AN EXPLORATION OF PERSISTENCE AMONG SUCCESSFUL LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA

A doctoral thesis presented
by
Janet Nichols Spriggs

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
February 2018
Abstract

Community colleges serve as entryways to higher education and a sustainable future for tens of thousands of students in the United States each year and are designed to provide affordable access to education, particularly for lower-income individuals. Within the United States, postsecondary student completion is a significant issue in academia, and it presents problems of greater societal consequence. Community college students face numerous inherent risk factors, and barriers and institutions provide student support services and intervening programs to help students overcome barriers to persistence. Therefore, the purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (APA) study was to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. This study was guided by this research question: How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success? By helping colleges understand which services and interventions are effective at strengthening the success of lower-income students, this study informs the provision of support systems in place for low-income community college students and helps student services practitioners create and enhance programs that will help low-income students stay in school and graduate. This study shows that the imprint of growing up low-income ultimately impacts students’ postsecondary choices and their reactions to barriers jeopardizing their ability to persist. This study also affirms the importance of supportive relationships and the impact of positive institutional support systems.

Keywords: community college, low-income, persistence, success, relationships, post-secondary, barriers, at-risk, self-determination, self-motivation
Dedication

Nelson Mandela said: “Education is the greatest weapon which you can use to change the world.” I grew up poor; a white girl, in a tight-knit Christian family, on a small tobacco farm in rural North Carolina during the turbulent 1960’s and 1970’s. Witnessing the harshness and cruelty of social prejudice, racial bigotry, and marginalization, had an indelible impact on me as a young child. Back then, I did not understand why people could be so cruel, but I did know that if ever given a chance to assuage the injustices, I would gladly accept that mantle. I cannot claim to have changed the world, but I sincerely strive to make a difference in the small portion of the world where I am. My passion for making a difference is borne from a love for learning, a strong, often naïve, determination never to be contained by discriminating social boundaries, and a passionate desire to continue to fight prejudice, bigotry, and marginalization. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

All of that compels me to dedicate this dissertation to the man and women from my youth who looked beyond my social position and saw possibilities for my future that I did not know how to imagine; a group of special teachers who lit a fire in my soul for harnessing the power of education to build a better tomorrow. These remarkable individuals do not know the impact they had on my life, or on the lives of many other young people; that is in itself, extraordinary. They did not do it for glory or fame; I believe they spent their lives doing what they loved and made a difference in so many young peoples’ lives because they too believe that education is a powerful weapon for improving lives, and making the world a better place. Therefore, I dedicate this culminating work of my educational pursuits to: Mrs. Thompson (1st Grade); Mrs. Huey (2nd Grade); Mrs. Clayton (5th Grade); Ms. McGee (7th Grade); and the best of the best, Mr. Weldon Slayton (8th, 9th, and 12th Grades).
Acknowledgements

Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, said: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” I started my doctoral journey with a single step in 2014, and as I draw ever closer to the final step of this incredible adventure, it feels like I have indeed walked a thousand miles. Fortunately, I never had to walk alone. I was blessed to have many people walking alongside me; extraordinary supporters who inspired me, motivated me, encouraged me, guided me, and sustained me every step of the way. While I do not have enough words to express my gratitude for their unwavering support appropriately, I offer my heartfelt appreciation.

First, to my thesis advisor, Dr. Thomas Wylie: thank you for skillfully guiding me through the unknown and sometimes enigmatic dissertation process with your insightful advice, extreme patience, and constant encouragement. To my second reader, Dr. Joseph McNabb: thank you for challenging me to make my thesis stronger by sharing your astute and constructive criticisms, your attention to detail, and your expert IPA and APA knowledge. Also, to both Dr. Wylie and Dr. McNabb: my doctoral colleagues were jealous of your rapid responses, and I greatly appreciate never waiting longer than a week to receive your thoughtful reactions to my work. To my mentor and the greatest leader, I have ever been privileged to know, Dr. Joseph Barwick: thank you for inspiring me to pursue my dream, even though it took a while for me to decide to take that first step. Thank you too for sharing this journey with me by being my third reader; I am forever grateful that you were able to be a part of this endeavor with me. You taught me the most valuable lesson of my career: that power derived merely from the authority of position is likely to be abused, but power granted from the people who want to go where the leader is leading, will foster a culture where the team goes way beyond job descriptions or corporate objectives. To this day, I would go wherever you lead.
I also want to thank my editor and my community college colleagues. First, to my editor, Leslie Wirpsa: thank you for editing my work and helping me create an impressive looking work of scholarship. Most of all, thank you for always encouraging me and pushing me onward. Second, to my President, Dr. Carol Spalding: thank you for affording me the privilege of embarking on this thrilling expedition, and giving me the opportunity to implement recommendations from my research to improve student success for our students. Third, to my fellow student success leaders and my college colleagues: Paula Dibley, Nekita Eubanks, Kizzy Lea, Lisa Ledbetter, Natasha Lipscomb, Darlene Pickman, and Sarah Walker: thank you for your constant support and encouragement and thank you for motivating me to complete this work. Most of all, thank you for believing with me that, together, we could use my research and our collective passion for the power of education to change lives and to make a difference for our students. You inspire me every day, and I am blessed to work alongside you. Next, to the entire student success division that I am privileged and grateful to lead: thank you for bearing with me as I completed this journey, and for working diligently every day by meeting students where they are; empowering them to see what their future can be, and helping them achieve their goals for a better tomorrow.

I do not know how to adequately express my gratitude to the extraordinary students who agreed to participate in this study. These eight successful graduates eagerly shared their precious time and their precious stories with me, and their humble sincerity forever changed me. To Clay, Mark, James, Laura, Nova Lee, Lily, Poudric, and Katie: thank you for your truthfulness and authenticity, and especially for your genuine desire to work with me to make things better for future students. You humbled me and inspired me. Likewise, to my fellow doctoral colleagues,
particularly the Charlotte CPS Fall 2014 cohort and Dr. Wylie’s advisee cohort: thank you for your unwavering support and motivation to *Stay the Course and Be the Difference*.

Finally, last but most certainly not least, I offer my heartfelt gratitude to my family for always giving me their love and support. I am especially grateful for my husband, Doug, who has blessed me with unconditional love and devotion for over 33 years. He endured this challenging journey with extreme grace, even when I was buried in reading or writing my thesis and I told him, “Don’t talk.” My hooding ceremony is scheduled for our 31st wedding anniversary, and I believe that is incredibly appropriate because I share this achievement with Doug – my biggest supporter, the absolute love of my life, and my *favorite person*. 
# Table of Contents

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

Dedication ...................................................................................................................................4

Acknowledgements .....................................................................................................................5

Chapter One: Introduction to the Study .....................................................................................13

Context and Background ...........................................................................................................14

Rationale and Significance ........................................................................................................17

Research Problem and Research Question ............................................................................20

Definition of Key Terminology .................................................................................................24

Theoretical Framework .............................................................................................................25

Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure ............................................................................25

Historical Foundation and Contemporary Application of the Theory. .................................26

Critics of Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure ......................................................................27

Bourdieu’s (1986) Theoretical Concept of Habitus .................................................................28

Historical Foundation and Contemporary Application of the Concept. ..............................28

Critics of Bourdieu’s Theoretical Concept of Habitus ..............................................................30

Rationale for Using Tinto’s and Bourdieu’s Theories ...............................................................30

Applications of Tinto’s and Bourdieu’s Theories to the Study ................................................31

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................33

Chapter Two: Literature Review .................................................................................................35

Barriers to Completion for Low-Income Community College Students ..............................37

The Academic Preparedness Challenge .....................................................................................38

The Resource Challenge ...........................................................................................................40
# Table of Contents

- **The Life Balance Challenge** ....................................................................................... 42
- **The Life Happens Challenge** ...................................................................................... 44
- **Conclusion** ................................................................................................................. 45

- **The Students’ Voices: What Do Students Need to Persist to Completion?** ............. 46
  - Role of Self-Efficacy and Goal Setting in Student Persistence and Completion .......... 47
  - Role of Social Integration and Organizational Involvement in Student Completion .... 49
  - Role of Student Support Systems ............................................................................... 50
  - Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 52

- **The High Cost of Opportunity** ....................................................................................... 53
- **The Rising Cost of the American Dream** ................................................................. 53
- **The Gap Between Available Aid and Cost** ............................................................... 54
- **Student Loans: Help or Hindrance?** ........................................................................... 55
- **Navigating a Complex Financial Aid System** ........................................................... 57
  - Conclusion ................................................................................................................. 58

- **Summary** .................................................................................................................... 59

- **Chapter Three: Research Design** ....................................................................................... 61
  - Qualitative Research Approach ...................................................................................... 61
  - Paradigm of Inquiry: Constructivism-Interpretivism .................................................. 62
  - Strategy of Inquiry: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) ......................... 64
  - Background and source of the IPA strategy of inquiry ............................................... 64
  - Rationale for using the IPA strategy and intended outcome for this research study. 68
  - Use of the IPA strategy -- data collection and analysis ............................................. 69
  - Participants .................................................................................................................... 70
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The Imprint of Being Low-Income

Limited Choices

Self-Motivation and Self-Determination

Work Ethic

Self-Doubt and Fear
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Imprint of Being Low-Income Conclusion</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Supportive Relationships</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and Staff Support</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Supportive Relationships Conclusion</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Institutional Support Systems</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Impact of Institutional Support</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid.</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and career advising (including counseling services)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library support and tutoring</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Impact of Lack of Institutional Support</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Institutional Support Systems Conclusion</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Imprint of Being Low-Income</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Supportive Relationships</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Institutional Support Systems</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Practice</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation one: Develop a proactive and relational student success model for providing institutional support of student success.</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendation two: Create institutional certification programs for professional and faculty advisors.................................................................174

Recommendation three: Develop student peer-to-peer and faculty/staff mentoring programs. .................................................................175

Recommendations for Future Research.................................................................176

Appendix B...........................................................................................................179
Appendix C...........................................................................................................182
Appendix D...........................................................................................................183
References...........................................................................................................186
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Each year, community colleges serve as gateways to higher education and a sustainable future for tens of thousands of students in the United States. While community college students face numerous inherent risk factors and barriers, financial status is the most prominent demographic barrier negatively influencing student persistence (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012). Community colleges provide student support services and intervening programs to help students overcome barriers to persistence, but there is a gap in understanding which services and interventions are effective at strengthening the success of lower-income students.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. A successful low-income student is defined as a student who qualified for the maximum federal Pell grant financial aid award and graduated during the previous term or will graduate within six months. Knowledge generated from this research is now able to inform the provision of support systems in place for low-income community college students with a goal of helping student services practitioners create and enhance programs that will help low-income students stay in school and graduate.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to low-income community college students to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study are discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research question are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.
Context and Background

Within the United States, postsecondary student completion is a significant issue in academia, and it presents problems of greater societal consequence. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2016a), only 59.6% of students who entered four-year universities in the Fall of 2008 completed their degrees within 150% of the normal time required for degree completion – six years. The most recent completion rate data for two-year institutions shows a decline in the three-year graduation rate (150% of the normal time needed for completion) from 29.4% for the Fall 2010 cohort to 27.9% for the Fall 2011 cohort (NCES, 2016a). The completion problem is greater at public, two-year colleges, where only 20% of students entering in Fall 2011 had completed their degrees within three years (NCES, 2016a). The six-year completion rate for community colleges is better, but, for the most recent Fall 2010 cohort, it was still low at only 39.3% (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSCRC], 2016).

