THE EXPERIENCE OF LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A SELECTIVE UNIVERSITY: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A doctoral thesis presented by

Paula Ribeiro Dias

to the

Graduate School of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

in the field of

Higher Education Administration

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

March 2017
Abstract

Low-income students at selective institutions report feeling a sense of isolation, alienation, and marginalization. However, it is essential that the voices of low-income students that have successfully navigated the college experience be part of the conversation. Rather than approach the study from a deficit perspective, this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis explored what individual characteristics or institutional strategies lead to the successful social and academic integration of low-income students at selective universities. From a strengths based resiliency theoretical framework, this study examined the positive personal and environmental protective factors that help students to succeed despite difficult financial circumstances. Data was collected through interviews with eight low-income college seniors who shared stories about their undergraduate experience. Results indicate that low-income students succeed by discovering their passion in academics, involvement, and leadership development as well as through a multilayered support system that includes faculty and staff mentors, family, and friends. Through a combination of personal motivation, institutional interventions, and supportive individuals, students were able to succeed academically and socially in college despite their low-income backgrounds. This research demonstrates the need for selective institutions to provide a strong support system through academic and co-curricular engagement opportunities targeting low-income students.

Keywords: college students, low-income, co-curricular, leadership, passion, mentoring, friendships, family, support system, resiliency, selective institutions.
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. 3

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study and Theoretical Framework............................................. 10
  Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................................. 11
  Significance of the Problem ....................................................................................................... 14
  Research Question ..................................................................................................................... 15
  Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................. 16

Chapter Two: Literature Review ................................................................................................. 23
  Low-Income Students’ Experience of Marginalization in College Hinders Success .............. 25
  Institutional Interventions Can Increase Student Success ....................................................... 32
  Selective Institutions' Role in Low-Income Student Success .................................................... 38

Chapter Three: Methodology ................................................................................................... 44
  Qualitative Research Approach ................................................................................................. 44
  Research Participants and Site ................................................................................................... 47
  Procedures .................................................................................................................................... 50
    Data Collection ......................................................................................................................... 50
    Data Analysis .......................................................................................................................... 52
    Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................................ 55
    Trustworthiness ....................................................................................................................... 56
    Potential Research Bias ........................................................................................................... 59
    Limitations ................................................................................................................................ 61

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis ......................................................................................... 63
  Theme 1: Discovering Passion .................................................................................................. 64
Subtheme 1a: Academic or Career Passion .............................................. 67
Subtheme 1b: Personal or Co-curricular Passion ..................................... 73
Subtheme 1c: Leadership Passion ............................................................... 77

Theme 2: Strong Support System ............................................................... 82
Subtheme 2a: Faculty and Staff Mentors .................................................. 86
Subtheme 2b: Family Connections .............................................................. 92
Subtheme 2c: Meaningful Friendships ....................................................... 95

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications .............................................. 103
Finding 1: Discovering Passion ................................................................. 104
Finding an academic or career passion increases motivation .................. 105
Co-curricular involvement increases student engagement ..................... 107
Personal development and growth through a leadership position ............ 110
Finding 2: Strong Support System ............................................................ 112
Building relationships with faculty and staff mentors ............................ 113
Encouragement from family builds confidence ..................................... 115
Establishing a sense of belonging through meaningful friendships ........ 117

Connections to Theoretical Framework .................................................. 120
Recommendations for Practice ................................................................. 123
Recommendations for Future Research .................................................... 126

Appendices
A. Recruitment Email (Initial Message) .................................................. 128
B. Recruitment Email (Targeted Message) .............................................. 129
C. Recruitment Email (Follow Up Message) .......................................... 130
D. Informed Consent Form.................................................................131

E. Participant Screening Questionnaire..............................................133

F. Participant Email Response..........................................................134

G. Initial Phone Script....................................................................135

H. Introductory Protocol & Interview Questions.................................136

References.......................................................................................138
Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the many people in my life that have made this educational journey meaningful and rewarding. I feel blessed to be surrounded by a support system that made this experience possible. Dr. Kim Nolan, my faculty advisor, you have inspired and motivated me since my very first doctoral residency course in Boston through the final edits of my dissertation and defense. Dr. Joseph McNabb, my second reader, you have provided insightful feedback and challenged me to improve my work. Dr. Roxanne Davies, my third reader and supervisor at Barry University, you have been the mentor and source of encouragement that I needed to get through those final days, weeks, and months. I could not have achieved this milestone without such a fabulous committee.

I am grateful to the students, faculty, and staff at Boston College that have graciously allowed me to research a topic that I am truly passionate about at an institution that will always be close to my heart. BC is the place that first instilled in me a love of education and a passion for social justice. I would especially like to thank the students that shared their time and stories with honesty and authenticity throughout the interview process. I would like to thank Burt Howell, Dr. Kelli Armstrong, and the Montserrat family for your full support and for modeling a true commitment to this important student population. I would like to thank Dr. Brian Braman for teaching me what it really means to live a life of excellence. Dr. Braman, you changed the trajectory of my college experience completely and for the better. Thank you to Dr. Ana Martinez Aleman, for your teaching and advising in the Higher Education Master’s program, which laid the foundation that brought me here today. You may not all realize the impact you had on me at the time, but I am forever grateful for your mentoring and support.
Last but not least, I am grateful to my family, friends, and colleagues that have accompanied me throughout this experience. They believed in me from the beginning, supported me throughout the coursework, research, and writing process and motivated me to make it to the end. I would especially like to thank my amazing husband and parents for helping me to balance work, school, and family life. Although this journey was not always easy, your unwavering love and patience made it possible for me to accomplish this lifelong goal. Most importantly, I am grateful to my children and their ability to bring joy and purpose to my life when I need it most.
I dedicate this dissertation to my family for making this personal and professional achievement possible: to my children, Jack and Olivia, who are my constant source of inspiration and motivation; to my husband, Iran, who always supports me in everything I do; and to my mom, Celia, whose unconditional love gives me the confidence to pursue my dreams.
Chapter One: Introduction

Every person, regardless of socioeconomic status, should have the opportunity to thrive in a higher education environment. They should feel comfortable, safe, welcome, and that they matter. However, this opportunity does not always exist in the United States. “One of the most pressing social justice issues of the twenty-first century is providing the opportunity for every American to pursue an education that could potentially unlock a life of reward and fulfillment” (Engberg and Allen, 2010. p. 786). Access and equity in higher education is the key to addressing this issue. Higher education has historically been associated with social mobility and a degree is becoming necessary to compete in the twenty-first century economy (Altbach, 2007). Not only does a college education bring advantages such as financial security to individuals and their families, it also adds to the culture, economy, and productivity of the society at large. Educated citizens are a benefit to all of society and as such, college should be an opportunity to decrease class stratification and level the playing field. It should be a time when students grow intellectually and socially through interaction with peers and faculty from diverse backgrounds. As higher education becomes more important for employment and economic growth, institutions need to provide access for all students to take full advantage of the college experience. Universities are admitting more diverse applicants and offering more opportunities to engage students both inside and outside the classroom. No longer is higher education just for wealthy elite men. The expansion that provides access to more students, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, also creates challenges that institutions have never faced before.

For students from low-income backgrounds, their educational journey can differ greatly from their wealthier peers (Kezar et al, 2009). With rising costs, families are expected to pay
more out of pocket (Johnstone and Marcucci, 2010; Baum et al, 2013). In addition to the lack of academic preparation and social connections, economically disadvantaged students tend to have more factors influencing their higher education pathway. Financing higher education today is more difficult than ever. This is significant because low-income students are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education, persist, and graduate with a degree. While they are in college, Kezar et al (2009) finds that they work more hours and are less involved, and also are less likely to take a full time load of classes, live in the residence halls, or enroll continuously each semester. Their higher income peers work less hours, rely less on financial aid, and tend to have access to more college information than low-income students (Bozick, 2007). These factors combined put low-income students at a disadvantage from the start of their academic career and throughout the college experience.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem of practice examined in this study is that low-income students at selective institutions report feeling a sense of isolation, alienation, and marginalization (Aries & Seider, 2005; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). Students may feel out of place socially, culturally, and financially (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). This isolation can be based on students’ own stereotypical beliefs of inferiority and inadequacy as well as social and cultural factors that send these messages. Students in Aries’ (2008) study at Amherst College report being confronted daily with disparities in wealth. This feeling of isolation adds to an already present perception of stigmatization and lower sense of belonging (Stewart et al, 2009). Soria and Bultmann (2014) found that this lower sense of belonging was pervasive even when accounting for race, gender and parental education. In addition, researchers found that in comparison to their state college
counterparts, low-income students at elite institutions felt an even higher level of exclusion (Aries & Seider, 2005).

Selective institutions tend to be more expensive and have higher admissions standards. As such, they are often more difficult for low-income students to enroll in. With the high cost of tuition, low-income students can be priced out of these institutions, even if they are offered admission. Once enrolled, low-income students are usually a small fraction of the student body (Aries & Seider, 2005). With limited financial resources and surrounded by apparent wealth, low-income students at selective institutions often do not feel a sense of belonging on campus. However, there are also those students who thrive, despite the challenges they face. The experiences of these successful students are the focus of the current study.

**Research Problem**

College should be a place where students thrive, meaning they grow or develop in positive ways throughout their experience. Key researcher in the field agree that feeling connected and engaged in college matters (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2003). However, the reality for low-income students is often different than that of their higher income peers (Soria et al, 2014). To begin with, low-income college students are more likely to attend less expensive and less selective institutions (Perna, 2006). Acceptance at selective institutions is based on the level of high school involvement, advanced placement classes, standardized test preparation and the guidance of well-connected and informed parents, all of which put low-income students at a disadvantage (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). Once enrolled, attending a selective private university as a high achieving low-income student can be a challenging endeavor. Barriers as basic as financing the costs can be prohibitive enough. Research shows that college costs have gone up exponentially and that higher education actually
perpetuates class stratification (Baum et al, 2013; Hillman, 2013). The increased costs leave many students from low-income families out of postsecondary education and those who do make it are not showing the same enrollment patterns and success as their more affluent peers.

In addition to the more apparent financial difficulties, low-income students often face additional barriers. Low-income students tend to work more hours to pay for the costs associated with furthering their education (Kezar, 2009). They may also have more family obligations that require money or time, preventing them from focusing on academics and getting involved (Arzy et al, 2006). These commitments can lead to low-income students feeling disconnected from their peers and disengaged from college life. In addition, low-income students may be the first in their family to go to college and be unfamiliar with the processes or culture. Students might feel isolated from their peers because they cannot keep up financially with the apparent lifestyle of other students. This population can also feel excluded because they are unfamiliar with the terminology, social expectations, or academic preparation necessary to fit in.

Although much of the literature provides information about the challenges, not as much is available about the solutions or strengths this population brings to higher education from the students’ perspective. Researchers suggest that more evidence is needed to better understand low-income students in college, since much of the literature focuses on admissions, retention, and enrollment patterns (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). There is some literature that explores successful institutional initiatives based on persistence data, but not qualitatively from the student experience lens (Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Rita & Bacote, 1997) Students that succeed in college are often overlooked. However, it is essential that the voices of thriving low-income students be part of the conversation, especially as educators strive to support all students. The individual or institutional factors that have led to their success is important data that can create
positive change for the future. Practitioners can use that information to create programs and policies that allow all students to feel welcome. The information gathered can be shared so that low-income students can see hope and models of achievement as they aspire to improve their futures through higher education.

**Significance of the Problem**

The experiences of low-income students in college should be of concern to politicians, administrators, faculty, employers, and taxpayers. College graduates will be the future leaders of business, education, and the country. This leadership needs to be representative of the American population. If the American dream of social mobility and financial security is to exist, students from low-income backgrounds must enroll and graduate from college. The entire country must be invested in these conversations and the solution will have to be multifaceted and collaborative. Arzy et al (2006) argues that until the U.S. improves accessibility to higher education for students from low-income backgrounds, opportunity to improve individuals’ economic and social status will remain a dream.

The significance of this research is supported by the reality that students from low-income backgrounds in particular remain marginalized in American higher education. This is significant because a postsecondary education should create a path towards positive advancement, not create additional barriers. At selective institutions in particular, the barriers can be even greater. A large wealth gap between lower and higher income peers can make it difficult for low-income students to integrate into the campus community, especially at selective, elite institutions. This is the case at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Granfield, 1991). Nonetheless, successful low-income students are able to overcome the challenges they face when
enrolling in universities where a culture of affluence prevails. This suggests that success is possible. However, the research has yet to provide a clear picture of what the solution is.

This study help educators better understand the obstacles as well as the strategies students use to remain successful in a postsecondary environment. Thayer (2000) finds that institutional strategies designed for low-income students are often successful for all students, but that general strategies do not always work for low-income students. Engagement for this population needs to be intentional and evidence-based. It is valuable to understand the experience of these thriving students to inform future research and practice. Although the literature shows the negative associations with low-income students, there is a lack of research on this topic that comes from a strengths perspective. Rather than approach the study from a deficit lens, a focus on student success turns the conversation towards the positive aspects of this population. The positive experiences and strategies uncovered provides much needed optimism and motivation to the faculty and staff that support students each day. Tools can be developed and shared to ensure that more low-income students successfully engage in the college experience, including at selective institutions. The findings from this study can be shared with higher educational professionals who can make a difference in students’ lives through the policies and programs that they implement and enforce.

**Research Question**

The aim of this study is to understand what individual characteristics or institutional strategies lead to the successful social and academic integration of low-income students at selective universities. Therefore, the central question guiding this study is: *How do low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college?* The researcher chose a qualitative approach to allow
for an in-depth understanding of individuals’ stories and interpretations through a series of open-ended interview questions.

**Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework can provide a map that guides the research study. Theories help to explain why the world works and tell a story about a particular phenomenon. A good and useful theory should be simple and consistent, provide a tentative explanation and a means for verification, as well as stimulate further research (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). Due to the importance of theory in framing the study, it is essential that the researcher be explicit in naming the framework. Stating the theory at the beginning allows for alignment throughout the remainder of the study. For example, the questions, methodology, data gathering and findings will all be viewed through the selected framework from the start. In the current study, the theory used to guide the research is resilience.

Through a strengths based resiliency theoretical framework, this study examined the experiences of successful low income students at selective institutions. When researching low-income students, scholars often take a deficit perspective, using problem-centered references (Zimmerman, 2013). Rather than focus on the problems faced by this population often characterized as at risk, this research highlights what works well to best inform scholar practitioners that can implement change in their field. Strength-based frameworks such as resiliency intentionally look at the positives, which can result in change strategies to enhance strengths. This paradigm shift from frustration to hope and optimism is exemplified by a greater focus in the literature from risk to resiliency. Resiliency models, first explored by Norman Garmezy, explore the positive adaptability of individuals that have experienced significant
adversity (Luthar et al, 2000). This combination of adversity and adaptability are the two main components that make up resiliency theory.

**Foundation of Resiliency.** As Garmezy explored the experience of children with mental disorders, he became increasingly interested in their remarkable ability to develop well (Masten & Powell, 2003). His curiosity and further work led to the extended study of resiliency by researchers in the field of psychology, with the intention of creating a better world for children with disabilities. When they noticed that children with extreme hardship were doing better than predicted, the resilience theory emerged and has continued today.

When researching resilience, it is important to understand how the description can be applied. Rather than designating a person as resilient, it is recommended that one focus on the patterns of resilience portrayed. “Resilience is not a trait of an individual, though individuals manifest resilience in their behavior and life patterns” (Masten & Powell, 2003). This means that a person that displays resilience patterns may not necessarily be well all of the time, but they have in general overcome significant adversity and have achieved positive adaptation. No one individual will be resilient in every facet of life. It must be clear that resilience is not an everyday constant in a person’s behavior but rather a general pattern.

Due to the complex nature of resilience, Kumpfer (2002) provides an organized mechanism to understand the often broadly described construct. The transactional model she outlines provides a framework for the interactions between individuals and their risk environments. It is the one that makes the most sense for the current study on low-income students in college. Although there is disagreement among researchers about terminology, definitions, and characteristics, Kumpfer (2002) finds that the common concept is in the search for positive protective factors in individuals that have been exposed to high risk experiences.
Six major constructs of transactional resiliency model

1. Stressors or Challenges
2. Environmental Context
3. Individual Characteristics
4. Outcomes
5. Environment & Individual
6. Individual & Outcome

**Resilience Models.** Resilience literature has taken various approaches over time. Some studies have focused on extreme trauma, such as war and natural disasters, while others looked at risk factors such as parental education or homelessness (Masten & Powell, 2003). These strength-based approaches to groups and individuals that have traditionally been viewed through deficit perspectives have changed the direction of the literature for the better. These models can overturn negative assumptions and lead toward a focus on the possibilities of positive adaptability despite extreme risk factors and adversity (Masten, 2001). Marginalized groups need to be viewed positively so that high expectations can be reached, regardless of background.
The two most commonly used resilience models in the youth development literature according to Zimmerman (2013) are compensatory and protective. Compensatory is described as those factors that have an opposite effect than the risk through interactions. They compensate for the negative factors that would otherwise lead to negative outcomes. Risk-protective are those that lessen the relationship between risks and negative outcomes. Along similar lines, protective-protective modifies the relationship between the risk and outcome. A third, challenge model of resiliency operates in a way that builds coping mechanisms through exposure to risks.

Of the four subcategories in the resilience literature, protective-protective is the one best suited for qualitative research (Kumpfer, 2002). The other three have been utilized in quantitative analysis and would not be the right fit for the current research study.

Protective variables that support positive outcomes “include such things as high-quality home environments and parenting, other supportive persons in the child's life who take on a parenting or mentoring role, positive extracurricular activities, supportive peer relationships, safe and caring school environments, and other positive aspects of a child's neighborhood, community, and culture” (Newland, 2014). The current study looked at protective variables to determine the experience of low-income students at a selective university. Since these students’ socioeconomic status can be viewed as a risk factor, the assumption is that there must a protective variable at play to support their adaptability in their environment.

**Resilient Students.** College can be a stressful time, especially as students adapt to a new environment. Research shows that flexible coping can be positively correlated with resilient outcomes (Galatzer-Levy et al, 2012; Kitano & Lewis, 2005). Students that come into college with strong coping skills would be more likely to succeed when challenges arise. In a new environment, many obstacles will get in the way of their success. These barriers can more easily
be overcome if the student already possesses flexible coping mechanism. In addition, student engagement was found to be an important component of academic resilience for students from low-income backgrounds (Finn & Rock, 1997). This aligns with Tinto’s model of college retention. Overall, students that get involved on campus develop relationships with peers, faculty, and staff, which strengthens their connection to the institutional as a whole. However, others disagree, asserting that Tinto does not take into consideration underrepresented groups (Tierney, 1999). For example, in a study of Chicana students, findings indicate that parental influence was a major factor in educational resiliency (Ceja, 2004). These nuances that exist within subgroups emphasize the need to study student success from various perspectives. Traditional theorists, such as Tinto, studied large groups without identifying marginalized subsets. The study participants were mostly white, middle-upper class students at traditional campuses. However, with growing diversity and increasing achievement gaps, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of special populations. Resilience is one lens through which to explore the success of this otherwise overlooked group.

**Critiques and Alternative Models**

Critics of resilience theory say that there is great variation on the terminology and definitions of the key constructs (Luthar et al, 2000). Concepts such as risk, adversity, and success can be characterized very differently and subjectively. As the theory and findings continue to grow and become more prominent in the field, more universal definitions and common themes will surface. In the meantime, it is important that all definitions and processes are outlined explicitly before, during, and after the research study is conducted. During the early wave of resilience research, the findings have been surprisingly consistent, despite the variability in terms and measures used (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). As the second wave of more recent
resilience research emerges, there will be new criticisms. One of the areas that critics have commented on include the tendency for resiliency to focus too much on the positive and not enough on the risk and challenges of the individual or group (Masten, 2002). For the current study, resiliency will be a strong theoretical framework, although there are alternative models that could have been selected as well.

