be a priority in the American education system. Regardless of a student’s socioeconomic status, the education process should not stop when a student graduates from high school. The growing gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-not’s’ results in a loss of talent that continues in today’s society and it continues the cycle of social inequality (Engberg & Allen, 2011).

As a society, we have historically valued post-secondary education. Has the affordability become problematic, however, and is the return of a college degree worth the investment? With each passing year, the cost of goods and services continue to rise due to myriad reasons; a college education is not exempt from this phenomenon. For low-socioeconomic students, even with financial aid, they struggle with payment options for the rising prices of a college degree (McSwain & Davis, 2007). In many studies, low-income students experience high dropout rates and are likely to leave after their first year of college (Aronson, 2008; Fischer, 2007; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Tinto, 1993; Wells & Lynch, 2012; Wiggins, 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Low-socioeconomic status students whose parents have some college or no college degree leave the education arena at rates higher than students whose parents have a college degree (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Families of low-socioeconomic students are able to influence the success of their children’s college endeavor by promoting a positive educational environment in the home (Gofen, 2009). Introducing and engaging their children in day-to-day conversations about higher education is instrumental in breaking the education cycle (Gofen, 2009). Gofen (2009) states that although parents may be unable to be a role model to their children, conversations about the daily struggles, toils and missed
opportunities in life without an education provided encouragement for students to enroll in college.

**Characteristics of Low-Socioeconomic Students**

Low-socioeconomic students share certain characteristics. A majority of low-socioeconomic students fail to acquire the academic qualifications that are essential to support college enrolment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Muraskin & Lee, 2004; O'Brien & Shedd, 2001). In addition, low-socioeconomic students are less likely to enroll or they delay entrance in college (McSwain & Davis, 2007; Wei & Horn, 2009). Low-socioeconomic status high school students are often mocked and ridiculed by their peers because of their college aspirations (Hudley, et al., College freshmen's perceptions of their high school experiences, 2009). Lack of peer support tends to lower a student’s academic goals as well as school adjustment (Hudley, et al., College freshmen's perceptions of their high school experiences, 2009) in addition to delaying entrance into college (McKay & Estrella, 2008).

Other characteristics of low-socioeconomic students include the inability to cover tuition expense (McSwain & Davis, 2007), they are less likely to attend college on borrowed funds (Macy, 2000; O'Brien & Shedd, 2001) and they have children or other dependents or are a single parent themselves (McSwain & Davis, 2007; Wei & Horn, 2009). Additionally, low-socioeconomic students attend college on a part-time basis and have several periods of non-enrollment (McSwain & Davis, 2007; O'Brien & Shedd, 2001; Wei & Horn, 2009). While in high school, low-socioeconomic students are generally more apt to be steered away from rigorous courses including honors and AP courses (ASHE Higher Education Report, 2007). Low-socioeconomic students are prone to select a vocational major versus liberal arts major (Aronson, 2008; Green, 2006).
Peer interactions, inside and outside of the classroom environment, benefited students who engaged in those encounters (Yeh, 2010). By limiting low-socioeconomic students the opportunity to engage in rigorous courses, this behavior keeps them unprepared to enter the college arena as compared to other matriculated students (Hao, 2011). Low-socioeconomic students need to be prepared with ‘college knowledge’ in order to have a chance at success (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

Without college knowledge, low-socioeconomic students have difficulty with the transition from secondary school to post-secondary school (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009). The highly structured day of a high school environment is very different than the independent responsibility of college life. For many low-socioeconomic students, obtaining the knowledge to successfully navigate and understand all the avenues in the college process can be intimidating (Engberg & Allen, 2011). These characteristics exhibited by low-socioeconomic students rob them of the necessary social and cultural capital to be successful in college (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988).

Family income plays a role in the attrition rate of low-socioeconomic students. Students who are positioned higher on the socioeconomic ladder, their position has a positive influence on their decision to enroll in college (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Ishitani, 2006). Conversely, networks

Financially, low-socioeconomic students have difficulty meeting the financial challenges of paying for tuition even after factoring in financial aid (McSwain & Davis, 2007; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Since the 1980’s, the cost of college tuition has risen at rates that have outpaced inflation (College Board, 2006; McSwain & Davis, 2007). To offset the cost of tuition, many low-socioeconomic students rely on Pell Grants to cover much of the tuition costs (Wei & Horn, 2009). Pell Grants are a government commitment in providing financial assistance to poor people
giving them greater access to a college education (Macy, 2000). Increasing low-socioeconomic students’ participation in education beyond high school is a national public policy goal (O'Brien & Shedd, 2001). Even with Pell Grants and other sources of financial aid, is a college degree worth the investment for low-socioeconomic students?

Is a College Degree Worth the Investment

Upon entering the public school system, all students, regardless of their social economic classification should be evaluated periodically. Paying particular attention to students who are low-socioeconomic in order to provide necessary intervention to assist in preparing them for the college journey. It is important to provide, at a minimum, a high school education that adequately prepares working poor students not only to enter college but to succeed in college as well. For low-socioeconomic students, is the financial burden of college tuition worth the investment?

There are financial and societal benefits to obtaining a college degree. Recent articles report “adults with a college degree have much lower unemployment rates and higher lifetime earnings than do their peers who do not attend college.” (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013, p. 42). An adult holding a bachelor’s degree earned 75% more during their lifetime as compared to a high school graduate. That percentage increased to 84% in 2009 (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Obtaining a college degree has a positive direct impact on an individual’s career earnings that increases their socioeconomic rank (Pascarella, Smart, & Smylie, 1992).

Stressing to low-socioeconomic students how important it is to be prepared for college and knowing what financial resources are available helps with the decision to attend college (Engberg & Allen, 2011). A low family income combined with the lack of family support and knowing how to navigate many of the processes of college puts low-socioeconomic students at a
disadvantage (Gofen, 2009). However, providing low-socioeconomic students with the proper tools and guidance may be enough to convince them a college degree has the potential to elevate them out of their working poor class status, propelling them into a level that alleviates some of their financial burdens. Low-socioeconomic students do not attend college because they are poor and they remain poor because they made the choice not to attend college (Macy, 2000).

Low-socioeconomic families annual income is generally too low for them to qualify for any educational tax breaks, plus they typically are unable to afford the initial tuition payments (Macy, 2000). Low-socioeconomic students have fewer resources to devote to college expenses and they have a greater need for financial aid (McSwain & Davis, 2007). A major obstacle for low-socioeconomic students is they are not able to rely on their parents for financial support (McSwain & Davis, 2007). Family income is a large influence on persisting and completing college despite academic ability (Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

Students whose parents have a better understanding of the overall college process, from preparing, applying and attending college have greater success (Gibbons, Pelchar, & Cochran, 2012). Learning about different college processes, particularly financial aid, is heavily influenced by parental involvement (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Flint, 1992; Litten, 1982). Future aspirations and goals are prevalent themes among interviewed students as to why they persist in college (Rood, 2009). Students are motivated and view college as a pathway to a better life than what their parents experienced (Rood, 2009).

Conclusion

Low-socioeconomic students struggle with payment options for college tuition, despite assistance from different financial aid sources. Lack of financial support may be a contributing
factor in low-socioeconomic students leaving college during their first year or shortly thereafter. Other commonalities among low-socioeconomic students are

- they are less likely to attend college on borrowed funds;
- they have children or other dependents or are a single parent themselves;
- they attend college on a part-time basis and have several periods of non-enrollment;
- they do not enroll in rigorous high school courses such as AP or honors classes; and
- they are prone to select a vocational major versus liberal arts major.

Because low-socioeconomic students do not have good role models, they lack the college knowledge and often struggle with the transition from high school to college life. Lacking the appropriate college knowledge, and social and cultural capital places low-socioeconomic students at a disadvantaged compared to their peers who are higher up on the socioeconomic ladder. Parents who do not understand the benefits of a college degree have expectations their children will not go to college in order to contribute to the family’s financial support.

Without the appropriate tools and guidance, low-socioeconomic students will continue to perpetuate the lack of education cycle exhibited by their parents and family members. It may be beneficial for low-socioeconomic students to have exposure to positive role models in an effort to convince them that a college degree is one way to elevate their lives out of the working poor status. When interviewed, low-socioeconomic students who persisted stated it was their desires and goals that provided the motivation to complete college. They were able to see that a college degree provided a conduit to a better life than that of their parents.
Students Resiliency

Resiliency has several definitions. Among the definitions of resiliency, many share several common features involving human strengths, disruptions as well as growth, coping mechanisms and positive outcomes following adversities (Bonanno, 2004; Connor & Davidson, 2003; Friborg, Hjemdal, Rosenvinge, & Martinussen, 2003; Masten, et al., 1999; Richardson, 2002). To describe people who are resilient, terms such as ‘hardy’ and ‘invulnerable’ have been used (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005; Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Other terms such as ‘optimistic’, ‘confident’, and ‘goal directed’ are also commonly used to describe resiliency (Bernard, 1991; Masten A., 1994). Another definition portrays resilience as a protective mechanism, one in which a person’s response to risk is modified (Rutter, 1987). Educational resilience is defined as the probable success in school, as well as other accomplishments in life, in spite of environmental adversities brought about by conditions and experiences (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Students who have warm, caring relationships with their parents or other adults along with high academic expectations are found to exhibit educational resilience (Clark, 1983; Taylor, 1994).

At risk students who are resilient have been described as having dispositions, beliefs and personality characteristics that support their success irrespective of their circumstances or backgrounds (McMillan & Reed, 1994). There are two components defining resiliency: (1) being exposed to a substantial threat or severe adversity and (2) overcoming the threat or adversity in a positive fashion despite the assault on the evolving process (Garmezy, 1990; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter M., 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982). Regardless of the definition, resiliency is a process, not an attribute of an individual (Rutter, 2012).
Rutter (2012) speculates that resiliency is misleading in that it necessitates a superior functioning instead of a better functioning when compared with others who are experiencing the same levels of stress and/or adversities. With resiliency, promotive factors, regardless of population, operate in similar fashions and are supported by focusing on competence (Masten & Powell, 2003). Promotive factors include cognitive abilities, temperament, parenting quality and good schools (Rutter, 2012). The concept of resilience is interactive; its presence must be inferred regarding the variations and outcomes of individuals who experience stress or adversity (Rutter, 1987).

The stereotype that low-socioeconomic students defy is that poverty prohibits their academic success and that low income is tied directly to low academic performance (Williams & Bryan, 2013). Students that are able to move pass the stereotype, students who succeed in school, often are labeled as educationally resilient and frequently go unnoticed unless they falter and stop progressing academically (Wang, Haértel, & Walberg, 1997). Although there are low-socioeconomic high-achieving students who excel academically, students from this group are less likely to attend or graduate from college compared to their peers who hail from higher socioeconomic strata (Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007).

Despite these odds and obstacles, low-socioeconomic students from urban areas do excel and are academically successful (Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2004; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). School personal need to understand it is important to know why many students who face obstacles are academically successful while others from similar backgrounds and adversities fail. (Williams & Bryan, 2013). For schools that lack an understanding of this concept, their policies, programs and other counseling services intended to improve low-socioeconomic urban students’ outcome will most likely become ineffective (Fraser, 2004).
Reasons for Underachieving

When students who have the ability to perform well in school fall short of their potential, it is noticed by teachers, parents and researchers (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). A primary concern regarding students who have the ability to achieve but fail is the number one issue among educators (Renzulli, Reid, & Gubbins, 1990). There are many reasons students underachieve or fail in school, including poor performance, too many absences, low self-esteem, family issues as well as disruptive behavior (Reis & McCoach, 2000; Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). A study identified risk factors in the following five categories of students who fail to perform in school

- personal pain
- academic failure
- family tragedy
- family socioeconomic situation
- family instability

The study concluded that students who fail often fail in everything they do; risk is pervasive and if a student is at risk in one area, the expectation is they are also at risk in other areas. (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005).

Reviews of research summarized the following findings pertaining to underachieving students in that

- underachievement begins in elementary school
- underachievement appears to occur in some years but not others
- parental issues influence or actually cause underachievement
- positive peer interaction can reverse underachievement
• students who are busy in clubs or extracurricular activities are less likely to be underachievers
• structure with work or practice assists in developing a model of achievement in their lives
• a counselor, teacher or other caring adult can reverse the process of underachievement

Much more research is needed on reversing underachievement by interventions (Reis S. M., 1998; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Many of the findings pertaining to underachievement may be easily corrected, in particular, involvement in extracurricular activities, structure with work or practice, positive peer interaction and having a mentor or other caring adult taking a vested interest in the student.