In 2009, then-President Barack Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative (AGI) which proposed millions of dollars in federal funding to help higher education institutions increase credentialed graduates by awarding five million additional degrees and certificates by 2020 (The White House, 2009). Instead of focusing on enrolling more students, the AGI aimed to help more students complete their programs and achieve their credentials. Almost half of all postsecondary education students in the United States attend two-year community colleges (Baime & Mullin, 2011), and two-year institutions awarded 25% of the 3.1 million degrees conferred at colleges and universities in the United States in 2008 (Kotamraju & Blackman, 2011). To meet the AGI’s goal, the nation’s community colleges will have to confer 1.75 million degrees annually, an increase of approximately 250 thousand per year (Kotamraju &
Blackman, 2011). While funding for the AGI was cut from reconciliation legislation amending the Affordable Care Act in 2010, two billion dollars was included in that legislation to fund the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant program. Additional funding for higher education, including increased allocations for federal student financial assistance, was part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.

The nation’s leading community college organizations have also emphasized their commitment to advancing completion. In 2010, six organizations signed the Democracy’s Colleges Call to Action with a goal of increasing the number of community college students with credentials by 50% by 2020 (AACC, 2015). The 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges is a group of institutional leaders who affirmed the importance of completion. The Commission recommended that colleges advance graduation rates by 50%, also by 2020 while preserving the community college mission of access and while eliminating disparities in attainment such as those associated with income, ethnicity, race, or gender (AACC, 2012). In the 2009-2010 academic year, when the Democracy’s Colleges Call to Action pledge was signed and the 21st Century Commission Report was released, public two-year community colleges awarded 918,467 credentials (AACC, 2015). Using an annual degree award rate of 920,000, a 50% increase would yield a goal of 4.6 million more degrees over the ten-year period, for a total of 13.8 million credential awards by community colleges by 2020 (AACC, 2015). Between 2010 and 2014, community colleges were 17% of the way toward the goal. In 2015, AACC projected that colleges would only reach 90% of the goal by 2020 but that they would need an additional year, achieving the goal by 2021 (AACC, 2015).

The characteristics of students who attend community colleges are different from those of the typical four-year student population. Their inherent risk factors include being older, attending
school part-time, and often being the first person in their family to attend college. These factors contribute to the low completion rates (Bragg, 2001; Brint, 2003; Cox & Ebber, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Garza & Landeck, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Additionally, unlike universities, community colleges are commonly open-door institutions. This means that some programs have restrictions on numbers of students they can enroll, they require prerequisites, and they have minimum high school grade conditions. The majority of programs, however, do not have any selective admissions criteria and accept all applicants, regardless of their academic preparedness or socio-economic standing (Brint, 2003; Nakajima et al., 2012).

Even though each of these barriers can hamper the ability of community college students to stay in school, socio-economic status is the greatest risk factor for student persistence (Nakajima et al., 2012). Community colleges are designed to provide affordable access to education, particularly for the millions of lower-income individuals and families (McKinney, Burridge, & Backscheider, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that a large number of community college students come from low-income families (Fike & Fike, 2008). According to the College Board (2016), approximately 31% of these students in the lowest income quartile in the United States attend community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 8). Even though the average cost of tuition and fees at community colleges is about one-third of the cost to attend a four-year university, many low-income students still find it difficult to afford the total cost of attending unless they can access student loans (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015). Numerous studies indicate that loans negatively affect persistence (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015). Additionally, two-thirds of the students work full-time while attending school either full-time or part-time. About half of these students indicate that work, not school, is their primary
focus and motivator (Brint, 2003). Students who work full-time are much more likely to drop out than students who do not work or who only work part-time (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Schmid & Abell, 2003; Voorhees, 1987). Scholars have identified that work demands constitute the main risk factor associated with community college student withdrawals (Swager, Campbell, & Orlowaki, 1995).

**Rationale and Significance**

Numerous initiatives have aimed to mitigate impediments to student persistence for four-year university students. Only a few research studies, however, have addressed the issue of community college persistence, and even fewer still have explored this problem amongst lower-income students (Torres, 2006; Bundy, 2013). This gap deserves attention, given that the average cost of tuition and fees at four-year baccalaureate institutions is approximately two-thirds more than the cost to attend a community college, making this educational option often the only affordable one for many low-income students (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015). Even though lower-income students repeatedly exhibit high motivation to stay in school, unexpected obstacles frequently signal the end of promising collegiate careers for disadvantaged populations (Dayton, 2005; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014; Wirth & Padilla, 2008).

As might be expected, the quality of a college’s instruction is not the most common reason why poorer students drop out (Garza & Landeck, 2004; Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Unexpected obstacles impeding continued persistence commonly include health issues, childcare needs, job layoffs, or a myriad of other circumstances that trigger financial or other burdens too difficult to overcome (Bundy, 2013; Hawley & Harris 2006; Miller et al., 2005; Walpole, Chambers, & Goss, 2014). Economically disadvantaged students do not
often have familial support systems to help them overcome barriers; therefore, institutional services are frequently the only positive intervention available to lower-income students. In short, support services commonly constitute a lifeline towards not only completion for community college students, but for career success. In this context, this research makes a significant contribution by providing community college practitioners with insights into the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of existing support services; it simultaneously helps to inform the design and development of adequate support systems that can significantly enhance completion rates.

As Miller (2009) asserted, “Two-year colleges have been the pathway to middle-income for millions of Americans” (p. 24). The positive impact that community colleges have on the almost 12 million students they serve each year is relatively intuitive: the higher the postsecondary degree completed, the greater estimated lifetime earnings. In 2012, a community college graduate with an associate’s degree could expect to earn $10,700 more each year than a high school or high school equivalency graduate (AACC, 2014). Underscoring the economic importance of education beyond high school, 62% of employed Americans will need a postsecondary credential by 2018 and “some kind of postsecondary education and training has become the threshold requirements for middle-class earnings and status” (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 21). However, for the economically disadvantaged, the open access to higher education that community colleges provide may not be enough to help them build a bridge out of poverty. Low-income students charged with navigating an unknown higher education system and faced with the challenge of securing enough money to pay for their education, are “too often marginalized and left out of the higher education equation due to financial circumstances” (Engberg & Allen, 2010, p. 804). Thus, in addition to identifying effective mechanisms through
which student services professionals can assist this population, this study can also provide resources and knowledge to help low-income students understand the support services and systems that are available to help them overcome barriers impacting their ability to persist.

Engberg and Allen (2010) suggested that disparities in education “fuel the reproduction of social inequality that has characterized American society for centuries, and the resultant talent loss translates into social and economic losses at both the individual and societal level” (p. 786). Only 38% of low-income high school graduates in the United States enroll in a postsecondary educational institution immediately following graduation, compared to an 84% enrollment rate for students with family incomes over $100,000 per year (Bozick & Lauff, 2007). In 2009-2010, 70% of community college students nationwide had incomes low enough for them to qualify for and receive Federal Pell grant assistance (Hoyle & Hammons, 2015). Almost 80% of the community college Pell grant recipients in 2009-2010 had total family incomes falling below 150% of the national poverty threshold, and more than 60% of those students’ family incomes were below $20,000, the federal poverty line for a family of four (Anonymous, 2011). Access to postsecondary education continues to increase, but significant disparities exist between the number of higher income students and lower-income students enrolled in both two-year and four-year institutions (Bozick & Lauff, 2007; Enberg & Allen, 2010). Expanding the research on low-income community college student persistence will inform policies and practices that will help postsecondary leaders improve opportunities for financially-disadvantaged, at-risk students.

Following a 2009 presentation by Jill Biden, Ph.D. in Education, at the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, several developing countries, including Qatar, Thailand, and Vietnam established community colleges based on the United States model (Boggs, 2012). Biden urged developing countries to consider the model as a means to increase standards of
living and their competitive edge in a global society. Thus, internationally, community colleges are receiving increasing recognition as a key conduit for expanding educational opportunities and improving economic strength. Not only do community colleges contribute to curbing poverty, according to a study by Economic Modeling Specialists International (EMSI) (2014), higher wages resulting from community college degrees added $809 billion in income to the economy; this represented 5.4% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for that year (AACC, 2014). In this context, by identifying effective strategies to assist community college students in persisting and completing their degrees, this study can have a positive ripple effect on enhancing workforce preparedness and economic development nationally, and perhaps globally, given that other nations are beginning to adopt models similar to the U.S. community college.

In summary, expanding research on effective institutional persistence strategies for low-income community college students has significant implications for individuals confronting poverty and for the local and global economy. As previously stated, at the institutional level, this study informs policies and practices to help student services practitioners enhance existing services and build new support systems that will have a positive effect on persistence and graduation rates. At the individual level, this exploration helps students access more effective support services so they can persist and obtain higher lifetime earnings. At the societal level, this study identifies effective persistence strategies that will increase the educated citizenry and decrease the socio-economic gap that continues to dominate higher education opportunities.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The uniquely American community college model of higher education is the fastest growing, most affordable, and easily accessible option of postsecondary instruction in the United States (Boggs, 2011). According to the College Board (2016), 42% of all students enrolled in
postsecondary institutions in Fall 2014 were enrolled in community colleges and 46% of all students who graduated in 2014 had been community college students at some point within the previous ten years (Ma & Baum, 2016, p. 1). Tuition at public, two-year institutions is about one-third the cost of tuition at four-year institutions (Boggs, 2011) and the National Commission on Community Colleges (2008) stated that community colleges are located within 25 miles of 90% of the population in the United States. While access to higher education remains a foundational tenet of the community college model, the mission has expanded since the latter decades of the twentieth century. Today, two-year institutions are focused on a broader, dually-focused mission of ensuring access to postsecondary opportunity and then advancing success for the students who have gained access (Boggs, 2011).