Another theoretical framework, such as Bourdieu’s theory of social capital, could have been selected to research the experience of low-income students in college. According to Bourdieu (1986), people are shaped by their economic, social, and cultural capital. His work is often used in research to understand how individual’s experiences are affected by power structures. Bourdieu’s theory suggests that social class structures can negatively impact low-income student experiences, due to limited access to capital. However, as this study aimed at using a strengths perspective, Bourdieu’s theory was not the best choice. Social capital tends to focus on what individuals are lacking and would therefore not have done the students’ positive experiences justice.

Additional theorists such as Vincent Tinto (1987) or Alexander Astin (1984) have studied the student experience through the Student Involvement perspective and have become leading researchers in the field. Student Involvement theory explains that the more involved students are in college, the greater their learning, development, and success. These involved students are more likely to have a better experience and be retained in the long run. The critique of this theory is that the research focuses largely on higher income white male students, which was the predominant population of college students at the time. This presents a challenge to the current study because the theory may not in fact be applicable to non-traditional groups such as those from low-income backgrounds (Rendon et al, 2000; Tierney, 1992; Hoffman, 2002).
Summation

In conclusion, the theoretical framework of resilience served as the ideal perspective for this researcher to examine the experience of successful low-income students at selective universities. In particular, Kumpfer’s (2002) transactional model allowed for alignment throughout the study so that all of the components flow in a linear direction. The literature on low-income students at selective institutions is limited and requires further investigation, especially from a positive perspective such as resilience theory. Following this introduction, the study reviews the literature in chapter two, outlines the methodology in chapter three, analyzes the data in chapter four, and shares the findings and implications in chapter five.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

A literature review is meant to gather current information relevant to the research topic. This synthesis of the existing knowledge is used to formulate and argue a question for original research (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). To discover what is not yet known about the topic of low-income students, this researcher first explored the key authors and publication in the field. With an open mind, the researcher examined studies relevant to the current topic and outlined the findings in the following review. The chapter will be organized into three literature streams, including 1.) Low-income students’ experience of marginalization in college hinders success, 2.) Institutional interventions can increase student success, 3.) Selective institutions' role in low-income student success. The result is an overview and analysis of the experience of low-income students at elite colleges in the United States.

The present literature review uncovered alarming findings regarding the experience of low-income college students. The wealth gap clearly translates into a divide in educational attainment and success (Tinto, 2006). For example, only 12% of 24 year olds from low-income families have completed a bachelor’s degree, compared with 73% of their higher-income peers (Mortenson, 2007). This disparity by income is a serious problem facing American higher education today that needs to be better understood and addressed. The achievement gap that exists affects low-income students’ ability to both enroll and complete their undergraduate education successfully. When it comes to selective, elite universities, the gaps are even wider (Tinto, 2006). The reality is that the experience of low-income students in higher education is a mix of serious challenges and uplifting success stories. There are many statistics showing the difficulties these students face in funding their education, completing a degree, and fully engaging in the campus culture (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Choy & Bobbit, 2000; Davis, 2003;
Mortenson, 2007; Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Aronson, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kezar et al, 2009; Engberg & Allen, 2010). On the other hand, there are also plenty of high achieving students and institutional initiatives demonstrating that success is a real possibility (Arzy et al, 2006; Griffin, 2010; Harper and Griffin, 2010; Hu, 2011; McLaughlin, 2012). This literature review will explore these challenges and successes for various perspectives to provide an overall picture of the current situation.

Overall, the experience of low-income college students is certainly different than that of their higher income counterparts (Tinto, 2006; Aronson, 2008; Kezar et al, 2009; Stuber, 2011). Specifically, the following literature review examined the marginalization of low-income students in college, their experience at elite institutions, and the possibility of success against the odds.

Overview

Low-income students experience college differently than their wealthier peers (Aronson, 2008). In addition to the traditional components of academics and social life in college,
economically disadvantaged students have financial factors influencing their success in higher education. The research shows that low-income students are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education, persist and graduate with a degree (Choy & Bobbit, 2000; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kezar et al, 2009). This is significant because college should be a place that fosters inclusion and a sense of belonging, but instead can serve as a source of isolation for low-income students. Even as access to higher education has risen in the United States, low-income students are still priced out of many institutions due to their socioeconomic status. Overall, low-income students are more likely to enroll at for-profit institutions and community colleges. Although these institutions have their benefits, high achieving students should have greater choice when it comes to enrolling in higher education. Selective institutions can play a distinct role in implementing initiatives to support motivated, high achieving students in their academic pursuits. Higher enrollment and graduation rates for all income levels benefits our society as a whole. The following analysis will further examine the experience of low-income students in higher education as well as the potential strategies to increase inclusion and success.

**Low-Income Students’ Experience of Marginalization in College Hinders Success**

Low-income students tend to experience college in a more negative way, compared to their higher income counterparts. Aronson’s (2008) research confirms that the experience of low-income students in America is different than their higher income peers in college. Rather than provide a sense of belonging, college can become an experience of marginalization for low-income students. Marginalization occurs when individuals are pushed aside, given less importance, or excluded from the community or society. This is contrary to the purpose of higher education, which is inclusion and participation in the social and academic life of the institution. Research confirms that family income correlates with graduation rates (The Educational Trust).
The lowest income students graduate at significantly lower rates than higher income peers, a gap that should be of great concern to all educators. Part of the problem is that low-income students cannot always fully participate in the traditional college experience, which requires financial resources. Students may not have access to all of their academic materials, be able to live on or near campus, attend social events, study abroad, or pay for additional expenses that come with being a traditional college student. Low-income students are also more likely to enroll part-time, work more hours, skip a semester, and not continue with their education, all factors that increase feelings of isolation and marginalization.

**Systemic Stratification Begins Before College**

The isolation low-income students experience begins well before college and continue through to employment when students have not been prepared with the right tools to succeed throughout their lives. Aronson (2008) argues that the overall college process funnels out students from low socioeconomic backgrounds starting as early as childhood. Schools perpetuate inequalities through funding and opportunities at a young age, where schools in low-income neighborhoods receive less resources than wealthier school districts (Darling-Hammond, 1995; Ansalone, 2001). The challenges include various factors in addition to lack of funding, such as lower expectations, inconsistent guidance counseling, misinformation, and diminishing motivation (Aronson, 2008). Low-income students miss out on many opportunities simply because of their socioeconomic status, geographical location, school district funding, and resources. In a country that prides itself on opportunity for all, children and young adults are systematically excluded from achieving their full potential based on their families’ socioeconomic background.
This concept of the funnel filtering out financially disadvantaged students throughout the educational process illustrates a system that sets many students up for failure from the beginning. This is especially true in high school, where important decisions are made regarding the selection of classes, importance of grades, extra-curricular involvement, college visits, admissions applications, teacher recommendations and other essential components of the process. One major example is access to proper financial aid information, which is crucial for low-income students as they consider college as a viable option (De La Rosa, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009; Bettinger et al, 2012). Findings from De La Rosa’s (2006) analysis indicate that although financial aid is an essential factor for low-income students, these families are not well informed about college options and available aid. The misinformation can prevent students from attending top schools that they would otherwise be able to attend and succeed at, such as more expensive, selective universities that provide strong aid packages to students with financial need. The result of this exclusionary education system is an unfair process that influences which students are represented in higher education and perpetuates class stratification in college.

**Isolation Continues in College**

In the United States where education should be the great equalizer, colleges often miss the mark by preserving social class stratification (Oseguera & Astin, 2004; Mortenson, 2000). The American system of higher education is decentralized and multilayered, which gives the appearance of creating access for all, but in reality stratifies society even more (Karen, 2002). Low-income students enter college at a disadvantage and continue to suffer exclusion in various ways due to their economic background. They have a unique experience where they may not feel like they fit in with their classmates. While in college, low-income students work more hours and are less involved, and also are less likely to take a full time load of classes, live in the residence
halls, or enroll continuously each semester (Walpole, 2003; Kezar et al, 2009). These experiences often prevent students from building relationships since many college bonds are created outside the classroom in the residence halls, clubs and organizations, dining halls or athletics. If they are working or helping with responsibilities at home, they may become increasingly isolated.

Higher income students work less hours, rely less on financial aid, and tend to have access to more college information than low-income students. They can use their free time to visit faculty office hours, hang out in the student union, and attend social events on campus. The low-income student is also more likely to attend less selective institutions with less resources such as community colleges. These colleges serve a great purpose in society but do not provide the same experiences and opportunities as the four-year universities, with greater networks and resources (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). The challenges experienced by low-income students put them at a disadvantage from the start of their academic career and throughout the college experience (Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Cook & King, 2007). The long-term effects of the marginalization of low-income students in college can lead to gaps in the workforce, income, leadership, and representation across American society.

Financial Barriers Increase Marginalization

Finances are one of the primary factors that make low-income students feel a sense of marginalization on campus. Financial assets and college costs are significant barriers for low-income students as they select which institution to attend and whether to persist through completion. As tuition increases and public contributions decrease, families are responsible for picking up more of the college costs (Altbach et al, 2009; Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010). This has implications for low-income students who may not have the resources to pay for this bigger
share of the finances, especially at expensive institutions. Although low-income students pay less than their higher income peers to attend selective institutions, lower income students pay almost half of their income towards college costs, a figure that is at least double what the middle and high-income students pay (Hill et al, 2005). The fact that they are paying less does not actually make much of a difference if that figure is still more than what they can afford. When students do not receive enough financial aid and have to work many hours to pay for living expenses and educational costs, they are less likely to engage with the campus community and achieve success.

Policies, such as Pell Grant awards, can help influence access and affordability for low-income students as well as increase enrollment and retention (Dynarski, 1999; Dynarski, 2002; Kane, 2003; Bettinger, 2004; Linsenmeier et al, 2006; Kane, 2007; Deming & Dynarski, 2009). The problem is that Pell Grants have not kept up with rising college costs, meaning that they no longer cover as much as they used to (Thomas, 2000; Cook & King, 2007; Finlay et al, 2010). In addition, tuition tax credits and deductions are mostly going to higher income families (McPherson & Shapiro, 1997). States are spending less on higher education and institutions are giving out less need-based grants to students. This means that low-income students are paying more out of pocket for their education.

Access to grants, scholarships, and work-study do increase persistence rates for low-income students (Engle & O’Brien, 2007). However, even with scholarships and loans, low-income families struggle to pay tuition and all of the other costs that go along with a college education. Higher income peers do not have these same level of concerns about money and expenses. For example, books, transportation, food, housing, medical care, and clothing are just some of the additional bills that often get forgotten when students plan for higher education.
These expenses add up to thousands of dollars and can be the deciding factor when it comes to enrolling in classes and pursuing a degree. Low-income students have to make difficult choices about skipping meals, buying textbooks, fixing a car, or paying the bills. The stress and anxiety that financial hardships can cause can make it challenging to concentrate on schoolwork, build relationships with peers, and engage in the classroom. These factors disproportionately influence low-income students and their ability to succeed in college, increasing marginalization in American higher education.

**Student Employment in College**

With increasing college costs and limited financial aid available, working while in college is not uncommon for many students. Riggert et al (2006) found that 80% of people enrolled in higher education work and 50% of students under the age of 24 work at 4 year institutions. However, low-income students in particular work too many hours, leaving less time for the social and academic engagement that is key to success (Soria et al, 2014). Compared to higher income families, student from low-income backgrounds were found to be 74% more likely to work to pay for their own college costs (Bozick, 2007). Since low-income students tend to work more, it would be best for them to get jobs on campus and ideally limit their hours to 20 per week (Pike et al, 2008). When students find positions on campus under these conditions, their success can actually increase. Having a supervisor who works at the institution can lead to a mentoring relationship, positive reinforcement, support, and accountability.

Work-study jobs, in particular, have been found to increase retention (Engle & O’Brien, 2007). Work-study positions are known for being flexible and allowing students to put academics first. On campus jobs allow students to schedule their hours around classes, do homework when the office is not busy, and take time off around exams and school breaks. The
work experience from being in a professional setting on a college campus can teach students transferrable skills and contribute to their career preparation (Choy 2001). These are luxuries that low-income students at off-campus jobs do not have and may not be a realistic option for all. As low-income students make decisions regarding work, colleges can encourage and facilitate the on-campus job options that are known to increase success and reduce isolation.

**Low-Income, Students of Color, and First Generation Status**

When researching the marginalization of low-income students in college, it is clear that much of the literature overlaps with work on first generation and students of color (Terenzini et al, 1996; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; McGrath and Braunstein, 1997; Ting, 1998; Thayer, 2000; Martinez & Klopott, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Cho et al, 2008; Mamiseishvili, 2010). The research shows that all three of these groups experience feelings of marginalization on campus. For example, McGrath and Braunstein (1997) studied students’ gender, race, and income in relation to freshmen retention. The researchers found that of the three factors, income was more likely to predict success during the first year of college. Another study combining low-income and first generation students found that this group is in particular danger of failure in higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In addition, Thayer (2000) suggests that, “strategies that are designed for general campus populations without taking into account the special circumstances and characteristics of first generation and low income students will not often be successful for the latter”. The interconnections among underrepresented groups often make sense. However, it is also important not to make generalizations about these three distinct groups. Research that is specifically focused on low-income students is necessary because there are socioeconomic factors that may not apply to students of color or first generation students from more affluent backgrounds (Tinto, 2006; Carnevale & Rose, 2003). The discussion of these
groups may overlap but they should never be treated as one and the same. The feelings of marginalization may be common to all three groups of students but the reasons and solutions are unique and deserve to be explored independently as well.

**Conclusion**

Marginalization that occurs to low-income students in American higher education is a reality that requires further investigation. Rather than open opportunities equally among all economic classes, evidence shows that colleges are actually preserving inequalities (Mortenson, 2000; Oseguera & Astin, 2004; Aronson, 2008). This is a result of lack of preparation and resources in high school as well as the higher education system of funding, admissions, expectations, and socialization. While in college, the systems in place are not designed to support low-income students, who may require a different set of strategies for success. Although the American higher education system has remained mostly the same over several centuries, the population of students pursuing a college degree has changed. The diverse influx of students from different backgrounds, including low-income students, requires educators to rethink how students are experiencing the college process, academics, and campus life. The end result is that marginalization of this group of students must stop and it will be up to institutions to decide how they will make changes towards inclusivity.

**Institutional Interventions Can Increase Student Success**

The feelings of marginalization that low-income students feel in college and the additional challenges faced at selective institutions are a current reality in American higher education. Although the data often points to the financial, academic, and social challenges faced by low-income students in college, there is also a growing body of literature exploring the positive experiences and success stories that exist (Thayer, 2000; Arzy et al, 2006; Engle and
These researchers studied student success through individual student experiences and institutional efforts to improve support systems. Findings indicate that individual characteristics, motivation, and preparation play a role in students’ chances of succeeding. In addition, policies and practices can contribute to an institution’s ability to graduate a high number of low-income students successfully. Educators must seek to implement institutional factors that are within their control based on data-driven information about the low-income student populations enrolling in college. The result of this approach is that students have a better experience and the environment becomes more welcoming and supportive of students from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Traditional Student Involvement Theory**

Traditionally, one of the main strands of literature on student success in college was student involvement theory (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1987; Kuh et al, 2008). Student involvement theory posits that academic and social integration are the key to student retention (Milem & Berger, 1997). Vincent Tinto, one of the leading scholars in the field argues, “the quality of faculty-student interaction and the student's integration into the school are central factors in student attrition” (Tinto, 1987). His findings indicate that retention programs should seek to strengthen students’ commitment to the college and vice versa. Similarly, Alexander Astin suggests that the more involved students are in college, the greater their learning, development, and success (1984). These central theories that focus on students’ motivation and behaviors put the bulk of the responsibility on the student to take the initiative.

Kuh et al (2008) agrees that the student must dedicate their time and energy, but adds that institutions must create an environment that nurtures collaboration, faculty-student interaction, mentoring, research, and co-curricular involvement. Student engagement in these educationally
purposeful activities is seen to increase student success and persistence (Kuh, 2001). The more students have opportunities to engage deeply in course material and build relationships with members of the college community, the more likely they are to do well academically and graduate. The emphasis is on student characteristics as well as how institutions interact with students after enrollment (Kuh et al, 2008). The research finds that institutions where students were highly engaged had certain characteristics in common (Kuh et al, 2005). A mission driven philosophy, focus on student learning, clear student success pathways, and a shared sense of responsibility are some of the factors found at colleges that do well with student engagement. Not only were these characteristics present, but they were also interconnected. Individually, each factor has its benefits, but several combined have the best impact for students.

**A New Look on Student Success**

Not all of the research is in full support of the student involvement theory literature. The primary critique of the traditional theorists such as Tinto and Astin is that their research focused largely on higher income white students and may not in fact be applicable to non-traditional groups such as those from low-income backgrounds (Rendon et al, 2010; Tierney, 1992; Hoffman, 2002). In fact, Arzy et al (2006) found that contrary to student involvement theory, student success was not necessarily based on the students’ integration with the college environment. Rather, for students receiving financial support from private foundations, the students described the external foundation advisor as the key factor to their success. The financial and personal support provided by this outside entity helped students overcome the challenges they faced at the institution. Kraemer (1997) agrees that the traditional involvement theories may not be applicable to all groups. Her study on Hispanic students finds that cultural sensitivity, cost, and proximity to home are better predictor’s of student success than
involvement. The original Tinto and Astin theories of involvement assume that students will assimilate and conform to the institutional characteristics. However, those studying underrepresented groups more recently argue that institutions must adapt to promote the success of all students (Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995; Thayer, 2000). Recommendations from Walpole’s (2003) study on socioeconomic status indicate that more research is needed to better understand the effects of social class on low-income college students’ experiences and achievements.

In Tinto’s (2006) later work, he acknowledges that by focusing on student involvement outside the classroom, the research “was inadvertently taking on a social class bias that tended to favor the more privileged students who had the luxury of either attending a residential institution or of being able to spend time on campus before and after class”. His updated findings show the need to include classroom engagement as well as the important connections to families, church, and other external communities, which are often important in the success of underrepresented students. Colleges must take these relationships into account as they prepare for increased diversity in incoming student groups. Additional work on the connections between involvement and success with diverse populations will continue to provide clarity on the various ways colleges can support students in their academic journeys.

**Success from a Strengths Perspective**

In addition to involvement and engagement theories, researchers have explored student success through new perspectives more recently, particularly through a strengths mindset. Rather than focus on the financial challenges, academic preparation, and social isolation, strengths models look at what is working and why. Studies have been done to show how successful students may have internal characteristics that contribute to their abilities to thrive in college
(Harper and Griffin, 2010; McLaughlin, 2012). For example, McLaughlin (2012) finds that high-achieving, low-income students’ own resilience and intellectual abilities are the primary sources of their success at an elite institution. The low-income students at prestigious universities in Harper and Griffin’s (2010) study also cite that in addition to the programmatic support systems that helped them, the students themselves also had an internal drive to succeed. Although these characteristics may be out of the institution’s control, educators can strategize to encourage and provide support structures to these intrinsically motivated students through intentionally designed institutional efforts.

By moving from a deficit perspective to a positive approach, educators can see how the diversity that low-income students bring to an institution is an asset to the learning process (Thomas, 2014). Universities can use students’ backgrounds and characteristics to develop socially inclusive pedagogical practices and policies. These insights are changing the way research is done for disadvantaged populations. It should also change the way institutions create and implement policies and practices for traditionally marginalized student groups. By approaching success from a positive perspective, additional research studies can guide educators toward creative solutions rather than generate additional barriers and excuses.

**Institutional Interventions**

From the institutional perspective, findings indicate that policies and programs have a positive influence in student success. This is an area that educators can have a direct influence on the student experience based on their decisions and actions. Institutions can take a strengths perspective when addressing systemic problems that appear not to have a solution. Engle and O’Brien (2007) discovered common practices that can increase retention and improve success for low-income students in college, such as targeted retention programs, use of disaggregated data in
decision making, provisional admissions programs, and required reporting by income. Harper and Griffin (2010) find similar trends in their study of high achieving, low-income students at selective institutions, which emphasize college preparatory programs, financial aid, and mentoring as supportive factors in their success. Similarly, Hu (2011) concludes that Gates Millennium Scholars with significant financial aid are more likely to join activities on campus and later take on leadership positions because they have more time and do not have to worry about finances as much. In addition, financial literacy in the first year, TRIO, and Pell grants were shown to increase students’ chances for success (Kezar, 2009). Kezar et al’s (2009) suggestions include focusing on classroom engagement in particular as a success strategy, including offering culturally relevant experiences, providing supportive and collaborative environments, and ensuring that basic financial needs are met. Research findings indicate that institutional support services such as these that focus on academic, personal, and financial aspects of the college experience can help low-income students at elite institutions in particular (McLaughlin, 2012). By studying institutions, policies, and programs that have increased success, educators can implement strategies that work for this particular student population.