Attributes and Protective Factors of Resilient Students

There are several factors that differentiate students who overcome adversity and achieve their goals versus students who fail to overcome similar adversities. Students who have positive peer support or are enrolled in extracurricular activities such as summer, sports and/or gifted programs tend to overcome their adversities (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). Students, whose parents are good role models, have some educational exposure and take a stake in their children’s life fair better handling and overcoming threats or adversities (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). Finally, having a teacher or counselor as a positive role model, engaging in some form of religious training and for girls in particular, making a conscious decision not to date, all contribute to positive achievements (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005). Following these recommendations does not guarantee every student success. However, it may be enough to make a difference between students who achieve and those who do not.
Other protective factors identify personal qualities that may have assisted in coping with various types of adversity (Prince-Embury, 2013). Some of the personal qualities to assist with overcoming adversity include intellectual ability (Baldwin, et al., 1993; Brooks, 1994; Jacelon, 1997; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Wolff, 1995; Wright & Masten, 1997), autonomy (Werner & Smith, 1982), relaxed temperament (Jacelon, 1997; Rende & Plomin, 1993; Wright & Masten, 1997), effective coping strategies (Brooks, 1994; Luthar & Zigler, 1991), sociability (Brooks, 1994; Luthar & Zigler, 1991), self-reliance (Polk, 1997) and finally communication skills (Werner & Smith, 1982). In addition to personal qualities that are considered protective factors, there are protective factors that are classified as environmental such as good peer relationships (Cowen & Work, 1988; Werner & Smith, 1982), positive relationships with other adults (Brooks, 1994; Conrad & Hammen, 1993; Garmezy, 1991; Werner E. E., 1997), and positive school experiences (Brooks, 1994; Rutter M. , 1987; Wright & Masten, 1997). These factors, individually or combined, have been found to be present in people who have flourished when faced with adversity (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984; Masten A. S., 2001; Rutter, Harrington, Quinton, & Pickles, 1994).

Conclusion

There are many definitions regarding resiliency. However, among the definitions there are commonalities including human strength, coping mechanisms and positive outcomes regardless of adversities. Terms such as ‘hardy’, ‘confident’, ‘optimistic’ are associated copiously with resiliency. Students who have forged positive, warm relationships with peers as well as adults who have high academic aspirations tend to exhibit educational resilience. A key component of defining resiliency is the positive outcome regardless of the adversities or threat
encountered. These are the students who are successful in their journey of obtaining a college degree.

Low-socioeconomic students defy the stereotype that their economic status precludes them from completing a college degree or their status is tied to low academic performance. Colleges and universities need to have a firm understanding as to why many students who face obstacles are academically successful while others are not. Institutions that do not grasp that concept, any policies, programs or other counseling services implemented in an effort to improve the outcome of low-socioeconomic students will most likely become ineffective.

There are many reasons why students fall short of their potential. Some of those reasons include low self-esteem and family issues, both which could contribute to students easily giving up on pursuing a college degree. Risk factors for students that fail fall into five categories with several sub categories. What studies have concluded is students who fail tend to fail in everything they do; students at risk in one area tend to be at risk in other areas. Additional research is needed on reversing the underachievement trend by interventions.

Despite adversities, educational resilient students have several attributes in common to overcome obstacles and be successful in their pursuit of a college degree. Educational resilient students often surround themselves with positive role models who are able to provide proper guidance, direction and support in their endeavors. Students are often engaged in extracurricular activities including but not limited to gifted or sports programs. Parents who take a vested interest in their children’s life, those children tend to have better coping skills in handling and overcoming threats or adversities.

Personal qualities that assist in coping with and overcoming threats and adversities include autonomy, sociability, self-reliance and a relaxed temperament. In conjunction with
personal qualities, there are environmental qualities such as positive relationships and school experiences that contribute to the resiliency of a student. What is abundantly clear is personal and environmental factors, individually or combined, are present in people who flourish when exposed to threats or adversities.

**Summary**

Roughly, 76% of first-generation low-socioeconomic college students fail to persist and graduate from college with a degree. Many studies provide an in depth look as to why this classification of students fails to persist. However, few studies look at the reasons first-generation low-socioeconomic students persist and graduate with a college degree. Because first-generation low-socioeconomic students lack adequate college preparation or college knowledge, they are significantly less successful than their more affluent peers in completing their college education. In order for first-generation low-socioeconomic students to meet the demand and rigor of college, they must be adequately prepared prior to leaving high school. Part of that preparation is to gain enough college knowledge in order to navigate the many processes of college life.

For low-socioeconomic students, part of that college knowledge includes understanding and navigating the financial aid process. The lack of financial support for low-socioeconomic students contributes to their premature departure from college. Surrounding themselves with positive role models may benefit low-socioeconomic students in understanding that a college degree has the potential to elevate them into a higher social class structure. Low-socioeconomic students indicated it was their personal goals and desires that provided motivation in obtaining a college degree.
Educational resilient students share commonalities. These students surround themselves with positive role models who provided guidance and support. They engage in extracurricular activities and they have similar personal qualities to cope with overcoming obstacles and barriers. Some of those shared personal qualities include but are not limited to autonomy, sociability and self-reliance.

Being inadequately prepared stifles first-generation low-socioeconomic students college knowledge, needed knowledge to assist with navigating the college or university realm. What experiences do successful first-generation low-socioeconomic students (seniors) who are in their final semester share? The rationale for this study is to examine and understand those shared experiences of academically successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students (seniors) who are in their final semester of obtaining their baccalaureate degree.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain a comprehensive understanding of how first-generation low-socioeconomic students (seniors) perceive their reality, and to qualify their perceptions of their life experiences in the successful pursuit of a college degree. Considerable research illustrates reasons why first-generation low-socioeconomic college students fail to graduate (Aronson, 2008; Fischer, 2007; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Wells & Lynch, 2012; Wiggins, 2011; Woosley & Shepler, 2011) as well as their high attrition rate (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; Gibbons, Pelchar, & Cochran, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005). The existence of research illustrating the success rate of first-generation low-socioeconomic students is sparse. The research question that guided this study was: What are the life stories of first-generation low-socioeconomic students attending a four-year public university who have succeeded academically?

Methodology

A qualitative inquiry was proposed for this study as the style of research. Creswell (2007) explains that qualitative research empowers individuals to share their stories as a mechanism to have their voices heard. He further explains that qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem.” (Creswell, 2007, p. 249). The research approach employed, narrative inquiry, is the study of experience as story (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Narrative inquiry utilizes, among other items, conversations, stories, interviews, life experiences and field notes as a way to not only research but to understand how people create meaning in their lives. People’s lives, individually and socially, are shaped by their stories (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007).
This study explored the ‘lived experiences’ of participants, or how their lives were lived (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Specifically, this study utilized narrative inquiry to investigate how certain first-generation, low-socioeconomic college students (seniors) succeeded in the journey of obtaining a college degree. Narrative inquiry was a term first used and published by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). Connelly and Clandinin argued for its use in educational research because stories help organize human experiences, and because human beings live storied lives, individually and socially. Additionally, since narrative inquiry research is intended to provide a voice to those who are traditionally marginalized, providing a platform for telling their stories (Hendry, 2007), it seemed an appropriate and correct choice for methodology for this study.

Study participants, through an interview session format, told their own stories of how they persisted and graduated from college. The purpose of the interview format was to have the study participants express their own reality regarding their college experiences. Part of the storytelling reality was listening to the study participants express their expectations and obligations as it related to their habitus.

Reality for individual study participants is not relegated to a single reality. Instead, the study participants form many realities based on their own perspectives. The collection of individual realities, it was hoped, would reveal patterns or themes common to each individual reality. In an effort to increase the graduation rate of first-generation low-socioeconomic students, the identification of commonalities among individual realities was then analyzed for causes and effects.

In guiding a narrative inquiry, the researcher conducted the interview process keeping three commonplaces – temporality, sociality and place – as checkpoints (Clandinin & Huber, in
press; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Temporality refers to having some relationship with time. People and events have a past, present and future. Regarding narrative inquiry, the importance was to recognize people, places and events as a process in transition (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Sociality combines the personal and social conditions of the study participants and the researcher seeking information by questioning. (Clandinin & Huber, in press). The two are engaged in an inquiry relationship and as such, the researchers cannot subtract themselves from the relationship. Place refers to the physical location or places where the inquiry and events occurred, recognizing that all events occur somewhere (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). The purpose of the checkpoints is to allocate resources to all three, not to focus on one commonplace at the expense of the others (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Ultimately, arriving at an explanation derived from patterns or a theme that produces a calculation on the outcome as well as exhibiting a level of control over the phenomena was the objective.

**Participants and Site**

The study site was a four-year public institution situated in a rural area of Massachusetts, roughly 35 miles south of Boston. The institution offered Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees along with post-baccalaureate and post-master certificates. Total student enrollment was approximately eleven thousand students, with undergraduate enrollment approximately 9,600 students. Undergraduate enrollment by gender was comprised of 59% women, 41% men. Undergraduate enrollment by race/ethnicity was approximately 77.8% White, 9% Black or African American, 1.8% unknown with the remaining 11.4% dispersed among other race/ethnicity categories.

A purposive sampling procedure was employed in the selection of the study participants. Creswell (2007) suggests a sampling pool of 3 to 10 subjects. Another article on qualitative interview suggests a sampling size of six participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). A
review of eight articles in a paper from the National Center for Research Methods on the number of study participants indicates there is no definitive answer, instead a range of 8 to 40 study participants is suggested (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

Several factors to consider when selecting an appropriate number of study participants include time constraints (time and financial), purpose of the research, heterogeneity of the population and availability of potential study participants (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Life story research typically involves a smaller sample size (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Based on all these factors, I chose a sampling pool of the six participants listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abie</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baily</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Communication Disorders in Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cacy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dalia</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian &amp; Asian</td>
<td>Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Haitian American</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fawn</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Anthropology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students who were seniors in their last semester of studies, reasonably expected to graduate, and received Pell grants in the pursuit of their baccalaureate degree were asked to participate in the narrative inquiry study. Additional criterion to narrow the pool of candidates included students who were classified as first-generation students. Interviewing study participants allowing them to recount their own stories regarding their educational journey, analyzing the data provided a comprehension of the way students created meaning from an
understanding of their life experiences and the role those experiences played in their successful completion of college.

A baseline of questions to begin the conversation was used with follow up questions being asked. Follow up questions were asked to delve deeper while attempting to uncover the full understanding study participants had regarding their life experiences and the influence it may or may not had played in the completion of their degree. The purpose was to understand the way study participants created meaning in their lives.

Initial contact to students was made via email using their institutional email. Students who were receiving Pell grants were asked to voluntarily participate in a study providing they were first-generation students. A definition of first-generation students was provided in the initial email and subsequent meetings to ensure study participants meet the eligible criteria. Age range of study participants was open in order to capture those students who progressed normally as well as students who may have stopped out for one or more semesters and for students who began their college journey at a later age. Criterion sampling was the method best suited for this phenomenological study as all participants had experienced the phenomenon.

Data collection was done via interviews with study participants. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the study participants. All interviews were conducted at a place selected by study participants in an effort to add a level of comfort and familiarity. It was suggested that interview locations be on the institutions campus, but not necessary. Interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes each session and recorded in order to be transcribed and coded at a later date.

Interviews were semi-structured in format. The semi-structured interview occurred between researcher and study participant as a scheduled, extended conversation. The semi-
structured interview focused on a specific topic with a limited number of questions ready ahead of time with plans for follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview style shared qualities of both topical and cultural.

A topical style interview centers on “specific facts, descriptions of events, or examples that will help answer a particular, focused research question” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 31). The topical interview was looking to answer the question of what are the shared experiences of the study participants. A follow up question looked to answer how the study participants felt they were prepared to pursue a college degree. Rubin & Rubin (2012) state that the interviewer utilizing a topical style is more of a [portrait] painter instead of a photographer, where the painter has to gather and interpret all the pieces to be recreated.

With the cultural interview, it is the “norms and values that define expected behaviors with a given group, organization, or society” that was culled from study participants answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 33). The commonality of study participants being first-generation, low-socioeconomic may reveal an expected behavior or pattern that was influenced by their habitus. The researcher was looking for behaviors, choices and phrases exhibited by study participants that indicated norms and values within this subset of the student population. The information was interpreted and pieced together to form a portrait of first-generation low socioeconomic students.