The shift from a singular focus on access to a focus on access coupled with success reframed the role of the community college from that of a teaching institution to a learning institution. Boggs (1993), described the new learning paradigm: “The mission is student learning. Learners are the most important people in the institution. Everyone else is there to facilitate and support student learning” (p. 2). This new learning paradigm advanced the conversation at community colleges by challenging institutions to accept ownership for their responsibility in helping students succeed and to measure their institutional achievement by the success of their students. In response, community college practitioners focused on improving persistence and success rates, developing student retention strategies, and improving support structures and practices designed to mitigate inherent risk factors and diminish barriers impeding persistence (Boggs, 2011). Preserving the foundational ideology of access and inclusion for all students, while delivering effective retention, interventions, and support structures is challenging.
Therefore, it is essential that community college administrators, staff, and faculty understand what strategies work.

Persistence is a complex issue within higher education and especially at community colleges, given the inherent risk factors faced by the diverse student populations at open-door institutions. While significant research has been conducted on persistence at the university level, minimal research has focused specifically on community college persistence (Torres, 2006). Community college students have different characteristics than those of four-year university students. Those atypical traits foster natural barriers to student success (Bozick, 2007; Bragg, 2011; Brint, 2003; Cox & Ebber, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Garza & Landeck, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). The results of persistence research for four-year students are not necessarily applicable to divergent two-year student populations (Cox & Ebber, 2010).

As previously identified, socio-economic status is the most prominent risk factor negatively influencing community college retention and completion rates; additionally, these indicators are much more severe for lower-income students than for higher-income students (Boggs, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012). To adequately meet students’ needs and help at-risk, lower-income students stay in school, practitioners need to understand their students’ lives and appreciate their educational experiences (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Latz, 2012). More specifically, there is a gap in understanding which services and interventions are effective at strengthening the success of lower-income students. Therefore, this study sought to understand the experiences of low-income community college students who successfully negotiated barriers to success and who have graduated or are within six months of completing their degrees. It particularly focused
on how they made sense of the services that have either supported or impeded them in their educational journeys.

By embracing the stories and lived experiences of their low-income students, community colleges can gain deeper insights into how these students’ needs differ from other student populations. Findings from this research are beneficial for community college staff and faculty who support and teach the majority of low-income postsecondary students and college administrators who are ultimately responsible for retention and their students’ successful journey to completion. This study was also intended to extend the persistence research agenda by advancing the importance of studies focused on the most egalitarian of all of the models of higher education: the uniquely American community college which is often labeled democracy’s college.

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative study, was guided by the following research question:

How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success?

IPA is a double hermeneutic approach in which the “participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). This study was framed within a social constructivist paradigm, allowing meaning to be co-created by analysis of the subjects’ understandings of their experiences and the researcher’s sense-making of those experiences. Because IPA recognizes the role that the researcher plays in sense-making through dynamic and iterative interpretation, it is well-suited for this exploration of factors that influence persistence from the internal lens of community college students who have successfully reached
their goal (Shinebourne, 2011). The researcher gives voice to the participants’ stories and uses an idiographic approach of analysis to make sense of their stories (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

**Definition of Key Terminology**

**Expected Family Contribution (EFC)** – The Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is the amount of money that the Department of Education has determined to be appropriate for an independent student or a dependent student’s family to contribute to the student’s postsecondary education within an academic year. The EFC is determined by a formula that considers multiple factors including family size, taxed and untaxed income, assets, and the number of family members currently attending college.

**Low-income student** – For purposes of this study, the definition of a low-income student is a student who qualifies for the maximum federal Pell grant award.

**Pell Grant** – The United States Department of Education administers the federal Pell grant program and provides need-based financial assistance to low-income students based on estimated family contribution (EFC). The maximum Pell award in 2014-2015 for a full-time student with an EFC of $0 was $5,730 (NCES, 2016).

**Persistence** – As used in this study, persistence means continuing from one semester of coursework to the next semester.

**Retention** – This study defines retention within higher education as the act of persisting. Student retention occurs when students are retained and persist through their program of study.

**Student success** – For purposes of this study, the definition of student success will describe a student who graduated during the previous term at the subject institution, or who had completed
almost all their degree program requirements and was set to graduate during the current academic year at the subject institution.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, in conjunction with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (1986). Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory, is perhaps the most used theoretical construct for assessing why higher education students persist to graduation (Metz, 2002). It delves into the interaction of behavior and perception, implying a behavioral component of integration in which students become involved and assimilate within a college’s academic and social systems. The theoretical construct of habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) suggested that predisposed norms and tendencies differ between social classes and influence both students’ attitudes and behaviors, potentially hindering their ability to persist to graduation (Navarro, 2006). Simply put, habitus represents an individual’s existence as an internalized set of dispositions that shape the individual’s perceptions, thoughts, actions, and reactions (Throop & Murphy, 2002; Costa & Murphy, 2015). Additionally, Bourdieu applied habitus to the field of education, suggesting that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often struggle and are less likely to succeed because their habitus does not align well with the fundamental assumptions and values of their institution (Glaesser & Cooper, 2012). By combining Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory and Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of habitus, the theoretical lenses for this study focused on understanding how the shared outlook and experiences of students from low-income social structures influenced their ability to make a successful social and academic transition into the college culture, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would persist to graduation.

*Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure*
Historical Foundation and Contemporary Application of the Theory. The foundational framework for Vincent Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure can be traced back to his research collaboration with John Cullen (1973) from Columbia University’s Teachers College. Tinto and Cullen developed a basic theoretical model to explain student dropouts as “an interactive process between the individual and the institution” (Tinto & Cullen, 1973, p. v). The Tinto and Cullen (1973) theory was derived from Durkheim’s (1952) sociological theory of suicide and the economic theory of cost-benefit analysis; it identified academic and social integration variables affecting student persistence. This foundational framework for Tinto’s (1993) theory suggested that students’ aspirational and institutional goals, institutional experiences, academic and social integration, and external commitments collectively contribute to a postsecondary student’s ability to persist (Metz, 2002).

Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory focuses on the interaction between behavior and perception. Tinto (1993) implied a behavioral component of integration in which students become involved and assimilate within the college’s academic and social systems. The theory establishes three stages that students must successfully navigate to achieve integration: separation, transition, and incorporation (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek 2006; Milem & Berger, 1997). Separation occurs when the student disassociates themselves from their families, friends and past communities. The transition stage begins after separation and continues until the student conforms to their new collegiate environment. The final incorporation stage begins after students have adapted and adopted the normal behavior patterns for their institution, thereby successfully integrating into the institutional culture (Milem & Berger, 1997).
Tinto (1993) theorized that student retention is directly related to the institution’s deliberate efforts to integrate students academically and socially (Long, 2012). He pinpoints three major sources of student departure: difficulty academically, difficulty resolving educational goals with occupational goals, and difficulty integrating or remaining incorporated in the social and academic cultures of the organization (Kuh et al., 2006). In this model, academic and social integration are both complementary; yet, they are independent processes of a student’s life that lead to greater institutional commitment and ultimately successful completion (Bean, 1983).

Tinto’s (1993) theoretical framework is one of the most used theories for predicting the major causes for student persistence and retention (Bai & Pan, 2009; Metz, 2002). Numerous studies have validated, tested, expanded, and substantiated Tinto’s model. Tinto’s (1993) theory is accepted as a solid predictor of student attrition and an important contribution to the voluminous body of work aimed at identifying major causes for student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1982; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Braxton & Brier, 1989; Halpin, 1990; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). Several theoretical constructs that focused on student integration and student involvement are grounded in Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory (Bai & Pan, 2009). Numerous contemporary scholars have expanded and applied Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theories: Pascarella (1980), Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), Bean (1983), Pascarella and Chapman (1983), Braxton and Brier (1989), Halpin (1990), St. John (1990), Paulsen and St. John (1997), and Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997).

**Critics of Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure.** Milem and Berger (1997) affirmed Tinto’s (1993) contentions that institutional commitment is a significant predictor of persistence and that social integration is a significant predictor of institutional commitment. However,
Milem and Berger (1997) and several other studies contradict Tinto’s (1993) assertion that academic integration predicts institutional commitment (Braxton et al., 1997). Various studies have also noted the absence of specific institutional characteristics in Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theories, suggesting that organizational attributes should be included as a conceptual lens within Tinto’s theory (Bean, 1983; Braxton and Brier, 1989; Pascarella, 1985). Critics have also noted that Tinto (1993) did not include any measurements of active learning, and it did not account for other dimensions that could facilitate social integration, institutional commitment, or student retention (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Tinto’s (1993) theory has been criticized for not being applied to two-year students – the focus of this theory is only on traditional four-year students (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Halpin, 1990; McCubbin, 2003; Metz, 2002). Tierney (1992) suggested that by focusing only on four-year students, Tinto (1993) may have misinterpreted Van Gennep’s rites of passage and created potentially harmful applications to minority populations (Tierney, 1992).

**Bourdieu’s (1986) Theoretical Concept of Habitus**

**Historical Foundation and Contemporary Application of the Concept.** Social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) development of practice theory in the last half of the 20th Century informed the work of anthropologists and sociologists, as well as scholars from numerous humanistic disciplines (Throop & Murphy, 2002). The theoretical concept of habitus is one of the three elements of Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of practice and the central view in Bourdieu’s collective sociological work (Bonnewitz, 2005; Walther, 2014). Bourdieu utilized habitus to support his exploration of various sociological phenomena. Habitus aims to recognize, explain and reveal inequalities among different levels of society (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Throughout his work, Bourdieu used various definitions and formulations to describe
habitus, such as a multiplicative scheme of “durable, transposable dispositions” that emerges out of a relation to wider objective structures of the social world (1977, p. 72), as “society written into the body, into the biological individual” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63), and as “a spontaneity without consciousness or will” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56).

Social experiences largely molded by an individual’s position in a particular social setting form habitus. An individual’s habitus shapes their opinions and understanding of the world, ultimately guiding their choices without the individual being mindfully aware that their personal experiences are influencing their behavior (Bourdieu, 1977; Costa & Murphy, 2015; Throop & Murphy, 2002). A core tenet of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is that it is unconsciously transmitted. Therefore, habitus is grounded in the belief that an individual’s actions are not produced through conscious intention, but rather are *modus operandi*; their actions are merely a usual, subconscious way of doing things (Throop & Murphy, 2002; Costa & Murphy, 2015).

