A CASE STUDY OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FACULTY AMBASSADORS AND FIRST GENERATION HISPANIC STUDENTS IN A FIRST-YEAR INITIATIVE PROGRAM

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Abstract

This qualitative case study sought understanding of unique mentoring relationships of six faculty ambassadors and nine Hispanic first-generation students (HFGS) as part of a first-year initiative program. The single site was a career college in Texas, Taylor College. There were three research questions to guide inquiry comprised of six faculty ambassadors and six students in interviews, class observations, two grand tours, and one focus group with three HFGS: (1) What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program? (2) How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions? (3) How has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus? A purposeful sampling strategy was employed with maximum variation sampling for ambassadors and criterion sampling for students. Findings illuminated barriers to overcome and importance of building trusted relationships between ambassadors and students as they learned to navigate college. Ambassadors helped HFGS find their way in college by providing mentoring and as an advocate in student’s behalf. Findings led to five conclusions: (1) Emotional support provided in the mentoring relationship is vital for student integration, (2) Validating HFGS is crucial to students developing an active voice, students feeling welcomed, and acknowledging that experiences and contributions matter, (3) The importance of building a trusted relationship between mentor and mentee was crucial to integration, (4) Helping HFGS understand the process of going to college, learning to integrate, and becoming self-reliant were central to student success, and (5) Re-aligning students’ responsibilities of family, work, and school are essential to a successful start in college.

Keywords: Hispanic first-generation students, persistence, retention, mentoring, ambassador, career-based college, student integration, prior experiences, first year experience
DEDICATION

To both of my parents, Clint Allen Swafford and Shirley Marie Elliott, who gave rise to the importance of being dedicated to what you love and always remember to pursue your dreams unbounded by limits. And most importantly, that it is always about helping people.

To my wife, Cheryl, who has been beside me for more than thirty years of my life and brings a perspective of caring and support that has truthfully made me want to be a better person. She has uncompromising patience and ability to give me a feeling of calmness with just a word. She has been my cheerleader and best friend through all of this journey.

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CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

A central goal of the Obama Administration and Department of Education was to increase minority student access to college and improve low retention rates in the United States (Dept. of Education, 2010). In 2011, there were eighteen million undergraduate college students at Title IV based institutions in the United States: 10.6 million in four year institutions and 7.2 million in two year institutions (IPEDS, 2012). Of this total undergraduate population, 2.9 million Hispanic undergraduate students attended Title IV based institutions; and 1.5 million were in four year institutions and 1.4 million in two-year community colleges in the United States (NCES, 2012). Hispanic student populations have continued to rise at both four-year institutions and especially two-year community colleges. While college access has improved for many Hispanic students, there are substantial problems with continued low retention rates.

While race and ethnicity can be considered separately, Hispanic for this study followed the Pew Center and U.S. Census recommendation of self-identification as opposed to alternative geographical or cultural determination. The 2010 census defined Hispanic ethnicity as not being a race. The federal government of the United States mandated that for data collection purposes a minimum of two ethnicities be presented; the first is Hispanic and Latino, or persons of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and the second is other Central and South American origin, not Hispanic and Latino (U.S. Census, 2010; Synder & Dillow, 2011). In this study, many students that were classified Hispanic, could classify themselves as non-Hispanic white. Within this study site location at Taylor College, Hispanic students followed a self-identified approach of classification and could complete a campus form updating ethnicity in the university database banner system.
The schooling of Hispanic college students in the United States has been largely characterized by high dropout rates and low degree conferral (Kewal, Ramani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). While retention and persistence seem to be used interchangeably, the terms have different meanings. Retention was defined as act of retaining or providing help to current students by educational agents to continue the goal of the student’s pursuit of a possession at the same institution; in this case the goal is degree attainment (Vegas & Martinez, 2008; Tinto, 2012). As an example, most universities measured semester to semester retention to see what percentage of students continued at their university working towards a degree. Retention is reflective of support initiatives to help students be academically successful at one university or college campus (Vegas & Martinez, 2008). The overarching goal was to retain students that are making academic progress and moving towards degree conferral.

Persistence was a broader term; it focused on the student’s goal of obtaining a degree irrespective of university location. Persistence is defined as the student’s decision to keep working toward a degree at one or more institutions while remaining in school (Tinto, 2012). One practice institutions could do to support persistence, for example, was providing courses that could be applied to degrees at one or multiple educational entities. Another example of practice was common course numbering, such as English Composition 101 for easy identification irrespective of the college the course was taken at. However, for this study, Hispanic first-generation students were involved in a mentoring relationship with an ambassador –or mentor– with the intention to improve student integration for their first year of studies.

**Organization of the Chapter**

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to retention theory to address degree attainment for Hispanic first-generation students from Tinto, Astin, Bean, and Rendon. This chapter discussed
the degree attainment gap for Hispanic first-generation students, Hispanic student emotional maturity and confidence, academic preparedness, and a need for student mentoring to help Hispanic students integrate at one campus in Texas. Student retention has shown to improve by aligning a mentoring initiative with faculty helping new Hispanic students persist in college (Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke, 2011). The phenomenon of an ambassador-student mentoring relationship was analyzed for meaning through the lens of Rendon’s (1994) validation theory as a possible means of helping students with campus integration. Traditional versus non-traditional student status was discussed next.

**Defining Traditional and Non-Traditional Students**

While the defining of student status can be segmented several ways, most seminal authors and higher education literature follow two distinct classifications for student status: traditional and non-traditional. Accordingly, full-time student status can be determined for undergraduate studies several ways. One of the most common attributes for traditional students is entering college directly after high school, full-time enrollment status, 18-24 years old, and living on a college campus (NCES, 2010). Full-time students tend to be involved in campus community events, social activities, and have time to be engaged in campus life. While there is significant history in higher educational institutions built around traditional full-time student status; most student participants in this study do not fall into a traditional student status.

In determining the appropriate definition of non-traditional student status there are many variations in classification. Many of the seminal authors and educational entities use age of 25 years or older, enrolling one year or more after high school, part-time enrollment status, and commuting to campus (NCES, 2010). These factors tend to follow an at-risk label and have been evaluated as determinants for student success. Non-traditional status usually includes first-
generation to college students and economically disadvantaged student populations. In her research on non-traditional students, Rendon (1994, 2011), also considered the student status including full-time employment, first-generation status, and family cultural identity as important to inclusion. In this particular case study, there was a significant non-traditional student population including prior military, full-time employment, family responsibilities, and all were commuter students; as Taylor College is not a traditional campus environment with housing. In the next section, retention challenges are discussed to give an understanding of the major barriers faced by HFGS in their pursuit of a college education.

Retention Challenges for HFGS in College

Hispanic first-generation students faced many challenges in their college journey. The decision to enter college is not an automatic assumption, nor is it an expectation for many first-generation students and their immediate families (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nunez, 2009). Moreover, HFGS tend to come from families where college education is not common or perceived as necessary; the families also tend to worry about how to cover the expense (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). But as more Hispanic students choose to enter college, it is essential that educational leaders look for the best support tools for helping students be successful integrating and succeeding (Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, & Coles, 2009). Frequently, this group is not aware of higher education opportunities or ways to navigate college which increases retention and a need to build support (Rendon, 1994; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Also, several aspects of HFGS retention that add to complexities of being successful in college are: (1) they tend to not live on campus, (2) they do not have time to engaged in campus activities and socialization, and (3) they do not always establish support relationships with faculty, family, or other students (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini, 1996). Next, the degree attainment gap for Hispanic
first-generation students is discussed with a proactive stance on finding ways that improved chances for student degree attainment.

**Degree Attainment Gap for Hispanic First-Generation Students**

Hispanic first-generation students (HFGS) are an important group to study because they represented almost 20% of the entering freshman class from 2012-2015 at the study site for this case study at one location in Texas. HFGS is defined as any Hispanic college student whose parents do not hold a baccalaureate degree (Choy, 2001; Thayer, 2000; Boden, 2011). There is a substantial bachelor degree attainment gap of 13% lower for HFGS verses non-Hispanics in for-profit career colleges with open enrollment like the site of this study (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010), which means there is a gap in retention of HFGS. In looking at HFGS undergraduates attending a four-year university, 9.5% are enrolled in for-profit career-based institutions, including this study site institution for this particular study (IPEDS, 2012). Recent statistics from a six-year cohort starting in 2007 (open admission-for profit) show 34% of HFGS in for-profit university sector obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years versus 47% for non-Hispanics; irrespective of student’s age or gender, but the overall conferral level decreases if HFGS are not attending with full-time status in college (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2012). For the HFGS participants at this study site, recognizing and building support was a major initiative to help with degree attainment. Next, emotional maturity and confidence of HFGS are discussed as factors of retention challenges.

**Student’s Emotional Maturity and Confidence**

In this study, there were student participants that displayed a lack of emotional maturity and self-confidence as they struggled with believing they could be successful in college. HFGS can struggle with a lack of emotional maturity as a result of exposure to poor prior academic
experiences and unfamiliar new experiences (Santiago, 2011). Emotional maturity is defined as one’s ability to adjust to a change in environment, surroundings, and controlling emotions and behavior (Webster’s Dictionary, 2014). An example of a lack of emotional maturity, is that many HFGS tend to take less rigorous courses while in high school that rarely prepare them for entering college; then they are usually required to take remedial courses when they do enter college. HFGS may struggle with lack of self-confidence based on prior performance which can influence students’ adjustment to college (Majer, 2009). It is vital that HFGS feel a sense of belonging early from multiple communities especially from faculty agents to support student integration and strengthen their confidence (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Andrada, 2007; Wolf-Wendle, L., Ward, K., & Kinzie, J., 2009). The faculty ambassadors in this study worked with their first-year student mentees to improve their emotional maturity by showing confidence in the students’ abilities and listening to their needs. Next, academic preparedness is discussed as many students in this study had to adjust and improve their academic skills to conquer the rigor of college-level work.

Academic Preparedness

While there have been, numerous studies examining retention challenges of HFGS from a deficit position (Baptiste & Rehmann, 2011), there is a need to position a new and engaging perspective to help students feel part of the college community and support integration (Rivas-Drake, 2008; Salas, Aragon, Alandejani, & Timpson, 2014). Academic preparedness represents knowledge and skill levels in mathematics and reading assessment to be ready for undergraduate college level curriculum (Boden, 2011). As an example, such an engaging position should go beyond assumed traits of non-traditional students and rethink support systems which can help strengthen student skills and preparedness for college-level rigor. Faculty can play an influential
role in helping Hispanic students to improve their preparedness through tutoring and one-on-one intervention efforts (Hurtado, 1996; Nora, 2011). In addition, academic preparedness in a validating campus environment allowed students to ask questions and seek understanding to improve their academic skills by seeking tutoring and support early on. Next, the impact of part-time status for some HFGS in this study was an additional challenge.

**Impact of Part-Time Status for HFGS**

Part-time status in college increased time to complete a degree and the overall expense incurred. The impact of more than 70% HFGS going to college part-time in Texas around a job, family, and other obligations bring major obstacles to reaching degree conferral, as stated in the article Time is the Enemy (NCES, 2012; Ishitani, 2006). HFGS are more likely to be part-time status, about 73% are part-time which may create a disadvantage in college integration; because part-time status extends commitment beyond traditional time period (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; Nora, 2011). Another concern with part-time status is increased degree expense which can decrease overall persistence outcomes (Hurtado, Spuler, & Carter, 1996). Also, part-time based student status can considerably reduce student integration and a feeling of belonging (Museus & Quaye, 2009; NCES, 2012).

Part-time status can also decrease time to seek needed tutoring and help due to schedule conflicts and other student responsibilities beyond school (Nora & Reyes, 2012). In this current study, many HFGS went to college part-time after work. Adding college with full-time work status could have a detrimental effect on reaching degree conferral; because it increased time to finish and the possibility of giving up as other responsibilities may overload the students when combined with college. Next, one important need for this HFGS group in this study was having strong support agents that could help them with successful campus integration.
Integration into College

HFGS needed to feel a sense of belonging and acknowledged by faculty agents and administrators to help support students’ integration to the new campus environment. The integration into college for HFGS both academically and socially was crucial to overall student success. It is suggested that HFGS need a collection of multiple communities around them that include the educational, family, and community agents if possible to increase their feeling of belonging and help their integration (Gupton et al., 2009; Laskey & Hetzel, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999). Rendon (1994) initiated a study on students in community colleges in which she found both in and out of class experiences and involvement must be engaging and meaningful to improve students’ integration. In Tinto’s integration framework (1993), he suggested that the students that built support relationships with faculty and made friends were more likely to persist than students not connected. The next session discussed a unique first-year initiative (FYI) ambassador program that supported incoming new students at Taylor College.

FYI Ambassador Program

In this study at one specific career-oriented school in Texas, Taylor College, there had been an increasing need to address the growing population of HFGS that entered in their first year of college. As an example, this group of students varied in age and experience levels, but there were many commonalities, they were HFGS and had no educational exposure beyond high school or a GED level education. Many were geographically dispersed across Texas and they were moving or had moved into the North Texas region to seek an education. As students started their journey into college, many brought deficit levels both academically and socially. But, also these students had a common dream of obtaining a needed college education that could increase their chances for better careers and financial stature. Many of these HFGS sought knowledge
and support as part of the first-year initiative retention program as they ventured into an unknown world of higher education.

In this FYI program, the support effort followed guidance from many prior designed support programs for non-traditional students. An important component of any FYI program, student mentoring has the potential to have a positive impact to help reduce the student’s feeling of marginal effort and overall underachievement as students build a feeling of importance and that they matter (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1999). Students must feel there is a hope and sense of why it is important to obtain a post-secondary education and see how to navigate school (Jamelske, 2008; Herrero & Gracia, 2004). In this current FYI program, there was an alignment with faculty ambassadors that provided mentorship and support for the first-year students. Tinto (1987) argued that role modeling or mentoring could be a positive component of any successful retention program, it appeared to be most important with disadvantaged minority students (p. 161). Mentoring was a major piece of this FYI program at this study site in an effort to help improve student integration into campus.

In this case study within the FYI program, there was a faculty-student mentoring segment to address academic and social integration around each student’s unique needs. This FYI program continued to focus on listening to student needs and sought the best designed intervention efforts to support HFGS. These unique faculty paired HFGS relationships were built on a foundation of trust that allowed the researcher to listen student group’s concerns and needs as they navigated through college. The FYI program was dynamically changing as the students’ needs changed and faculty learned more about the actuality of being an ambassador. It was essential to note that the needs of these students were going to be uncovered at the student level, recognizing from research and experience that many students had different academic and
learning style needs. Next, the ambassador roles for this study were described as faculty provided needed assistance to new students.

**Ambassador Roles in FYI Program**

At this study site, ambassadors were identified as faculty members who volunteered to mentor first-year incoming students. Students were assigned an ambassador from their degree program department such as business that helped them integrate into campus and served as a first resource for needed information. Each faculty ambassador was assigned as a mentor for seven to nine students each session, and he/she met weekly with the students for the first two eight-week sessions of the student’s first year. Getting new students involved in FYI mentoring support early was important to retention efforts in and out of the classroom. A need to provide students with faculty support cannot be overstated, as students need to have a strong feeling of belonging and engagement plays an important role in their persistence (Kuh, Pace, & Verper, 1997; Olenchak & Herbert, 2002). If ambassador support was not responsive, it could be a strong deterrent for new HFGS if they did not feel welcomed and part of the campus environment.

**How the Ambassador Program Addresses the Problem**

The central problem to address for HFGS is low retention due to their lack of integration and need for feeling a part of the educational environment (Gloria & Castellanos 2012). Rendon (1994) stated that HFGS must feel an outreach of support early from their faculty and support colleagues as students needed to feel welcomed and that they mattered. This unique faculty ambassador mentoring program relied on building relationships that encouraged understanding between each mentor and mentee as student feelings of belonging were fostered. Faculty mentors established a level of caring and support for students mixed with focus on performance expectations. While prior studies had focused on HFGS retention issues, this study attempted to
fill the gap in the literature by focusing on meaning of unique faculty ambassador-student
mentoring relationship and its possible impact on retention. In the next section, the conceptual
framework is established for this study as Rendon’s (1994) validation theory was operationalized
as the theoretical lens in evaluating unique faculty-student mentoring relationships and how
those relationships might support improved integration efforts.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study sought to understand the phenomenon of a mentoring relationship between
ambassador and their paired HFGS as Rendon’s (1994) validation theory was employed to
inform the study on a first-year initiative (FYI) program intended to increase student integration.
The HFGS participants within this study entered their first year of college at a career university
at Taylor College in Texas. Strong support systems that help students integrate and feel part of
the university community are essential as posited by Tinto, (1975); Astin, (1991), & Bean &
Metzner (1985). Astin (1975) advocated for attention on both involvement and integration levels
within school and illustrated that by increasing student involvement could increase integration.
Tinto (1987) described the importance of student attributes such as social adjustment to a new
setting, prior academic experiences, and integration as influencing the decision to persist or leave
college. Later work by Tinto (1993) on student retention did not solely rely on the student’s
responsibilities, but also had reliance on teachers, support colleagues, and institutional climate;
which established a needed sharing of responsibilities for outcomes and a multipronged approach
to retention efforts. While student retention efforts are important, the major trust of this study
was to explore the meaning of each individual faculty-student mentoring relationship and if it
could influence integration for first-year HFGS entering Taylor College.
While Tinto’s model on academic and social integration is a foundational pillar for higher educational studies. Rendon’s validation theory was imposed for this study as the framework that highlighted students’ feeling of belonging and validating their existence at campus. In light of students that came to college feeling marginal in terms of their importance and preparedness; developing a strong sense of place and being validated as a welcomed member of the college community was important to improve students’ belonging (Rendon Linares & Munoz, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012). As communicated by Rendon (1994), and acknowledged in the current study; validation of students relied on faculty interactions that were frequent, positive, and affirming an interest in HFGS and their experiences. The understanding that HFGS needed a connection to faculty agents as someone in their behalf and there to help them be successful was a foundational stance of validation theory. One significant addition to the guidance of validation theory in this study, was discovered and communicated in Chapter 5 was the importance of building trusted relationships with HFGS to enhance their integration. In the next section, how faculty were prepared to serve as ambassadors to first-year students was discussed including information on course delivery modality, and on-campus average class size.

Preparing Faculty to Serve as Ambassadors in FYI Program

In preparation for a new FYI retention program at Taylor College in Nov 2013 session, the need to assess what would be needed for faculty to serve as ambassadors was on the horizon. A series of faculty meetings started in July 2013 with an initial talk about the desire to have faculty help address new student orientation and first-year support. The faculty agents are a significant component of any college experience and set a pivotal role in helping new students to integrate successfully in college (Fuentes, Ruiz, Berdan, & DeAngelo, 2014; Pascarella, 1980). Faculty at many colleges are expected to do more including mentoring and support for students.
In this campus at Taylor College, faculty wanted to provide input and support for incoming new students and realized that the student population came with many support needs.

Faculty mentorship is not a new phenomenon and has been instituted in many educational settings. One of the unique needs of new students was to find someone they could learn from on how to be successful in school. Educational research has proposed that faculty have one of the most significant impacts with new students in college and can serve as a role model in teaching students successful traits (Hurtado & DeAngelo, 2012; Pascarella & Tarenzini, 2005). These faculty-student interactions serve to socialize norms and help students with expectations of college (Kim, 2010). The faculty ambassadors in this study talked about becoming a guide for information originally, but later building a relationship with their mentees that allowed them to give students advice and direction. Some outcomes from meetings with faculty determined the following items that were added to the FYI program to align a faculty ambassador with 7-9 new students each new session. A summary of the list is as follows:

1. Setup a mentor that was in the department of the student’s degree plan (ex. Computer Science student aligned with Computer Science Professor).
2. Make mentoring weekly meetings for the first 2 sessions required for all new Taylor College students.
3. Faculty ambassadors worked with both academic and campus integration goals with each student mentee to develop a strategic student success plan.
4. Develop an individual academic plan for each mentee and discuss their weekly assignments and scheduled tutoring appointments. This included a course plan to follow for the next 2 sessions.
5. Have an open-door policy that included frequently calling and checking on student mentees before class.

6. Faculty developed learning community based assignments and classroom exercises that positioned students into groups in an effort to increase engagement.

The typical student at Taylor College was part-time status and taking courses in the evening after full-time work commitments. Students were encouraged to take their first courses on campus for the first two 8 week sessions. This recommendation was to help students integrate back into college and to have time directly with faculty ambassadors. While a few students chose to take their courses in an online modality, they were still assigned an ambassador and still had the requirements of meeting on campus weekly. The typical class on campus averaged about 10 students and was scheduled one night per week. This scheduling allowed most students to take 1 or 2 classes per 8-week session and have time for meetings with their faculty ambassador. As students progressed beyond the first two sessions and if they were maintaining academic GPA requirements, they could choose to be less involved in the mentoring meetings but still maintained contact with their ambassador for year one. Next, a look at how mentoring program is enabled to support student integration at campus.

**Mentoring Program to Support Integration Efforts**

Mentoring of participants in different settings including business, community outreach, and other arenas is certainly not new. For example, in the educational arena and as part of this study, mentoring was defined as the art of establishing an influential relationship between the faculty member and student that relied on developing student’s skills, talents, and connectedness to support their educational and social concerns (Crisp & Cruz, 2010, Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Mentoring may help address emotional and academic deficiency needs that students are
struggling with such as writing, mathematics, and poor study habits, which can impede their ability to be successful (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011). Cunningham (1999) illuminated mentoring between faculty and their students as a powerful tool that enhanced classroom and out of classroom experiences and gave significance to being connected to college and to peers. The benefits of student mentoring are numerous and included building self-reliance, trust in others, and a solid foundation for positive support while in college and beyond.

The focus of this study was to understand a mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their paired HFGS in a first-year initiative program that fostered integration of students at a technical college in Texas. As engaged college administrators and educators, we should consider the need to build educational settings that foster support for HFGS as they progress into an unknown world of higher education. The FYI was a first-year initiative program effort that aligned entering freshmen with a faculty ambassador to help students integrate and navigate through the first year of college. Mehta, Newbold, and O’Rourke (2011) suggested that faculty need to know their student’s background and provide advice as part of establishing a mentoring relationship as imperative to improve student success and retention outcomes (p. 20). In the next section, theories to address retention are explored as seminal research is discussed including Tinto, Astin, Bean & Metzner, and Rendon as part of this qualitative case study investigation.

**Theories to Address Retention**

It is important to note many fundamental pillars of educational entities including policies and procedures, institutional climate, and overall program delivery are not designed for the needs of non-traditional students which may negatively impact their retention (Kezar, 2010). As suggested by Torres (2006), two areas of concern for many HFGS are (1) the unique cultural
characteristics of this student population, and its effect on attrition, and (2) the need to extend studies on non-traditional institutional settings for this population are paramount to improving student success (p. 299). Attrition is defined as the measurable delay, discontinuing, or complete departure of the student that is in pursuit of a degree (Kuh, 2005). As stated by Metz (2002), Tinto’s (1975) original theory focused on the following attributes of student retention: (a) pre-entry that acknowledges prior educational exposure, (b) initial pre-establishment of educational goals, (c) created connections with faculty and student peers, (d) external student-based responsibilities, and (e.) academic and social-based integration into the institution. Many prior retention theories tended to emphasize deficit student attributes irrespective of institutional administrators’ and teachers’ responsibilities to provide needed support for HFGS.

Many seminal researchers have centered on student retention built around full-time status, traditional-age, white, residential-based populations which are not reflective of the majority of students coming to higher educational settings today (Reason, 2003; Tinto, 1993) or reflective of the Hispanic student population in this current study. The student departure model developed by Tinto (1975) and later extended (1987), promoted assimilation of students into the mainstream post-secondary educational setting and focused on individual student qualities as opposed to addressing a collective collaboration. This theory from Tinto, due to its original focus on traditional full-time students, was criticized for minimizing the cultural dimensions of minority students, which was a factor in overall attrition rates in college (Tierney, 1992). Tinto (1993) later acknowledged this criticism and suggested the need for student engagement and building of student communities to enhance a feeling of belonging to positively challenge student attrition. An important component of Tinto’s theory is a claim to understand why students leave college and a need to structure support to help improve retention.
Astin (1991) established a stance in analyzing student attributes of college impact in the input-environment-output (I-E-O) model. He stated there must be a strong correlation between students and the institution, by following path analysis which is to estimate causal connections between variables, one can estimate student outcomes. Bean & Metzner (1985) developed a conceptual model to explain the significance of non-traditional student attrition, the model considers student fit into the environment (climate) and includes academic, psychological, background, and environmental variables and extends on context of works by Tinto (1975), and Spady (1971). Bean and Metzner’s Attrition Model identifies a collection of attributes as factors to student attrition: (a) collective routines as student falls into a life of routine, (b) reliance of student need for institutional information, (c) classroom engagement and participation levels, (d) student integration, and (e) academic reward distribution as students examine the reward system associated with academic performance (Metz, 2002). While these retention models may address some quantifiable attributes, they do not appropriately address importance of student experiences and qualitative evaluation of students’ feelings of belonging applicable for this specific study. In the next category, validation theory is introduced and operationalized for this study.

**Operationalizing Validation Theory**

As suggested by Nunez (2009), when constructing a conceptual framework for HFGS, it is important to impose cultural sensitivity awareness and include support from faculty to help students in developing self-reliance and a feeling of belonging. Acknowledgment of student significance and formulate a plan of equity is a fundamental component to validation of HFGS in college (Rendon, 2011; Andrada, 2007). Rendon (1994) originally conceived validation theory as an enabling and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class faculty agents that fosters academic and irradiate interpersonal development. Validation theory was appropriate for this
study as it illuminated the need for student support and establishing a plan for improving HFGS academic success. One attribute of validation theory is to recognize where students have been and prior experiences in and out of school matter and have shaped their current view.

In this study while validation theory served as the theoretical frame, it was recognized that prior student experiences and the addition of a faculty-student mentoring relationship both had overlapping influence on successful student integration. Validation theory states that there is a need to acknowledge all non-traditional students and their existence as important to improving their integration at campus (Rendon & Nora, 2000). But, Rendon’s validation theory does not specifically note that faculty are to serve as ambassadors or mentors to all new students. Figure 1. Conceptualizing the constructs of student integration below shows that most students’ prior experiences initially impact their level of integration coming into college. Faculty mentoring as part of the FYI program, was operationalized to help new first-year students to increase student integration and minimize any negative influences from prior detrimental experiences at other school environments. It is also noted, that some students could have had positive prior experiences that could help increase their ability to integrate coming into college.

Figure 1. Conceptualizing the Constructs of Student Integration
Validation theory from Rendon (1994) highlights the importance of acknowledging and giving positive reinforcement to students; but it does not specifically call for faculty ambassadors in mentoring relationships. The focus is however on faculty agents as teachers giving light to HFGS voices and validating their experiences and opinions as significant to the classroom and college environment. As an example, learning and calling on students by name gives recognition to their existence and sense of belonging in the college setting. A few important professor classroom actions as noted by Rendon (2011) are the following:

1. Connecting lectures to real-world events that are present for Hispanic students
2. Developing a safe-class environment where students can communicate their views and experiences
3. Establishing group activities that allow students to connect to others and recognize multiple perspectives
4. Discuss academic goals and always start student feedback with a positive messaging that is timely and motivating

**Prior Experiences Matter**

The manner of how minority students are prepared as entering freshmen in college contributes heavily to their perceived expectations of higher education and their ability to persist beyond prior educational experiences (Bellington, 1984; Valencia, 2010). Many HFGS encounter many obstacles such as lack of financial support, linguistic needs, and being away from home and friends which can negatively influence student retention (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Zalaquett, 2006). Research on HFGS’ prior experiences can reflect a lack of academic preparedness, attending low performing schools, and need for integration into an arguably antiquated higher educational setting not designed for non-traditional students.
(Merisotis & McCarthy, 2004). In other prior studies on HFGS, outcomes tend to concentrate on low student engagement and lack of desire in school as opposed to building strong student–centered initiatives that may have positive impact and support the needs of Hispanic students (Zurita, 2004; Choy, 2001; Strayhorn, 2010). In support of this intervention, faculty recognized students’ prior experiences as valuable and tried to help HFGS in reaching educational goals. Next, students’ views of institutional climate importance were discussed as climate of the institutions’ agents had a crucial impact on how students perceived support in school.

**Students’ Views of Institutional Climate Importance**

In the United States, President Obama administration’s goal of producing five million college graduates by 2020 had major obstacles to overcome in advancing university needed changes in climate to support non-traditional student populations (Urick, 2011). Institutional climate is the conceptualization of elements including historical, structural, and behavior based assumptions that are perceived by students as they assess the learning and social environment in college (Hurtado, 1994). Historically, many higher educational systems have continued to exhibit an institutional climate that are incongruent with support needs of non-traditional part-time commuter based students (Hurtado, 1997; Ishitani, 2006). As an example, many non-traditional students are entering an outdated educational system that has not adjusted or changed in decades. The need to postulate a positive and supportive institutional climate that legitimizes non-traditional student experiences and gives meaning to their voices is critical to advancing educational needs in our country (Rendon, 2011; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). The institutional climate in this study site started with faculty ambassadors and agents reaching out to assigned new entering students and showing that faculty were available and always there to support the students and their needs.
Choy (2002) stated that non-traditional high risk students have become the constant focus for administrative agents and researchers as they review concerning low academic preparedness, prior school performance, and student characteristics as reasoning for unsuccessful attempts and ultimate departure from college. Retention of non-traditional students including HFGS has been the subject of many research examinations on student unpreparedness (Ishitani, 2006) and lack of academic and social support from the student’s immediate family (Garcia, 2010). Validation theory illuminates the need to acknowledge and adjust past procedural processes and policies that are detrimental to the needs of non-traditional students that continue to enter college in growing numbers (Rendon, 1994). Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) study on HFGS is an example on successful student connectedness with faculty, as students that find support can improve performance and integrate in school (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011). The necessity to escape from theories based on a deficit approach to theories that recognize and celebrate HFGS is overdue (Tienda, M., 2009) as validation theory was employed in this study.

Student mentoring was positioned as the apex of validation theory, where student significance and recognition of individual successes were paramount to increase the likelihood of a multipronged intervention effort to improved integration. There was a strong reliance on building support as faculty ambassadors worked as mentors with incoming students to improve integration. Faculty spent time each week in an effort to acknowledge student integration and learn better methods to support HFGS. As part of this student retention effort, faculty became an important supporter of incoming students that were learning to navigate in college. Next, the problem statement was discussed which included the perspectives of HFGS participants and their retention concerns; and the need to address the significant retention gap between HFGS and their non-HFGS counterparts.
Problem Statement

A major goal of the Obama Administration and Department of Education was to increase minority student access to college and improve low retention rates for minority students in the United States (Dept. of Education, 2010). The need to improve retention of new HFGS at Taylor College was vital, as this was the fastest growing student population; yet they had considerable retention problems. With a major goal to inform this case study, retention for most HFGS at this study site had not improved in several years. Retention rates averaged about 20% for incoming HFGS from year one to year two, and 38% for non-Hispanic FGS undergraduates. Within the 2010-2013 time periods there were 35% of entering freshmen classified FGS, almost 20% in the same period were classified as HFGS. In a comparative measure on retention, non-FGS for year one to year two are at 48% retention revealing a large retention gap at this campus.

As an attempt to address this retention gap, an FYI retention program was implemented in November 2013 that included an effort to highlight a mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and students to improve chances for success. As previously described, the FYI program aligned faculty mentors or ambassadors with entering freshmen to help students feel a sense of belonging and integrate into college life. This study employed validation theory by Rendon (1994) as an asset model approach to recognize and give significance to HFGS and their importance to this university. Establishing mentoring relationships with students provides the opportunity to share valuable insight into the college’s expectations and allows students a person to support their academic success and help them learn to navigate the college experience (Laskey & Hetzel, 2011). Therefore, this study was intended to better understand a phenomenon of the faculty-student mentoring relationship and explored support needs of HFGS participants.
Negative prior educational experiences can impact HFGS success in college (Kezar, 2010). If students have difficulties in high school, this can have an undesirable impact on perception of college and why it is important for their future (Nora & Reyes, 2012). Many HFGS tend to complete less-rigorous academic courses and curriculums adding to the gap in terms of academic preparedness for college from prior experiences. This behavior can lead to overall lower high school GPA’s and lack of readiness for college, and reduce college aspirations as a factor of poor prior experiences in school (Bui, 2002; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). When looking at experiences of HFGS, this student group needed support and intervention from faculty that could build student’s perception of college and their ability to be successful.

This case study was unique for Taylor College, and few studies addressed how mentoring relationship might help HFGS to integrate. HFGS have unique needs when they enter college, integrating into this environment and social system is central to their success (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Kezar, 2010). Integration was defined as the student’s feeling of being part of the campus community and a valued member of the campus student body (Rendon, 2011). A sense of connectedness to the campus can be like a feeling of connection to one’s own community (Herrero & Gracia, 2004). The ambassador-student relationships were not well understood, so it was important to seek knowledge about the phenomenon of mentoring relationships and determine if these relationships could have a positive impact on student integration.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their HFGS in a first-year initiative retention program at a technical college in Texas. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program?
2. How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions?

3. How has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus?

**Significance of the Research Problem**

The significance of this study was a three-pronged evaluation. The first touched on the local value at this campus site as the current student group participated in the FYI program. Second, the field value for qualitative inquiry to determine what might help other HFGS at additional educational institutions. And third, what could be learned as student-faculty mentor relationships were examined as a possible impact on current theoretical research. This study sought to learn from the selected HFGS group about their unique needs and how to best support them as faculty ambassadors reached out to help students navigate in college.

**Local Value**

One of the major barriers for HFGS at the local institution of this study had been the lack of academic preparedness as they entered college. The need to complete more rigorous Math and English courses has been noted in helping Hispanic students in their first-year adjustment to the requirements of college (Cabrera et al., 2006). Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) argued that one of the most important correlation factors as a predictor of HFGS persistence is their parents’ post-secondary education; however, many Hispanic students at this site are from agricultural families and all participants will be first-generation college students. Harrell & Forney (2003) stated if one parent has graduated from college, and had a household income of $75k per year or more; it was four times more likely that their young adult would persist in college (p. 151). If the parent had gone to college, they were more likely to understand the experience and needed information to help their child in terms of academic preparedness and social adjustment. Hence,
for HFGS in this study, they needed more guidance from culturally aware faculty about how best to adjust to the new environment of college.

**Field Value**

Considering HFGS at other institutions, it was the hope that this study could shed light on the value of how HFGS experience a faculty mentor-student connection and what aspects of that experience might help students persist in college. As suggested by Parsons (2008), the design of a retention program for minority students will follow a cultural based capital perspective which celebrates cultural differences and does not rely on a deficit based approach (p. 1128). Duzak (2002) also stated that language is a strong tool for conveying social identities and the need to address possible language deficiencies is paramount to instilling academic success. The goal was to identify what barriers to retention were present and develop the needed strategic initiatives as part of a scalable FYI program that would embrace mentoring support that may help increase HFGS retention by improving student engagement. The hope was that lessons learned from this study could be transportable into other college environments for HFGS.

**Research Value**

From a holistic perspective, there was hope that as the student-faculty relationships were examined, there could be some common themes that were representative of unique needs of HFGS entering college. While it was probable there would be many student unique issues that might not be scalable or add knowledge about this population, there should be commonalities as this study unfolded. One theme of prior retention research was it did not acknowledge cultural, economic, and the societal views of Hispanic students. Most prior research had come from a perspective of identifying a deficit-based stance on HFGS. There was a resilient need to better understand this growing population especially for geographical locations such as Texas,
California, and Arizona where the Hispanic population growth is paramount. Next, the positionality statement of the student researcher was communicated for this case study.

**Positionality Statement**

I had both a professional and personal stake in the outcomes of this qualitative case study as the location was at the university where I work, but not at the two locations that I oversee. As a faculty chair, I serve in the academic affairs department and oversee faculty, curriculum, and student support at two center locations within this metro at Taylor College. In acknowledgement of my values and possible bias that I am a dean, I selected a central location for this study that I did not have academic responsibility for. I also did not select students for this study that I had in my prior classes where I was their professor; as that could have influenced the possible student perception or willingness to discuss their feelings. I had personal interest in this phenomenon to better understand faculty ambassador-student mentoring relationships in the first-year initiative.

As a non-Hispanic researcher, I became the instrument in conducting and analyzing observations and interviews; hence it was important to listen for self-bias and acknowledge the need to understand this student group and their support needs. Maxwell (2005) suggests that as a researcher it is important to acknowledge our own values and bias and make certain that we do not simply remove our knowledge and experiences from the study, but communicate them (p. 108). I was candid in acknowledging that I was working as a new novice researcher and not as an academician and wanted students to be a knowledge base for this study to mature. I sought HFGS that I had not had prior communications with, and I described my role as a researcher for this investigation. I communicated to all student and faculty participants in this study that I was engaged in doctoral studies at Northeastern University and that this study would seek to add knowledge to support current and future HFGS in college.
I structured study interviews on mentoring relationship building between faculty and their Hispanic students based on Constructivism theory. As researcher and principle instrument for this inquiry, I wanted to explore how students and faculty co-constructed meaning and its impact on student’s perception of belonging in college. Co-construction is a cyclical process in the knowledge gathering that can strengthen ability to capture and retain participants’ views and defined meaning (Hogan, 1999; Takacs, 2003). Constructivist believe in encouraging and building students’ feelings of belonging and their ability to be academically and socially integrated in an effort to persist (Rendon Linares & Munoz, 2011; Kezar, 2010). The students’ perspectives were important to capture, as the phenomenon of these mentoring relationships were not well understood nor known if they could help student retention outcomes.

**Conclusion**

The need to hear and acknowledge the voices of HFGS and their faculty mentors was important to knowledge gained from this unique case study. While there are many aspects of retention research that are clear in stressing needed faculty support such as: 1) help with academic preparedness, 2) help recognizing and overcoming student risk factors, and 3) help in building a feeling of belonging and confidence for students. It is paramount that this HFGS student group be recognized as invaluable knowledge providers to study (Tienda, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The need to adjust the university climate at Taylor College to a caring and supportive environment was essential to improve student integration. Kezar et al. (2005) suggested that university agents must launch a strong metamovement linking a complex collection of initiatives to a group of values and shared agenda as they ask how each policy decision relates to the public good and improvements for all
students. This case study effort included implementing approaches to curriculum and student orientation that built and heightened the feelings of student belonging here at this study location.

In prior studies on student retention, the goal had always been to determine how we as administrators could retain students and help them to be successful. Many of the seminal research articles on retention focused on student integration and being built around full-time, traditional age, residential based students which are not reflective of the current majority of HFGS coming to community colleges or university settings (Reason, 2003; Tinto, 1993). While many institutions strive to build communities for minorities, there is a continued assumption that underlying barriers impacting retention are the same as those of the majority student populations (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000, p. 130). This unique case study sought to learn about the phenomenon of these faculty-student mentoring relationships and build HFGS self-confidence and their sense of belonging in an effort to improve integration.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **Attrition**: The measurable delay, discontinuing, or complete departure of the student that is in pursuit of a degree in the educational setting (Kuh, 2005).

2. **Constructivism**: Concerned with the overarching nature of knowledge and how one creates or interprets it. As *constructivism* posits that each individual mentally develops and constructs a world of experience through the use of cognition based processes (Young & Collin, 2004).

3. **Emotional maturity**: One’s ability to adjust to change in environment, surroundings, and control emotions and behavior (Webster’s Dictionary, 2014).
4. First year initiative (FYI): A first-year initiative program effort that aligns entering freshmen students with a faculty ambassador as a mentor to help the student integrate and navigate through college.

5. Hispanic: While race and ethnicity can be considered separately, Hispanic for this study will follow the Pew Center and U.S. Census recommendation of self-identification as opposed to geographical or cultural determination. The 2010 census defines Hispanic ethnicity as not being a race. The federal government of the United States mandated that for data collection purposes a minimum of two ethnicities be presented Hispanic and Latino, person of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, or other Central and South American origin or not Hispanic and Latino (U.S. Census, 2010)

6. Hispanic First-Generation Students (HFGS): Hispanic college students whose parents do not hold a baccalaureate degree.

7. Institutional Climate: Conceptualization of elements including historical, structural, and behavior based assumptions that are perceived by students as they assess the learning and social environment in terms of access and support (Hurtado, 1994).

8. Integration: Measure of the students’ feeling of being part of the campus community and a valued member of the campus student body. There is a sense of connectedness to the campus as in a feeling of connection to one’s own community (Herrero & Gracia, 2004).

9. Mentoring: The art of establishing an instrumental relationship between the faculty member and student that relies on developing and encouraging skills, talents, and connectedness to support educational pursuit (Crisp & Cruz, 2010).

10. Non-traditional student: Student who does not follow the criteria for a traditional student in terms of age (18-24), full-time status, or living on campus (Bean & Metzner, 1985). A
non-traditional student can be classified several ways, while age as a determinate is common where student is 25 years old or older and hence did not go directly to college after high school. This includes low-income and first-generation status (Rendon, 1994).

11. Persistence: defined as the student’s decision to keep working toward a degree at one or more institutions while remaining in school (Tinto, 2012).

12. Retention: act of retaining or providing help to students by educational agents to continue the student’s pursuit of a possession at same institution; in this case the goal is degree attainment (Vegas & Martinez, 2008; Tinto, 2012).

13. Student Ambassadors: Faculty members that will act as mentors for the first year of study to help students integrate and help with academic and social adjustments.

14. Traditional College Student: A student that enters college directly after high school, age determination includes 18-24 yrs. old, full-time college status, and living on campus (NCES, 2010; Bean & Metzner, 1985).

15. Validation Theory: Intentional intervention initiative to affirm students as valued members of the institution and participants in the learning process and communities (Rendon, 2011).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their HFGS in a first-year initiative retention program at a technical college in Texas. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program?
2. How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions?
3. How has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus?

The first question was a reflective and discovery question that looked at the FYI ambassador program to determine the nature and importance of the faculty ambassador-student mentoring relationship and its’ aid in explaining student outcomes. The need to focus on meaning and seeing how validation could be developed to help students build confidence was vital to integration efforts. The second question explored the impact of prior student experiences as a factor in the mentor-student discussions and looked at how these experiences influenced the relationships. The third question examined how the mentoring relationship influenced student integration and helped students to feel part of this campus environment. This literature review examined and discussed prior and current literature on student retention models and focused on the need to institute the validation of students as a major component of a first-year initiative program for new HFGS participants.

Introduction

The typical student is changing for most universities throughout the country and even the world, especially in Texas with the increasing HFGS population (Tienda, 2009, pp. 7-14). A large career-based technical college in the southwest was experiencing growth of HFGS that
were the first in their immediate family to enter college and seek an undergraduate degree. In this literary review, the term first-generation student FGS was defined as a student whose parents or guardians did not persist in college (Nunez, 2011) or did not possess a baccalaureate degree (Choy, 2001; Thayer, 2000; Boden, 2011). As posited by Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002), approximately 50% of all HFGS who entered a traditional university would fail to obtain a bachelor’s degree within six years. This gap between HFGS and their non-Hispanic counterparts has been widely known and well documented in vast higher educational research for years.

This study emphasized exploring the need for faculty-student mentoring. In this study, ambassadors were aligned with their HFGS to support student integration in the first year of college. This chapter reviewed theoretical research on college student retention efforts and specifically addressing the education attainment gap between these HFGS and non-Hispanic counterparts. Many HFGS participants had not experienced positive validation of prior efforts and had not had exposure to a positive university experience, which brought many challenges. In summary, a new non-deficient approach was enabled to support student integration.