**Procedures**

Once a viable sampling pool was determined, the process of interviewing study participants began by allowing study participants to select a day and time that was conducive to their schedule but also staying within the confines of the study parameters. Interviewing students who had a similar socio-economic status and social capital, the intent was to identify patterns or
themes based on their individual experiences. Examining the individual experiences, what were the expectations felt by students and how did they view their own obligations based on their social capital. A narrative inquiry study examines the stories of each individual based on their own experiences and reality.

Interviews were conducted at locations that provided a familiar setting for study participants. Initial interviews were scheduled for 90 minutes in length with strict adherence to time limits. Follow up interviews were scheduled as necessary for clarification as well as gathering additional data. Students told their stories of persistence and graduation.

An analysis of the raw data looked for patterns or themes among participants in order to develop a general level of focus answering the questions on the groups shared experiences of success. First-generation low-socioeconomic students, due to their social capital, may believe they are predisposed to play a certain role in society. Hearing stories of students who persist and graduate may reveal themes of how they view themselves and the roles they play in society based on their habitus or social capital. Discovering similarities of successful students who may feel at a disadvantage and the tools and methods they employ to be successful may be paramount in raising graduation rates among this population of college students.

Data Analysis

The researcher used a holistic approach in the analysis of data. Holistic coding was utilized in an effort to understand and develop themes among the data, not by analyzing data line by line but instead looking at data in its entirety (Saldaña, 2012). The data analysis looked for similarities and patterns of successful first-generation low-socioeconomic students (seniors). Students who were in their last year of studies and reasonably expected to complete a four-year degree was the measure of success.
Coding was completed in a multistep process. The initial stage of data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading transcripts, reviewing field notes written during interviews as well as reviewing audio recordings of the interview process. During this data layout stage, text was prepared in order to assign codes. The preparation of text in a double spaced format, leaving room for writing notes, assigning codes and grouping text when topics change is known as unit breaks or stanzas (Saldaña, 2012).

After an initial read through of the transcript, a second read through was completed in which codes were assigned to words or passages. According to Saldaña (2012) a code is a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” to parts of language or visual data (p. 3). After coding of each transcript, data was analyzed to determine any common themes or patterns in the individual transcripts as well as themes and patterns among all study participants responses to the study questions.

These statements were grouped by meaning which were then transcribed describing experiences of the participants. Not only were the participants’ experiences described, but the context which influenced the particular experience was also described. Creswell (2007) labels this process as imaginative variation.

Similarities and patterns of study participants were further explored for services, procedures or policies that assisted study participants in completing their college degree. An analysis of the data may reveal certain procedures or attributes that were instrumental in assisting students to persist and graduate. These findings may have the potential to be implemented within the higher education system in an effort to increase the graduation rate of this segment of the student population.
Ethical Considerations

In an effort to maintain study participants anonymity, any information gathered from study participants during this study that can potentially identify study participants will remain confidential. Disclosure of such information will be made only with the expressed written consent or request of study participants or as required by law. A researcher protects the identity of study participants by assigning numbers or aliases to study participants (Creswell, 2007). Study participants were provided pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Any digital or analog recordings of interviews or other conversations with study participants do not have labels with any identifying information of study participants. Study participants were allowed to view their individual transcripts to edit or correct discrepancies. A professional transcriber transcribed the audio files. Prior to transcription, a Transcriber Confidentially Statement was procured. All electronic files, audio, data, etc., were encrypted and password protected via current technology if possible. All written files along with electronic files were kept in a secured file cabinet in student researcher’s home office. The student researcher’s home has an alarm system that was activated when the home was vacant.

Data gathered during this study was used for the sole purpose of a doctoral thesis project by student researcher. Any future use of study data is possible. Should future use of study data be necessary, confidentiality will remain for study participants. Access to files will be by principle investigator or project student researcher only. Information regarding confidentiality was shared with study participants prior to the interview process verbally and via a Consent Form.

Repeatedly, study participants were made aware they were participating in a voluntary study along with the purpose of the study. Study participants were made aware their participation was voluntary and they could cease participation in the study at any time without any
repercussions. Study participants for this study were students who were classified as first-generation college students who came from a low-socioeconomic family background. Due to this financial classification, study participants may have been vulnerable and felt that lack of participation in the study could somehow have adverse effects. Study participants were reassured no adverse action would befall them should they decide not to participate or cease to participate at any time during the study. This constant reassurance should have removed any fear of negative consequences felt by study participants in regards to obtaining their college degree.

There was an increased chance that study participants for this study were born and currently lived in the same geographic area as student researcher. This student researcher was hopeful that this connection would put study participants at ease, viewing the student researcher as part of their community and not someone who has power, actual or implied, over them. Rubin & Rubin (2012) state that people who are viewed as marginal to society may see the interviewer as an official authoritative figure or as having power over them.

Because of this, potential study participants may have felt they had to participate. Study participants were informed of the study’s purpose and that their participation was voluntary. Study participants were required to submit a consent form indicating their willingness to be part of the study. Study participants were reminded periodically they were under no obligation to participate and they could opt out of the study at any time. Study participants who completed the study were provided a gift card of nominal value for their participation.

**Trustworthiness**

Any study needs to be concerned with its trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) hypothesize that trustworthiness in a study is established by obtaining four components: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. What measures should be employed
to ensure these four components are met to have trustworthiness within the study? To certify the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed a different methodology for each component found in literature.

Member checking established the first component, credibility. Member checking is where participants are consulted to ensure the researchers interpretation of collected data is in agreement with their own interpretation of the same data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). The second component, transferability was established by thick description. Thick description is a way of establishing external validity that allows readers to decide if the study findings are transferable to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011).

A third component was established by an audit trail. An audit trail provided details, information and other documentation regarding the study that may allow an independent researcher to attempt replication of the study by the methods used and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). The audit trail included, but was not limited to, interview questions, field notes, audio recordings of interviews, annotated transcripts, draft reports and of course, the final research study itself.

Reflexivity established the fourth component, confirmability. With reflexivity, the researcher identified how much potential bias could affect data characteristics by a self-critique process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). Being open and transparent, the researcher understood their position to the study topic was not neutral and they made public their own biases (Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). Employing these methods of establishing trustworthiness, any researcher influence was minimized thus increasing the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2007).
Potential Research Bias

Being in the higher education field for twelve years, the researcher has witnessed many students who have started their college education only to leave the institution with nothing to show for their time except a few grades and a mountain of student loan debt. The type of students in this predicament covers the entire spectrum. However, there are a disproportionate number of first-generation low-socioeconomic students who fall into this category. While it is easy to identify students at risk of dropping out, it is also easy to identify students at risk who work through the adversity, difficulty and pitfalls in order to achieve what they set out for – a college degree.

Students who are successful in grades K-12 and graduate from high school have a better chance of being prepared and successful as they enter college. There is an abundance of studies that have been conducted dealing with educational research (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). What happens to the results of these studies? Are there any changes in policies and/or procedures based on the researchers results that would increase the persistence rate of first-generation low-socioeconomic students?

The researcher is the seventh child out of nine from a family where only the father worked. It was apparent at an early age that attending college was going to be very difficult if not entirely out of the question, and if it were a possibility, the financial burden would be the researchers. The researcher’s bias is that if they were able to overcome the adversity then all students should be able to do the same. Although the researcher was able to overcome obstacles and complete his degree, the researcher does realize that not every situation is identical. Students come from different backgrounds and cultures. Obstacles that the researcher was able to
overcome could pose a significant issue for others, perhaps based on gender or ethnicity, which they are unable to endure.

While the researcher does not fit the first-generation classification, his low socio-economic upbringing does allow a connection to potential study participants. During the interview stages, drawing upon this connection to build a rapport with study participants may put them at ease. This level of comfort may provide a more open and honest dialogue with potential study participants allowing a more in-depth probe into how they view their habitus affecting their educational journey.

Care must be taken while gathering data, as well as the data analysis process, such that the researcher, as the interviewer, does not interject his own biases into the study. The researcher’s educational experience is parallel to the study participants. Also, the possibility that the study participants currently live in the city where the researcher grew up, and attended the same public school system is great. The institution where the pool of study participants will come from is the same institution where the researcher obtained his undergrad and graduate degrees. All of this was self-monitored to minimize any adverse influence that could potentially come from the researcher’s experiences.

**Limitations**

All effort was made to maintain at least three or more components of trustworthiness of the study. However, despite these efforts the study is faced with limitations. A primary limitation is the selection of the student participants. Every student participating in the study will fit the criteria of first-generation, low-socioeconomic which makes the group appear to be homogenous. However, other factors such as but not limited to race, age, ethnicity and gender
may influence the study participant’s experiences. Those other factors could very well influence study participants view of their habitus and how it influenced their educational endeavors.

An additional limitation may be the institution itself. The institution, due to its location situated in a rural area, is conducive to attracting students from surrounding metropolitan cities whose demographics are largely low-socioeconomic. Tuition at the university, as a state institution, is significantly less than non-state institutions located 35 miles north of its location. Students who reside geographically between the study institution and a plethora of institutions in the Boston area may select the study institution due to its low cost as well as the ability to commute thus reducing the overall financial burden. The attractiveness of low cost and ability to live at home while attending college may restrict the transferability of generalization to other institutions.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to investigate shared experiences of academically successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students who are in their last semester of study and reasonably expected to graduate. Narrative inquiry was used because it examines experiences of study participants told as a story. Narrative inquiry utilizes stories, conversations and life experiences as a way to not only research but to understand how people create meaning in their lives. Narrative inquiry is an intimate study of a person’s experiences over time and in context.

Utilizing narrative inquiry, the most common form of data collection is verbally, through conversations. People are able to provide meaning to their own experiences and actions. It is most often used as a way to understand the experiences of people. The purpose in conducting interviews with study participants was to have them become actively involved in the telling of their stories. In telling their own stories, study participants are able to make sense of their own reality.

Participants for this study shared their experiences in overcoming obstacles and adversities in order to succeed in their educational journey of obtaining a college degree. They shared their experience through story telling. Stories are a form of social action and the telling of stories is one way of experiencing life. The stories told were one technique to provide meaning to the study participants experiences in their pursuit of a college education.

Two distinct themes emerged after analyzing the data and those themes are presented in this chapter. The first theme, experiences of the first attempt at postsecondary education, had two subthemes, support from family, and influence of their children. The second theme, experiences
of the second attempt at postsecondary education, also had two subthemes, social programs for education and balancing commitments.

Table 1

*Themes and Corresponding Subthemes by Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Abie</th>
<th>Baily</th>
<th>Cacy</th>
<th>Dalia</th>
<th>Ellen</th>
<th>Fawn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Attempt</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children Influence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Attempt</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Programs</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chapter is divided into two main themes with each of those themes divided further into two sub-themes. The main theme begins with a broad descriptive summary of the main theme as well as a broad descriptive summary of the two subthemes. The subthemes will begin with a summary, followed up with evidence from the participants’ transcripts. Each subtheme will include a conclusion based on the interpretation of the data. A final summary analysis is provided at the end.
Experiences of First Attempt at Postsecondary Education

All six study participants made an initial attempt on their journey to obtaining a college degree, only to suspend that journey until a later date. Many of the study participants abandoned their pursuit due to financial hardship as well as having families of their own. The lack of parental support, financially and emotionally, along with responsibilities of becoming a parent themselves derailed their ability to finish college.

However, those same elements provided the push for the study participants to resume that journey. In some cases, it was returning to the point where they left off in their studies; in others, it was almost returning to the beginning. Regardless of why they left college or at what point in their studies they left, realizing that patterns where repeating reignited the idea of returning. The ability to provide a stable environment, socially and financially, for themselves and their children was the result of what they were hoping a college degree would deliver.

Support from family, financially or emotionally, was mostly non-existent. Conversations regarding college did not occur. In only a few cases, there was just the mere mention of the study participant receiving any type of verbal affirmation that their parent(s) had a desire for them to attend college. Negative reinforcement was prevalent from parents with regard to attending college. Sibling encouragement, as well as encouragement from grandparents, played a larger role versus any encouragement from parents.

Language barriers, gender biases and financial wherewithal were major components preventing college participation. In addition, lack of stability and continuity of family life also contributed. Combining all these components with the parental lack of a college degree or college knowledge provided all the ingredients necessary for a difficult first attempt that resulted in failure.
Raising children is consuming in time, finances and other resources that bring added stress to life. Raising children as a single parent escalates those elements of stress exponentially. The inability to provide for the basic needs of children can be at times demoralizing. However, the feeling of parental inadequacy can also provide the impulse to seek out ways to improve in order to provide the basic necessities of everyday life.