The research is clear that intentionally designed programs are the best investment for the low-income student population, which needs that special attention. Although some retention models designed for low-income students also work for the general population, studies show that general strategies do not always work for low-income students (Thayer, 2000). These established practices allow students the supportive structure and resources they needed to make appropriate connections and focus on academics. Educational leaders can choose to implement these research-driven practices at their institutions based on the needs and resources of each institution.
Conclusion

The research on student success has evolved since the classic involvement theories as the college population has become more diverse. The original theorists as well as more current researchers agree that new strategies and models must be designed to support low-income students. Although low-income students may come in to college with internal motivation, the research shows that there are concrete examples of strategies that institutions can implement to address the problems of marginalization in higher education (O’Brien, 2007; Kezar, 2009; Kezar et al, 2009; Harper & Griffin, 2010; Hu, 2011; McLaughlin, 2012). Financial support, connections to a support person, and intentionally designed programming were the key findings that increased retention and success of students from low-income families. Institutions should rely on these current research findings to design targeted intervention strategies that support the success of low-income students.

Selective Institutions' Role in Low-Income Student Success

The success of low-income students at selective institutions is just as important as it is anywhere else. These institutions play a unique role in educating high achieving students and may provide an ideal opportunity for cultivating solutions to the problem of marginalization. It is clear that inequities exist in higher education, but this is especially true at elite, selective institutions (Tinto, 2006). Increased competition among students to gain admission to selective institutions and increased competition among institutions to enroll the highest achieving students is perpetuating the problem of stratification (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Selective institutions are increasingly enrolling more high-income students, at the exclusion of middle and low-income students (Astin, 2004; Oseguera & Astin, 2004; Pallais & Turner, 2006; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). Data shows that only three percent of students attending highly selective colleges came
from the bottom quartile of socioeconomic status, a figure that should be five times larger if it were based on the proportion of the U.S. population (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). The decreasing proportion of low-income students at elite institutions makes their experience isolating academically and socially. This disproportion is true at state flagship universities, top-ranked private universities, and top-ranked liberal arts colleges (Pallais & Turner, 2006). In fact, the underrepresentation of low-income students is even greater than racial minorities at selective institutions (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). However, with selective admissions and more resources at their disposal, selective institutions can make important decisions about how to grow and support their high-achieving and intrinsically motivated low-income students.

**Benefits of Attending Selective Institutions for Low-Income Students**

The marginalization of low-income students, which is more pronounced at selective colleges, leads to a segment of the population missing out on educational opportunities that should be available to all high achieving students, regardless of income (Aronson, 2008). Socioeconomic stratification is an issue that the top tier of institutions of higher education should work to fix, not perpetuate. Research shows that enrollment in elite institutions leads to higher graduation rates and larger income, opportunities that should not be reserved for those who already come from more affluent families (Eide et al, 1998; Brewer et al, 1999; Karen, 2002; Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Eide et al (1998) argues that students that attend selective undergraduate programs are more likely to attend graduate school and more specifically, at major research institutions. Their research goes on to say that selective institutions give graduates a boost in the labor market with salaries reported as up to 37% higher six years after graduation. Astin and Oseguera (2004) agree that graduates from top-ranking institutions with more resources are viewed more favorably by employers and graduate schools. Through admissions
preferences, targeted financial aid programs, and specialized support initiatives at these well-connected colleges and universities, low-income students can have greater access to networks that provide high-paying jobs and opportunities for further growth.

**Financial Aid and Recruitment Practices**

Selective institutions are unique in that they can select the best students from a large pool of applicants. Their budgets are not purely based on enrollment and they often have some flexibility in terms of financial aid packages. Although selective institutions spend four times more per student than least selective colleges and subsidize up to 12 times more in funding, admissions preferences for economically disadvantaged students have decreased over the past three decades (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Astin and Oseguera (2004) argue that the biggest challenge facing low-income students is that selective institutions rely heavily on standardized test scores and high school grade point averages in their admissions decisions. This practice puts underrepresented students at a disadvantage because students from less resourced backgrounds tend to perform lower on these measures (Walpole et al, 2005; Fleming, 2000).

Since low-income students tend to enroll at more affordable community colleges, universities that want to diversify can target high achieving low-income students through creative financial aid packages and recruitment efforts. Students at community colleges and less selective 4-year institutions are less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree than those at selective universities, even after controlling for academic ability (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011). It is in the best interest of students and universities for high achieving, low-income students to attend elite colleges. All students benefit from exposure to diversity, which can enhance the student experience as well as the institutional profile (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000; Gurin et al, 2004; Bowman, 2013; Park et al, 2013). However, the reality is that only the wealthiest of institutions
can afford to completely eliminate tuition costs for low-income students through strategies such as no loan programs (Waddell & Singell, 2011; Hillman, 2013). These no loan programs are available to the highest achieving low-income students that qualify based on admissions criteria and level of financial need. In the end, a small amount of students benefit from these opportunities, which allow students to focus more on their academics without as much concern about their ability to pay for college. Institutions such as the University of Virginia, University of North Carolina, Princeton, Harvard and Brown are among the leaders in introducing aggressive efforts to increase low-income student representation on campus (Pallais & Turner, 2006). For example, when Harvard implemented its financial aid initiative for low-income students, the university reported an 8-10 percent increase in low-income matriculation (Waddell & Singell, 2011). On the other hand, many selective institutions are moving away from need-blind admissions towards a practice of considering ability to pay as an admissions factor (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). Since they are concerned about maintaining tuition revenue, they end up hurting low-income students the most because they cannot afford to pay the high rates, especially in the private sector. Without significant increases from federal and state funding sources, some researchers are skeptical that significant changes in low-income student enrollment can be made at the majority of public and private institutions (Pallais & Turner, 2006). Although they may want to make changes, limited resources may prevent them from doing so successfully.

More targeted financial aid and recruitment strategies must be considered to make a significant difference for the growing number of low-income students pursuing higher education. Research shows that most Americans favor admissions preferences for low-income students as well as increased funding, both of which promote educational opportunities and upward mobility (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Selective institutions often miss out on high achieving, low-income
students because their recruitment efforts do not align with these students’ geographical locations or financial need (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Hill & Winston, 2010; Hoxby & Avery, 2013). The issue is not that these students do not exist; it is that they may not be targeted and informed in the right way. Traditional efforts do not work for this particular population so creative solutions will be necessary to find the right strategy.

**Conclusion**

The experience of low-income students at selective institutions is an area that deserves further exploration. Evidence suggests that income stratification is even more pronounced at selective institutions in America. Elite colleges have the luxury of selecting the top students from all income brackets, but are increasingly admitting already affluent students. For those high achieving low-income students with academic preparation, the main challenge is financial. Students not only struggle to pay for tuition, they also have to work to make ends meet. Experts find that those who do manage to succeed at selective institutions benefit in the long run (Eide et al, 1998; Brewer et al, 1999; Karen, 2002; Carnevale & Rose, 2003). These institutions should make a targeted effort to recruit, retain, and support students from low-income backgrounds. More aggressive recruitment strategies that start in earlier high school years and providing financial aid decisions at the time of admissions are two recommendations that could encourage students to apply and potentially enroll in more selective institutions (Carnevale & Rose, 2003). Although there is some literature exploring the experience of low-income students at selective institutions, the present review indicates that more research is needed to better understand and support this particular population, especially through an institutional policy and programming lens.
Summation

The literature indicates that low-income student experiences differ greatly from the traditional, higher income college student (Choy & Bobbitt, 2000; Corrigan, 2003; Aries & Seider, 2005; Pallais & Turner, 2006; Arzy et al, 2006; Engle & O’Brien, 2007; Kezar et al, 2009; Stuber, 2011). For low-income students at selective institutions, a feeling marginalization is especially pronounced. This is demonstrated throughout the research in the admissions process, financial aid knowledge, institutional connections, and success in college. Although success is possible and should be highlighted, the reality remains that “even high achieving lower-income students are less likely to graduate from college than their higher-income peers (59 percent versus 77 percent)” (Kezar, 2009, p. 38). The current data shows the need to better understand this unique population from various perspectives. Walpole’s (2003) study on socioeconomic status indicates that more research is needed to better understand the effects of social class on low-income college students’ experiences and achievements. This is especially true for selective institutions that can position themselves to be leaders in this movement. The result with be more satisfied students that feel connected to peers and the campus, graduate at higher rates, and become more successful in the long run. The burden then becomes on institutions to use the data to create inclusive policies that support all students and targeted programs that have been proven to increase the success of low-income students.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The problem of practice examined in this study is that low-income students at selective institutions report feeling a sense of isolation, alienation, and marginalization (Aries & Seider, 2005; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). To understand the lived experiences of these students, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as the research approach for this study. As a qualitative method with roots in phenomenology, IPA research has grown in popularity in recent years, specifically in the fields of health, psychology, and social sciences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2010; Pringle et al., 2011; Larkin et al., 2011). Its emphasis on understanding lived experiences through the way participants make meaning is an ideal fit for a study focusing on the experiences of low-income students. Through a constructivist-interpretative paradigm, the current study allowed the researcher to explore the many voices and truths that exist among low-income college students through interaction with the participant (Ponterotto, 2005).

Guided by a strengths based resiliency framework, this study sought to understand what individual characteristics or institutional strategies lead to the successful social and academic integration of low-income students at selective universities. Therefore, the central question guiding this study is: How do low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college?

Qualitative Research Approach

The research design in this study was guided by a qualitative approach. Unlike quantitative approaches, the current study used open ended questions, analysis of words rather than numbers, and an inductive approach that draws meaning from particular situations. Although qualitative research allows the researcher to view the study from various different
perspectives, this flexibility is then refined in the particular approach used in the study. The approach selected shapes the study design in a way that is very central to the final product. The research question, data collection, analysis, and evaluation look very different depending on the type of qualitative approach used by the researcher (Creswell, 2012). Historically, the social sciences were quantitatively driven, but during the later 20th century, interest in qualitative approaches rose (Creswell, 2012). This trend has continued as more researchers are drawn to interpreting experiences and phenomenon using participants’ own words and descriptions.

Within quantitative and qualitative research approaches, there are different paradigms that researchers can operate out of when approaching their study. Ponterotto (2005) summarizes the main philosophies as Positivist, Postpositivist, Constructivist-Interpretivist, and Critical-Ideological research paradigms. These four major classifications allow researchers to conceptualize their study into an approach that fits with their research needs, interests, and topic alignment. The present study comes out of a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which allows for co-creation of meaning through dialogue and reflection, and serves as the foundational paradigm for qualitative research (Ponterotto, 2005). Research that is done through the lens of this paradigm views truth as subjective and in context. Rather than quantitatively measuring experiments from an objective, positivist perspective, constructivism-interpretivism allows for multiple realities that are constructed and interpreted by the participants and then analyzed qualitatively by the researcher. On the other hand, constructivism-interpretivism is also unlike the critical-ideological paradigm, which takes the researcher-participant relationship to the opposite extreme by immersing oneself in the problem and solution. This middle ground of constructivism-interpretivism allows for the establishment of trust through personal interaction during interviews but also requires that the researcher consider positionality and bias to then
bracket one’s beliefs. Bracketing can be seen as demonstrating validity throughout the process, including reviewing the literature, collecting data, and analyzing results (Smith et al, 2009; Chan et al, 2013). This process ensures that participants’ stories are analyzed through their own experiences of the phenomenon being studied.

The researcher created the current study and research questions in a way that encouraged participants to make meaning of their own lived experiences as they saw them. Of the many qualitative constructivist-interpretivist research approaches, this researcher selected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the best strategy for the research. This was a good fit for the current study because it aligned the problem of practice, research question, data collection, and analysis process in a way that was consistent with the researcher’s aim. Phenomenologists are generally concerned with the lived experiences of human beings (Smith et al, 2009; Willig, 2013). An IPA approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of students’ stories and interpretations through a series of open-ended interview questions. Although IPA has strengths and weaknesses, its emphasis on understanding lived experiences through the way participants make meaning was an ideal fit for a study focusing on the experiences of low-income students (Reid et al, 2005). Rather than utilizing a purely objective perspective, participants can articulate their own perceptions of their major life experiences that have a particular significance to them (Smith et al, 2009).

Beginning with German humanist, Edmund Husserl, who first shifted to a focus on the essence of a phenomenon during the late nineteenth century, phenomenology aims at understanding everyday human experiences, but also achieves that end through the perspective of the people experiencing the phenomenon themselves (Shosha, 2012; Roberts, 2013). Husserl believed that researchers should acknowledge, but set aside biases and assumptions from the
research. This concept of bracketing allows the research to be uninfluenced by previous knowledge of the phenomenon (Shosha, 2012; Smith et al, 2009). Along similar lines as Husserl, his student Martin Heidegger was very interested in lived human experiences. However, rather than bracketing, hermeneutics became his main focus (Dowling, 2007). Through interpretation of lived experiences, rather than mere descriptions, human existence can be understood in context.

IPA is based on this interpretative lens, which allows the relationship between an individual and the world around them to be the main focus (Shosha, 2012). Taking phenomenology a step further, Jonathan Smith is the first to articulate IPA through an inductive, double hermeneutic process. IPA research has grown in popularity in recent years, specifically in the fields of health, psychology, and social sciences (Reid et al, 2005; Smith et al, 2009; Smith, 2010; Pringle et al, 2011; Larkin et al, 2011; Willig, 2013). Often overlapping with other qualitative approaches, IPA is meant to be a search for meaning with the researcher as the primarily tool for collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 2002). The result is a study that is primarily described through rich text, as opposed to numbers, and utilizes an inductive approach to analysis.

**Research Participants and Site**

The research site chosen for this IPA study was a private university in the Northeast enrolling about 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students. At about $65,000 per year for residential students in 2016, this institution is expensive and also selective, accepting 29% of its 30,000 applicants (U.S. Dept. of Education). A graduation rate of 92% also indicates a high rate of success among its student body. Of the roughly 10,000 undergraduates, 13% receive Federal Pell Grants, the criteria used in this study to establish low-income status (U.S. Dept. of Education). In 2009, the university established a program for low-income undergraduate students who are Pell Grant eligible to receive free resources and services. About 1,300 undergraduates
are assigned by the Financial Aid office to this program, which mentors students through the college experience, distributes free tickets to athletic and social events, provides funding for service trips and retreats, as well as assists with emergency funding such as food, housing, books, and travel. This office and its staff served as the primary recruitment tool for selecting research participants. As suggested for IPA research studies, 8 homogeneous participants were selected using non-probability purposeful sampling based on predetermined criteria (Merriam, 2009; Smith, 2009; Wagstaff & Williams, 2014).

To participate in the study, participants must have met the following criteria:

1. Students must be registered full time in their senior year so that they have at least three years of experience to reflect upon.
2. Students must be eligible for a Federal Pell Grant to show low-income status.
3. Students must be traditional-age students (18-24 years old).
4. Students must have a 3.0 grade point average or higher to show academic success.
5. Students must be involved in some sort of university activity to show successful social integration (such as student club, leadership activity, student government, retreat, community service, sports, artistic group, etc.)

**Recruitment.** Once the research site and the Northeastern University Internal Review Board approved the study, the researcher began the recruitment process by contacting the office that runs the program for low-income students on campus. All low-income undergraduate students at the university are registered through this office and are eligible to receive special services and resources, although some participate more actively than others. The staff in the office meet individually with students as well as maintain regular contact over email to provide support as needed. A weekly email newsletter is sent to all 1,300 student members to inform
them of important deadlines, upcoming events, and free resources. This email newsletter was one of the recruitment mechanisms used by the researcher to gather potential participants. The other main recruitment strategy was through individual recommendations from the Program Manager, Assistant Manager and Graduate Assistant, all of whom have established relationships with students and were able to spread the word about the study verbally. Recommendations from these three staff members and responses to an email blast were the primary way of creating the purposeful sample. The researcher provided all of the materials to the office staff for recruitment, including a list of the criteria and an email script (Appendix A) that was sent to all students that qualified. The result was a group of twelve interested students that replied of which the researcher was able to schedule eight student interviews that fit the study criteria.

**Screening.** Interested participants were screened for eligibility by responding to a few initial questions regarding their demographics, grade point average, and social involvement through a free electronic survey tool, Survey Monkey. All students that completed the initial screening were contacted and those that fit the criteria were selected on a first come, first serve basis. The researcher wanted to interview a minimum of eight participants so she recruited 12 in case any were to withdraw or unable to schedule an interview. The researcher selected the first 3 male and 5 female seniors that met the study requirements. As the study only focused on income status, participants from all race and ethnic backgrounds were included. All potential participants that expressed an interest in participating were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D) allowing for the release of their names, phone number, and email addresses to the researcher. This information was used to maintain contact with participants regarding initial interview scheduling and any necessary follow up. Participants were notified of the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation from the first phone call and were provided these details
in writing prior to conducting the recorded interview. Once the study participants were selected, the researcher scheduled an initial phone call to review the criteria, confirm their participation, answer questions, and finalize a mutually convenient date, time, and location for the 45-90 minute interview.

**Procedures**

**Data Collection**

Once the participants were recruited, screened, and finalized, the researcher moved forward with the collection of data. The data collection in IPA research is very intentional and carefully planned. The interpretative nature of the process relies on the participants to make meaning of their lived experiences in the context of the identified phenomenon. Participants should share their firsthand account at length in an open, encouraging setting (Smith et al, 2009). To achieve this end, IPA is most often conducted through a small group of homogenous participants, selected purposefully, and interviewed in depth (Smith et al, 2009; Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). These semi-structured interviews allow for targeted questions that prompt participants to think carefully about their answers in a particular way. The interview questions must be well thought out in advance by the researcher to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to respond to the same questions in a similar amount of time. A limited number of follow up questions may be necessary to fully understand the experience of participants. Although the interviewer set up this structure in advance, it is also noteworthy to share that IPA allows for much flexibility during the actual interview. Participants were given open-ended questions and their answers shaped the direction of the interview. The interaction consisted mostly of the interviewer listening to the participants’ personal stories. The interviewer was mindful to remain calm and allow each participant sufficient time to reflect on each question and
tell their story with rich detail, which results in the best data for IPA analysis (Smith et al, 2009). Although one-on-one interviews tend to be the primary data collection technique used in IPA, these studies can potentially be done by reviewing diaries, conducting focus groups, or corresponding through email as opposed to the exclusive use of interviews (Smith et al, 2009; Roberts, 2013; Jones et al, 2014). These additional sources were not used in the present study.

This researcher collected data by conducting interviews with eight participants, which were recorded with consent on two different electronic devices over the phone. During the interview, the researcher asked 13 previously constructed questions, which allowed for open-ended responses that the participants could expand on with their own stories (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith et al, 2009). Follow up questions were used for clarity as needed. Each interview began with an introduction and general questions then funneled down towards more specific and personal topics. This targeted approach allowed participants to feel more comfortable with the interviewer before delving into more personal experiences. In the interview schedule constructed in advance, the interviewer began with an open descriptive question to get the participant comfortable telling a personal story at length followed by more analytical questions later (Smith et al, 2009). No close-ended or leading questions were included. The researcher used active listening techniques to ensure that the participants’ responses were at the center of all follow up questions and remained the main focus of attention, which helped bracket any of the researchers’ own feelings about the participants’ experiences (Smith et al, 2009). At the conclusion of the meeting, the interviewer thanked each participant for their time and asked if they had any final comments or questions. The recording devices were then turned off and the interview came to end. A follow up thank you email was sent following each individual interview.
Data Analysis

After the data collection process was complete, the researcher carefully analyzed the interview data through a rigorous process. Particular to IPA research is that the data collected must be examined interpretively and in context (Dowling, 2005). This process allows for the participants’ stories to remain personal and authentic at all times. Merriam (2002) argues that meaning is “socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (p.3). To look at a participant’s experience without taking into account the world and the entire context surrounding it would be incomplete. Throughout the data analysis and interpretation process, the researcher carefully considered the stories and context that the participants described in their interviews. Attention to detail was especially important as the researcher attempted to make meaning of the data into more generalized findings.