**Scope of Literature Review**

This literature review presented work on student retention models including research from Tinto (1975), Astin (1984), Bean (1980), and Rendon (1994) and other key educational researchers. In addition, this literature review assessed retention modeling theory and examined what attributes may be present as students make the decision to remain or leave college. Many prior seminal retention models had valuable lessons learned and helped in this investigation. There was a distinct gap in many prior retention modeling efforts as they were designed to focus on traditional student populations that were not the same as the needs of HFGS that were the central focus of this study. While there was a vast array of prior knowledge on traditional
student retention in many top-rated research journals such as *The Journal of Higher Education* and *Review of Educational Research*, the need to establish a pathway from deficit-based approaches to one supporting non-traditional Hispanic students became the foundation of this current case study investigation.

The phenomenon of this study focused on the relationship between ambassadors and their HFGS and relied on a substantially different non-deficit approach as validation theory was operationalized as the theoretical frame. The non-traditional student retention work of Rendon Linares (2011) was employed to illuminate what was known about the power of promoting student validation and the need to strengthen student self-efficacy as components of a FYI program. This review highlighted elements including institutional climate, student motivation, involvement, and readiness to improve overall retention. The review also promoted validation and self-efficacy of students through mentoring to inspire success in college irrespective of prior deficiencies. HFGS had different socioeconomic and cultural-based backgrounds as well as linguistic needs as English may not have been their primary language. There were many areas educational agents could improve to positively alter academic deficiencies and increase student validation to support academic and social success.

This literature review contained strands of literature on student retention, Hispanic student pipeline, and degree attainment gap as HFGS concerns in college were examined. The emphasis was to highlight validation theory as a theoretical lens and determine the meaning of the relationships between ambassadors and students and the impact on integration. The literature review stemmed from structured inquiry from databases to included ERIC (EBSCOHost), ProQuest Dissertations, JSTOR, and PsycINFO. The search paths were initiated with research collectively focused on student retention models and retention work by seminal authors that
define the higher educational retention knowledge base. Key word searches included filtering for peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and noted published retention articles.

Some example inquiries were validation theory, institutional climate, college access, non-traditional student, socioeconomic strata, low-income, and Hispanic first-generation student. There were numerous article collections from *Review of Educational Research*, *Research in Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, and *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. The framework of this continued discovery was to identify what was known about college student retention and how the retention models had evolved to better understand non-traditional student concerns and needs. As the research continued to narrow and looked at many existing retention models, a discovery argument emerged that noted the lack of retention efforts that are expended on non-traditional students and specifically HFGS. Many articles and books displayed a deficient-based approach when identifying reasons for low-income and HFGS not being successful both in entering or persisting in prior college attempts.

A structural component of this discovery argument was to abandon a prior deficient-based foundation and replace with a celebrating approach to validate and give credibility to students’ experiences both in and out of the college classroom environment. Furthermore, the need to celebrate HFGS’ cultural and ethnic values and give meaning to belonging in college was positioned with guidance from their ambassadors as a major thrust of the FYI program. The discovery argument for identifying academic and social needs of this student group was steered towards establishing help with integration. The closing of this chapter defined why a proactive approach of building students’ belief that they too could be successful in college was an essential component of any successful support program, especially a program focused on the needs of non-traditional HFGS populations.
**Hispanic Pipeline to College**

Hispanics now constitute over 16% of the U.S. population; the increases of this group on educational school resources, especially in lower-income areas, has been a major focus of educational planning strategies. In Texas, the percentage of Hispanics entering community colleges or universities is one of the largest ethnic groups and is increasing annually (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). Two tectonic issues are paramount: 1) the rocketing Hispanic population, and 2) inadequate educational resources in low-income school districts as combined with 70% of HFGS students have parents that did not complete high school (Rotherham, 2011). There are more than four million Hispanics in public schools whose primary language is not English with approximately 75% born in the U.S. (Urick, 2011). In addition, the manner of how students are prepared in high school contributes heavily to the expectations of higher education (Billington, 1984, Lopez & Fry, 2013). Teaching and assessment styles in many secondary schools have developed certain learning strategies that are not always entirely transferable to the independent styles of learning expected in higher education but many times continue to persist especially in low-income school districts (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Cook & Leckey, 1999).

Hispanics are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. As argued by Tienda (2009), “Hispanics account for more than a third of the 100 million people added to U.S. population between 1976 and 2006 yet the level of socioeconomic inequalities with non-Hispanic whites has never been greater”. Hispanics comprise the largest segment of the labor force, America’s global competitiveness “will be impacted significantly by progress that Hispanics make at all levels of our educational system and beyond, especially college degree completion” (AAHHE, 2009). As noted by Albert Schweitzer, “Truth has no special time of its own, its hour is now” (Hansen, 2007, p. 171). Tagore (1961) had an insistence on the fullest
possible development of one’s creative personality within a pluralistic society; his resistance to 
dogmatism and advocacy for freedom for all people was continually displayed eloquently here 
“Unity does not mean uniformity” (p. 247). There is an ethical responsibility to make certain 
educational entities are redesigned to address the needs of this important ethnic population.

**Hispanic Educational Attainment Gap**

The Hispanic population within the United States from 2000 to 2010 had grown from 
35.3 million to 50.5 million which was 16.3% of the total U.S. population (Ennis, Rios-Vargas & 
Albert, 2011). Yet, HFGS in college faced major obstacles as they attempted to pursue a college 
education (Nora & Reyes, 2012). Although these rates had improved over the last ten years, 
there was a persistence problem leading to an educational attainment gap that still exists between 
Hispanic and non-Hispanic whites in college (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2010). For several HFGS 
that graduated from high school, more than 50% entered a community college and were placed in 
developmental studies which increased time to degree completion, overall attrition, and added 
overall expense (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, & Solórzano, 2015). According to the Pew 
Research Center, as of 2014, among Hispanics ages 25 to 29, just 15% of Hispanics have a 
bachelor’s degree or higher. By comparison, among the same age group, about 41% of whites 
have a bachelor’s degree or higher as do 22% of blacks and 63% of Asians (Krogstad, J., 2016). 
In an effort to address and improve the educational attainment gap for HFGS as a focus of 
national and Texas educational goals, access and support for these non-traditional students is a 
critical component of any retention effort (Santiago, 2011).

In Texas, there had historically been an assumed connection between low academic 
attainment and economic poverty for many HFGS as they were part of school segregation 
divided along economic lines. HFGS disproportionately attended high schools where
approximately 70% of students were classified as low-income students in underfunded schools (Orfield & Lee, 2004; Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Yuan, & Harrell, 2013). In October 2000, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board released “Closing the Gaps by 2015”: Texas Higher Education Plan. This plan’s goal was to close educational gaps within the state of Texas by creating a focused initiative on educational attainment issues such as HFGS participation, academic success, excellence, and research. This plan was built on the foundation of support from major business and political communities and was critical to the overall success of local communities and the State of Texas. The plan invested resources into a needed FYI program associated with community colleges, universities, and connections to local businesses to provide summer work co-op opportunities and minority student scholarships.

For HFGS there were three distinct issues that continued to be paramount in a comparative analysis with non-Hispanic student counterparts: the under preparedness to be academically successful due to poor high school fundamentals, high propensity of attending community colleges instead of a four-year university, possession of numerous risk factors such as low parental education, limited financial support, and lack of information about university life in general (Tienda, 2006, p. 8). Each of these issues had an influence on persistence, but all combined which was typical for many HFGS could be prodigious as the definitive goal to ultimately reach degree conferral. According to the Texas Higher Education Board in looking at “Closing the Gaps by 2015” which was originally drafted in 2000; Texas Higher Education enrolled over 84,000 more college students than the prior year. Hispanic student levels increased by 33,000 students overall but the cumulative increase was significantly below established targets. Texas institutions awarded 12,000 more undergraduate degrees in 2010 than prior year with Hispanics claiming more of these undergraduate degrees than any other year since 2000.
Moreover, a survey from “Latinos in 2009: America’s Changing Workforce Survey” conducted with 16-25 years old participants, approximately 88% said yes to the importance of a college education and intended to go to college; yet many participants were referring to going to a community college not university (PEW Center, 2009).

**Retention Challenges of HFGS**

There was a need to focus on the essential areas of student retention by increasing the level of student involvement and engagement through socializing student validation and self-efficacy as HFGS navigated the institution in pursuit of a college education (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Furthermore, Rendon’s lens of validation theory (1994) has helped to establish HFGS’s perception of their academic preparedness and to assess needed intervention plans for support (Creswell, 2007). In this study of HFGS, their decision to enter college was not an automatic assumption nor was it an expectation for many. Many times, this group of students are not aware of higher educational opportunities or ways to navigate through college which increases the need to build support and validation efforts for these students (Rendon, 1994; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). HFGS many times struggled with a lack of self-confidence and prior positive validation of their academic performance in school attempts.

A growing percentage of HFGS in Texas were present that attended academically weak high schools that were challenged for basic funding and ability to maintain facilities including qualified teachers to provide educational direction. Gibbons & Borders (2010) posited that many HFGS tended to have lower self-efficacy skills and struggled with their ability to advocate for themselves due to less parental support and perceived barriers. There were many HFGS in Texas that had simply never tried to be academically successful and lacked educational mentors, which provided evidence for their low college entry testing scores and their academic deficiencies.
As argued by Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), the baccalaureate degree is the avenue to extend mobility of choices and it is the single most important educational component in terms of economic benefit. As stated by Brint (2006), most of us recall the saying, “To get ahead in life, you need an education” (p. 163). In the U.S. labor market a person holding a master’s degree will make more than twice as much as a person with a high school diploma every working year of their career (Day & Newburger, 2002). As we look at the world of job creation it is evident that most of the millions of jobs that are being created over the next decade will require specific training and a knowledge base beyond that of a high school diploma (Callan, 2000). The global pressure for obtaining a college education and ultimately being a graduate has a consequence for all individuals seeking future employment, especially for this growing Hispanic population in Texas, as the number of labor based and low-skill occupations continue to decrease yearly (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

As colleges and universities throughout the country review retention concerns and look for ways to better serve and retain diverse student populations, much of the scholarly research in retention modeling has focused on traditional students and settings (Tinto, 1993; Reason, 2003). There is a distinct gap in the research of retention models and example implementations that have focused on non-traditional students and students attending part-time and evening commuter schools (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). In addition, many HFGS attended college part-time.
and did not live on campus or have time allocation or financial means to be in social activities as related to institutional setting for traditional students in college. Non-traditional students who live away from campus view institutional climate differently than residential students (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985) they are searching for an agent who believes they can be successful in college (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). A welcoming campus climate is vital to provide support for all students especially for non-traditional students.

Theorized Non-Traditional Student Deficiencies

The constructs of student motivation and self-determination had an influence on student academic success and persistence. As noted by Deci and Ryan (2000), self-determination theory (SDT) reflects on the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (p. 230). Intrinsic motivation for students looks at engaging in activities for the satisfaction of participation. As an example of intrinsic motivation, when asked: Why are you going to college? To continue to learn new and interesting things. Extrinsic motivation originates from outside student, as an example of extrinsic motivation, when asked: Why are you going to college? To get a better job (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p 232). Non-traditional students can struggle with self-determination from having multiple responsibilities such as work, spouse, children that compete for their time as they pursue college (Orbe, 2004). Likewise, Deci and Ryan (1985) suggested it is essential to understand that people move around on this motivational continuum and this has impact on their self-determination. Also, self-determination has a correlation to helping students learn how to navigate and to conquer their fears as they experience academic and social celebration of their successes (Pascale, 2011). In summary, this theoretical perspective for non-traditional students, which includes the HFGS participants in this study, with needed support can improve their self-determination and be successful in school.
Lack of Motivation and Emotional Detachment

One of the major areas of focus had to do with HFGS motivation and the need for these students to feel connected to the university and build a strong desire to be successful in a new world unknown. Emotional detachment from school could become a major problem for many of the HFGS at an early age in their educational pursuit. According to Voelkl (1997), this emotional detachment and a feeling of not belonging could create low motivation and overall disinterest in school (p. 301). Students must have collectively family, friends, and teachers that believed in them and their desire to be academically successful. Additionally, when students are emotionally detached from the university, they will not seek support services or tutoring, which can cause increased attrition for this important student population (Ruiz, 2009). Lastly, this emotional detachment and a feeling of alienation can start early, even by middle school, causing HFGS to disassociate with their teachers and the overall institutional climate.

For many HFGS, they found the road to college an extreme leap into the unknown. Many of those students brought patterns of low academic performance and also minimal comprehension. Having been in poorly equipped primary schools, they find problems in understanding of educational fundamentals including mathematics and language skills that other students will not encounter (Bui, K.V.T., 2002; Choy, 2001). Many researchers believe the single most positive objective is to engage HFGS in the educational climate and create a robust overall campus support system, which can make a great deal of difference in the path to student persistence (Astin, 1984; Mallette & Cabrera, 1991; Nora, 1987). As suggested by Tienda (2009), for many of these HFGS they did not have good prior experiences as they may have encountered teachers that did not help to prepare or motivate them for academic success in college. In addition, many HFGS had to commute to college after full-time work and had family
and financial obligations that could not be put on hold while they attended school. However, past performance and present stresses can be overcome as students become involved and engaged in college. Such concerns are discussed in the next section.

**Involvement and Engagement Concerns for HFGS**

Student involvement and engagement were needed attributes for all students as they navigated as new participants in college. As suggested by Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini (2004), the more that student involvement and engagement could be enhanced in the academic setting, the greater the chance for skill development and knowledge base advancement. Astin (1984) argued that as a part of a developmental theory for higher education, the level of student involvement had a strong correlation to retention outcomes. Furthermore, involvement noted by Astin (1984) had a focus on the investment of physical and psychological energy that is exerted in preparation and academic studies by the student (p. 301). Student involvement theory is qualitatively unlike other development theories in that it is concerned with the “how” of student development (Astin, 1999, p. 522). While, Astin’s theory (1984) on student involvement had been criticized in that it underestimates the impact of involvement for minority students, especially many HFGS (Rendon, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000); it served as a significant foundation for retention research. In this case study, student involvement and engagement were acknowledged as important to HFGS integration as ambassadors worked with their mentees.

For new college students providing assistance and information as they get started is crucial to early success. And, this is especially true for non-traditional students that had no family role models that had been to college and could assist with the schedule planning, financial aid, and student housing issues to name a few. The ability for new HFGS to have time with faculty both in the classroom and outside is helpful to their increased likelihood of persisting
Furthermore, Esprivalo-Harrell & Forney (2003) suggested that HFGS as they enter college should be aligned with first year college mentors who should include faculty, support staff, and possible upper term students to help guide them through this new educational environment (p. 155). Tierney (1992) suggested that while Astin’s (1984) theoretical model on student involvement noted overall importance of the student’s responsibility for their success, it did not identify the institution’s responsibility in providing an inclusive and welcoming climate for non-traditional students. Lastly, it was crucial that faculty colleagues reached out to HFGS frequently to provide assistance that included welcoming the students to campus, providing opportunities to ask questions, and to express their needs as new students navigated this new environment.

While there have been studies that have looked at HFGS as compared to non-first-generation students (NFGS), it is relevant that on average the NFGS tend to have higher SAT scores and overall better GPA and the overall percentage to graduation as compared to HFGS is almost twice the percentage on an annual basis (Esprivalo-Harrell & Forney, 2003). As the seminal literature was examined on HFGS retention, there was a collection of data that supported a negative outlook on HFGS as compared to non-first generation students and placed HFGS at an insurmountable disadvantage in terms of financial and emotional support as they entered the transition to college (Ishitani, 2003). The weight of evidence on HFGS shows continued deficiencies in their academic preparation, specific college selection, and overall persistence once in pursuit of a college education (Ishitani, 2006; Barry et al., 2008).

HFGS balanced a host of additional anxieties over going to college. As noted by Terenzini et al. (1994), HFGS tend to have a more difficult time with the transition to college and have a host of concerns including all of the common anxieties of any new college freshman.
plus cultural and many times linguistic concerns (p. 302). As suggested by Richardson & Skinner (1992), when HFGS are measured against students whose parents are college educated, the HFGS are more likely to leave a four-year university and either transfer to a community college or drop out of college altogether. Hence, it is critical there were forms of student engagement heightened by a vast welcoming institutional climate to support and establish new bonds with the college and its student population both academically and socially.

**HFGS Academic Preparedness Concerns**

HFGS had a tendency to suffer many stereotypes from many different segments of society including some educational administrators and teachers who thought this ethnic group had problems including laziness, low motivation, and little desire to succeed in school. In examining the level of academic preparedness as HFGS transition into college, there has been a positive increase over the last several years; yet a gap still exists in terms of numbers of Hispanic students that persist (Schmidt, 2003, p. 14). As suggested by Harrell & Forney (2003), high school success in advanced mathematics is an extremely important subject to measure probable success in many college majors including engineering, science, and medicine and has a direct correlation to college persistence and defines student preparedness. In summary, since equity for HFGS was an overarching goal, practitioners must address academic deficiencies such as a lack of preparedness early in each student’s education, so those deficiencies are minimized.

Horn & Nunez (2000) argued that student success in higher-level mathematics courses greatly increased HFGS college entrance and future bachelor degree attainment. Unfortunately, most HFGS as compared to their non-Hispanic student counterparts that came from college educated parents did not take calculus in high school; comparatively less than 8.6% Hispanics take calculus versus 17.5% of white students from college educated parents (U.S. Dept. of
 Likewise, many HFGS believed they were well prepared for entering college and did not realize they had academic level issues with mathematics and/or English comprehension (Cabrera et al., 2006). Hence, there continued to be large disparities between racial and ethnic populations. When analyzing HFGS academic preparedness, many higher educational agents tended to use entrance placement testing as a strong indicator of academic preparedness yet there were concerns with validity and assessment characteristics especially in reading comprehension for students that English was not their primary language (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Berkner et al., 2002; Boden, 2011). In this particular study, the HFGS participants mentioned frequently their concerns with a lack of mathematics skills primarily, as opposed to reading comprehension concerns.

As advocated by Kelly (2005), many educational institutions have continuance of racial and ethnic disparities including linguistic limitations which may pose devastating consequences for our society. In addition, there was evidence that one contributing factor to low graduation rates for HFGS was their inability to find support groups and membership that enhanced student engagement especially in predominately non-Hispanic White campuses (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1993). As explained by Attinasi (1989), it was determined HFGS at a large university setting could have difficulties finding ways to cope and feeling a part of the university; but smaller group communities could help with the difficult transition to the larger educational setting. HFGS found their transition to college a complex one as students might lack guidance and instructional information pertinent to college preparation and understanding academic expectations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). In summary, it was suggested that campus based sub-cultures helped to provide an understanding of needs of HFGS as they integrated into the university environment.
HFGS Migrate into Developmental Education

As HFGS obtained a high school diploma and set sights on entering post-secondary education, many entered college by starting in developmental education courses. Developmental education or “remedial” level education included the need to improve both Mathematics and/or English skills to reach a college level of comprehension. When students placed developmental, they had to be successful in their Math and/or English skills courses to progress to taking courses that counted towards their chosen degree (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Many HFGS could struggle with these developmental courses and needed significant support from faculty mentors and agents as they entered college. By starting in developmental courses, students extended the time to reach a degree and added to expense of their education goals.

Prior studies focused on developmental education stressed that students could become disheartened from the start if they did not do well in developmental courses. Specifically, HFGS could be placed double-developmental status, where they were trying to improve mathematics and English comprehension simultaneously. Seminal researchers warn that the educational colleagues should recognize both the psychosocial and non-cognitive components to understand behaviors that impact students’ persistence and motivation to learn (Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum, 2012). Many HFGS had a difficult time succeeding especially in leaning and overcoming their weakness in mathematics. Developmental education required strong support from faculty agents and a lot of encouragement for these HFGS to successfully complete and advance to standard level coursework.

HFGS Self-Efficacy

The need to help HFGS learn to advocate for themselves and reach toward their educational goals and acknowledge temporary setbacks as they navigate through new
experiences and unfamiliar territory was imperative to persist. As a person learned skills to advocate in their own behalf this followed a domain that identified motivation characteristics to include both intrinsic and extrinsic components. Theoretical knowledge of self-efficacy was vastly mature and had been built on the work of Bandura. Bandura (1977) detailed cognitive processes and captured their role in acquisition and memory of behavioral formation and pattern retention. Bandura (1997) argued that people actually evaluate their own significance within four environmental zones: past performance, exposure to others around them, stated opinions from those they trust, and their level of emotional stability and intelligence at the times of their societal exposure.

As an example, if you were a HFGS and female say 21 years old that was focused on completing your degree and having a professional career yet your parents continued to ask when are you going to slow down and get married? Do you not want to have a family soon and be a wife and mother, I got married at 17? In another sense, if HFGS had little or no exposure to learning, how to advocate for themselves in a professional and emotionally mature manner, they tended to check out in new and unfamiliar settings such as college. Non-traditional students did not have the exposure or mentors that they could learn from and pattern successful behavioral orientation and outcomes. As argued by Baum (1973) behavioral patterns and the way in which people react tend to not follow immediate consequences, but are a result of outcomes that pertain to aggregate levels of exposure over time.

Non-traditional students in college needed to see examples of care and validation of their ability to succeed from all surrounding participants to build their confidence in themselves and their level of self-efficacy. Positive consequences and experiences affected and modified the student’s behavior as they saw that their behavior and attitude had a tremendous influence on
academic and social success. Recognized and celebrated positive behavior became a repetitious cycle of building self-esteem and one’s ability to better advocate for themselves as environment and educational expectations become better understood and reachable (Estes, 1972; Bandura, 1977). It was critical to the success of the FYI program that we as collective educational agents instilled a strong initiative to mentor and help HFGS build self-efficacy skills and provide support as they focused on success in college and beyond. In the next sub-section, there was a look at the institution’s response to HFGS by providing an engaging institutional climate that included learning communities to validate students and show life experiences were important.

**Institutional Climate**

As we turn our attention to institutional climate as a component of student retention efforts for HFGS, it was evident that there were many important tenets. Moreover, significant scholarly work had been done but still little was known as to a specific combination of efforts that could positively impact attrition. The need for positive validation was one of the most important essentials for underrepresented students and was heavily intertwined with collective retention tools. HFGS had difficulty in an institutional climate that was sterile and strongly segmented with participants that continued the invalidation of their goals and increased student attrition (Terenzini et al., 1994). Many non-traditional students needed a sense of focus and direction from faculty and institutional agents to find their way.

The overall institutional climate noted that the perception of students as they saw student access and a willingness of campus agents to provide support were critical to enhancing student engagement. HFGS needed to feel the institution was pro-actively providing support and helping them to validate their educational desire and ambition to be academically successful (Rendon, 1994). What was known is that the percentage of HFGS continued to grow faster than any other
ethnic group and even though still statistically low; more HFGS were entering college every year and this focuses direct attention on the institutional climate and administrator’s ability to support and foster these students (Hurtado et al., 1996).

There was not a golden tool that could be used to help all students to progress and be successful in their educational pursuit. In evaluating the importance of institutional climate as a factor of retention for HFGS, the Pew Hispanic Center argued that an increasing number of 16-25 years old Hispanic students stopped their education because they did not feel connected to the school and did not believe that college was necessary for their job prospects that were usually blue-collar labor jobs (Lopez, 2009). One of the major components of the new FYI program was to operationalize support efforts to align the institutional campus climate to be welcoming for Hispanic students and gave them a sense of belonging. As the process was started in looking at retention efforts for HFGS, it was important to define some broad-based components of attrition and examine the real causal effects versus looking at the symptoms of the problem.

**Learning Communities**

As argued by Rocconi (2010), a growing number of educational institutions are focusing on learning communities as a way to address the needs of students and to impact the overall persistence picture. The ability to take courses into a cohort approach initiated faculty discussions on students’ progress. Also, faculty in the program determined the challenges, which became critical to helping students to be successful academically and build their confidence and engagement. Learning communities came on the horizon in the mid-1980s, and many times were recognized as high impact processes that were positively linked to student learning and success in the educational environment (Kuh, 2008). Learning communities as defined by Gabelnick et al. (1990) were a purposeful redesign of the curriculum that linked courses and their
learning outcomes together that were taken as a group such that the learning objectives could be managed and targeted (p. 5).

Tinto (1993) established a strong support for learning communities and the need for students to have a relationship with faculty and administrators built on support. He denoted that a positive correlation existed between institutional engagement and increased student persistence and that this phenomenon was not dependent on the student skill sets as it worked for all students. Tinto suggested that persistence was a complex problem with many variables and that not all facets of persistence were addressed. He placed responsibility on educational institution as to their commitment to supporting and building the climate for student engagement.

While there is room for structured variation in learning communities, there are two commonalities: shared learning and connected learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There has been a lot of interest in learning communities as they have had a noteworthy impact of overall student persistence outcomes and engagement. As many researchers, have suggested that the relationship between learning community participation levels and educational outcomes may be indirect, they are based on mediation through overall increased student engagement (Rocconi, 2010). In further examination of learning communities, Pike (1999) suggested that any direct effects on educational gains seemed to be eliminated in the presence of control factors when evaluating for characteristics such as ACT scores, ethnicity, or gender. Pike (1999) did establish evidence that suggested that interactions with faculty and student communities was important to the roles between learning community-based participation and the learning outcomes.

In evaluating the research of Zhao and Kuh (2004), they suggested that studies should include looking at both direct and indirect effects of the learning communities and be focused on the outcomes of collective learning. Likewise, Zhao and Kuh stated that to study these
relationships, structural equation modeling should be part of the analysis on student engagement and learning community participation. The need to establish a modeling algorithm that took into account the fundamental variables and looked at the relationships that represented the direct and indirect effects of learning communities as they related to the learning outcomes seemed to be important to the validity of the research. In support of learning communities as they impact student development especially for HFGS, Pace (1982) suggested that students come into the university setting with many variations of experiences and distinct differences in their backgrounds, which influenced the level of effort. Pace went on to argue that past research did not always include the overall quality that students themselves invested in using facilities and opportunities for learning and development in the school environment (p. 18). But it was the quality of what students established after being in the institution that determined their perception of development and growth.

Student intervention especially for first year students, had grown dramatically in the last few decades with indications that as many as 95% of U.S. four-year institutions had established a student persistence and intervention program. While there was great variation in many of the first-year student intervention programs most all contained an extended orientation approach to helping students find their way in the university setting. Likewise, this approach also helped establish a relationship with the student early so that the level of engagement and support were enhanced. Many institutions established learning communities and formulated a series of introductory courses to institute student orientation and community. These programs established a structured approach to enhancing performance, overall persistence, and ultimately graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In next section, academic retention models were explained and
explored as they provided a strong foundation for what was known about retention for students and how to enhance validating non-traditional students within this specific study domain.

**Academic Retention Models**

While there were research findings established in historical retention models it was noted they focus on a traditional full-time student population and did not necessarily map well for the needs of non-traditional student populations. As defined, retention was the act of helping the students by educational agents to continue their pursuit of a possession or goal at the same institution. This was a fundamental goal of administrative and faculty agents in keeping students in college until degree conferral. In addition, this section examined some premier seminal researchers’ work in retention modeling theory and assessed need for a model that highlighted support for non-traditional students. As a broad statement, HFGS tended to come from families with lower income and lower educational attainment. These societal factors for HFGS could bring reduced educational expectations for family and impact the student’s decision to go to college as displayed by lower levels of engagement (Terenzini et al., 1994).

The various perspectives in theoretical models for student retention included institutional setting, psychological attributes, and sociological exposure (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Analysis from the psychological realm, Astin (1975) denoted through his student involvement theoretical framing that persistence was a product of psychological and physical determinants that students exerted in their academic period. As well, Tinto (1987) researched the collective interaction between the student and institution and examined how social strata and student experiences were reacting with the academic setting in a complex motion. Tinto (1975) suggested that there was a strong correlation between academic preparedness, socioeconomic levels, and ethnicity/gender as predictors of academic and social success in college. Lastly, Bean (1980) argued that there
was a comparative analysis that looked at perception of student satisfaction as a component of attrition and modeled the importance of outside agents including parental support and motivation as vital to understanding student retention efforts.

Several aspects of HFGS retention added to the complexities of being successful in college. Students tended to not live on campus, did not have time to be engaged in campus activities and socialization, and did not always establish needed support relationships with faculty, family, or other students (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1996). In addition, when prior retention models were examined, they employed a quantitative approach to measuring data with a single variable evaluated; while holding other variables constant which did not always model student situations. More recent retention models looked at the variables collectively and examined how dynamically changing variables could influence overall student persistence simultaneously.

**Durkheim’s Work on Social Integration Theory**

Durkheim (1952) built a theoretical framework around studying suicide and showed a correlation between reduced levels of integration into society and the systematic increase in depression and suicidal tendencies. Durkheim’s research supported the comprehensive need for youth participation in school and society to increase self-esteem and mental well-being, reducing depression and isolation. Furthermore, Durkheim focused on societal solidarity or cohesion of social groups and had concern of how individuals would maintain social closeness in this modern individualistic world. Durkheim’s work established a strong development of empirical research design that was a foundation of sociology. This research provided the framework for examining HFGS and their need to maintain strong social bonds with family, teachers, and friends as they integrated into college. Tinto argued that the act of dropping out of higher education due to a
lack of integration was analogous to Durkheim’s theory of social integration theory in looking at reasons for suicide as one drops out of integration into society.

The contributions of Durkheim’s work (1952) were stellar as he established a resilient link to the need for individuals to establish a high level of involvement within society as a component of not feeling depression. This psychological-sociological discovery later helped develop an approach for future research on HFGS and their need to feel a sense of belonging and importance to classmates around them. Tinto (1975) advanced the idea that while there were correlations to Durkheim’s findings, we had to consider the importance of student integration.

**Tinto’s Model of Student Departure**

In his original model of departure, as noted in Figure 2. Dropout from Higher Education below, Tinto’s (1975) examined personal characteristics and looked at the influence of family background and the student overall commitment in terms of GPA and grade accumulation in high school. Tinto felt there were specific reasons that a student would depart and this should be measurable. He looked at a longitudinal process that included interactions and what he deemed as commitment to success. Tinto’s integration theory serves as one of the most recognized and used frameworks and is especially popular in illuminating differential between non-traditional student needs and static institutional norms (Nora & Reyes, 2012). While Tinto focused on student integration into post-secondary institutions, other researchers emphasized that the institution also held responsibility to help students feel a sense of belonging and must provide support to students in their educational pursuit (Rendon et al., 2000). The decision of a student to depart from an educational institution must be focused as to the institution’s commitment to the student not transferred to being only in the student’s domain. Tinto’s student model of departure relied on work from Spady (1971), who applied knowledge
from Durkheim’s theory (1952) of suicide to drop-out phenomenon. Spady (1971) denoted that the process of drop-out was a complex social process as academic performance was the main dominant factor in accounting for attrition (p. 38). Tinto (1975), argued that the level of student commitment was a reflection of overall integration degree into their institution of learning. Later Tinto (1997) expanded his work in integration model, as shown below in Figure 2. suggesting academic persistence would occur within the larger social system as a part of the institutional campus commitment (p. 619).

Figure 2. Tinto Model of Departure

While Tinto’s work provided a framework to base theoretical reasoning and mapping of persistence strategies upon it was not without criticism. Kelly (1996) argued that students did not persist because of price based on a cost/benefit analysis but there must be a predictive model that defined attrition and accounted for the unique interactions based on student and institution correlation and level of student engagement. As Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) conducted
studies to validate Tinto’s model they could not find any reliable attrition predictions established based on pre-college traits. However, they were able to discern that pre-college characteristics were certainly a part of the measures of academic and social integration that helped to explain the statistical significance of variance in their study of student persistence (p. 280). A variety of student retention models today are a summation of historical models designed to better integrate and balance institutional landscape and student needs, especially for HFGS participants.

As non-traditional student needs are researched and examined, critics to Tinto’s longitudinal model of institutional departure focused on the student to integrate into the mainstream, when the institutional climate could be representative of traditional student needs. Tierney (1999) argued that to place the primary responsibility on non-traditional students to simply integrate into an existing broken institutional system was a mistake. Instead, it is the institution that needed to change their policies to support needs of non-traditional students as they navigate in college. He suggests that a retention model must include collective cultural and socioeconomic acknowledgment and non-traditional student needs should be integrated into a new institutional outreach by university agents. Tinto (1993) brought to light that there was reliance beyond the academic component of student retention. He made a distinct point challenging any type of student attrition model that saw student departure as reflecting some weakness in the individual.

Tinto (1987) suggested that effective student retention was in the development of effective educational communities that sought to completely and thoroughly involve and nurture students in both their social and intellectual life and that must be committed to the education of these students, not the retention of them. This level of student support and nurturing was even more intensified for HFGS because of the collection of academic and social obstacles to
overcome to persist in school. Retention becomes the result of continuous efforts to engage and mentor students through their educational journey (Hurtado, 1994). The idea focused on the importance of students becoming engaged and integrating into the college setting. The importance of students being part of the campus and establishing relationships that was outside the classroom was fundamentally the foundation for future retention models. As an example, there were cases where the student had been successful and had strong academic performance yet they did not feel part of the college campus and failed to establish vital relationships.

A noted limitation in Tinto’s departure model was the inability to track non-traditional students that may depart the educational path but later returned either to the same institution or another institution to continue their educational pursuit. Specifically, Tinto’s model only accounted for the full-time continuing students that do not have an interruption in their studies. According to Tinto (1987), the answer lies in focused attention in admissions, academic assistance and faculty engagement, and new student support and orientation. For retention to be successful did not require complex modeling and statistical equations of significance, it required that faculty and administrators put the needs of students in front of all other issues. There was a need to center attention on the mission to support and assist students in every way possible and as displayed below in Figure 3. Tinto’s longitudinal model of departure looks at the importance of measuring the pre-entry attributes while recognizing that both the formal and informal performance on entry are in play. This model combined social and academic systems that had impact on students’ social and academic integration and recognized the importance of these systems as they combined goals and commitments to produce a departure decision.
As Tinto developed his theoretical framework for a longitudinal model for departure, he argued that we must examine the barriers of academic weaknesses, student background, and societal exposure as students make decisions to leave college or persist.

Figure 3. Tinto’s longitudinal model of institutional departure

One specific weaknesses of such an examination was it did not formulate a plan for non-traditional student success nor did it follow students that may return to the original institution or another institution to complete their studies. Furthermore, a concern existed that students had responsibility to integrate into the institutional setting, but there were also additional institutional responsibilities as well. In Tinto’s original theory on student departure, he focused only on the students that made a distinct decision to leave school. There was little effort to determine why
they left and find the attributes such as financial hardship, social dis-functionality, or academic low-performance causing academic viability concerns. The next section examined Astin’s I-E-O model for student involvement which was a foundational theoretical model that included the impact of multiple influences on retention evaluated collectively.

**Astin’s I-E-O Student Involvement Model**

In Astin’s (1970) research he detailed a sociological model of college impact with an input-environment-output (I-E-O) model approach that used college based influences (variables) as a collective stream instead of looking at a single variable on student retention. The three core elements of Astin’s student involvement model were inputs as prior educational experiences, the environment students were exposed to, and outcomes that were a summation of lessons learned, attitudes, meanings, and beliefs gathered as students persist through the institutional environment (Astin, 1984). This was a multivariate time dependent approach that reviewed the variables in a collective fashion as opposed to looking at the given variables or constructs in a singular mode that did not identify or evaluate the dependencies or their associations with each other. In analyzing student persistence, Astin (1975) noted that a conditional state comprised of the summation of psychological and physical energy exerted by the student towards the college experience. In a comparative analysis of engineering modeling, similarity existed in that if input variables were evaluated in a singular fashion, you were missing correlations and importantly the interactions between the variables as they were imposed on the model simultaneously.

As an example, by Astin (1984), a motivated student who was highly involved in their studies and learning process would exhibit attributes such as being in campus clubs, honor society, and meet with faculty and support agents (p. 518). Astin (1991) seemed to listen to the need for advancing the ideas around student and environment balance. In addition, he provided a
retention modeling foundation with the I-E-O Model that helped fulfill a gap in which the student and the institutional environment had responsibility to support successful outcomes. Astin (1975) started with a fundamental view on ethnicity, socio-economic status, and even geographical significance of where the student was from which had a bearing on what he referred to as “fit” as a part of persistence equation. In summary, it was clear that individual student attributes and environmental constraints could certainly have an effect on retention modeling outcomes.

**Bean’s Model of Student Attrition**

Bean’s research stated that students tended to leave and check out of college when they had no feeling of belonging to the institution through their commitment (1980). As an example, Tinto’s student integration model (1975) and Bean’s model of student attrition (1980) were combined to form the integration model of student retention which examined why students that had a stronger level of engagement were less likely to leave school (Prospero & Gupta, 2007). As suggested by Cabrera, Nora, and Castaneda (1993), the integration model of student retention (IMSR) combined academic integration and social integration as required components that needed to be addressed to positively impact HFGS persistence (p.123-124). While social integration was derived from the student’s ability to integrate into the social surroundings of the university and find needed connections including close friendships and a feeling of belonging to the university setting and all of its associated participants (Prospero & Gupta, 2007). In summary, the use of academic integration referred to the student’s assimilation into the new academic setting including the academic rigor, classroom engagement, academic support, and access to faculty mentoring.
Bean (1980) extended conceptual modeling from human resource management in the study of employee attrition to the departure of students in college. Bean (1983) suggested that college students examine the linkage between college attendance and future job opportunities and advancement. Bean noted in his research that there were multiple reasons that students leave college and that complexity exists in determining distinct patterns of those decisions. As an example, one important attribute for many students was based on the need to establish a link between college and their occupational career advancement and need to find a social and intellectual connection with others around them (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner (1985) in Figure 4. below a conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition integrated learned lessons from research by Tinto and extended retention efforts to encompass needs of the non-traditional student populations.

Figure 4. Bean, J. P. & Metzner, B. S. (1985). Conceptual model of non-traditional student attrition
Bean (1980) was critical of both work by Spady and Tinto because of the inability of distinguishing between the analytical (academic) variables and the demographic (social) variables which rendered path analysis and modeling unsuitable (p. 156). Bean (1980) pointed out that even though Terenzini and Pascarella (1979) spent considerable time analyzing Tinto’s model, there was a modeling weakness in this research as path analysis to determine causal effects was not employed. Nora (1987) and Nunez (2008), in their examinations of retention issues for HFGS, followed Bean’s model as the lens to evaluation of student attrition problems and the inability to integrate into the new educational environment of college. One important outcome was based on the need to establish a link between college and occupational career advancement and need for students to find social and intellectual connections with others.

Bean (1980) developed a causal model that conceptualized attrition based on causal effects and evaluated institutional commitment as the primary indicator of decisions to drop out of the college environment. Bean’s research gave an important foundation to understand student perception of institutions and their belief this journey would help their career path if completed.

**Student Social Networks**

The need to establish a connection and strengthen social networks as a resource developed within and pertained to the building of relationships that could provide access and privilege to those that possessed it. Social networks were the result of relationships that expounded based on prevalence of norms such as obligations, developed trust, and collective participation (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Hispanics from a viewpoint on ethnicity were noted to possess an identity, and valued interdependence among their own culture, which was key to their need to validate their importance in the educational arena (Noble & LaCasa, 1991).
Putnam (2003) noted that recent evidence showed that a high level of social networking with faculty and student peers strongly correlated with ethnic homogeneity in communities. The formation of self-reliance and establishing of social networks could be a valid alternative for the lack of human or physical attributes in building communities and the revitalization of existing neighborhoods (Cheong, 2006). Coleman (1988) suggested that social capital theory was an excellent lens to examine higher educational institutional climate and assess student engagement levels to build contextual meaning and determine needed adjustments to supporting high-risk students. Coleman (1990) stated that social networks were a characteristic of social structure and included the actions of the participants within that given structure (p. 302).

Coleman and Portes described how the importance of bounded social networks that allowed for student capital and connectedness to be created and maintained within the domain of the group (Lin, 2001). Flap (1991) suggested that there were three key components to social networks as part of the mobility of social resources: (a) the number of active members within one’s social connected network, (b) overall strength of the network members and their desire to help the recipient, and (c) the collective summation of all of these network resources combined.

This foundational idea of social relationships and community are well vested in building of an FYI program that positioned the need for community formation and collectively developed student support tools for the Hispanic student population. The need to establish mentor-based relationships that increased both academic and social engagement were pertinent to retention outcomes. Unfortunately, if the examination of non-traditional student retention was attributed to use a deficit-based model that signified many of these students started out as an underdog and behind other traditional students could negatively influence outcomes. This particular case study
chose not to use such a deficient-based approach and instead illuminated a more asset-based model to support the needed validation of these HFGS non-traditional student experiences.

**A New Approach Instilling Validation Theory for HFGS**

This case study employed the use of student validation theory as the theoretical lens to study an FYI program that acts as an intervention and support system for HFGS as they entered a career university in Texas in their first year in college. Rendon (1994) originally conceived the formulation of validation theory as an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and personal development. HFGS as non-traditional students were required to balance many responsibilities as they experienced challenges from college and family simultaneously that are opposing forces (Riehl, 1994; Orbe, 2004; Nora, Urick, and Quijado-Cerecer, 2011). An example of student validation would be focused on a Hispanic female FGS that was 20 years old and came from a farming community in South Texas and had responsibilities to helped raise siblings and contribute to family by working two part-time jobs. Such demands may not be present for traditional students but are common for non-traditional students as they balance familial and school (Rendon, 1994). Significance of this study for higher education administrators and faculty was to advance the institutional understanding for improving validation through student exposure to an FYI retention program.

**Historical Foundation for Developing Rendon’s Validation Theory**

In establishing the foundation for validation theory and assessing the seminal literature at that time, one area for non-traditional students of importance was cultural integrity in contrast to assimilation into traditional college settings. Tierney (1999) argued against the stance of Tinto’s framework noting student assimilation, without addressing the institutions’ responsibilities to non-traditional students is cultural suicide. Tinto’s view of assimilation requiring disassociation
with the prior home culture to be successful at integration, this was not well received. In conjunction with Tierney’s work, Tanaka (2000) stressed the need for interculturalism to be recognized and acknowledged by educational entities. Interculturalism is a process of learning and sharing across difference where no one culture dominates. This places all cultures and social positions under the same scrutiny and cultivates the ability of each student to have a voice and a forum to tell his or her story (Falcone, 2011, doctoral dissertation). The work of Tierney and Tanaka gave another cultural addition to Rendon’s expansion of validation theory.

Students need to have the feeling of a supportive educational environment that helps them integrate and be part of the campus community. The aligning of work by Tierney and Tanaka, supported the notion that higher educational agents had a responsibility to acknowledge and support non-traditional students and their cultural backgrounds as welcomed. Rendon’s developing of validation theory as an enabling intervention for these non-traditional students had roots in the work by Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule’s (1986) on women as learners in Women’s Ways of Knowing, as a foundational lens. In this research, Belenkey et al. found that women who were treated as incompetent, needed acceptance and validation that they were capable and needed members. Rendon (1994) brought this collective work into the lens of validation theory of minority non-traditional students in college.

**Reasons for Employing Validation Theory**

Starting in the early 1990’s, validation theory was the creation of a theory by Rendon Linares that supported scholar-practitioners in their study of low-income first-generation students as they entered the unknown setting of college. As postulated by Rendon Linares (2011), validation theory noted an intentional intervention initiative to affirm students as valued members of the institution and participants in the learning process and communities. The
necessity to establish a positive reinforcement of student abilities and successes was paramount to foster student personal development and ultimately persistence. Several HFGS had family and work obligations that competed with their planned educational goals. In validation theory, the need to reflect on student experiences and what was meaningful to them was a critical component as students communicated doubt in their ability to be successful in college was evident. Table 1. notes six elements present in validation theory by Rendon (2011).