There is acknowledgement of missed opportunities in one’s own life through self-reflection or other methods, and seeing those potential opportunities bypassing their children through repeated patterns of behavior can be a heavy burden to carry. There is strength in recognizing the effort and sacrifice needed to better a person’s social position by earning a college degree. Elevating their own social status, by default they also elevate their children’s status and afford opportunities to them.

Recognizing the societal expectations of their social status, and recognizing how that status had the potential to adversely affect their children, finding options to complete their education became a priority. The study participants resisted succumbing to the stereotype that their economic status would prohibit them from earning a college degree. With children of their own, the study participants’ principle focus became providing better opportunities for their children. In order to increase those odds, they made the decision to return to college.

Not having social, emotional or financial support of family proved to be a large hurdle in being successful in college. As adults, the inability to provide for their own children played a major role in the decision to return to a collegiate environment. Although these obstacles disrupted their first attempt at a college degree, it also provided the impetus to move forward and try again. The following sections describe the experiences of the study participants regarding family support and their children’s influence on their decision to return to college.
Support from Family

Support from family can come in many different forms - emotional, social and financial. Expressing words of encouragement and praise is a form of emotional support that can be provided by parents or other family members. Having a particular social position in society or within a network of peers is a form of social support. The ability to assist in some capacity with the financial burden of college expenses is a form of financial support.

The goal of attaining a college degree is greatly influenced by parental education as well as parental involvement. Providing an environment in the home that promotes education has a positive effect on the outcome of a child’s college experience. For parents who have not progressed beyond a high school education, engaging their children in conversations regarding college can assist in breaking the lack of education cycle.

Positive family support for the study participants was trifling at best, in most cases it was non-existent or negative support. When asked if there was parental support, emotionally or financially, to attend college, some of the responses included: their parents belittled them for believing they could succeed in college or dismissed that college would provide a better way of life. Fawn, whose parents divorced when she was eight years old and identified her ethnicity as White, stated that her father was “very much uninvolved” in her education. She explained, “If it wasn’t on his time, it wasn’t his problem.” Her mother developed alcoholism when she [Fawn] was age eleven. Her mother’s alcoholism became worse as Fawn grew older. She recalls it was not until she was well into her twenties when her mother began to recover.

Conversations regarding college between Fawn and her mother were lacking. When asked about any conversations that occurred in her home when growing up, Fawn explained it was with her grandmother, and even those conversations were sparse in substance.
She [grandmother] would come down from where she was...she was like an hour out of town. When she’d visit I’d complain about things and she’d say, “Oh, well, wait till you get to college.” Just little...like no real planning or serious discussion, just like it was this lofty goal type of thing, like wouldn’t it be nice.

Abie, who also identified her ethnicity as White, grew up in a two-parent household, middle to upper-middle class neighborhood, and whose parents both finished high school, was told by her parents that college ‘wasn’t going to happen.’ When asked why her parents were not supportive of her choice to attend college, Abie explained when she presented the college application to her parents their reason was:

Because I was a girl and I was going to get married. I would soon find a guy that would marry me and have a family, but that, that’s not what girls did [attend college] and they [parents] didn’t have that kind of money to spend, pretty much. My brothers went to college, they both went [to community college], neither one of them finished.

Dalia, who identified as Asian and Caucasian, grew up in a bilingual house with both parents in a lower-middle class neighborhood. Her mother completed high school and her father completed 10th grade. She explained that her parents placed some emphasis on attending college but they did not realize the process behind it. Her dad was a truck driver and her mother tried unsuccessfully to be a small business owner. Her mother’s endeavor put the family in financial straits.

Dalia explained that sometimes her parents would express the importance of attending college, but despite the occasional ‘You need to go to college’ comment by her parents, there was no substance behind that statement. Dalia expressed that her parents offered no guidance or
support and the language barrier added an additional layer of obstruction for her parents to assist her. Dalia felt her parents did want her to attend college because they emphasized it occasionally. She also felt her parents were not realistic about the process behind attending college. Dalia did not have any resources at home, she did not own a computer until after she graduated high school and there was no Internet access in the house.

Baily, who identified as Asian American, came from a two-parent household. She classified her household as low income. She grew up in a predominantly White neighborhood where they were the only Asian family. Because of the lack in neighborhood diversity, Baily stated her family was very withdrawn and did not interact with their neighbors. Her parents did not speak much English.

Baily explained that her parents did not finish high school and they were not supportive of her attending college. When asked about family support to attend college, she responded:

My parents did not speak much English. My parents weren’t really there for education. The education wasn’t there because where they came from they never had that education. They came from Cambodia, which is a poor country, so they lacked on education. I know when I was younger they always pursued me to go to school to learn more, but after high school it wasn’t really their decision about going to college.

Cacy, who identified as White, explained that growing up she attended five different high schools because of being in foster care. She entered foster care when she was eleven years of age. Each change in school also meant a change in neighborhood and demographics. For Cacy, moving from foster home to foster home offered little stability and continuity. She did state that many of the foster homes were two-parent households.
Prior to entering foster care, only her mother raised Cacy and her sibling. Her mother did not go beyond high school. One foster home where Cacy lived the longest, she considers them her family and continues to maintain a relationship, was a two-parent household. Although it offered some stability, there was an expectation that she would not complete high school much less attend college. She explained that foster kids like her were disadvantaged and expectations were low for them to succeed educationally.

Ellen, who is one of ten children and identified as Haitian-American, was also in foster care. Her experience was very different from Cacy’s. Ellen entered foster care as a teenager, around the age of fourteen. Prior to entering foster care, Ellen lived in the city in a very diverse neighborhood. When she entered foster care, she moved to a suburban town. She described her experience:

I lived in a little gated elderly community kind of thing, kind of family community, very quiet. It was weird once I transitioned to [a new location]. Because I went from knowing different races to being the only Black person in my class and being really uncomfortable and being under represented, I guess, in the community that I went to school in. That was different.

Both of Ellen’s parents had high school diplomas. She expressed “both sides of my family definitely wanted me to go to college” and Ellen herself wanted to go to college. However, no one in her immediate or extended family had a college degree. She had no friends or family who had attended college. She herself was not sure why she would go to college or in what program of study she would enroll. She never gave attending college much thought.
Conclusions. Parents of the study participants were not educated beyond high school. However, their lack of education did not inhibit some minor conversations regarding college from occurring in a few of the homes. The minor amounts of educational conversations, by themselves, were not enough of an influence to ensure success. The occasional utterance of college being a possible career path provided little assurance of successfully applying to, entering, financing, and earning a college degree.

Not having the social capital or the college knowledge, the families were not able to assist their children in the process of attending college. Not only did the parents lack college knowledge, they lacked a solid network of people that they or their children could employ for assistance in navigating the college environment. The societal expectation of the families’ social and cultural capital was unable to provide opportunities for family members to access networks that would assist them in their educational endeavors. The study participants, not having a family member who attended college, were not able to draw off their family members experiences to assist them in any of the college processes.

In a few of the households, there was also a cultural barrier. The parents had emigrated from countries were their educational opportunities may have been limited. There was some encouragement from the parents to ensure their children graduated from high school. However, beyond that, the parents were disinterested. Their exposure to education in their culture did not extend beyond a basic education. Settling in this country did not change their outlook on the importance of a college degree despite their own toils and hardships.

The family of another study participant had a culture gender prejudice and bias. The parents determined that ‘girls’ do not go to college. Instead, they are to find a nice man to marry,
have children and raise a family. Only the boys of the family were provided an opportunity to attend college.

The apathetic position of one parent regarding the interest and goal of their daughter to attend college may have been caused by their own shortcoming of not being educated. Study participants disclosed their families were not in a position to assist financially with their education. In most cases, there was little to no emotional support providing them with assistance or encouragement to attend college.

Other family characteristics, such as having a parent battle substance abuse or parents unable to be fiscally responsible for themselves or their children may have contributed to the many reasons study participants were unsuccessful in their first attempt of attending college. A contributing factor for failure of study participant’s first attempt at attending higher education would be lack of a home environment conducive to fostering encouragement. The study participants, all but one who is a single mother, began to understand they were establishing the same environment and repeating the cycle for their children that they themselves endured. Recognition of the cycle repeating itself added to the desire for going back to college in order to provide better opportunities for their children and themselves.

**Influence of their Children**

Having one or more children to care for can present its own set of challenges. Providing that care in substandard form can be difficult to accept. Watching their children endure the same struggles they experienced was not an acceptable way of life. The difficulty of raising their children in a similar environment as their own was a path the study participants wanted to avoid.
They did not want their children to continue the cycle. They wanted the ability to offer their children the educational opportunities their parents were unable to provide them. One way to safeguard those opportunities was to earn a college degree. The unintentional effect of having children was the influence the children had on the decision making process in returning to college. It was stated the children’s influence was heavily factored in the process to degree completion. With the exception of Ellen, who had no children, the study participants commented that they wanted to provide a better home life for their children and themselves.

Five of the six study participants were single mothers raising a family while trying to attend college. Due to their own upbringing and experiences watching their parents struggle, they themselves recognized the pattern repeating. Baily, who was a teenage mom at 16, contemplated dropping out of high school. Not long after graduating high school, she had her second child. At this time, Baily was working two jobs while trying to attend college.

After her third child, who was diagnosed with Autism, Baily became a stay at home mom. Taking time off from college, she realized that she had to do something with her life. After her son was born, she explained her situation as follows:

He was diagnosed with autism so I became a stay at home mom. I had to do something with my life. I couldn’t just stay at home because I got bored and I thought maybe if I go back to school for special education communication disorders I could find more information about my child’s diagnoses so that way I could know more about his health and all that. Then be educated on his needs and then I could probably help somebody else, so that’s why I’m here and trying to pursue that kind of field.
Fawn, whose first attempt at college was disrupted due to bouts of anxiety, stepped away from her education for several years. During that hiatus she had two children. After the birth of her second daughter, she recognized she was in an abusive relationship. Fawn realized she wanted to leave and not be in that environment for the rest of her life. Every time she attempted to get ahead, somebody or something became an obstacle preventing her from moving forward.

At that point, it just kind of switched focus and became more about my daughters. I had kind of saw the cycle repeating itself, where my parents had me at a very young age, very self-absorbed and immature people because they were so young, and then they couldn’t grow out of that because life was happening to them, so they got stuck in sort of this arrested development, trying to raise babies themselves.

Every time I tried to get ahead, my kids’ father or somebody else would try to pull me back. At first it worked, because it was an excuse for me. It was like, he needs me, or this person, whatever. Then it just started making me angry, like no, you’re dragging me down. You don’t care if I succeed! I need to succeed because no one else is going to be able to raise these kids and I’m not going to have them go through what I went through.

Dalia, who was married at 22 and had children, focused on her relationship and parenting. It was during that time when she became more serious about receiving her college degree. At the behest of her brother, she attended a school specializing in career education. Her brother had convinced her it was the quickest way to establish a career and provide for her children.

That’s what I did. It was such a small setting so I think I just gained a lot of confidence being there and realizing I can do this. I just really set that goal for myself, like, I’m
going to complete this schooling. I knew at that point I did want to transfer out into a university of just college where I obtain an undergraduate degree.

When Dalia was asked to identify an event that influenced her decision, or the impetus that pushed her to return to college to pursue her four-year degree, she responded:

After having my children, they were about two years old, I was just really thinking about my relationship at the time, where my life was heading, what direction, because like I said, I was really upset about not being able to go to college right after high school. I don’t want to say that I didn’t think it was possible, but more of me was thinking, realistically, is this going to happen?

She added that having children is when she “got more serious about education.” She had set goals for herself and wanted to provide better opportunities for her children.

Abie had a similar epiphany. After leaving college the first time, she stated that it felt like years had passed and before she knew it, she was married and had her first child. After her second child and still married, she realized something had to be done. They needed two incomes to purchase a home and support the family. It was not long before she found herself as a single mother of three. She recalls being angry about not having a college degree.