The second level of interpretation in IPA research is where the researcher analyzes how the participants perceived their experiences. This two-stage interpretation process, or double hermeneutic, means that the researcher interprets the participants’ interpretation of their experience (Smith et al, 2009; Pringle et al, 2011). This is a foundational component of IPA methodology. In this approach, active involvement and interpretation by the researcher ensures that meaning is fully uncovered. When it comes to the actual analysis, some researchers rely heavily on computer programs to code and analyze data while others prefer traditional manual approaches. These choices do not determine the rigor or validity, but are a matter of personal preference, available resources, and individual situation. This researcher used a combination of manual coding and electronic coding through NVIVO analytic software.

Before formal analysis began, the transcribed text was sent by email to each participant, giving them the opportunity to make any corrections or clarifications. This accuracy check
allowed the participants to clear up any unusual responses in a way that ensures the validity of the results. The review prevents responses from being taken out of context or being misinterpreted due to confusion on the researcher’s part. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, it is essential that the researcher maintains the accuracy of responses, allowing the participants the chance to review and make corrections, and always referring back to the original transcripts when any doubt or questions arise. After transcribing the interviews and reviewing the information with participants, the data was then analyzed carefully using an exclusively inductive and descriptive process (Merriam, 2002; Shaw, 2010). No hypothesis or assumptions were made in advance, as is the case with other qualitative approaches.

The following steps were taken based on Smith et al’s (2009) analytic process and supplemented by Shaw’s (2010) recommendations for IPA analysis:

**Step 1: Reading and Rereading.** To keep the participants’ stories and experiences authentic, the recorded interviews were listened to several times and carefully transcribed (Shaw, 2010). Nuances in the tone, pauses, and expressions were noted to capture the full range of responses. The transcribed data was read several times so the researcher is very familiar with the data (Smith et al, 2009).

**Step 2: Initial Noting.** After reading and rereading the transcription closely, the researcher began taking notes in the margin (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Shaw, 2010). Shaw (2010) suggests writing descriptive summaries in the left hand margin and initial interpretations in the right hand margin. Both were written in short pieces near the raw data to lay the groundwork for analysis and facilitate tracing back during future interpretations.

**Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes.** Using the notes in the margin as guide, the researcher fully read through the summaries and initial interpretations. The researcher’s role was
to code the data with key words based on patterns that became emergent themes (Smith et al, 2009). The most significant information was pulled from the notes and raw data to create the themes.

Step 4: Searching for Connections among Emergent Themes. Common themes were then clustered to provide a description and create a visual table (Smith et al, 2009). It was important that evidence in the transcript was sufficient for each theme so that the findings truly reflect participants’ responses (Shaw, 2010).

Step 5: Moving to the Next Case. The same process was repeated for each of the eight interviews that were conducted in the study. Following these steps ensured that each participant’s data was analyzed in the same way with the same attention and rigor. This consistency gives the process additional credibility.

Step 6: Looking for Patterns across Cases. Once the analysis process was complete for all cases, the researcher created a final set of themes based on commonalities (Smith et al, 2009; Shaw, 2010). These themes are presented in the findings chapter and supported by raw data from the transcripts. In addition to analyzing commonalities, the researcher also uncovered oddities that were specific to only one participant.

At the completion of the data analysis, the researcher began identifying findings and making conclusions. The common themes that emerged from the data analysis process served as the basis for the discussion of the findings. The researcher goes on to explain how the discoveries made impact students, educators, and the field of higher education in general. Recommendations for future research are highlighted based on the findings and remaining literature gaps.
Table 1: Study Procedures

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential when researching human subjects and the researcher takes this responsibility very seriously. All Northeastern University Internal Review Board approval took place before contact with potential participants began. Due to the nature of IPA research, participants were asked personal questions about their college experience. However, the present study presents a low risk of causing harm to participants. The researcher took the necessary steps to make participants feel comfortable and built trust during the initial screening and interview. Participants were well informed of their rights throughout the process.
This researcher took special precautions to maintain the anonymity of all participants. This included remaining discreet during the recruitment phase through the execution of the study. At the time of the interview, each participant was asked to select a pseudonym to be used in the study. Only the researcher knows the identity of each participant and this information is stored on a password protected computer in an encrypted file. No personal identifiable information was included in any documents so that the identity of all participants remains anonymous. Participants were informed verbally of these procedures in the initial screening phone call and provided a written document at the time of the interview.

**Trustworthiness**

The purpose of the current study is to understand how low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college. To achieve this end, it was necessary to explore the subjective college experiences of the study participants as low-income students that have achieved academic and co-curricular success. Yardley’s (2000) four criteria for quality of qualitative research were used to assess validity throughout the process:

1. Sensitivity to context
2. Commitment and rigor
3. Transparency and coherence
4. Impact and importance

This process was documented at every step of the way in a manner that can be retraced from the interview protocol to the final conclusions. This system builds trust and reliability through transparency (Shaw, 2010).
As the data was carefully analyzed through a transparent process, the researcher paid special attention to always use evidence to back up any findings or claims (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). By the use of direct quotes and short vignettes, the researcher relied on the language of participants when creating themes and drawing conclusions (Yin, 2011). Lastly, this researcher maintained a sense of skepticism throughout the research process. From the literature review through data analysis, the researcher looked for any discrepancies or rival explanations to ensure that discovery and interpretation were as complete and reliable as possible.

**Credibility.** To build credibility in qualitative research, it is especially necessary to be completely transparent in the documentation and procedures (Shaw, 2010; Yin, 2011). Throughout this study, all of the steps and protocols were outlined explicitly and carefully. All materials were included in the appendix, shared with the participants, and with the research site in advance. Documentation was provided so that others can review and inspect the data sources themselves, as a form of internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Although the present study will follow an inductive process with open-ended questions, there was still a documented method and series of procedures followed at each step to avoid unintentional bias. Participants completed a screening questionnaire, spoke on the phone to schedule the interview and review any questions, participated in an hour long interview with the researcher, and reviewed the transcripts for any errors or misunderstandings. This final step of member checking is the most crucial for credibility as it allows for the participant to provide clarifications and corrections prior to data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Russell, 2008). All of these interactions combined allowed for scrutiny of information and confirmation of the accuracy and credibility of the data.
**Transferability.** It is important to view the findings of this study in context (Merriam, 2002). The individual stories of participants at this particular institution were not meant to represent all low-income students, but rather highlight emergent themes based on individual experiences. The experiences of low-income students reflected cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the sample. The selective nature of this institution influences the kind of student that is accepted, enrolls and is likely to succeed. Since this university has taken proactive steps to create an office dedicated to addressing the needs of low-income students, the research findings may not transfer to institutions that have not made a similar commitment in terms of space, personnel, and funding. To address the challenges of transferability in the present study, the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the process, analysis, and results using quotations when illustrating participants’ perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Russell, 2008).

**Dependability.** Demonstrating the data collection and analysis process in a way that is explicit and accessible is a technique that increases dependability, especially in qualitative research (Whittemore et al, 2001). Prior to screening and selecting participants, the researcher worked closely with the research site to ensure that all participants fit the criteria identified in the study. This researcher ensured that the sample was reliable through the referrals from trusted personnel. As is common in IPA research, the researcher spoke directly to the participants, who gave a firsthand account of their experiences. This account was transcribed verbatim and reviewed by participants before moving on to analysis. Notes and themes were always connected to the original transcripts for verification purposes.

**Confirmability.** Documentation through an audit trail allows a reader to trace back the findings to the raw data and confirm that the interpretations are grounded in the transcription, notes, and emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2008). This researcher recorded
the process each step of the way to allow for confirmability by an external viewer. This audit trail serves as a record of the procedures taken throughout the summarization, decision-making, and analysis process (Shaw, 2010). After the interviews were transcribed, participants had the opportunity to make corrections, clarifications, and modifications to the text. By allowing the participants to read and provide clarity on the interview transcript, the researcher confirmed that the responses were recorded accurately (Russell, 2008). This improves reliability as it decreases any possible confusion that may arise as the analysis and interpretation phase of the study moved forward.

**Potential Research Bias**

The researcher is aware that in all research, there is potential for research bias. Positionality refers to the researcher’s position as it relates to the group being studied. The most important factor within this concept is self-awareness. Having a personal and professional connection to the work can impact how the researcher conducts a study and sees the results, especially in qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013). Since the researcher has a personal and professional connection to the work, she took precautions in conducting the study and analyzing the results (Creswell, 2013). By following the steps in the participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures, the researcher was able to bracket her own biases and focus on the content of the research. In IPA, the essence of the data is the individual experiences of participants that share their personal stories. Beginning with the research design and the creation of the interview questions, these were at the forefront of all interpretation throughout the study. The researcher always referred back to the raw data when clustering themes and drawing conclusions, preventing that her own experiences interfered with the data from the participants’ experiences.
Having been a student at the institution in this study, the researcher understands firsthand how challenging it can be to fit in as a new student. She also remembers how rewarding it was to fully engage in the campus community. As one of the few commuter students at the residential campus, she struggled to identify with her peers at first, especially those from more affluent and well-connected backgrounds. As an immigrant, she moved to the United States with her mother when she was five years old and grew up in Massachusetts, attending public schools her entire life. Her parents were always very supportive and encouraging of her academic goals, regardless of what they were and she found faculty mentors that cared about her success. She joined student organizations that opened her eyes to social injustices around the world, which led to a discovery of her passions and skills and a major in philosophy. In her professional life, she has worked closely with low-income students, supporting them through their own journey towards success. Each student has a different story about what it means to come from a low-income background in college. Keeping this in mind, the researcher let the data speak for itself.

Machi and McEvoy (2012) suggest that by confronting personal views, the researcher can control their opinion so as not to influence the work. This researcher understands the strong connection between her life experiences and the present research study. With an interest in addressing the challenges students face as well as highlighting their success strategies, the goal was to create a safe space for students to genuinely reflect on their experiences without external pressures or expectations. The interview questions guided them without influencing their stories so that the data remained free from external influence. Throughout this process, the researcher was committed to a consistent awareness of the biases that may affect the way the research is conducted and analyzed. Briscoe (2005) suggests that groups should be researched both by those who identify with that group and those who do not. It is best to have both so that the work does
not raise suspicions of biases. It would be great for others to replicate the study at similar and different universities by other researchers with varied perspectives.

Limitations

Limitations for the present study are mostly based on transferability or generalizability, a common limitation in qualitative research (Yardley, 2008). The present study is focused on one university with a small sample size. The chosen methodology, IPA, recommends a small sample size to understand the individual experiences in depth as opposed to a large representative sample (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Starks & Tinidad, 2007). Therefore, these students do not represent all low-income students and this university does not represent all institutions of higher education. This study is particular to the experiences of these students at a university that has implemented strategies to increase the success of low-income students. These program are unique and therefore the findings may not translate to other students at other universities. In addition, the participants in this study were asked about their college experience during a one hour interview, which may only represent a segment of their full experience. This study relies on students’ memories to get at the essence of their experience and comfort level in sharing personal stories about how their financial background intersects with their college life.

Summary

To understand the lived experiences of successful low-income students in college, this study used a qualitative IPA methodology through the process of individual in-depth interviews of participants (Smith et al, 2009). The research site and sample were carefully selected to represent students at a university in the northeast that has implemented a support program for Pell Grant eligible students. IPA aligns most closely with the research goals because of the ability of the researcher to collect the personal stories of students as a means of describing and
interpreting their experience in college (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Participants’ account of their experiences were analyzed through a careful twofold process of data collection and interpretation, called a double hermeneutic. The intended outcome was to understand the experience of these students and what factors may have influenced their successful college navigation, despite the financial challenges presented by their family income background. The findings represent common themes among participants’ and include a discussion about how this data can be used to improve the college experience for low-income students. Results may be of significance to students and families with similar situations, colleges and university personnel, as well as policymakers and researchers that make decisions about admissions, hiring, programming, and funding. The following chapter will review the findings through the use of direct quotes from participants.
Chapter 4: Research Findings and Analysis

The aim of this study is to understand what individual characteristics or institutional strategies lead to the successful social and academic integration of low-income students at selective universities. Through the qualitative lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with eight college seniors from low-income backgrounds with a 3.0 grade point average or higher and that have been actively involved in co-curricular college life. The study participants were asked to share their lived experiences through a series of 13 interview questions intended to answer the study’s central research question: *How do low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college?* After a rigorous analysis of the data, two superordinate themes and six subordinate themes emerged based on commonalities. The themes and their recurrences are outlined in the table below:

Table 2
*Superordinate and Subordinate Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Mike</th>
<th>Amy</th>
<th>Nick</th>
<th>Julia</th>
<th>Joe</th>
<th>Erin</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discovering passion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Academic or career passion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b. Personal passion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c. Leadership passion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Strong support system</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Faculty or staff mentor</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Family connections</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Meaningful friendships with peers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The identified themes are further explored in this chapter, which includes several excerpts from the interview transcripts to demonstrate how students described their college experiences from their own perspectives. The table illustrates how both of the superordinate themes emerged in all participants’ responses and how each subordinate theme emerged in at least half of the participants’ responses. The use of direct quotes and short vignettes ensures the researcher is using evidence to support findings and conclusions. This strategy will be used throughout this chapter to maintain transparency and validity.

**Discovering Passion**

Discovering passion was identified as one superordinate theme that emerged from the transcribed data. All participants discussed how finding their passion was a significant component of their college experience. Their descriptions of falling in love with an academic major, being called to a particular career, or developing an intense interest in a particular sport, co-curricular activity, or leadership experience demonstrate how important discovering something they were passionate about became in their college journey. Not all students discovered their passions right away. In some cases, they may have fallen into their passion accidentally or by “luck” as some participants described it. Other students described purposely seeking out opportunities to continue their passions from childhood or high school in college. Regardless of how they came across it, finding something related to their passion in college kept them engaged, motivated, and successful. The various ways this manifested are described in the following sections.

Erin described her experience of falling in love with service after a friend invited her along to the Appalachia Volunteers group meetings. “I started going to Appa meetings because one of my friends outside of the team that I had met earlier that fall, she had been going to
meetings and said ‘do you what to go with me? I think it would be fun.’ So I was like sure and went.” This casual, word of mouth invitation from peers was a common thread among participants. Later in the interview she shares this experience “made me realize what I am passionate about.” Although she did not know what to expect, Erin joined after her friend’s invitation and it made a huge influence in her college experience going forward. She continued to join service projects throughout the remainder of her college experience. Julia joined the rugby team as a freshmen after seeing a flyer on campus. Looking back, she describes rugby as a “huge sense of stability” as it helped her find her place on campus as well as deal with the stress of her dad’s terminal illness. Along the same lines, Julia received an email about the McNair research program, which she joined and later described her work in a campus neuroscience lab as, “one of the best parts of my college experience so far because I am just so passionate about neuroscience.” Her willingness to try new things and get involved on campus led to some of the most important parts of her undergraduate experience. Similarly, Nick joined a freshmen male mentoring group after receiving an email and “not thinking too much of it.” Some other guys from his floor were going to try it so he decided to give it a shot as well. Looking back as a Freshmen League mentor, he describes it as, “the most important thing I have done in college.” His decision to sign up shaped the rest of his college experience in ways that he could not have imagined. He had not planned to commit the next four years to this program but that is exactly what happened

Some students already came in with the idea to get involved in a particular activity in college. Ana hoped to continue pursuing one of the things that she was already passionate about since she was little, dancing. Her mom owned a dance studio and she grew up as a dancer. As Anna shared, “as soon as I started dancing, all of the homesickness was gone. I think that’s what
I needed, to be in my comfort zone again with girls that loved the same thing I did.” Her experience was about finding the right group that fit with who she was as a dancer. This connection to her identity and home was important to her, especially as someone who was having difficulty finding a group of friends. Performing at college-wide events gave her a sense of pride and connected to the greater university community.

Multiple students agreed that rather than doing something because it looks good on your resume or because friends were doing it, their college experience was about doing it for themselves. In Erin’s words, “in high school you kind of just sign up or join clubs and things sometimes just to put on your resume for college, not necessarily because you want to do them.” That was not the experience she wanted to have in college. Anna’s response echoed that sentiment, sharing that dancing to her is “just something that you are doing because you are doing it for yourself.” It was important for her to find that in college. In general, participants were very aware about the social pressures and competition that exists among the student body. Students compare themselves against others in terms of appearance, academic ability, income status, relationships, and social life. Nick shared that he felt pressure to take an economics class because several friends were pursuing business careers. Although it seemed to be the popular thing to do, he did not enjoy or do well in the class and soon realized that it was not for him. He decided to major in art history because, “it was really something that I was passionate about and I don’t think there is anything else I would have rather majored in.” Once Nick realized the he did not have to follow the same career path as his friends to fit in, he found a major that fit with who he was as a student. Making that decision to follow his passion was the best thing for his academic career.
The data shows that students’ involvement in an activity that they were passionate about was a meaningful component of their college experience. Whether it was an academic major, co-curricular club, sports team, or service trip, investing time into an activity that really mattered to students was described by participants as the best parts of college. The following sections will describe each of the three subordinate theme in more detail: 1. Academic or Career Passion, 2. Personal or Co-curricular Passion, and 3. Leadership Passion.

**Academic or Career Passion**

Participants that were able to discover an academic or career passion described the experience as a strong connection to something deep inside themselves that led to a sense of belonging and purpose in their lives as students. Amy, Julia, Jessica, Mike and Nick were able to connect their academic and career experiences to their passions in terms of personal interests, talents, goals, and values. Throughout the discussion, it became clear that these passions were a part of their identity in college and would continue after they graduate.

Two of the following examples are of students that described how their experiences outside the classroom were connected to their academic majors. The first student, Amy, has an off-campus internship in addition to two other part-time jobs that include working at the police station on campus and a restaurant off campus. The internship experience has influenced her future in terms of preparing her for a career in international development, which she hopes to pursue after graduating with a degree in political science. Amy explained,

> I work two or three times a week at a non-profit downtown that does development of education system in Haiti. It’s an unpaid internship but it’s really awesome. I was saying that is what I want to do, international development. So it’s something that I am pretty passionate about and a big thing for me right now.
Although Amy admits that she barely has any free time to get involved in other campus activities anymore, this experience is so meaningful and worthwhile to her, that she doesn’t mind sacrificing her time to volunteer at the non-profit organization. This is an example of how committed students are once they find something that truly matters to them.

A second student, Julia, describes herself as a first generation college student that was very involved and very successful academically in high school. Her involvement with the McNair research program designed for low-income and underrepresented students includes the opportunity to work in a neuroscience laboratory on campus. Julia chose to do this in addition to her classes and co-curricular involvement because she is a premed student hoping to pursue a career in neuroscience. The following quote exemplifies her true passion for the work in and of itself, not just what it will help her achieve. Julia shared,

I work in a neuroscience lab and neuroscience is kind of one of my passions. I think that is the culmination of my nonacademic, nonsocial career here at BC, becoming a McNair scholar and doing the research that I am doing… I just get so excited about these problems and finding out how things work and why do they work this way, and what is a new problem that we can look at and maybe we can try it this way. Being able to do that kind of just makes me happy, even though most people don’t find it all that enjoyable but I just genuinely love it.

This demonstrates how college can be an exciting time of self-discovery as well as intellectual stimulation and growth. Her passion and happiness with her academic experience is evident in the research she is doing through McNair. Without that program, she may never have had the opportunity to do hands-on neuroscience research in a lab as an undergraduate. Julia went on to explain how taking one particular course in college
confirmed her love for neuroscience even during one of her most difficult semesters. She said,

I took a course called psychopharmacology, which is basically about how your brain is on drugs and what happens. It is my favorite course to date at this school. I knew I liked neuroscience before and this just kind of confirmed and helped me figure out which facets of neuroscience that I like.