Habitus evolves and adjusts based on individuals’ continuing experiences and current situation (Mayrhofer, Meyer, Steyrer, & Langer 2007; Walther, 2014). It is a way of being that “encapsulates social action through dispositions and can be broadly explained as the evolving process through which individuals act, think, perceive and approach the world and their role in it” (Costa & Murphy, 2015, p. 7).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus suggests that individuals’ internal dispositions guide the way they perceive and view their place in the world. An individual’s habitus is formed through experiences within the various settings to which they belong, such as within their family, social, and school groups (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Mills, 2006). Bourdieu (2000) concludes that a child’s habitus predicts how they will move forward within a social class hierarchy. Bourdieu also concluded that educational institutions naturally replicate social inequalities (Swartz, 1997; Mills
& Gale, 2007; Grenfell, 2008). Thus, individuals may relegate themselves to subordinate positions by accepting the ideas and structures that confine them in a lower social stratum, not because they agree with them, but because they do not see alternatives (Connolly & Healy, 2004; Mills, 2008).

**Critics of Bourdieu’s Theoretical Concept of Habitus.** While Bourdieu’s theoretical construct of habitus left a lasting impression on both cultural and educational sociology (Ozbilgin & Tatli, 2005; Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006), numerous scholars have criticized Bourdieu for discounting the impact of an individual’s ability to freely choose an action as a result of their social experiences (Calhoun, 1993; Throop & Murphy, 2002; Walther, 2014). Collins (1989) suggested that the greatest strength of Bourdieu’s habitus is his explanation of social change. However, King (2000) contended that the habitus does not leave room for social transformation resulting from “the complex renegotiation of relations between individuals” (p. 429), and “the habitus reduces social reproduction to the mechanical imposition of prior social structure on the practices of individuals” (p. 429). While Bourdieu asserts that habitus ensures that individuals act “intentionally without intention” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 12), scholars refute this claim because it does not allow for the possibility that intentional and conscious free choice affects the actions and reactions of individuals, regardless of their habitus (Calhoun, 1993; King, 2000; Throop & Murphy, 2002).

**Rationale for Using Tinto’s and Bourdieu’s Theories**

Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure provided a theoretical model for exploring how the level of academic and social integration of low-income community college students influences their use of support systems and institutional interventions. This theory served as an appropriate lens for exploring the central phenomenon of low-income students experiencing a
problem that threatened their ability to remain in school by considering the institution’s deliberate intervention efforts. Since inherent risk factors and barriers prohibiting persistence are common for low-income student populations, a framework like this that consolidates student behavior and perceptions with institutional integration was appropriate to examine the problem adequately.

The theoretical construct of habitus enables an approach to meaning-making that considers how a low-income student’s social class affects their perceptions, thoughts, reactions, and actions (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Thus, habitus is a thinking tool to guide analysis of the decision-making of low-income community college students. Research has established that inherent risk factors and barriers common to low-income students often create situations where students must choose whether to drop out or persist. Theoretically, the construct of habitus provides a lens for deeply interpreting how the complexities of these students’ lives and the unconscious influence of their habitus impacts the way they think about and perceive their options as they negotiate degree completion; it permits an exploration of how they integrate, both socially and academically, into the institutional culture.

**Applications of Tinto’s and Bourdieu’s Theories to the Study**

A central element of Tinto’s (1993) student departure framework suggests that student success is directly tied to how the institution provides academic and social structures that support integration (Long, 2012). Additionally, Tinto’s (1993) theory identifies special populations, such as low-income students, that need specific interventions and support services to promote persistence (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of habitus assesses how an individual’s past shapes their perceptions of the present and their recognition and selection of choices. The core elements of Tinto’s (1993) framework and
Bourdieu’s (1986) construct of habitus are reflected in the central research question focused on the student’s perceptions of the institutional services and programs that were beneficial at helping them persist to completion. The graphic below illustrates how Bourdieu’s (1986) construct of habitus and Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure converge and how they were applied in this study.

As shown in this graphic, Bourdieu’s theoretical construct of habitus provided a conceptual lens for viewing how the low-income students’ perceptions, thoughts, actions, and reactions affected the way they integrated into the institution both socially and academically.
Tinto’s theory of student departure provided a theoretical framework for analyzing how social and academic integration influenced low-income students’ ability to persist to completion.

In-depth interviews guided the researcher’s analysis of the participants making sense of their world and defining their experiences as they perceived them. The voices of the participants highlighted individual stories and provided authentic representations of the experiences of low-income community college students who are negotiating the complexities of community college education, work obligations, and family (in some cases). Overall, this exploration strengthens the understanding of the educational experiences of low-income community college students. A more in-depth understanding of this disadvantaged population helps educators identify opportunities for advancing their success.

**Conclusion**

The traditional access mission of community colleges opens the door to higher education for individuals with academic, economic, or lifestyle barriers prohibiting their ability to attend a four-year higher education institution. The contemporary mission of the globally expanding American community college model is dually-focused on providing access and advancing success for greater career advancement. Currently, postsecondary completion rates are low, with the national completion rate within three-years for community colleges being particularly low (less than 30%). The low rates put community colleges and the economic contribution they make to the national economy at a crossroads. Institutions need to develop effective support structures to help students navigate barriers impeding their persistence.

Since community colleges are the most affordable postsecondary option, they are home to large numbers of low-income students. As such, they provide a pathway to higher lifetime earnings and more sustainable economic futures for this disadvantaged population. However,
low-income students face unique challenges and inherent risk factors that threaten to derail their ability to attend school and once enrolled, to persist and complete their educational goals. This study focused on the journey to completion for successful low-income community college students to gain insight into their experiences with the institutional services and programs that helped them overcome obstacles and persist. Chapter two presents a review of the literature and presentation of the extant scholarship on low-income community college students and other supporting streams of research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter one introduced the study, the research problem and the significance of the study. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature that supported the need for this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study.

The foundational core of the uniquely American community college paradigm is built around the principle that everyone deserves access to postsecondary education. For millions of students each year, this open access mission paves the way to college transfer or career and technical training beyond high school and is the catalyst that leads students into long-term and viable careers with greater lifetime incomes (Miller, 2009). However, persistence rates at two-year institutions continue to decline, and dismally low completion statistics have precipitated growing concern within academia. This issue has become a national topic of interest within the public arena.

Approximately 60% of students at four-year universities complete their degree within six years (150% of the normal time required); the completion problem is even more pronounced at two-year institutions where less than half that number, or just under 28% of the students, graduate within the same 150% measurement timeframe, or three years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016a). Scholars have investigated the differences in the characteristics of the typical community college student, compared to the four-year college student. They have identified various inherent risk factors for community college students such as: being low-income, academically unprepared, or older; having to work at least part-time; and being a first-generation student (Bragg, 2001; Brint, 2003; Garza & Landeck, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Fike & Fike, 2008; Wirth & Paidlla, 2008; Cox & Ebber, 2010; Nakajima et al., 2012). These natural barriers have contributed to diminished retention and lower graduation
rates at two-year institutions, particularly for low-income students (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2015). For the economically disadvantaged, having accessible postsecondary education may not be enough to build a bridge out of poverty, since the greatest barrier to student persistence and completion for community college students involved the multiple challenges low-income individuals face (Boggs, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012).

Ample and significant research on persistence at four-year universities exists; however, there is a gap in documentation and understanding of the mechanisms through which persistence can be improved at community colleges (Torres, 2006; Martin, Galentino, & Townsend, 2014). A considerable number of divergent and inherent characteristics exist between the typical two-year student and the average four-year student (Brint, 2003; Garza & Landeck, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Bozick, 2007; Cox & Ebber, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Wirth & Padilla, 2008; Bragg, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012). Research findings focused on university persistence and completion cannot necessarily be directly correlated to community colleges (Cox & Ebber, 2010).

To improve graduation outcomes among lower-income students, community colleges must understand which support services and intervention programs effectively help students overcome obstacles prohibiting persistence that is essential to completion. Thus, this study sought to answer the question: *How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success?*

This literature review addressed the need for expanded knowledge about successful strategies for mitigating barriers to completion, specifically for low-income community college students, through a critical investigation of the existing research. The assessment of related literature elucidated the unique educational challenges of economically disadvantaged students
by considering various dimensions of their identity and their position within their socio-economic setting.

Three distinct, yet overlapping strands of literature related to understanding persistence and completion for lower-income community college students provide the framework for analysis and presentation of the literature. First, it is essential to understand the intrinsic characteristics and risk factors facing the typical low-income community college student. Therefore, part one provides a review of the prevailing literature focused on the inherent attributes and common barriers that impede persistence to credential completion for economically disadvantaged community college students. The next section offers an exploration into what students perceive as the most critical factors influencing their ability to persist to completion. This body of literature examines the students’ viewpoints within three concepts: self-efficacy and goal setting, social integration and organizational involvement, and student support systems. Part three discusses the impact of rising costs for higher education and the associated implications of federal financial aid that has not kept pace with increased costs of attendance. Finally, this review presents a summary of the literature and an overarching conclusion drawn from the extant body of knowledge in support of this qualitative IPA study that sought to understand the experiences of low-income community college students who had successfully negotiated barriers to achievement and who were within six months of completing their degrees.

**Barriers to Completion for Low-Income Community College Students**

There are numerous differences in the demographic characteristics of the traditional community college student and the average four-year university student. Simply put, unlike most four-year students, the typical community college student faces unique and inherent risk
factors that test their ability to stay in school and progress to degree completion (Bragg, 2001; Brint, 2003; Garza & Landeck, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). While education is perhaps the best tool for breaking the cycle of poverty for the large numbers of impoverished people in the United States (Duncan, 1999), lower socio-economic standing is also the most predominant demographic barrier impeding student persistence and ultimately prohibiting student success for community college students (Boggs, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012).

Lower-income high school graduates are much less likely to attend, persist, and complete college than are their higher-income counterparts (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Wei & Horn, 2009). While 78% of high-income high school graduates enroll in college, only 55% of low-income students enroll in a postsecondary institution immediately following high school (NCES, 2009). Low-income students drop out four times as much as students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008), and completion rates for high-income students at four-year institutions are six times higher than the rate for students from lower-income families (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Seventy-eight percent of high-income high school graduates earn a bachelor’s degree within six years following graduation, compared to 12% of low-income students (Mortenson, 2007). This section provides a review of the literature addressing four specific challenges that most often impede persistence for low-income community college students: the “academic preparedness” challenge, the “resource” challenge, the “life balance” challenge, and the “life happens” challenge.