Table 1. Six Elements of Validation Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Validation Theory by Rendon</th>
<th>Six Elements of Validation Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in and out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development (Rendon, 1994).</td>
<td>This first element places responsibility of reaching out to students on the faculty agents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-income and FGS can be scared to ask questions in their class, especially if they have prior bad experiences in school.</td>
<td>The second element is to instill validation of students and make them feel capable and strengthen their feeling of self-worth and self-confidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation is a prerequisite to starting student development in school.</td>
<td>The third element notes as students begin to experience validation from faculty agents consistently, they feel more confident with engagement and involvement in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation occurs in multiple areas with multiple agents including classroom and other campus locations such as the library, student center, labs.</td>
<td>The fourth element acknowledges the importance that students meet and work with multiple agents including the faculty, ambassador, student support team, and campus agents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation is a continuous dynamic process not static.</td>
<td>The fifth element notes that validation is a developmental process and not an end process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting students with validation early in the process is crucial to improvement.</td>
<td>The sixth element focuses on the importance of starting validation of new nontraditional students as soon as they arrive and start college.</td>
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Table 1. highlighted the elements present in validation theory and gave a basis for existence in this particular case study with faculty ambassador-student mentoring relationships.
Validation theory provided a platform for the celebration of enhanced student self-motivation and built on increasing self-worth and a feeling that non-traditional students could be successful with the assistance and mentoring of institutional agents to include faculty and staff around them (Rendon, 2011). This case study examined student interview questions such as the following list:

1. Can you describe your first mentoring conversation with your ambassador and how that conversation went?
2. What have been the most important characteristics from your background that have helped you in relating to your faculty ambassador?
3. As you think about the mentoring relationship with your ambassador, how has this relationship changed over time?

The prominence of validating the academic dreams and educational goals of HFGS as they entered and progressed through the unknown setting of the university was paramount to their decision to persist. The two major areas for validation theory for underrepresented students were academic and interpersonal as follows.

1. **Academic validation** required in-class and out-of-class mentors to help non-traditional students build trust and learn how to increase their self-confidence.
2. **Interpersonal validation** relied on in-class and out-of-class agents to help support and guide the building of student relationships and addressed their needs as they managed and socially adjusted to this new life in college (Rendon, 1994).

**Research Examples Employing Validation Theory**

As an example, Barnett (2011) arranged a study on academic integration and a challenge to students to focus on improved persistence. While the investigation relied partially on seminal
work of Tinto’s longitudinal model of departure, there was an incorporation of validation theory by Rendon (1994) to explain the importance of faculty-student mentoring relationships. Barnett devised a research instrument to gather understanding of a student’s sense of belonging and integration with four noted constructs: 1) valuing students, 2) caring delivery of knowledge, 3) overarching acceptance and celebration of student diversity both in terms ethnicity and student life experiences, and 4) faculty mentoring their students. All four constructs showed positive levels as components of validating predictors of integration and student’s desire to persist in college. In the findings, there were strong correlations to increasing faculty mentoring with improving student skills and student affirmation that students felt they could become academically successful (Barnett, 2011).

In the area on student belonging efforts, Zhao and Kuh (2004) studied the relationship between learning communities and enhanced student belonging by looking at 365 four-year universities’ populations. The implementation of learning communities showed positive results in terms of prolonged engagement and student social and academic improvement. Zhao and Kuh (2004) stated that learning communities and the operationalizing of Rendon’s validation theory were important components of allowing students to share their life experiences and build mentoring relationships of trust with their faculty mentors. Students that participated in active learning communities established important bonds with others this increased their feeling of belonging as legitimate college students who could succeed. Collaborative learning as a part of these communities gave non-traditional students a needed voice and allowed them to share their experiences and validate their educational pursuit.

**A sense of belonging.** A sense of belonging was a significant part of students’ decisions to stay in or exit college. Seminal research by Strayhorn (2012) stated that the importance of
positive student sense of belonging was a crucial element for all non-traditional student persistence efforts. Both Rendon Linares (2011) and Hurtado (2013) noted the prominence of students’ feelings that they belonged and received validation of their existence in school. Faculty had an essential responsibility to help students with building their sense of belonging and feeling confident in their decision to be present (Stebleton, Soria, Marina, & Huesman, 2012). Validating students and acknowledging their voices both in and out of the classroom was a crucial component of faculty-student interactions.

A paramount study performed by Tinto (1997) examined a multitude of aspects which are thought to influence decisions to remain in college: involvement level, institutional setting, level of social and academic integration, and the significance of outside agent’s impact on college students. In Tinto’s research on integration, he made distinct emphasis on the importance that it played in persistence. Tinto (1993) displayed a reliance on Rendon’s work in validation theory to describe how important a student’s integration inside and outside of the classroom are. Tinto argued that the need for organizational change in educational institutions to improve student retention and build relationships between faculty and students was needed for overall retention gains. According to Tinto, institutional reform was needed to help students feel validated as active college members, individuals, and contributors in their pursuit of belonging.

**Student Voices in Validation Theory**

Rendon Linares & Munoz (2011) argued that the experiences between the world of the student and the world of the university are incongruent. As a teacher and mentor, we must focus on giving non-traditional students a feeling they belong and that they matter. Furthermore, the adding of non-traditional student voices aided in sharing of all participant experiences, which might not be part of traditional student’s lives. In examining validation theory for approximately
the last twenty years in educational research there were numerous quantitative and qualitative studies that had employed this perspective as their theoretical lens of investigation. Validation theory had been operationalized frequently in studies that illuminated the needs of HFGS (Bustos-Flores, Riojas-Clark, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009; Laskey, 2011; Jamelske, 2008; Perez & Ceja, 2010; Vasquez, 2007). Supporting non-traditional students as valuable participants and showing their opinions mattered helped enhanced the classroom and campus experience.

**Student Mentoring**

The number of universities and colleges that have designed and implemented some type of structured mentoring for students is increasingly the norm in today’s educational landscape, and ever increasing for new students as a persistence and retention effort (Walker & Taub, 2001; Cuseo, 2009). Gardner (1981) argued that students needed a mentor as someone to trust and communicate with as they navigated through school. Students long for human connections to mentors that can believe in them and help them to find their way and be successful, especially in this unknown environment of college (p. 70). The need for caring and understanding from mentors is great for all students, but it is exponentially of importance for underrepresented first-generation students who do not have college role models at home or in their local community (Cuseo, 2009). In looking at the perception of new college students in terms of mentoring, research suggests that students value mentors that are accessible, nurturing, and for the student’s academic success and overall educational achievement (Frost, 1991; Kezar, 2010). Student mentoring was major component of the FYI program initiative at this campus.

Viewing mentoring from a social strata lens reveals the linkage by example of an adult guide to the child in development (Bandura, 1977). Also, he asserts that the connectedness of
the mentor role model is key to a students’ decisions in pursuing higher education. Tinto (1987) suggested that while student’s academic and socio-emotional predisposition had influence on student adjustment, interactions with faculty had an impact on levels of satisfaction in college. Academic focused mentoring programs typically matched freshmen students with selected faculty mentors to improve study skills, academic deficiencies, and personal adjustment to college (Jacobi, 1991; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Likewise, the effectiveness of mentoring for new college students contained a correlation between the personal characteristics of the mentor and mentee. The ability to build a trusting relationship as opposed to being based solely on academic knowledge or educational expertise of the mentor, was important to mentoring success (Knox & McGovern, 1988; Redmond, 1990). Mentoring established a communication bridge that many freshmen students, and especially non-traditional HFGS, may have not had in prior educational settings.

The focus of student mentoring is to build and validate a visual and foundational bridge to help students in their pursuit of educational attainment in college. This need becomes exponentially extended when the college population includes non-traditional students and specifically HFGS as they look for guidance and models in their educational journey into the unknown world of higher education (D’Abate, 2009; Luna & Prieto, 2009). This literature review examined what had been learned and debated from researchers and practitioners in student mentoring and highlighted experiences that surrounded student needs. Mertz (2004) stresses a model of differentiation between what is mentoring verses other support relationships with students. In conclusion, there was a strong commonality for the need to provide and foster a relationship between the student and faculty ambassador and support agents.
With a focused effort on helping non-traditional students to be successful in college the need for a resilient mentoring stance was a valued component of this FYI support retention program. While mentoring had many definitions across different research studies, common themes were aimed at a support and learning partnership that included student guidance, acceptance, and advocacy (Kram, 1985; Jacobi, 1991). Levine and Nidiffer (1996) noted that mentoring design contained both emotional and academic parameters and provided needed information and encouraged guidance to help non-traditional students learn to navigate. The central goal of mentoring was to strengthen the bond of student engagement and connectedness to the campus and faculty partners leading to successful degree conferral (Pascarella, 1980; Research to Practice Brief, 2011). Mentoring based retention programs tended to align one on one relationships that helped build confidence and a feeling of connectedness that illuminated the students’ belief that they could be successful (Johnson, 2006; Pascarella, 1980). Mentoring for participants in this study was a strong intervention to help support student integration.

As the cultural component of student mentoring was examined there was reason to establish that both the cultural background and learning environment be assessed as important attributes to the mentoring experiences. In looking at student development and need for a strong mentoring initiative, Chickering and Reisser (1993) noted that environmental factors such as institutional structure and size must be acknowledged as intricate parts of the overall mentoring process. According to Kram (1985), in establishing the mentor-student relationship it was important to illuminate the mentor’s desire to help students along with their self-concept as a provider of advice to the student. Cabrera et al. (1993) stated that HFGS are more inclined to drop out of school than non-Hispanic students and may lack self-reliant tools to persist.
Padilla (2001) argued that there were four consistent barriers for non-traditional Hispanic students to be addressed as stated below: 1) discontinuity, 2) lack of support/nurturing, 3) student integration, and 4) barriers to needed resources. Discontinuity was the contradiction between the students that came from a small-town community into a large metropolitan school setting.

Figure 5. Conceptualization of expertise of student’s ability to overcome college barriers (Padilla, R. V. 1991).

Nurturing needs was a major focus of attrition as they influenced student decisions to stay. The ability to help students integrate to a new campus environment was imperative to persistence. Financial aid and support center advisors were important to helping these non-traditional students understand needed information about going to college, and funding their education.

In this study, all of these pieces were needed as faculty ambassadors worked to help HFGS be successful in their college experience. Padilla (2001) noted in Figure 5. above conceptualized a student’s ability to reach beyond barriers that could negatively impact their educational pursuit in college. It was the detailed combination of theoretical and heuristic knowledge that allowed the students to build confidence and self-efficacy as they learned to
navigate through new experiences (Padilla, 1991). But if the given student’s level of theoretical and heuristic knowledge was insufficient, there was a strong probability of negative outcomes including possible poor academic performance or worse attrition. The prerequisite for strong persistence outcomes was to establish a FYI program that addressed the needs of HFGS and validated their feelings of belonging (Padilla et al, 1997; Rendon, 1994; Crisp & Cruz, 2010). In summary, the need to build initiatives that encompassed mentoring and support were prime to improve student success and student engagement levels.

**Building Trust between Ambassadors and Student Mentees**

Building trust was a momentous part of student mentoring and relied on building a personal connection between the faculty and student mentee. As signified in this study’s FYI program, building trust should start early, before first-year experiences begin. As well, first-year adjustment is a crucial part of integration for all students entering college (Mouraz & Sousa, 2016). Early trust building should start with faculty-student interactions that promote confidence and engagement as students learn about the new landscape of college (Fuentes, Alvarado, Berdan, & DeAngelo, 2014, p.302). In summary, recent research advances the need for engaging faculty outreach to new students frequently and timely, with care.

While building trust has distinct phases in terms of level of involvement, for new HFGS, they seek someone that can show them what is needed to be successful in college. It is important to acknowledge that poor experiences and low expectations from prior teachers dissuade these students from pursuing college or trusting college agents (Vela, Zamarripa, Balkin, Johnson, & Smith, 2013; Becerra, 2010). The need to provide an educational setting that allows for positive communication with listening and acknowledging these students, is significant to creating a trusting relationship. Initially, HFGS freshman can be reluctant to share their past experiences
and discuss what their needs are, others are not even certain why they are here in school (Nunez & Kim, 2012; Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). Hence, building trust can be slow, but with encouragement and making certain that students are recognized as important contributors to the campus is a significant first step. Building trust relationships requires patience and insight to understanding and pro-actively planning for student success.

Summary

This literature review explored the needs for HFGS coming into a new world of college. It examined a significant volume of literature that focused on student deficiencies and past concerns as well as more contemporary research views on student support. It was highlighted that much of the literature pertained to a different student-based population that was traditional full-time students not non-traditional students. The position of enabling validation of theses non-traditional students gave light to the importance of mentoring and providing support. The HGFS in this study needed someone who believed they could do this and be successful in college. The adding of faculty ambassadors who worked with the new students began a process of building trust relationship to help students successfully integrate into the new campus setting.

This literary review focused on student validation and the need for celebrating non-traditional student successes as students navigated through college. The need to provide care and compassion for HFGS to help build their self-confidence was evident as students explained their prior post-secondary educational attempts. As prior retention models were examined it was important to realize they were not designed for non-traditional students, and many current and past policies are at odds with non-traditional students. The need to design a FYI program that aligned student mentoring was crucial to help HFGS in validating their abilities and improve their emotional engagement levels.
Limitations and Conclusions

As this literary review, focused attention on the knowledge base of retention theories and examined how these theories could inform researchers of probable components needed in any retention implementation, there were distinct limiting factors which simply did not address non-traditional HFGS. First, it was evident that many prior studies both quantitative and qualitative in nature had a structural foundation around traditional full-time student populations and did not focus on the needs of non-traditional and low-income students. Second, there was an emphasis on advancing the need for change onto the student as deficiencies were highlighted as reasoning for attrition, as opposed to distributing equal need for change to the institutional level with administrators and teachers. Third, as argued by Rendon Linares & Munoz (2011), re-examining what was needed to influence non-traditional students in positive ways was advocated. Finally, the research revealed a noted gap in prior retention theories, which needed to be evaluated.

In conclusion, lessons learned propagated around the underlined need to establish frequent and lasting relationships between students and their faculty mentors. Out of all support initiatives, focusing attention on the need to have students build self-reliance and strong bonds with faculty mentors was paramount to student success. In an array of prior research literature, non-traditional students tended to have a deficient existence as opposed to determining how educational agents could build connectedness and support systems for that vital group. Instilling, a new approach of asset-based validation and giving all students a voice and making sure they know faculty agents are in their corner to help them was crucial to improved student outcomes.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their HFGS in a first-year initiative retention program at a technical college in Texas. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program?
2. How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions?
3. How has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus?

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm for this study was Constructivism-Interpretivism, which advanced that people are active interpreters who construct their own reality and knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005). The term paradigm came from seminal work by Kuhn (1962) in “The Structure of Scientific Revolution” which emphasized the idea of exponential explosion in knowledge causing a major paradigm shift which was in opposition to a worldview of accumulation of knowledge over time. Although both paradigms had similarities, constructivists claim that individuals create their own realities through lived experiences (Guba, 1990; Williamson, 2006). An interpretive paradigm focuses on understanding the environment through people living in it and searching for meaning in people’s behavior (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). As researcher, I was also constructing internal meaning through my interpretations of all data gathered on each of these specific mentoring relationships.

Constructivists suggest that student learning is based on continuous interaction and accommodation as students develop and interpret knowledge as central to the learning process (Piaget, 1985). Ponterotto (2005) used both Constructivism and Interpretivism together when
describing an alternative paradigm to positivist. A characteristic of Constructivism is focused on the interaction between researcher and participants as the researcher seeks to understand the complexity of the participants lived experiences (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014; Schwandt, 2000). Constructivist argued that reality is constructed by the individual, as opposed to being an external entity (Hansen, 2004; Williamson, 2006). The faculty and student participants in this study constructed knowledge through multiple perspectives where faculty and students were co-constructivist in the mentoring process.

Interpretivists propose that people observe and interpret their environment and themselves in a dynamic process as people seek to understand their world (Schwandt, 2015). An interpretive stance assumed individuals created and associated their own subjective and intersubjective meaning as they interacted with the world around them (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Crotty, 1998). Weber (1947) argued that all people have shared experiences and they attach meaning to those experiences to establish their own perspective. Dilthey (1976) defined introspection, as self-observation of an individual’s world by better understanding the world of others. As an example, for educators to better understand HFGS, it was vital to acknowledge student’s prior experiences, individual perspectives, and each student’s worldview.

There were three distinct perspectives in Constructivism-Interpretivism: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Ontology, is the nature of reality and what is known, constructivist-interpretivist argue there are multiple realities that are constructed by individuals (Willis, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Epistemology addressed how people acquired knowledge and interpretivists believe knowledge was socially constructed as opposed to being objectively determined (Carson et al., 2001; Feldman, 2002). Axiology referred to values of the researcher which could influence interpretation of data, hence it was important to communicate the
researcher’s values and recognize possible bias (Ponterotto, 2005; Noddings, 1984). In this particular case study on faculty-student mentoring relationships, reality was subjective and impacted by participants’ perceptions, experiences, and worldviews.

A qualitative methodology was the best choice for this particular case study inquiry because it allowed the student researcher to get into the natural environment of participants and their experiences first-hand. This allowed the phenomenon of these unique ambassador-student relationships and their meaning to surface and become clearly identified. As noted in the literature review for this study, HFGS needed a strong advocate to guide them and teach them how to be successful in college. Furthermore, Merriam (2009) noted that a central tenet of qualitative research is that the all study participants individually construct their own reality, this became significant as participants communicated their experiences and feelings about college and their place in this environment. The meaning within these relationships was constructed by the individuals as they engaged in the world they were interpreting (Crotty, 1998). This case study approach amplified the meaning and depth of the dynamic faculty-student connections as students relied on their ambassador for guidance and advocacy.

**Strategy of Inquiry**

Qualitative inquiry supported the importance of participant’s everyday experiences. The student researcher wanted to hear the student’s voices as they described their world from their individual perspective. The faculty ambassadors provided another voice on this relationship with their students and the experiences that occurred. Participants attached distinct meanings to their experiences which leads to inquire about their meaning and complexity (Creswell, 2007). Also, the student researcher sought to capture and interpret voices and everyday experiences of each participant which gave an ample collection of understanding from this study.
Merriam (2009) stated that qualitative research increased understanding of the human experiences and studying a phenomenon of interest at an in-depth level. Likewise, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argued that qualitative research allowed the study to be done in the natural setting and gave the ability to study the phenomena in terms of meaning that people gave to them. A common thread that is present in all qualitative research is an inductive approach and flexible design (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012). As well, qualitative research situates the researcher into natural world of the participants and their activity and gives visibility to their world (Patton, 2002). This qualitative study evolved around a qualitative approach of inquiry with interviews of participants to search for developing patterns to explain possible theory and discover meaning.

In this particular study, I was interested in the meaning and understanding of how mentoring between an ambassador and student mentee could be helpful to integration. It was recognized that all student participants would not have the same needs, enter with the same prior experiences, or desire the same level of connectedness to their ambassador. However, I wanted to get close to each participant and hear how their mentoring relationship started and matured. It was not assumed that all mentoring relationships would be without issues or necessarily helpful. In addition, I wanted to be transparent to the study design, and allow the participants to be at ease when honestly describing the mentoring relationships and how they changed.

**Research Design**

Given the purpose of this study was to understand a phenomenon of the mentoring relationships that was not well known, it was appropriate to use a qualitative research approach. In addition, a qualitative approach best supported the research design because this study sought understanding of the mentoring relationship and how it might help integration, which may foster future retention of HFGS. Although mentoring was largely believed to benefit HFGS, it was
important to seek evidence that helped understand the mentoring relationships as experienced by those involved. It was important to recognize there may be times when the relationship was not beneficial. Furthermore, it’s also important to understand why HFGS needed support from their ambassadors and how that relationship might positively influence student success. However, this was a unique investigation as there was little known about faculty mentor- mentee relationships currently and if those relationships could improve student integration.

While this qualitative study was focused on the phenomenon of mentoring relationships meant to help retain HFGS, it was expected that different people would have diverse ways of constructing meaning about those relationships. For example, one research question required student reflection on prior experiences and how those experiences may impact the current mentoring discussions. This study included variations of reality based on each participant’s experience and role on campus which helped in understanding the phenomenon. This group of HFGS and their faculty ambassador may have had a different interpretation of their environment, but they would construct meaning as they engaged in this unique mentoring relationship. This study gathered diverse student and faculty mentor perspectives to determine emerging themes within the case to support clarity and understanding of student needs.

**Qualitative Case Study**

A qualitative case study is an approach that explores a phenomenon through various lenses and relies on both collecting and analyzing multiple data sources for understanding (Yin, 2009). A case is defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as a specific phenomenon that is occurring within a bounded context. While case study as a methodology can be placed in different research traditions, there are distinct philosophical differences between the two leading case study researchers Yin and Stake (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013).
Although Yin (2009) informed my understanding of case research, his methods are more consistent with a post-positivist stance, including greater emphasis on logic models, hypotheses and probabilistic reasoning. Stake (2005) and Merriam (2009) were alternatively situated within a constructivist paradigm, which was consistent with this particular qualitative case study.

In qualitative case study research, the researcher examines real life in a bounded system through interviews, observations, focus group, and select documents (Merriam, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As stated by Yin (2009), case study involved the real-life settings, emerging experiences, and ability to uncover meaning. Also, the unit of analysis is defined as a major entity to be studied such as a person, program, or group (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2009). This case study was focused on one portion of the FYI program; the unit of analysis was unique mentoring relationships with pairing of a faculty ambassador and their HFGS. Validation theory by Rendon (1994) highlighted the need to acknowledge non-traditional students as welcomed and important; but there was an additional component of mentoring by faculty to help HFGS integrate into campus and strive to be successful in college.

Case study research was an appropriate approach for this study because the FYI program was bounded and contained a unique student mentoring component. Yin and Stake use different terms to describe case types: illustrative, exploratory, critical instance, cumulative exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive foundation are listed by (Merriam, 2009). The three most common types of intent for case studies according to (Stake, 1995) were instrumental, collective, and intrinsic. This study best aligned as an intrinsic case study type, as noted in Figure 6. because the FYI program was unique to a specific location and participants. This unique study examined the mentoring relationships between faculty ambassadors and their paired HFGS over the first year of college at this site.
Stake (1995) noted case study design should remain flexible and allow for adjustment so it could provide guidance to the study at hand. In this particular study, it was important to have flexibility and not constrain or force data to fit an existing platform. The student experience and exposure to his/her faculty mentor guided this study as thoughts and perceptions were captured and analyzed. Stake (1995) argued that in case study, the need for the researcher to get close to the phenomenon was a critical component. This case study showed consistency with Stake’s (1995) philosophical stance of being close to the phenomenon and recognized that the focus was on the case itself as the emergent nature of collection and findings were explored. This also helped the student researcher as data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted for meaning and developed rich-thick descriptions as participants described their experiences and needs. The faculty and student participants in this study gave specific and in-depth examples of how they felt and what they needed from the mentoring relationships and school environment.

**Research Site**

The research site for this investigation was at one campus location in Texas, Taylor College, which had a growing HFGS population of entering freshmen into undergraduate studies.
One area of investigation was to look at the study site through the eyes of this new Hispanic student population. The researcher wanted to determine if the campus climate at this site was impersonal or did it offer an inviting presence for student integration. This study site had major demographic changes over the last two years as more HFGS entered. It was important to hear the voices of these Hispanic students and their ambassadors as they described their world views.

The Hispanic student population has had substantial growth in terms of new student percentages at this study site. This study was conducted at one location, Taylor College, yet the study site is part of one of the largest career universities in the U.S. The campus president gave permission to conduct this study since he recognized the importance of providing exceptional support and care for these new HFGS. Taylor College colleagues continued to assess the mentoring needs of this important HFGS group in their first year at this campus. In the next section, the researcher will discuss the participants and details of selection for this case study.

**Participants**

The participants for the current research study at Taylor College were all first-year undergraduate HFGS and their paired faculty ambassador who worked with them in a mentoring capacity to support student integration. There is a stance among retention theorists that faculty mentors are a vital link to establishing a support system where mentoring new students may help with integration into college (Tinto, 1993; Reason, 2003). However, the focus of this case study was on the unique mentoring relationships and meaning of those relationships, the participants included the HFGS mentee/s and pairing of their faculty ambassador. There was a total of 15 study participants within this unique case study at Taylor College. There were 6 ambassadors (mentors to students in FYI program) selected for interviews only, and 9 total HFGS mentees in
which 6 of those students participated in individual interviews only and 3 other HFGS were selected to participate in one small focus group conducted toward the end of the study.

In November 2013, a new FYI program was implemented at Taylor College with nine faculty and three staff agents serving as ambassadors to 71 incoming freshman students. By January 2014, it was determined by administration that faculty members alone were best suited to align with new incoming students, because of their unique mentoring relationship skillset. Students met formally with their faculty mentor each week but also were encouraged to build an informal relationship with their ambassador that allowed for casual meetings frequently to strengthen overall student integration. Table 2. below shows the session, number of faculty ambassadors, and number of new students that were in each session for the new FYI program.

Table 2. Faculty Ambassadors and All New Student Counts (some of these are HFGS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Faculty Ambassadors</th>
<th>New Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan 2014</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 2014</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2014</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 2014</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2014</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 2015</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 2015</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2015</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the researcher sought to build a varied and broad population sample for this study inquiry, it was noted that many students were in the same technology programs and a predominant male gender population was present. Taylor College was a small campus location that had a significant percentage of their students in technology based degree programs, hence there were not as many females at this location which had an influence on the makeup of the selected student population for this particular study. Although, there were 2 out of 6 HFGS selected that were female; they both brought broadness and unique experiences to this study.
The context of those female student experiences gave light to another facet of this study, as the different responsibilities of those female students were explored including being a mother and student to male gender-bias concerns that needed to be uncovered. Overall, these female students helped to enrich the understanding, and depth of meaning of mentoring relationships as participant experiences were communicated and validated.

**Case Sampling Strategy**

A purposive (Chein, 1981) or purposeful (Patton, 1990) sampling strategy was employed to insure selected students fit the definition of first-year status, HFGS, and had been assigned a faculty ambassador and attended mentoring meetings. According to Maxwell (2005) purposeful sampling also referred to as non-probabilistic or subjective sampling in qualitative research allowed for direct attention to in-depth small samples, a single case, to be selected on purpose. In purposeful sampling, one essential point is on the participants and their experiences, so knowledge and understanding can be obtained about phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). In this study, the researcher wanted to capture lived experiences of participants and what was needed to improve both student integration and possible retention outcomes.

Purposeful sampling is synonymous with qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007) and serves as an umbrella for many sampling strategies that are all part of a purposive sampling plan. Some examples of purposeful sampling are criterion sampling, maximum variation sampling, and snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009). Initially for purposeful sampling to begin, the criteria for participant selection was to be established. LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch (1993) suggest that a criterion-based list of attributes be developed for your participant search. For this particular study, there was a combination of purposeful sampling types that included maximum variation sampling for faculty ambassadors and criterion-based sampling for selection of HFGS mentees.
In selection criteria of faculty ambassadors, a maximum variation sampling (Glaser & Strass, 1967) strategy was enacted to seek a wide distribution of faculty ambassadors based on gender, faculty department, teaching experience, and ethnic/cultural makeup. Maximum variation was defined as a heterogeneous sample of the participants with diverse characteristics including gender, ethnic diversity, and experiences (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). By following this purposeful strategy of variation there was a diversity in ideas and emerging perspectives from a small sample size that could possibly be extracted to represent a larger population. In this study, the researcher heard broad perspectives from a diverse faculty group on their experiences with mentoring HFGS. In summary, maximum variation was an appropriate sampling strategy for faculty ambassadors and helped guarantee a more diverse population in this unique study.

As noted, faculty ambassadors were not the first part of the selection criteria for this study. The HFGS participants were communicated with about the study goals and a student was selected first, and then their associated ambassador was contacted for the next segment of study. It is important to note, that the ambassadors selected had no knowledge of any of their mentees being also selected for this study. By keeping a confidential status about all participants this helped to guarantee security of their sensitive information. In addition, it was noted that 4 of the 6 faculty ambassadors for this study, were prior ambassadors and had additional students to mentor from previous sessions. Also, confidentiality of study members helped participants be unbiased about their views and opinions as the interviews and other data gathering was fulfilled.

The decision to select HFGS student participants first in the pairings turned out to be the best decision. Because as students originally inquired about study, they seemed to have a calling to participate, and felt committed to helping. Several of the student participants mentioned wanting to tell their story of prior attempts in college. Also, hoping this study could help in
understanding some of the issues and possibly helping future students in going to college. Next, as a student was selected and interviewed, confidentially their ambassador was then contacted next to get the other participant views of this unique mentoring relationship. Below were the inclusion criteria for student participants for either interviews or a focus group which was near the end of this study.

**Inclusion Criteria for HFGS Selected for Interviews or Focus Group**

1. Currently in or have just completed first year undergraduate studies at this college.
2. Must be a “Hispanic first-generation student”, which meant parents (mother and/or father) did not hold a baccalaureate degree.
3. Must be currently enrolled in a baccalaureate program at Taylor College determined by researcher before or in one or more of the following three sessions Jan 2015, March 2015, and May 2015, and attended one of three new student orientations.
4. Must have met with their faculty ambassador a minimum of three times determined by student researcher to discuss mentoring needs and support.
5. Student was willing to participate in interviews or a focus group scheduled to last one hour to one and a half hours with student researcher to discuss the faculty ambassador-student mentoring program.

**Exclusion Criteria for HFGS Selected for Interviews or Focus Group**

1. Student not in their first year of undergraduate studies at Taylor College.
2. Student that communicated to the student researcher they did not wish to be part of study.
3. Student that did not have a faculty ambassador determined by the student researcher during any of the following three sessions Jan 2015, March 2015, and May 2015.
4. HFGS that had NOT met a minimum of 3 times with their faculty ambassador determined by the student researcher as a requirement for inclusion in this study.

5. Students who had not been continuously enrolled and had stopped out for more than one 8-week session.

6. HFGS participants that had previously had courses with the student researcher as their professor of record.

The student researcher started by interviewing new HFGS mentees from the Jan 2015, Mar 2015, and May 2015 sessions then their paired faculty ambassador. There was strength in acknowledging multiple realities and that should be a part of all of the participant selections for any study (Flick, 2002; Stake 2010). Patton (2002) suggested that the researcher specify a minimum sample size in terms of projected coverage of the phenomenon within the study investigation. There was a total of 15 study participants, 12 for interviews and 3 students for focus group discussion in this study to capture overall experiences with mentoring. The exact number of study participants was driven by listening for repetition in the data of interviews and focus group to know when to conclude data collection and analysis. As the student focus group concluded, repletion of student experiences with mentoring and school became evident.

In this research study, current students were selected purposively from different sessions in the first year of studies to give a broad distribution of student exposure time to the faculty ambassador initiative. Students selected came from different degree programs such as business or engineering technology to provide a wide array of academic disciplines. Students were told about the study and the case study’s overarching goal to improve student integration. Once students had shown an interest by written communication they were contacted by the student researcher to discuss details of the study inquiry. HFGS participants were selected based on
criterion-based sampling as shown in Table 3. Next page for interviews or the focus group, but they were not allowed to be members of both events.

**Possible Student Mentee Limitations**

1. It is noted that HFGS participant selection included more students in Computer Information Systems, Computer Engineering Technology, and Electronic Engineering Technology programs; but this was representative of the Taylor College campus student population characteristics.

2. It is noted as a limitation that all students selected for the focus group were male and in Computer Information Systems program. A female student that showed interest for the focus group was an accounting student that did not participate as she was sick that day. Notification was not received from student until almost time for the focus group event.

3. A possible bias and limitation was also present in terms of gender, where only 2 of the 9 total student participants were female. Again, this was a realistic student sample of the actual population within engineering related degree programs at this campus.

4. It is noted that 3 of the 9 students selected for this study were military veterans. This could tend to sway the distribution and possible bias since these students had more experience than some students in this study.

5. It is noted that there are a significant percentage of HFGS selected that are classified as non-traditional students versus traditional. There were 3 traditional students and 6 non-traditional students within this study. As noted, this was a solid representation of the larger student body at Taylor College, and the percentage of non-traditional is approximately 70% for undergraduates.
As participant showed an interest in the study, there was communication by the student researcher to explain the foundation of this case study and why it would be beneficial to participate in the study. The student researcher hoped to learn more about this HFGS group and how mentoring might help student integration at this campus. It was important to assess what was known and not known about this Hispanic student group. Remembering, this was a unique student population at an individual study site; the hope was to help these HFGS participants with integration in their first-year studies. The additional limitations denoted next were not expected or planned for, but became apparent as this study investigation was being conducted and that required acknowledgement and attention.

Table 3. Paired HFGS Selection Criteria (criterion-sampling strategy)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>1st year college at this study site</th>
<th>Classified as HFGS</th>
<th>Currently attended one NSO</th>
<th>Met with ambassador a min. of three times</th>
<th>Transfer Student</th>
<th>Interview or in Focus Group</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
<th>Prior Military</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>BUSN</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>CET</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>EET</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>NET</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>ACCT</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Degree Program Legend: ACCT-Accounting, BUSN-Business, CET-Computer Engineering Technology, CIS-Computer Information Systems, NET-Networking Engineering Technology
Additional Limitations in this Study

1. As the student researcher, but also academic dean, required a constant self-check that I removed any bias or assumptions of an academician. At times, that seemed difficult but provisions of not selecting students that I had prior as students in my courses helped.

2. An additional discovery for this study, was that all students selected were in-stream continuing status; there was not a selection of students that had attrition from this location or had completely stopped out in their education currently. This limitation notes that the ability to conclude on retention or persistence is limited without this information.

Inclusion Criteria for Faculty Ambassadors Selected for Interviews

1. Faculty member that had a “Hispanic first-generation student” as one of their student mentees. (HFGS): Hispanic college student whose parents (mother and/or father) did not hold a baccalaureate degree.

2. At Taylor College before or in one or more of the following three sessions, Jan 2015, March 2015, and May 2015 served as mentor to HFGS in the FYI program.

3. Willing to participate in interviews to last one hour to one and a half hours with researcher to discuss faculty ambassador-student mentoring relationships and program.

Exclusion Criteria for Faculty Ambassadors Selected for Interviews

1. A faculty member that had not served as a faculty ambassador to HFGS in any of the following three sessions, Jan 2015, March 2015, and May 2015 determined by the student researcher for this study.

2. Faculty member that had communicated to the student researcher they were not interested in being a participant in this study.
3. A new faculty member in their first year of teaching at Taylor College determined by the student researcher.

4. A faculty member that had selected to be in working with new faculty as a faculty mentor instead of working in the FYI program initiative.

Possible Faculty Ambassador Limitations

1. Faculty ambassadors had no knowledge of the students selected within this study to protect all participants’ confidentiality.

2. Faculty that had served as prior ambassadors before had a heavier student mentee load as the aggregate number of students continued to increase over multiple sessions of new mentees added for mentoring which could impact availability and desire to participate.

3. There was a limitation in terms of broadness as only 2 ambassadors selected were female.

4. There was a strong percentage of ambassadors from engineering and math; but this was a true representation of the current student population.

A criterion-based sampling strategy was implemented for selecting HFGS that supported common elements shared such as HFGS status, first-year student status, and assigned a faculty mentor, attending faculty-student mentoring sessions. Criterion sampling has predetermined common attributes required in selection of participants for cases that are information rich (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). While all HFGS had common attributes, they also brought rich-defined differences in terms of their unique experiences, college expectations, and reasons for being here to obtain their educational goals. The student researcher disclosed that he was also a current adjunct faculty member, and he excluded any of his prior or current students from this study to reduce possible bias or feelings of pressure from any students that participated.
This criterion-based sampling strategy brought rich-thick descriptions and vivid details of HFGS experiences and their perspectives on mentoring and integration efforts at this school.

**Selection Sampling Matrix**

The new HFGS were selected first (Table 3.) and then the student researcher contacted their paired faculty ambassador as part of this study. It was recognized that an HFGS could be selected for the study and the ambassador chose not to be a participant. However, for this study, in this case an alternative student would have been chosen if possible or another faculty ambassador if that was not an option. Yet, that situation never arose and all ambassadors that were part of the students selected, were glad to assist with the engaging study on integration. The designed selection process went smoothly and there were no examples in which participants did not qualify or opted out of the study after selection determinations. The table below (Table 4.) displayed attributes for ambassadors including ambassadors to students from previous sessions.

Table 4. Faculty Ambassador’s Selection Criteria (maximum variation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ambassador (pseudonyms) and College Department</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Current number of students for mentoring at time of interview</th>
<th>Was a prior ambassador before Jan 2015 Session</th>
<th>Ethnicity of Ambassador</th>
<th>Ambassador in Jan 2015, Mar 2015, or May 2015 or any combination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sway - Business</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shell-Liberal Arts</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sieve-Engineering</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron-Business</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan-Liberal Arts</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Non-White *</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ambassador Legend: * Ethnicity permission specifics not granted for study

In the next section, the recruitment and access plan was highlighted for this study.
Recruitment and Access

The recruitment of participants was at one study site in Texas, Taylor College, and consisted of HFGS mentees and their paired ambassadors. This study started by sending Appendix B: a letter of recruitment for student participants and then Appendix A: a letter of recruitment for faculty participants and so an appropriate group could be identified. The researcher worked with registrar to obtain a new student list from January 2015, March 2015, and May 2015 while acknowledging all family educational rights and privacy act (FERPA) and student no contact agreements to seek possible paired HFGS candidates. The new student list included name, address, contact information, academic standing, self-identified ethnicity and race, degree program, and enrollment status. While it was possible there might be a need to expand HFGS list before January 2015, this did not become an issue for this study. All selected case study participants’ names, addresses, contact information were secured by researcher and given a pseudonym for masking true identity and increasing overall confidentiality.

Appendix C: Student Recruitment Posters were placed in areas such as the student center, study areas, and bulletin boards inside the study site. Recruitment posters were successful in promoting this study and had students contact student investigator directly to express interest in the study. The student researcher relied on the attached script Appendix B: Letter of recruitment for student participants when calling or talking to students in person that had reached out for more information. The student researcher followed criterion sampling as HFGS were selected for the study from different academic programs as paired with their ambassador. All initial communication with potential participants was to measure their interest in this study, selection criteria, and communicate the goal of understanding this mentoring relationship.
The HFGS that were selected to participate in either one-on-one interviews or focus group were also transfer students and had up to 60 credit hours in transfer. By including six transfer students, this increased balance of students with experience in college combined with true freshman that had not had prior experience. Transfer students often have more maturity since they have experienced college before and know the expectations (Jacoby, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As an example, in this study, Alice captured one experience in community college as not feeling a connection to peers: “Many students there [community college] were just like an extension of high school, they had no idea of a career path or why they were there except to play.” The four selected transfer students communicated prior experiences as a prospective that would not have been obtained from only students that had never been to college.

A specific process was followed to acknowledge confidentiality of all participants’ sensitive information such as names, addresses, or student I.D. numbers and all pertinent information will be coded or encrypted. Confidentiality as argued by Tolich (2004), can be breached when the traits or identities of participants are made know or are identifiable either in the research report or after the research study has concluded. As an example, on details, the pseudonyms were assigned to all participants as recommended by Kvale (1996) which were only viewed by the student researcher and primary researcher. A master file was employed that containing pseudonyms and a confidential file was password protected and storage of the files within a secure cloud based network. In the next section, data collection process will be explained and clarified.

**Data Collection**

As part of the alignment for qualitative case study research, this section described data collection plan and detailed the multiple instruments employed. The instruments consisted of
interviews, observations, focus group, and pertinent documents that were coded in field notes (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009; Kvale, 1996). The primary data source for this study were the faculty ambassadors and paired HFGS mentees in twelve individual interviews. The researcher conducted observations of HFGS and ambassadors in three classroom lecture visits, two non-formal student groupings in the student center and library, and two grand tour events. One focus group was conducted with three HFGS that were not selected for interviews to triangulate data collection of participant experiences and exposure to mentoring relationships in FYI program.

**Student and Faculty Mentor Interviews**

The primary source of data for this study were semi-structured interviews involving faculty ambassadors and their paired HFGS. According to Merriam (2009), semi-structured interviews are guided by flexible questions that explore issues yet allow for the emergence of new ideas to surface. Interviews were conducted in the library area which was selected by the participants and ranged from one to one and a half hours in length. Creswell (2013) recommends that the researcher decide on the interview questions to ask, identify the interviewees, and focus on what type of interviews are best suited for the study at hand. Kvale (1996) states that the reason for conducting qualitative interviews is to better understand the central themes that the participants experience.

The interview schedule was set in Nov 2015 and Jan 2016 sessions to have one-on-one interviews with six HFGS and his/her paired ambassador. The interviewer determines all questions, materials, and flow in this exchange but as a human instrument brings strength, flexibility, and understanding of participants and their unique experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kvale, 1996). The interviews were conducted in a tandem approach in which each HFGS was interviewed first and then his/her paired faculty ambassador next. The faculty ambassador
nor the student mentee had any idea that their ambassador or mentee would be part of this interview process. Accordingly, as faculty ambassadors were interviewed, their views and comments were not directed at the student mentee in this study; but at all students that they had provided mentoring to for a more holistic view. The decision to interview the student first was made to explore how well mentoring was or was not working in the student’s opinion. The student researcher used this approach of talking with HFGS and then their ambassador in sequential interviews as a way of discovering and seeking in-depth understanding about these unique mentoring relationships from both perspectives.

All interviews were confirmed and a time set up by the student researcher to meet at the library for HFGS and their paired faculty ambassadors to participate in the study. The first 10-15 minutes of each interview was to read the highlights of consent form. There was no pressure from the researcher if an ambassador or their HFGS chose to end their participation at any time. As all participants were preparing for individual interviews, the researcher asks if there were any further questions before proceeding. Each participant was given a copy of informed consent form for their records and student researcher retained a signed copy for research record.

The student researcher spent the first few minutes covering highlights of the study with participants to ensure they understand and to answer any questions they had. The student researcher reiterated that participants could choose to leave the study at any time. Once the recorder was turned on the student researcher ask participants to state their name and whether they agree to be audio-recorded. Interviews followed a flexible interview guide to ensure participants were asked the same questions but with room for unique discussion to include general follow-up questions as needed. The guide included warm up questions at the beginning, and then interview questions related to each of the research questions.
As an example of one student interview, there was some deviation from what was planned and what actually occurred. In the first student interview with Ava, the interview began with a good warm-up question in having her describe why she picked being in computer programming as a degree concentration in business. But as the interview continued, the researcher began to deviate from scripted interview guide and asked multiple questions at once that created some confusion and definitely did not cause consistent flow. To address this issue in future interviews, the student researcher kept the interview guide close at hand to reference and adhere to. Another noticeable phenomenon, was learning to listen to interviewee and not be thinking about next question at hand. Ava’s interview was one of the most informative of all interviews, she had a strong conceptualization of HFGS and their needs in college.

This first student interview helped adjust what researcher was needing to do to be able to really listen to conversation and pick up on key opportunities to ask follow-up questions to seek deeper understanding. As an example, Ava was asked about her first conversation with her ambassador [also faculty member] and what was discussed. She said a student asked how this information does really applies to me. The faculty ambassador said “you’re going to take this knowledge base with you and apply it to career and to life in general” when talking about conceptually breaking down a problem into parts that could be solved a piece at a time.” Ava and her peers found this to be excellent advice in programming and in solving life issues as well.