Although she was having a difficult time dealing with her father’s recent passing, the neuroscience course she described was a source of enjoyment and motivation. It was what helped her get out of bed and what made her feel a sense of belonging. She said that her neuroscience research in general helped to “reinforce what I want to do with my life, what kind of work that I want to do, what I am interested in”. Julia’s career aspirations are a source of inspiration to succeed in classes and the lab. That confirmation that she has chosen the right career path increased her commitment to her academics and boosted her self-confidence. She later took advantage of an opportunity to present her data findings in a research conference.

For Jessica, who describes herself as “really passionate about nursing”, transferring into the School of Nursing was difficult and the science courses were especially challenging. However, she still said that it was completely worth it. Although it required her to meet with professors to review tests, reach out to upperclassmen for assistance, and study additional nursing textbooks, Jessica loved the experience of being in the nursing field. She shared,

I call it the best decision I could have made with my BC career. Having my clinicals and having opportunities to go to health conferences and present in conferences and do service and clinical abroad that are related to nursing, I think completely shaped my BC career.
The experience of being immersed in nursing was so rewarding to Jessica, that she applied for a summer grant to conduct a research project in Ghana about women’s health care. She received the funding and worked with a community service organization to gather data on malaria and pregnant women’s use of mosquito nets. This experience was closely connected to several of her interests and helped her grow as a student and researcher. Jessica shared that she loves women’s health and this unique experience gave her an opportunity to put her skills and interests in practice in the real world. As she described it,

It was everything that I still want to do now and it was working with women in Africa and Ghana is so similar to Nigeria where I'm from. It was nursing, it was public health, it was advocacy and I feel like all of these things I had explored at BC beforehand and now I was doing it independently. I feel like I've grown a lot… I feel like it has led me in different ways and inspired me to kind of build bridges between different interests. It made me a leader.

This experience was important to Jessica because it brought together those things that matter to her and she was able to do it on her own, in a different country, in a professional way. She was able to connect her academics with service as well as research and career development. This is important because integration of these individual components is what made the experience so valuable.

Inspiration from an academic course is also what gave Mike and Nick the drive to pursue their academic passions in college. Mike’s experience with discovering a passion for his academic major was largely connected to the academic challenge that was rewarding to him as a student during his sophomore year. Although he described the transition into the linguistics major as one of the hardest times for him, he also said that the challenge, “invigorated me more
than it did inhibit me, it was like cracking the academic code here.” The intellectual growth he experienced was additional incentive to continue his academic passion. As Mike puts it,

In my first two years, I had a lot of difficulty speaking up in class and just engaging. But, when I joined the linguistics community by taking Sanskrit and syntax and semantics by the spring semester sophomore year, I was really just, my mind just grew so much because it was so challenging.

This is an example of how finding the right academic major can make or break a student’s college experience. Even though it was challenging, taking this one class increased his academic engagement and changed his college path. After having one particular professor from the linguistics department that he really enjoyed in class, Mike decided to further explore the possibility of pursuing it as his academic major. He describes how and why he feels so connected to the department:

When I first went to meet another professor in the department, Margaret Thomas, first for academic advising, I was a sophomore, so she asked me why do you want to switch into linguistics and I was just like, I am really into languages and I just want to learn all these languages. And she was like, yeah you definitely belong here. And also the people that I met in the linguistics department, for whatever reason, students in this department can be quirky and have personality and they are at least for me, much more relatable. And it is a small department and you know everybody. I met some really good people in the department. I was definitely, I found sort of my place here at BC.

Having someone tell him that he fit in confirmed his decision to commit to his academic major. Finding his place was an important step in feeling like he was part of a community on campus.
Mike’s experience with the people, professors, and academic rigor made him feel a sense of connection to the department in a way that he had not previously experience in college.

Similarly, Nick was inspired to declare his Art History major after taking an introductory course in his freshmen year. During summer orientation, someone asked what his favorite class in high school was, which prompted him to register for an Art History course to fill his schedule. Nick brought in many AP credits from his private high school and had room on his schedule to explore things he was interested in. He said,

One thing that always kind of made me a little different than my friends, was that I really, really like art and I really enjoyed an art history course that I took in high school... I took a freshmen art history course [in college] and I really liked it so I didn’t really think twice about that. I really enjoyed the types of conversations that we had in those courses and the material was so interesting so I kept going with that... It was really something that I was passionate about and I don’t think there is anything else I would have rather majored in but I knew that art history was really something that I really wanted right after I took that first course... I think I will look back on my art history major as something that I am really proud of that I did because I never enjoyed my time in class so much.

For Nick, that one decision to take art history because he had enjoyed in high school completely changed his academic experience in college. Being prompted to think about something he liked in high school set him on a trajectory that became fulfilling personally and academically.

In summation, participants that chose to pursue their academic and career passions in college shared how these decisions had such a positive impact on their college experiences, both in the classroom and beyond. Discovering their passion helped them get through difficult times
and the challenges served as motivation rather than a barrier. Students who pursued their passion committed the time and energy even when it was not easy and saw these as some of the most meaningful parts of their college experience. As Amy, Julia, Jessica, Mike, and Nick described their college successes, their academic and career passions were recurring themes throughout their undergraduate experience.

**Personal or Co-curricular Passion**

All eight of the participants interviewed shared some sort of personal passion for a co-curricular activity that they were involved in. These were activities that they invested their time and energy into because they fulfilled them personally, whether it was a club, service project, or team. The campus groups that students were involved in provided a sense of community and connection to the campus that was essential to their overall college experience. Often, participants’ identities were closely tied to how they chose to spend their time in college. Examples of how these personal passions manifested in students’ lives are described below.

Participants commented on how their involvement in co-curricular college life was the way that they were able to develop relationships with peers and staff on campus. Although they got involved in their activities for different reasons, their engagement experiences ended up becoming very meaningful for them in the long run. For example, when Amy described her involvement with the Appalachia Volunteers, she shared that the meetings that take place before the weeklong service trip were important to getting to know the group and connecting her to people she is still very close with:

There are weekly meetings and you meet with your small group. That was great because I felt like I got really close with my small group. And three of those people are my best friends now.
For Amy, many of these relationships continued after the service experience was over. Finding her best friends was an important milestone as a freshmen looking to connect with others. Similarly, Erin was able to find a community within First Year Experience (FYE) that she has stayed in contact with over time as well. Erin expressed a lot of passion about her work with FYE, especially in her work as a summer orientation leader. Although she did not initially expect it, she shares how she “fell in love” with the program:

I initially applied to be an orientation leader because they offer free housing over the summer and it was a summer job that was compensated. So that was my initial attraction towards it because it was a great way to stay at BC over the summer and have a summer job. And so I think that is how it started off and I just fell in love with the whole office of First Year Experience and the staff members and the people and have just kept a relationship with them ever since.

This long-term sense of community led to other opportunities to serve as a retreat leader mentoring freshmen and on the convocation committee, which plans the annual convocation speaker and common reader. Her commitment and passion to the work and mission of FYE was evident in her continued involvement with the office and their programs. FYE continuously came up when Erin described her positive experiences and relationships in college. Although she initially got involved as a source of extra income and free housing, it developed into much more.

The opportunity to connect with peers was a key component in Jessica’s experience as well. In her service trip, she was able to connect with a group of people with a similar background and interests and with whom she became comfortable with over time. Although her freshmen year was difficult and she was unsure of whether she would return for another
semester, her passion for the Jamaica service trip grew over time as she became a leader as did her connection with the broader university community. She shared,

I was in [Jamaica] Magis my freshman summer and I think that really gave me a good perspective on service. That was my first introduction to a community, especially a community of color, because it specifically was students that Magis attracts. I just loved it. I loved the kids and I felt like I kind of got more or less what the BC mission was trying to do with this whole justice thing and it was just ... I felt very comfortable. I was just happy to have that experience and so it made me more optimistic for my sophomore year or even the end of my freshman year at that.

This experience was transformative for Jessica because it gave her hope and a place where she fit in. It led to a realization that she could find her place in college and that there were people that she could connect with on a personal level. The service trip provided a structure for her to meet people, process emotions, connect with a mentor, and feel included in the greater community. It was also a concrete opportunity for her to experience the university’s social justice mission in action.

Overall, the relational aspect of getting involved with something in college contributed positively to participants’ social experience. Friendships and social interactions with a diverse range of people was often positive outcome of co-curricular involvement for participants. For example, when Julia shared her experience with joining the rugby team, she expressed how that involvement forced her to get out of the library and interact with other people:

It helped me start to get a place on campus where I fit in. When people would say, that’s Julia, what do they think of when they think Julia, rugby. It’s a defining
characteristic that I could call my own. Something that would, you know, I was
decently good at and just guaranteed social interaction with people even if I have
a million other things to do.

Rugby helped Julia to establish her own identity in college. Although these were not the same
students who would become her closest friends in the long run, it was a way for her to branch out
and meet new people, try something new, and destress. It gave her the confidence and a sense of
belonging that made her transition to college a little easier, even when she was dealing with her
father’s illness and subsequent passing. These opportunities to socialize with peers were essential
during her freshmen year when she was questioning her decision to live so far from home.

For some students, the growth they experienced through their co-curricular involvement
was remarkable. Throughout the interview, participants shared examples of how much they had
changed intellectually or personally as a result of their college experiences. It was clear that the
impact for them was deep and often unexpected. Mike shared how the Arrupe Immersion
program shifted his thinking in terms of the concept of social justice. He said,

> It really kind of introduced me to the idea or notion of social justice in a profound
way and ever since then, I have tended to do other programs that are similar or
taking courses on things like that. So that is one way that I was really impacted
and if I hadn’t done Arrupe, I honestly don’t know if it would be such an
important notion for me now.

Not only did Mike’s experience teach him something new about himself, it also pushed him to
continue learning more. The immersion trip affected the decisions he made about participating in
other activities or registering for classes that have a similar focus on social justice.
As Nick reflected on his experience with a male mentoring group that pairs upperclassmen with freshmen to discuss issues of campus diversity, competition, hookup culture, and drinking culture, he also had a realization of the impact the experience had on him. He shared,

I guess now that I am thinking about it, I realize how much it has changed my perception and how much more open minded I am as an individual. I put most of that upon Freshmen League and those responsible for that positive change in my life.

Nick called the program one of his favorite things about college. He enjoyed it so much his freshmen year that he went on a service trip with the group the following year and spent his final two years in college as a Freshmen League mentor and as a work-study student in the office that organizes it. This is an example of how students can immerse themselves in their co-curricular passions in a way that becomes personal, especially if they are given opportunities to grow and build on their experiences over time.

In summation, participants that were able to find something on campus that they were truly interested in benefitted from those experiences in ways they did not foresee. They learned about themselves, their peers, and the world around them in unexpected ways. The groups they were a part of influenced their connection to the campus and their sense of self. The activities provided a structure and space for them to express themselves in a way that was authentic within a small community of their peers.

**Leadership Passion**

The third and final subordinate theme under discovering passion was identified through the participants’ sharing of their leadership and mentoring roles on campus. Not only was this
group of successful students engaged in their academic and co-curricular passions, several participants talked about the significance that the leadership roles had on their college experience. While reflecting on their experiences in formal leadership positions on campus, students were able to articulate the growth and positive impact these roles had on them as individuals.

For two participants in particular, the experience of mentoring younger students allowed them to open up more themselves. For example, Julia shared how her work with incoming first generation college students over the summer was a meaningful experience for her:

I think being around people with a similar background as me, being able to provide resources and advice, I don’t really know why but it made me feel more stable in my place at BC… Overall it was just a very positive experience and the first time that I opened up about my first year struggles, about my dad being sick, and his passing. It was the first time that I opened up outside my closest friends about what happened. I don’t know, it was just generally a good time.

Leading others gave her the opportunity to process her college experiences in ways that she had not done before. Mentoring these students was a powerful experience for her and she continues to stay in touch with them to this day. She has also become mentor to sophomore women through a program in the Women’s Center. She said that, “sophomore year can be a slump period as it was for me so I am hoping it will be a beneficial relationship for both them and me.” Through her leadership role, Julia wants to have a positive influence in other students’ lives and also sees how it can be a positive experience for her as well. In the same way, Erin found her role as an orientation leader to be extremely valuable personally. She shared, “being an orientation leader and seeing how everyone is going through similar experiences and everyone has their own story
helped me to open up more and that has been a huge part of my social success.” These peer-mentoring programs not only benefit the participant being mentored, but can also have a profound effect on the development of the student leader as well.

Some students persisted in finding their niche even when they were unsure of where it would lead them. Jessica described how her leadership experiences pushed her to “grow and to be a role model” for younger students through her involvement in the Jamaica Magis service trip, being a Resident Assistant, and as a student leader in Black Student Forum (BSF). Although she described having a difficult first year, she did the service trip, applied to become an RA, and served as a representative for BSF all as a freshman. She shared that although she was nervous at first, her involvement gave her purpose. Overtime, she assumed leadership positions in all of these activities and they became a large part of her college experience. She described her RA experience in the following quote,

It’s just been such a good experience for me because I love having an impact on freshmen. I don't know if I impact them but they impact me. I like knowing that even if whether they need me or not I was there to support them because when I had a rough freshman year, I didn't feel like I could go to my RA. She wasn't available, she just seemed to be in another world. Now it's just like I feel like it's the most, it's my favorite way, I guess, of giving back, especially since I have so much freedom to talk about the issues that are important to me. Whether it's about the media or whether it's like feminism or women or culture, all these things are definitely under the RA model and it's just been a really good experience. I get good feedback from my halls and from my staff. It's been really good for me.
Jessica’s own experience informed who she is as a leader. She shared how she loved the RA program and the community of people that it has introduced her to. Like her, the other RAs were also enthusiastic about creating good programs. They even got together and collaborated to organize the first women’s retreat for their residents. This is an example of how she was able to take her joys and talents and turn it into an opportunity to do something good for her peers. It is also personally rewarding for her as an individual and as a leader to experience that success and satisfaction. This experience gave her a voice on campus and a way to channel her energy into something positive.

Participants also shared how their leadership positions on campus increased their learning or personal growth in the process. As a resident assistant and academic tutor, Mike reflected on his personal development:

It was actually from my RA job that I was kind of able to in a way grow up you could say, or just mature as a leader I think…I got to talk to these freshmen and several of them, I kind of became a mentor for and I am good friends with a lot of them still. That was really positive.

Mike can see his own progress through the RA experience and also sees himself as a mentor to his residents. Similarly as a tutor, he noticed his own growth through the process of teaching other students. Mike connected his growth to both his academic experience in the classroom and improved interpersonal communication skills overall:

[Tutoring] has been really rewarding because I learned so much more. You really have to be able to explain things and that has helped me in the classroom and also just having conversations with people.
This increased awareness and increased skill is not something that can be taught in theory. Experiential learning often happens through leadership roles and mentoring opportunities. On occasion, these opportunities can lead to additional self-discovery.

Having the opportunity to practice skills and reflect on their talents and goals is one of the benefits that come from student leadership positions. In Nick’s case, he was able to connect his mentoring role during junior and senior year with a future career possibility. He shared,

[Mentoring] has really helped me think more about what I want to do with my life. I have definitely taken to the mentoring role. I really like communicating with people. I like talking to people so I think a counseling role would be something that I would really enjoy in a professional setting. I am thinking human resources, just being able to interact with people and get to know their stories a little better since that is something that I really value.

This exploration and discovery can be a process that brings meaning and purpose to a student’s experience. It may open new doors, create new relationships, or become their life’s work. It may serve as the extra motivation needed to get through a difficult semester or life obstacle.

In summary, the students that told stories about their leadership roles were able to articulate a sense of growth and self-discovery that contributed positively to their college success. They viewed these experiences as essential to who they had become and influential in their relationships with those they mentored. The awareness and skills they developed translated into other areas of their lives, which often served as additional confidence and drive.

Conclusion

Overall, the theme of discovering passion surfaced as a prominent aspect of participants’ college experience and was connected to their sense of success as a student. The researcher
identified the three subordinate themes based on an analysis of the transcripts. Students who discovered a passion in college and invested the time and energy in something that was meaningful experienced several benefits including motivation, confidence, self-discovery, and personal growth. These themes also showed repeated examples of how the participants’ involvement in meaningful academic and co-curricular experiences increased their sense of belonging on campus. Although their college experience was difficult at times, having something in their lives that was close to their heart provided a sense of fulfillment for students. Participants spoke about these experiences with a sense of pride and joy that was evident in their descriptions of their learning and development. The personal satisfaction and success students’ felt in their passion projects was not planned or expected, but certainly became an essential component of their identity during college. As they looked back on their college journey, the most life-changing and influential experiences were those that linked with their passions. These experiences are an important part of how they have achieved success. Although the discovery process looked different for each student depending on their interests, passions, and personalities, the overall result was a positive experience that helped students successfully navigate college academics, resources, and relationships.

**Strong Support System**

Having a strong support system was identified as the second superordinate theme based on the interview data. All eight participants described how the people in their lives were such an important component of their success in college. Having someone they could relate to on a personal level, someone that could listen, give advice, and make them feel better, was one of the key findings in the research. Participants discussed how these people supported them when they were going through difficult times and challenged them to improve. Seven of the eight
participants cited a faculty or staff mentor as being instrumental in their growth and success. Half of the participants commented on their family’s positive influence on their college experience. All of the students focused on the importance of developing meaningful friendships with peers to help with the transition to college and to establish a sense of belonging. Having people in their lives that cared about them emerged as an essential component of doing well both academically and socially in college. The various kinds of relationships and how they manifested in students’ lives are described in the following sections.

Several students shared that having a faculty or staff mentor contributed to their positive experience in college. Amy mentioned that as a result of her experience with anxiety, she is now connected with staff that support and guide her on a regular basis. She said, “now I have a counselor and I am talking to the dean a lot who is helping me academically get back into it and overcome anxiety.” The dean helped her reach out to her professors when she was falling behind in classes. If someone had not supported her through this process, she may not have been successful in catching up academically during that semester.

In describing her mentors in college, Jessica said, “I just really appreciate the support I've had. Even if it's like a hug, even if it's just like some words of encouragement.” Jessica appreciated the small gestures that she experienced as a result of her mentoring relationships. As someone who felt lost when she first arrived on campus, she described that having adults that know her and know her story was one of the best things that happened to her. She continued, “I love my mentors...They listened without making me feel like I was stressed for no reason or that I was making things up. They listened and they gave me suggestions and they checked in on me.” For Jessica, that support provided a sense of comfort on campus that she did not experience at first. They made her feel like she had a voice and spoke up for her when she needed them to.
This notion of an advocate was especially important to students because they live independently on campus, far from their families and their traditional support systems.

When students described their families as being part of their strong support systems, they articulated a different kind of relationship than the ones with faculty and staff. The family support they described was more of encouragement and love as well as financial. Students described how their parents believed in them and their aspirations. They were proud of their child for their accomplishments and wanted to see them be happy and successful, although they may not have been able to support them as much through the traditional college process. Ana described how her family has always been supportive of her and her academic pursuits, “they were very excited. I guess with my family, it’s mostly about who makes it further. They really want to push us forward, the youth of the family.” This motivated her to want to continue her education. Her family was investing in her to succeed and she was willing to put the work into it to make it happen.

Student also talked about how their family’s support of their academic ambitions helped them in college. Not having pressure from their parents to declare a particular major or follow a certain career path gave them the freedom to explore what they wanted to do with their own lives. Nick’s parents, who are educators themselves, were supportive of their son’s academic and career choices. Although he described how difficult it was being far from his family and friends at first, he soon found people on campus that he connected with and an academic major that he loves. He gives credit to his family for their support in allowing him to find his own path in college. Julia’s mother was similarly supportive of her daughter’s academic and career ambitions. Although she never pressured Julia to study medicine, Julia is passionate about her premed neuroscience major and her mother is supportive of her choice. These students recognize
that their family’s support has given them the opportunity to be themselves, to make their own choices, and to be happy with what they choose to study in college. This has taken some of the pressure off of them, which may have otherwise hindered them from being motivated and successful academically.