The Academic Preparedness Challenge

The community college open admissions policy provides access to postsecondary educational opportunities for all regardless of academic performance and is one of the main
reasons why students decide to enroll at community colleges (Hoachlander, Sikora, & Horn, 2003). Consequently, a lack of preparedness for college-level work and unsatisfactory academic performance before entering college present two challenges for the average community college student and two of the strongest predictors of persistence (Bragg, 2001; Garza & Landeck, 2004; McArthur, 2005; Reason, 2009). Most universities have selective criteria for admissions that preclude admittance for unprepared or underprepared students (Fike & Fike, 2008). Therefore, students who attend four-year universities are less likely to need remedial courses (Hawley & Harris, 2006). Often students with an ultimate goal of pursuing a baccalaureate degree will attend a community college first because poor academic performance in high school and the need for remediation makes open access admissions their best, if not their only option (Hoachlander et al., 2003).

Over 60% of first-time community college students need remediation; in short, to succeed, they should begin their collegiate career with developmental coursework before enrolling in their first credit course (Barbatis, 2010; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Grimes, 1997; Martin et al., 2014). While students have to pay for remedial coursework, they do not get “real” credits for the courses that are transferable or counted towards their degree. Research has noted a high correlation between academic performance and greater student retention (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Leppel, 2002; Lufi, Parish-Plass, & Cohen, 2003). Specifically, the greater the high school grade point average (GPA), the more likely a student is to earn a high cumulative GPA at the community college; GPA is a predictor of student retention (Makuakane-Drechsel & Hagedorn, 2000; Hagedorn, Maxwell, & Hampton, 2002; Nakajima et al., 2012).
Low-income students face academic challenges more often than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Perna, 2005; Pierce, 2016). Additionally, economically disadvantaged students take more developmental courses and have more trouble completing postsecondary coursework (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Seider, 2008; Walpole, 2011). Martin et al. (2014) found that low-income students who attended elementary and high schools in high-poverty districts were more likely to be underprepared for college-level academics. Kahlenberg (2001) attributed the lack of preparation of impoverished students to the students’ backgrounds, citing lack of motivation by peers, less-qualified teachers, and uninvolved parents, as three major factors influencing academic unpreparedness. Changing these negative characteristics may be more effective at reducing the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged populations than school reform (Rothstein, 2004).

Hansen, Trujillo, Boland, and MacKinnon (2014) suggested that these students face a myriad of obstacles to overcoming weak academic performance. Many who struggle with college coursework require remediation to have any hope of successful matriculation in college-level programs. Students who enroll in community colleges, particularly economically disadvantaged students, spend a great deal of time and money taking developmental courses before they ever enroll in the first credit course for their program of study. Every developmental course taken by a student, adds to the time it takes to complete their degree and extended time for completion can trigger consequences that create barriers for students (Walpole et al., 2014). During the mid-2000’s federal financial aid rules were enacted that penalize students who do not complete their degree within the period deemed acceptable by the Department of Education (Walpole et al., 2014).

**The Resource Challenge**
Community colleges are designed to provide affordable access to education, particularly for millions of lower-income individuals and families (Kipp, Price, & Wohlford, 2002; Horn & Nevill, 2006; Boggs, 2011; Meier, 2013; McKinney et al., 2015). In 2009, the average tuition at community colleges was 175% less than the average cost at four-year institutions. Additionally, 90% of the population of the United States lived within twenty-five miles of a community college (Boggs, 2011). Due to the lower cost of tuition and the ease of access, it is not surprising that in 2008, 52% of low-income, post-secondary students attended community colleges (Portraits, 2011). Approximately 22% of the postsecondary students in the lowest income quartile in the United States attend community colleges (Brint, 2003).

The relatively low cost to attend a community college makes them the only affordable, postsecondary option for many low-income students (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015). While the cost of tuition and fees are lower at community colleges, numerous other direct and indirect costs make the total cost of attendance much greater. Rising costs of books, supplies, transportation, daycare, and various other living expenses create additional financial barriers that are often too great to overcome, especially for the lowest-income students (Pierce, 2016). Furthermore, state and federal funding for higher education has not kept pace with escalating costs, creating an affordability gap for low-income families, making it imperative for most low-income students to work to be able to pay even the lowest tuition and fees at community colleges (Baird, 2006; Fike & Fike, 2008). Even though 62% of full-time community college students work either full-time or part-time, they still struggle to afford to pay living expenses and have enough left to cover the cost of attending school (AACC, 2014). In 2016, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) at the University of Texas at Austin surveyed 100,000 community college students at 177 community colleges across
the United States (CCCSE, 2017). Forty-seven percent of the students who responded to the CCCSE survey indicated that a lack of financial resources might cause them to withdraw from school and 49% of students reported running out of money within the past 12 months and seeking financial support from charitable organizations or families and friends (CCCSE, 2017).

Work demands constitute a primary risk factor associated with student withdrawals (Swager et al., 1995). Students who work more than twenty hours per week have a lower GPA and students who work full-time are much more likely to drop out than those who do not work or who only work part-time (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Schmid & Abell, 2003; Voorhees, 1987). King & Bannon (2002) reported that students who worked 25 hours or more per week recognized the harmful effects of working on their achievement and their experience of college.

Even though federal financial aid programs, along with other state or college-based programs are in place to reduce the need for students to work, research has shown that many low-income students will choose to work because work is valued among this student population (Kasworm, 2010; Perna, 2010; Walpole, 2011). Therefore, Perna (2010) suggested that colleges should explore ways to reconceptualize student employment as a positive enhancement to the student’s experience, instead of a detractor of their experience. For example, Walpole (2011) recommended expanding on-campus work programs by encouraging college departments to hire low-income students and by instituting programs to place working students in college jobs that provide a meaningful experience for them. Other research has promoted the creation of institutional job banks of external employers who are willing to work with students’ schedules as a way to mitigate the negative aspects for working students (Engle & Lynch, 2011).

**The Life Balance Challenge**
The average age of a community college student in the United States is 29 years old (AACC, 2015). Kasworm (2003) defined an adult student as someone who is 25 years old or older and possesses at least one of the following characteristics: works full-time, attends school part-time, raises children, returns to school after some time, or supports themselves financially. Even though adult students tend to have higher GPAs, they are less likely to persist because of inherent obstacles associated with balancing school with other obligations (Capps, 2012; Hansen et al., 2014; Welch, 2014). Additionally, persisting adult students take longer to graduate because they are more likely to attend only part-time to accommodate work and family schedules (Capps, 2012; Martin et al., 2014).

Lower-income students are more likely to work while attending school. At community colleges in Fall 2012, 62% of full-time students worked either part-time (40%) or full-time (22%), while 73% of part-time students worked either part-time (32%) or full-time (41%) (AACC, 2014). Over half of the students who work full-time and attend community colleges acknowledge that work is their primary focus and job demands are a major reason why they drop out (Swager et al., 1995; Brint, 2003). In general, students who work part-time or students who do not work at all are much more likely to continue than students who work at least part-time (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Schmid & Abell, 2003; Voorhees, 1987). In the 2016 CCCSE survey, one student described the life balance challenge: “It was a struggle to work around my school schedule, to be able to pay my bills, to continue to go to school, and to make it back and forth to school” (CCCSE, 2017, p. 12).

Engagement has been recognized as a key factor for success for postsecondary students (Tinto, 1993; Kezar, 2003; Braxton, 2008). However, lower-income students tend to have multiple demands and greater constraints on their time than higher-income students, reducing
their ability to spend as much time engaging in college as wealthier students (Perna, 2010; Ziskin, Torres, Hossley, & Gross, 2010; Kezar et al., 2015). For example, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to work 30 or more hours each week and attend school part-time, less likely to stay in school continuously, and more likely to be a commuter student (Kezar et al., 2015). These characteristics compete for the lower-income students’ time, subsequently reducing their involvement in co-curricular or extracurricular activities (Arzy, Davies, & Harbour, 2006; Seider, 2008; Colyar, 2011; Walpole, 2011; Kezar et al., 2015).

The Life Happens Challenge

Often, community college students do not persist to completion because of unexpected obstacles that are beyond the students’ or the institutions’ ability to mitigate. These barriers could fall under what this study defines as of life happens impediments. The average community college student is 29 years old and responsible for supporting themselves and often bearing the weight of acting as the head of the household for their family (Bundy, 2013; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Walpole et al., 2014). All too often, unanticipated situations arise that take precedence over educational pursuits. Unexpected health problems, child or other family needs, economic difficulties, or a myriad of other circumstances can impact a student’s ability to persist. These obstacles impose time, financial, or other hindrances that are often too difficult to overcome (Bundy, 2013; Hawley & Harris 2006; Miller et al., 2005; Walpole et al., 2014). Low-income students do not have emergency funds to offset unforeseen circumstances; thirty-nine percent of students reported being confident they could come up with $500 to support an unexpected need, while only 17% and 6% reported they could secure $1,000 and $2,000 respectively (CCCSE, 2017).
Individual desire and motivation to remain in school, or a particular college’s quality of instruction, commonly have little to do with the reasons why community college students drop out (Garza & Landeck, 2004; Miller et al., 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). Frequently, at-risk community college students cannot complete their studies because personal or financial life issues get in the way of continued matriculation. These students are more successful when they have effective familial support networks, and institutional programs or services in place that help them mitigate life happens barriers; without familial or institutional intervention, these obstacles all too often signal the end of a student’s academic career. This is particularly true for economically disadvantaged populations who rarely have familial support systems capable of helping them overcome life happens barriers (Dayton, 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). The broad-based support needed in these situations may include things like transferring financial responsibilities to a spouse or a parent letting their adult child live at home during their matriculation (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Numerous factors contribute to low completion rates at community colleges in the United States, including the inherent risk factors associated with the typical low-income community college student’s experience, which is the focus of this literature review. A large number of economically disadvantaged students have other risk factors, such as being academically unprepared, having difficulty securing financial resources to cover the cost of attendance, having difficulty balancing school with work and family obligations, and being forced to deal with unexpected life events. These inherent risks create natural barriers to persistence that all too often signal the end of postsecondary pursuits for large numbers of low-income community college students.
Students have affirmed the importance of familial and institutional support systems for helping them overcome obstacles and remain in school. Gilbert (2008) suggested that institutional co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences, as well as support services and programs, should be targeted and reflect the unique and individual characteristics of distinctive student populations. Additionally, Best & Kellner (1991) found that college practitioners need to understand cultural and structural barriers facing low-income students, and subsequently build institutional support structures that are free of hidden cultural biases and structural barriers that may impede their success. It is vital that community college staff, faculty, and administrators be aware of inherent risk factors facing low-income students so they can build effective student support services and programs that mitigate this unique populations’ innate risks, and help more students overcome barriers threatening their ability to persist to completion. Insights and data gleaned from this study contribute to enhancing that awareness.