During an interview, Seidman (2006) suggested it is important to concentrate on listening as opposed to evaluating the data in the midst of the conversation. Field notes are crucial to capture participant body language as people describe their experiences and insight (Schwandt, 2015). As an example, what were the participants wearing and what items did they bring to the interviews such as phones, back packs, and other items. The field notes helped to create a record
of what was observed visually and what came to light while in the interview process (Kvale, 1996; Merriam, 2009). The student researcher looked for evidence to better understand these unique mentoring relationships and how mentoring helped HFGS integration into the campus.

A later interview occurred at the library with a faculty ambassador, Professor Ron, who is in accounting and law. As that interview began, he talked about his students finding their path both in career and life. When he arrived for the interview he was well prepared and it was noticed that he had pre-read the interview guide and had notes about what he wanted to say. As the interview moved into the area of student integration he had this to say “students need guidance and exposure directly to faculty ambassador and to their student peers. Learning accounting or any other subject is difficult and having support and others around you helping is a necessity.” This interview gave an illustration of ambassador-mentee relationship and signified just how important it had become for students seeking help to integrate into this college.

**Student and Faculty Observations**

Observations of HFGS and faculty participants served as a secondary source of data for this study. In addition to the campus grand tour described later, there were five in and out of classroom observations lasting an hour to one and a half hours each. Three observations were in classrooms and two outside of classroom observations were in public locations including the student library and student center. Patton (2002) argues that a skilled observer learns to pay attention to detail, write rich descriptions in field notes, and develop rigor in methods to help validate observations. In this case study, the significance of how students interacted with faculty and other student peers helped support understanding of their integration in college.

As an example of a freshman classroom observation, there was an eye-opening experience for any educator. Alice [a student participant] and others were having trouble in
understanding how to conceptualize digital gates, causing her professor to move the class into a peer based leaning community exercise to help. He assigned students into peer groups of 2 students each. One student worked with Alice and explained how he had done one of the problems. Then it was her turn to explain to him how she did another one, which developed a non-threatening environment to ask questions and seek understanding. This exercise was well-received and helped students feel confident and was less threatening than students doing problems in front of the entire class.

In one out of class observation in the library, Marcia, Professor Ron’s mentee who was to join the focus group but did not due to being sick; was nervous as she struggled to get her notes in order after dropping them everywhere for her upcoming exam. She began to prepare for studying by setting up her laptop and a computer tablet side-by-side. It was an accounting exam and there were several accounting books all stacked up in her workspace. She was clearly stressed, she had her laptop on her accounting notes and was referencing 2-3 other books as she wrote in her spiral. Marcia continued to write notes vigorously and was cramming for her upcoming accounting exam which seemed reflective of new students acclimating to college.

The classroom and out of classroom observations were set in the middle of the data collection process and completed after one-on-one interviews. Observations were distinguished from interviews, because they place researcher right in the middle of phenomenon and allowed for a first-hand view of the setting and its participants (Merriam, 2009; LeCompte et al., 1993). The student researcher tried to create a vivid picture of what the classroom setting looked like and how participants were placed and interacted in this environment. The student researcher wrote field notes immediately after observations to be coded about all interactions and observed
details. The observations within the student center and library served as another important view of HFGS interactions in an informal setting that the student researcher described.

**Campus grand tour.** As part of the strategy to better understand the routine and campus areas of importance to HFGS and their faculty ambassadors, two grand tours of the campus were conducted. Spradley and McCurdy (1989) use an analogy of a grand tour question or action as follows; this is to draw an extensive picture of the participant’s world surroundings, to map their cultural landscape. The student researcher accompanied one HFGS and later one faculty ambassador on a grand tour of the campus and recorded conversations with a phone recorder and participant wireless microphone. Fetterman (2010) suggest that the participant’s view of the study landscape is pertinent to the context of a study and to better understand how agents are perceived in this setting. A campus map located in (Appendix L: Taylor College Campus Map) was provided to both participants for the grand tour, which lasted about 15 minutes. Participants marked on the map what areas to go to as part of their routine, in what order, and describe why these locations were important to them.

The campus grand tours were an important part in understanding day-to-day routines of participants and increasing triangulation of data sources. This gave insight into what was important to both a student and ambassador as they described their day. In one campus grand tour, Juan took me to places on campus he frequently went to and detailed his routine and how it usually went. He said “when I first get here, I have already planned what I need to accomplish before class; that usually means going to the library and working on homework or class-based research.” Juan was also forthcoming in talking about how he was close to his student peers and they really relied on each other to get through school.
In the second grand tour of campus, Professor Drew from networking took me through his day and where he like to go before for class. We went to the networking center within the Information Technology department and he began showing me the network servers he worked with in setting up for classes. Professor Drew talked about the need to get software ready and setup parameters for that night’s class. He said that he started at this point so he could verify that all software and systems were ready to go for class. This was an interesting tour and showed me there was a lot of work to do before evening classes started.

Focus Group

The student researcher conducted one small focus group with three HFGS near the end of data collection and analysis as a third source for participants not selected in the prior interview segment. This focus group of selected students met for about one hour at the library which participants had chosen. The focus group discussed students’ perceptions of the mentoring relationship and gave insight to their integration at the campus. This meeting was recorded with a digital recorder and used in constant comparison to prior interviews. The researcher verified all data was de-identified by removing any specific names, places, or any identifying references.

Focus group research involves engaging a small group of student participants that come together to have a discussion on a specific issue or given study topic (Wilkinson, 2004). A focus group guide (Appendix H: Focus Group Guide) includes open-ended questions such as, describe your first mentoring conversation with your ambassador and how that conversation went. This line of inquiry was meant to collect student participants’ thoughts about the nature of their mentoring relationship and their discussions proceeded. The focus group followed a small group format allowing the three students to communicate what their experiences had been with their mentoring discussions. Focus groups tend to be less threatening to participants and allows the
researcher to get a group perspective and test some initial findings from prior interviews or observations (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Bennett, E., personal communication, 2015). The dynamics of the focus group for this study allowed three student perspectives to surface but also helped the researcher recognize redundancy was present and data had reached saturation.

The three students selected, Tom, Joe, and Stan for the small focus group where computer information science and information cyber-security students. This focus group was an excellent chance to inquire and reflect on all the information that had been gathered from other sources. Of the three students, one was prior military and two had attended other schools before coming to Taylor College. One of the students, Tom, mentioned how their ambassador helped build their self-confidence and said “he was so helpful in understanding my situation with family responsibilities and helped me learn how to be successful in school.” The broadness of this small group was reflective of larger participant population and helped to know when data collection had reached saturation; as gathered data from prior interviews continued repeating.

Documents

The word documents can be broad and include government records, public data sources, or school records, for this study the student researcher relied on documents from the study site registrar vetted for FERPA and student access compliance. For this study, the student researcher reviewed active participant’s FYI documents including student information guide, written one on one faculty mentor notes from HFGS meetings, and discussed with ambassadors the Appendix M: FGS Mentoring and Teacher Advice. Another example of documents reviewed were tutoring records and academic discussion notes with a faculty mentors pertaining to student’s individual academic plan and needs. Hancock & Algozzine (2011) suggests researchers can use documents to better understand the case and obtain details about participants that may have not been known.
The documents mentioned above were thoroughly reviewed and de-identified, then discussed with faculty to gather a better understanding of how HFGS have been integrating into the mentoring program and campus setting.

Field Notes

The student researcher wrote about interviews and in and out of class observations with all participants in field notes throughout data collection and analysis. Field notes consisted of descriptive jotted brief notations to elaborate explanations of the setting, participants and what is being observed in vivid details (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As an example, student researcher may state a student is Hispanic but not use their real name and what they are doing and how this can be of significance to the study. Field notes were coded since they represent data collected from multiple instruments (Merriam, 2009). Furthermore, the student researcher sat in the back of the room and used a notebook for writing field notes and not a recording device, because using a recording device may have changed observation dynamics of participants in this natural setting.

Field notes were part of capturing the observations and allowed for writing thoughts to recall the key details that were experienced which became invaluable. Lofland & Lofland (1995) argue that it is crucial to capture your field notes closely in time after the observations as your memory can lose sight of important details that occurred. When observations were outside the classroom setting, student researcher looked to see how the participants were actually interacting, conversing, and the context of their campus relationships. As an example, the researcher had written field notes about all interviews and observations and one was with Ava, she came to her interview prepared with notes in hand and made a comment at the onset, “it is my hope that this information can help other future Hispanic students be successful.” The field notes supported the need to capture what was happening and also researcher’s thoughts as observations were
explored for meaning and in relation to phenomenon of mentoring. In summary, field notes provided an additional instrument for data collection and analysis. In the next section, the data analysis plan was discussed and evaluated in detail for this study.

Data Analysis

As data began to emerge, analysis was initiated in conjunction with the data collection process simultaneously. Merriam (2009) argued that data analysis does not fit into a separate category directly after data collection, and analysis begins at the onset of the first interview, first observation, and first document reviewed. In this study an inductive approach was undertaken as part of a general inductive method, but not in a direct interpretation as understanding unfolded as the study emerged. Additionally, data analysis is a circular phenomenon not linear and the outcome of analysis is to develop emerging categories to discover themes that help answer the research questions of the study (Creswell, 2007). In following an inductive position, data analysis process captured the unique experiences of these HFGS and their faculty ambassador relationships, this formulated the creation of dynamic categories which later emerged.

In following three seminal methodologists, Yin, Stake, and Merriam each have distinct differences in their views on data analysis process. Yin (2009) defined analysis within the context of examining, categorical structure, and tabulation to address propositions of a study as both quantitative and qualitative evidence is considered (p. 109). Stake (1995) noted that analysis was to give meaning to initial imprints as well as final determinations, and the need to discover through intuition as opposed to following a formal structured protocol. Merriam (1998) looked at analysis for case study with a constructivist view in making sense of the data and the need to consolidate, reduce, and interpret what participants said and what researchers viewed.
The data analysis for this case study recognized all three seminal views; but was structured more in light of Stake than the work of Yin, as intuition was guided by a flexible protocol.

Stake (1995) suggested there were two strategic approaches to analyzing data; categorical aggregation and direct interpretation but also noted these are not the only ways to analyze data as this is left to the researcher’s discretion. According to Stake (1995), case studies relied on the researcher providing a sequence to events, categorizing properties, and keeping a count of occurrences in an intuitive aggregation. Categorical aggregation allowed for the collection of small pieces of information or instances to build a larger picture of the overall phenomenon. Direct interpretation is focused on a specific instance and looks at this occurrence from every angle and tries to build meaning and understanding of that instance without expounding to an assumption about the overall phenomenon. Within this study, categorical aggregation evolved as the categories were refined as analysis intensified. It is important to realize that both or only one of these approaches maybe implemented, or they both can be present concurrently.

Since this case study was an intrinsic case study type, the primary apex of analysis was placed on the case itself. Stake (1995) argued a case study is complex and the researcher should not spend too much time on aggregation as this could become a distraction. In this case, the student researcher focused on unique mentoring relationships and there were categorical data needs but they were secondary to understanding the case itself. Merriam (1998) suggested in categorical aggregation and searching for patterns, that data collection and analysis are in play simultaneously as indicated by Stake (1995). Yet, this was not to indicate that analysis was over at the end of data collection. In summary, while data collection and analysis can be reflective of being done concurrent, analysis intensified as the study advanced and once all data sources were collected (Merriam, 1998); this was evident in the circular flow of analysis in this case study.
In qualitative research, data analysis involves managing words, language, and the context of meanings that are being expressed and implied by participants in their world (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, the ongoing struggle of data analysis especially in qualitative case study was to navigate through large amounts of data that had empirical significance and capture meaning, rich descriptions, and understanding of participants’ views (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Qualitative data analysis focused on the need to organize and reduce data into categories or themes. Dey (1993) stated that data fracturing as a first cycle of open coding was used to develop concepts and these concepts helped provide a basis for fresh description. Data analysis relied on the scope of coding and creation of themes in second cycle coding to describe what was happening (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), in this study iterative cycles of coding were imposed to discover later themes as they developed and matured.

An inductive approach allowed for findings in the research to emerge from dominant themes embedded within the raw data and not restrained by more structured methodologies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Thomas (2006), an inductive approach allows for the following: (1) the condensing of raw data into a summary based format, (2) a clear connection between the research objectives and summarized findings from raw data, and (3) construction of a structure of experiences and processes that are embedded in the raw data. Strauss & Corbin (1998) noted that inductive analysis allowed the theory to emerge from the data (p.12). There are many study examples of induction employed in qualitative research since it lends itself to a straightforward approach to analyzing data and is guided by evaluation criteria (Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Inductive analysis can be adventitious in qualitative inquiry as the overarching task is data reduction and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The inductive
approach focused on procedures to create significant meaning and expose themes (Merriam, 2009), which are crucial in a qualitative investigation.

**Analysis Process for this Case Study**

An inductive approach was best suited for listening to this HFGS group that described their needs combined with their faculty mentor’s insight. In addition, while an inductive approach has a strong difference in contrast to deductive which seeks to evaluate if data has consistency against some theoretical hypothesis, it was recognized the process had a deductive part later in analysis as well (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). As an example of induction for this study, student participants described their inability at other larger campuses to integrate. Many students [felt like a number], and that little support was provided. Furthermore, inductive analysis started from a clean slate and built on emergence of themes, in this example of [felt like a number] it became significant to the theme of [prior experiences of large campuses] that did not support these student participants.

For this particular study, an inductive approach started with open coding. This was an ongoing dynamic process in which data sources were collected and then analyzed in repetitive iterations to evaluate and adjust as needed in interviews and observations. Data was fractured and broken into units of meaning from participant responses. After going through several passes on each transcript, codes were established and defined as part of the codebook entries. Initially, there were large numbers of singular codes that had not been collected for any kind of reduction or grouping.

As an example, when the first student interview was analyzed there were more than 50 initial codes highlighted on transcript. This particular interview while informative showed the researcher was an amateur in asking questions, listening for meaning, and missing follow-up
opportunities. One code [you can do it] that came from this was when Ava described how important her ambassador was and their relationships’ impact on decision to persist in her studies. Ava mentioned “as a single mom and full-time employee, it helped tremendously to connect with her [ambassador]; she [ambassador] understood my concerns and was a great inspiration in making it in this first-year.” There were waves of in-depth information from this participant to collect and analyze, as the study progressed this became one of the most important interviews of this study.

Reflecting back on the starting of analysis, the transcripts were evaluated manually. Additionally, I listened to the first few interviews multiple iterations and found that by the second or third time, there were participant discussion and explanations that I had not heard before. As another example, I now in Ava’s interview heard the pauses as she thoroughly processed the question and then responded with significant insight. Furthermore, in one instance, was when Ava described her need for her ambassador to be straightforward with her. She meant that she needed the truth of how college was going to be and what tools she needed to be successful at it. Ava said, “I do not want a fairytale, I want the truth from my ambassador so I can plan and reach my goal of obtaining my education.” As a single mother, she desperately needed this trust and confidence in her ambassador as her advocate. Initially, I had placed a code [no fairytale] that merged after multiple iterations into [building trust] and this later opened a whole dimension around multi-levels of trust building.

In this particular study, an inductive approach as defined by Thomas (2006) was included for data analysis because it allowed the findings to emerge from dominant themes within the data, without being restrained by a more structured method of analysis. When the second student interview occurred with Alice, follow-up became more fluid and also, I heard similar stories of
needed support. Alice and Ava had told similar examples of their feeling of [being lost] in a larger campus settings and not getting the support that a new student desperately needed. This code [being lost] and others gave light to trusting a person [ambassador] now that students had been aligned with, a mentor to help them find their way.

As other interviews occurred, the feeling of [being lost] was repeated by multiple participants. Another example of initial coding came from an interview with Juan. He talked about a tragic event in his family when an uncle had past. He admitted he was lost and left school not know if he would return. The coding here started with [tragic event] that led to part of prior experiences impacting students. As coding continued, this code [tragic event] helped to explain just how family issues can impact students in college. As codes emerged, this code moved through being part of challenges to a theme of [student care] as his ambassador became a close advocate and welcomed him back into campus.

In light of this particular study, data analysis was an ongoing interactive process; there was a need for reflection and interpretation through stages in the process (Kvale, 1996; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). An inductive approach was employed initially but became more deductive in time to analyze multiple sources including field notes on interviews, focus group, and out of classroom observations. Following research of Creswell (2012), he suggested that there are six steps in analyzing qualitative data: (1) organize data, (2) code database, (3) describe the findings, (4) reports finding, (5) interprets the meaning and (6) validate the findings. Likewise, data analysis moved through many non-linear steps and started with the data organization and ended with the validation of findings. The goal here was to generate well-defined categories as shown below in figure 7. Codes-to-theory model from codes that helped discover themes and offered
explanations reflecting on inductive/deductive approaches to derive concepts from raw data as
categories and later themes surfaced (Thomas, 2006).

Figure 7. Codes-to-Theory Model: Thomas, 2006.

The data analysis began with reading and re-reading the field notes and manually
capturing data from interview, classroom observation, and the one student focus group. The
need to re-read and look to capture initial thoughts, word usage, and expressed thoughts were
important to seek segments to further explore (Saldaña, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The line
based evaluation where each line of data was analyzed will help to split up the data into meaning
units or smaller segments that convey an idea (Saldaña, 2009), which can be a word, a phrase or a
whole passage of text. Ultimately, coding serves to answer the detailed research questions and
their purpose in the study (Merriam, 2009). Meaning units help build general categories, or
clusters of coded data (Merriam, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). In the study, the meanings units were
key as they emerged and changed, giving deeper details of the participants’ experiences.

Throughout the data analysis process, the student researcher constantly compared data
from all sources, including interviews, documents, field notes, and observational data. As an
example, in this study, categories started inductively developed over the course of the study
using constant comparison, but became more deductive as analysis continued over time. As
defined, constant comparison was an iterative analysis process in which each interpretation and finding was compared to existing findings as categories emerged, this approach was anchored in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As well, Merriam (2009) stated all qualitative analysis relies on constant comparison which comprised both inductive and comparative components and was a major part of qualitative research without requirement on constructing a grounded theory. In this study, data analysis included grouping patterns and recoding to reduce overlap and redundancy, as codes either emerged while some were removed completely.

As second-cycle coding began, axial coding was employed and data segments began to be evaluated for commonality of meaning as data was restructured to work towards thematic grouping. It was recognized that this stage had interpretive requirements as pieces of the puzzle where finding categorical homes. In addition, interview transcripts were analyzed multiple times to capture and collect understanding and themes as they began to emerge. The prior example above with Ava, transcended through second-cycle coding towards a new category defined as [building trust] between ambassador and student mentee developed which helped to answer research question one. In addition, as the categories matured towards thematic process, through multiple iterations themes emerged and later stabilized. As an example, a chosen category such as [my ambassador believes in me] became in time a major theme for [building trust] in multiple levels of depth for each of the students.

As this analysis process continued and data segments moved closer towards well-defined themes, there were continuous looks at constant comparison and keeping an ongoing dynamic approach as the study analysis matured. As another example, Keith had a code that his [mentor knew him], similarly Tom said his [ambassador in his corner]. After, multiple iterations of coding both of these codes moved into a theme of [building trust] as support of that multi-level
phenomenon. By using QSR N-Vivo 10 software for collection and analysis, comparisons and striping of data segments became easier to see overlap. This improved the possibilities of not missing emerging themes buried within large amounts of data. As using this tool became more intuitive, ability to re-code and move data segments around became more fluid. In summary, that allowed the researcher to focus direct attention on actual analysis, and not on becoming overwhelmed with data size. Next, the coding plan is discussed for this study.

**Coding Plan**

Coding was a key to qualitative analysis and synthesis as sorting of the data sets were conducted. In qualitative inquiry, a *code* is normally a word or phrase that assigns a summative and salient attribute for a portion of data (Saldaña, 2013). In evaluating the role of theory, development, even prior to data collection distinguishes major contrast to other design methodologies in comparison to a case study approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the construction of categorical levels for the data, it is most common to use the comparative method of data analysis as the participant remarks and experiences are compared and contrasted to determine data locations (Merriam, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the unit of analysis must meet two criteria: (1) the unit should be heuristic and relevant part of the study, (2) the unit is the minimum piece of information that is singularly distinctive.

Coding methods are divided into first cycle and second cycle (Saldaña, 2013) or open initial coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and states these methods are processes which happen in initial coding (first cycle) by fracturing raw data into parts. This collected data is then rearranged into emerging categories which allow for comparison between the data codes within a category and also between different categories (Maxwell, 2005). Below, Figure 8. Coding Strategies/Methods show how codes change from first to second cycle towards theory.
In figure 8. As in this study, the researcher started with first cycle open coding (In Vivo) and then moved to second cycle axial coding to reconstruct and develop refined categories and themes. The categories help to formulate an emerging understanding of the data and to generate themes and organize data to support general findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). In second cycle (axial) coding according to Saldaña (2013), analytical skills are needed to help classify, prioritize, conceptualize, and attempt to construct theory from the data in first cycle processes. Substantive categories will be part of second cycle coding and tend to progress inductively as the researcher develops both thematic concepts and theory (Maxwell, 2005), in this study these categories helped describe participants and their mentoring relationships.

Coding is not a singular or sequential process, it is iterative, which means codes change as they are reordered or completely absorbed into categories (Strauss, 1987). Coding goes beyond simply labeling data; it provides a path for data to the captured idea and back (Richards & Morse, 2007). Saldaña (2013) states that coding is not an exact science, a code can be developed to summarize data but not necessarily reduce the overall amount. Coding is described
as a method to organize and group similar categories as containers for the data. In this specific study, coding significance and how the coding book is examined is fundamental to getting participant voices and perceptions captured accurately and with maximum details.

The transition from first cycle coding to second cycle can be either smooth or quite disruptive, according to Saldaña (2013). The researcher uses reasoning and intuition to determine which data looks similar and feels similar in terms of description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The establishing and re-working of codes will lend to refinement of categories and support theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As an example, an earlier code of [professor gave out number] along with [faculty support me], these moved towards a theme of [faculty care] in student outreach. Later, this emerged into the theme of [faculty care], as many examples showed faculty mentors going beyond a teacher only role. In this coding process, some researchers suggest coding for themes in the onset, but, in the beginning, Saldaña (2013) argues there are other areas to focus on, such as values and content of all participants. Overall, the coding continued to change in terms of number of codes and specifically the depth of meaning which became more apparent as themes emerged.

Axial coding, as second cycle coding, strives to determine which are the most important of codes and which are less important so that redundancy is minimized and codes are developed (Boeije, 2010). While there are two categories for axial coding: non-hierarchical (flat coding) or hierarchical (tree coding), they both can be used in tandem; in non-hierarchical the data codes (labels) are grouped like a list without sub-code levels because of their similar meaning and in hierarchical data codes they are grouped based on a tree structure by links and do contain sub-codes with relation of parent to sibling approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This grouping effort reduces first cycle initial coding as sorting and relabeling produces categories defining
conceptual structure (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As the transcription is analyzed, a code or label is assigned to the word segment and then the relationships between codes or labels are determined (Saldaña, 2013). In the process of data being put back together and grouped into categories, these categories supported thematically concepts to provide understanding and explain the complexity of emergent patterns.

In another example of initial open coding, when examining issues of large college campus exposure for student participants there was a code [feeling lost]. As interviews and discussions continued this became significant and repetitive for students in this study. Alice mentioned, “I was so lost and felt uncomfortable in huge freshman seminar sized classes, there was no connection to the faculty.” Second cycle coding developed this category of [large university climate] as being structurally unwelcoming and faculty unable to support the needs of new students. This theme emerged and strengthened as a part of prior student experiences.

**Codebook Development**

A codebook was created as a set of codes that captured the labels including their definitions to help guide the data analysis process. A codebook was developed in an iterative process that relies on updating definitions and increasing the clarity as the process continues (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). Codebooks are an essential ingredient for qualitative research and analysis, as the codebook operationalizes codes and how they are defined (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; MacQueen et al., 1998). In addition, for this study, the cookbook continued to be added to as the study had labels changed over time for better clarity and detail. The codebook helped create consistency when applying codes from source to source. The codebook also helps answer why you as the researcher used one code over another as you proceed with analysis (Bennett, E., personal communication, 2015).
Table 5. A Segment within an Interview with Student Participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant I.D.</th>
<th>Segment type</th>
<th>Theme I.D.</th>
<th>Interviewer question/ student response</th>
<th>Sequence count #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juan 01</td>
<td>Audio wav.</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1. Talk about some of the challenges your ambassador helped you overcome. Juan: He has been a real <em>friend</em> but it took time to understand me. Before, he was not sure that I wanted to be here. He helped to show me a way to get through and be successful in college.</td>
<td>N0003a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava 03</td>
<td>Audio wav.</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>2. Talk about some of the challenges your ambassador helped you overcome. Ava: My ambassador is my best <em>friend</em> to some extent. She is hard and expects me to work extra hard to be successful. She believes in me.</td>
<td>N0004a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The codebook development for this case study relied on using QSR NVivo 10 as a platform with QDA qualitative data analysis for collecting and analyzing all data sources. Codebook development has been explored by many researchers (Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and is consider to be mature in advances for inclusion of numerous data sources including text retrieval, video, and audio wave files from interviews, observations, and field notes. The student researcher examined each of the interviews, observations, focus group, and field notes to assign codes (numerical) via QDA software to develop logical categorical themes. The study codebook included tabling and indexing that allowed data sources to be sorted, compared, and examined. Numerical assigned codes allowed the database to track numerous sources and create the appropriate tables that allowed the embedded data and similar data sets to develop as the analysis was implemented and continually analyzed all data in multiple iterations. Table 5. above shows an example of the software and data elements that were captured for one interview.
For this study, the codebook contained criteria for inclusion and exclusion of text instances which relies on the researcher setting the appropriate definitions and logic for sorting tables via QSR NVivo 10 software platform. The QSR NVivo 10 software allowed for color coding of similar text words and themes. As an example, if the student researcher was working with a non-coded transcript of an interview; student researcher could start by setting a code word within the interview such as the theme “success” and see how many times that word appeared. This process was executed with one or multiple transcripts of interviews in an effort to develop a category. Student researcher worked to capture voices to make informed decisions in navigating multiple data streams.

**Quality Checks**

Qualitative research imposes a naturalistic approach to examination of a phenomenon in a real-world setting, and the researcher as the main instrument must directly address and verify quality checks in their interpretations and findings (Patton, 2001). The student researcher in this study worked to strengthen overall quality checks by triangulating multiple data sources and implemented member checking so participants could review findings. Although, for this particular study, the student participants were slow to respond or give feedback on their information from interviews or other data gathering tools. While, emailing of the data files was conducted, there were few participants that took time to review and/or communicate the accuracy of the content. Creswell & Miller (2000) state that the researcher must determine the credibility of all findings and assess strategies such as trustworthiness, member checking, reliability, internal and external validity, and audit trail to improve research quality. Quality checks in qualitative research refer to tools and strategic planning of how data is collected, analyzed, and reported (Maxwell, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research centers on the need for a reliable and valid means of describing findings within the research endeavor. Trustworthiness was defined as ability to believe in outcomes or results, dependable, reliable, and confident (Webster’s Dictionary, 2015).

Table 6. Alternative Set of Criteria to Judge Quality of Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research (naturalistic terms) versus Typical Quantitative Terms (conventional terms)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional terms Quantitative</th>
<th>Naturalistic terms Qualitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>internal validity</td>
<td>credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>external validity</td>
<td>transferability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reliability</td>
<td>dependability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>objectivity</td>
<td>confirmability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The quality check plan for this study addressed trustworthiness by providing ample details on data collection, analysis, and study findings as they appeared; and was open for review by all study participants. Halprin (1983) argued there is a need for trustworthiness as a means to determine how the researcher convinced the audience that the study findings were plausible.


Credibility draws on the interpretation of participant data as being conceptually “credible.” Transferability assessed if findings were localized or could be extended to other studies. Dependability assessed how the study data was collected, analyzed, and theories developed.

Establishing Credibility

Credibility depends less on a large sample of participants and more on the richness of the information that is gathered and how the researcher analyzes this information (Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the student researcher discovered richness of information
gathered from participants by providing ample opportunities for participants to review their transcripts at the end of interviews and focus group event, unfortunately, students in this study were either reluctant or did not provide feedback when transcripts were sent to them.

**Prolonged engagement.** Given (2008) noted prolonged engagement helped a study to go deeper in investigation of causation and reasons associated with the phenomena that maybe missed in a short-cycle investigation. Prolonged engagement is defined as spending adequate time in the study with participants to see and interpret their environment, culture, and the phenomenon of the study (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The student researcher spent 6-8 weeks with the study participants consisting of HFGS and their paired faculty ambassadors in interviews, observations, and a student only focus group to allocate sufficient time for prolonged engagement to occur. The student researcher focused on prolonged engagement by listening and giving significance to student voices and their concerns in an effort to improve integration.

**Triangulation.** Gave significance to strengthening findings by using multiple sources of information including interviews, field notes, and observations. In this study, student researcher used the same interview guide and interview questioning format within the same setting to gather participant data but also relied on in and out of classroom observations and lastly a focus group inquiry. As data was gathered for collection and analysis, the student researcher then evaluated all data sources for collective themes from interpretation of participant’s stories and comments. Triangulation for qualitative research tends to build a comprehensive understanding and robust description of each participant and their view (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Creswell, 2007). Triangulation helped credibility by relying on different data gathering tools.

**Member checking.** Member checking relied on participant involvement in each stage of this study. As this case study was conducted, member checking was performed and ongoing as
suggested by (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) allowing participants to evaluate their data for accuracy, yet as stated earlier participants did not provide formal feedback. As stated by Creswell (2007), member checking allows participants to review and determine if data collected and findings are accurate and representative of their beliefs and experiences which can reduce incorrect data assumptions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that member checking as a process should be done within the study because it is essential to share findings with study participants to strengthen significance. Finally, member checking strengthened the case study in terms of clarity by providing planned review of the gathered data and its accuracy.

**Current Study Member Checking Protocol**

The member checking protocol for this study included a 20 to 30-minute review session approximately 3 to 5-days at the study site after each of the interviews, observations, and the focus group has been conducted. The flexible protocol allowed for each of the individual participants to have time to review their comments and check for clarity and content accuracy. Within this study, the student researcher had 2 students send a very short email noting that they had reviewed the transcripts and the information gathered was accurate. Additionally, all 6 of the faulty ambassador participants gave verbal confirmation that their transcript information was accurate; there was one small change made by Professor Sieve on length of service. A protocol check gave an ample opportunity to allow all participants to verify their comments and also the student researcher to summarize current findings. But, not all participants provided feedback, but a few did acknowledge receipt and that the data provided looked fine. I would have preferred more stability and participant feedback in this stage as the study continued.

This protocol was followed closely and never seemed to need much adjustment as far as the process. The biggest issue was not getting most student participants to communicate or
review their transcripts after being sent back to them. This feedback loop that should be important to accuracy and determining data was valid seemed out of control. The student participants simply did not provide their comments after this step. Two students did send a very short message saying their transcript was fine, but no detailed student participant feedback or comments about inaccuracies were communicated to the student researcher. In the next subsection, transferability was discussed.

**Establishing Transferability**

Transferability related to the level of the findings being able to transfer to other studies or are the findings more specific to this particular study (Merriam, 2009). For this particular study, there was a unique phenomenon focused on the mentoring relationship between a faculty ambassador and their paired HFGS; but it was quite probable that some of the themes may represent some commonality for similar populations. The student researcher noted that the foundation of mentoring importance for new students seemed vital to their success in integration within this study. There should be similarities for needed student mentoring with faculty ambassadors at other campus settings. Moreover, the building of trust as a multi-level part was discovered and recognized as a significant part of the mentoring phenomenon. In summary, building trust was a needed attribute of mentoring, and should be part of any FYI program.

**Thick descriptions.** In this particular study, thick descriptions emerged and through multiple iterations became more mature and detailed participants’ needs. An example, was the emergence of the building of trust between students and their ambassador. Thick descriptions were present when HFGS described their ambassador and how they had helped the student to integrate into school. In addition, thick descriptions describe explicitly the in-depth information in which the researcher observes or gathers from the participants and from the setting dynamics.
(Holland, 1997; Geertz, 1973). Also, by clearly describing the phenomenon, the student researcher started to see common patterns as details emerged that showed to have a transferable dimension beyond this current study. According to research by Lincoln & Guba (1985), rich thick descriptions as a part of transferability depends on similarities and the understanding that findings may not be able to be generalized and still hold significance to the unique study at hand. In light of this study, as an example, thick descriptions were developed around the multiple levels of trust between ambassadors and mentee. Ava described how she moved from sharing minimal information to total confidence and belief in her ambassador as her mentor, “she is now my advocate and a trust friend and I know she is always in my corner to help.” Similarly, Tom mentioned, “my ambassador is always there to support me in becoming a better programmer, she is patient and supportive.” Stake (1978) refers to this goal of transferability as a “natural generalization” and Merriam (2009) states that rich thick descriptions should provide details so readers can determine the extent to which findings might be transferable. In summary, the student researcher worked to be explicit when describing all participants and their surroundings.

**Establishing Dependability**

As the student researcher, the need to communicate and keep record of all changes was thought out thoroughly and executed throughout this study with details logged. Dependability stressed the responsibility of the student researcher to be adamant when communicating about the contextual stance of the research and setting. Trochim (2007) argued that the researcher must detail and communicate all changes as they occurred and define how these changes impacted the study and implications. In this particular case study, the student researcher relied on stringent details in capturing field notes, analytical memos, and keeping accurate notes as all activities with study participants. As an example, researcher reviewed all notes after each interview same
day or next day and added additional thoughts while they were vivid. One of the components of dependability was the inquiry external audit explained next.

**Inquiry external audit.** An external inquiry audit requires a student researcher that is not directly involved in the specific study review processes of data collection, data analysis, and determine if findings are supported by actual data (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The external audit sequence gave a chance for a second set of eyes to review the overall study design and review of outcomes with an intent to be a check on data quality and accuracy. In this particular study, the student researcher had the audit and review completed by his doctoral student advisor. The process of an external audit allows for feedback as the data collection and analysis are still being conducted, and to offer guidance in process changes if appropriate (Merriam, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the student researcher relied on the continuous stages of feedback and direction from his doctoral advisor that helped improve the overall clarity and details within the study and especially throughout the detailed data collection and analysis stages.

**Establishing Confirmability**

Confirmability centers on the level to which study results can be confirmed or reassured by others (Trochim, 2007). Part of this strategy was to document all procedures in the study design that guide checking and rechecking all data throughout the process. Cohen and Crabtree (2006) suggests that to strengthen confirmability for this study, the student researcher will rely on the participants to review their specific interviews and observations and make sure that their discussion and answers were correctly captured. Secondly, the student researcher had doctoral study advisor review findings and make suggestions as needed. An example of a process for confirmability is audit trail process described below.
Audit trail process. In the search of the literature, the student researcher found that Lincoln and Guba (1985) presented a strong stance of what an audit trail was and its significance to both data collection and analysis. The audit trail noted all research decisions as they happened and established a path of confirmability of findings, which was important because this was a record of what was changed and when in terms of improving validity and accuracy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) relied on work of Halpern (1983), which was based on an audit process of fiscal accounts and identifies six categorical areas of information for an audit trail to be completed: 1). Raw data 2). Data reduction 3). Data reconstruction 4). Process notes 5). Materials relating to intentions and dispositions 6). Instrument development information. Specific to qualitative studies, there was a conceptual view of the audit trail: an auditor will audit all decisions, processes, and methodologies by first party in a separate occurrence form than the actual study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The audit trail for this study included a log of all study decisions from research design, data collection, and decision processes as the study investigation unfolds. The student researcher kept a detailed log book to capture research activities including sampling strategies and make analytical notes on interviews, memos, classroom visits, and the focus group. The audit trial allows for keeping track of study decisions and notes that are not coded so there is a record to go back to for review by the student researcher or a separate reviewer to follow the trail for clarity and logic (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Merriam, 2009). An audit trail supports self-reflection on decisions and logical order of the study by the student researcher (Akkerman, Admiral, Brekelmans, & Oost, 2006), which strengthens findings and analysis decisions (Mason, 2002; Kvale, 1996). The student researcher relied frequently on notes and information that were within the audit trail notes to remember why decisions had been made for this study.
As an example of the importance of the audit trail, there were numerous times researcher had to refer back to decision tree and review how and when study decisions were made. One student had given information about her experiences at other colleges prior to coming here. Ava talked about the inability to connect at her prior school with faculty. In one exchange, Ava noted “the faculty member basically told us he would not have time for tutoring or email discussions, he said read the book and try to get together to figure the information out.” The researcher had to go back to audit trail and look at details for coding and later emerged themes.

**Data Storage and Destruction**

In the area of data storage, it was vital that there was a plan to guarantee that all of the data recordings of one-on-one interviews, focus group, and all associated interactions with the study participants were secure. All interview transcripts, observation notes, and focus group information were recorded on two digital portable recorders. Transcription and coding of the all data were performed using a tool MAXQDA that supported management and coding of the data sets. Memos and field notes were stored on a personal password-protected laptop of the student researcher and backed up on a flash drive. The master file, transcripts, and participant consent forms will be held in storage at a professional secure lock box leased by student researcher for three consecutive years after study has concluded then all forms will be professional destroyed.

It is important to note that there was a specific flash drive that had been allocated just for interview data. This removed the problem of any multiple copies or devices such as a desktop or laptop computer involved. The flash drive as property of the researcher remained in a secure locker space leased by the student researcher that cannot be retrieved by anyone except me as the researcher in this study. The university information technology team were allowed to make one secure master copy of all information on the flash drive and secure the data onto a university
owned password protected RAID based hard drive for redundancy. After this case study investigation concluded and all degree requirements met at Northeastern University, the data from both the flash drive and from hard drive system will be destroyed after one year from degree conferral of student researcher.

All recordings of interviews, field notes, focus group, and all data collection were reproduced and sent so participants were allowed to review at any time of request as all information resided in a password protected cloud repository on Dropbox.com. While there did not appear to be any faculty mentor or student information that could be damaging, the need for compliance with all IRB regulations was strictly adhered to. All student participants were required to sign the enclosed Appendix B: Letter of Recruitment for Student Participants which acknowledged that this was a voluntary effort that could be stopped at any time. The student researcher completed NIH training on April 14, 2013 and submitted IRB Application to Institutional Review Board on 9-21-2015 which was approved on 10-5-2015.

As many qualitative studies contain rich descriptions of the participants it is critical that this protection of sensitive data is planned for and executed as to how the data will be embedded into a secure scheme and how to discard it when appropriate (Kaiser, 2009). All of the student participants were allowed the opportunity to review their own information and might petition to have their information changed or deleted from the record at their request. There was no sharing of data that was not secured, password protected, and encoded to protect the identity of the participants. Some researchers have questioned the assumptions that all participants should be provided a pseudonym as a trend has also noted that participants often want to be recognized for their accomplishments and experiences especially in social based research (Tilly & Woodthorpe, 2011). In the next section, the protection of human subjects for all research studies will be
discussed and why this is crucial that the rights and safety of all study participants be recognized and guaranteed that they are safe and not negatively impacted in any way.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The protection of human subjects centered on making every effort to protect and do no harm to all study participants both physically and emotionally. It was critical that measures to protect all participants were implemented and ethical conduct be presented in all phases of the study. There were some important protection measures and safeguards that were built into this study as directed by the human subject research protection office at Northeastern University. The need to structure questions with concern and respect for the participants was important while constructing the interview guide and overall study design. The students were asked to participate in this study completely on a voluntary basis and the outline of the study and what it entailed was thoroughly explained for each participant. All participants were given a unique pseudonym to protect identity and any associated personal information and had ability to leave the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable.

Another concern that was also within this study as it looked at this student population was a possibility of coercion. An example of coercion would be if a person might be persuaded to associate or alter their opinions based on offered outcomes. Coercion was defined as the exercising of power to alter or influence someone to do something or act in a certain way based on provided or assumed advancement (Miller & Kreiner, 2008). As a student researcher, it was ethically and morally important that there was no persuasion or inappropriate leading of the participants or altering their statements in any way. By allowing collected data to be reviewed by the participants helped validate accuracy and safeguard concerns from all parties; the ambassadors were active in this area but students were not.
One major component of protection of all participants as guided by compliance with human subject protection was abiding at all times in an ethical manner. Patton (2002) argued that ethical stance of the student researcher combined with applied rigorous methods were crucial to credibility of any study. In this specific study, the student researcher maintained at all times confidentiality and respect for information from participants. Merriam (2009) states that all ethical decisions should be communicated and clarified so the reader can understand what ethical dilemmas were present and dealt with. In summary, the student researcher was cognizant of all participants’ feelings and emotions that could be present as each of the participants described and communicated information which at times could be quite sensitive.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their HFGS in a first-year initiative retention program at a technical college in Texas. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program?
2. How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions?
3. How has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus?

In finding answers to above research questions, there was heavy reliance on interviews with Hispanic first-generation students and their paired faculty ambassadors. Likewise, the class observations, two grand tours, and one focus group discussion all provided significant secondary data sources to strengthen detailed descriptions and understanding of the mentoring relationships. Data collection began with coding of interview transcripts that amplified voices of both student mentees and faculty ambassadors. Field observations and the field notes became invaluable as support data to interviews that helped all participant voices in this study to emerge.

This chapter started with an introduction of the study participants as each ambassador and their paired HFGS were noted followed by presentation of the findings. Participants are referenced as HFGS for Hispanic first-generation student, faculty ambassador, and the university stated as the study site was Taylor College. The three research questions were answered within their own section as categorical themes are discussed that developed from the data. Categories developed within this study were created through an inductive process and focused on insight and understanding of research questions at hand. The last chapter of this study provided conclusions that instilled a reverting path back to the seminal research literature and knowledge obtained through evaluation of student retention efforts and validation theory.
Study Participants

Primary data for this study was a collection of 12 semi-structured interviews consisting of six pairings of ambassadors and their selected HFGS in a mentoring relationship; secondary data was from observations and one focus group with three additional HFGS participants as note in Table 7. Participant descriptions were arranged in order as actual interviews were conducted and later one focus group and all participants assigned a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality.

Table 7. Student and Faculty Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Student Gender</th>
<th>Degree Department</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Student Age</th>
<th>Traditional or Non-Traditional status</th>
<th>Ambassador &amp; (gender)</th>
<th>Ambassador College Dept.</th>
<th>Ambassador Years of Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ava F</td>
<td>Technology Management</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Sway-F</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice F</td>
<td>Computer Engineering</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Shell-F</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan M</td>
<td>Electronic Engineering</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Sieve-M</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger M</td>
<td>Network Engineering</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Drew-M</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith M</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Ron-M</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John M</td>
<td>Computer Information</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Morgan-F</td>
<td>Liberal Arts Math/CIS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stan M (Focus Group)</td>
<td>Computer Information</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Morgan-F</td>
<td>Liberal Arts Math/CIS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom M (Focus Group)</td>
<td>Computer Information</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Morgan-F</td>
<td>Liberal Arts Math/CIS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe M (Focus Group)</td>
<td>Computer Information</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Morgan-F</td>
<td>Liberal Arts Math/CIS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** (Traditional Status noted by 18-24 yrs. old, went to college directly after high school)
Interview 1: Ava

Ava was a female HFGS transfer student that had been at the university for almost one year. She completed an associate’s degree in computer information systems and transferred to continue her studies in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree in technical management. Her chosen concentration was in business information systems and extended on her in-depth knowledge and experience in computer programming. Ava had made school an intricate part of her master plan to obtain her degree and to continue her education. Ava was a picture of unbounded determination to obtain her degree and talked of graduate school after this accomplishment:

As a programmer, you have to be thinking about code and how users may mess it up. I want to learn as much as I can about computer programming and also project management because these are really hot areas for the future. When I was in my first programming class there was only two females and we felt a little out of place but I wanted to show I could do this just like the boys.