In addition to mentor and family support, participants described having close friends that they can rely on to celebrate their accomplishments and support them through challenging times. Finding peers that they could hang out with, confide in, vent to as well as laugh and celebrate with was a theme that emerged from all eight students interviewed. Joe described those friendships as the best part of his experience in college. Although he shared that his outgoing, social personality has connected him with many students all over campus, he has a few close friends that he can always turn to and those include his roommates and two friends from his high school that also go to BC. Mike, Nick, and Erin also described their roommates as some of the most important people in their support systems. These peers are the people they rely on for day to day personal, social, and academic affirmation. These best friends they described are the front lines and seen as the people they will be close with for years to come. How students developed these friendships and examples of what it means to them will be further discussed below.

The findings indicate that in order for students to succeed academically and socially in college, they need a strong support system around them. Participants described relationships with faculty and staff mentors, parents and family at home, as well as roommates and friends on campus as being essential to helping them navigate the college experience. The students shared examples of how certain support groups influenced them at particular times of need and for different purposes. The following analysis shows the connection between these support systems and student success.
Faculty and Staff Mentors

Developing a close relationship with a faculty or staff on campus was described by most of the participants as a positive experience that made them feel supported as well as challenged them to grow beyond their own expectations. Most of the faculty and staff mentoring relationships that students described in the interviews developed as a result of having a professor in class or through an intentional mentoring program on campus. These programs were designed to connect students with services, departments or people on campus that could serve as resources for them during their time in college. The following examples highlight how students were connected with faculty and staff mentors and how those relationships have influenced their college experience in a positive way.

Rise is a mentoring program for senior women through the Women’s Resource Center that pairs female students with female faculty and staff on campus. Two of the participants talked about their mentoring relationship through this program as an important source of guidance and support during their senior year. The young women described how they get paired with a faculty member that they meet with once a month along with a small group of other students. They can also meet individually with their mentor throughout the year, which Amy did regularly. She said,

My mentor is also my political science professor so I already had known her before. She was great and I met with her so many times about career choices or how stressed I am or how busy I am or whenever I am unsure of myself, especially in regard to career choice.

This opportunity to meet with someone in her academic field to discuss her career was especially beneficial to ease the anxiety about her career. Although Amy already knew this professor, the structure that the program provided gave her the confidence to reach out for additional one-on-
one support. Some students may not always feel they can ask for this kind of ongoing guidance within the context of a typical student-faculty relationship.

For Ana, her Rise mentor has served as a positive female role model that has helped her see an authentic example of a successful woman. This honesty stood out to her because it showed her that it is okay to be different and that things are not always going to be perfect. She described the impact of her faculty mentor in the following quote:

She lets us see through her. She acknowledges her flaws and her mistakes and also her successes. That has been really helpful for me because I see her as such a successful woman and the fact that she lets me know that she hated her first job and she wasn’t successful in the beginning and there were some people that really believed in her and some that were really critical of what she did. That really helps me about seeing that. She tells us as a group a lot about her life and how it’s fine to just not do the standard thing all the time.

This inspiration can be exactly what students need when they are in college. Several participants shared how they felt pressure to fit into what appeared to be other students’ perfect experiences. Faculty and staff can be a source of support as they share the realities of college and work to adjust students’ unrealistic expectations.

Nick also described that pressure to fit into the college life expectations around academics, drinking, and relationships and how he was able to process those experiences with a group of guys through a male mentoring program. Nick developed a close relationship with a staff member in the program that he described as “the most important person that I met in college”. They were from the same home state and became his go-to person on campus for advice and guidance.
He has been there for me through all sorts of situations, helped me figure out things, even with a work-study job on campus. He has been huge help there. He helped me out with personal issues. I feel like I can go to him and tell him about a problem with a roommate or a friend of mine or something like that and he is there to just listen and sometimes he will chime in and give advice, or sometimes he will make light of it by making a joke or something like that. He can just put a smile on my face. He has definitely been one of the most important [people] and I think the way he has done that has been to just listen to what I have to say.

This example demonstrates how desperately students want to be heard. They need people who will be there for them in a way that family or friends may not be able to help. Someone that is well-connected on campus can help students get a job, find research funding, navigate the housing system, or provide a strong letter of recommendation. In addition to this kind networking influence a faculty or staff mentor can provide, Nick’s description highlights the personal connection and simple advice that a friendly face can offer.

Staff can serve as a source of motivation when they push students outside of their comfort zone. That was the experience of participants Erin and Jessica as they described their mentors’ faith in them to become student leaders when they first doubted their own abilities. Erin’s mentor from the Office of First Year Experience saw her leadership potential as a freshman even though she was a quiet student. She shared, “she is one of the people in my experience that has been very supportive of me since the beginning and is constantly telling me how much I have grown.” Erin went on to serve as an orientation leader and later on the convocation committee. Her mentor was the one that told her that she could do it and that
reminded her how much she has changed since they met. This external source of positive affirmation pushed her to try new things and grow as a leader.

Jessica shared a personal experience where she was uncertain of her place on campus. She felt disconnected and uncomfortable freshmen year. After going on a service trip to Jamaica, the trip advisor wanted her to become a student leader the following year. He said to her, “I know you can do this” and although she turned him down the first year, she ended up doing it and now considers it one of her most impactful college experiences. This mentor was also the person that advocated for her academically and financially on campus. He called the dean on her behalf and worked with another department on campus to get funding for her to take a theology class over the summer. He was also the person who celebrated her accomplishments. “In my junior year, he was there when I got the MLK award. He was just like, he was beyond himself. He was so proud.” For Jessica, having people around her that supported her through both the good and bad times was essential to her wellbeing. She went on to describe nursing faculty members that helped her study when she struggled academically or supported her dream of pursuing women’s health. She described a strong relationship with the only black nursing professor in the program,

I kind of showed up in her office and I was like, 'hi’. We prayed together for my nursing mentorship program. I told her I was interested in research, I love women's health and she's a women's health nurse practitioner. She allowed me to go to the Black Nurses Association conference with her. I presented with her. She let me write the abstract for a piece she was publishing. She just put a lot of trust in my hand and gave me opportunities because she was like, "I want you to grow." It was great. I am inspired.
These mentors not only told students that they had potential to succeed, they gave them opportunities to practice their skills in real and meaningful ways. Giving students important responsibilities is the ultimate show of trust in their ability and builds their confidence in ways that are inspirational and motivational.

Joe’s experience with his mentors was so powerful that he said “I don’t think I would have gotten through life without them here”. After experiencing several ups and downs in his school, personal, and home life, Joe found an assistant dean that was committed to his success. He describes the important role she played in his life in the following quote:

She would be what I would consider a guardian angel. Not only someone that has been there for me to open up to but given me her number in case something goes on, has walked me to counseling services when something has happened, has helped me academically, has helped me socially, has helped me build my character, has helped build me as an individual to accept who I am, be proud of who I am and move forward.

Faculty and staff that go beyond their job description to mentor a student with this amount of care and concern leave a lasting impression on their college experience. They may be the only person the student has to rely on and become the reason they are able to stay connected and succeed.

Julia, who lost her father while in college, was connected to her most important mentors through a research program on campus. She described the staff in the Learning to Learn office as being available to her during this difficult time,

When I was going through that delayed grieving time, that was my first very important semester as a McNair scholar but in the [Learning to Learn] office, they
were really there for me and understood that I was having a really rough time. I don’t know, they were always open to talking and even though I tend to not open up, just having that there was a huge thing for me. And knowing that if I really needed someone to talk to, I was just feeling even more lost than I could ever possibly feel, they were there for me.

The personal support as well as the academic and financial support the office provided allowed her to pursue her passion in neuroscience. They provided funding for her research study in a lab and for her to present her findings in a research conference. In addition, she was paired with a neuroscience faculty mentor that has been a source of support throughout her research:

He is a huge support for me academically, intellectually. He is, where do I even start about him? He is just one of those genius people that is also good at everything else but he helps me to kind of grapple with these huge mechanistic questions… these are questions that I struggle with but that I truly enjoy and he is just there to talk it out with me and help me decide which direction that I want to go in next. Not just because he want his lab to publish another paper but also because he wants me to fall in love with research the same way that he did and help just solve questions. That is kind of what he does for a living. He asks questions and he wants to help support me in asking those questions.

As a first generation college student with big aspirations, this kind of mentoring from an experienced researcher is invaluable. The guidance that a mentor like this is able to provide could not be replicated in any of her other support systems.

Faculty mentors not only inspire but also challenge students to grow academically, intellectually, and personally. Mike described how he has established relationships with mentors
and how that helped his success in college. He said the following about on professor in particular,

He is able to explain things very precisely and I just kind of absorbed that and learned from that… after having him as a professor, I have become much more equipped in terms of verbal expression in the classroom… I also went and talked to him fairly often. At least every other week if not every week just to sometimes ask a question or even ask him personal questions about what should I do with my life… definitely developing relationships with professors is helpful.

Mike felt comfortable around his professors and enjoyed meeting with them regularly. He talked about how he enjoys one-on-one relationships with people as opposed to socializing in groups and he has been successful at doing that with several faculty and staff on campus. He is very connected with his academic major community and continues to seek out opportunities for intellectual growth.

In summation, participants shared several examples of how developing strong relationships with faculty and staff on campus was beneficial to their college experience. The personal connection, academic support, career guidance as well as motivation and inspiration these mentors provided were instrumental in students’ self-discovery, confidence, and ability to overcome challenges.

**Family Connections**

Among the aspects of a strong support system, participants described family connections as one of the important contributions to their success in college. Although the geographic distance remained an obstacle, half of the students described their family’s emotional and financial support as very important to their college experience. Several students shared that one
of the challenges in transitioning to college was being far from family and friends. They
described being homesick during their freshmen year or wanting to leave to be closer to home.
However, these students eventually made the successful transition and developed relationships
on campus that helped them achieve a sense of belonging. For some students, however, the
connection to their families remained a constant source of support and comfort.

Julia was a student that questioned her decision to go to college right out of high school.
Her dad had been recently diagnosed with a terminal illness and she was now living on the
opposite side of the country from her family. Although it was difficult in the beginning, Julia was
eventually able to find her place in college. Throughout her journey, Julia maintained a strong
connection to home. She talked about how her mom has always been a source of support,
especially in terms of her academic aspirations:

I am half Korean so my mom and I joke all the time because she is the atypical
Korean mom in that she didn’t want her daughter to be a doctor, an engineer, or a
lawyer, I did that to myself. So even though she didn’t necessarily push that upon
me, she is very much behind me pursuing those dreams.

Julia shared that her family can sometimes put a lot of pressure on her and that she also needed
to provide support to her mom who was going through a lot as well. As she reflects on her
experience, Julia is unsure of whether staying in college was the best decision at the time,
however she was able to find sources of support and motivation to thrive both socially and
academically in college.

Like many college students struggling with being away from home for the first time,
Nick missed his family and friends. He described how he felt bad leaving home when he spoke
to his crying mother over the phone. Staying connected with his parents was difficult at times,
but he repeatedly described their support of him and his decisions in college. He especially appreciated their openness to his academic and career exploration decisions. For example, he shared,

I never really had a lot of pressure from my parents in choosing a major. And they really value education, they don’t really care that I make a whole ton of money so I was really free to do whatever I wanted to do academically in college.

This meant a lot to Nick, as someone who was passionate about exploring an academic major that was not the most common on campus or financially lucrative. Having compared himself to his peers and feeling pressure to try business classes, his parents’ full support in his decision to pursue art history was very meaningful to Nick.

Similarly, Ana’s family has always trusted her to make her own decisions from a young age, especially her dad. Her parents were never concerned about her grades and she was free to explore the academic path of her choosing. Although she was initially told that she could not attend college in her home country of Mexico due to safety concerns, she was encouraged to pursue her degree in the United States. She navigated that process independently and was accepted to several universities. She shared that, “my family as a whole makes me feel like I am doing a good job. They are proud and they let me know so that is always a nice thing.” She appreciates that her family communicates that support because she says they are the reason she is able to pursue higher education in the first place. She shared that she was never in a rush to leave home, having a strong connection with her parents, siblings, and grandparents. It was actually very difficult for her to leave her parents to go so far and although she sometimes regrets not having explored internship opportunities elsewhere, Ana always spent her summers at home to be close to her family.
Ana went on to describe her goal of going to law school after she graduates from college. She shared that her grandmother offered to pay half of her law school tuition if she chose to do that. Similarly, Erin described her dad’s continued support from the beginning with a comment he made after submitting her final tuition payment: “that was the best money I ever spent on anything.” Although these students did not come from affluent family backgrounds, their families valued their education and made them feel like what they were pursuing was worth the investment. This served as reassurance and motivation for students that were far from home and following their dreams.

In summation, family support was an important component of the college experience for the participants that maintained a strong connection to home. Parents that were proud and loving motivated students to succeed and their trust in the students’ decision making gave them the confidence to follow their passions. Although leaving home was difficult for Ana, Nick, and Julia, their connection with family became a source of inspiration as they move towards the end of the college experience.

**Meaningful Friendships**

When students leave their families and friends to move to college, it can be a difficult transition. However, all eight participants in the study described the process of making friends on campus as the turning point in establishing a sense of belonging in college. Although students talked extensively about how important their friendships are to them, the process to developing these relationships was not always quick or easy. Participants often struggled to meet people that they connected with at first but eventually were able to develop strong relationships that support them through good and bad times.
In the competitive environment participants described where students are constantly comparing themselves to each other in terms of academic ability, appearance, and financial status, finding good friends was very important to their college experience. Having people that were there not only during fun times, but also during the difficult times as well was a theme for Joe and Julia. As Joe described his closest friends, he said,

I know that I can talk to them not only during the good times but also the bad times. I can call or send them a text message and they would be there in a heartbeat. And those are the individuals that will pick me up if I am down or bring me out if I don’t feel good or being kind of sad. They get me through on a day to day basis, and make sure that I am doing well here at BC.

As a very involved student with many connections on campus, he has a smaller group of people that he would describe as his closest friends. This is important to have as college can be a time of many ups and downs, self-discovery, and changing relationships. Similarly, Julia was able to find that group of close friends as well. As she puts it,

Overall I just got really lucky that my friends are the type of people that are willing to tell you uncomfortable truths, but they are also willing to be supportive … they are willing to have really tough conversations and like deep conversations and they don’t feel superficial… Academically they are there for me when I do well on a test or I didn’t do well on a test. Or if I am having a bad day or a good day, they are there for me. They are a constant source of support and I can always go to them if I am not in the mood or things don’t go well or celebrate with me if things do.
This shows how much students value having peer support when they are going through a difficult time. Living away at college can be difficult and having people that can support you on the day to day journey can make the experience rewarding and fun.

For some participants, making friends in college did not happen as easily as they had hoped. After getting involved in student clubs and service trips, Amy was eventually able to connect with people that had similar interests and her relationships grew from there. In her words,

I met some of my best friends through Appa, which was great because I was sort of in a time where I felt unsure of where I was socially and where I belonged and that really really helped me meet people, and also meet the types of people that I knew I wanted to hang out… Just being more self-aware and conscious about what was making me happy and who was making me happy, allowed me to make good friends. I think up until sophomore year, I didn’t have best friends or good friends, but now I am so happy with the friends that I have made. Going outside of my comfort zone benefitted me so greatly.

Although it took some time to find the right people, developing those meaningful relationships was worth the wait. For Amy, her friends were very important as they were the ones that were able to help her come to terms with her anxiety and encourage her to seek help from a counselor.

Once I realized that and talked to my friends about it who also has similar experiences and they were like ‘you should go see someone’, it’s not a shameful activity to go see someone. You don’t have to feel bad about it or think that you are crazy. Once I reached out to some of my friends, I was able to get help and get the support that I needed and that has helped me overcome [anxiety].
This informal peer advisor role is important as students often look to each other for emotional support. Having people around that can truly be supportive and honest during difficult times is essential and looking back at her college experience, Amy expressed how happy she is to have met her best friends in college.

Similarly, Ana struggled to find a group of friends freshmen year. She and her roommate tried hard to meet new people and it eventually paid off. She shared, “I have some friends that are just amazing. They are just so bright and they are very smart and so focused and so educated”. This was something she was looking for in college so she purposely baked cupcakes for the other girls in her residence hall, left her room door open to socialize, and scheduled dinner plans with different groups until she found friends that she truly connected with.

Erin described challenges with socializing in college from a different perspective. She described that her initial hesitation with friendships in college was being unable to keep up with their affluent lifestyle. The girls she first met were used to activities that she was unable to afford such as traveling, shopping, and brunch in the city. Once she was able to find group of girls that she could be honest and open with, she found her place. That ability to be herself around her friends was a turning point in her college experience.

For Jessica, being an RA since sophomore year meant that she had the unique experience of living in a single room in a freshmen building for three years straight. However, through her involvement in co-curricular activities such as Black Student Forum and Jamaica Magis, she was able to connect with people that had similar interests and passions. This is what she said about the group of students that went to Jamaica with her:

They really embraced me. I think they really saw the best in me. They listened to me when I did a reflection. They confided in me. They just had fun with me and, I
don't know, they just welcomed me, they just embraced me and made me feel comfortable and made me feel happy. They always checked in on me even though I was supposed to be their leader, they just made me feel happy.

For a student that talked a lot about feeling uncomfortable on campus at first, this experience of peer support was meaningful. As a senior, she no longer feels lonely on campus and she attributes that to getting involved on campus. Although she never really experimented with the party culture, Jessica shares that she has found a really great core group of friends in the nursing school. She was part of a group that volunteered in Haiti over spring break and shared what that group experience meant to her:

We did like an open clinic for seven days and they were my roommates and we were just like, we were laughing, we were talking, we were just like, just having really amazing conversations about Haiti and about blackness, about what we want to do with our life. I just felt like I could be totally open and honest with these girls. They could hear my struggle and take it for what it is and encourage me to be better. They see the best in me. They're always hyping me up and all that stuff. They just have been such a good, friendly BC experience, especially since freshman year, sophomore year and even half of junior year I was still kind of socially lost. I was like, oh who's my group? Who are my friends for real? Now by senior year I think I've finally found that they have made such an impression on me.

This is an example of how a successful student can struggle with finding their place in college even if they are very involved and look like they have everything figured out. It took Jessica almost three years to find a group of friends that she could truly connect with.
In summation, developing meaningful friendships with peers in college is not always easy but it proved to be an essential component of the university experience for all of the participants in the study. What was most important was not necessarily having a large group of acquaintances, but actually have those few people that students’ could rely on no matter what. Students valued honesty and support the most when it came to describing their true friends. Friendships were mostly initiated through a common interest, characteristic, or lifestyle. Students described connecting with peers through co-curricular involvement, service, or bonding over being from the same home state. Regardless of what commonality brought them together, students expressed how these relationships helped them through the day to day realities of being away at college. The relationships were often superficial at first but grew over the years to become meaningful, authentic friendships that students could rely on for fun as well as support during the most challenging times.