**The Students’ Voices: What Do Students Need to Persist to Completion?**

Paulsen (2001) found that college graduates earn higher salaries, are more likely to be employed, and are less likely to need public assistance than individuals who have only a high school diploma or a GED. However, even though two out of every three jobs will require a post-secondary credential by 2020, only 38.7% of adults between the ages and 25 and 64 have a college degree (Hillman & Orians, 2013). Existing literature reveals a myriad of conclusions about how to increase both enrollment and completion rates at community colleges, a majority of which focuses on understanding the students’ perceptions about what makes a difference in their ability to persist to completion. This section of the literature review provides a review of studies related to understanding community college students’ perspectives about what positively influences their decision to persist to completion. Specifically, this section focuses on three
themes related to student decision-making: self-efficacy and goal setting, social integration and organizational involvement, and student support systems.

**Role of Self-Efficacy and Goal Setting in Student Persistence and Completion**

Martin et al. (2014) studied common traits of community college graduates and concluded that their ability to establish clear goals, coupled with a belief in their ability to accomplish the goals, was a strong predictor of persistence to completion. A common thread emphasized consistently by participants was some version of the phrase “Begin with the end in mind” (Martin et al., 2014, p. 229). Goal-oriented students with clearly defined educational plans and established benchmarks, who had the ability to articulate their educational goals clearly, were much more apt to continue, ultimately earning their credential (Barbatis, 2010; Camburn, 1990; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Kefallinou, 2009; Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, & Terenzin, 1998; Simmons, 2013; Voorhees & Zhou, 2000).

Hansen et al. (2014) studied the concept of academic hope and concluded: “The findings postulate a core story of hopeful thinking in which students thought that they would be successful, persisted despite obstacles, generated alternative pathways when encountering difficulties, sought out social and organizational supports, and were resilient in the face of adversity” (p. 55). Snyder (1995) defined hope as “the process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (agency), and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)” (p. 355). Other studies have confirmed the link between academic hope and performance. Students with significant levels of academic hope also have well-defined goals and a strong belief in their ability to achieve their goals. The research connects these attributes with positive outcomes like academic performance and goal achievement (Feldman, Rand, & Kahle-Wrobleski, 2009; Rand, 2009; Snyder, Shorey, & Rand, 2008). Additionally, Hansen et al.
(2014), concluded that thinking hopefully was the strongest cognitive motivator that helped
students develop successful stratagems to meet their goals.

The notion of academic hope can be compared to aspiration capital. Yosso (2005)
defined aspiration capital as “maintaining hopes and dreams for the future, regardless of real or
perceived barriers” (p. 530). Simmons (2013) asserted the importance of aspiration capital;
numerous other studies provided examples of the power of aspiration capital by sharing the
stories of students who persevered to completion despite confronting substantial personal or
professional barriers (Kefallinou, 2009; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Simmons, 2013).

One of the primary barriers shaping self-efficacy for large numbers of community college
students is lower socioeconomic status (SES). Community colleges enroll a majority of low-
income post-secondary students (Horn & Nevill, 2006), and social class is a primary determinant
of success (MacLeod, 1995). Low-income, postsecondary students are much less likely to
complete their programs and graduate than students from higher income families (Walpole,
2003). Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) concluded that the majority of students develop
both educational and occupational expectations for themselves by the time they are in the
seventh to ninth grades; moreover, these expectations are strongly related to their SES. Low-
income students tend to set lower postsecondary educational expectations and are less likely to
take college entrance exams than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Fitzgerald
& Delaney, 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001).

The theory of social reproduction posits that social inequality is reproduced or passed
down from generation to generation; thus, it is difficult to move up in social standing (Collins,
2009). However, Martin et al., (2014) found that having clear goals and being highly motivated
by a strong self-efficacy was a common characteristic of successful community college
graduates, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Moreover, regardless of their incomes, students with well-defined goals were more motivated and self-empowered to find solutions to their problems and remove obstacles that threatened their ability to persist to completion, even if they failed to integrate academically and socially within the institutional culture (Martin et al., 2014).

Role of Social Integration and Organizational Involvement in Student Completion

Scholars have consistently affirmed the importance of social integration and student involvement within colleges – through co-curricular experiences that provided avenues for student life to support classroom learning – to higher completion rates (Barbatis, 2010; Simmons, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Additionally, Tinto (1993) affirmed the direct correlation between continued and successful persistence and participation in student organizations. Barbatis (2010) asserted that underprepared community college students benefited from student organizations that “expand the concept of learning to include affective outcomes such as leadership, self-understanding, and citizenship as well as cognitive outcomes” (p. 20).

Simmons (2013) suggested that social interactions between students and their peers, as well as between students and faculty, help to establish relationships that foster academic success and promote persistence. Kezar (2003) concluded that faculty mentor programs provided increased leadership to student engagements that contributed to increased persistence. Turner and Thompson (2014) reported that 67% of freshmen students cited focused activities as their greatest enabler. Students who integrate socially become more involved in student organizations and initiatives, creating support networks that build institutional commitment and help students enjoy their collegiate experience, thereby strengthening the likelihood these students will persist
to graduation (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Simmons, 2013; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

Social integration and organizational involvement are critical components of success, particularly for minority students (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Quaye, Griffin, & Museus 2015; Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen 2013; Williams & Bryan, 2013). For example, Quaye et al. (2015) suggested that colleges should invest time and money in venues that provide opportunities for cross-cultural communications for Black men while helping them learn more about themselves, express their identities, and improve their quality of life. Six out of eight African American youth in the Williams & Bryan (2013) case study asserted their belief that school extracurricular activities were a critical factor contributing to their academic success, and three of the eight participants also attributed close social ties in their communities as a factor in their success. Jayakumar et al. (2013) studied the Young Black Scholars (YBS) community pathway to a college program, affirming the positive effect of “a supportive peer environment of high expectations and encouragement, where students took individual responsibility for collective success” (p. 566). Students from cultures substantially different from their institution’s predominate culture are more apt to persist to their goal completion if they find a cultural affinity group (Braxton, Brier, and Steele, 2007).

**Role of Student Support Systems**

Hansen et al. (2014) emphasized the importance of student support programs to promote positive connections with faculty, staff, and advisors saying: “It was evident in the students’ stories that the organizational context affected their hopeful thinking and their ability to create strategies to attain their goals” (p. 65). Their study promoted a supportive atmosphere that advanced student visualization of educational success as key in helping students set realistic
goals and develop stratagems to overcome setbacks (Boland & Kinnon, 2014). Various research studies advanced the importance of building strong support systems to help students mitigate barriers to persistence (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Miller et al., 2005; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Comprehensive services help students explore career options while they are in school and help them find rewarding employment when they graduate. These support systems should include robust financial aid counseling and assistance developing financial plans to meet their educational goals (Hawley & Harris, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015; McKinney & Novak, 2013). Robust advising practices that ensure appropriate goal setting and educational program planning are also critical (Boland & Kinnon, 2014; Hawley & Harris 2006; McArthur, 2005). Early alert systems designed to set in motion the identification of at-risk students quickly maximize the opportunity for rapid response to put in place measure that can mitigate barriers to persistence (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012).

Relatively low tuition and fee structures at community colleges have historically helped provide access to higher education for countless low-income students. Even though the average tuition and fees at public, four-year institutions is two-thirds the average total for public two-year institutions, a growing number of community college students need financial assistance to make their educational goals viable (McKinney et al., 2015; McKinney & Novak, 2013). Colleges can improve persistence by minimizing financial barriers and helping students develop monetary plans that include maximizing financial assistance programs and scholarship opportunities to minimize economic barriers that hamper persistence (McKinney et al., 2015; McKinney & Novak, 2013; Nakajima et al., 2012; CCCSE, 2017).

Twenty-five percent of students in the McArthur (2005) study did not know they had a faculty advisor; or, if they did know, they had never met with that individual. Students in that
study reported that they viewed academic advising as important to their ability to achieve their goals, but they complained about receiving poor, ineffective, and inadequate advice and counseling (McArthur, 2005). Advising programs that engage students are critical to successful persistence efforts (Boland & Kinnon, 2014; Hawley & Harris, 2006; McArthur, 2005).

Sixty-five percent of students in a study by Turner and Thompson (2014) stated that developing effective study skills was the greatest obstacle they encountered. Programs addressing the deficiency in effective study skills are essential to building student self-confidence and self-efficacy, and ultimately to promoting comprehensive academic integration that can build a foundation for student success (Barbatis, 2010; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

**Conclusion**

This review of the relevant literature supports the critical importance of support systems in student persistence and completion. While students are in charge of their destiny, colleges still play an active support role in student success. When barriers arise, students with well-articulated plans are more apt to utilize support systems to find ways to overcome barriers and adversity and move forward on their academic pathway. Successful students seek out support systems and use them to balance external challenges with school commitments. Institutional support systems provide academic assistance to help students develop goals, secure necessary funding, and to mitigate the impact of barriers that influence their ability to remain in school (Hawley & Harris, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015; McKinney & Novak, 2013). New and emerging efforts to advance completion should explore the continued development of support systems that promote self-efficacy, aid students in planning, and endorse social and academic assimilation (Boland & Kinnon, 2014; Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Miller et al., 2005; Williams & Bryan, 2013).
The High Cost of Opportunity

Community colleges provide the most affordable opportunity for post-secondary education for thousands of economically disadvantaged students in the United States (Kipp et al., 2002). However, since the 1980s, tuition and fees have risen at alarming rates, outpacing inflation and consumer prices, thus making it increasingly difficult for lower-income students to afford the high cost of a postsecondary credential (Kennamer, Katsinas, & Schumacker, 2010). The United States Department of Education’s Federal Pell Grant program was created and designed to help low-income, postsecondary students afford the higher education opportunity by providing grants that do not have to be repaid, rather than loans. However, the maximum Pell award for low-income students only covers about 35% of the average cost of attendance for an independent community college student (NCES, 2016). The widening gap between cost and financial assistance makes it increasingly difficult for lower-income students to afford the opportunity that higher education provides (Kennamer et al., 2010).