Another thing I thought about is how happy I am that I took this time for myself to achieve my college degree. When I think about the last four years I can't help but realize how much this opportunity has given me - I am a better critical thinker and a more confident woman. I realize more now that I was angry back in the day because I wasn't following through with my own needs which is something I take full responsibility for not doing long ago.
Abie concluded that her motivation was primarily financial, and a determination to complete something that she had started years ago. She also stated that she would tell her children they have an opportunity that was not provided to her when she was eighteen. Abie often muses about what her life would have been like if she had the same opportunities as her children.

**Conclusions.** The study participants, whose parental education did not reach institutions of higher education, and whose family support to pursue their own education was minimal at best, managed to break the non-education cycle. After their first attempt at college was unsuccessful, the study participants had made the decision to overcome barriers in order to earn a baccalaureate degree. While their low social capital and lack of family support, financially and emotionally, may have deterred their educational journey, that deterrent was temporary.

Being single mothers, they were struggling financially. After having children and being on their own, stressed to provide stability in their life, that is when they realized that the path to opportunities and elevating their social status was earning a college degree. The stimulus to return to college obviously appears to be emanating from seeing their children endure the hardships that they themselves experienced.

One item they had in common was their admitted struggles to provide minimum necessities for themselves, but more importantly for their children. The recognition of the social and educational pattern being repeated by the next generation appeared to be a catalyst for them to make the short term sacrifice to return to college. They did not want their children to endure the hardships they experienced.
Once they made the decision to return to college, what were the shared experiences of the study participants? Without financial support from their family and raising children predominantly on their own, how did they overcome financial obstacles to complete their degree? Similarities were found among the study participants in their experiences of attending college for the second time.

**Experiences of Second Attempt at Postsecondary Education**

The six study participants were unsuccessful in their first attempt at college. This endeavor was stifled mostly due to financial difficulty, unsupportive family members and lack of college knowledge, but also having ‘life’ get in the way. With the exception of Ellen, the other participants had the additional obstacle of raising a family without the assistance of a supportive partner. Even with the educational loads placed on them by their studies, there was the time management and balancing acts with the demands of college, work and raising a family that needed to be addressed.

The study participants’ immediate family members were not in a position to assist them financially and they were unsupportive emotionally in most cases. Being able to draw on the experiences of a family member or someone to assist in their own college endeavor was not available the first time around. Having tried once, the study participants were now able to draw on their own experiences in navigating the college process. They had begun to build a network, surrounding themselves with people that could assist them by tapping into their knowledge base. They had obtained college knowledge.

They utilized that college knowledge to traverse some of the commonplace aspects of entering college. Areas such as financial aid, entrance applications and campus orientation were familiar. Having exposure to some of the routine characteristics of entering college may have
provided a level of reassurance, but there was still the financial burden to overcome. Having small children themselves only compounded their financial difficulty.

In addition to financial aid, there were other programs, social and financial, that played a significant role in the study participants returning to their studies. Several study participants acknowledged that without these social programs providing opportunities for them to return to college, they would not have had the means to return and finish what they started. Not only did some of these programs provide financial support, but it also provided a way to assist with balancing the demands of their other commitments by freeing up and reallocating resources from other areas in their life. The following sections describe the experiences of the study participants’ second attempt at postsecondary education regarding social programs for education and balancing their work, school and life commitments.

Social Programs for Education

In addition to financial aid loans and Pell grants, other social programs were available and provided assistance to the participants on their path to obtaining a college degree. Participants were eligible for different types of assistance depending on their particular situation. Some of the programs participants used were transitional assistance, tuition waivers and childcare vouchers. Participation in these programs was a way to overcome financial burdens that alleviated some of the pressures of attending college with limited resources.

Although they were able to use these social programs once eligibility was determined, the obstacle was having the knowledge that the programs existed. In some cases, the journey in discovering that knowledge was long and filled with verbal bouts. In others, it was a matter of just asking many different people a plethora of questions in order to gather as much information as possible to make an informed decision.
Fawn was on welfare and had difficulty finding work, especially for minimum wage in menial positions. She was constantly being told she was overqualified. Without some form of income, she had to rely on welfare to support her and her two small children. In order to continue receiving welfare benefits, Fawn was required to show she was employed at least part-time. She explained her situation:

They have a time limit on how long you have to receive benefits before you’re penalized because you don’t have a job or whatever. They gave me childcare and I found part-time work, twelve to fifteen hours a week. To keep childcare, I needed to do thirty [hours]. It was like two years and just constantly in and out of the Department of Transitional Assistance, leaving in tears, having screaming contests with the people there, just back and forth over how I could make this work.

After speaking with several different people at the Department of Transitional Assistance office, Fawn was provided information that would change her outlook, providing her with the opportunity to return to college. They presented Fawn with the option that if she were to return to college, the hours of attending college would be added to her work hours. This meant Fawn would be able to meet the thirty-hour weekly minimum requirement to continue receiving childcare benefits. After hearing the news, Fawn stated “I was like well then, I’m going to school.” Fawn stated that if she were not on welfare to receive that benefit, she probably never would have returned to college.

Cacy was able to utilize a tuition waiver for foster children. A person who was in the foster care program needed to attend a state school in order to utilize the benefit. Cacy explains her situation comparing her two attempts at college.
I did have Pell Grants and had the unsubsidized and the subsidized Stafford loans, but I wasn’t able to take advantage of the tuition waiver for foster children because I didn’t go to a state school.

Going to school now, before I got married, I had the Pell Grants and all that stuff. The first year I think I owed $400 for the first year. Now that I am married I don’t get any financial aid, and so it’s just doing the installments, and fortunately my husband is well employed so it takes some of that pressure off.

Ellen, who also was in foster care, took advantage of that benefit as well. When she discovered that most of her college education would be paid for through the program, this is when she “definitely knew I wanted to go to college.”

I accepted a couple of the loans that financial aid provides, but other than that, I didn’t have to pay for anything out of pocket because I was in foster care, so I got certain fees waived. I got grants and other things that helped me pay for my schooling. I don’t owe too much in loans. I would say about $6,000, if that. That was only because I wanted to take out the loans.

Baily had other options presented to her to finance her education. When she began working at a health community center, she discovered they had an education reimbursement program. At the time Baily had two daughters and was working seventy-two hours per week on average at several different jobs. She spoke about working at the health community center:

Then I found out that they had some kind of reimbursement fees for education if I was to go to school for the same field that I was going to go for, that I was working for, that they would reimburse me 70%. I don’t remember how much it was [dollar amount] but I did get reimbursed.
Abie, who had two children, found it difficult to attend college while balancing the demands of raising a family. She was working part-time for a utility company and in researching opportunities that would allow her to return to her studies, she discovered the school had a preschool resource center at the college.

I came to the college and I went to every desk that there was and asked a million questions, “How do I sign up? How do I do this?” They said, “You are the perfect candidate for this program that we’re going to start in the fall.”

That was the biggest thing to take that burden away, that I didn’t have to pay for anything out of pocket, that I could just go and that my kids could go to preschool. It was an awesome experience because my son had some speech problems and they helped him at the children’s center.

The college had an adult day program that allowed students to drop off their children at an on-site daycare facility. This program allowed Abie to attend classes without the added pressure of finding a place for her children to go while she was in classes. To further offset the financial burden of college, Abie looked for and found employment that offered educational reimbursement benefits.

Dalia’s challenges with daycare were offset two different ways. First, she lived with her elderly parents who she was helping out financially. They in turn assisted as much as possible with caring for their grandchildren. However, when that was not possible, Dalia had childcare vouchers from a state program. She also was provided benefits through the states supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP). Despite the mutual assistance between Dalia and her parents, she stated that regardless of her situation, it still became very stressful with all the other pressures of life.
**Conclusions.** Social programs, in the form of education assistance, financial assistance or through some other provided service, paved the way for the study participants to reenter the collegiate environment. Participation in the social programs did not eliminate all the obstacles or make problems disappear. Nor did it come without an individual sacrifice by the recipients themselves. Any sacrifice would most likely be temporary and wane once they completed their college degree. Participation in one or more of the many different social programs did provide an opportunity for them to traverse a return path to a college degree.

Regardless of the type of support received, be it childcare benefits or tuition waivers, it was noted the support was welcomed and it also reduced other pressures or barriers in returning to college. All study participants received support through some form of social program. The support, either financial or through other services, was enough of an incentive to convince them to return to their studies. These social programs delivered a temporary relief valve in reducing some of the pressures in attending college making the decision to return easier. However, there was still the obstacle of balancing the demands of a family life, work and college commitments.

**Balancing Commitments**

Anyone who has taken on multiple tasks realizes there are balancing acts occurring. How does one devote finite resources, be it time, money or themselves, to the tasks and commitments they have undertaken? Attending college is enough of a drain on ones resources without adding the complexity of raising a family and the demands of maintaining employment. Balancing the commitments of school, work and life can be overwhelming at times. The lack of support, knowledge or experience in how to manage the demands of multiple commitments contributed to the study participants delay in earning a college degree. The study participants expressed there
were times difficult decisions needed to be addressed regarding their continuance with their college degree.

Dalia, an economics major, reviewed and revised her situation periodically to maximize receipt of financial aid while simultaneously rearranging her schedule to suit her children’s needs. When asked to speak about any challenges she faced in order to persist in her educational endeavor, she explained that being an economics major assisted in deciding how to proceed.

Yes, I have had a lot of challenges. I’ve been given financial aid in the past, or every semester I’ve been here. The biggest challenge has been it still just really wasn’t enough because I have to carry that full-time course load, yet I can’t…because I have children as well. So, trying to juggle all of that has been extremely challenging. I’m an economics major so I weighed my costs and benefits all the time. I re-analyze a situation and think, if I maybe withdraw from this course then I have more time here, but I still get financial aid. The largest impact for me was that I had to frequently withdraw from at least one course because I would fall behind. It seemed like I always fell behind in one course because, again, that shift in focus.

Dalia stated that she knew her methodology of frequently withdrawing from a course would delay her graduating, which was a sacrifice she had to make. She was frustrated because withdrawing set her back; it prevented her from graduating sooner. She acknowledged that if she were more financially secure and did not have other stressors to handle, she would have balanced her resources better. Despite her best efforts to attend every class, the needs of her children would shift her focus causing her to miss too much information to be successful in a class.

Prior to starting her last semester of study, Dalia was unable to pay off a small balance of less than six hundred dollars from the previous semester. One week after the start of classes, the
institution contacted Dalia and notified her of the outstanding balance. In order to remain enrolled she would have to pay off her prior semesters balance. After explaining that she was unable to do so, the institution provided Dalia with a retention grant that paid off her small balance. Not having the added stress of how the balance was going to be paid off, Dalia did not have to worry about finding a way to service that debt. She could now devote more resources to her studies.

Abie’s struggles were financial as well. She had to balance working enough to pay her bills without jeopardizing financial aid. She stated, “It’s been hard because the less you work and the less money you make, the more money you have to pay out of pocket [savings] to pay your bills and stuff.” Abie confided that there was a time she was not in school because she “could not balance it – physically, emotionally or financially.” To offset some of the demands, Abie went back to work full-time and enrolled in on-line courses for a semester. She explained that on-line courses were not easier, it was a decision she made to allow her more flexibility with balancing the demands of attending classes, working and raising a family.

Baily’s experience was similar. She explained that college is “just hectic” and “very stressful.” For her, managing a family and attending classes is “very, very hardcore.” For Baily, the administrative tasks of college added to her stress. Financial aid forms, commuting to campus, navigating the parking lot, all that combined with the course load and homework made it difficult to juggle college life with family life.

Coming to school and all that stuff was just kind of difficult. Trying to get to class, the parking lot and everything is really hectic. I try to manage it all. The coursework itself, too, is an overload. At least because I don’t think one course has more work, more
homework than the others. I think maybe me juggling the lifestyle with the schoolwork was kind of difficult.

Fawn is using her network of friends to assist her in balancing the demands of raising a family, attending school and working. She indicated that she has improved her network, surrounding herself with friends and peers who were supportive of her decision to attend college. She knew she was unable to rely on her parents for support. She stated her parents sometimes became angry or upset with her when she reached out to them. At one point during a visit with her father, he expressed to Fawn that he did not understand why she was attending college and that whatever she was attempting to accomplish was not going to work.

Fawn was grateful for the supportive people in her network and the assistance they offered, emotionally and by assisting her with childcare. She was making the conscious decision to jettison people in her network that did not add value to her life.

I’m staying away from that and relying more on the people who are excited that I’m in school and can’t wait to see what courses I’m going to enroll in the following semester and offer their support, like watch my daughters for a couple hours so I can get a paper done. I’m fortunate, because if I didn’t have those people in my life, I probably would have dropped out again because I would have had to focus on work. I would have been failing [my courses].