Conclusion

The theme of having a strong support system was prominent among all student participants as they described their college experience. Students’ examples showed how the people in their lives played such an important role in their happiness and success. Faculty, staff, parents, and friends were able to provide support during the most challenging times and also celebrate their successes. These different support systems helped in different ways depending on the relationship and the needs of the student. Faculty and staff were able to provide support and build students’ confidence in terms of academic and career guidance. Families showed their love by serving as a source of encouragement, even if they could not offer specific college advice. They were especially supportive when they communicated their trust in the student to make academic and career decisions. Authentic friendships were the day to day support system
that kept students connected and motivated to push even through the bad times. Through common interests and campus involvement, students were able to develop meaningful relationships with peers that went beyond the party culture. This analysis showed that students were not alone in their college journey. They became successful because each student had a multilayered support system that they relied on throughout their college experience. Each of these relationships served different purposes at different times but each was essential to their ability to stay on track throughout the years. In the end, none of the students were able to process their experiences without highlighting the support of the important people in their lives.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand the individual characteristics or institutional strategies that lead to the successful social and academic integration of low-income students at a selective university. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the central research question identified was: How do low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college? The individual interviews with eight college revealed two superordinate themes and six subordinate themes that answer this central research question. After careful analysis, the researcher concluded that low-income students made sense of their college success by discovering and committing to an academic or co-curricular passion as well as through a multilayered support system made up of important people in their lives. The first set of subthemes that emerged from Discovering Passion focused on academic and career passion, personal and co-curricular passion, and leadership passion. These highlighted the opportunity for students to explore themselves, their relationships and the world around them through activities that got at the core of their identity. This means that students were inspired to succeed in college in large part
because of their commitment to their passions. Having the opportunity to pursue those passion projects kept them motivated as a student both inside and outside the classroom. The second set of subthemes from Strong Support System focused on faculty and staff mentors, family connections, and meaningful friendships. These demonstrated the importance of key people in students’ lives and how those relationships supported them throughout the college experience. The love, support, and guidance provided by the various individuals that cared for the students, kept them motivated to succeed and served as a safety net when they faced a challenge, disappointment, or difficult decision. Examples and quotes highlighting the two overall themes of Discovering Passion and Strong Support System were provided throughout the chapter to connect the findings to the original interview transcripts. The following chapter will draw conclusions based on the findings presented as well as explore implications for further research and practice.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The aim of this study is to understand what individual characteristics or institutional strategies lead to the successful social and academic integration of low-income students at selective universities. Through a qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the present study examined the experience of low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast. Participants were asked to articulate their own perceptions of their college experiences that have a particular significance to them (Smith et al, 2009). The central question guiding this study is: How do low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college? The findings indicate the emergence of two superordinate themes and six subordinate themes outlined as follows: (1.) Discovering Passion, including (1a.) Academic or career passion, (1b.) Personal passion, and (1c.) Leadership passion; (2.) Strong Support System, including (2a.) Faculty or staff mentor, (2b.) Family connections, and (2c.) Meaningful friendships with peers. These themes answered the central research question by suggesting that low-income students successfully navigate the college experience by discovering and committing to something they are passion about on campus and with the support of important people in their lives that include mentors, family, and friends.

This chapter presents the two major findings in the context of the current literature and this study’s theoretical framework. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the finding’s implications for future research and practice on the experience of low-income students from a strengths perspective. The following section will review the theme of Discovering Passion followed by the three subthemes in connection with the research.
Discovering Passion

The first central theme for low-income student success in the study is Discovering Passion. The findings connected to this theme suggest that students who find something in college that they are passionate about are able to successfully engage in and navigate the college experience. Participants indicated that discovering and committing to something in college that they were passionate about was an important component of their college experience. Students reported that their academic and social success was largely connected to discovering a passion for their academic major, future career, social justice project, athletic team, leadership role or co-curricular activity. Once they made this connection with something meaningful in their lives, participants reported feeling a stronger sense of belonging and engagement with the university experience.

Passion is defined as “a strong inclination toward an activity that individuals like (or even love), that they find important, in which they invest time and energy” (Vallerand et al., 2007, p. 507). The present study’s finding on the importance of discovering passion in college for low-income students is largely reflected in the present literature on student success. When students discover and commit to passion projects, their college experience transforms into something meaningful and fulfilling. They are exposed to new ways of thinking and living that changes their lives for the better. Arzy et al (2006) found that students’ thoughts and actions were altered as a result of the college experience toward an increased awareness and appreciation of new perspectives. The college experience should be one that is transformative and discovering and pursuing a passion can enable students to experience growth in a way that shapes their identities and understandings of the world differently.
The following section will explore the first subtheme of finding an academic or career passion in the context of the current literature.

**Finding 1a: Finding an academic or career passion increases motivation**

According to participants, finding an academic major or career that they were passionate about pursuing motivated them to work hard in college. Their passion for the course content, research project, or internship served as inspiration for them during their academic journey. Students reported enjoying the course content and discussions even when they were most challenging. Their work felt rewarding and meaningful because they were truly interested in the material. Since their classes and career goals were in line with who they were as a person, the time and energy that they dedicated to their projects did not feel like a burden, but was rather enjoyable. These activities kept them going even when difficult challenges arose. Overcoming challenges was rewarding and served as a boost to their confidence.

The literature on discovering passion in college is aligned with the findings in this study. Although nothing related to low-income students in particular exists in the current scholarship, studies have shown a positive connection between a passion for academics and student success. Ball (2006) argued that students learn more when they work on things that they care about. As students described in the present study, selecting a major or career that they cared about was one of the best parts of their college experience. The research on career development and vocational discernment is also based on the premise that finding one’s passion or calling is connected to success (Achter & Lubinski, 2005). Participants felt good about being able to pursue something that mattered to them, rather than being pressured by family or friends into someone else’s academic or career expectations. Stoeber et al (2011) support this finding, arguing that a healthy passion for studying was positively associated with academic engagement in college. This is
consistent with participants’ descriptions of their academic pursuits. This healthy passion, as opposed to an obsessive passion, was just enough to keep students interested without becoming all consuming. Although their classes did not take up all of their time on campus, they were a significant experience that increased their level of engagement in college.

Research shows that college education should be about helping students find and pursue their passions (Shireman, 2009). Students in the present study talked about their passions being related to their own intrinsic interests as well as being supported by external factors such as faculty engagement and academic challenge. This is in line with literature that shows how successful students experience passion depending on the environment around them. Enthusiastic faculty and adequate challenge were found to be conditions that promote passion in academic environments (Fredricks et al, 2010). This means that professors can set the conditions for students to discover and pursue their passions by their behavior as well as the complexity of the academic material that they present. Students are inspired by faculty that are engaged in the classroom and model passion in their own work.

In conclusion, the study’s findings are in alignment with what other studies have found in relation to academic and career passion and motivation. The present literature supports the notion that pursuing an academic or career passion is positively connected with student success (Ball, 2006; Achter & Lubinski, 2005; Stoeber et al, 2011). This strong interest in something can be facilitated by the educational environment and as well as the way the faculty approach their course content (Shireman, 2009; Fredricks et al, 2010). Although the findings are supported, they deserve further attention to expand on the notion that institutions can play an important role in setting the conditions for exploration and discovery of academic and career passion.
The following section will explore students’ exploration of personal passion through co-curricular involvement in college life and activities.

**Finding 1b: Co-curricular involvement increases student engagement**

According to all study participants, getting involved in a co-curricular activity that they cared about was one of the ways that they successfully navigated college. Through involvement in programs such as community service, athletic teams, retreats, and clubs, students were able to learn about themselves, make new friends, and connect to the university in unexpected ways. Participants discussed how their involvement in these activities increased their connection to the campus and their sense of self. The structured opportunities offered through various university departments allowed them to join different organizations and programs. Once they found an activity that they were passionate about, they often continued with it and increased their involvement over time.

There is an abundance of literature on the benefits of student involvement for traditional college students. The literature supports the idea that involvement in co-curricular activities in college leads to positive outcomes. Student involvement theory links the time and energy that students devote to their college experience with their likelihood of success in college (Astin, 1994). Influential theorists have long argued that involvement and integration into campus life are key to the academic and social transition to college (Astin, 1984, 1993; Tinto, 1987, 1993). These findings have been confirmed through more recent literature as well. Huang and Chang (2004) find that students that are involved in academic and social activities in college benefit through personal growth and learning. Findings in the present study are in line with this research. Students experienced a sense of growth and self-awareness as a result of their involvement in campus programs. In addition, studies find that higher levels of co-curricular involvement in
university programs were connected with increased persistence, academic engagement, and higher grades (Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Huang and Chang, 2004; Bergen-Cico & Viscomi, 2013). In addition to participation in clubs and organizations, research shows that involvement in athletics, intramurals, and recreation were also connected to increased engagement (Smith & Thomas, 1989; Hall, 2006). This research is in line with the present study’s findings on discovering a personal passion through involvement. Three of the participants cited involvement with a dance, running, or rugby team as a meaningful component of their undergraduate experience.

The literature shows that the timing of involvement in co-curricular activities is important. Involvement within the first six weeks is especially beneficial for freshmen (Fenzel, 2001). This fits with the present study’s finding that students often found out about the activities that they pursued during their first semester of freshmen year. Several cited the involvement fair in September as the first event where they signed up for various activities such as service trips and clubs. The one student in the study that tried to get involved in new activities during sophomore year expressed difficulty finding a group that she connected with since most of her peers were already involved. Students in the study reported that their co-curricular activity and the other students involved were a source of support. These groups and experiences increased their sense of belonging on campus and in turn their success in college. The research supports this finding that a sense of belonging to a community was essential to college student retention (Wade, 1991). Students in this study commented on how programs that provided a small community structure allowed them to express themselves in authentic ways in the company of their peers.
Less literature exists connecting co-curricular involvement and low-income student success at selective universities. Research on other underrepresented groups shows that involvement can be an important factor for non-tradition college students. First-generation students benefit significantly from involvement in college activities (Garcia, 2010). This group often overlaps with low-income students although particular research on low-income students is necessary to shed light on this growing population. The limited research that does exist shows mixed results in terms of low-income student involvement in co-curricular campus life. Some studies show that low-income students are less involved in co-curricular activities than their more affluent peers (Stuber, 2009; Arzy et al, 2006). However, Lehmann (2012) found that low-income students do participate in clubs and organizations on campus and had the desire to pursue career related internships, volunteering, and international study. However, it was in the latter, more valued and competitive experiences, that Lehmann’s (2012) participants felt were out of reach for them. None of the research so far has explored the connection between successful low-income students and their involvement in activities that they are passionate about on campus.

In conclusion, both this study and the literature highlight the importance of co-curricular involvement in college life for student success and engagement. The research that supports involvement in activities that engage students’ interests has existed for several decades (Astin, 1977; Smith & Thomas, 1989; Astin, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Huang and Chang, 2004; Hall, 2006; Bergen-Cico &Viscomi, 2013). This study expands on that to include the particular experience of low-income students at a selective university. Research on low-income students should be included as part of the campus involvement literature going forward. This body of research is more limited and does not align with the present study’s findings. Rather, it portrays low-income students as disengaged with campus life (Arzy et al, 2006; Stuber, 2009;
Lehmann, 2012). Traditional literature has argued that having the opportunity to engage in an activity that connects to a student’s passion can increase their connection to the institution and academic achievement. Although the present study supports this argument, more research is needed to clearly articulate the relationship between involvement and low-income students at selective universities.

The next section will explore the concept of personal development and growth for low-income students through involvement in a leadership position on campus.

**Finding 1c: Personal development and growth through a leadership position**

Participants discussed their involvement in leadership roles as significant to their personal growth and college success. Through formal mentoring programs and leadership positions as well as resident assistant, orientation leader, and peer-tutoring jobs, students articulated a process of self-discovery that changed the way they viewed themselves and the world around them. They described how these roles motivated them to go above and beyond and served as a boost of confidence. Through mentoring younger students, participants learned more about themselves and were able to articulate their own growth in the process. To be successful in their positions, they had to reflect on their own experiences. The relationships leaders developed with their mentees were important to them because they felt a responsibility to guide them through the complexities of the transition to college. They wanted the younger students to have a better experience and felt they had something valuable to provide. The skills and competencies they developed translated over to other parts of the lives, increasing responsibility, maturity, time management, communication, and confidence.

The literature on student leadership is consistent with the findings of the present study in that studies show a positive connection between involvement, leadership, and student success.
Hu (2011) argues that student involvement is linked to leadership capacity. All of the student leaders described how their involvement in activities as a student participant is what led them to later become a leader. The experiences were meaningful enough that they wanted to stay involved in a leadership capacity. For a few of the students, they were encouraged to take the leadership role on after being nominated or encouraged by a staff mentor that saw this potential in them. The research shows that working on campus in leadership roles is a benefit for students and linked with increased socially responsible leadership capacity (Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014). This is demonstrated in the present study in participants’ discussions of how important their leadership roles are to their college experience. Students described how their leadership roles are so closely tied to their individual identities and have become something that they are truly passionate about on campus. Research on leadership programs has shown the impact of these experiences on students’ personal development and growth in college as well as their interest in leadership and service in the future (Woelk & Weeks, 2010). This research is very much in line with the present study’s findings, especially for the students who saw the connection between their leadership on campus and future career goals. Students gave examples of how the skills they developed would transfer to their lives after college, such as becoming a women’s health nurse in Africa or working with diverse people in a human resources role.

For low-income students in particular, there is less literature on the subject of student leadership and success. St. John et al (2009) found that high achieving, low-income students of color that were engaged academically and socially were more likely to hold leadership positions. In addition, the low-income students in the study with more grant and scholarship funding were more highly associated with leadership positions in college. However, given that the present
study does not link income with race and ethnicity, the correlation with this study’s finding is not as strong.

In conclusion, the literature supports the findings in the present study linking student success to involvement in leadership development activities in college. Studies show that involvement in co-curricular activities is connected with increased leadership and personal growth (Hu, 2011; Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014; Woelk & Weeks, 2010; St. John et al, 2009). In fact, the literature proposes that not only does leadership increase student success in academics during college, it leads to continued success after graduation. Therefore, the present confirms previous studies’ case that students who get involved in leadership development during college benefit overall.

In the following sections, the second theme of Strong Support Systems and its three subthemes are discussed in relation to the current literature.

**Strong Support Systems**

The second central theme for low-income students in this study is having a strong support system to rely on throughout the college experience. The literature shows that financial aid is not all that low-income students need to be successful in college (Pierce, 2016). Institutional support in other ways can have a large impact on the retention and success of low-income students in college. Having key people to help guide them through the complex higher education system can be the determining factor for their success in college. Programs that intentionally create support systems through advising, mentoring, early alert, and learning communities can make a different in low-income students’ college experience.

The following sections will explore each of the subthemes in detail as they relate to the literature, starting with the development of relationships with faculty and staff mentors.
Finding 2a: Building relationships with faculty and staff mentors

The first subtheme under Strong Support Systems is developing relationships with faculty and staff mentors. According to study participants, the relationships they developed with faculty and staff in college were a significant component of their success story. Participants described faculty and staff mentors as the people they would go to when they needed academic support, career guidance, and personal advice. For low-income students, having a close relationship with faculty and staff served several purposes. The mentors supported students through difficult times, made referrals to other departments, advocated on behalf of student needs, affirmed their decisions, and challenged them to be better individuals.

The literature on mentoring in higher education is positively associated with student success, which aligns with the present study’s findings. Positive outcomes in relation to mentoring include academic success and vocational discernment (Campbell et al, 2012). This is supported by the current finding in that students shared examples of faculty members that helped them improve academically when they were struggling and mentors that helped them figure out possible career paths. In the literature, faculty mentoring in particular is shown to have strong impact on students, including in terms of positive leadership gains (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Dugan & Komives, 2007). Several participants in the present study discussed how their faculty members gave them unique opportunities to pursue research in the laboratory, conferences, publications, or on service trips. These personal interactions with someone in their field of interest and access to competitive opportunities impact students’ academic engagement as well as future prospects in terms of graduate school acceptance and job placement. Campbell et al (2012) maintain that students that have mentors in college display increased personal growth and showed greater leadership capacity. This is exemplified in the present study’s findings in
instances where the faculty or staff member nominated a student to serve on a university committee, encouraged them to apply for a leadership position, or selected them to lead a particular project in their department.

The literature on faculty and staff mentoring relationships with low-income students in particular is more limited. Ishiyama (2007) found the importance of personal connection in research mentoring relationships between faculty and underrepresented students. However, the study primarily focused on African American, first-generation, and low-income students as whole without breaking out social class as a separate construct. Dalton et al (2009) also described the importance of mentoring and advising for low-income, first generation students as Lyndon State College implemented retention strategies on their campus. These examples highlight the benefits of mentoring for underrepresented groups but more direct research is necessary to support the present study’s findings that associate faculty and staff mentoring directly with low-income student success.

There is also research that contradicts the findings of the present study. Arzy et al (2006) explored the experience of high achieving low-income students that receive private foundation scholarships to supplement Pell and institutional grants. In their research, students reported not feeling a sense of connection with faculty in college. They preferred to stay quiet in class discussions, not ask questions after class, or build relationships with their professors. The students did not want to be seen as outsiders or have their professors doubt their academic abilities even when they had valid contributions to make. Students in the present study did share initial doubts about their academic abilities and making comparisons to peers in their classes that they assumed came from more affluent backgrounds. However, nearly all participants shared stories about how they eventually did connect with certain faculty and staff and how those
relationships were instrumental in guiding them through the academic, personal, and overall college experience. The exception was one student in the study that did not feel that the faculty knew her or cared about her success in college. Her support system included others in her life but not any university faculty or staff.

In conclusion, the study’s finding is mostly supported by other studies in the literature. All of the broader research on mentoring points to the role of the faculty and staff relationship as a strong component to student success (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Campbell et al, 2012). The participants’ positive experience with faculty and staff mentors is supported by the overall literature on student success. When students have the opportunity to work closely with faculty and staff on academic or co-curricular projects, the relationship can develop into meaningful and long-term mentoring. There are also studies focusing on low-income, first generation students that support the findings as well (Ishiyama, 2007; Dalton et al, 2009). On the other hand, there was one on successful low-income students that found a disconnect with the college faculty (Arzy et al, 2006). Although much of the traditional literature shows a strong correlation between mentoring and success, low-income students cannot benefit if they never develop these relationships with faculty and staff. The present findings confirm that low-income students can benefit from faculty and staff mentoring but additional literature is necessary to find out how these relationships can happen.

The following section will review the finding on maintaining a strong connection with family at home in the context of the current literature.

Finding 2b: Encouragement from family builds confidence

According to study participants, maintaining a strong connection with family at home was an important component of the support system that students relied on during their college
experience. Although students did not describe a constant connection with family though their everyday experience of navigating college, they did cite parents and loved ones as being essential to their source of motivation and drive. Students shared that their families may not have been able to provide as much financial support or college related guidance, but they did appreciate how much they showed their love and encouragement in other ways.

In alignment with the finding, the literature supports the idea that family plays an important role in motivating students in college (Kranstuber et al, 2012). Messages from parents about working hard were especially significant for student empowerment and satisfaction with the college experience. Research on first-generation Latino students find that they are aware of that their college success and academic achievement are a source of pride for the families and communities at home (Borrero, 2011). Along similar lines, a study on African American and Latino community college students found that supportive family relationships impacted students’ successful outcomes (Sandoval-Lucero et al, 2014). In addition, family support was found to be a positive predictor of thriving in Mexican-American college students (Morgan, 2016). Positive outcomes, such as grade point average, were confirmed in connection to family’s support in college especially for young women (Cheng et al, 2012). Although these studies do not focus on low-income students in particular, they have established a trend in the literature, which the present study expands on.

With a particular focus on high, achieving, low-income students, there is also research that suggests affirmation from family members increases students’ self-esteem and confidence (Arzy et al, 2006). This is similar to how study participants said they appreciated the positive encouragement they received from family over the phone or when they were home during break. Arzy’s (2006) study revealed that having people that they care about from home such as parents
and grandparents communicate their pride and support was affirming, especially since students recognized their family’s economic sacrifices and struggles. The research goes on to explain that high achieving, low-income students that want to succeed and have the support from families are often willing to put in the extra time and effort into the college search and financial aid process required to help them achieve their academic goals (Arzy et al, 2006). The students in the present study were certainly successful in navigating that process, often without the assistance of their families due to the lack of social capital in their home life.

In conclusion, the literature supports this study’s finding that low-income students that have a supportive family structure benefit from their encouragement and affirmation (Arzy et al, 2006). Having loved ones share their support and pride inspires students to maintain motivation and confidence in their college academics. Recent literature on the role family plays in the support and motivation of college students continues to grow in recent years, with the results in support of the current study’s findings (Borrero, 2011; Kranstuber et al, 2012; Cheng et al, 2012; Sandoval-Lucero et al, 2014; Morgan, 2016). Since the focus of these was not high achieving low-income students, the present research study expands on the limited body of literature to help establish the importance of family support for low-income college students in the field.

In the following section, the final subtheme of developing meaningful friendships with peers is explored in relation to the current literature on low-income student success.

**Finding 2c: Establishing a sense of belonging through meaningful friendships**

According to participants, the people that they rely on the most to get through the everyday experiences of college are their friends. These friends are the ones that celebrate their successes, encourage them to do well in classes, and support them when they are having a bad day. Students reported finding friends in college was one of their priorities early on although it
was not always as easy as they expected. Over time, students were able to develop meaningful friendships with peers that were authentic, honest, and supportive. Being away from home, participants relied on friends in college in ways that were very personal at times. These friend groups were often instrumental to their social life but also provided support in areas such as family problems and mental health struggles. The amount of friends was not the most important aspect of this finding but rather the quality of the relationships is what mattered most.