Ava had been close to her ambassador at this university, it was the fourth school she had attended. In addition, she talked about how it was different here and there were a lot of people to help you and make you feel welcomed. The faculty ambassador had really taken to her and Ava described how that had been important to her success. She had many responsibilities as a single mother and full-time employee plus going to school. Ava said that she had an approach to take school one day at a time and she did not care how long it took to get her degree because she would eventually.

Interview 2: Professor Sway

Professor Sway was in College of Business and Management and had been here at the university for 18 years. She was focused in the areas of business information systems and
human resource management. Professor Sway had both undergraduate and graduate students and had an incredible ability to bring twenty plus years of industry experience into teaching:

I encourage my students to build their networks immediately and to foster their contacts and professional relationships. The need to learn this early on is a foundation for a professional career and advancement. Students are the reason we do what we do. My students needed a believer that knew they could do this.

She was passionate about teaching and being a role model for her students. There was no mistake she expected her students to give 110% effort and commit to their educational pursuit. Professor Sway was a model for caring for students and mentoring beyond the classroom.

**Interview 3: Alice**

Next interview was with Alice, a student in the College of Engineering and Information Sciences, majoring in computer engineering technology. Alice showed signs of being gifted in engineering and computer programming at an early age. She was noticed by teachers in high school and asked to join math and science organization in high school. She sometimes struggled with self-confidence and questioned processes in college. Alice doesn’t necessarily love engineering, but she realized she was gifted in this area.

Alice started in local community college immediately after graduating from high school. She struggled with navigating and feeling part of college community. While in high school, Alice won several district and national awards in engineering and project design in which she developed a website and business software system for a business in her community. Alice noted she preferred to learn on her own and was not a strong socializer in school or in general. She was quite analytical in her thinking skills and worked better individually:
Well, I just didn’t really know what was going on here because I came from a community college and that was like way different from how it is here. I am still not that knowledgeable of how things go, so it is really just getting to know what my options are kind of, and where to go for things to get done.

Alice came to this university site approximately one year ago, and still had concerns on learning to navigate from her ambassador and being academically successful in her program. She had been loosely connected with her advisor, and stated at times that she really did not understand the FYI program and why she needed it. Alice was paired with a senior faculty member from College of Liberal Arts and Sciences due to her interest in mathematics.

**Interview 4: Professor Shell**

Professor Shell was a member of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the university, which included mathematics and statistics. Professor Shell had been at the university for 23 years and 22 of that as a full-time faculty member. Her areas of expertise were in mathematics and statistics, which were required for all offered degrees in the university. Professor Shell had a strong connection to students and worked with them on learning to adjust to the demands of a career-based education. She noted that many of her students at this university were full-time workers that go to school at night to seek a degree to better their career opportunities. Many struggled with making and maintaining efforts required to be successful in college with so many other responsibilities including, job, family, and school.

**Interview 5: Juan**

Juan was an engineering student in Bachelor of Science in electronic engineering technology program. This was the third student interview and continued to bring light to the prospective on HFGS in college. Juan was both first-generation to college and also first-
generation to the United States, in that his entire family were from Mexico. Juan was a great example of a student that had a desire to complete college and be the first in his family to do so. He was engaged and focused on success and making his family proud:

Well, when people say you get to college, you are kind of on your own. So, that’s what it was, because in High School, you may have your teachers and you even have your parents to help you out. But once you get to college, you know, it’s a whole another level, like if you slack off… then that’s on you.

The academic progress of Juan had come through a lot of hard work in learning electronics and also English as a second language. His family made it a priority that he and his siblings would come to the United States and learn to speak English and obtain their education. Juan speaks and understands English well and it was hard to recognize it was his second language. As with all students in this study, their exposure to their ambassador was both as ambassador and faculty member teaching them in their program of study. Juan had made learning engineering and school in general a major goal to accomplish for both he and his family.

Interview 6: Professor Sieve

The next interview was with Professor Sieve who just returned from a technical conference. Professor Sieve had been here for 31 years and had served in the Engineering and Information Sciences College. He was a senior professor that served as a faculty member, academic chair, and dean for the engineering college. He was a demanding professor with a specialization in digital signal processing. Professor Sieve talked about students and their need to balance school:

Most of my students are adults and many of them are married, have kids, or already are in relationships. Balancing that aspect of their lives with school and
with work is another challenge that we have to address. Sometimes students are not mature in terms of the decisions made. Students do not put school as priority and we have to work to make sure of that again, to create that balance, putting school first at this stage is important and some other issues can wait.

Professor Sieve was part of the third paired mentoring group and was specifically aligned as the faculty ambassador for Juan. Professor Sieve was demanding of students but had a strong personal investment in each of them. He had worked with Juan both within the classroom and as a mentor and guide. Professor Sieve had a genuine interest in his students to help them learn engineering but also to learn to navigate in life. Professor Sieve knew his students on a first name basis and strived to influence their educational journey.

**Interview 7: Roger**

I had an interview next with Roger at the main campus. Roger was a very interesting individual, a veteran in the United States Marines. He spent almost eight years in the service as a member in the air wing defense, traveling in to Arizona, Virginia, then stationed in Japan for several years. Roger was an advanced communication technician and learned about military communications and networking parameters. Roger described his connectedness to ambassador and how that felt; “I would say it helped a lot knowing that, one, he was willing to help me if I wasn’t completely understanding, if I wasn’t understanding what he was teaching.” Roger mentioned he felt his ambassador cared and really made him feel like this was the place for him and that he could be successful and obtain his degree.

**Interview 8: Professor Drew**

Professor Drew was part of the fourth paired group with the student Roger. He had worked closely with all his students and had a structured approach to learning networking and
the support technologies needed to be successful in this program. He said, “No matter how much I try to emphasize early this is more work than you realize and you need to get started immediately. Students struggle with that usually for a while but they figure it out and then understand that they have got to spend more time working on it.” He was a strong advocate for mentoring, and serving as an ambassador gave him a way of helping students in and out of the classroom as mentees integrated and learned to navigate in school. Professor Drew was known as a demanding professor, but would spend as much times as students needed to learn as long as students were engaged and trying. He had many success stories in his tenure.

**Interview 9: Keith**

The next interview was with Keith, a fifth paired student with Professor Ron as his ambassador. Keith was excited to be part of this study and came to me to inquire about it early. Keith was an older student that had worked in industry for many years before coming to college. He was a lead manager for a multi-location furniture building company. Keith said, “I was just listening to my ambassador talk about what it really takes to run a new modern business; it made so much sense. Accounting is important to me. It’s kind of a foundation of a business. For me, accounting is it, yeah that’s the business side.” He had seen first-hand the need to seek a college education to better support his business.

While he could do all facets of building cabinet tops and associated furniture, he knew that there were needs in making financial decisions that allowed for better control and efficiency. His interest and degree pursuit were in the area of accounting. This was a strong area of need for any growing business. Keith mentioned the importance of helping to take care of his people and that would help the business to be successful for all participants. Keith had a great attitude and passion to be successful both in school and in business.
**Interview 10: Professor Ron**

This interview was with Professor Ron, who is Keith’s ambassador. He was in the College of Business and Management and specialized in accounting. He had been a faculty member of the university for approximately five years. Professor Ron talked about students needing a mentor for academic and life discussions; “All students need some type of mentor to help them out with, you know, the simple aspects of campus, but also the complex nature of course work at times, and so, being a mentor means a lot of different things to me.” Professor Ron was active in accounting and worked closely with the Texas Board of Accountancy as both a CPA and also a Tax Attorney. He was engaged with his students and spent significant time with them as they learned accounting and sought reaching degree conferral.

**Interview 11: John**

The next interview was with John. He was the sixth paired student mentee with Professor Morgan as his ambassador. John was in computer information systems with a concentration in database management. John was a veteran of the U.S. Army and currently held an associate’s degree in paralegal studies from another career-based school. John talked about the need to integrate at school, “That's just a matter of getting acclimated to school and your surroundings and once you come to this campus more and more you get to meet more people so you become more accountable.” He was involved in programming while in the Army and in his career prior to being in the military. John talked about campus integration and acclimating into school.

**Interview 12: Professor Morgan**

The last interview was with Professor Morgan. She was a faculty ambassador within the sixth group with student mentee John. Professor Morgan had been in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for 19 years, specializing in mathematics and computer programming. She had
virtually all students including freshmen that were taking mathematics for their degree program. Professor Morgan had extended her teaching breathe to include computer programming, an area she was fluent in as an engineer.

Professor Morgan had a special ability to help students understand mathematics and enjoyed working with new freshman students. She recognized that many of her students feared mathematics and some had bad prior experiences. Professor Morgan relied on support and motivation and helped her students to break down the walls of learning mathematics. Math was a major hurdle for most students with maybe the exception of engineering students. I looked forward to talking with Professor Morgan and knew she would bring insight on mentoring.

Focus Group Participants

A focus group was conducted on 5-23-16 within an interview room at the library, which was chosen as a good meeting location by student participants. Initially four students showed interest in a focus group discussion, the three that attended were computer information systems students with Professor Morgan as their ambassador. The students are described below and one student, Marcia, an accounting student, was sick that day and did not attend focus group. Focus group participants collectively felt additional help was needed to navigate online shells and course tools with confidence; online shells are a component of every course. Overall, focus group participants communicated the same thematic information as prior students in interviews strengthening the researcher’s decision that data collection was now complete.

Focus Group: Stan

Stan was a student in College of Engineering and Information Sciences, pursuing a degree in Computer Information Systems with a concentration in Database Management. In talking with Stan about computer information he said, “I have been in manufacturing and
computer control system for many years, so this was a natural extension to that.” Stan talked about how manufacturing industry relies on computers and robotics. Stan, felt he needed to get a college education in this area to stay up on technology and his career. He struggled initially with balancing work, family, and college in terms of time and juggling responsibilities.

Focus Group: Tom

Tom came to Taylor College because he had heard a lot of his work colleagues mention it as a great school for electronics and programming. He was a student in College of Engineering and Information Science and was studying for a degree in Computer Information Systems with a concentration in Cyber Security Programming. Tom said, “I spent six years in the Army as a network systems specialist and wanted to continue my education in security area.” When the new concentration was developed at Taylor College in Cyber Security, he was ready to get started learning and seeking his degree. Tom had an outstanding first year in Cyber Security and held a 4.00 GPA in his studies.

Focus Group: Joe

Joe came to Taylor College as a transfer student from a large public university in Texas. He stated that he had always loved computers and programming was a passion for him. Joe talked about his love for computers at an early age, “I started with a Windows 95 computer as a kid learning to program while in middle and high school.” He was now in the College of Engineering and Information Sciences in pursuit of a degree in Computer Information Systems with a concentration in Web Development. Joe mentioned feeling overwhelmed and lost at a large public university. After making the decision to seek other school options, he found his place at Taylor College with small classes and a caring faculty ambassador that provided concerted support and guidance as Joe focused on his studies.
Grand Tour Description of Taylor College

Taylor College was not a traditional campus; it was integrated into a technology based industrial setting amongst electronic and biomedical industry corporations. There were no campus dorms for student housing as all students were commuter students. Students would not find plush campus lawns or athletic fields; instead there were concrete parking lots and a vibrant business center with the campus surrounded by technology-based companies. Taylor College was less than a mile from a major international airport; students and faculty saw and heard a constant stream of commercial airplanes flying right over this campus day and night for landing or take off, and that loud sound of jet engines became a familiar backdrop of this career-focused campus. This campus reflected a connection to both industry and technology-driven entities around it and supported a need to educate technology professionals in surrounding community.

Taylor College was a career-oriented school that resided in a two-story brown brick building co-located with a nursing school owned by the same educational group in a large city in Texas. The major focus is technology-centered degree programs that taught students in areas like networking, engineering, and business occupations. When entering this facility, the first door was admissions center and there was always a person there to greet visitors. Classrooms, labs, and library were on the second floor; most classes were held in evening hours to better accommodate working adults. Administrative and faculty offices were also on the second floor within an area called Student Central. Students frequently mentioned positive support from faculty at Taylor College and its student-centered focus on helping them reach degree goals.

Entering Taylor College, was like walking into a hi-tech company and/or hospital facility. On the first floor in view, was a display area that showed both medical and engineering projects including a robot with a speech synthesizer and voice recognition system. For new
student orientation, that robot would be near the front door to say “Hi” as students and faculty entered the building. Similarly, the nursing school had their nursing student lounge, which was designed like a doctor’s office and allowed students to display lab projects and then periodically conduct health fairs. The campus did not look like any traditional college campus building but as a new-edge based technology career facility.

**Findings**

Data was collected from interviews, observations, campus grand tours, and one focus group. It was then analyzed and synthesized into eight categories to answer the three research questions, summarized in Table 7. Starting with research question one, what is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program was explained through four categories: 1. ‘Building trust between ambassador and student mentee,’ 2. ‘Strategizing ways for students to balance personal and academic responsibilities,’ 3. ‘Offering encouragement and care for students by ambassadors’ and 4. ‘Talking about everything.’ The second research question, how have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions. There were two categories that showed presence for these study participants 1. ‘Reinterpreting students’ past education experiences’ and 2. ‘Strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias.’ Research question three, how has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus, had two categories 1. ‘Helping students with emotional engagement at the campus,’ and 2. ‘Providing tools to help students independently navigate college.’ An additional findings section was included to explore possible changes to the current FYI program that multiple participants believed beneficial for future students. This section was not included in Table 8. with other findings because it did not specifically focus on answering the research questions, but it was determined relevant to this FYI retention program and its future improvement.
Table 8. Summary of Findings

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The Nature of Mentoring Relationships

What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program was explained through four categories: 1. ‘Building trust between ambassador and student mentee,’ 2. ‘Strategizing ways for students to balance personal and academic responsibilities,’ 3. ‘Offering encouragement and care for students by ambassadors,’ and 4. ‘Talking about everything.’ In this case study, student mentoring follows that conceptual process of aligning experienced faculty members as ambassadors with incoming freshman students in an effort to help the students learn to navigate college and processes involved in supporting their success. This particular study is centered on seeking understanding of these unique mentoring relationships between new HFGS and their faculty ambassador as students go through their first year of studies at Taylor College. Excerpts from interviews, observations, and a focus group are included as examples to help strengthen the readers’ understanding of mentoring relationships and highlight students’ personal connectedness with their ambassadors as these relationships matured. It is important to acknowledge that not all students or ambassadors in this study thought every mentoring relationship was successful or even necessarily helpful for all of the participants involved.

Building Trust between Ambassador and Student Mentee

As the first construct of mentoring relationships, the phenomenon of building trust between ambassadors and their students had multiple-phases of depth. Building trust between an ambassador and student mentee was defined as learning to rely on and feel confident in another person’s opinion and direction. Trust took time and not all students started at the same place in these trust building phases. What students were looking for in mentors was someone who believed in them. Trust building usually started slowly and built over time and not all students were at or reached the same place in this process. This process did not happen instantaneously,
for many students it took time and students moved at a different pace as the building trust process emerged. One way to initiate this trust relationship was to create meaningful communication avenues and give students a chance to express their ideas, beliefs, and to be themselves. As an example of this hierarchy-process of positive trust building; Juan talked about the beginning point of trust and how his relationship grew stronger with his ambassador as this process developed:

Well, at first I kind of came at it from just a student-faculty member point of view. I wanted to keep information minimal, just wanted him to know what he needed to know. But after a while, we kind of made that connection, I was now unafraid to let him know anything going on in my life or any issues. He gained my respect and trust.

When ambassadors allowed their students a voice and validated the importance of multiple viewpoints considered in discussions, trust building started. HFGS new to college needed assertive support, to feel their existence mattered, and their needs acknowledged.

In building trust relationships, there was vulnerability present especially for students as they had to trust their ambassador enough to follow their advice and open up to communicate needs. But, not all of these students started in the same phase of trust; many brought doubt about mentoring and relying on anyone to help them. As an example, Alice was reluctant to accept mentoring or to understand why she needed any support; she said, “I don’t normally like to tell everybody anything about me; I usually just try to figure out what it is that I need in school by myself, and then who to ask about it.” In another example of the first phase of trust building, Joe, also had an initial wall between him and his faculty mentor; because he had a lack of trust from the experiences before in school; he commented, “I really had to work at trust because others
have let me down before and I just thought I could do this all on my own, but my ambassador stayed with me through this time.” This human process of confiding in another person was a complex and sometimes lengthy endeavor.

Trust building relationships started with an introduction of the ambassador and new students at new student orientation (NSO), as students started their new relationship most kept personal information sharing minimal. NSO is always held on campus in a large classroom that has been setup with tables in the round somewhat dictating that everyone forms into groups from the start. This allows the new students to gather in groups at a designated table with their pre-selected ambassador. The students enter campus, many for the first time, to meet student peers and are introduced to their ambassador that will be by their side as mentor. Students have no idea that they are going to be assigned to a faculty ambassador or how important that relationship can be to helping their assimilation into a new campus environment. NSO sets expectations associated with being a new student and centers attention on prioritizing school and building connections with both one’s ambassador and student peers that are on this educational journey.

NSO will give a view for all new students of where things are on campus and who the campus colleagues are including faculty and staff teams. It is important to spend time on introductions of colleagues at campus, locations of their offices as well as the learning center, financial aid, and student support teams so that new students can confidently navigate around campus. NSO is divided into sections so each department has an opportunity to speak to incoming students. Students also attend a break-out session with their new ambassador who spends time going over the FYI retention program and talks about student mentoring and their expectations for future meetings with each of their new student mentees. This is a time that the
ambassador wants to establish open communications and let their students know that they are available and there to help each student be successful.

In the second phase of building trust, there were meaningful conversations on helping the mentees learn how to be successful with problem-solving skills. As an example of learning these problem-solving skills, Professor Ron and Morgan had similar metaphors for taking a step-by-step journey up the stairs or in climbing a mountain as an approach to learning how to proactively manage and solve problems. As other participants described this with slightly different words, there were common meanings that surfaced pertaining to breaking down large problems into solvable smaller ones. Students and faculty talked about the need to learn a step-by-step approach to be successful and not let their problems become overwhelming. This ability to learn structured approaches to problem solving and to break large problems into smaller manageable ones was applied to conquering both school assignments plus better managing problems in life.

Ambassadors taught their students about learning problem-solving skills. In defining this example as part of building trust, ambassadors helped students to develop a success plan and to use certain techniques that could be used to address and resolve issues. The faculty ambassadors brought similar analogies of helping students break down large problems into actionable steps within their educational journey. Students needed someone with expertise to help them learn how to reach through their problems and associate with people who believe it was possible. In the small focus group meeting, Tom, a computer information systems student, talked about how his ambassador [professor] reiterated the goal of becoming successful in computer programming; “Computer programming is like eating a pie; you have to do this a piece at a time. The faculty ambassador, Morgan, stated “There is no way to eat a whole pie at once you have to do it in
pieces.” In this study, HFGS had to have trust in their ambassadors and learn these step-by-step approaches to better problem solving by taking small steps.

Learning to solve problems was a significant skillset that was applied daily in college and extended into our personal lives. One of the strongest tools to managing problems was breaking problems down into manageable entities to be solve. Professor Ron talked about how applying problem solving techniques worked both in accounting and in life; he talked about how building trust with his students and reaching out early was important:

A step-by-step approach for structured problem solving is like learning to climb your staircase, it must be broken down into smaller pieces to be solved. I let them know that it’s all a building block, think of it as a staircase, you’ve got to make it up the stairs to get to your goals.

Problem solving is learning to manage large complexity and finding that all large problems are a collection of smaller ones. Climbing the staircase step by step served as an analogy to learning to achieve goals by using problem solving techniques to manage obstacles and find solutions.

Some students also struggled with addressing and solving their own problems; they needed a step-by-step approach on breaking these down and learning to successfully find a solution. Professor Morgan used a metaphor parallel to Professor Ron of climbing the mountain to taking a step-by-step approach to learning how to solve problems. She thought it was crucial that students recognize climbing the mountain must be planned out and broken down into steps just like problem solving in college and life. Professor Morgan emphasized this analogy; she said, “We are going over this mountain and students don’t think they can do it and we are going to make it to the top and go over the other side. You have to give them confidence that they can
go over the mountain.” Students can be overwhelmed if they do not have guidance and a plan to follow to tackling problems head on.

Learning problem-solving was a crucial element in building trust between students and their ambassadors. Without such trust, ambassadors could not help students move forward or provide accepted guidance. As an example of problem solving discussed with the ambassador, students learned this process; First, identify and write down the specific problem. Second, write the impact; determine if the problem was dependent on other issues, or if it could be isolated. Third, list proposed solutions, evaluating their potential for addressing the problem. Next, rank the possible solutions and determine the best one with guidance from the ambassador. Finally, implement the solution into action and assess its effectiveness and need for adjustment.

Problem solving and learning to manage school issues were valuable tools needed to help students succeed in college. Many students in this study had never learned how to break down problems into solvable pieces for themselves. As an example of this, Juan stated that his paired ambassador helped him build a success plan that strengthened his confidence and gave him a map for solving problems; “I can actually accomplish this, this is stuff I could do, it was just a matter of breaking problems down and he helped me with that.” As well, Ava mentioned that “problem-solving techniques help you to go through the road blocks and challenges that will come towards you and you learn to push forward to succeed.” Other students in this study, had similar troubles initially learning how to break down large problems into smaller ones that could be solved sequentially. Many students mentioned they struggled and even became overwhelmed with attempting problem-solving without later learned methods. An example of a problem to be addressed, was determining the correct course load for each session and developing an academic plan that included enough time to study and attend scheduled tutoring appointments.
As an example of trust building relationships reaching the third and highest phase, included students now talking about their personal issues and seeking advice from their ambassador. Students including Ava, Juan, Joe, Roger, Stan, Keith, and Tom talked about how their relationships changed to feeling more confident in their ambassador and sought advice on school and life issues. While, Alice and John overcame significant struggles; they did not reach the third phase and were more reserved with discussing personal information. As an example of reaching the highest phase, Ava expressed her feelings about her ambassador and how their relationship had grown stronger as her ambassador provided needed advice and guidance; “She [ambassador] is always checking on me and reaching out to make sure that I am ok. My ambassador gives thoughtful guidance in how I might handle certain situations, she cares about my success and well-being.” Similarly, Joe mentioned how his ambassador reached out to help him get acclimated after coming back to school; he said “She [ambassador] took the time to meet with me at campus multiple times and went over needed programming structure concepts before class started, that really strengthened my understanding and our relationship.” HFGS’s in this study talked openly about how important one-on-one discussions with their ambassadors had become which provided direction, advice, and a person to listen to concerns.

The process of building a trusted relationship and reaching this higher phase of personal caring required patience and both parties had to be willing to communicate needs as they emerged. When this subject of trust came up, Roger talked about consulting with his ambassador about a career change that was stressful for both he and his family, he stated; “My ambassador has the best intentions for what he’s telling me and whatever he tells me I have respect for him and trust his word now that I know him, to where when he tells me something I keep it. Similarly, Professor Sieve mentioned, “Many of my students have not had wonderful
experiences with school, they need time to trust you and what you are saying to them. This is not an easy or quick process, you have to be patient and recognize that students do not always tell you what they need or feel.” In this study, numerous participants communicated that patience and time were needed for trust relationships to have a chance to both improve and be successful in moving through these phases of depth.

Building trust at this highest level focused on personal student needs and ambassadors knowing and supporting their students both academically and as a caring friend. One of the students, Keith said “My new ambassador [professor] made me feel like he really cared and was always there to support me. He gave out his cell phone number and said call if you get stuck on your classwork or anything else.” Also, Stan in the focus group commented that his ambassador was really patient, she knew my background “She took time outside of class to help me with acclimating back into college after coming out of the military which really helped me.” Additionally, Professor Shell was linked to being an ambassador for Alice approximately one year ago and try to help her with integration. She establishes a link to her students that was based on understanding the needs of working adults with many other responsibilities plus going to college. Professor Shell talked about her aspiration as an ambassador to build trust and respect in her classroom:

Well it starts by building trust factor with them being in your class. It doesn’t happen right away but two or three weeks in and maybe students are coming into class a little early or staying a little late that’s when you talk on a more personal level, that’s where mentoring comes in, some students tell you, how rough their day has been and you try to get them to discuss other issues with you as they begin opening up.
Building trust extended for most students in this study with their ambassador to having a friend and advocate in their corner to discuss issues pertaining to school and in life.

Building trust was an ongoing effort as many students did not have prior experience with success in school nor with a faculty mentor who provided support. As student participants talked about trust and their ambassador relationship, it was as though they were talking about a family member or close friend whom they confided in and trusted completely. Many students in this study needed more than just academic support because some displayed low self-confidence and were unsure they could be successful. The need for ambassadors to mentor new HFGS was evident as a strong intervention effort in each student’s behalf. Students in time began to open up and rely on their ambassador for guidance and support. They knew they could reach out to such a trusted person, who would direct them and validate their importance in school.

The need for direction and guidance to keep students on track was central to building their trust within this mentoring relationship. Providing guidance and reaching out was defined as helping students know their ambassador believed in them, made sure they were doing well in classes, and provided direction on a consistent basis. As an example of reaching out, Stan said his ambassador really reached out frequently and made him feel they could work together; “My ambassador was always checking on me and making sure that I was getting it [understanding material], that really helped us bond.” Similarly, Professor Morgan, stated “my students are always amazed I know their names, recognizing students as people goes a long way in building our relationship.” Roger talked about confiding in his ambassador and making an effort of reaching out for advice; “My ambassador guided me when I asked questions about how to get into networking profession and skills needed there.” Faculty were passionate about knowing
their students; they wanted their students to know they could count on them as a trusted guide and help them be successful in college.

Later in this study, a small focus group discussion with three students was conducted and participants offered their experiences on trust building with their ambassador. As an example of trust building at the highest level of trust, Tom stated he had a strong trust in his ambassador and mentioned how helpful their relationship was to him; “I have a great respect for my ambassador and she has really helped me in school and in career discussions. She took time to talk with me when I was making a career change and I was nervous and stressed and she provided great guidance.” One item frequently mentioned by participants was feeling their ambassador treated them as peers not just as students and always sought to help them with their problems along the way. Also, Stan in discussions about his ambassador providing support stated; “My ambassador provides support by reaching out to see that I am making it and my needs are being met.” Many student participants mentioned how their ambassador felt more than just a professor to them, but as a trusted friend that they could confide in and discuss any school or personal issues with.

In summary, the process of trust building had distinct phases starting with the first introduction to the faculty ambassadors at the NSO meeting. Initially, most students were guarded about opening up and sharing information about themselves with their new ambassador. As this process of mentoring began to have one-on-one meetings and time to have discussions on how school was going and learning needed problem solving skills such as time management; many students started to acknowledge the support and open up about their academic needs. In time, some of the students became closer to their ambassadors and ask for their opinions and directions on problems that were more personal in nature and beyond the boundaries of school. Overall, most HFGS moved through these phases and found that their relationships with their
ambassadors helped them to learn how to better adjust and manage school on their own. In the next category on trust building, the need for students to learn strategies of balancing personal and academic responsibilities of family, friends, and work around going to college are explored.

**Strategizing Ways for Students to Balance Personal and Academic Responsibilities**

This second construct of the nature of mentoring relationships helped explain how students worked with their ambassadors to learn how to manage multiple responsibilities including the addition of college. Strategizing to balance personal and academic responsibilities were defined as the learned skills to better adjust multiple accountabilities for one’s family, occupation, and going to college concurrently; success required trusting the ambassador as new strategies were learned and implemented. These mentoring relationships were categorized as a collaborative process between ambassadors and mentees that goes beyond just academics, and included the need for students to balance personal and academic responsibilities. Ambassadors mentioned some HFGS had never learned how to be successful or manage their time with several responsibilities. Students also communicated the problem of not having people who experienced college to talk to besides their ambassador; strategies to help with balancing responsibilities were brought up regularly but had different degrees of success.

Ambassadors and students talked about how college expectations had to be explained clearly so students could align multiple responsibilities and better manage their time. As an example of responsibilities explained, Keith talked about the difficulties of being a husband, father, and full-time employee with accountabilities in addition to school. He had to work on making adjustments to balance all of these and make his life work for him and his family, he recalled thinking, “I’m going to do this; I’m going to go back to school.” In addition, Ava stressed how difficult it initially was managing school and being a single mom for her child; “I
had to learn how to balance all of these together: family, work, and school talking it through with my parents and faculty ambassador, they all were so supportive.” Learning how to develop a daily planning schedule was a major strategy learned in ambassador meetings with mentors. HFGS communicated that working with their ambassador taught them on how learned strategies could be applied and help them with managing their responsibilities with family, work, and school effectively.

In one-on-one meetings, ambassadors covered many learning strategies including time management for college freshmen and setting up weekly planners to include class schedule, weekly study time, scheduled tutoring, and time allocated to upcoming major projects for the academic session. As an example of needed strategies, Joe initially had a challenging time in getting his head around needed adjustment for studying, and what college would be like. He stated, “I thought this would be just like high school and I would be ok to just keep my same routine. But, it was way different and the rigor of college was not like high school.” Similarly, Roger also struggled with a need for learning time management; “I first had no time management skills whatsoever; I would put everything off till the last minute and then I’d be up all night trying to do it.” Many students in this study had to adjust their study habits and allocate more time to be successful in college.

Another major issue was the balancing of family as many HFGS in this study were married and/or had children. As an example of balancing family needs, Roger in his interview brought up a prior email and showed it to me from his phone, he had kept it and it clearly was important to him; it was a conversation that came from his faculty ambassador that showed an understanding of family and need to balance obligations as a parent:
He [ambassador] knows my family situation and if anything comes up he sends me an email; “Let me know if this isn’t going to work for you.” Like for instance, we had a holiday coming up and he had to change class from our regular day to another day. So, he sent out an email that said, Roger, I know you have a family and that is first priority; if this new day and time isn’t going to work for you, please let me know.

As participants talked about this issue, it was clear that school took away important time from family obligations. Moreover, Ava mentioned a similar experience with her ambassador, who called her one day after work just to see how she was doing in her classes. Ava said, “She told me that she was here if I need to talk or to come in anytime I needed to, she has always been there like that.” Students had to adjust their schedules with family, and friends to make major sacrifices to succeed in school. Overall, this issue of balancing responsibilities had to be well understood and students had to be willing to learn balancing strategies to allocate the time needed towards their college studies to be successful.

The decision to go to college and the need to balance additional responsibilities simultaneously were difficult for this student group. The process of attending school at night after working all day was another issue that required a strategy to implement so students could balance both work and school. Professor Sieve discussed the need of his students to reassess balancing work and school responsibilities as they began school at night after a full day of work:

The electronics and computer engineering program are evening programs and we have students who are full-time workers. They come to us for night school right after work. One issue is balancing work with school. We try to find a balance that can allow school and work to co-exist.
Many times, HFGS did not have realistic expectations of college and requirements of time to be successful, so mentoring centered on getting balance of responsibilities adjusted and followed.

Interviews with HFGS revealed that not all had planned to go to college, and those decisions were not pre-planned events. Stan mentioned how until entering the military, he had no intention or reason for going to college. He said, “When I got out of high school, I entered the military and in many ways, that was my first experience in hearing about the importance of college and obtaining a degree.” Similarly, Professor Sway stated, “Several of my students talk about not being expected to be in college or how to be successful if they did go.” In terms of going to college, John mentioned that when he finished high school, most people either went into the military or to work; “I did not even think college was possible at that time, so I went into the military right after high school.” Students while from different backgrounds and experiences, communicated it was difficult to have meaningful discussions about college with parents or friends, as they had no understanding of college and its positive attributes.

The process of addressing the needs of these new students that were new to college and had somehow found their way here was a significant part of building integration. Faculty ambassadors talked about how they met with their new students as soon as possible; and started conversations about how they would be there to provide support. One starting point, was to give these students a foundation that started with validating their decision to be here to seek a college education. As an example of strategies employed, Professor Sway talked about starting a new relationship by learning about her individual students. Where were they from and how was their family as a bridge to building a plan for balance of the students’ responsibilities and support needs. She said, “I want to find out about this individual, what has brought them here? What are their goals and how does college fit into their lives? Likewise, other faculty ambassadors
mentioned a similar strategy to start their connection with new students. As another example, Professor Morgan stated, “I open up just easy conversations talking about student interest and learn about their dreams; I need to have a reference of where did they come from and what has brought them here at this time. If, I can find what they are interested in and what is their unique goals; then I can build a personal plan to support them and get them acclimated to being a successful participant in this new environment.” Students also communicated learned strategies to balance their lives with college; Stan noted, “My first day here when I met my ambassador was a sigh of relief, I was going to have someone that I could talk to as she was so open to listening and not just giving me a speech on what to do. She took time to learn about me.” Likewise, Ava mentioned that her ambassador customized a schedule that included tutoring time and one-on-one open discussions with her about just anything I wanted to talk about. She said” My ambassador took time to listen to me and learn about me, I really appreciate that before giving me advice. One thing that I needed was someone to just talk to; as a single mom, I had lots of doubts about if I could do this and she was such a positive vibe to me.” In addition, Professor Sieve mentioned, “I need to get to know my new students first and these small class sizes give me that opportunity to have a strong influence as an ambassador to my students.” The students in this study, communicated that the time spent learning about strategies from their ambassador for balancing their responsibilities was one of the most important skills needed to be successful in college.

In terms of the importance of managing family, work, and school, all participants talked about how difficult that was especially in the first few sessions of college. On the subject of having multiple responsibilities, Tom stated, “I am a husband, father, and full-time employee so adding school to that equation definitely was and is a struggle, but it should pay off.” All the
student participants acknowledged balance causing huge issues in the beginning; Stan said, “At first, I felt like all of these family, work, and school needs competed against each other all the time.” Not all students felt their ambassador’s connection or being able to obtain understanding was successful. As another example of this phenomenon, Alice gave a candid picture of needed balance and simply feeling that her ambassador really did not understand her desperation. She stated, “I had a conversation with my ambassador when I was going through a tough time, I was moving, had a new baby, and just got married, and I was getting pressure from my husband’s family. My ambassador didn’t understand how to help.” In addition, many of the participants mentioned having to adjust and address volatile balance repeatedly and to be successful required a lot of direct communication and understanding from all parties including their family members, ambassador and professors, and their work colleagues and manager.

Managing school, family, and work for most students improved after their initial first two or three sessions of school as they adjusted and found the best plan to be effective in their efforts. Most students took a few sessions with their ambassador to adjust to a new routine and additional responsibility of college. The need for support and guidance made the ambassador connection crucial as students were balancing their school and lives. As an example of taking time to adjust to school, Juan said in his grand tour, “is hard to believe where I am at now almost through my first year of college; my ambassador has pushed me to be here and successfully learn to manage everything.” Similarly, to Juan, Joe stated in the focus group, “I took a while to get aligned with going to school and my ambassador was helpful in sorting things out so I could truly focus on school.” The time spent with ambassadors allowed HFGS to better understand the process of balancing their responsibilities around school.
In summary, HFGS in this study needed guidance and instruction on how to conquer problems that seemed to be overwhelming and became distractions to focusing on school. One of the major strategies learned was to take large problems and dis-assemble them into a collection of smaller ones. Then a strategy to solve the smaller problems could be implemented. Another significant strategic skill was to learn time-management which helped students to better organize and manage their day-to-day activities. Students worked with their ambassador to create a planned schedule that included times noted for studying and reserved tutoring sessions. The next personal construct in explaining the mentoring relationship looks at supporting encouragement and care for students and included an effort from all campus colleagues especially ambassador’s function in leading student mentoring and providing guidance.

**Offering Encouragement and Care for Students by Ambassadors**

A third construct that helped to explain the nature of mentoring relationships was defined as the pro-active efforts of ambassadors in offering reassurance and attention to support students with college and life-related needs. Providing encouragement and thoughtful care for students was a universal objective for all ambassadors at this study location. As an example of caring and being straightforward with students, Ava mentioned her experiences with her ambassador and how important caring and encouragement was for her:

It was important that my ambassador was always honest and told me the truth on what to expect in school. She was not telling me some kind of fairytale– she was straight forward on how things are going to be – I think for me that really helps if someone’s going to tell you their life-related experiences and how they got to where they are now. She shared that with me and I could see her commitment.
Ava’s comment about not wanting someone to tell her a fairytale, but the truth, was reflective of the prominence that she needed honesty and support from her ambassador. Ava displayed a depth of understanding true commitment, and her passion to be successful in college and in life irrespective of the challenges. For most HFGS, going to college was stepping out into the unknown. They had few resources to help them when making this unfamiliar life decision. The ambassadors’ efforts showed that encouraging and caring personally for students could give them a better chance for persistence.

Another significant aspect of encouragement was each ambassadors’ availability to their students. In light of encouragement, John mentioned, “One thing I would share is every single instructor and my ambassador were always willing to assist with any problems should they arise. They provided us with their email and cell phone numbers and lots of encouragement to stay directly connected.” Availability of ambassadors was also important to other students in this study, Stan also said that availability was helpful and needed; “My ambassador and other faculty encourage us to reach out to them anytime needed, which makes a huge difference to me.” The students frequently mentioned that faculty [ambassadors] provided availability outside of normal campus hours to support and help them. A major outcome of providing encouragement signified giving students’ confidence in themselves. Professor Morgan stated, “They are looking for somebody that will listen to them; I don’t think they are getting that from anybody outside school.” In talking about encouragement with Ava, she also mentioned how important this has been for her; “My personal journey is being a single mom trying to get her degree and my ambassador really helped encourage me to just keep going. I felt mentoring discussions helped me connect to her [ambassador] and also to school.” Encouragement from faculty ambassadors
was critical to building self-confidence for students in this case study and helping them to believe in themselves.

Many HFGS in this study mentioned never receiving encouragement before coming to Taylor College campus particularly in their high school years. Joe mentioned in high school he was a slacker, his teachers never encouraged him to focus on school success or college; “I felt they just wanted to get through their day; they did not have time to provide support to every student like me.” John communicated that while at other schools, he never had teachers tell him he could go to college and be successful at it. He said, “In high school we were not encouraged about college; after graduation, we went to work. I was fortunate the military helped me build self-encouragement to strive for my best efforts.” Ambassadors had a consistent view that needed encouragement was missing in many cases; students had little acknowledgement of their abilities to succeed in college.

Encouragement of students and working to develop confidence were strong parts of mentoring these HFGS in this study. While there were variations in experience and exposure for each student of this study, all needed someone in their behalf to remind them they were supposed to be here and could make it. Stan suggested, “We all need support but I thought that college was not for me at one time.” Unfortunately, there were stories from some students that displayed a lack of encouragement either in high school or at another college that derailed their self-confidence. Alice also mentioned, “I never felt comfortable at prior colleges, and my ambassador here sometimes just did not understand what I was going through.” Many HFGS suggested without encouragement from family or peers it was hard to see why they should go to college, but for most students in this study their ambassador helped build their self-confidence and gave them hope to be successful.
Recognizing unique needs of HFGS brought accolades for many ambassadors, and providing student care was important to them for each mentee’s individual success. Student care was defined as going beyond virtual boundaries of being a teacher; care for students included being an advocate and seeking to remove barriers that impeded success. Ava talked about her ambassador connection and how student care was needed for HFGS that came to college; “There were still struggles in my ambassador’s /professor’s life that you can’t see on a daily basis, but to see they overcame struggles is important to my current journey.” Professor Shell also stated, “You can see this connection get friendlier and sometimes the students share more with you of what’s going on in their life, so it does grow and evolve.” Strong connections between the ambassadors and HFGS were an important part of successful student care helping students to understand their ambassador was there to help them.

Caring for students was not about marketing a product or service; it was a genuine effort to engage with students to help them connect with faculty support. Keith mentioned this caring connection with his ambassador, “When I first came here and met my ambassador; he was really forthcoming; he totally let me be part of his life, because I spoke to him on week nights and weekends even. He said to let him know how I was doing;” Student care had many examples outside classroom as well; faculty believed in helping students succeed. An example was a fund supported by colleague and alumni donations that allowed students in financial hardships to apply for financial assistance. Professor Sieve said a local alumni group sought to help Taylor College students in need by providing textbooks and tuition support for their first-year classes.

Examples of displayed care included a grand tour of the campus by a student and faculty ambassador separately explaining their day-to-day routine, including the location of classrooms and offices and where they go on campus that was important to them. One of the grand tours
with Professor Drew reinforced his strong belief in student care as he said; “I tell my students that I want them to succeed and that I will focus on what is in their best interest to learn.” The other grand tour was with Juan who mentioned his ambassador frequently. Juan stated his ambassador always pushed him to work hard and truly cared about his success:

From day-one he [ambassador] stuck with me and made sure our relationship was working, he [ambassador] cares that I make it and make him proud. He laid out a study plan and frequent tutoring requirements for me and when he did that, it was not at first easy to understand, but he made me look at it. Okay, I can actually accomplish this plan.

The grand tour continued with Professor Drew, who led us through the information technology server room to see allocated networking equipment for his classes. He suggested, “Networking is intense as if the students are now network administrators at a corporate site with responsibility for customers’ accounts on corporate network.” Roger mentioned, “Yes, I don’t want to miss class; he is going to go over a lot of important stuff and I need to know this.” Also, Tom, who has a career focus in network security, re-iterated this point saying; “That guy [Professor Drew] he knows his stuff and he will make sure that you do too.” Many students in the networking program indicated that it was like being in a training center but also indicated Professor Drew cared about his students and their success in school and in their future career. The next construct, talking about everything is discussed as students reach a higher level of trust in their ambassador.

**Talking about Everything**

Additional roles of ambassadors in the FYI included non-academic conversations with students. “Talking about everything” became a theme and sometimes even included difficult
subjects; but many students in this study confided in the ambassador and frequently ask for direction. This fourth theme was defined as discussions that had no direct correlation to school, but students needed support with managing school and life issues concurrently. HFGS in this study were in need of someone to provide support and guidance in life-related issues. It became clear after some in-depth discussions, that students would not only need support in the classroom but beyond. No magic formulas existed for designing a homogenous intervention program that would fit all students the same; each had unique needs. Students had many concerns about life needs that needed attention and sometimes required outside professional intervention that had to be discussed and implemented.

Faculty ambassadors mentioned that one of their goals was to get their HFGS talking about everything on their mind. Many HFGS asked for advice and needed a person to listen to their concerns and discuss life related issues. In looking at this observation holistically as the student researcher, the current retention initiative needed to contain the ability to help students manage their environment and focus on school efforts. As an example, Professor Sieve discussed life related needs with students as their relationship matured:

We got into some difficult discussions and you have to be careful how to tread water, but at the same time, you feel responsible to teach these kids some social skills that they have not gotten until this point. Students feel comfortable to come to me and talk about their life issues and I try to give them advice on what to do. Being able to have difficult conversations between ambassadors and students was needed to move forward and build on their relationship. In addition, Keith mentioned that direct conversations really helped him and his relationship with his ambassador became stronger:
I’ve had many positive discussions with my ambassador. I had put kind of a wall up sometimes; Do I really want to share my personal problems with my professor, because is it going to count against me. When I opened up about everything, my professor [ambassador] made it easier to understand that; “No there is no wall,” because every problem including life ones needed to come out.

The ambassadors in this study communicated they sometimes felt their students were needing someone beyond a mentor or guide. The one-on-one conversations led in a few instances to help the students seek outside professional help to discuss concerns or life issues. Taylor College provides outsourced medical and psychologist services that all students enrolled have access to, and is completely confidential. Ambassadors and student mentees mentioned the need to honestly discuss all concerns so that students could direct their attention to college. Talking about everything, brought them closer to their ambassador and helped build trust in that relationship as they continued their educational journey to persist in their first year of college.