Fawn’s network comprised of people who started out as mentors and supervisors. She felt now that she is completing her college degree that she could categorize people at her place of employment and in her network as peers or her equals. However, she still recognizes them as her mentors as she elevates herself on the socioeconomic ladder. She continues to build and strengthen her network, which she states has improved over time.
Ellen, being the outlier of the study participants, did not have the added pressure of raising children while attending college. Her biggest obstacle, according to her, was herself. She explained that she is a ‘huge procrastinator.’ She would delay in doing her assignments, and although she did not submit assignments late, she would put it off until the last minute.

Her procrastination did cause her to become overwhelmed at times, to a point where she would enter a depressive state. She was asked about overcoming the depressive states; she replied it was a number of items that pulled her out and kept her on track. She would talk it out with herself and at other times with her friends. Expressing her thoughts to people who were supportive of her assisted to channel her emotions, stay on schedule and complete assignments on time.

Managing the time for work, life and school became easier for Cacy after she got married during her last year of college. Being single, she was unable to register for some courses she needed. Any courses that were offered later in the day she was unable to attend because she had to work.

Now I am fortunate that I am not working. I was working when I first went back to school, but since I’ve gotten married last October, I’ve been able to not work, which has been helpful. I definitely had to be more conscientious about making room for studying and time management.

**Conclusions.** Social programs, from childcare vouchers to tuition free classes, all played a part in the decision process for the study participants to return and complete their college degree. With the exception of Ellen, who had no children, the financial burden of supporting a family as a single mother became a major obstacle in returning and finishing their educational journey. Taking advantage of the social programs in place at the time eased the burden for the
study participants. At times the process of uncovering a social program that would provide the best benefit seemed problematic in and of itself.

   It took two years of unproductive conversations with the Department of Transitional Assistance before Fawn was made aware of a social program that put her on the path to completing her education. Cacy and Ellen, both who were in foster care, took advantage of a tuition waiver to attend college at a state institution. Baily’s employer provided a very generous tuition reimbursement option as long as she pursued a degree that was commensurate with her work. Abie and Dalia utilized daycare programs that allowed them the flexibility to attend classes. For each study participant, recognition in the importance of social programs to assist in their degree completion was a pivotal moment.

   The social programs offered more than just financial opportunities to return to college. They also provided a relief from the pressures of balancing college, work and everyday life demands. Balancing these demands can be analogous to a three-legged stool. Resources are provided equally and constantly to each leg of the stool. Constant monitoring of the finite resources keeps everything balanced. The social programs worked symbiotically with existing resources to buttress strained areas providing the balance needed for the study participants to not only continue, but to complete their educational journey.

   **Conclusion**

   What experiences do successful first-generation college students (seniors) share? The findings illustrated in this chapter attempted to highlight those shared experiences. Each study participant embarked on a different journey toward degree completion. Despite the different paths, they all shared commonalities in pursuing their goal of earning a college diploma,
regardless of how long it took them to accomplish that goal. Although they hailed from and lived in different parts of the country, and had different upbringings, their stories were also similar.

Home life for the study participants included single parent households, dual parent households and foster care. Some of the study participants’ parents did not finish high school while others parents received their high school diploma. A few parents of study participants went beyond high school for certificate training. Neighborhoods were a mixture of lower and middle class, all were predominantly White while study participants ethnicity were White, Asian-American and Haitian-American.

Even with these demographic differences, they shared the common thread of having a low-socioeconomic status and being first in their family to complete a college degree. These two attributes are what tie them together providing shared experiences in completing their degree. The study participants expressed a lack of emotional support from family members. In some cases they were ridiculed for thinking a college education would elevate them to a higher socioeconomic position. Parents who did not progress beyond a high school education brought on the lack of support. Some parents felt that education was not an important endeavor, or that girls were supposed to find a nice man, marry and have a family.

The lack of emotional support from family, coupled with the lack of financial support placed study participants at a greater risk of not completing college. This risk and unsuccessful outcome was confirmed as they told their stories regarding the first time they attended college. The ridicule received from family members at the mere thought of attending college forced study participants to embark on the journey alone.

The detachment of a parent to their children’s education endeavors was quite evident. There were no words of encouragement or surplus of finances. There were no support networks
that could have been exploited for assistance. Networks of family or community support to assist in navigating the process did not exist. There were no prior experiences of family members to learn from when it came time for the study participants to attend college. With one exception, the younger sibling of a study participant was able to show through his own career education experience that returning to her studies would be beneficial, which she did ultimately. The lack of college knowledge by parents and family members hindered the success of study participants. Despite their best intentions, they were unable to manage the difficulties and handle the pressure of attending college.

Financially, study participants had to find a way to cover the cost of a college education. After completing high school, they each tried attending college without financial assistance from their family. It was too great an obstacle for them to overcome as young adults and they dropped out. All but one had children and, within a short period, they each realized that it was difficult to make ends meet. By the time they came to that realization, children were born and they had the added pressure and difficulty of raising a family of their own, without a supportive partner.

Trying to raise a family as a single parent was difficult. In some cases, children had been diagnosed with special needs or had difficulty with their speech patterns. This placed an added burden on an already stressful situation. Acknowledging that the cycle of not being educated was repeating itself, study participants explained that their children became the catalyst in making the choice to return to college. They wanted to provide better opportunities, elevate their standard of living, not only for themselves but for their children as well.

Still faced with the financial burden of covering the costs of a college education without family support, social programs became a means to an end. Study participants utilized social programs they were eligible for which removed some of the pressures. Study participants made
good use of social programs such as tuition waivers to attend a state school or generous tuition reimbursement if the degree pursued was in their field of employment. Other social programs provided childcare vouchers or daycare programs providing services so study participants could attend classes. One study participant explicitly expressed that if it were not for social programs, returning to college would have been unlikely. Regardless of the social program used, it was enough to persuade study participants to return to the collegiate environment.

Expressing the difficulty in balancing the demands of college, work and life was a commonality among study participants. Making decisions on what courses to drop to free up time for their children’s needs or moving to an on-line format for a semester in order to work more hours became a common tactic. Constantly reviewing their situation, trying to maximize financial aid became a way to ease any financial burden. Relying on a supportive network of colleagues or friends to watch their children for an hour freed up time to study or complete a project. The receipt of a zero hour institution retention grant was the difference between dropping out for a second time and completing the final semester.

Creative thinking was necessary in order to allocate resources and balance demands while progressing toward degree completion. Carrying the proper amount of credits to remain enrolled provided an adequate amount of financial aid without jeopardizing benefits. Like a double-edged sword, the risk of potentially postponing their graduation date was worth the reward of ultimately receiving a diploma.

Regardless of the method employed, each one had to overcome the demands of balancing their finite resources in several different directions. Providing a better life for their children as well as themselves, and moving from a level of poverty to a higher rung on the socioeconomic
ladder became more than just a dream. For these study participants, the completion of their college degree provided the key to open many more doors of opportunity.

The participants for this study found themselves faced with an unexpected situation. This situation, combined with other elements provided enough courage to return and finish what they started. Regardless of the study participants’ low social capital, they were able to move beyond any defined limits of their habitus and graduate college. The following chapter places the study participants within that perspective and the literature review used for this study.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to investigate shared experiences of academically successful first-generation low-socioeconomic college students. What experiences do successful first-generation college students (seniors) share? Bourdieu, as cited in Lareau & Horvat (1999) theorized that students who hold valuable social and cultural capital fare better in college against their peers whose social and cultural capital contains less value, thus creating an educational inequality between students.

The low social and cultural capital of first-generation low-socioeconomic students, their habitus, socialized norms or tendencies that guide behavior and thinking, could be hindering their ability to persist and graduate from four-year institutions of higher education. Navarro (2006) speculates a person’s habitus creates a lasting impression. This impression causes a person to think, feel and act within distinct limits that guides their responses to situations. Although habitus is an individual process that is created through a social process, it leads to a continuation of patterns (Navarro, 2006). Habitus is not static nor is it eternal; with unexpected situations or over a long period, habitus can be altered or changed (Navarro, 2006).

This study employed a narrative inquiry methodology to investigate student perceptions of their life experiences in the pursuit of their college degree. Narrative inquiry is a process by which stories, conversations and life experiences provided a way to research and understand how people created meaning in their lives. This investigation sought to uncover what those stories revealed about overcoming adversity and persistence.

There were two central themes uncovered; each central theme contained two sub themes that revealed themselves from the stories told by study participants. In telling their story, study participants shared their experiences in overcoming obstacles and difficulties on their way to
successfully obtaining their college degree. Experiences of their first attempt at postsecondary education were the first theme. The two subthemes were support from family and influence of their children. Experiences of their second attempt at postsecondary education were the second theme. The two subthemes were social programs for education and balancing commitments. This chapter lays out the findings, how they are situated within the literature and implications for practice.

**Experiences of First Attempt at Postsecondary Education**

First-generation students, which comprise one-third to one-half of all college undergraduate students in the United States, (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Ting, 2003), are classified as the first in their family to earn a college degree. First-generation college students tend to be at a disadvantage due to the lack of their parents’ social capital. Without this social capital, first-generation students do not have the college knowledge of entering a collegiate environment, successfully navigating the application process and/or applying for financial aid (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004).

First-generation students typically are at a higher risk of dropping out of college without completing a degree as compared to second-generation students (Pratt & Skaggs, 1989). In pursuing a college degree, first-generation students are least likely to endure the demands and rigor of college (Thayer, 2000; Williams & Butler, 2010). When initially entering college, first-generation students are faced with the anxieties of being dislocated (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996) and they also contend with cultural, social and academic transitions (London, 1989).
Study participants, who were first-generation, made an initial attempt at college only to leave prior to completing their degree. The departure of all study participants from their educational pursuit supports the literature. For many first-generation students, they become the financial contributors to the household which prevents them from being enrolled full time (Eitel & Martin, 2009; Hao, 2011). Although a study participant was in the situation of providing financial support to her family, she used that scenario as quid pro quo by having her parents watch her children to ease additional financial burdens but to also attend classes.

The failure to recognize the need for a college degree as well as not understanding the numerous college processes is common among parents of first-generation students (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Findings from this study supported the literature. Whether it was cultural or gender based, several study participants disclosed that their parents did not support the value of a college degree. In addition, the parents’ lack of moving beyond a high school education provided no basis or experiences for their children to draw upon when entering college themselves.

For first-generation students, there is a lack of role models that can provide assistance in navigating the college process as well as lack of parental and community support (Ting, 2003). Due to the low social capital of their families, study participants had limited access to resources outside of their immediate family unit. Study participants were unable to draw upon experiences or knowledge bases of family members or the family network. Attempting to navigate the college process without prior experience, knowledge or assistance supports the literature in reasons first-generation students are unsuccessful.
Conclusion

Children do not have the option of being born to educated parents. Nor can they control the views of their parents regarding the importance of a college education. Empirical evidence from this study show the impact a parent’s lack of educational achievement can have on their children. Lack of conversations regarding college while growing up, lack of strong social networks, lack of acknowledging the benefits of a college degree – all contributed to the unsuccessful first attempt of completing college for study participants. A deeper examination of support from family, and its impact on study participants, follows next.

Support from Family

First-generation students, like all college students, come across problems while at college. Experiences while at college and experiences prior to attending college form the basis for issues first-generation students encounter (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Without obtaining parental college knowledge, study participants were unprepared to adequately resolve the issues they encountered. The lack of parental, as well as community support, increases the difficulty in navigating these issues (Ting, 2003). First-generation students who lack peer and family support tend to be disadvantaged prior to arriving at campus (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Students who are lower on the socioeconomic scale receive little support or encouragement from their family in attending college (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Evidenced by this study, and supported by the literature, lack of family support systems placed additional burdens on first-generation students that contributed to their unsuccessful first attempt in the college arena.

Rendering no assistance with the application process, offering little to no financial support and not providing positive words of encouragement created a home environment that was destined to achieve college failure for the study participants. The lack of family support is
driven by expectations of parents that children will give up college in order to contribute financially to the family (Hudley, Moschetti, Gonzalez, Cho, Barry, & Kelly, 2009). An obstacle for students is they are unable to rely on financial support from their parents (McSwain & Davis, 2007).