The Rising Cost of the American Dream

From 2001 to 2006, community college enrollment grew, on average, by 40%, adding more than 2.2 million students (Kennamer et al., 2010). Between 2000 and 2014, the average cost of attendance at community colleges nationwide increased by 28% (Sutton, 2016). Alaska was the only state that decreased tuition and fees from 2001 through 2006. Twenty-eight states increased both tuition and fees between 11% and 50% and another 18 states saw increases of more than 51% (Kennamer et al., 2010).

Data from 2016 from the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] showed that tuition and fees had consistently continued to grow: In 2014-2015, the average cost of tuition and fees at a public two-year institution increased to $3,270, or a 7% increase from 2011-2012. In
addition to the soaring cost of tuition and fees, incidental expenses for books, transportation, and housing escalated. Sutton (2016) found that 50% of community college students struggle to buy food and pay for housing. In 2011-2012, the median family income was $26,100 for dependent Pell grant recipients at community colleges, while independent students’ median income was only $12,700 (CCCSE, 2017). Even after receiving a Pell grant, it cost the dependent student’s family 40% of their total annual income to cover the cost of community college, while an independent student in the same income quartile was paying more than their total annual income to attend a community college (Sutton, 2016).

The Gap Between Available Aid and Cost

Pell grants provide critical support to help low-income students attend college, but the maximum award amount falls short of the cost of attendance. Pell grant awards are based on a student’s Expected Family Contribution (EFC), calculated with a formula that considers a family’s taxed and untaxed income, assets, family size, and the number of family members who are currently attending college. During the 2009-2010 academic year, almost 80% of community college students who received federal Pell grants had total family incomes falling below 150% of the national poverty threshold, and 61% of those students’ family incomes were below $21,756, the federal poverty line for a family of four (Anonymous, 2011; Baime & Mullin, 2011a; CCCSE, 2017). In 2014-2015, the maximum Pell award for a full-time student with an EFC of $0 was $5,730, but the average total cost of attendance for an independent student was $16,370 (NCES, 2016).

From 1980 through 2010, average tuition and fees at public, two-year institutions rose from $355 to $2,544, a 717% increase. Over the same period, the average cost for books and supplies increased from $272 to $1,638 or 602% (AACC, 2014). Even though the maximum
Pell award increased by 297% over this 30-year timeframe, the additional aid did not make up for the dramatic increase in the cost of attendance. In 1980, the maximum Pell grant award covered just over 46% of the total estimated cost of attendance for a full-time, nine-month, independent community college student, but by 2010, full Pell only paid for 28% (AACC, 2014). Additionally, when adjusted for inflation, Pell awards only grew by $1,219 from 1987 through 2010 (Baime & Mullin, 2011). This gap between rising costs of attendance and availability of federal aid poses a significant obstacle for low-income community college students.

**Student Loans: Help or Hindrance?**

There is a great deal of tension and much debate within the higher education community, especially within the community college sector, about whether or not student loans help or hinder student success. The tension centers around a disagreement over the responsibility of the government to support the cost of higher education versus the responsibility of individuals to finance their education. Institutions faced with declining enrollments and lofty goals for increasing completion rates are struggling to decide if loans expand opportunity and promote retention or if they exacerbate financial inequality by introducing increased financial burdens (England-Siegerdt, 2010). Experts disagree about whether high student loan limits will drain Pell resources; they also do not concur regarding assessments of the financial risk undergone for students who do not graduate and who eventually default on their loans (Dowd & Coury, 2006). The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) supports increased Pell limits and lower student loan debt, while the American Council for Education (ACE) suggests that students who can borrow money at competitive interest rates can reduce their workloads, study full-time, and achieve greater academic success (King, 2002; Dowd & Coury, 2006).
The ACE position views student loans as a necessary, viable, and desirable student benefit – an investment that improves completion rates. The opposing AACC position adheres to the traditional role of community colleges as an affordable option for higher education that places a minimal financial burden on students (Down & Coury, 2006). While it is true that community colleges cost less than four-year universities, dramatic increases in attendance costs, coupled with Pell grant aid (that has not kept up with escalating costs) has created a substantial gap for low-income students (Kipp et al., 2002). Consequently, more and more community college students are unable to afford community colleges without student loans (Dowd & Coury, 2006). The Center for Community College Engagement (2017) reported that 40% of students who receive Pell grants indicated that student loans were still necessary for them to be able to pay for college, as compared to 22% of students who did not receive Pell grants. Even though many low-income students rely on loans to help finance their education, 51% of those students believe they have too much student loan debt (CCCSE, 2017).

Student loan debt among community college students continues to grow, as do default rates, especially for borrowers who leave college before earning a degree (McKinney et al., 2015). Institutions faced with declining enrollments and lofty goals for increasing completion rates in response to the AGI are struggling to understand if loans expand opportunity and promote retention or introduce additional financial burdens and exacerbate financial inequality (England-Siegerdt, 2010). Research studies focused on understanding how student loans impact student success reveal contradictory results. Some suggest that students who take out loans are more likely to persist. Some believe that the economic benefits, especially for marginalized populations, outweigh concerns about high indebtedness (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Jackson & Reynolds, 2013). McKinney et al., (2015) suggest a positive effect on short-term
persistence of student borrowers within the first year, but a negative effect on retention over a six-year period, as borrowers become discontented with debt and eventually drop out more frequently than non-borrowers.

The debate regarding whether student loans help or hinder community college students is ongoing. Rising costs negatively affect the ability of low-income students to enroll and persist, and low-interest, federal loans may be the only alternative available to these students for financing their higher education dreams. It is reasonable to conclude that low levels of manageable debt may be a wise investment if the degree earned helps the graduate attain a higher lifetime salary. However, loans may also create a major problem for low-income students who borrow excessively, never earn their credential, and subsequently default on their loans (McKinney et al., 2015).

Navigating a Complex Financial Aid System

Low-income community college students depend on financial assistance to help them afford a postsecondary education. However, the complicated process of applying for federal assistance poses a major impediment to success for these students (Kane & Avery, 2004; King, 2004; Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006; Romano & Millard, 2006; Davidson, 2013). King (2004) found that one-third of community college students with the lowest incomes, and therefore the greatest presumed need, never applied for financial aid. To receive federal financial aid, students must complete the Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA). According to results from the 2008 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), and the 2008 FastWeb Student Loan Survey, a large number of students who would have qualified for aid, did not apply because the FAFSA was too complicated (Davidson, 2013;
Bird & Castleman, 2015). For every ten first-year students, one who would have been eligible for aid never applied because of the complexity of the FAFSA (Bird & Castleman 2015).

In response to the problem of students who qualify for aid not applying because of difficulty understanding and completing the FAFSA, high school, and community college staff have invested in programs to help students and their families navigate the application process. Additionally, the United States Department of Education developed an initiative called the FAFSA Completion Project to provide school systems with information about students who completed the FAFSA (Bird & Castleman, 2015). While studies have shown a significant positive impact of initiatives aimed at helping lower-income high school seniors complete the FAFSA (Bettinger, 2004), fewer institutional initiatives have focused on helping returning students refile. Students must complete the FAFSA annually, yet approximately 16% of Freshman Pell recipients return in their sophomore year without having refiled the FAFSA (Bird & Castleman, 2015). While sufficient Pell funding is critically important for low-income students, it is equally important that the filing processes be simple, and adequate support is provided to help students navigate both the initial application and subsequent re-application processes (Romano & Millard, 2006; Bird & Castleman, 2015).

Conclusion

A college transfer or career technical education program at a community college offers hope and the promise of a sustainable job and brighter future for economically disadvantaged students struggling to break free from poverty. However, these students often find themselves caught in a Catch22: Low-income students need a college education or workforce training credential to be able to secure higher wages and stable employment, but the total cost of attending college is often far greater than they can afford (Bundy, 2013; Walpole et al., 2014;
Hawley & Harris, 2016). Federal financial assistance is available for low-income students, but the gap between the rising costs of earning a post-secondary degree and the availability of adequate financial aid presents a significant challenge for them. Financial aid helps students afford postsecondary education and students who receive financial aid are often more successful than those who do not (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, & Trostel, 2009; Alon, 2011). Institutional strategies aimed at improving retention and completion must recognize that financial aid is an integral part of student success and year-to-year persistence for lower-income students (Haveman and Wilson, 2007; Chen and DesJardins, 2007; Alon, 2011).

If community colleges are to continue to provide a gateway to opportunity and a bridge out of a life cycle of poverty for economically disadvantaged populations, financial aid policies and institutional support systems must be structured to help students overcome the gap between costs and availability of aid. They must simultaneously mitigate the potentially harmful economic consequences of excessive student loan debt.

**Summary**

This literature review revealed while community colleges provide the most affordable higher education option for millions of lower-income students (McKinney et al., 2015), low socioeconomic status is the greatest risk factor preventing persistence for community college students (Boggs, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012). The review highlighted the unique educational challenges of economically disadvantaged students and examined research related to low-income community college students and their experiences with barriers that impacted their ability to finish their programs of study and ultimately graduate. The literature revealed that even though community college tuition costs are relatively low, low-income students are particularly at-risk because the total cost of attendance is often much larger than they can afford (Bundy, 2013;
Walpole et al., 2014; Hawley & Harris, 2016). Research showed that support systems are vitally important for helping these vulnerable populations overcome obstacles that threaten to derail their postsecondary matriculation. Additionally, while federal financial aid eases the monetary burden of earning a post-secondary credential and improves student success, the gap between the cost of attendance and availability of financial assistance is escalating (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, & Trostel, 2009; Alon, 2011).

Each strand of literature examined in this review underscored the importance of understanding the experiences of successful low-income community college students. The extant literature supported the need for additional research focused on persistence at two-year institutions and aimed specifically at helping low-income students stay in school and complete their degrees. Understanding how low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees made sense of and explained their academic success, which was the central thesis of this study, particularly benefits student services practitioners by providing insight into which existing support systems are effective at helping these students stay in school. This research can lead to improved persistence rates and higher graduation rates.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The aim of research in this particular doctoral program was to examine a complex problem of practice, generate knowledge from data gathered at the research site, and provide context and strategies for introducing systemic change to help resolve the problem of practice. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. The central research question guiding this study was: How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success? This chapter begins with a general discussion of qualitative research within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, followed by a comprehensive description with a supporting argument explaining why the IPA approach was an appropriate strategy for data collection and analysis. The latter sections of this chapter focus on the procedural elements by presenting a step-by-step guide of how the study was conducted, including a detailed account of the data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, potential research bias and the researcher’s positionality, and possible limitations of the study.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative approach to understand the research problem. Unlike quantitative scientific methods growing out of research traditions within the physical and biological sciences, qualitative research methods developed from anthropological and sociological traditions (Borg & Gall, 1989; Savenye & Robinson, 2005). The choice of whether to use a qualitative or quantitative approach to address a research problem should be determined by types of questions the researcher is asking to explore the problem of practice (Creswell,
Quantitative research methods are best suited for investigating a problem to explain why it occurs. In contrast, qualitative research approaches are best suited for researchers seeking to explore a problem by learning from study participants and using what they learn to develop a thorough understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015).