Section Summary

This section described four themes on understanding the nature of the mentoring relationship between ambassadors and HFGS: 1. Building trust between ambassador and student mentee, 2. Strategizing ways for students to balance personal and academic responsibilities, 3. Offering encouragement and care for students by ambassadors. And lastly, 4. Talking about everything. All four categories helped answer research question one on “What is the nature of the mentoring relationship.” An example of building trust was illuminated by the student participants as they described the importance of having an ambassador who was more than a mere teacher. Their ambassador believed in them, provided guidance and direction, and knew they could succeed. Ambassadors offered encouragement and care for their students which was
at the heart of mentoring. As students began to trust their ambassador, they opened up more about life-related issues with confidence.

In all data collected and assessed in this study, the persistent message from students and their faculty ambassadors emphasized the need for giving students significant encouragement. Showing daily student care and frequently stating you can do this and I am here to support along the way. As Joe stated in focus group, “I needed someone to believe in me, to build me up, and state that I could do this.” Professor Morgan, Joe’s ambassador, encouraged him constantly and said she believed in him; she said, “Keep your eyes on your goals of graduating. Just keep going one step at a time towards your goals and you will succeed.” Encouragement and care were needed commodities with new HFGS; they relied on someone who believed they could make it.

Building trust was a phenomenon that required HFGS to rely on having someone to support and encourage them in their journey in college. Ambassadors provided an advocate that taught HFGS they could be successful and learn to believe in themselves; for many students, this was a new experience. However, trust relationships were difficult for many HFGS in this study; some had a reluctance to accept help or be vulnerable by opening up to another person and allowing their needs to be exposed. Trust was always a time-consuming and sensitive endeavor as many students had prior failed trust experiences with other people, causing them to have developed walls around themselves. Most ambassadors were aware of such attributes. Therefore, they demonstrated trust and developed a bond that allowed mentees to value their ambassadors’ support and advocacy over time. In the next section, details a discussion to answer research question two, how students’ prior experiences factored into mentor-based discussions with their ambassadors. Prior experiences included exposure to both positive mentor relationship and ones that may have not been beneficial for the student.
How have Students’ Prior Experiences Factored into the Mentor-Based Discussions

The second research question, how have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions had two categories that showed presence for these study participants 1. ‘Reinterpreting students’ past education experiences’ and 2. ‘Strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias.’ The first construct looked at the need to reevaluate students’ past involvements of high school, community college, or other university attempts. Often, these prior attempts had fueled low self-esteem in students, who had not encountered professors who wanted to connect with and help them. Many students had attempted previous college before and experienced an uninviting climate and felt no connection to their professors who were supposed to be there to help them. A few students in this study indicated prior college attempts were just like their continued bad experiences in high school. The second construct provided strategies to mitigate cultural and gender bias. Some male students within this study revealed gender bias toward female students and professors. The ambassadors sought to work through prior issues with some male Hispanic students to minimize unprofessional or derogatory gender bias. Another bias or preconceived notions involved many Hispanics’ notion from their cultural working environments that questioned the need for college. In the next construct, the importance of reinterpreting students’ past education experiences is discussed as a significant source of concern to minimal support and guidance in past attempts.

Reinterpreting Students’ Past Education Experiences

In this construct, students’ school attempts including high school, community college, and other university environments created an impression of what was needed in terms of mentoring student support. Reinterpreting students’ past education experiences was defined as the need to make sense of prior attendance in high school, community colleges, or universities for this HFGS
group. The transition to college was difficult for many HFGS including cost because students lacked knowledge and resources in planning goals to attend and succeed. In one grand tour, Juan talked about a difficult conversation with his parents discussing cost of going to college; “I remember talking to my parents about cost of college for first year. They wondered how they could afford this.” Juan’s parents were unaware of offered grants, scholarships, and loans for college and believed it was too expensive.

In this study, college priority was not always apparent; how HFGS perceived going to college and seeing its value varied considerably. Ambassadors noted that non-FGS could talk with their parents with knowledge that their parents had gone to college and had a grasp of what was needed. In HFGS groups however, families and friends rarely had knowledge or experience to offer any suggestions or guidance to help. As an example of priorities beyond high school, Tom in the focus group, mentioned, “I was bound for service in the military after high school; going to college really was not discussed or part of the plan.” Keith stated “when I finished high school, I was already working and college was not really seen as a possibility; I was expected to go to work full-time and contribute to my family financially.” Stan similarly stated, “When I finished high school I did not think I was meant for college; next step was military or just going to work.” For HFGS in this study, it was most important to have a mentor that reached out to discuss the value of a college education and believed these students could be successful as a college student.

Many student participants in this study had prior attendance at community colleges or other universities, usually with poor results. The participants reflected on prior attempts at college, primarily at large traditional campuses where they felt unsupported and had no mentor to help them. Often, students noted their need for a welcoming campus setting, as opposed to an
unfriendly institutional climate. In many prior school attempts, campus faculty and colleagues did not seem interested in providing help or reassurance to support these students. However, some HFGS had benefited from a positive mentor in previous educational experiences which will be discussed next.

**Reinforcing a prior beneficial mentor experience.** In looking at how HFGS talked about prior high school and/or college and attempted to be successful; students in this study mentioned a connection to a specific person, not about student’s level of campus engagement. Importance of a mentor in prior school experiences was defined as how significant it was for students in this study that had a previous connection to a mentor in their life that guided them to strive to be successful in school. As an example of having a prior mentor, Alice stated she had a wonderful high school science teacher that believed she could be successful in engineering; her teacher said; “You have a gift for engineering and can do this if you want to.” Furthermore, Tom stated he had a high school physics teacher as a prior mentor; “He was so influential with me and always shared his knowledge of physics and math because he knew I was interested in computer science; I will always remember his guidance.” There were distinct differences for HFGS that communicate about a prior positive mentor experience, as these students often mentioned wanting to be successful in college for their parents, spouse, prior mentor, and their children as opposed to doing this for themselves. As another example of a prior positive mentor, Ava communicated about one teacher who was so supportive and helpful; “My high school English teacher was my first mentor; she listened to me and was patient, and she always believed I could do this-get to and succeed in college.” The connection to a supportive person was imperative to these HFGS believing they could be successful in college and life.
HFGS that had a prior mentor before coming here talked about how important it was that someone believed in them and provided guidance. Professor Sway stated, “It could have been a prior counselor in high school, a teacher, or a boss who says, ‘you have potential, you should do this’ was a common theme.” This was crucial that some HFGS had someone who was their champion for supporting their success. Joe mentioned a prior teacher helped him feel supported; “I want you to understand this as a programmer and I will help you; I know you will be great at this.” In many instances, being successful in college was an unknown feeling for these HFGS; that never had a prior teacher or mentor in their behalf that communicated that these students could do this and be successful at it. In the next category, altering students’ impressions of past education attempts; the need to communicate with their ambassador and discuss these poor experiences at past schools was important to leaning to positively move forward now.

**Overcoming bad experiences at prior schools.** The need to recognize students’ feelings after past college attempts including exposure to non-supportive large campus-based environments was vital to help students have a new start at school currently. Overcoming bad experiences at prior colleges was defined as the need for ambassadors to discuss and unravel their mentee’s concerns of being in schools that did not support or nurture their existence. As an example of unsupported concerns at prior schools; Professor Drew said, “Usually it was not that good of an experience at other schools; many of these students talked to me about being lost and unsupported there.” In another example of students not being supported, Professor Morgan mentioned her students with similar stories on feelings of being overwhelmed and unrecognized at large campuses prior to coming to Taylor College. She communicated, “I heard they felt like just a number, and nobody took the time to explain expectations; they were lost in the group.” As well, other students within this study mentioned they didn't have enough or any personal
attention with mentors or faculty and they were not self-motivated enough to persevere on their own to be successful. Sometimes large college campuses and freshman classes made these students feel unknown and unsupported. As an example of being new at a large university, Ava communicated her feelings of being at a large university as a freshman; “I walked into English class with 50+ students. I remember my professor saying, “I don’t have the time to go over everyone’s questions, if you have a question just e-mail it; hopefully I can get to you.” Similarly, Tom stated when he went to a large public university he was overwhelmed; “That school was so big, and I had like 100+ students in each class; and professors where teaching like five classes and unavailable.” HFGS desperately needed support and guidance from trusted mentors and advocates that could have helped them find their way through the maze of a large college.

As interviews continued with students that had prior college experiences, this type of unfriendly exposure became commonplace even in smaller colleges. As an example of non-support, Alice talked about feelings of being over her head while at community college and their distance of not being able to help or support her. She felt there was a widespread disconnect between the students and faculty, and there was not any time for mentoring support. Alice stated her frustration and disappointment with her whole community college experience; “I just felt like if I couldn’t do it then I was going to fail, like I had no choice but to fail. In my prior community college, they were teaching really big classes, so they could not keep up with students’ needs.”

Within the same realm of exposure to a large university, Joe added that he started at a large public university right out of high school at 17 years old; “I had around 200 students in my freshman classes, it was so intimidating; I could not imagine going to any professor with my problems.” Many students in this study mentioned having minimal support as new students in terms of mentoring or even tutoring available.
In addition to these students’ problems with large colleges, Taylor College faculty ambassadors brought up other negatives. Lack of support for students could also impact the overall economy and environment; students who could not persist in their studies would most likely drop out of college altogether. As an example, focused on priorities of other universities, Professor Sway suggested that sometimes universities forgot their mission of students first as the priority; “I think that several universities focus on other priorities besides teaching students, our students come jaded from no support and need our attention to succeed.” In additional there were comments on the overall increasing Hispanic college population; Professor Morgan stressed how some universities could not support this growing Hispanic population and needed to reassess their school mission. A large percentage of HFGS would eventually enter community college or a public university; hence there was an obligation for providing mentoring and support for these students. Professor Morgan stated, “My job is to help them be successful and having someone in their corner that says you can do this is crucial to success.” Ambassadors tried to help students get past a lack of support at prior schools by being a cheerleader and advocate for student success.

The need for HFGS to understand how college operated and how to successfully persist was communicated frequently at Taylor College. HFGS in this study appreciated the support of their ambassadors, as well as their helpful advice. Ambassadors talked about making certain that students knew faculty were there for support and believed these students could do this. The need to discuss prior school attempts and moving on successfully was a frequent topic of discussion with paired ambassadors. The next construct, on facing the fear of mathematics created needed attention as HFGS aligned with ambassadors for support and guidance to conquer this subject.
Recovering from and working through the fear of math. Another major concern for HFGS in this study was mathematics and their fear of not being successful at it. Recovering from and working through the fear of math was defined as a major dilemma for most students that knew this was a weakness and that they had to pass math to obtain any degree in college. Unfortunately, many students that came to Taylor College had several detrimental experiences both in high school and previous colleges with mathematics. As an example of recovering from the fear of mathematics, Professor Sieve noted “Mathematics is still a challenge for most students here and in engineering based programs it is the language we must speak.” Also, Professor Morgan gave a reality check on how our students tend to perceive mathematics and how prior bad experiences can be hard to overcome. She said, “I generally ask in week one, how many people in class like math and I’ll have one who likes math. Sometimes they see a course failure once in math as a total failure.” In addition, Keith said that he had numerous problems with math all the way through school and felt his teachers did not help; “I always struggled with math and even in middle school was not good at it and most of my teachers just seemed to give up on me.” Several students in this study commented on their fear of math, but positively one of the constant accolades was that ambassadors and professors here tutored all students in math starting in the first year of studies. There were math open lab sessions late afternoons on a weekly basis directed by math faculty to support all of the campus students. At Taylor College, as in most universities, mathematics touches all students, and succeeding in math is a significant hurdle toward integration and success. Conversely, failing math often prompts students to give up and drop out of college.

HFGS in this study talked about their need for assistance and tutoring to be successful in mathematics. In addition, they expressed their reliance on their ambassador to help minimize
anxiety with worrying about not being successful. As an example of initial fear of math, Keith said he entered mathematics and felt initially scared; he ended up having a great and validating experience, thanks to a strong connection with his ambassador; “Mathematics was a challenge for me. I’ve had two algebra classes, and talking to both teachers, my first experience with my first professor was just amazing; she was so helpful.” In addition, Juan mentioned, “I thought I was good in high school math, when I hit college level Calculus; I was lost until my ambassador found tutoring for me.” Ambassadors were cognizant of this problem and in most cases quite diligent in getting their student mentees’ tutoring help early on to improve their abilities in mathematics and ease the fear by helping students to improve their understanding in this subject.

Many issues with mathematics started long before students came to college. Some HFGS came from rural areas or financially struggling school districts where mathematics was not always emphasized as important. HFGS many times were in school districts that did not have a student population preparing to go to college, which impacted overall rigor and focus on upper level mathematics exposure. As an example of minimal exposure to math in high school, Roger mentioned that when he was in high school, higher level math like calculus was not even taught; he said, “I remember most of us struggled with Algebra; we did not ever get to things like calculus at that school.” Similarly, Alice also mentioned about her exposure to math, “Pre-Calculus for engineering programs in my high school was challenging; I had to attend tutoring just to get through it.” Mathematics was important for all programs, especially engineering technology-based programs; it had to be learned in steps over time with patience and direction. Several participants in this study explained their frustration with mathematics, and that their prior exposure was weak; some had impatient teachers even in middle school that made them feel that they were not good at math. As an example of bad experiences in math, Ava communicated that
“I always thought math was hard plus some teachers early in school did not make me think I could do it.” As well, John mentioned, “I did not like math; it was hard and I did not understand how it applied to me.” In discussing this with Professor Drew, he felt that he had to show applications to apply mathematics and that students saw it as important and actually even fun. In continuing, Professor Shell, who has taught advanced mathematics and statistics agreed that math touches all disciplines and is the core to problem solving in virtually all occupations; “Many students are fearful of math and experienced detrimental exposure at early stages. I try to help them see the connection between mathematics and their other interests to be successful.”

Overall, several students in this study struggled but got through mathematics with tutoring support and guidance at Taylor College.

In summary, mathematics was a major emphasis at this campus and tutoring help sessions were well established to help students be successful. Most HFGS, along with other students, start in developmental math due to their low entrance math placement scores and an overall lack of understanding. Starting in developmental math increases the time and cost to reaching degree conferral; it also can be a detrimental part to increasing student attrition. Development math courses require that students reach a grade level of 80 percent or higher to advance to next math course. As an example of facing math difficulties, Stan commented on his experience; “Math was never easy for me, but I had to get through it to be a computer science programmer.”

Moreover, Professor Shell said “For success in math, students must attend tutoring early on and work lots of problems to be successful.” Students must see that math is in their everyday lives. In the next category, strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias that could be problematic for some male HFGS entering college is explored and discussed.
Strategizing How to Mitigate Cultural and Gender Bias

As discussions were conducted in this study, one major subject that appeared was that some HFGS males were exhibiting either cultural and/or gender bias. This theme strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias was defined as an issue in which a few male Hispanics showed detrimental masculinity bias towards females within the college. As an example of male gender bias, Alice mentioned in her prior engineering class; this Hispanic male student would dominate most discussions and initially made her feel out of place. She said, “He was an experienced technician and corrected my comments in our class constantly; I do not know if he even realized how that looked and felt to me.” Male dominance could become a negative factor in which male Hispanic students showed a domineering position in school over female students and sometimes even with the female faculty.

As an addition example detailed later in this section, Professor Morgan in her interview, reiterate that she had also experienced the conditions of gender bias within her classroom. In addition, Professor Morgan is a non-Hispanic female professor and engineer. She noted that some Hispanic males in class, showed a distinct gender bias condition when she lectured or gave opinions of the engineering industry that she had been a member of for many years. Similarly, Professor Ron, mentioned that he also experienced a few male Hispanics that showed a detrimental presence towards females in his accounting classes. While this seemed to be only a few male Hispanic students, it became apparent that this was not a single occurrence or only directed at just female students.

This cultural component of male authority for some Hispanics could be connected to a blue-collared male dominated outlook, strong opinions towards females, and bias that assumed the roles of females to be homemakers not engineers, doctors, or professors. Faculty discussed
one approach to intervene was to include direct class conversations covering recent business
news about successful female professionals in industries such as engineering and accounting.
Another alternative approach was to bring female professionals as guest speakers into classes
and at campus events. A resilient example of intervention was a recent multi-location based
videoconference on higher education for all students with the CEO of Taylor College, who is a
Hispanic female. Overall, these Hispanic male students needed exposure and guidance to
improve disposition and understanding of females in professional roles in school and society. In
the next construct, Hispanic male dominance is discussed with focus on intervention efforts.

**Mitigating Hispanic male dominance.** In this study, concern towards a few Hispanic
males dominating and showing a detrimental bias towards female students and some female
faculty had rarely surfaced until participant interviews were conducted. These Hispanic males
could have been brought up in family households that displayed gender bias with their father and
mother. In classroom settings, sometimes Hispanic gender bias came up in discussions that
could polarize conversations and make females including professors feel uncomfortable. In one
instance, a gender bias occurrence led to a Taylor College administrator having a difficult
intervention conversation with the student who acted as if he was unaware of this problem. As an
example of experiencing gender bias, Professor Sway mentioned she had experienced gender
bias more than once with a few Hispanic male students over the years and gave her insight:

- It’s variant, pretty much, father-centric phenomenon. And there is a sense of
machismo, within Hispanic culture. There can be some challenges for Hispanic
females with not wanting to speak up in class or feeling uncomfortable talking in
front of males, or especially being assertive with their ideas. For some Hispanic
guys, they have a kind of arrogance that can make it difficult for them to learn
what they need to know and how to be a professional.

In many instances, there are male domineering bias still today towards females in certain
occupational choices such as technology, medicine, and engineering careers. As an example,
Ava stated her thoughts on gender bias, “There is sometimes a bias about females in technology
fields; and people don’t look at females being able to do engineering. We should not limit
females to just nursing or teaching areas.” As well, Professor Morgan stressed similar concerns
she has noticed with some Hispanic male students with her being a professor and engineer. She
had a hard time establishing a connection with some Hispanic male students; they were not
accustomed to women in knowledge-based roles like being an engineer and professor.

In discussing this issue further with faculty ambassadors, they had some helpful strategies
used in classroom exercises and assignments. As an example of possible approaches, Professor
Sway mentioned she had team-based exercises in her classroom; “I wanted to be cognizant of
having females sometimes as team leads for our groups.” Also in the same light, Professor Ron
acknowledged in accounting classes, he once had a Hispanic male student who showed gender
bias towards female accounting students. So, Professor Ron invited a female CFO from a
fortune 100 company to talk to his class so this student could get a reality check “she displayed a
great image for female professionals that other students could identify with.” Fortunately, issues
with gender bias were isolated, and in some instances other male students reassured female
students they were welcomed and gave them their support. In the next construct, having a blue-
collared view of college is discussed and approaches communicated on how HFGS broaden their
understanding and recognize the importance of college and possible professional occupations
Mitigating cultural bias of home community towards college. Many students talked about never having access to information that would help them know what to do to plan for college. Several of the students in this study stated they never knew how to get prepared for college and few people around them could offer any assistance. As an example of this dilemma, Stan mentioned being from a manual-labor upbringing and never even thinking about college or a degree until later in life; “My community and family did not have exposure to college and working in a labor job like construction was all I knew.” This was echoed by Roger who said, “I went to work full-time in the furniture building business with family and had never considered college or why it would be needed.” Similarly, Ava mentioned that while her parents backed her decision to go to college; they had no experience or understanding of why a Hispanic female would do this in going to college when she was a mother with family obligations. Moreover, Keith stated, “When I finished high school, I was already working and college was not seen as a possibility, I was expected to go work and contribute to helping my family financially.” Many HFGS in this study were full-time workers from families that had farming or low-skill labor backgrounds, thus, having no knowledge of college.

As more participants were interviewed, it became evident there were similar experiences for female students in this study as well. As an example, Ava talked about when finishing high school there were family obligations that required her to work full-time and support her family. She stated, “When I was finishing high-school, few kids were going to college; some were getting married and almost all were looking for full-time jobs.” Similarly, Alice mentioned that she had got married and already was starting a family and was unsure why or how she could attend college. She said, “When I finished high-school, I was getting married and I was not certain I would go to college with all of these current responsibilities.”
Shell mentioned that students from working-class backgrounds are committed to work for their survival; which makes it difficult to have time for a successful attempt at college. She said, “For many Hispanic students the biggest barrier is their time commitment for college; they don’t have enough time to be successful at it.” One of the best intervention tools to help these students was frequently talking with their ambassadors about managing college and making it a priority to succeed. Students needed someone to listen and develop a student success plan that they could follow. In contrast to non-FGS students whose parents had gone to college, HFGS in this study never mentioned having anyone to guide them towards college. Next, negative influences of some prior friendships had to be examined if conflicting with the aspirations of college.

**Refraining from negative influences of some prior friends.** In interviews with other HFGS participants in this study, a few students mentioned the challenge of distancing themselves from other friends while striving to work with new peers at school. There were conflicts with hanging around some prior friends; as many did not understand the commitment to being in college. As an example, Ava communicated, “I had to re-think about some of the people I was hanging with before, and they were a bad influence on me when I was trying to make it in college.” In addition, Stan had a similar example on this issue; “My buddies wanted to go have fun all the time, but with me going to college, it made that all different and I had to distance myself for a while to have a chance to be successful in school.” Similarly, Joe stated, “It was a difficult but needed transition, as I had to distance myself from my old high school friends that kept dragging me down. They had no interest in college and wanted me to do the same.” In contrast, John talked about his fitting in was a little easier now as an older student; he said, “I feel it is a little easier for me to fit in and go to college now later in life, after having a career and not having young children to take care of like many of my peers.” Working to fit in with peers
touched almost all students in different ways especially the younger ones as they adjusted their need to make new friends at this college.

Faculty ambassadors saw certain occurrences were student mentees were still not acclimated to fitting in at school. Many students still had issues and distractions with spending too much time with outside school friends or family that had no interest in college. This dilemma usually warranted difficult discussions with their ambassador and appropriate action determined to correct. As an example, Professor Shell said “sometimes students think just coming to class is enough which leads to disappointment. You have to talk about their commitments and then sometimes they have to make tough decisions on putting school as a priority over others.” As well, Professor Drew talked about some of his students needed to examine their commitment and leave the past behind; he said, “Many of my students come from the working class with non-college friends that can hamper their current college attempt. They have to put college first for a while to be successful here.” Similarly, Professor Sway stated, “I talked to my new students about making decisions on prior relationships if those are distractions; they need to have people around them that support their decision to be in college now.” In the next category, talking about everything was discussed as conversations extended outside the scope of school.

Section Summary

This section described two themes: 1. Reinterpreting students’ past education experiences, and 2. Strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias to answer the second research question: How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions. The first theme, reinterpreting students’ past education experiences, defined students’ exposure to prior college attempts that needed discussion with ambassador to help
students focus on success in their current college. It was determined that some students had a prior positive mentoring relationship with a teacher, counselor, or person in high school or at another college, which helped build their self-confidence. Students needed someone [ambassador] to provide guidance and strong mentoring on what to do to be successful in college. The third area looked at how to support students that feared math, providing math review sessions and tutoring helped support students in this needed area and build confidence that they could learn mathematics.

The second theme on strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias, highlighted concern with some Hispanic male student’s gender bias towards females including faculty. Ambassadors worked with student mentees to minimize this detrimental gender bias. As an example, some faculty initiated having female students leading discussions and groups in class and inviting outside industry female professionals to talk in their classes. Another concern was students having a working-class mentality and not having any plans of going to college; introducing career options and understanding of college were important to communicate to this HFGS student group. In the next section, research question three will examine the positive influence of the mentoring relationship on student integration at this campus.

**Influence of Mentoring Relationship on Student Integration**

Student integration as impacted by mentoring was defined as the ability for student participants to adjust to a new environment, become emotionally engaged in school, and feel part of the campus community. The third research question, how has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus, centered on the mentoring relationships between ambassadors and their paired students, and how mentoring influenced student integration at Taylor College. Two categories explained importance of integration and how significant this
phenomenon was to students’ persistence: (1) Helping students with emotional engagement at the campus, and (2) Providing tools to help students independently navigate college. Integration played an extensive role in students’ feelings about college and had an impact on their decision to stay or exit from school.

Integration for students could be a complex process that was constantly changing. We all have the need to fit into the group and feel that we are wanted there. Furthermore, this was certainly a part of going to college, making friendships, and establishing relationships with faculty and support colleagues. As reflective of the foundation of validation theory, students needed to know that others accepted them and wanted them present. Many students within this study did not always have such relationships with either faculty mentors or other students that gave them a feeling of belonging. Next, helping students with emotional engagement at campus was crucial to students’ feelings of belonging and having trusted people around them; HFGS needed to feel welcomed, their voices heard, and that their existence at campus mattered.

**Helping Students with Emotional Engagement at the Campus**

The role of emotional engagement had a significant impact on students in college and their learning structure and decisions to stay at school. Emotional engagement was defined as responses or reactions to professors, class peers, academic setting, and college life as a whole by creating and strengthening students’ feelings of belonging there. As an example of needed integration; Ava communicated, “You’re going to need to link up with your ambassador and other students that are going through the same issues you are to help you with school.” While writing field notes in the learning commons study area, five students gathered to talk about their upcoming freshman course project. If a picture had been taken of these five students faces, it did not matter what time it was or where they came from; they were emerged in their studies. In
addition, Juan recalled his first freshman engineering project; “it was exciting, but nerve-racking, as we got our group going, we felt lost but focused at the same time.” The intention of students needing to feel a connection to campus, their ambassador, and student peers represented one of the important factors to engagement and ultimately to student integration.

Students sought to strengthen their emotional engagement and improve integration chances at this college as ambassadors provided help with assimilation. Some students came to Taylor College directly after high school, while others had been in college before at other type of institutions. It was crucial that this campus felt welcoming and that students could feel it as they entered the front door. As an example of working to integrate and feeling welcomed at campus; Roger said that “Everyone here seems happy and when you come in it feels like home here.” Similarly, Keith mentioned when he first came to Taylor and how it felt here; he said, “When we toured the place, everybody had a smile on their face. Everybody shook my hand. And that’s when I said to myself, ‘If I’m going to go through this and spend a few years in college here,’ I’m going to be happy.” For some students in this study, integration was hard because of their lack of time on campus beyond scheduled classes. As an example of this dilemma, Professor Sway stated, “I see barriers in these students’ time constraints; they don’t spend a lot of time socializing on campus. As soon as class is over, they have other obligations which can hinder their integration.” One of the actions that helped when possible was students spending more time with their ambassadors and peers early on to support their successful integration in school.

Approaching the idea of connecting first to campus and then building on understanding of content seemed a powerful combination that enhanced mentoring. Professor Ron talked about his students and how he must help them first emotionally engage in school and then work on the subject of accounting. He mentioned engagement was everything, because if his students were
struggling with not feeling connected to campus, then it was hard for them to focus on their studies; “They don’t know if they can do this; accounting is too hard, but mentoring helps in fostering understanding, so they have a good chance… [student] ‘Hey, you know what, I can really do this,’ meet that goal I’ve always dreamed of.” Connecting with students and providing mentoring support proved important to advancing their engagement levels in class and school.

Students in this study mentioned it was ironic that many faculty ambassadors were prior Taylor College students themselves. Students felt that faculty here understood what it was like to go to school concurrently while working full-time. As a reflection on faculty as prior students, Keith said, “All new students should know that many campus faculty here were also [Taylor College] students, and have been successful at this campus; that is so important and powerful to communicate to everyone.” Furthermore, Tom also commented, “It is cool that my current programming professor got a degree in computer science from this campus, just like I am working on.” In contrast, Professor Shell stated that she did not leave integration completely up to her students; she setup cohorts in class to work in teams and share contact information as a means of building engagement. She said “I organize my new students into groups and help initiate the introductions to their peers; sometimes that is all it takes to help them began to integrate here.” Many faculty at Taylor College had been students here and are now doctoral students or consistently updating their credentials in light of an ever-changing technology world.

In this study, HFGS who displayed a strong emotional engagement level identified themselves as connected with their ambassador and found value in their mentoring relationship. These same students talked about their sense of belonging at this university and felt as an important contributor to their classes and to this campus. As an example, Ava talked about this engagement in the classroom; “She [ambassador] quickly involved me in classroom discussions
and valued my opinion; I felt class was interesting and I wanted to do well.” Similarly, Stan mentioned that his ambassador helped him with a lack of engagement in computer information classes; “She [my ambassador] was knowledgeable in computer science and took time to get me involved and part of class, as I initially was feeling out of place.” Additional, Joe said, “My ambassador was always helping me with engagement; she took the time even after class to go over programming problems that I was confused about, she helped me fit in with the others that were more advanced than me.” In this study, needed positive emotional engagement emphasized increased feelings of connectedness to ambassador and peers, and students that were emotionally engaged were vested in their education and school success.

One lesson learned from this study on new students’ emotional engagement was possible reluctance to reach out initially to their ambassador or student peers. Students did not always know what to expect; so, support with connecting to campus and their ambassador became crucial. As an example of giving advice to new students, Roger said, “I would say to new students that ambassadors know what they’re talking about and are here to help much as they can; ambassadors want you to succeed.” Likewise, Tom suggested that new students should meet with their ambassador on a frequent basis, he said, “One initial mistake I made was being scared to talk to my ambassador because I did not have anyone like that at my prior school.” Also, Keith suggested, that the new students get involved with other current students in their program at school; “I would tell the new students to be engaged in meeting other students at campus that are in their program to learn about program expectations and content.” In discussions on integration, many students needed intervention to improve their emotional engagement levels. Having a pro-active ambassador and peers helped HFGS with building emotional engagement levels and better integration into school.
Demonstrating student commitment of belonging at a small campus. In discussions with study participants, the subject of being at a small campus where small classes increased time with students helped build strong relationships based on individual needs. HFGS acknowledged needing personal attention; and their ambassadors worked to help them individually be successful. Alice talked about this campus faculty being helpful versus a prior community college; “At this school faculty are more helpful than in community college; professors here are easier to talk to and get a hold of; they have time for you. I like that.” Similarly, Joe stated that, “After being at a large public university and lost in the maze, here I have one on one attention with my ambassador and professors; they know me and support me.” For many of the students in this study, a small campus combined with ambassador support was needed for student success. Several of these students had not been supported in past schools or fared well at these other campus environments.

Many HFGS commented on how a small campus size had been a positive experience and helped them feel supported. As an example, at Taylor College, most freshman classes average about 15 students, giving significant attention to each member. Ava mentioned smaller classes helped her connect to campus and faculty; “My ambassador and professors make a point to help me frequently, and they show you where your classes are and help you daily to be successful.” Keith added, “I like this small campus and my ambassador and professors are always available when I need them, which is impossible at a large university.” Many students mentioned feeling like a number at prior large colleges and felt more confident and at home at this campus. HFGS in this study gave accolades about the small campus feeling and they felt a part of this college community environment.
While HFGS in interviews mentioned positive attributes of having a small campus, this became magnified when conducting classroom observations. A strong faculty ambassador-student connection unfolded in Professor Morgan’s computer programming class. She had an incredible ability to look at students and knew when they were struggling and needed help in her class. As an example of ambassador showing patience, Tom, in that computer class, said “she knows about programming and also as a professional engineer shows patience when helping us.”

So, she first called a ten-minute break to give everyone a breather. When students returned, she started with a hint of getting their program syntax sorted correctly. Then, students could move forward, and the frustration turned into effective learning. Also, Alice mentioned how she loved having small classes with attention from faculty; “Most of my classes are very small and I have time to get help that I need; I never had any help at prior schools.” In addition, students in this study expressed that the small classes were one of the reasons they came here, and this also allowed professors more time to spend individually with students and help them.

Having a small campus gave students more individual attention with faculty and their ambassador helping their mentoring relationships to become stronger. As an example of small campus attention, Roger said, “It’s a little more personal with everybody that I have dealt with here. Most faculty know me by name, right down to the guard up front, and everybody always has a positive attitude.” Similarly, Joe said that, “I think that a small campus helps support the students and allows faculty more time to work with everybody. For me that is such a strong part of being here.” Furthermore, Professor Ron stated that “I really like the small campus and classes, I enjoy getting to know my students on a more personal basis. I learn what their needs are and how to best support each of them.” As students felt recognized and validated as part of this campus, student integration levels improved because students knew they had support and
mentoring to be successful. As an example of the small class experience, John talked about how he recently went on a field trip with his class. He said:

Professor Rick took us down each aisle looking at all the different components power supplies, memory, or mother boards for computer building. He was just sharing his experiences of what he's done in the past and was giving us some good information about computer components and how technology has evolved. You could never do that in a large school and it was great.

This small campus and its small classroom environment were well received by HFGS in this study. As an example of student support, Stan mentioned his ambassador was a strong advocate of reaching out and taking time to help students learn; “She knows programming first hand and how to teach us to be software engineers, because she came from the engineering industry.” Alice added “this campus is small and focused on learning, not a big school to get lost in; I like the small classes.” Ambassadors also had an advantage in helping their students integrate at a small campus; because it gave them more time to really know their students well and each student’s individual needs in school. The next sub-category to help students with improving emotional engagement was developing learning communities at Taylor College.

**Developing learning communities to enhance connectedness to campus.** A growing number of educational institutions are establishing learning communities as a way to encourage students learning. Learning communities focus on supporting student engagement as students are active participants in the learning process, and their professors became more of facilitators. Typically, two or more courses were linked together with the same students and professor into a learning community. Course development was designed where two or more courses were co-structured with integrated learning outcomes that blended the courses in support and learning
objectives. Students learned to work in active groups which helped with integration and connecting to campus, peers, and their faculty mentor. Learning communities included visits from industry speakers to exposure students to the local professional community, enhancing connections to campus and knowledge of their field.

The learning communities changed the typical professor-led lecture classroom into an engaging student-focused discussion on course objectives. As an example, Keith mentioned, “It is important to have a connection with peers. Relationships with other students have become strong as we rely on each other to succeed in school. I enjoy learning from my peers in our learning teams on programming labs.” As well, Tom added, “I like being in an active learning classroom where I can learn a lot of stuff from my student peers who have a lot of industry experience to offer.” Likewise, Juan mentioned his experiences with learning community teams on their mini-projects in engineering; “We learned to work together in learning teams, especially on mini-projects; you have to come together and make decisions to be a successful team in this environment.” Strong advocates for learning communities at Taylor noted that this had improved students’ self-esteem. Also, Professor Ron, an advocate for learning communities, reflected on how great it felt when his students worked in groups and build each other up to make it a successful team experience:

Sometimes, I don’t think students realize how much they’ve learned until it’s all over. I have asked some students, “Remember when I taught you way back when, and how tough you thought things were?” They will say, “Wow! Oh yeah! I completed it; I did it!” I see this more than anything at graduation.
Learning communities helped HFGS in this study to engage in learning and feeling vested with their ambassadors and student peers, as trusted partners in their education and a substantial part of each unique mentoring relationship.

Learning communities increased time students spent in a team environment and helped students as they learned to acknowledge others’ opinions and work together. Students enjoyed an active learning environment that validated their importance to their classmates and to their ambassador, which became a larger part of technology-based program designs. Learning communities at Taylor College integrated and restructured portions of curriculum, as an example, a mathematics course was co-developed with the first circuit analysis course to improve student mathematics skills required in electronics. Students worked closely with their faculty ambassador and peer teams that became stronger academically and on a social level. Learning communities helped students to better integrate and feel part of campus community as their voices and opinions were acknowledged as important to discussions. In the next sub-category, providing tools to help students independently navigate college was discussed as students learn how to manage school and assimilate into campus with guidance from their ambassadors.

**Providing Tools to Help Students Independently Navigate College**

For all new students, the need to learn to navigate through a new environment was essential to their success in school for the first year. This theme, providing tools to help students independently navigate college was defined as obtaining the needed skills and understanding processes on how college worked was a crucial part of successful student integration. Learning to navigate in school for most HFGS was a new skill as they rarely had people who understood the landscape of college and how to progress through it successfully. One process was helping
HFGS with self-dependency and involvement in both the academic and campus community. Ambassadors had to work closely with their mentees to help them learn how to successfully get through school and obtain these new skills. To be successful throughout college, not merely in the first year, students needed to master making their own decisions and becoming less dependent on others. One example of this process in the electronics program involved taking first-year students to view the senior projects. This had an engaging impact on all new students’ passion to learn to envision their own success. In one campus grand tour, Juan was ecstatic talking about the recent senior projects, he saw a team designed robot with vision system allowing it to automatically maneuver and learn the environment around it:

Man, I went to the senior project last Friday and those guys are incredible. They built a robot that can see and drive around the lab and never hit any obstacles.

That robot is cool! It was able to pick up items out of the bend based on the students giving a voice command. It was programmed to know the objects by name and could go to the bin and find that object. How cool is that?

The senior projects were well-received as people from industry and other schools came to view and ask questions of the senior students. New students saw this vision as being a model of themselves in the future and helped strengthen their passion for success.

For many students at Taylor College, learning how to do things themselves was unknown territory. Pushing students to be independent was defined as the process of mentees learning to rely on themselves, and become more self-sufficient through help from their ambassadors. As an example of support tools, Joe talked about his ambassador’s influence and how she had helped him on becoming more self-reliant, he said, “My current ambassador puts me in the driver’s seat as the only way to learn programming is by doing it yourself.” In addition, Alice stated, “While
my current ambassador tried to support me; it was my engineering professors that helped me become self-reliant. They coached me on learning to speak up when I did not understand something.” The HFGS here work to learn how to handle many temporary setbacks, outside responsibilities, and manage school simultaneously. Ambassadors work with paired mentees to help them learn how to stand on their own feet and take responsibility for their own education.

The importance of students obtaining tools to navigate independently and also taking responsibility for their own educational decisions is one of the most critical to succeeding in college. In another example, Professor Shell stated, “Students must accept responsibility for their own learning and become self-dependent; sometimes that’s a new revelation to many of our students. Similarly, Alice stated, “I am interested in learning; like I want to learn on my own [independent], like I am just very… I do feel like everybody here wants me to be successful, and they will help you.” In light of the students learning to manage themselves was part of many discussions. Similarly, Ava commented on need to accept responsibility for getting degree:

It’s a big step to go to school and finish it in general. You must go through all the road blocks and challenges that come towards you. Faculty ambassadors can help you. But, no one can do it for you; you have to do this for yourself. It doesn’t matter how long it takes you as long as you finish successfully.

Ambassadors spend substantial effort in teaching their mentees to be self-reliant so in year two they can navigate on their own in school.

Many student participants acknowledged that learning to take responsibility for their success in school was difficult but required, because no one could do this for them. As an example of making a choice about school, Professor Morgan talked about her students’ self-reliance, she stated that students must make an active choice to be successful in college. She
added, “Students have to make the choice they are going to be successful or not, build their own self-confidence with initial guidance. One of my students said to me, I want to learn everything I can, so when I go out there I have a leg up on everybody else.” Ambassadors in this study agreed on the need to support students initially in their first year; but students must learn about self-reliance and make a choice and commitment to their own education.

The development of student independence was hard to predict as different individuals experienced it at varying degrees. Several students seemed to be more dependent and needy, no matter their exposure to mentoring help. However, in this study all of the students benefited by their own admission to having a mentoring relationship and guidance in year one of college. Self-reliance improved as most students got more exposure to school and its encompassing responsibilities. Several participants mentioned the need to fit in with their peers at school, and that they had to conquer the detrimental feeling they would be unsuccessful in college.

Students were encouraged to meet other peers and establish friendships while here in college; this was important to feeling a part of a group and that they were not going through college alone. This construct was defined as the need for students to establish relationships with peers to help them assimilate into college. Some HFGS talked about feeling they could not be successful in college and simply did not fit in with other students in their program. Some students mentioned difficulties with school in general and their inability to make friends, which was a deterrent to centering their focus on their studies. As an example of coming back after a tragedy, Juan discussed a difficult time in his life that caused him to quit school for a while and go back home to Mexico. His uncle had tragically passed away, causing Juan to lose his motivation and created an emotional detachment from college leaving him wondering if he would return and if he could fit in with his prior student group again. Juan stated how he felt:
I left because there was a death in my family and I felt really uncomfortable talking about that. But when I came back after some time, like my ambassador just kind of wanted… no explanation; he just wanted to know what’s going on and I told him everything that happened. I mean he helped me get back into school and all that and he even helped me get my scholarship back which is a pretty hard thing to do, so we definitely have built a strong trust from that. This took me awhile to get back in the group of student friends that I had hung with.

The above example was not isolated, other students also struggled with making friendships and fitting into a peer group at school. Similarly, Alice stated, “I never felt like I belonged in the groups. It was always a feeling of not fitting in, and I had to work at meeting other students in classes to even work on class projects together,” Additionally, other students in this case study mentioned problems of making friends because of a lack of time beyond just class meetings.

Section Summary

This section described two themes that helped answer the third research question, how has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus. In the first construct, helping students with emotional engagement at the campus was determined as significant when students explained their emotional connection to faculty ambassadors and process of feeling involved at this campus. Conversely, many students also described their prior inability to connect to faculty and peers in other settings. For students in this study to be successful, they needed a mentor that believed in them and helped them to believe in themselves. Most HFGS in this study needed a small campus environment with significant support to help guide them and strengthen their feeling of belonging with their faculty and student peers. The
development of learning communities and structuring student groups helped support integration and students feeling that they mattered and had a voice at this campus.

In the second construct, providing tools to help students independently navigate college gave light to several conversations on the need for mentor support. The process of learning to successfully navigate in school was a major component as part of student integration. Many HFGS in this study mentioned not understanding how to find their way in going to college. Student mentees did not have family or peers to help who had been to college. Ambassadors worked with mentees to teach tools such as time management and developing student plan.

**Additional Findings**

The FYI retention program was designed and implemented in November 2013 with intention of supporting all incoming new students. One cornerstone for the FYI program had been the ongoing mentoring component with faculty ambassadors and their paired new students. The focus of this study narrowed the scope to specific HFGS study participants within the retention initiative. The FYI retention program was discussed with study participants and many ideas and suggestions where formulated to possibly improve student success. One recommended addition from those discussions was a suggestion for a second layer of support provided by upper-term honors students in conjunction with current faculty ambassador support.

Adding upper-term honors student support for incoming new students to the FYI program initiative was first mentioned in interviews. While initially this idea started in light of aligning upper-term honors students with incoming freshmen. As an example, Roger said, “If a student, like a year ahead of you, assisted the ambassador or professor and brings students that don’t know as much up to par, it would help everyone.” Other study participants also mentioned a similar addition to add upper-student support in addition to current faculty for mentoring. As
well, Stan talked about upper-term students helping; “I think having upper-term students work with first-year students would be great. This could help new students with learning and upper-term students also would benefit because if you can teach the subject, then you know the subject.” Similarly, Professor Ron also brought detail to this idea of upper-term students providing tutoring and guidance while maybe working part-time in the campus library:

If you have upperclassmen working in the library as tutors, then there is a positive interaction between somebody that’s already been there, and somebody that’s just entering that can give them some helpful guidance. New students may also be more at ease with talking to a student for help as opposed to a professor.

In looking at this suggestion for using upper-term honors students there was a strong correlation for new students to see the possibility that they could do this too and be successful in school. The ability to see another student that has conquered their fears and learned to navigate successfully was a powerful image. This suggestion seemed to be worth exploring further and looking at possibly piloting this in the near future. Furthermore, other faculty ambassadors and student mentees also communicated this idea without being queued in our interview discussions. In interviews and later as a strong recommendation from the doctoral committee, it was then determined that upper-term students in the same program of study as the new students would be the most significant addition to FYI effort. In summary, this change for the second layer of mentoring student support was explored as a recommendation.