Family support is able to sway the success of a child’s attempt at college by simply fostering a positive home environment regarding education. Simply introducing higher education topics and encouraging conversations about college can be enough to break the education cycle (Gofen, 2009). Parental involvement significantly influences the goals of attending college and earning a degree (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). Support from family members can affect college ambitions of a student. Many times, the family is the engineer of the student’s college success (Gofen, 2009).

Examining the study’s findings, participant’s indicated there was very little, and in some cases non-existent support from family members. For one study participant, due to their situation, the expectation was they would not complete high school much less continue onto college. For other study participants, family support was absent due to parental belief that education beyond high school was not a viable option. Despite the fact that many parents of the participants toiled laboriously to provide for their family, their own lack of education and life’s hardships were not enough to persuade them to foster a pro college environment in the home.

Study findings support the literature to the extent that a home environment devoid of any exposure regarding higher education places students at a disadvantage. Navigating the many processes of applying for or attending college created an additional layer of frustration. These small annoyances in total provided an excuse to depart the college environment on the first attempt of completion.
Conclusion

Not receiving words of encouragement from family members maintained the stereotype and belief that a college degree was unattainable. As demonstrated by the study, and supported by the literature, a word of encouragement from a family member attending a career institution was enough to persuade one study participant to return and complete her degree. The effect words of encouragement from a family member had on a study participant not only created a boost in their confidence, it was the impetus to set goals and execute a plan to academic success.

With the exception of one study participant, all others had similar scenarios – they became mothers and began supporting and raising their own families. Through whatever course of action, these study participants found themselves in a precarious situation; they were single mothers trying to support and provide basic necessities for their children. Becoming a single mother as an influence for returning to college was not prominent in the literature. However, it became an interesting outlier and was a conspicuous theme of this study.

During the interview process, when the fourth study participant revealed she was a single mother, and the positive impact it had on her decision to return to college, the researcher determined it was a significant factor to include in the study. Interestingly, five of the six study participants were single mothers. This next section examines how being a single mother influenced the study participants decision in returning to college.

Influence of their Children

Analyzing the data of this study, an unexpected feature of study participants became a prominent theme – all but one study participant was a single parent. Within the literature, one of several first-generation low-socioeconomic characteristics was they have children or other
dependents or are a single parent themselves (McSwain & Davis, 2007; Wei & Horn, 2009). The characteristic of having children or being a single parent is one of many that contribute to the causes of departing college without degree completion.

Identified in this study, having children was a contributing factor of the study participants’ decision for dropping out of college. However, for study participants, it was also a major component for returning to college and completing their degree. Five of the six participants were single mothers raising two or more children. In telling their stories regarding their own persistence in finishing their degree, study participants disclosed their children influenced their decision to return to school.

Study participants were exposed to watching their parents struggle, working hard and long hours to support the family. Now that they themselves were parents, with no partner to offer emotional or financial support, they realized the pattern was repeating. Not wanting their children to live a similar life to theirs prompted study participants to alter that course of action. One way to change or break that pattern was for them to become educated, hoping their college degree would create opportunities for themselves so they could provide a better life for their children.

Wanting to provide better opportunities for their children, opportunities that were not accessible to the study participants was not the only factor that backed their decision to return to college. One study participant, after her child was diagnosed with Autism, decided to embark in a program of study that would help her understand her son’s condition. Motivation in returning to college stimulated by her child’s condition was multifaceted – she would gain a better understanding of her son’s Autism while also having the opportunity to use her knowledge in helping others.
Financial stability for themselves, but more importantly for their children was another deciding factor. The literature does not necessarily address financial stability in this context. Instead, it illustrates family income largely influencing students in persisting and completing college despite academic ability (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Study participants wanted the financial stability so their children would be able to attend college with some of the financial burden alleviated. In order to break the cycle, study participants wanted to earn their degree, raising their own socio-economic status so they could offer their children educational opportunities.

**Conclusion**

The literature supports that having children or other dependents is one of many reasons for departing college. However, the literature does not address in any manner if having children is also a catalyst for returning to college. Having a college degree tends to elevate a person’s socio-economic status (Pascarella, Smart, & Smylie, 1992), and in doing so the ripple effect has an impact on students graduating. Study participants’ decision to return to college was greatly influenced by their children, knowing a college degree offers financial stability and better opportunities for them and their children.

It would be inconclusive to state the path to a college degree is to have children, using them as a promoter to earn a college degree. In this study, the coincidence that five of the six study participants not only had children but also were single mothers could be classified as an anomaly. What is conclusive is children played a dual role. First, they contributed to the cause of leaving college. Second, they were instrumental in the decision to return to college.
Study participants shared similar experiences in their first attempt at earning a college degree. Despite being of different ethnicities, growing up in different parts of the country or having different family dynamics, their educational journeys followed the same basic path. Did these similarities continue when they returned to college? What did their stories reveal about their experiences of a second attempt at postsecondary education?

**Experiences of Second Attempt at Postsecondary Education**

First-generation students are at a disadvantage in the pursuit of a college degree due to a lack of capital (Lareau & Horvat, 1999), support (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991) and college knowledge (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012; McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004). The participants of this study, and their premature departure from college sans degree, are supported by the literature. However, the literature supports the study in a broad overview. What the literature did not address is first-generation students who are unsuccessful in their first attempt, are they successful in degree completion with subsequent attempts? How many tries are needed in order for first-generation students to be successful?

After their unsuccessful first attempt, study participants choose a different path to continue with their lives, a path that, initially, did not include a college degree. Some study participants were married and focused on raising their family; others began families without getting married. Regardless of their marital status, a majority of the study participants found themselves raising a family without help from their partners. Before long, they realized the difficulty of being a single parent trying to support a family on wages at or just above minimum wage.
Despite their lack of capital, support or college knowledge, the shared epiphany for the study participants was the road to a better social status was through higher education. For some it was the realization that the familial pattern was repeating itself. Study participants were working several jobs trying to eke out a meager living. They witnessed a repeat of their upbringing playing out in front of them only now they were in the parental role.

Navarro (2006) claimed that habitus is not static or eternal and it can be altered or changed over a long period of time or via unexpected situations. For the study participants, their habitus was altered by an unexpected situation – becoming a single parent. Not wanting their children to live the life they did, one of difficulty and unsupportive of higher education, study participants made the challenging decision to return to college. Each study participant shared their story of the difficulties in making the decision to return to their studies. For some, they picked up where they left off; for others they started anew.

Similar to their first attempt, study participants still lacked the social capital and family support. However, what they did gain was college knowledge. They were now able to draw on their own experiences that provided some familiarity in the process as well as the college environment. There were still challenges they needed to overcome, some new and some familiar. However, during their tertiary education hiatus, some study participants made good use of their time by establishing strong support networks. These support networks provided additional college knowledge to assist them.

The newfound networks were an additional source of knowledge for the study participants that were previously unavailable to navigate the college landscape. Hooker & Brand (2010) speculate that first-generation students need a level of ‘college knowledge’ in order to increase their odds of success. Drawing on their own knowledge gained from their first attempt,
augmented by knowledge and support from established networks, study participants were successful in their second attempt.

The literature indicates the cultural and social capital of a person is determined by the resources they have access to as part of a network or group (Yeh, 2010). Without their parents’ social capital, first-generation college students are lacking in ‘college knowledge’ (Cunningham, Cooper, & Leegwater, 2012; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004). The low social and cultural capital network of study participants, and lack of resources available to them in pursuing a college degree is supported by the literature.

Also supported by the literature is the increased availability of resources by study participants from strong social networks or groups which they built and became members, resources which assisted them during their second attempt at college. Astin, as cited in Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts (2012), found that students’ involvement with peers and faculty, the amount of effort they invest socially and academically, directly impacts their retention. Social and academic integration affects retention and persistence (Siegel, 2011). Surrounding themselves with friends, colleagues and peers who supported their college undertakings allowed study participants to draw on their networks resources assisting them during their second round.

Conclusion

The increased resources from the strong networks included not only emotional support or advice on navigating the college environment but also included social support. The social support came in different forms, from words of encouragement or advice to information on
eligible programs or services. Without the assistance of social programs, the study participant’s second attempt would have been met with the same fate as their first.

**Social Programs for Education**

The financial burden of paying for college is typically offset by loans, grants and scholarships. First-generation low-socioeconomic students face the financial challenges of paying for college with difficulty even after factoring in any financial aid awards (McSwain & Davis, 2007; Muraskin & Lee, 2004). Pell Grants are one component of the process in receiving financial aid. The government has made a commitment to render assistance to low-socioeconomic students offering access to finance a college degree utilizing Pell Grants (Macy, 2000). Low-socioeconomic students rely heavily on Pell Grants to cover the cost of tuition (Wei & Horn, 2009). However, the literature did not discuss other social programs that greatly assisted study participants in completing their college degree.

Financial aid has the ability to offset the burden of paying for college out of pocket. In some cases, it can eliminate the financial cost all together. However, other social programs provide assistance that financial aid does not address. These programs are not part of the college system but work with students in providing them other options to help with attending classes. Many of these federal and/or state programs were not supported by the literature. In speaking with study participants, they made known some of the programs they were eligible for that augmented receiving Pell Grants allowing them to remain in college.

Although the social programs were not part of the college system, in order to receive benefits, and continue those benefits, study participants needed to provide documentation from the college on a regular basis depending on the program. Study participants who were single mothers were saddled with the difficulty of providing childcare allowing them to attend college
as well as work. Programs within the state of Massachusetts provide childcare vouchers for students as long as they are accruing 30 hours of schooling or work per week.

Other programs including but not limited to education assistance from employers or tuition waivers for students who were in foster care that greatly assisted study participants. A program, which was sponsored by the college, was an on-site daycare facility. This program allowed students to attend classes while their children were cared for by a school sponsored program.

Research literature did not discuss any outside social programs as a means of affecting first-generation low-socioeconomic students’ ability to attend or complete their college education. While researching this topic, keywords that may have located such literature were not utilized. Empirical evidence from this study blatantly shows how these social programs positively influenced study participants ability to return to college. Several study participants greatly recognized that the opportunity to participate in these social programs is what provided them with the means to return and finish their college degree.

**Conclusion**

Social programs provided an avenue for study participants to return to their studies by lessening a financial burden (tuition waivers or childcare costs). However, a tangential benefit from these programs was the assistance in balancing the demands of everyday life. Reducing study participant’s financial outlay meant they were able to focus more on their studies instead of trying to balance the demands of academics with the burden of working to pay for services. This brings us to the final theme of the data analysis, the balancing of commitments by study participants.
Balancing Commitments

All of the study participants expressed a common issue with returning to college. That issue was the ability to balance all the commitments of work, life and college. Raising a family, alone, adds a layer of complexity to the process of organizing all the resources in order to continue effectively with their studies. Lacking support, either from family, friends or other sources made the journey of completing their degree much more difficult. Difficult decisions had to be made often where resources were realigned. The result of those decisions, for one study participant, pushed off graduation for a year; for others it meant doing without in order to provide for their children.

Due to demands and pressures of life and work, one study participant reluctantly withdrew from brick and mortar courses but continued her studies via online. This decision allowed the study participant to ‘attend’ classes on her time instead of being held to an on-campus schedule. The online component was not easier for the student. However, it provided freedom to juggle their commitments along with the flexibility to complete the course work during off hours. After regaining control of the situation, the student was able to rejoin her peers in the classroom.

The study participants were not of traditional age. They were single parents who returned to college to better their social status in an effort to provide opportunities for their children that were not available to themselves. The literature does not address the issues of balancing work, life and school. Most of the literature addressed successful college students who were traditional age and not a single parent.

The literature did address balancing demands. However, that balance was between the demands of the college culture and the demands of the student’s culture of origin of being first-
generation (Logan, 2007). The balance for first-generation students is successfully handling conflicting relationships with their family and friends that adds layers of stress and guilt for the student (Williams & Butler, 2010). As one study participant experienced, her father’s continuous reminder that college was her idea and he would not be part of that process strained their relationship.

First-generation students tend to reside at home and are likely to work more hours off campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004). The literature supports one component, working more hours, but not the other of residing at home. Because study participants were beyond traditional age and raising a family, they did not live at home; they did work long hours at several jobs in order to provide for their family. At times the physical, emotional and financial balancing act became too much to manage causing one study participant to withdraw, regroup and then reenroll. For others the balancing act was hectic causing a lot of added stress to an already stressful situation.

Study participants found creative ways to balance and manage all the components of their lives. They enlisted the help of their newfound peer networks, they utilized benefits from eligible social programs, and they were better prepared because of the knowledge they gained from their own experiences. Balancing the many components of their lives while constantly reviewing and revising their plans, study participants were able to complete their journey and earn their college degree.