The traditional literature on college friendships advocates for the importance of developing social relationships to help students adjust on campus. Tinto (1986) argues that students experience a sense of loss when they go to college because they leave behind their friends from home when they move to the new and unfamiliar territory of college. His theory posits that to connect with this new community, students need to get to know their peers and develop new friendships. This is very much in line with how the participants of the present study described their experience in college. Once they were able find a group of friends, students expressed a sense of belonging and a decreased sense of loneliness. That transition is especially important during the first year, when students are new to college and do not yet know how to navigate life away from home. Cosden and McNamara (1997) indicate that this social support is essential when students transition to college, especially in terms of their social life. Students in the present study described how important it was to find a group of friends that they could go out to dinner with in the dining halls or talk about things that were important to them. They described the pressures of fitting in such as drinking alcohol, attending sporting events, exploring the city, or the hook up culture. Once students were able to develop meaningful friendships, these social pressures were reduced because they felt like they could be themselves and still be accepted by their friends. The literature shows that this social acceptance by close friends
facilitates students’ sense of identity in the new living and learning environment (Panori & Wong, 1995). Before establishing these friendships, students were unsure of their place on campus. Over time, they were able to move from classmates, roommates, or acquaintances to meaningful friendships, which positively contributed to establishing a healthy sense of belonging on campus.

As with previous findings, the literature on low-income students and friendships is rather limited. In opposition to the present study’s findings that friendships are essential to success in college, Arzy et al (2006) found that high achieving, low-income students approached friendships on campus with caution. Students preferred to stay connected with their friends from high school at home and did not feel comfortable with their peers in college. The students in that study chose to focus on their academic achievement rather than the social experience of being in college, often opting to live at home or visiting family regularly on the weekends. This lack of engagement was the case even though they had been active in clubs and sports in high school. Only one student in Arzy et al’s (2006) study discovered meaningful friendships in college. This finding is mostly inconsistent with the present study’s participant experiences. The context is also different in that that present study focused on students living at a selective university with a majority residential population. Although participants in the present study reported having difficulty building new relationships with peers in college initially, making friends on campus was important to them and all students were successful in doing so eventually.

In conclusion, the present study’s finding on establishing a sense of belonging through meaningful college friendships is largely supported by traditional student development theory. The literature shows that friendships make the transition to college easier and help establish a connection with the college community (Tinto, 1986; Cosden and McNamara, 1997; Panori &
Wong, 1995). The aligns with the study’s finding that the process of transitioning from high school and home life to an immersed college experience is facilitated by the development of friendships on campus. However, the one research study on high achieving, low-income students in particular showed that on campus friendships were not essential to student success in college, but that friends from home were able to play that supporting role just as well if not better (Arzy et al’s, 2006). Given the limited research on low-income students’ friendship experiences in college, the present study expands on the literature because it focuses specifically on students that have moved away from home to a residential campus community.

The following sections will review the findings in relation to the study’s theoretical framework as well as implications for practice and future research.

**Connections to the Theoretical Framework**

Rather than focus on the problems faced by this population often characterized as at risk, this research study used a strength based resiliency framework to intentionally look at the positives. The resiliency model in education focuses on the ability of students to succeed despite difficult circumstances (Luthar et al, 2000). Through personal and environmental protective factors, students can overcome risk factors and thrive in college. The low-income students in this study enrolled in a selective university despite the risk factors that come with having lower socioeconomic resources. Through their resiliency and protective factors, they have achieved great success both academically and socially in a competitive environment. With a combination of their own individual characteristics and the environment, these students have been able to adapt and cope with barriers along the way.

The current research on low-income students is primarily focused on the risk factors rather than success stories. Most of the literature discusses the lack of access, high attrition rates,
achievement gaps, and financial barriers associated with being a low-income student (Aries & Seider, 2005; Stewart et al, 2009; Zimmerman, 2013; Soria & Bultmann, 2014). However, there are also those publications that support the strengths-based approached used in the present study. The 2007 ASHE Higher Education Report suggests that educators must learn from successful underrepresented students to create the conditions that will improve education, persistence, and attainment overall. Qualitative studies can provide an insight into students’ experiences in a way that allows researchers to understand the thought process and decision making behind students’ successful academic and social college experience. For example, Lehmann (2012) studied the experience of low-income student involvement in extra-credential experiences such as internships and observed the outstanding success that many students achieved by overcoming social class barriers. This means that there is more to learn from these successful students and what makes them different from those that fall through the cracks.

The major findings in the study are closely connected to student engagement theory. Discovering and pursuing a passion project on campus requires students to engage in the academic and co-curricular life of the institution in a way that is meaningful. This concept of engaging academically and socially on campus is supported by the literature on resiliency. Finn and Rock (1997) found student engagement to be an important component of academic resilience for students from low-income backgrounds. This means that institutions should work to increase opportunities for student engagement, which can serve as a protective factor for low-income students. The literature shows that there are strategies to increase resiliency in low-income students. Service-learning and spiritual exploration are two ways universities can foster and strengthen student resilience (Yeh, 2010). Although much of the research focuses on the
resilience students enter college with, exploring institutional mechanisms to build resiliency can contribute to increasing student success as well.

The research also suggests that students that are academically successful despite having experienced difficult conditions have a strong support system of family, friends, and teachers that guide them through difficult situations (Perez et al, 2009). This corresponds with the present study’s finding that a multilayered support network helps low-income students succeed academically and socially in college life. Relying on people that know them and care about them makes it easier for students to get through challenges. That support system can ensure that a barrier does not prevent a student from succeeding through motivation, advocacy, and influence depending on their role and individual situation.

In conclusion, although the literature on low-income students has been traditionally focused on the negative risk factors contributing to the low success rates, there is also research that explores the student experience from a strengths perspective (Finn and Rock, 1997; Perez et al, 2009; Yeh, 2010). As researchers continue to examine this population through multiple lenses, a full picture of their college experience will emerge. Studies that look at resiliency can help students, faculty, and administrators create the conditions necessary for low-income students to succeed in higher education.

**Conclusion**

The central question guiding this study is: *How do low-income students at a selective university in the Northeast make sense of and explain successfully navigating the first three years of college?* The study answered the central research question by claiming that low-income students successfully navigate the college experience by discovering and committing to something they are passion about on campus and with the support of important people in their
lives that include mentors, family, and friends. This conclusion is supported by the participants’ rich descriptions of their college experience through the lens of their academic and social successes. Students shared detailed accounts of their courses, professors, co-curricular activities, leadership experiences, parents, and friendships. They also described how they were able to successfully overcome obstacles they experienced along the way. Participants’ articulated the importance of the connections they made with people and programs on campus that were essential to their sense of belonging and success in college.

The study’s findings are mostly supported by traditional student success literature. The theme of discovering passion through engagement in the academic, co-curricular, and leadership opportunities available on campus aligns with the research on student involvement and engagement. The theme of strong support systems aligns with the research on mentoring, family, and friendships that exists. However, in some cases, there is a disconnect with the traditional literature on low-income students. The findings in this study do not represent the research that suggests low-income students are disengaged academically and socially in college. As high-achieving students, they more closely resemble the traditional college student in the literature. Due to the unique subset explored in the present research, the findings in this study expand on the student success and low-income student literature in a way that is new in the field.

In the following paragraphs, recommendations for practice will be discussed as well as how these recommendations can be implemented in higher education.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The findings in this study have several implications for university faculty, staff, and administration seeking to create campus environments that promote student success. The
findings have further applicability for low-income students that want to achieve success in college, especially high achieving students that attend selective universities.

Participants wanted to select and pursue an academic major and career path that was meaningful and rewarding. Academic advisors, career counselors, faculty, and family can play an important role in guiding students through the decision making process to select the best fit for the student. Training staff and faculty on appropriate strategies for course selection and exploration can help students start their academic careers in a way that shows them the various options available to them. Rather than pigeonholing students into a particular major or career track as early as freshmen year, policies that encourage exploration will make students feel comfortable about investigating different options. Advisors, faculty, and family can support students in the decision making by encouraging them to select a major that is based on their interests, rather than social status or external expectations. Programs can be implemented through academic departments, career centers, campus ministry offices, residence life, and student engagement that encourage exploration and discovery. Lectures, discussion groups, retreats, and mentoring programs can become avenues for implementing a discovery philosophy through the campus culture. Communication to parents in person during orientation and ongoing through email and newsletters can reinforce the institutional strategy that actively promotes students discovering their passion.

Participants found co-curricular activities and leadership roles that increased their sense of belonging and allowed them to grow throughout their college journey. It is the role of all educators to ensure the students transition to college and achieve academic and social success. Knowing that involvement and integration are essential to the academic and social transition to college, practitioners can create campus environments that engage students in academics, co-
curricular activities, and leadership. Institutions can provide structured opportunities for students to participate in welcoming activities and programs as early as the first weeks on campus. Students indicate their involvement in programs specifically designed to ease their transition to college is beneficial to their social and academic success. Bridge programs bring incoming freshmen to campus during the summer to introduce them to campus resources, set realistic expectations, connect with other freshmen and develop relationships with student leaders, faculty, and staff. Programs offered throughout freshmen year such as retreats, mentoring programs, and freshmen seminars provide a safe space for students to discuss first year challenges and college expectations with peers, student leaders, and staff that can guide them through their experience. As students progress beyond the first year, institutions can implement leadership opportunities that push students outside their comfort zone in ways that make them reflect on their experiences and grow beyond their expectations. Practicing leadership through structured programs can serve as life-changing opportunities that bring increased meaning and heightened self-awareness to college students. Continued engagement activities such as internships, study abroad, and volunteer service can supplement students’ academic, social, and leadership experiences throughout their undergraduate career.

The findings have implications for low-income students pursuing higher education. Participants reported facing obstacles along the way, but all found strategies and resources that helped them overcome barriers. Proactively getting involved in programs and activities that fit with the passions or exploring new experiences outside their comfort zone leads to self-discovery, meaningful friendships, and a stronger sense of belonging on campus. When students seek advice and support from faculty and staff, it increases their knowledge of resources, expands their network, and leads to the development of mentoring relationships. The guidance
and advocacy these mentors provide help students answer academic, career, and personal questions as well as address problems they face in their college and personal lives. Students can implement their own success plans to ensure that they are following through with their goals throughout their college experience. Doing so under the guidance of an advisor or mentor will increase the likelihood of success and satisfaction.

The following section will provide recommendations for future research studies.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Overall, the study’s findings were consistent with student success theories. The literature on low-income student success is just beginning to grow, with more recent publications focusing on innovative programs and approaches for this underrepresented group in American higher education. As more selective institutions focus on increasing low-income student enrollment and as state and federal governments create programs to support low-income students, the research will continue to expand on this important topic. Currently, much of the research focuses on community college students, the public sector, or individual state and institutional program assessment. There is a gap in terms of large sample sizes and longitudinal data for low-income students, especially those enrolled at selective institutions. There is also a gap in terms of strengths based perspectives that focus on success rather than risk and deficits.

There are a growing number of news articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education and major newspapers as well as doctoral dissertations focusing on the experience of low-income college students. However, the peer-reviewed literature does not yet include large amounts of significant research on the success of low-income students in college. Research that focuses specifically on low-income students is needed. Much of the literature combines low-income students with racial minorities and first generation students. Although underrepresented groups
should continue to be examined, the achievement gap between low and high-income students deserves individual attention. As more low-income students continue to enroll in higher education, especially in selective universities, and programs are developed to support them, it is important for scholar-practitioners to assess the experience of these students and programs. More research is needed to explore the specific connections described in the present study’s findings such as the role of mentoring, friendships, leadership positions, and academic major choice for low-income students, particularly at selective institutions. The work on expanding the literature on low-income student success should continue to explore the students experience in community colleges and less selective institutions where the majority of low-income students are enrolled.
Appendix A

Recruitment Email (Initial Message)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Student Research Participation

Dear Students,

My name is Paula Dias and I am a former staff member at [Department & Institution]. I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently in the final stages of my program conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and seeking research participants.

My research topic focuses on the experiences of successful low-income college students. The goal of this study is to raise awareness about experience of low-income students and to improve the support and success of these students in college.

For students interested in participating in this study, I am looking for rising juniors and seniors to interview for about one hour. The expected time commitment includes filing out a short initial questionnaire online, 45-90 minute interview scheduled at a convenient time, and a follow up email to review the interview transcript.

If you are interested in taking part in this study or in learning more, please contact me at dias.p@husky.neu.edu. I will then provide you with additional information with further study details.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

All the best,

Paula Dias
Appendix B

Recruitment Email (Targeted Message)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Student Research Study Participation

Dear [Student Name],

My name is Paula Dias, a former staff member at [Department & Institution]. I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University. I am currently in the final stages of my program conducting a study for my doctoral thesis and seeking research participants.

You have been recommended by [staff name] as a possible participant. My research topic focuses on the experiences of successful low-income college students. The goal of this study is to raise awareness about the experiences of low-income students and to improve the support and success of these students in college.

I am writing to see if you would consider participating in the study. If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experiences for about an hour. The expected time commitment includes filing out a short initial questionnaire online, 45-90 minute interview scheduled at a convenient time, and a follow up email to review the interview transcript.

Please contact me at dias.p@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in taking part in this study or in learning more. I will then provide you with additional information with further study details.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

All the best,

Paula Dias
Appendix C

Recruitment Email (Follow Up Message)
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject Line: Student Research Participation

Dear Students,

This is a follow up email concerning the message you were sent about a research study I am conducting for my doctoral thesis.

This is a reminder to email me at dias.p@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions.

Thank you again for considering participation in the study.

All the best,

Paula Dias

*Note: This is a follow up email sent to students not responding within seven days of the initial email request. In addition to this follow up email, the initial email will be forwarded so individuals can view the information included and respond appropriately.
Appendix D

Informed Consent Form
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Name of Investigator(s): Kimberly Nolan, EdD; Paula Dias
Title of Project: Experience of Successful Low-Income College Students

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you have self-identified as a successful low-income college student.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand the personal experiences of successful low-income college students and the factors that may be connected to their success.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview for about 45-90 minutes at a convenient time for you either over the phone or on the Boston College campus. Once the interview is transcribed, we will ask you to review the text via email to confirm that it is an accurate representation of your responses. You will be given the opportunity to approve or to make any corrections or clarify any confusion that you notice.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
Risks to participating in this study are minimal and unlikely. Participants may feel uncomfortable sharing personal stories related to their family income background.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help other low-income students in the future.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study 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. You will be asked to select a pseudonym, which will be used throughout the study as opposed to your real name. Audio files and transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer until the completion of the study. After the dissertation defense, these will be deleted permanently.
What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

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

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Paula Dias at dias.p@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Kim Nolan, the Principal Investigator, at K.Nolan@northeastern.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?
No payment will be provided for participation.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
It will not cost you anything for participate.

Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.

____________________________________________     ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part               Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E

Participant Screening Questionnaire
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

[Administered via Survey Monkey]

First Name:
Last Name:
Email Address:
Phone Number:
Graduation Year:
Academic Major:
Gender:
Date of Birth:
Race/Ethnicity:
Hometown:
Cumulative Grade Point Average:
Pell Grant eligible: Yes/No

Please list any co-curricular involvement in college (leaderships, retreats, service, clubs, cultural organizations, sports/intramurals, research, etc.):

Where do you work during the academic year?
How many hours do you work per week during the academic year?
What days of the week and times are most convenient for an initial phone conversation?
Appendix F

Participant Email Response
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. As you know, my name is Paula Dias and I currently working on my doctoral thesis for the Doctor of Education degree program at Northeastern University under the advisement of Dr. Kimberly Nolan.

I am researching the experiences of successful low-income college students and the factors that may contribute to their success. The goal of this study is to raise awareness about the low-income student experience and to increase the success rate of these students in college.

Based on your responses to the Survey Monkey questionnaire, you have met the criteria for participation in the study, including the following:

- Currently registered full-time senior at the university
- Pell Grant eligible
- Age 18-24
- 3.0 GPA or higher
- Involved in at least one co-curricular activity

If you choose to continue your participation, you will have three interactions with me.

1. Phone conversation to review the study procedures, informed consent form, and schedule a time and date for the interview. You can also ask me any questions you might have about the study. I have attached the informed consent form for you to review in advance.

2. Interview that will last approximately 45-90 minutes. In this in-depth interview, I will ask you to share stories about your experiences as a successful low-income student in college. This interview will be audio recorded and transcribed in writing. The questions I will ask are attached in this email so you can review them in advance.

3. The written transcription of the interview will be sent via email for you to review. You will have the opportunity to share additional information and clarify points of confusion or inaccuracy.

Based on the availability you indicated, I would like to propose that we schedule the initial phone conversation on [date/time]. Please let me know if this still works for you.

Thank you again for your interest and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

All the best,

Paula Dias
Hello [Student Name],

This is Paula Dias, the student at Northeastern University conducting the study on successful college students. Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral research project. You have met all of the criteria to serve a participant. At this time, I would like to review the study procedures with you. Prior to conducting the one hour interview, I will review the informed consent form that you will sign if you agree to participate. If you agree to participate, I will ask to schedule an interview with you that will last approximately 45-90 minutes and will be audio recorded. After the interview audio is transcribed, I will share the text with you via email to review. You will have the opportunity to clarify your responses or correct any errors at this time.

[Review all sections of informed consent and answer any questions]

If you do not have any other questions and are interested in participating, please sign the form and return to me via email. At this time, I would like to schedule your interview date and time.

[Select mutually convenient date/time/location for interview]

Do you have any questions about anything at this point?

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. I appreciate your time and look forward to speaking with you about your experiences at the interview on [date/time]. Please feel free to contact me through email or phone if you have any questions in the meantime.

*If the student at any point expresses that he or she is not interested in participating, I will thank them for their time and end the conversation in a friendly manner.
Appendix H

Introductory Protocol & Interview Questions
Northeastern University College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as a student that has been successful in navigating and engaging the academic and social experiences of college. My doctoral research project focuses on the experiences low-income students’ at an expensive, selective institution. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into the experience of students. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can support all students during their college experience.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio record our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [if yes, thank the participant and turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. My dissertation advisor and I will be the only people privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. The transcribed data may be used for future research studies. However, only a pseudonym will be used to label the transcripts.

After the interview is transcribed, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for your review.

I have planned this interview to last no longer than about 60 minutes. During this time, I have several open-ended questions that I would like to ask. There are no right or wrong answers and I very interested in learning about your experiences. Feel free to take your time in thinking and responding. I will likely not say much but will be listening carefully to your responses. Do you have any questions for me at this time?

Interview Questions:

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.

2. Can you tell me about your college experience?
   a. In the classroom
   b. In the residence halls
   c. On campus in general

3. Can you tell me about your transition to college?
   a. Social
   b. Academic

4. Describe your involvement in college life?
a. How did you get involved?

5. Can you tell me about how your involvement impacted you?

6. Can you describe an academic success you have had in college? What made this possible?

7. What do you attribute to your social success in college?

8. Can you tell me about a time that you felt a sense of belonging in college?

9. Can you describe an obstacle that you have faced? How did you overcome this obstacle?

10. Can you describe what has been the best part of your college experience?

11. Can you describe what would you change about your college experience?

12. Thinking about the people who have supported you during college, who are those people? What have they done to be supportive?

   a. Inquire about specifics concerning family, peers, faculty, staff, administrators, community members, and others as appropriate.

13. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed?
References


Aronson, P. (2008). Breaking Barriers or Locked Out? Class-Based Perceptions and
Experiences of Postsecondary Education. *New Directions for Child & Adolescent Development*, (119), 41-54.


Bergen-Cico, D., & Viscomi, J. (2013). Exploring the Association between Campus Co-


college? Cross-cohort evidence on the effects of college type on earnings. Journal of Human resources, 104-123.


American Council on Education.


Kane, T. J. (2007). Evaluating the impact of the DC tuition assistance grant program. *Journal of Human resources, 42*(3), 555-582.


Martin, G. L., & Blechschmidt, S. (2014). The Impact of Being a Resident Assistant on


Thayer, P. (2000). Retention of Students from First-Generation and Low-Income