As an example, Professor Drew mentioned, “Connectedness to upper term students, not just to a faculty member, would be a good idea if there was an opportunity for the newer students to look and communicate with some of these students in their same program that are almost
ready to graduate.” Similarly, John in our interview talked about his prior school and that they had established a mentoring support club that was comprised of upper-term students within the same subject area. He felt that this could be a welcomed addition to our FYI program as he felt new students sometimes were reluctant to talk to faculty or administrators until they had been here awhile. Additionally, Ava also reiterated this exact point of new students being reluctant to seek out help from others and may be more prone to talk to other students:

One concern with new students is they are going to be reluctant to ask for help from faculty. Because you’re not going to really want to ask questions just because you are afraid of how people might look at you just because of you’re asking certain questions.

Another idea that seemed viable for supporting HFGS and other new students in FYI retention program was adding a student appreciation meeting. As an example of participants that thought a student meeting was needed; Professor Morgan said, “You know if we could get these students to more events, it would be helpful to build our relationships and just let them know we appreciate them being here.” In addition, Professor Ron stated, “Since we are at a commuter school, it would be helpful to have some event outside of class to just have students come and get to know one another.” This meeting would allow students to meet faculty and peers to ask questions about college and navigation after they arrived and being here in their first 8-week session. The idea was to establish relationships beyond the ambassador and also give an opportunity for information exchange once students had begun to integrate into the campus environment. The idea of having a departmental information meeting for new students which could allow for them to meet the faculty and administrators; and their student peers also seemed to be a positive and possible addition to the FYI program for new students. Professor Sway said
that new students need a formal gathering to meet all faculty and many student peers that they will be in class with. She said, “I think it would be good to have a mandatory meeting at least once a session for students to meet together. I’ve had students tell me, they wouldn’t have got through their program had it not been for their peers.

There were additional comments and suggestions that could be examined and possibly implemented to strengthen FYI program. It was wonderful to get so many possible additions to consider and this exemplified the importance of asking participants within the actual program for their suggestions for future improvements. The idea of using upper-term students seemed to be an excellent addition. This idea is already in the implementation mode at this time for a pilot run on campus. Both ambassadors and HFGS mentees were supportive in providing suggestions to continue improvement of mentoring and overall FYI retention initiatives.

Chapter Summary

In chapter four there were extensive findings that became vital in answering the three research questions of this qualitative study. Mentoring relationship with faculty ambassadors provided necessary support as a central tenet to help HFGS learn to navigate and integrate into college. There were four distinct themes to explain the findings on nature of the mentoring relationship: 1) Building trust between ambassador and student mentee, 2) Strategizing ways for students to balance personal and academic responsibilities, 3) Offering encouragement and care for students by ambassadors, and 4) Talking about everything. Building a relationship based on trust between ambassador and mentee aided students in conquering many of their concerns about success in college. The process of providing encouragement and helping students establish a proactive academic success plan were essential to their success.
Another considerable task for this HFGS group was to assess their prior experiences including unsuccessful past college attempts and develop an assertive student action plan to persist in school now. There were two themes that emerged to support prior experiences and how they influenced mentor discussions: (1) Reinterpreting students’ past education experiences and (2) Strategizing how to mitigate cultural and gender bias. Many students in this study had attended prior community colleges or large university settings causing most to feel not connected nor recognized as being important and a part of that campus community. Several participants communicated that the institutional climate at prior schools was not inviting or a feeling of caring about students and their success. The need in having a caring ambassador and connected student peers assisted in providing encouragement as an important factor in student integration. The ambassador-mentoring relationship helped validate new HFGS’s as being important and recognized members of student body at Taylor College.

There were two themes to reinforce findings on student integration at Taylor College: (1) Helping students with emotional engagement at the campus, and (2) Providing tools to help students independently navigate college. Tools like time management and mathematics tutoring were employed to help HFGS address academic requirements of college. As part of additional findings, a review of participant recommendations and possible additions to current FYI program were discussed. One possible addition was adding upper-term undergraduate students as a second layer of FYI support for incoming new students which had several participants’ support including the doctoral committee for this study. In Chapter 5, conclusions were presented that integrate and expound on findings from this chapter along with recommendations for practice and future research included.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their HFGS in a first-year initiative retention program at a technical college in Texas. The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What is the nature of mentoring relationships in the FYI Program?
2. How have students’ prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions?
3. How has the mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus?

This study examined data gathered from interviews, in and out of classroom observations, two grand tours, and a small focus group to explore and better understand the unique mentoring relationships. While the objective of improving the retention gap of approximately 18% between HFGS and their non-FGS counterparts at Taylor College was real; finding deep meaning and understanding of current mentoring relationships between faculty and HFGS was the central goal of this study. Retention was not something to fix directly; it was the end result of enhanced integration as students developed relationships with faculty through mentoring exchanges as exemplified in this study. Validation theory by Rendon (1994) was employed as the theoretical frame to illuminate needs of HFGS and value student experiences and their existence as part of this campus community. An inductive process allowed data to be collected and analyzed which established eight categories to answer the three research questions. Findings discussed in Chapter 4 led to five major conclusions, implications for practice, and future recommendations.

Chapter five answered the questions “What has been learned?” and “What now?” as a better understanding of HFGS needs unfolded; it was crucial that lessons learned be fed back into the current FYI program to expectantly improve the depth of understanding of ambassador-student mentoring relationships. What was learned from this participant group and could that be
extracted and applied to other similar populations? In addition, what future adjustments would be needed to continue to grow this FYI program? How should findings be employed into a mentoring effort beyond this campus? Lastly, would these findings work at other similar campus locations? This chapter contains three sections to answer the above questions: a/ Conclusions and Discussion, b/ Implications for Practice, and c/ Recommendations for Future Research.

**Conclusions and Discussion**

This section provided conclusions and discussion for this qualitative case study. There were five salient conclusions derived from analysis of data that led to a better understanding of HFGS needs: (1) Emotional support provided in the mentoring relationship is vital for student integration, (2) Validating HFGS is crucial to students developing an active voice, feeling welcomed, and acknowledging that experiences and contributions matter, (3) The importance of building a trusted relationship between mentor and mentee was crucial to integration, (4) Helping HFGS understand the process of going to college, learning to integrate, and becoming self-reliant were central to student success, and (5) Re-aligning students’ responsibilities of family, work, and school are essential to a successful start in college. Not all conclusions here directly aligned with literature from seminal researchers; there were a few instances actual data from participants gave additional insight to be considered.

As one example of this first conclusion on emotional support within mentoring, seminal literature stressed mentors setting up formal one-on-one meetings with their mentee’s. In this particular study, it was more effective to have a less formal approach with faculty engaging with students that were on campus before class time. Faculty established both an open-door policy and going to where students congregated on campus, which enhanced successful outreach. The prominence of the second conclusion on validating HFGS was a constant reminder that HFGS
needed someone who believed in them and felt they mattered. The importance of building a trusted relationship between mentor and mentee was crucial to integration and providing deeper understanding of mentoring. Helping HFGS understand the process of going to college, how to navigate, and how becoming self-reliant were central to their continued success. Lastly, the process of re-aligning students’ responsibilities of family, work, and school were essential to improve integration in the first year of college. Each conclusion was discussed in light of how it related to current seminal literature and the conceptual framework chosen for guiding this study.

**Conclusion 1: Emotional Support provided in the Mentoring Relationship is Vital for Student Integration**

The first conclusion in this study is that emotional support provided in the mentoring relationship is vital for student integration. This conclusion acknowledged that HFGS many times faced major issues to learning in college and needed to establish faculty mentor support. According to Merriam (1983), successful mentoring is a powerful emotional based interaction between an older person [ambassador] and younger person [student], in a relationship in which the older member is trusted, loving, and experienced in the guidance of the younger. The mentor can help shape the growth and development of the protégé. The HFGS participants in this study were aligned with an ambassador to initially provide information and guidance in their first-year at Taylor College. In most cases in time, the ambassador became a support agent that the students relied on and sought for support and direction in their educational journey.

The process of mentoring was a significant part of the FYI program initiative. Mentor based programs align one on one relationships that help build on confidence and feelings of connectedness that illuminate the student’s belief that they can be successful (Johnson, 2006; Pascarella, 1980). Most HFGS participants did not have outside support in terms of people that
attempted or had been successful in college to provide guidance. There was a strong parallel between strength of the ambassador-student relationship, and ability to improve integration.

**Most participants had a positive view of mentoring.** In discussions within this study with both ambassadors and their student mentees, participants were positive in their view of student mentoring. Faculty talked about how HFGS desperately needed a guide and someone to help students find their way. The central goal of mentoring is to strengthen the bond of student engagement and connectedness to campus and faculty partners leading to successful degree conferral (Pascarella, 1980; Research to Practice Brief, 2011). Faculty ambassadors established mentoring sessions on a weekly basis, but found that being flexible and allowing new students an open-door approach was more viable and needed for success. In this current study, most HFGS benefited from having an ambassador and mentoring was important to their integration; but some students felt they did not need an ambassador, yet those students struggled in school.

There was a strong need for these HFGS to be connected to their ambassador and know their ambassador supported their goal of being successful in school. HFGS in this study that had established a mentoring plan and relationship with their ambassador, assimilated into their studies and the campus more fluidly. Cunningham (1999) illuminated that mentoring between faculty and their students was a powerful tool that enhanced classroom and out of classroom experiences and gave significance to being connected to college and to peers. Gardner (1981) argued that students needed a mentor as someone to trust and communicate with as they learned to navigate through school. Overall, mentoring had a positive impact in helping HFGS build trust in their mentor, align responsibilities, and become validated members of this campus.

**Needed student care from ambassador.** The area of student care was a major component of mentoring efforts for students in this study. The need for student caring and
understanding from mentors is exponentially importance for underrepresented, first-generation students who do not have exposure to college role models (Cuseo, 2009). Part of student care was setting up scheduled tutoring sessions on an ongoing basis, helping new HFGS with course tutoring, and letting students know that they can do this. Mentoring research suggests that students value mentors that are accessible, nurturing, and display their concern for student’s academic success and overall educational achievement (Frost, 1991; Kezar, 2010). Mentoring established a communication bridge many HFGS may have not had in prior educational settings; mentoring showed to be important in helping these students with integration.

With incoming new HFGS there was the need to address and align their expectations of what college was and would be like. HFGS can find the transition to college a complex one as they may lack guidance and instructional information that is pertinent to both college preparation and understanding of academic expectations (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Students in mentoring support had a broad range in age and exposure as some came directly from high school while others had been out of school for more than 20 years. Many HFGS think they are well prepared for entering college and do not always realize they have academic level issues with mathematics and/or English comprehension to include reading and writing based deficiencies (Cabrera et al., 2006). In this study, students were not always well-prepared for college level work especially in mathematics. In summary, significant mentoring support helped address the HFGS needs to integrate into the college and was a major part of successful mentoring for each student.

In referencing the seminal literature, mentoring was a valued prerequisite for college student integration and especially for non-traditional students. The non-traditional students in this study are HFGS, who come with the need to align with someone that could show them the way to be successful in college. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) noted that mentoring design
contained both emotional and academic parameters and provided needed information and encouraged guidance to help non-traditional students learn to navigate. The process of mentoring students is to develop and increase the level of self-confidence, learning academic skills, and finding tools to be successful in school (Luna & Prieto, 2009; Kram, 1985). The central goal of mentoring was to strengthen the bond of student connectedness to the campus with faculty ambassadors leading mentoring efforts.

Hispanic students, especially first-generation, need support and guidance in learning to navigate and find their way in college, and mentoring can help this goal become attainable. Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) noted that the success of a mentoring relationship can be measured by the support, guidance, and direction to help students succeed and make an effective transition from one educational level to another. Pope (2006) argued, “Success ultimately depends upon students successfully becoming a part of the academic and social fabric of institution” (p. 42). Emelo (2009) described a culture-mentoring model consisting of four mentoring dimensions described as (a) contextualizing communication, (b) handling conflict, (c) prioritizing efforts, and (d) using time. As stated by Emelo, these four mentoring dimensions can disrupt mentoring relationships or can be a valuable opportunity to build cultural competence, which research identifies as one of the limitations for Hispanic students (Andrade-Pizarro, K., 2013).

Findings from this specific study supported the importance of providing strong faculty-mentor support for HFGS, as faculty ambassadors talked about their college experiences to help students see that they too struggled but graduated. In one highlighted student event in week one, faculty wore their regalia to classes as an example of the goal to students of graduating. In a similar light, some faculty brought a student graduation border hat to sit on the front podium as a reminder to students of the goal to reach degree conferral. Gardner (1981) states that students
long for human connections to their mentors that can believe in them and help them to find their way and be successful in this unknown environment of college (p. 70). In summary, mentoring was vital to HFGS integration, ambassadors mentioned that their responsibilities went beyond a professor-student relationship; faculty wanted to be a strong advocate for their students.

**Conclusion 2: Validating HFGS is Crucial to Students Developing an Active Voice, Feeling Welcomed, and Acknowledging that Experiences and Contributions Matter**

This second conclusion supports that validating the existence of HFGS at Taylor College is crucial to making sure this student group have an active voice, feel welcomed, and their experiences and contributions matter. Discussing prior college attempts or bad experiences at other schools are a significant part of validating students and working to help them succeed now. In review of the retention literature, there is an important emphasis on noted student attributes and needed assimilation into college. But it is noted that in this study, students needed someone that could help them integrate and become successful in this campus location irrespective of past outcomes. The problem is a considerable amount of retention literature is centered on traditional non-Hispanic students and does not always recognize Hispanic students’ existence in college.

As an example, Tinto’s (1975) research on student dropout was examining student academic and social variables pertaining to traditional students, but later Bean and Metzner (1985) brought inclusion of non-traditional student attrition into this important discussion. Additionally, Rendon (1994) established the importance of validation theory as an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in-and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and personal development (p.44). In this case study, the HFGS participants communicated the importance of obtaining faculty mentor support, needed nurturing advocacy, and a feeling of inclusion as a valid student member at their campus community.
**Having an active voice.** The lens of validation theory by Rendon (1994) that supported acknowledgement and recognition of HFGS was a vital ingredient to helping students become active participants in college. While many faculty may center attention on academic quality, HFGS are far more than just an academic component and need validation of their existence and worth in school from both family and college agents. Other seminal researchers in support of validation theory discussed the prominence of having family support in Hispanic students’ educational experiences and the parent’s blessings for their young adults going to college was crucial to academic success (Crisp, 2009). For example, research by Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) highlighted how this support and encouragement from family helped Latina/o college students strive to become more resilient and successful in postsecondary education. The ability for HFGS to have time with faculty [ambassadors] both in classroom and outside was helpful to their increased likelihood of persisting (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Astin, 1993). Some students were forthcoming about fear of the classroom environment and never felt they really belonged prior to coming to this campus. Struggling with added commitment of school combined with work and family required students to readjust their life.

**Students feeling welcomed.** In review of other research on Hispanic student validation in college, participants mentioned their teacher [mentor] and how important it was that their mentor believed in them. HFGS can struggle with a lack of emotional maturity as a result of exposure to poor prior academic experiences and unfamiliar new experiences (Santiago, 2011). Many HFGS have not experienced prior teachers, professors, or mentors [ambassador] that showed an interest in them and pushed for them to do well in school. One item illuminated in this study, was how HFGS needed someone to tell them frequently “you can do this”, and “you
will make it”. Validation of these students and their needs aligned with review of other studies on importance of ambassadors’ commitment to helping HFGS be part of the college community.

**Students’ experiences and contributions matter.** An important issue that emerged from review was looking at student prior experiences and the presence of gender-bias issues for some male HFGS towards females at many colleges irrespective of location or size. For some male Hispanic students, displaying gender-bias concerns had connection to cultural influence and prior exposure to a male dominate home and/or community. This machoism [machismo] can result in the appearance of a negative view of women, yet this for Hispanics is stressed for males as being strong providers, protectors, and defenders of females and the family unit (Morales, 1996; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). In some cases, Hispanic males had not been exposed to a world of professionals where females were in educated roles such as doctors, engineers, and professors. Faculty mentors in these studies expressed when this behavior was present, private conversations were needed to help students work towards improvement and a better understanding of females and their professional roles.

The findings in this study highlighted the importance of validation of HFGS and their many contributions to university. The acknowledgment of student significance and need to formulate a plan of equity is a fundamental component to validation of HFGS in college (Rendon, 2011; Andrada, 2007). Many ambassadors communicated that when students were supported and given a feeling of trust and importance, they were more secure and this led to better performance. Integration becomes the result of continuous efforts to engage students through their educational journey (Hurtado, 1994). Some students were scared they would fail in school; this could lead to postponing college.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Six Elements Present in Rendon’s Validation Theory</th>
<th>Elements supported/ not in FYI that influence HFGS integration (This Study)</th>
<th>Findings that Added to this research discussion not directly in Validation Theory (This Study)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This first element places responsibility of reaching out to students on faculty agents.</td>
<td><strong>Supported</strong> This element is strongly supported with current FYI outreach for new students. Faculty going to students as opposed to waiting.</td>
<td><strong>Added</strong> <strong>Formal Mentoring</strong> that aligns local faculty ambassadors directly with new students not in Validation Theory specifically. The FYI program has all new students in ambassador-student relationships for 1st year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The second element is to instill validation of students and make them feel capable and strengthen their feeling of self-worth and self-confidence.</td>
<td><strong>Supported</strong> This element is a part of the FYI effort. Faculty initiate validation of students in and out of classroom. It is noted this is for all students to increase their belonging and self-reliance.</td>
<td><strong>Added</strong> One of the major findings in this study was <strong>Trust building</strong> between the mentors and their assigned mentees. It was determined this was developing and had different phases of depth. Details in Chapter 4 &amp; 5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The third element notes as students begin to experience validation from faculty agents consistently, they feel more confident with engagement and involvement in school.</td>
<td><strong>Supported</strong> This element was present and part of initiating connections to new students at the NSO. Faculty display the validation that students are supported from start to end.</td>
<td><strong>Comment Only:</strong> This element showed significant presence with the HFGS in this study. Ambassadors described the changes for many of their mentees as mentoring and validation were positively working. Different levels experienced for each student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The forth element acknowledges the importance that students meet and work with multiple agents including the faculty, ambassador, student support team, and campus agents.</td>
<td><strong>Supported</strong> This element was part of FYI where new student has a student success coach, faculty ambassador, plus other support agents at campus.</td>
<td><strong>Comment Only:</strong> Student support advisors discussed registration, financial aid, and where to go for needs. Ambassadors monitored tutoring and the academic plan of study. Multiple agents also were student peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fifth element notes that validation is a developmental process and not an end process.</td>
<td><strong>Supported</strong> This element of development is focused on the individual needs intervention process.</td>
<td><strong>Comment Only:</strong> Validation as a tool needs adjustment to the needs of an individual student. So, small campus is ideal for customizing the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sixth element focuses on the importance of starting validation of non-traditional students as soon as they arrive and start college.</td>
<td><strong>Supported</strong> This element also aligns with the NSO and starting of mentoring for non-traditional students.</td>
<td><strong>Added</strong> NSO was set up as first meeting with new students to minimize fears and provide information all new students needed. NSO is well received. <strong>NSO is NOT directly in Validation.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Validation theory helped explain roles for ambassadors and campus agents in recognizing and acknowledging new HFGS at this campus. Several students in this study communicated about their experiences at prior schools, they did not have any mentors or support to be successful in college. Ambassadors worked from day one to support new HFGS entering FYI program at Taylor College and initiating a pairing with students for mentoring support to begin. Non-traditional students can be successful with assistance and mentoring of institutional agents to include faculty and staff around them (Rendon, 2011). Validation theory provides a platform for the celebration of enhanced student self-reliance and builds on increasing each of the students’ self-worth and feeling of hope.

As a significant addition to the findings within this study was that while validation of HFGS was important to students’ self-identity and advancing the belief they could be successful in college; the fact was that aligning faculty as mentors with incoming students was not directly communicated by Rendon. Although, there were many instances where Rendon suggested that faculty and administrator have responsibility to help non-traditional students integrate into the college successfully. However, Rendon (1994) communicated clearly about the need to validate cultural needs of diverse populations both in and out of the classroom. Additional research by Rendon (2002), noted six elements as contributors to academic and personal student growth.

The above list of elements on Table 9 and the overarching enabling position of Validation Theory by Rendon (1994) was woven throughout this FYI program initiative. Many discussions with faculty about the goals and needs of being a successful ambassador to new students, including a significant HFGS population; were in light of this foundational framework. In conclusion, the validation of all new students has substantial value; but for HFGS as a large
percentage of the incoming population at Taylor College, student validation is one of the most important components of this FYI support effort.

**Conclusion 3: The Importance of Building a Trusted Relationship between Mentor and Mentee was Crucial to Integration**

One of the most influential constructs that developed in this particular study on mentoring was the building of trust between the ambassador and mentee. The presence of trust was in phases from the student mentee relied on ambassador for campus information, to the ambassador was an advocate in their behalf, and for some, a trusted friend. In addition, the phenomenon of trust took time to establish; and not all students in this study were at or reached the same phase of trust. There were three distinct levels of trust which showed up in this study. Trust building usually started slowly and built over time with continued mentoring exposure. In summary, most students started at different levels of trust building with their ambassador and not all reached the highest level or stayed at a certain level, as trust was a dynamic process.

Trust building started with an introduction to the ambassador at the NSO. In watching several of the ambassador-mentee introductions, there were students that were very guarded of their information and showed reluctance to open up. While others seemed to immediately start talking and providing conversation with their new ambassador from the start. In this new relationship, for students, there was vulnerability present and some students recognized that this was a different environment. These faculty was immediately here to provide assistance and outreach to help students integrate into the new campus.

**First phase of trust.** In the first phase of trust, most students were just seeking information about college and how to get around the new campus. Many of the HFGS in this study had been at previous colleges and did not have positive experiences or help with their
needs. When students were in interviews, several talked about their first meeting with their ambassador and how they felt guarded about giving out too much information too fast. They needed time to get to know the ambassador and see if they were really there to help and be trusted. Overall, most of the students progressed through their first phase and established a stronger connection to their ambassador.

Second phase of trust. In the second phase of building trust, ambassadors began to develop academic plans of action for their students and helped them with learning tools needed to be successful in college. Learning problem solving skills, time management, and how to develop a daily planner that helped students manage their day were all crucial elements to integration. In this phase, students had more open discussions with their ambassador. They talked about career possibilities or changing their current job with their ambassador. In addition, the level of trust was becoming deeper and students were more engaged in trusting the directions and advice of their ambassador.

Third and highest phase of trust. Building trust at the third and highest level focused on personal student needs and ambassadors knowing and supporting their students both academically and as a caring friend. Building trust was an ongoing effort as many students did not have prior experience with success in school nor with a faculty mentor. Many students in this study needed more than just academic support because some displayed low self-confidence and were unsure they could be successful. The need for ambassadors to mentor new HFGS was evident as a strong intervention effort in each student’s behalf. Students in time began to open up and rely on their ambassador for guidance and support. They knew they could reach out to such a trusted person, who would direct them and validate their importance in school. In this study, numerous participants communicated that patience and time were needed for trust
relationships to have a chance to both improve and be successful in moving through these phases of depth in trust relationships.

In illumination of research on trust between students and faculty, there is a vast array of literature. There is need to focus and narrow this window to look at Hispanic students and the makeup of their struggle to trust teachers and professor in school settings. Trust is defined as the ability that someone or something is good, honest, and in the subject’s best interest (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Trust is divided into two distinct areas, (a) social trust, and (b) institutional trust. Social trust building looks at the need to establish norms and social-based interactions (Simpson, 2012), while institutional trust, denotes trust in organizational and institutional settings, such as a university or college (Putnam, 2001; Dinesen, 2012). Trust building for Hispanic students has reliance on both constructs involving both social and institutional components (Mangan, 2011; Chacon, 2013). Overall, the HFGS students in this study took time to build trust relationships with both their ambassador and student peers.

In reflection of trust building in this case study, the student researcher found that the HFGS in this study needed an advocate and person to rely on as they attempted to be successful in school. It was clear, that academic preparedness and tutoring were not that successful, until students had validation and a feeling that they could do this. Many of the students in interviews always talked about that their ambassador was their biggest fan. He or she believed in them and thought that they could make it and the ambassador would do everything possible to help. The empowering of validation theory with these HFGS participants was energetically present, as several of the student group reached this third phase, they showed determination and self-reliance to make it in college.
Conclusion 4: Helping HFGS Understand the Process of Going to College, Learning to Integrate, and Becoming Self-Reliant were Central to Student Success

The forth conclusion centered on the need to help HFGS understand the process of going to college, learning to integrate, and learn self-reliance; as some HFGS struggled in unknown world of college, especially at the onset of being a new student. Gibbons & Borders (2010) posit that many HFGS tend to have lower self-efficacy skills and struggle with the students’ ability to advocate for themselves; due to less parental support and perceived barriers. Moreover, HFGS can face the reality of culture shock as they enter an unfamiliar college environment; where the majority of students are non-Hispanic, adding to the pressures of integration and finding a sense of belonging in school (Yosso, 2006; Gonzalez, 2002). In conversations with study participants, the subject of students having a feeling of non-support at prior college attempts was frequently discussed. As an example, students talked about their prior experiences at community colleges or at large universities where they never felt supported or able to integrate into that disorganized environment with other students. Conversations led to a description of a prior large campus setting being uninviting for these new HFGS. Overall, HFGS struggled to get past some detrimental experiences in prior settings and now needed support to integrate into current campus that included working with their ambassadors and student peers to help learn the process of college and to be successful at it.

Understanding the process of going to college. One of the significant factors for HFGS in their first-year of studies was both support from family and from student peers. The support from family, irrespective of their formal education, can influence and strengthen the ability of new students to find their way as they integrate into college (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005). For HFGS, the connection to family was strong; and a need to have their approval was
paramount for new students in college. Peer connections with other students allowed new
students to find people that were going through the same experiences. Yet, HFGS need to find
connectedness to campus agents that help them understand college.

In light of the research, there was evidence, both quantitatively (Hurtado et. al, 1996;
Rodriquez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cordoza) and qualitatively (Sánchez, B., Reyes, O., & Singh,
J., 2006), that suggest student peer support could be the most influential in the first year of the
student integration cycle in college. As an example, Hurtado and colleagues found that the peer
connections were better predictors for social adjustment, while the parental guidance was most
influential on emotional adjustment. In addition, peers built bonds with other students that could
allow for more instrumental support, where students form study groups, sharing their classroom
experiences, and helping each other with needed success strategies in college (Phinney & Haas,
2003; Rodriquez et. al, 2003). In comparison, having family support while important; does not
help with experience in college, and so these peer relationships become significant for new
students working to integrate. In summary, support from family, student peers, and academic
mentors were all valued components of helping HFGS understand process of going to college.

**Connecting to faculty and student peers.** In this particular case study, the need for
connections with faculty and student peers seem to be one of the strongest indicators of
integration. For many of the HFGS in this study, students talked about the feelings of belonging
and enjoying learning from faculty and their peers. Conversely, the HFGS participants that
struggled with making faculty and student peer connections, had a more difficulty experiences
with integration and belonging in the campus environment. As an example, in this study, HFGS
talked about making friendships with their peers, and how that student group helped them keep
moving towards graduation. Students communicated in interviews and the focus group that one
major accolade for Taylor College was faculty and peers welcomed them and wanted to see them succeed here. Lastly, the faculty ambassadors communicated that if their students did not feel connected or had a feeling of belonging here; the learning process required for degree completion became more difficult.

**Learning to integrate.** Students worked with their ambassador to build an action plan that provided daily direction but had flexibility around individual student needs. While initially all HFGS’ had a minimum of once per week meetings with their ambassador, it became clear that some students needed more attention. Ambassadors were given autonomy to adjust and add scheduled time at their own discretion to better serve individual students. As an example, students would list all of their outside responsibilities and then develop their daily planner to follow. As expected, a few students that stated they did not want or need an ambassador, seem to struggle the most in terms of their ability to integrate into school. Overall, ambassadors being flexible, and using an informal approach to student outreach; by talking to students frequently before and after classes and seeing how they were doing helped improve action plan results.

The research revealed that when talking with ambassadors, mentors communicated that many HFGS came unprepared academically for college and could struggle to integrate into the new campus environment. There are numerous studies examining challenges of HFGS from a deficit position (Baptiste & Rehmann, 2011), there is a need to position a new and engaging perspective to help students feel part of the college community and support integration (Rivas-Drake, 2008; Salas, Aragon, Alandejani, & Timpson, 2014). Rendon Linares & Munoz (2011) argues that experiences between the current world of the student and the world of the university are often incongruent.
Findings from this study disclosed that student intervention helped these HFGS’ learn to accept and take ambassador advice as more time was spent in mentoring. Ambassadors stated that until they could establish student confidence, helping these students with academic needs such as time management and integration were not successful. As assurance was established, most HFGS’ began to listen and better communicate more frequently with their ambassador. As communication improved, ambassadors could better serve students and help them assimilate into college and manage school. In summary, successful integration was a process that required ambassadors and students to work together to help students feel they belonged at this campus and could be successful in college at Taylor College.

**Students becoming self-reliant.** The need for new HFGS freshman to learn self-reliance to be successful in college was not a simple process. Student had to work diligently with their ambassador and faculty agents to learn how to get things done themselves. As an example, it was recognized that HFGS’ in this study that made new friendships with peers seem to have a shorter time to integrate and become self-reliant sooner. Social networks formulated with faculty and student peers are exemplified as helping the new students with integration. The mentor’s goal was to help these HFGS to initiate their own course of action, become self-dependent, and have faith in their own decisions as that would be required beyond their first year of studies.

The research literature gave significant support for acknowledging Hispanics from a viewpoint based on ethnicity are noted to possess an identity and they value interdependence among their own culture. Hispanic interdependence is key to the need to validate this culture and individuals as importance in the educational arena (Noble & LaCasa, 1991). In addition, the formation of self-reliance and establishing a social network can be a valid alternative for lack of human or physical attributes in building communities (Cheong, 2006). Social networks were the
result of relationships that expound based on prevalence of norms such as obligations, developed trust, and collective participation (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). The campus community at Taylor College had worked diligently to make sure this campus was welcoming and that it was structured to provide support for HFGS to feel they were an important part of this campus.

In reference to the current study at hand, and an example of learning to have self-reliance, students talked about how their ambassador helped them learn to do things for themselves; and become self-sufficient on their own. In addition, HFGS participants mentioned they were closer to their ambassador and professors, these students needed lots of attention early on and received accolades frequently as they experienced an unfamiliar world of college. There was lots of noise and other distractions for their attention, and the ambassador works to reel them in and keep them focused on success in school. The faculty ambassadors sometimes had the role of father/mother, mentor and guide, and most important as advocate.

**Conclusion 5: Re-aligning Students’ Responsibilities of Family, Work, and School are Essential to a Successful Start in College**

The fifth conclusion illuminated the importance of faculty ambassadors helping their HFGS with re-aligning student responsibilities, addressing expectations of college, and students dedicating enough time to be successful. Most new HFGS participants were already full-time employees, had family responsibilities, and now were adding going to school at night. In addition, these new HFGS could become overwhelmed with the added stress of going to school on top of other numerous commitments. Such demands may not be present for all traditional students, but are common for non-traditional students as they balance familial and school (Rendon, 1994). In this case study, HFGS participants relied heavily on weekly mentoring conversations and guidance on learning to balance school with other obligations and talked with
their ambassador that had experience in this area. As the study participants discussed needs for balancing responsibilities including college, there was a clear indication of their commitment to be successful in school, with hope to better support their family in the future.

The research literature is vast on finding balance between school, family, and making adjustments in college, most students struggle at varying degrees. In examining seminal research literature on *familismo* [family] responsibilities, Hispanic students maintaining strong family ties as first priority and must be balanced with added obligations of college (Sánchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). In addition, HFGS as non-traditional students are required to balance many responsibilities as they experience challenges from college and family simultaneously that are opposing forces (Riehl, 1994; Orbe, 2004). As noted by Terenzini et al. (1994), HFGS tend to have a more difficult time with the transition to college and have a host of concerns including all of the common anxieties of any new college freshman plus cultural and many times linguistic concerns (p. 302). Establishing a sense of balance to include connections to student peers and faculty with positive relationships while maintaining a strong connection to family and culture is crucial to student success (Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Villalpando, 2003).

The findings in this study supported the conclusion that it was critical that students had someone with knowledge to help them balance their responsibilities and life to have a better chance of school success. As ambassadors began their conversations in one-on-one meetings with new HFGS, assessing the students’ responsibilities in conjunction with college was a first step to aligning a plan of action. Mentors helped each student with building a schedule that included an academic plan with scheduled times for studying, mentoring, and going over day to day course layout. Many of the HFGS worried about how to balance their other family, job, and additional responsibilities with school. So, most of these students required assistance in making
a plan of action to go to school at night after working all day. Faculty ambassadors met with their mentees early and frequently to help with this adjustment of balancing responsibilities and keep students positive about their journey.

HFGS did not always have academic related concerns at Taylor College, but adjustment concerns, those same students seemed the least connected socially to their ambassador. Bennett and Okinaka (1990) described this adjustment as the relative absence of a level of alienation that students experience when they are unfamiliar with the norms, values, and expectations that predominate the setting. One lesson learned from research articles on first-year mentoring at other institutions was many students struggle with college if academic or social components are not intact and addressed through mentoring. The need of abundant encouragement and student support showed to be important in helping these new HFGS as they sought to adjust their own responsibilities around the addition of college.

**Section Summary**

There were five principal conclusions that arose from detailed analysis of study data. First conclusion, emotional support provided in the mentoring relationship is vital for student integration. Second, the importance of validating HFGS in this study gave rise to students believing in themselves and building self-reliance to do it on their own. Third, importance of building a trusted relationship between mentor and mentee was crucial to integration. Fourth, an effort to help HFGS understand processes of college and how to navigate through successfully were the most important lessons learned in this study. The fifth conclusion was re-aligning students’ responsibilities of family, work, and school were essential to integrating into college. In the next section after additional conclusions, implication for practice are discussed.
Additional Conclusions and Discussions Considered

As this case study came to an end, there were additional findings and conclusions that allowed for discussion here and gave light to possible extension beyond this study. It is possible this may provide support for other student groups within other studies and additional boundaries. A few of the discussion points to shed light on are as follows: (a) Uniqueness of this study being in Texas, (b) How the FYI program extends beyond the boundaries of just academic significance, (c) Study’s impact on improvements for current FYI program, and (d) This study has influenced future FYI program design and faculty development.

Uniqueness of Findings and Conclusions to Study Being in Texas

One of the discussion points that arose in the doctoral defense was the idea of what is the significance of this study and these students being in Texas? Is there a uniqueness to the study being in Texas versus another state? I think that there was a vast amount of literature support and findings pertaining to students that had little reliance on the geographical landscape. First, as a reference, these new HFGS struggled with many of the same issues such as the lack of student academic preparedness, mitigating in developmental courses, and self-efficacy needs as they navigated in college. Second, building and enabling initiatives that lend themselves to supporting HFGS beyond geographical location is adamantly needed. The presence of low-income status and attending minimally funded primary schools was a constant for many HFGS; certainly, this does not occur only in Texas schools nor is it only pertaining to Hispanic ethnicity.

Participants coming from Texas. Although, Texas like California and Arizona had significant Hispanic populations, students in the South did have uniqueness. One of the specific areas of uniqueness as part of this study, was the agricultural heritage of most students as they were from Rio Grande Valley area in a farming community. In addition, many of the Hispanic
families had long histories in this South Texas agricultural environment. The needs of such an agricultural area could be in sharp contrast to the needs for a college education including lack of knowledge and support for going to school. Many of the HFGS participants in this case study, experienced and knew of those differential cultural values first-hand as they discussed college with parents and/or their spouse.

**Traditional vs. non-traditional status.** In looking at the uniqueness of the Hispanic students in this study, it is important to realize that there was contrast in the 9 students in terms of age, educational goals, and traditional vs. non-traditional status. While all of the participants in this study were HFGS, there was a contrast in traditional vs. non-traditional status. In terms of status, there were 3 of the 9 students in this study classified as traditional in that they were 18-24 years old and had entered college directly from high school completion (Alice, Juan, and Joe). These 3 students had different needs and experiences from the other students within this study. Collectively, they were in engineering degree programs and showed signs of lack of maturity and initially thought College would be like grade 13 after high school. Moreover, 2 of the 3 had come from a prior college environment and one was directly from high school to Taylor College. All 3 of these students longed for validation and a need to fit in at this smaller campus setting. In summary, these 3 students had less experience than other participants and needed direct guidance from their ambassador; it is noted that Alice questioned why she needed an ambassador, yet she struggled initially with her integration into a new campus.

The non-traditional group of 6 students were older and had experience in the work force and in life. There were 3 of these 6 non-traditional students that were veterans and others had been out of high school for decades in some instances. One of the common attributes of this group is they seemed to know they needed an education. These non-traditional students had
worked without a degree and recognized the value and need for school. Most in this group had a spouse and children, and they talked about the need for a career to support their families. In addition, this group similarly talked about the need of their ambassador and how welcomed that support had been. In summary, most of these students needed an ambassador as someone to help them get started and be an advocate in their behalf in this unfamiliar world of college.

**FYI Program Extended Beyond the Boundaries of Just Academic Significance**

In looking at this case study and specifically the FYI program initiative, the program tended to extend far beyond just academic support. The faculty ambassadors simply would not be successful with new students by simply only providing academic support. Several of the student participants in this study were academically capable; the problem was a lack of self-confidence that they could manage being successful in college. One of the strongest components of the FYI local program was the mentoring of these students. In discussions with faculty as ambassadors, many discussions were about building students’ confidence and a feeling of belonging, not always around academic issues. Also, the current FYI program had been well received by HFGS students in this particular study, 5 of the 6 HFGS in this study are well through their second year successfully. One student had chosen to take a short session break from family needs but returned for the March 2017 session.

In light of validation theory by Rendon (1994), one of the recommendation she communicates is that academic support and making positive changes are dependent on first validating that students are capable. The students in this particular study ranged from needing significant tutoring in Mathematics, and a few in English, but for the most part the need to be validated and have someone believe in them was the missing link. When the student participants were in interviews, most talked about non-validating prior experiences, and few felt confident in
the ability to be successful on their own in college. There were many discussions with these students that centered on being in large campus settings at community colleges or universities that did not have time to validate their existence. Hence, most students in this study felt lost.

The faculty that have served as ambassadors talked about their communications with their mentees around building the students’ confidence to help them integrate successfully into school. I think that this is an example of going beyond academic only support when faculty concern themselves with supporting all needs of their students including building their self-esteem and becoming an advocate for their success. Student participants within this study continually conveyed with accolades to their faculty for being pro-active and giving students a plan of how to succeed in college. The faculty would go beyond the scope of a professor and work tirelessly with students to help them improve skills and their self-image. “You can do this and I am going to help you” speaks volumes on the faculty commitment to their students’ success.

**Study’s Impact on Improvements for Current FYI Program**

The FYI Program has been in place since November 2013 and has made significant changes. A few of the changes have been to better position the one-on-one meetings with mentees. Ambassadors have matured in their understanding of student needs including their ability to guide and manage student support. In looking at this current study, there have been a few ideas emerge as feedback to consider as improvements to the current FYI initiative. Some participants in this study gave light to new ideas never considered before.

Discussions with interview participants open a few ideas to explore as possible FYI improvements starting with a second layer of support for new students. The discussions centered on adding upper-term students to the mix for helping new students with integration. Originally, this idea started with the thought of bringing in upper-term honors students as support agents.
As the discussions continued with multiple participants, including a discussion within the dissertation defense, it was recommended to adjust this idea to include upper-term students that more similar to the new students in their status. Below are a few of the mentioned considerations for upper-term student support participants.

- Upper-term student should be in the same program of study (ex. Engineering)
- Upper-term student if possible could be of the same gender and/or ethnicity
- Upper-term student could be from the same or similar geographical area (ex. Rio Grande Valley/ South Texas)
- Upper-term student could be of similar age

The thinking here was to developed a “buddy system” where all incoming freshman are aligned with an upper-term student for the first two 8 week sessions to help with navigation and integration at Taylor College. It would be helpful that the upper-term students introduced the new student to other peers and helped them to fit in at the new environment. This second layer of support should be fluid and allow for flexibility in terms of exposure aligned with the level of what the new student seems to need. Additionally, the upper-term student could help introduce campus clubs such as IEEE or the Veterans Association to help the new student find other support peers. In summary, this second layer would continue longer for new students that displayed to need for additional support while others may only need support briefly.

Another idea that came up in interview discussions from more than one participant was to have a follow meeting for the NSO New Student Orientation program. The NSO is scheduled on the Saturday before a new session starts. All of the new students are introduced to their new ambassador and the initial meetings is to briefly go over expectations of the FYI Program. Also, at the NSO, new students meet the student success advisors, financial aid team, and other campus
support members. In the NSO, students learn about the course shells and what to expect day one when their classes begin. The idea that was mentioned was the need to have a follow up meeting at the campus (ex. NSO 2.0).

The NSO 2.0 follow-up meeting would be scheduled in Week 2 or 3, and have an open forum type of gathering where students could come to get more information on navigating their course shell, submitting homework, and using the library resources in their studies. Many faculty in this study felt while the NSO was very informative and needed for all new students, there was a lot of information to cover. Hence, they felt that most new students after having started the session would have additional questions and would need a brief review. The student participants in this study, also alluded to the need for additional follow up after they started their first session. Furthermore, the NSO 2.0 follow up meetings could be scheduled before evening classes and also be recorded so they could be reviewed multiple times as needed.

**Study Has Influenced Future FYI Program Design and Faculty Development**

This study has already had an impact on the future direction of FYI program initiative. How faculty are trained as ambassadors to support all new students entering Taylor College has relied on this study’s information. The discussions with faculty and administrators have been frequent and this study has brought a new perspective to future directions for mentoring and supporting our students at this campus. One takeaway from this study has been to illuminate how important mentoring new students has become and providing exceptional support has a direct correlation to improved student integration. Overall, there have been additional design and training components added to the FYI program initiative.

The FYI program has been influenced by recent discovery from this case study on ambassador-student mentoring relationships. Specifically, one of the changes to the program
design has been to bring in visiting professors into the ambassador community. At Taylor College, there is a substantial increase in the percentage of visiting professors as part of the faculty team. It has been recognized that our visiting professors who teach 40% of the courses now, have not been included with being ambassadors to new students. The recent role of these visiting professor has been expanded to include this group in the ambassador mentoring role. This decision makes sense because faculty have arguably the biggest influence on student integration as noted within this study. A recent change to the program design will start a rotation of training for visiting professors in the ambassador role for July 2017 implementation. As well, this program design change will select 4-6 visiting professors that have been here more than one academic year to go through ambassador training. In time, all visiting professor that chose to become ambassadors will be in the same role with mentoring students as the current full-time faculty group, extending our outreach capability for new students.

Training of faculty to serve as ambassadors has also had changes and additions that stem from this study. One of the additions is to develop a full-time faculty ambassador group that will team up with the incoming visiting professor as they begin training. Full-time faculty have begun to meet formally each session to discuss their roles of ambassadors and share best practices as a few of those are mentioned here. Faculty development has matured and faculty are meeting 2 times per session for training, discuss mentoring, and being advocates for students.

- Ambassadors are reaching out to students on a weekly basis to informally check on them and see how they are doing
- Ambassadors receive student “alert messages” from professor on a student’s progress in their class. This gives timely information for ambassador-student outreach to have more impact to discussions for improvement
• Ambassadors check and give accolades to students that are doing great. The idea here is not to just focus on students that are not doing well

**Implications for Practice**

In reflection of findings in this study, several implications for practice emerged. Implications for practice are discussed in terms of ability to fit into additional locations where HFGS’ are present. Implications are discussed at both student level such as helping with motivation and integration into campus and also at the program level where a FYI program might help students better integrate into a new educational environment. This study was part of a pilot mentoring effort aimed at HFGS and their needs with hope of being expanded to multiple locations within this large career based university. At the student level, lessons learned started with learning how ambassadors communicated the importance of mentoring new HFGS’ to establish a relationship that might improve student’s belonging.