Conclusion

What are the shared experiences of successful first-generation college students (seniors)? As supported by the literature, this study confirmed first-generation students are at a higher risk
of dropping out of college. The lack of support from family, friends and networks places additional burdens on first-generation low-socioeconomic students making it difficult for them to endure the college environment. First-generation low-socioeconomic students work more and longer hours to support themselves taking away from the time needed to devote to their studies. The home environment for students of this classification is not supportive of higher education and lacks positive conversations regarding college and the benefits of a degree.

First-generation low-socioeconomic students are not in a financial position that is favorable to attending college. They are financial contributors to their family, have dependents or are single parents themselves. At times, they attend college on a part-time basis and/or have periods of non-enrollment. First-generation low-socioeconomic students utilize Pell Grants to finance their education. Pell Grants alone are not sufficient to cover the tuition costs but they do ease the burden.

Successful first-generation low-socioeconomic students have encouraging environmental factors such as strong networks and positive relationships with peers and older adults. They have personal qualities that assist with overcoming adversity such as effective coping strategies and self-reliance. They surround themselves with a network of positive role models or an environment that provides additional support and guidance for them to complete their college degree. Following are recommendations for practice based on conclusions from the study.

**Recommendations for Practice**

It is not practical to be involved in every potential college student’s home life as they grow up in order to foster a positive higher education environment. It is equally impractical in attempting to sway parents to understand the potential benefits of a college degree while the parents themselves have not attended college or believe the benefits would outweigh the costs.
What can be done to change the culture and thinking in order to increase the odds of first-generation low-socioeconomic students completing a college degree to greater than 24%?

Educational expectations of first-generation students become formalized early, usually between 8th and 10th grade (Choy S., 2001). Implementing into the public school curriculum a program that exposes students to college life, beginning as early as elementary school, may lay the foundation for students to engage in conversations regarding academic expectations. Introducing and engaging children in day-to-day conversations about higher education can be instrumental in breaking the education cycle (Gofen, 2009). It has the potential to demystify the college environment and allows students to ask questions without fear of being ridiculed.

As students’ progress from elementary to middle to high school, the conversations regarding college can increase appropriately. For their part, colleges can begin conducting information sessions as early as middle school. Most colleges hold recruiting career fairs at high schools targeting 11th and 12th grade students. Casting a wider net to include the middle schools in close proximity to the high schools would incur little additional costs, especially in the geographic area surrounding the college. Colleges can hold informational sessions at the middle schools, promoting college life and the benefits of earning a college degree.

Providing greater flexibility to high school counselors to set up college tours at local institutions for first year high school students may ignite the spark of interest for students. Visiting a college campus may encourage students to become engaged, ask questions and provide them with the ‘college knowledge’ increasing the likelihood of success. Affording every student with an appropriate amount of information and other resources may be enough for the students to initiate conversations in as well as out of the home environment. Without proper support, a student’s academic goals and adjustment to college life is lowered (Hudley, Moschetti,
Gonzalez, Cho, Barry, & Kelly, 2009). Students with positive peer support and good role models fair better at overcoming adversity (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005).

Summer bridge programs, which are short, intense introductory to college programs, are designed to assist in preparing students for the transition into college life (Giancola, Munz, & Trares, 2008; McCurrie, 2009). Bridge programs provide “a unique opportunity for students to succeed through refining their academic skills, gaining a better understanding of the rigors of college life through academic coursework in reading, writing, and mathematics” (McCurrie, 2009, p. 31).

A primary goal with some bridge programs is to help students develop their academic literacy that enriches the students’ cultural experiences (McCurrie, 2009). Writing workshops increase the students’ development as writers (Cleary, 2011) and students feel prepared for and understand the expectations of college writing (McCurrie, 2009). Summer bridge programs, if successful, help students socially adjust and academically prepare for college engagement.

By happenstance, each study participant was female. Equally coincidental, with the exception of one participant, the others were single mothers. One aspect of having children is supported by the literature while a different aspect is void. Having children or being a single parent is an aspect that influences first-generation low-socioeconomic students to abandon their studies. Students who make a conscious decision not to date, in particular females, add to a positive achievement (Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005).

Students who become parents while attending college with or without supportive partners, what options are at their disposal? To assist students in continuing with their education, colleges can collaborate with local day care providers to offer affordable daycare. Students can
use the day care services allowing them to attend classes and work on projects. Colleges that offer degrees in early childhood education can set up facilities allowing students enrolled in the major practical experience. The facilities serve a dual purpose, it provides a service to students who are parents while also providing practical experience for degree major students to apply what they are learning. Colleges can provide information and referrals to college students regarding childcare services they may be eligible to receive.

There are many social programs available to students to assist them with earning a degree. Several of these programs originate with federal, state or local entities working with colleges and students to provide assistance. What can colleges contribute to augment these programs in assisting students to degree completion? Financial assistance appears to have the greatest demand upon a limited supply of resources. With increasing student enrollment the growing demand places a larger burden on the supply, thus diminishing the per person assistance.

The harsh reality is colleges need to administer a discriminatory practice based on financial needs. However, colleges can also offer different types of grants depending on financial needs of a student and how close they are to completion. Students who have difficulty keeping up with payments or experience a cash flow interruption, colleges can administer grants in nominal amounts. These grants will remove some of the financial burdens of students allowing them to remain at the college. Colleges may even allow students to register for classes or delay proceedings of administratively withdrawing students for overdue balances below a manageable threshold.

Federal, state and local programs are too convoluted and mired down in bureaucratic red tape to make quick or major changes. However, high school as well as college counselors can
become versed in those governmental programs in order to provide guidance to those who could benefit. A study participant fought for over two years to maintain welfare benefits while unnecessarily struggling to balance childcare needs with working required minimum hours. Unbeknown to her, she was eligible for a program that would allow her to keep her benefits and attend college.

Providing students with information on social programs and/or benefits can be accomplished several ways. Establish a designated office or location where literature is displayed, as well as having knowledgeable staff to answer questions. Offer pamphlets or other forms of literature with appropriate FAQ’s and contact numbers. Provide links to government agencies on the institutions webpage.

Colleges can set up workshops on campus for program representatives to be available answering questions and assisting students navigate the eligibility process. Encourage students who have utilized the services to team up and mentor those who are having difficulty. Provide a formal format where sharing knowledge with their peers can be accomplished seamlessly. All of these small steps can lead to big results for first-generation low-socioeconomic students as well as all college students in locating needed assistance.

Balancing the demands of work, life and school was a common theme throughout the study. With technological advances, our society has evolved into a 24/7 landscape. Social media, cell phones and computers have made it possible to stay connected ubiquitously. Colleges have made great strides in offering online, hybrid courses or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS). With the exception of MOOCS, which normally do not offer credit for completion, the other formats are a way for students to balance the demands of everyday life while attending classes.
Moving to an online format would significantly reduce overhead costs for an institution freeing up resources. Brick and mortar classrooms give way to dens, living rooms and home offices. Student to instructor ratio is no longer limited to square footage of a classroom. Financial costs associated with students moving across the country, or from another country are no longer a barrier. Many institutions have made great strides in going paperless with the advancement of technology. There is room for improvement as more administrative tasks move to an electronic format reducing even more paperwork. All students, not just first-generation low-socioeconomic students would benefit from programs that have moved to an online format. Virtual classrooms at institutions of higher education are becoming a reality.

For his part, the researcher will be contacting appropriate administrators at the local middle school and high school in an effort to share the knowledge gained from this study. The desired outcome is to work with the local schools in implementing procedures that will assist in providing faculty, guidance counselors and other key personnel who work with first-generation low-socioeconomic students’ pertinent information that will assist students with their educational endeavors. Outreach to parents via literature displaying information on services will be provided. Additionally, invitations to attend an information session to begin conversations on the importance of a college degree will be extended to parents. The information session and distributed literature on preparing for college success can be part of the orientation protocol that normally occurs at the start of the school year.

The researcher, who works at a college, will also begin the conversations with appropriate personnel to review what efforts are being made to assist first-generation low-socioeconomic students, especially commuting students who have children. Currently at the researchers’ place of employment, a designated commuter lounge is being constructed with an
anticipated opening date to coincide with the first day of fall classes. A golden opportunity exists to create an information section in the lounge to house pamphlets and other literature that could assist students. The researcher will work with the institutions honor society, enlisting their assistance to facilitate implementation of methods in disseminating helpful information that would benefit not only first-generation low-socioeconomic students, but all students who are in need of social services.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Prior to undertaking this study, the researcher’s expectation was study participants would be traditional age students with one or two outliers. Additionally, the assumption was participants would be heterogeneous, single, without children. The reality was the opposite. Study participants were all females, over the age of 30, single, with two or more children. There was one outlier to the group; she was traditional age with no children. The group of participants did consist of a mixture of race and ethnicity as well as different strata within a social class.

Future studies consisting of traditional age male and female participants may garner different perspectives. It was not expected to find this group on their second attempt at obtaining a college degree. The expectation was a group who was enrolled for the first time, faced with adversity and how they perceived their life story in overcoming that adversity. One conclusion that members of this group realized after their initial attempt of attending college was life without a degree stifled career opportunities. Without a college degree the financial opportunities from career advancement was non-existent.

The desire to embark on a professional career path at appropriate financial compensation was encouraged by their children. Seeing the pattern of financial instability repeat, this group did not want their children to witness the hardships of life because they lacked a college degree. A
future study consisting of a group that has not experienced the hardships of raising a family or working long hours earning minimum wages may certainly provide an interesting juxtaposition. Recognizing the limitations of the small sample size, increasing the number of participants in a future study may bring a greater assortment that expands the findings.

Changing the geographic location for future studies regarding this topic may have different results. This study was conducted at a suburban 4-year state institution located in southeastern Massachusetts. Conducting a comparative study at institutions in another region of the United States, such as the southeast, mid Atlantic or perhaps southwest could be beneficial and provide varying results. Other comparative studies to consider would be private versus public institutions or small versus large institutions.

None of the study participants were Veterans. Another consideration to ponder would be first-generation low-socioeconomic students who are Veterans. Do they have similar experiences as they traverse the college landscape? Do they have an easier time balancing the demands of work, life and college? Do college Veterans Administration benefits, such as the GI Bill, relax the financial strain of paying for college?

Implementing a mentoring program as early as middle school could have a positive effect on all students, not just first-generation low-socioeconomic students. Engaging in intentional relationships between students and staff members may foster an environment where students can ask questions regarding the college process. Once students enter college, institutions can have a mentoring program for students. College mentors could be staff members or peer mentors instead of professors. Professors are often saddled with other academic duties and mentoring may take a back seat to those academic commitments. This would allow mentors the flexibility to devote
their attention solely to providing students with information and tools needed to successfully complete their academic journey.
Appendices

Interview Questions

1. Would you please describe your neighborhood in which you grew up while attending high school?
   a. From an educational point of view, would you please describe your neighborhood?
   b. From a socioeconomic point of view, would you please describe your neighborhood?

2. Would you please describe your family? (ie., Single parent household? Number of siblings?)
   a. What is your parents’ educational background? (Did they complete high school? Some college?)
   b. Can you describe the type of conversations that occurred in your family regarding college?
   c. How has your family life prepared you for college?

3. Can you talk about your high school experience, in particular, the types of courses you completed?
   a. Can you speak about how those courses prepared you for college?
   b. Can you speak about your experiences interacting with a high school administrator/faculty/guidance counselor that assisted you in preparing for college?

4. Can you talk about your experiences in handling obstacles, demands or challenges during college in order to persist to your final semester?
   a. Can you speak about your experiences in order to overcome any obstacles, demands or challenges?
   b. Can you speak about your experience transitioning from high school to college?
   c. Can you speak about your experiences navigating the college process, from entrance application, financial aid process and/or course selection?

5. Can you speak about your experiences with any social involvement while attending college? (social clubs, study groups, sports teams, etc.).
   a. What was your experience like interacting with your peers?

6. Would you please speak about your experience to finance your college education?
   a. Would you please tell me about your work experience during college? (Did you work? Number of hours per week on average? Was employment on/off campus?)
   b. Can you please describe how your work experience impacted your college journey and your studies?
References


doi:10.1002/yd.364


Educational resiliency: Student, teacher, and school perspectives (pp. 37-62).
Greenwich, CT: Information Age.