**FYI Program Mentoring as a Change Agent**

Faculty talked about how this mentoring connection maybe the most important agent of change for students, as many HFGS came with poor prior experiences and expectations. In setting up an initial plan of study, faculty started the process of having a plan of action and making sure that students followed this structured map to be successful. A few ambassadors highlighted the need to focus more on guiding students and believing in them as opposed to being critical of their past. HFGS needed guidance and someone to support the idea that they could do this and be successful in college irrespective of challenges.

**Possible intervention.** In examining the institutional level, there are areas that need to be assessed and reviewed that give a starting point to determining the need for a possible FYI intervention. In previous chapters, institutional climate which is the presence of what it feels like
when students and colleagues enter the school environment should be evaluated. There needs to be a collective feeling of positive and uplifting spirit displayed as all faculty, staff, and students are welcoming and want to help new students feel part of the campus as their home. Many HFGS’ in this study communicated this was a positive and recognizable attribute they felt when coming to this study location. As part of student care, if the institutional environment does not feel welcoming; new students will struggle to feel part of the campus and this can reflect on their desire to integrate.

The importance of validation and celebrating students was one of the most noteworthy discoveries in this study. Validation of HFGS and making sure experiences and contributions were recognized as important and welcomed were central of Taylor College. When ambassadors and their students were interviewed, HFGS talked about how engaged and supportive their ambassador and other faculty really were. One female student stated her ambassador was her friend and always in her corner, she said “my advisor was the one who believed in me and I wanted to do better in school for her and me”. The student participants talked about having an ambassador that made them feel important and valuable both in the classroom and in their mentoring meetings.

**Communicating prior experiences.** One lesson learned here was that not all students perceived they needed an ambassador or even support from mentoring. Some students were less willing to share their prior experiences and open up to discuss their needs with others. It was also discovered that this phenomenon of mentoring was not black and white, meaning students either accept or do not accept help, and it is quite variable in the stages of trust. As an example, some students may accept only guidance on issues as what courses to take; but at the highest level of trust, students discussed family and life issues with their ambassador as a trusted friend.
The students that communicated they did not need an ambassador also commented at times of being glad their ambassador stuck to helping them anyway. Students also showed different degrees of needing support, some interviewed were quick to seek out ambassador help and only needed a short time of mentoring; while others found, they needed more support for longer periods of time to be successful.

Local Implications

Another highlight that became apparent to me is that while ambassadors have a substantial role and responsibility in providing mentoring and support to students, some students that were in this study were reluctant to go to them for help. Faculty ambassadors in interviews mentioned that some of their student mentees would come to mentor sessions but just were not that engaged or open to help. This need to establish a relationship of trust in some cases never happened or the student was too skeptical of needing help. This dilemma of not being engaged tended to spill over to poor classroom performance and overall a lack of motivation to be successful in school. Overall, most HFGS in this study connected well with their faculty ambassador, but some students were more prone to connect with peers first.

Helping new HFGS understand process of going to college and learning to navigate from their ambassador and become self-reliant in college successfully was crucial to their chances of persisting. Ambassadors presented lessons learned about students and specifically HFGS as they described the importance of helping by showing students requirements of being successful in college such as learning time management and study habits. Several students in this study were not college ready from both an academic and emotional engagement perspective. The HFGS in this study needed to learn how to manage their schedule to include tutoring needs and learning to build a weekly schedule that gave time to complete assignments and study for exams. Many
students talked about level of rigor for their courses and initially feeling lost in how to get
everything done and keep up.

**Balancing multiple responsibilities with school.** Most HFGS in this study learned to
manage multiple responsibilities and showed significant ability to integrate in the first two to
three sessions of the first year of studies. After detailed discussions with ambassadors and
student participants, learning to balance school required learning time management skills to be
successful. Also, importantly learning how to disassemble large problems into manageable
pieces to be solved was crucial to success and not becoming overwhelmed. Students stated that
time spent learning about strategies from their ambassador for balancing their responsibilities
was one of the most important skills needed to be successful in college.

**Needing my student advisor.** All students in this study reaffirmed the need for support
and guidance from their ambassadors, faculty, and their student peers. One of the communicated
message from students was a feeling of being overwhelmed initially and the faculty mentoring
component of the FYI program helped them with having a support group. The HFGS also
mentioned how crucial it was to connect to their faculty members and with their ambassador; as
they relied on their professor’s guidance to understand how to be successful in each course. In
terms of navigation, students in this study talked about the student success advisors that would
meet with them to communicate just how the campus community worked and important events
to participate in such as seminars on financial aid. Overall, HFGS in this study noted trust in
their student advisor as important in conjunction with the relationship with their ambassador to
help understand financial aid, student loans, and possible membership in campus clubs.

**The importance of local peer relationships.** The out of classroom observations gave
light to how students communicated and built peer relationships. Students that were involved
with their peers seemed better informed about how things worked at the campus and had clarity on what they needed to do to persist. As I watched some interactions of HFGS in this study, it was apparent that students that built peer relationships had strong connections and were more involved in their studies as a whole. Conversely, those that did not connect to other students seemed disengaged and somewhat lost in feeling a part of the campus and community making their integration at risk. College success showed a substantial link to engagement and building faculty and student peer relationships.

Another discovery was the need for peer connections, as the student researcher made classroom and out of classroom observations, it was clear that peer connections were important to integration. The students that really connected and worked together with their peers seemed noticeably happier and showed that they relied on and respected their peers in school. There was a strong comradery that students seem to have for each other. In interviews, most students communicated how important their classmates were to their success and desire to be here. In summary, the collection of ambassador and student peers seemed valuable to HFGS in this study.

These peer relationships seemed crucial to new student integration and had a different dynamic than a faculty-student mentoring relationship. Peer relationships with upper-term students in college can strengthen or compliment faculty mentoring and this can help students feel a sense of belonging (Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis, & Ruder, 2006; Hurtado; Carter, & Spuler, 1996). In this study, all HFGS participants described how they trusted and worked as a team with their peers in school. Faculty ambassadors in the previous chapter highlighted how important it was that students make friends and build peer relationships to improve integration. As observations were concluded, there were strong connections in both classroom and labs where students were working together to be successful.
An additional conclusion was continuing to improve FYI program with feedback from participants plus possibly adding upper-term student support to strengthen campus integration. There have been many lessons learned as this program has matured and adjusted to needs of new undergraduate students. Initially there was a fixed one hour per week meeting for each student mentee. It was recognized by faculty that in some instances students needed additional time both in one on one meetings and tutoring. The decision was to monitor student outcomes and give autonomy to faculty ambassadors to adjust the time allocations as they deemed necessary to support efforts.

**Adding upper-term students as second layer of support.** As part of interviews and discussions from this study, ambassadors communicated the need to strengthen current FYI program by adding upper term students to help support new students. The thinking was that juniors and seniors could provide a great buddy system aligning with new students and helping them to integrate. For HFGS, best alignment maybe with an upper-term Hispanic student that could provide experience and knowledge on integration into the campus. Currently, this was a proposed change to implement as a pilot for July 2016 session. Initial conversations with the faculty advisor and administration are already in process.

The FYI program at Taylor College is a major effort to help all undergraduate new students find their way and better assimilate into this college. For HFGS’ this effort was amplified because they rarely had support from family or peers that understood what was involved in going to college. Students must feel there is a resilient hope and sense of why it is important to seek and obtain a post-secondary education and see how to navigate through school (Jamelske, 2008). But with this specific HFGS group, some students were able to find their way while others struggled was clearly present. In light of findings, HFGS that built trusting
relationship with their ambassador and peers seemed linked to their engagement and involvement levels within the FYI program.

One major strength of the FYI program was to formally assemble a connection between ambassadors and their paired students. Ironically, for many HFGS in this study, they would have never sought help from faculty in a mentoring capacity without such a program. An important component of any FYI program, student mentoring has the potential to have a positive impact to help reduce the student’s feeling of marginal effort and overall underachievement as students build a feeling of importance and that they matter (Scholossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1999). In the beginning eight week sessions, most HFGS in this study found the need to rely on and spend more time with their ambassador than was originally planned became the norm.

The central problem to address for HFGS is low retention due to their lack of integration and need for feeling a part of the educational environment (Gloria & Castellanos 2012). HFGS experience college differently than other students, they tend to be less involved primarily because of additional commitments beyond school. While positive attributes of faculty mentoring of students were numerous, FYI program initiatives also extend into the classroom environment and academic rigor levels. Appropriately balanced course rigor and high academic expectations can enhance students’ engagement and help build positive attitudes towards college (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). Faculty in this study consistently talked about helping their HFGS see the connection between students’ worldview and experiences recognized as part of the class discussions.

As an additional conclusion but not centered to address the research questions was a proposed addition to FYI program that both ambassadors and student mentees mentioned was adding upper-term students to provide support to new students at this campus. The upper-term
students would become a guide to help new students navigate and learn about expectations of college. One idea would be also using these upper-term students for tutoring new students and as a second layer of support with faculty ambassador mentoring. Faculty ambassadors thought that upper-term students in the same discipline as the new students were best suited for this initiative and this could also be important to their growth with helping others. Lastly, the position of gathering feedback from all participants would remain a vital tool to continued improvement of the FYI program.

Another proposed addition to current FYI program was having career information nights and inviting professionals from industry to come and speak to current students. This proposal was successful implemented and brought 3 industry professionals to visit Taylor College in what was called “Industry View Seminars.” As an example, a Taylor College alumni and successful engineering project manager talked with our students. He initially was a student from the Rio Grande Valley area of Texas who came to Taylor College. This was an incredible seminar that could not have been timelier to this study and most importantly to these HFGS.

**Implications beyond the Local Campus**

Many of the previously discussed implications are not limited to only the local campus. There are similarities for other student groups that are non-traditional but differ in ethnicity, region, and possible experiences irrespective of the cultural domain of Hispanic students. The need for non-traditional student mentoring support and helping students to integrate into a new college seems universal for many student populations. Also, it is recognized that ethnicity can be a complicated attribute as a divisor, other attributes such as low-income, regional similarities, and societal exposure are also considerations. This area of the study looks at the implications beyond just the local campus HFGS group.
Extending scope to include other FGS populations and students of color. This study brought light to a larger array of students than just the current participants. There was a several areas of discovery for non-traditional, low-income, and FGS populations that reached beyond ethnicity. It is evident that other student populations that have suffered from similar deficient academic and social experiences could benefit from this studies’ findings. One area of inclusion is for the validation of students, this is certainly not limited to only Hispanic FGS populations. All non-traditional students could benefit from having faculty help and believe in them as they begin the process of college. Without having mentors or people around them that understood college would result in the same needs for intervention.

This study also acknowledges the need to develop tools such as a study plan, academic tutoring, and integration into the campus setting. Again, these needs are not reserved for just Hispanic students. As we think about the current climate in the U.S., with a divisional stance on people from other countries and regions; it seems adamant that students could suffer from the pressures built around ethnic and cultural divisional. It is the opinion of the student researcher, that there will be increased needs to support all students entering college, especially non-traditional and students from other ethnic and geographical regions. In summary, all non-traditional student groups could benefit from a connection with faculty as mentors in their behalf as they enter a new school and environment.

Going back home to my community. Another subject that found light from interviews and the doctoral defense discussion, is the idea of bringing back the student to their home community after degree conferral. One of the important discoveries from the student conversations was that some students were here at college temporarily. This group made note that after school, they would be returning home. For some that was Mexico, for others that
included coming home to the Rio Grande Valley. In addition, some of the students worried how they would be received in their home community with family and prior friends. Furthermore, the need to bring back and help communities learn about education was on their mind; but there was doubt to the validity of how this would be received in a vast farming immigrant community. Some of the students noted that they wanted to work in community service and maybe even as teachers for younger children. Some students felt they had a significant obligation to the next generation of Hispanic students to give back and share their educational experiences.

Practical Implications

One practical implication that must be addressed from this study was how to extend this to high school counselors and local communities. As an example, in the farming communities, in South Texas, can these communities stay status quo? Are there ways to bridge a community that begins to recognize education as a goal to sustain future generations. Some students in interviews gave insight into a new dimension of this dilemma. Their parents wanted the best for them, and even though they did not have an education, they wanted this for their children. Some participants talked about their parents who had a strong belief that their children would obtain an education and not just continue in their footsteps of working in the local farming community. But others of course, had parents that did not understand education or why their children were pursuing a different direction than the heritage and home community.

In light of this practical implication, I think that this cycle of some Hispanic students choosing to go to college is a start for change. The goal would be this group in time would go back to their local community to be influential in teaching parents, community leaders, and peers the need for society to learn about educational opportunities. This subject should be approached as an addition to current community environment, not in place of. In addition, teachers in middle
schools and high schools should be proponents and change agents, because as teachers, they had to graduate from college. In summary, these teachers also have a responsibility to be positively influential with their current students about the importance of college.

**Personal Implications**

Personal implications are certainly apart of this study’s impact on me as a student researcher and it is apparent that there have been many lessons learned. I think that the commitment to my decision to be an educator has been rejuvenated, and care for students and their journey to be successful in college has become part of my passion. I am near the end of a second career and truly enjoy giving back as an educator and advocate for others. This study and this program have taught me that there are larger needs than me. Additionally, as an educator, I want to share with others the passion of making a difference beyond yourself.

This journey has been long and full of up’s and down’s, but to see the local student participants each day still on the path to their education is rewarding. I too, have grown here and believe that there is abundant work to be done in helping other students to have someone that helps show them they can do this. It is a process that revolves around giving back to others, as I had many mentors give significant time to me. Moreover, the future is bright here, some of these students are so glad to be here and show daily their commitment to having an education and better career in the future. In closing this section, I am the lucky one to have had the opportunity to follow this study with such compassion and guidance from my doctoral advisor.

Another personal implication, as an administrator, I recognize I too have an important responsibility to help re-design the FYI initiative to improve with this study’s information. The FYI program initiative will continue to listen to our students as they communicate and give recommendations for change. This campus has experienced a lot of change in the last few years,
as the campus has become smaller and total population has been reflective of the climate of for-profit education. In summary, there is a need to provide a pro-active small campus approach for students that do not do well at community colleges or large public universities.

**Section Summary**

Suggestions in this sectional summary applied to specific participants of this study, but there are certainly lessons learned that could be accessed when developing a new FYI effort for another population and location. The overall literature on mentoring and building faculty mentor relationships with HFGS has been close to the seminal research. Yet, there were still noticeable gaps in the seminal literature and actual documented student experiences in terms of integration. At this particular study site, HFGS where mostly engaged and complimentary of their faculty ambassador support. Overall, this study should help inform all faculty and administrators in an effort to strengthen the support and better understand students’ unique needs coming to this campus at Taylor College and possibly at other institutions.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This case study was implemented to better understand needs of HFGS coming to Taylor College, one career university site in Texas. Findings led to several recommendations for future research with hearing directly from ambassadors and HFGS on a unique mentoring relationship to improve integration. While, a retention gap between non- HFGS and HFGS exist, this study sought to understand unique mentoring relationships between ambassadors and selected HFGS mentees in an effort to improve integrate. There were recommendations general enough for other possible populations and ones that are specific to this HFGS participant group. As part of recommendations for future research, it is believed that findings in this study could extend to
other campuses and possible HFGS populations within this multi-site career university and beyond in the future.

1. This study was guided by principles of validation and focused on best practices to improve integration. While integration was a campus-wide initiative for all students, this study centered on how to support and increase integration of new HFGS at this campus. The interviews with ambassadors and their paired HFGS were central to hearing needs and how mentoring efforts were perceived. It was apparent that most student participants valued their mentoring relationship and felt it helped them to learn how to persist. If this FYI initiative is extended to other groups, it will be important to continue process of monitoring participants’ feedback to determine impact on integration outcomes.

2. One concern in this study is that human behavior and determining a student’s needs is a complicated endeavor. As other campuses and student populations are exposed to an FYI initiative, it will be important to not assume that a new group will have same needs or reactions as in this study. Many HFGS within this study had similar backgrounds but very different outlooks on school and their levels of engagement. Some students that had poor prior school experiences seemed to be positively impacted quickly when a faculty ambassador believed in them. While other students remained quite distant even though they also had provided ambassador support.

3. In this study, some HFGS males expressed dominate behavioral traits that seemed detrimental at times to their ability to work in groups with females and understanding value of everyone’s contribution in the classroom. Faculty ambassadors mentioned this phenomenon frequently and talked about how to help with support and corrective-based measures. This behavioral problem was most apparent with Hispanic males that were
from small rural environments. Faculty ambassadors talked about setting up classroom discussion groups that a female student was the team lead on to help exposure to gender-based parity. The female faculty ambassadors stated that even they felt a gender bias as a professor in how they were perceived differently by some students, this issue will need to be further researched as this FYI initiative is extended.

4. While most students in this study were full-time status, virtually all had full-time jobs as well. Further research should be done to determine both positive and negative attributes but the reality is as a career university most students are commuter and work full-time. One positive attribute was these students bring great industry experience and usually maturity to the campus community. But as a negative attribute, many also are biased in their perception of education and negative prior experiences can impact their ability to accept other participants’ ideas or help. Overall, the FYI initiative has helped change and shape many students’ outlook and view on college and worldview in general.

5. One campus initiative that has shown promise is use of upper-term students as a buddy system to help new students. The interviews uncovered this proposed addition and it is being reviewed for a pilot implementation in July 2016. The idea is to align upper-term students with incoming freshman to help navigation and their integration to campus. As mentioned, sometimes students will listen and take advice from a student mentor when reluctant to come to a faculty member. This is an exciting possibility and is expected to further extend support for new students.

6. This campus has also built as part of FYI initiative use of student support advisors, which are assigned to all students to help them with scheduling, financial aid, and overall support to graduation. The student advisors keep track of when students need to do
FASFA and monitoring student academic progress. Advisors work also as support associates to reach out to students about seminars, student clubs, and overall campus integration. The advisors call on students to help keep them on track and communicate campus provided support such as free tutoring services. Further research on student support advisors should be extended to collect feedback from students on how well this is working and what improvements may need to be made.

7. There is a need to extend this research to take a look at other similar campuses at career-based schools with HFGS populations. While there are rarely apples to apples based comparison, I would like to see how other schools have worked to retain their HFGS. The formation of support using faculty mentoring seemed to be implemented at other campuses in the research studied. Providing student care is a key component of any successful intervention, there are unique challenges for HFGS in terms of their integration and helping them understand college and expectations. Determining what components in other programs have been most successful could strengthen the current FYI program at this campus.

8. Integration is a difficult phenomenon to understand and even harder to effect. It seems that improved integration is the result of student engagement level and a feeling of belonging as communicated in validation theory. There is a real challenge to building trust for all students to be successful and it is an ongoing effort that is not just readily transferable to other student populations. It seems some theoretical literature is outdated and does not always address needs of non-traditional majorities of today in first to college populations. In summary, connectedness of faculty mentors combined with peer relationships seem to be certainly a part of the solution.
9. One recognized attribute in this study was that 3 of the 9 student participants were veterans creating a need for further research to be conducted. This outcome while not completely surprising seems to align with many under-represented and lower-income populations, and this is important to include in any integration solution. Students that were veterans frequently mentioned having a connection to other veterans in class including alignment with faculty that were veterans. At this study site, a veteran’s center and club has been implemented as the veteran population has continued to increase. The veterans group is comprised of both female and male students from all degree areas and they have started their own support services for veterans at this campus.

10. One reflective future implication was discussed in the doctoral defense, the issue of cultural reintegration as an important attribute. The student participants communicated in interviews of going back home to make a difference in their communities. A few students planned to be teachers, they want to give back to their local home community. The next generation of younger students that are from this South Texas area, need mentors and a mirror-reflection of people that went to college and succeeded. HFGS that look just like them, and came from the exact same community are important to influence change. It was felt, the students in this study would be successful, and they were passionate about their mission to help others, as they had been helped. In summary, the student participants wanted their families and communities to be proud of their chose to go to college and help others with being an example that they also could do this.

11. Taylor College had a substantial group of non-traditional students combined with traditional students directly from high-school. In this study, there were 3 of 9 students classified as traditional status, and 1 of those 3 was unsure of the reason for mentoring.
Overall, most students in this study, wanted and improved their integration by being in these mentoring relationships according to their reflection. There were no indicators that student status of traditional vs. non-traditional played a role in integration or the level of depth achieved. This study also highlighted that all HFGS in this study, took on campus and online courses fluidly after their first two sessions. The idea of online as a modality did not show to impact students’ academic outcomes or their ability to integrate on campus. In summary, there were no students in this study that took more than 50% of their courses online as of the March 2016 session.

Concluding Thoughts

As a paramount lesson in integration needs, students in this study talked about the feeling of connectedness and their need to be accepted and validated as part of the campus community. As an example of validating students’ existence, Rendon (2011) communicates a noteworthy message for this HFGS student group; “their need for acceptance and feeling that they too matter and have a voice is significant to their ability to be successful and hold an active part in the campus community.” Validating and mentoring go hand in hand, as this HFGS student group many times, were not recipients of praise for their work or hearing from past teachers that they could be successful in college. Building an initial FYI effort has been rewarding and seeing some students find success through their first-year studies has been an ultimate goal of any professor or administrator. This FYI effort will continue to mature and provide support as HFGS enter their first-year at Taylor College and seek needed mentoring to be successful in pursuing their college education.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Recruitment for Faculty Participants

August x, 2015

Note: An email only from student researcher will be sent for potential faculty participants that inquire about the study as no phone solicitation will be done.

Dear Faculty,

My name is Clark Swafford, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston. I will be conducting a research study for my dissertation, and I am recruiting faculty that have served as ambassadors in the first-year initiative program to participate in my study. The focus of this study is to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their paired Hispanic first-generation student/s (HFGS) in an attempt to improve retention in their first year of college. This recruitment form is to describe the process of being a faculty member participant in this case study on “A Case Study of Mentoring Relationships between Faculty Ambassadors and First Generation Hispanic Students in a First-Year Initiative Program” and to seek your participation in the study. To be a faculty participant the following criteria is needed:

1. Faculty member that had a “Hispanic first-generation student” as one of your student mentees. (HFGS): Hispanic college student whose parents (mother and/or father) do not hold a baccalaureate degree.

2. Have been at this study site before or in one or more of the following three sessions, Jan 2015, March 2015, and May 2015 serving as mentor to HFGS in the FYI program.

3. Faculty ambassador willing to participate in interviews scheduled to last one hour to one and a half hours with the researcher to discuss the faculty ambassador-student mentoring relationship and program.
The interviews will be conducted off campus and audio recorded and you may request a copy of the transcript if you wish to review it for accuracy. I may ask follow-up questions by phone or email, and I may ask you to comment on drafts of findings to see if they resonate with your experiences. Your answers will be confidential. You will be given a pseudonym, and I will not confirm your participation or non-participation except as required by law and the institutional review board.

Your participation or non-participation in this study will not affect your status as a faculty member or faculty review in any way. It is up to you to volunteer to participate; I will not contact you again regarding this study.

If you are interested and would like to hear more about the study, please contact me at swafford.e@husky.neu.edu or (469) 999-5258.

If you would like to participate in this case study, please fill out the bottom section below and return this form to me by email at swafford.e@husky.neu.edu or call me if there are any questions at (469) 999-5258.

Best,

Clark Swafford

FACULTY INFORMATION

Name:
Gender:
Ethnicity:
College Department:
How long as a faculty member at this university site:
Email:
Contact phone number:
Best time to reach you:
Appendix B: Letter of Recruitment for Student Participants

August x, 2015

Note: An email only from student researcher will be sent to potential student participants that see poster or inquire about the study but no phone solicitation will be done.

Dear Student,

My name is Clark Swafford, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University in Boston. I will be conducting a research study for my dissertation, and I am asking Hispanic first generation students (HFGS) to participate in a case study that involves the First-Year Initiative program. The focus of this study is to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and Hispanic first-generation students. This recruitment form describes the process of being a participant in this case study, titled “A Case Study of Mentoring Relationships between Faculty Ambassadors and First Generation Hispanic Students in a First-Year Initiative Program.” To be a participant the following criteria is needed:

1. Currently in or have just completed your first year with this college.
2. Must be a “Hispanic first-generation student”, which means your parents (mother and/or father) do not hold a baccalaureate degree.
3. Currently enrolled in a baccalaureate program at this specific university site before or in one or more of the following three sessions Jan 2015, March 2015, and May 2015, and attended one of the three new student orientations.
4. Met with your faculty ambassador a minimum of three times to discuss mentoring needs and support.
5. Willing to participate in interviews or a focus group scheduled to last one hour to one and a half hours with researcher to discuss faculty ambassador-student mentoring program.

The interviews and focus group will be conducted at an off-campus location selected by the participants such as a public library study room that are audio recorded and you may request a copy of the transcript if you wish to review it for accuracy. I may ask follow-up questions by phone or email, and I may ask you to comment on drafts of findings to see if they resonate with your
experiences. Your answers will be confidential. You will be given a pseudonym, and I will not confirm your participation or non-participation except as required by law and the institutional review board. Participation is entirely voluntary.

If you are interested and would like to hear more about the study, please contact me at swafford.c@husky.neu.edu or (469) 999-5258.

If you would like to volunteer this case study, please fill out the bottom section below and return this form to me by email at swafford.c@husky.neu.edu or call me if there are any questions at (469) 999-5258. I will not contact you again.

Best,

Clark Swafford

STUDENT INFORMATION

Name:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Major in college:

You are a first-generation student meaning that your mother and/or father do not hold a baccalaureate degree. Yes _______ No ____________

First Session you attended this university:

Contact Email:

Contact phone number:

Best time to reach you:
Appendix C: Student Recruitment Poster

**RESEARCH STUDY FOR SUPPORTING HISPANIC FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS IN THIS UNIVERSITY**

- Are you a Hispanic first-generation student here at the University?
- Have you been a student here before or since the January 2015 thru May 2015 Session?
- Would you like to help with understanding of the needs for Hispanic first-generation students at this university?

*Be part of a study to investigate the support needs of Hispanic first-generation students in a First-Year Initiative retention effort.*

**The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their Hispanic first-generation students in a first-year initiative retention program at a technical college in Texas.**

Please call C.E. Swafford at (469) 999-5258 or email me at swafford.c@husky.neu.edu to discuss the details of this dissertation study to support and illuminate the needs of Hispanic students at this campus. Your identity will not be disclosed and the intent is for me to learn from your experiences and insight.

*This study consists of an interview that will be one to one and a half hours in length, in and out of class observations, or a student focus group that will be one to one and a half hours in length being conducted for partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) at Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, School of Education in Boston, MA. You may be selected for either the interview or focus group, so the time commitment is approximately one and a half hours plus possible follow-up if needed.*

Contact: C.E. Swafford or my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at el.bennett@neu.edu for any questions or concerns about the study.
Appendix D: Signed Faculty Ambassador Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Education
Name of Investigator(s): Elisabeth Bennett, Ph. D., Principal Investigator, Clark Swafford, Student Researcher
Title of Project: A Case Study of Mentoring Relationships between Faculty Ambassadors and First Generation Hispanic Students in a First-Year Initiative Program

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

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

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

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a faculty ambassador to a paired Hispanic first-generation college student/s in their first year of studies at this study site.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the mentoring relationship between you as a faculty ambassador and your Hispanic first-generation student/s in a first-year retention program at study site.

What will I be asked to do?

You could be selected for one-time interview conducted at a site off-campus selected by the participant such as a study room at a local public library. Faculty ambassador interviews will be conducted in October 2015 thru January 2016 time frame. The interviews will focus on evaluating the unique mentoring relationship with your Hispanic first generation student/s in their first year of studies.

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

You will be interviewed at a location selected by you such as a public library study room at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will take one hour to one and a half hours. After each interview is completed, student researcher will review field notes and create an initial summary. The interview summary will be sent directly to you by email and you will be given seven days to review findings for accuracy. Each faculty participant can send any corrections and/or concerns directly to the student researcher by email to swafford.c@husky.neu.edu up to seven days after summary is received.

There will also be classroom observations conducted by the student researcher to observe interactions between Hispanic students and their peers and you as a faculty member. The student researcher is asking for permission to be able to do this at a convenient date determined by you in the Nov 2015 to Jan 2016 session time frame. If your class is selected, the classroom observation of your class will be summarized and sent to you at your request to me at email swafford.c@husky.neu.edu up to seven days after the visit.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or only minimal risk to any participants in this study. Faculty participants may feel uncomfortable answering certain interview questions. If so, they will be allowed to skip those questions. One potential risk is faculty members trusting that their interview data will be held at the upmost in confidentiality. As a precaution and to minimize risk, all gathered sensitive data will only be shared with student researcher, primary investigator, and the individual faculty member.

It is possible, some faculty participants may fear their comments or concerns could be viewed in a negative sense or have impact on their performance review or faculty status in the university. There will be no connection to faculty performance or faculty status as information is not to be shared with any faculty manager or administrator. The student researcher will continue to stress to all faculty study participants that their professional insight is crucial to the validity of this study and the focus is to help improve support for current and future Hispanic students.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There are no direct benefits for faculty study participants. However, potential benefits could include a better understanding of the relationship between faculty and their Hispanic first generation students to possibly improve integration and retention. The first-year initiative retention program may help support current and future Hispanic students and increase awareness of their cultural and academic needs in college.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part as a faculty participant in this study will be confidential. Only student researcher and primary investigator will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. All sensitive information including your name, address, faculty department, and any location or individuals mentioned will be given a non-disclosed code to hide the real information for increased confidentiality.

All gathered data will be shared with each of the participants and allow for them to review and correct inaccuracies. Student researcher will strive to be cognizant of ethical practice at all times and will acknowledge what areas of discussion might be too personal or concerning to any of the participants. Information will be maintained for one year by student researcher and then professionally erased. All faculty participants and their sensitive data will be given a code by student researcher to hide the real information to secure confidentiality and provide a high level of protection.

All digital recordings of faculty participant interviews, classroom visits, and associated campus tour recordings will be completely destroyed after one year beyond completion of doctoral defense. The informed consent forms that were signed by all participants will be kept for a period of three years in a locked box in IT security department at study site after doctoral defense. All electronic copies of the de-identified forms to include field notes, audit trail information, and associated documents will also be destroyed three years after doctoral defense. In rare instances, it is possible authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by the organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to request authorized review of information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

This study is completely voluntary for all potential participants and your decision to participate or not participate will have no impact on your faculty annual review or any other faculty status at the university in any way.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There is no anticipated risk or harm from being a faculty participant in this case study. Hence, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for any type of treatment solely because of your voluntary decision to participation in this research study.
Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question/questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a faculty member at this university.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact student researcher, Clark Swafford, at (469) 999-5258 or swafford.c@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Elisabeth Bennett, Ph.D., the Principal Investigator at (617) 390-4335 or el.bennett@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

There is no pay for being a participant in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There will not be any cost associated with study with exception that faculty interviews will be off-campus, so transportation cost (gas, mileage cost, etc.) incurred will be faculty participant’s responsibility and not paid for by student researcher or university study site.

Is there anything else I need to know?

The study faculty interviews will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you and at a location that you as a faculty participant pick such as a public library.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part __________ Date __________

Printed name of person above ______________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent __________ Date __________

Clark Swafford

Printed name of person above ______________________________________________________________

Depending upon the nature of your research, you may also be required to provide information about one or more of the following if it is applicable:

1. A statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or to the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable.

2. Anticipated circumstances under which the subject’s participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject’s consent.

3. Any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.

4. The consequences of a subject’s decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by the subject.

5. A statement that significant new finding(s) developed during the course of the research which may be related to the subject’s willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.

6. The approximate number of subjects involved in the study.
Appendix E: Signed Student Participant Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Education
Name of Investigator(s): Elisabeth Bennett, Ph. D., Principal Investigator, Clark Swafford, Student Researcher
Title of Project: A Case Study of Mentoring Relationships between Faculty Ambassadors and First Generation Hispanic Students in a First-Year Initiative Program

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

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

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

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a Hispanic first-generation to college student in your first year of studies at this study site.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their Hispanic first-generation students in a first-year retention program at study site.

What will I be asked to do?

You could be selected for either one-time interview or one-time focus group discussion conducted at a site off-campus selected by the participants such as a study room at a local public library. Student interviews will be conducted in October 2015 thru January 2016 time frame. The interviews and focus group will focus on evaluating the unique mentoring relationship with your faculty ambassador in your first year of studies. There will be one focus group session conducted in October 2015 thru January 2016 time frame after interviews have concluded at an off-campus site selected by participants with three to four Hispanic first generation students that were not selected for one-on-one interviews.

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

You will be interviewed or in a focus group at a location selected by you such as a public library study room at a time that is convenient for you. The interview or focus group will take one hour to one and a half hours. After each interview or focus group is completed, student researcher will review field notes and create an initial summary. The interview or focus group summary will be sent directly to you by email and you will be given seven days to review findings for accuracy. Each participant can send any corrections and/or concerns directly to the student researcher by email to swafford.c@husky.neu.edu up to seven days after summary is received.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There is no foreseeable risk or only minimal risk to any participants in this study. Participants may feel uncomfortable answering certain interview questions. If so, they will be allowed to skip those questions.
One potential risk is Hispanic students trusting that their interview and focus group data will be held at
the upmost in confidentiality. As a precaution and to minimize risk, all gathered sensitive data will only
be shared with student researcher, primary investigator, and the individual student.

It is possible, some student participants may fear their comments or concerns could be viewed in a
negatively or even affect their academic grades or standing. There will be no connection to academic
performance or grades and student information is not to be shared with any faculty or administrator. The
student researcher will continue to stress to all study participants that their unfiltered voices are crucial to
the validity of this study and the focus is to help improve support for current and future Hispanic students
at study site.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**
There are no direct benefits for study participants. However, potential benefits could include a better
understanding of the relationship between faculty and their Hispanic first generation students to possibly
improve integration and retention. The first-year initiative retention program may help support current
and future Hispanic students and increase awareness of their cultural and academic needs in college.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your part as a participant in this study will be confidential. Only student researcher and primary
investigator will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can
identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. All sensitive information including
your name, address, academic history, and any location or individuals mentioned will be given a non-
disclosed code to hide the real information for increased confidentiality.

All gathered data will be shared with each of the participants and allow for them to review and correct
inaccuracies. Student researcher will strive to be cognizant of ethical practice at all times and will
acknowledge what areas of discussion might be too personal or concerning to any of the participants.
Information will be maintained for one year by student researcher and then professionally erased. All
student participants and their sensitive data will be given a code by student researcher to hide the real
information to secure confidentiality and provide a high level of protection.

All digital recordings of participant interviews, focus group, and associated campus tour recordings will
be completely destroyed after one year beyond completion of doctoral defense. The informed consent
forms that were signed by all participants will be kept for a period of three years in a locked box in IT
security department at study site after doctoral defense. All electronic copies of the de-identified forms to
include field notes, audit trail information, and associated documents will also be destroyed three years
after doctoral defense. In rare instances, it is possible authorized people may request to see research
information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is
done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to request authorized review of information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
This study is completely voluntary for all potential participants and your decision to participate or not
participate will have no impact on your college studies in any way.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
There is no anticipated risk or harm from being a participant in this case study. Hence, no special
arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for any type of treatment solely because of
your voluntary decision to participation in this research study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want
to and you can refuse to answer any question/questions. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any
time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services
that you would otherwise have as a student at this university.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact student researcher, Clark Swafford,
 at (469) 999-5258 or swafford.c@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You
can also contact Elisabeth Bennett, Ph.D., the Principal Investigator at (617) 390-4335 or
el.bennett@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director,
Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115.
Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no pay for being a participant in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There will not be any cost associated with study with exception that interviews and focus group will be
off-campus, so transportation cost (gas, mileage cost, etc.) incurred will be participant’s responsibility and
not paid for by student researcher or university study site.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 18 years old and current student at study site to participate in this study. The study
interviews and focus group will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you and at a location that
you as a student participant pick such as a public library.

I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part Date

Printed name of person above

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

Clark Swafford

Printed name of person above

Depending upon the nature of your research, you may also be required to provide information about one or more of the
following if it is applicable:

7. A statement that the particular treatment or procedure may involve risks to the subject (or to the embryo or fetus, if the subject is or
may become pregnant) which are currently unforeseeable.

8. Anticipated circumstances under which the subject’s participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the
subject’s consent.

9. Any additional costs to the subject that may result from participation in the research.

10. The consequences of a subject’s decision to withdraw from the research and procedures for orderly termination of participation by
the subject.

11. A statement that significant new finding(s) developed during the course of the research which may be related to the subject’s
willingness to continue participation will be provided to the subject.

12. The approximate number of subjects involved in the study.
Appendix F: Faculty Ambassador Interview Guide

Warm-up questions

1. Tell me a little about your time as a faculty member here. Talk about the first-year initiative program and your involvement? What are your thoughts about the FYI program?

2. What issues do you see with Hispanic first generation students adjusting to campus life?

Nature of the mentoring relationship with HFGS

1. How do you typically start your mentoring relationship with the students?

2. Talk about some of the mentoring relationships with your Hispanic students.

3. Tell me about some of your student’s challenges in college that have to be overcome in the mentoring conversations?

4. Think of a metaphor that best describes your relationship with these Hispanic students.

5. Tell me a story about that metaphor and how your relationship with this/these student/students may have changed or matured?

Prior student experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions

1. How does the Hispanic students’ history and prior experiences before college come up in your mentoring conversation now?
2. What about your students’ backgrounds do you help them work through in these mentoring discussions?

3. What social supports or educational experiences, if any, do students mention helped them choose college?

Mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus

1. Describe how you talk with your Hispanic students about integration into the campus.

2. What barriers, if any, do students face in becoming part of this campus?

3. How has mentoring HFGS helped them adjust to college? How has it not been able to help?

4. What would you change or add to the current first year initiative mentoring program to help support campus integration?

General Follow-ups:

1. Can you tell me more about that?

2. Tell me a story about when that happened.

3. Can you provide more detail?

Wrap-up

1. Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not already covered?
Appendix G: Student Interview Guide

Warm-up questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What do you hope to accomplish with your degree?
3. Talk about your involvement with the first-year initiative program.

Nature of the mentoring relationship

1. Describe your first mentoring conversation with your ambassador and how that conversation went?
2. Talk about some of the challenges your ambassador helped you overcome.
3. Tell me about any challenges your ambassador could not help you resolve?
4. As you think about the mentoring relationship with your ambassador, how has this relationship changed over time?

Prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions

1. When you think about your prior school experiences, describe how those experiences came up in conversation with your ambassador. What about family experiences?
2. What aspects about yourself did you explain to your ambassador?
3. What issues, if any, in your history before college has your ambassador helped you talk through?

4. What have been the most important characteristics from your background that have helped you in relating to your faculty ambassador?

Mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus

1. What barriers have you faced in becoming a part of the campus?

2. How has your ambassador helped you integrate into campus life? How not?

3. As you look at the FYI program, and specifically the mentoring component, please talk about how mentoring might help students adjust to college? Or not?

4. What would you change or add to the current first year initiative mentoring program to help support campus integration?

General Follow-ups:

1. Can you tell me more about that?

2. Tell me a story about when that happened.

3. Can you provide more detail?

Wrap-up

1. Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not already covered?
STUDENT FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Script: Hello everyone, I want to start by thanking each of you for your time and decision to join this focus group discussion on the mentoring relationship between faculty ambassadors and their students. We will spend one hour to one and a half hours talking about your experiences with your faculty ambassador and mentoring support. I want to hear your voices, insight, and thoughts as you have a great deal of knowledge in the area of support needs and feelings of integration at this campus. As we go through this focus group please be mindful of others and their perception and feelings. I want to assure you that any issues you raise about faculty or other items will be strictly confidential.

Warm-up questions

1. Talk about your experience with the first-year initiative mentoring program.

Nature of the mentoring relationship

1. Describe your first mentoring conversation with your ambassador and how that conversation went?

2. How has this mentoring relationship influenced your plans in life?

Prior experiences factored into the mentor-based discussions

1. When you think about your prior school experiences, describe how those experiences came up in conversation with your ambassador. What about family experiences?

2. What issues, if any, in your history before college has your ambassador helped you talk through?
Mentoring relationship influenced student integration at this campus

1. What barriers have you faced in becoming a part of the campus?
2. How has your ambassador helped you integrate into campus life?
3. What would you change or add to the current first year initiative mentoring program to help support campus integration?

General Follow-up:

1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. Tell me a story about when that happened.
3. Can you provide more detail?

Wrap-up

Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not already covered?

Ok, everyone we are reaching the end of our focus group discussion. I will now go around the table one last time for any final thoughts. Lastly, I want to thank each of you for your time allocated to this focus group discussion and your incredibly valuable voices and insight.

Thank you!
Appendix I: Degree Conferral by Race/Ethnicity 2010

Figure 4.2
Degrees Conferred, by Race/Ethnicity, 2010

Bachelor's degrees
- Asian/PI: 4%
- Hispanic: 7%
- Black: 10%
- White: 71%

Associate degrees
- Asian/PI: 3%
- Hispanic: 5%
- Black: 13%
- White: 65%

Notes: White, black, Asian and other includes only the non-Hispanic portions of those groups. Unlabeled slices include non-Hispanic American Indians/Alaska Natives and non-resident aliens. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Degree-granting institutions grant associate or higher degrees and participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs.

Dear Faculty Ambassador,

While you were not selected to be a faculty participant within a research study, “A Case Study of Mentoring Relationships between Faculty Ambassadors and First Generation Hispanic Students in a First-Year Initiative Program.” I want to truly thank you for your interest in this study and for all that you do for our students every day. At the end of this study, the student researcher will wish to communicate with faculty on highlights of best practices gathered.

Sincerely,

Clark Swafford
Student Researcher
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University

swafford.c@husky.neu.edu

(469) 999-5258
Appendix K: Email sent to Hispanic first-generation students not selected for study

Dear Student,

While you were not selected to be a student participant within a research study, “A Case Study of Mentoring Relationships between Faculty Ambassadors and First Generation Hispanic Students in a First-Year Initiative Program.” I want to truly thank you for your interest in this study and for your commitment to improving student retention. Good luck in your educational journey!

Sincerely,

Clark Swafford
Student Researcher
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
swafford.c@husky.neu.edu
(469) 999-5258
Appendix L: Taylor College Campus Map
Appendix M: FGS Mentoring and Teacher Advice

Mentor advice:

1. Suggest that the students ask you and their professors for study tips each week.
2. Encourage all students to form or join study groups each session.
3. Encourage multiple advisors/advisee meeting to discuss progress each session.
4. Be aware of the “imposter phenomenon” which is anxiety about their academic success which is typically very high for FGS. FGS on average ask few questions in class and participate infrequently in discussions.
5. FGS can have significant pressure from home about responsibilities outside of the classroom needs. This can be a strong detriment to the overall success of the student.
6. Encourage student to be active participants in the campus life as these students may find it difficult to integrate and make quality friendships.
7. Ask about the outside work and home commitments when meeting in and out of the classroom environment.
8. Take the time to support and become an example for these students as they navigate through their studies.

Teaching advice:

1. Be aware of the “hidden curriculum” as to ensure students completely understand the class expectations and review assignments and deliverables.
2. Always start class with what is going to be covered and take a few moments on covering your suggested study skills needed to be successful.
3. Suggest study groups and one-on-one office hour visits.

Revised as a guide from the following academic success mentoring program:

http://cals.cornell.edu/academics/upload/FGC-Mentor-Advice.pdf