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) described qualitative research as a naturalistic approach, providing researchers with the ability to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Sherman and Webb (1988) asserted that the aim of qualitative analysis is “understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it” (p. 7). To that end, the qualitative researcher becomes engaged in the research setting through an interactive process of exploration that seeks to give voice to the research participants and their perceptions of the phenomenon (Sherman & Webb, 1988; Ely, 1991). An important characteristic of qualitative discovery is that it attends to the participants’ experiences as a whole, aiming to cognize unified knowledge by describing and comparing individual responses (Ely, 1991; Savenye & Robinson, 2005). In this sense, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) contend that qualitative methodologies are ideal for connecting meaning-making, from lived experiences to the social world.

**Paradigm of Inquiry: Constructivism-Interpretivism**

The results of any educational research study depend, at least in part, on the theoretical perspective, or paradigm of inquiry chosen by the researcher to inform the study. A theoretical paradigm is a set of interrelated assumptions about the world that provide a theoretical framework for a research study (Ponterotto, 2005). In contrast to quantitative paradigms, such as the positivist or post-positivist viewpoint of a single and objective reality, the constructivist-
interpretivist counter-response is primarily a qualitative prototype positioned in an acceptance of the validity of multiple realities (Ponterotto 2005). Emerging from cultural anthropology around the middle of 20th Century, the hermeneutical approach of the constructivism-interpretivism model proposes reality is not absolute, but rather unique to any particular individual’s meaning-making of it (Butin, 2010). Furthermore, meaning from an individual’s reality must be uncovered through deep reflection and cannot be captured and understood from the surface (Ponterotto, 2005). This study was positioned within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm because the researcher intended to develop new knowledge based on the meaning uncovered from a systematic and thoughtful analysis of the reality of successful low-income community college students.

Constructivism-interpretivism maintains that knowledge is subjective, contextualized, and value-dependent. The constructivist-interpretivist assumes that multiple realities, with equal validity, exist, and “reality is constructed in the mind of the individual, rather than it being an externally singular entity” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). Therefore, a qualitative analysis that accepts that “truth” is constructed, embedded in this paradigm, seeks to understand the meaning by searching for patterns (Butin, 2010). The role of the researcher as an interactive scholar within the study, and the interaction between the participant investigator, the participants interviewed/ the phenomenon, are distinguishing characteristics of constructivism-interpretivism.

Akella (2011) asserted that “all reality has meaning which is a construction of human interaction” (p. 124). This approach allows the researcher and the participants to co-construct findings through dialogue and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005).

Unlike a quantitative approach directed at finding the one best answer, the constructivist-interpretivist, qualitative method is a human science practice aimed at creating meaning from the
points of view and perspectives of the participants in the experience (Ponterotto, 2005; Butin, 2010). This method of inquiry is ideal for an exploration focused on: (a) listening to the stories of co-participants of a specific central phenomenon; (b) co-constructing meaning from interpretation of the participants’ collective insights and the researcher’s observations; and (c) explaining the knowledge and truths gained from analysis of the exploration in the voice of the participants (Savenye & Robinson, 2005; Glesne, 2006).

**Strategy of Inquiry: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

IPA is a qualitative strategy of inquiry that provides a “focused approach, which is committed to understanding the first-person perspective from the third-person position” (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 321). This research study aimed to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students and provide context for strategies to help resolve the problem of practice. Economically disadvantaged community college students face numerous inherent risk factors and barriers that affect their ability to persist and complete their educational goals. By framing this study within a social constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and by using IPA strategy of inquiry, the researcher’s primary goal was to understand the perceptions and realities of successful students and reveal the meaning constructed from the subjects’ understanding of how they achieved success (Ponterotto, 2005; Creswell, 2015). The following sections provide detailed information about: (a) background and source of the IPA strategy; (b) rationale for using the IPA strategy and the outcome of this research study; and (c) use of the IPA strategy to shape the questions asked, the form of the data collection, and the steps of data analysis.

**Background and source of the IPA strategy of inquiry.** The IPA strategy is a dynamic and iterative research method first introduced in psychology in the mid-1990s by scholar
Jonathan Smith and his colleagues (Smith et al., 2009). Known as the “father of IPA,” in his seminal work, Smith (1996) established IPA as a particular qualitative, empirical approach to psychology research, characterized by idiographic and inductive interpretation, and distinct from the quantitative approaches to research almost exclusively used at the time. Smith (2004) defined IPA as a definitive experiential research method that is structured with a specific set of guidelines.

As a qualitative research approach, IPA is both experiential and experimental, and three philosophical areas inform it: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiographic theories of knowledge (Smith et al., 2009). Dating back to ancient Greek philosophers Socrates and Aristotle, phenomenology is the philosophical study of the consciousness and experience of being (Shosha, 2012). A phenomenological researcher will identify a phenomenon, recruit participants with direct experience with the phenomenon to share their stories, and explore what the individuals experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell, 2015). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) described phenomenological research “as systematically and attentively reflecting on everyday lived experience” (p. 33). Like phenomenology, IPA research is interpretative with researchers seeking to make meaning from lived experiences of participants who have experienced a particular phenomenon, and from their perceptions and interpretations of that phenomenon (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009; Frank & Polkinghorne, 2010). Smith et al. (2009) credited the phenomenological philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, as key contributors in the development of IPA as a strategy for qualitative research.

Shosha (2012) described two distinct approaches of phenomenology: descriptive and interpretative. The German philosopher, Husserl, adhered to the descriptive approach known as transcendental phenomenology, which values discovery of the universal elements comprising the
true essence of a phenomenon and transcends assumptions and biases. Husserl’s most important contribution to IPA was his insistence on the importance of reflection as critical for both the participants and the researcher (Shosha, 2012). The philosopher Heidegger, one of Husserl’s students, proposed the interpretative approach. Heidegger’s development of interpretative phenomenology is closely connected to hermeneutics. Heidegger asserted that experiences never occur in isolation but rather overlap with other contexts within the natural world, creating an intertwining aspect to the process of meaning-making (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is also consistent with Heidegger’s view of phenomenology as an interpretative and existential process of inquiry that grew from hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, is the second foundation of IPA and it has a distinct role within the IPA paradigm. Focusing on the hermeneutical aspect of phenomenology, Smith et al. (2009) suggested that a primary and critical component of IPA research is making sense of the participants’ account of their lived experiences. However, while IPA research seeks to reveal the participants’ understanding of their experience, IPA interpretation also provides space for the researcher to question and critically analyze the participants’ understanding (Shinebourne, 2011). Additionally, IPA is a double hermeneutic approach in which the “participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). Smith et al. (2009) maintained that both phenomenology and hermeneutics are critical to IPA saying, “without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen” (p. 37).

The final foundational component of IPA is the idiographic nature of research, aimed at understanding the unique and subjective experiences of individual participants in contrast to a
nomothetic approach to understanding the objective phenomena of classes or cohorts of individuals (Smith, 2004; Shinebourne, 2011). An idiographic focus provides a structure for IPA researchers to complete an analytic process of individual cases, examine the similarities and differences between the individual cases, and construct meaning from detailed interpretative analysis and reflection on the commonality of patterns (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Shinebourne, 2011). Smith (2004) further asserted that IPA could be used for detailed analysis of one case because the details of that one case could provide elements that “brings us close to significant aspects of a shared humanity” (p. 43).

The primary contention of scholars with divergent thoughts on IPA as a valid methodology for qualitative phenomenological inquiry is “that IPA lacks a sound theoretical basis” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 16). For example, Sousa (2008) argued that it only requires two pages to provide the entire theoretical basis of IPA. Giorgi (2010) contended, “the originators of IPA have given no indication as to how their method is related to philosophical phenomenology” (p. 6). However, numerous studies have concluded that IPA is a relatively new, distinct and useful, interpretative approach, albeit often misunderstood or misapplied (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Finlay, 2009). For example, Shinebourne (2011) disputed the divergent counterargument aimed at discrediting IPA by presenting an argument focused on “the ways in which IPA draws on theoretical approaches to inform its distinctive epistemological framework” (p. 17). Brocki and Wearden (2006) observed that the illegitimacy argument about IPA is sometimes derived from a lack of focus on the interpretative facet of the IPA methodology. Since the role of the IPA researcher as a reflective analyst is a key, distinctive component of this research strategy, it is necessary for the IPA researcher to utilize an idiographic approach including thoughtful and focused interpretation of the meaning behind the
participants’ stories (Finlay, 2009). The key justification of IPA as a distinctive epistemological model of qualitative phenomenology is its theoretical approach for examining the meaning of human lived experiences through idiographic reflection and interpretation of the meaningful, existential consequences of the experiences (Shinebourne, 2011).

**Rationale for using the IPA strategy and intended outcome for this research study.**

For the purposes of this research study, qualitative methods were most compatible with the research goals, and IPA was an ideal strategy for exploring the stories of successful community college students and making sense of their understanding of the factors that influenced their persistence. Community colleges by design provide affordable access to postsecondary education for millions of lower-income individuals (McKinney et al., 2015), yet socio-economic status is the greatest risk factor negatively influencing persistence for community college students (Boggs, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2012). By 2018, 62% of workers in the United States will need a postsecondary credential and, the higher the postsecondary degree completed, the greater the economic benefit in terms of higher lifetime earnings (Carnevale et al., 2010). Therefore, community colleges provide a critical opportunity for higher education for economically disadvantaged Americans hoping to build a bridge out of poverty for themselves and their families (Miller, 2009). Scholars and practitioners interested in helping lower-income, at-risk students stay in school, will be better equipped to develop successful services and interventions if they understand their students’ lives, their perceptions and interpretations of what hindered or facilitated their success, and their general educational experiences (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Latz, 2012).

IPA researchers explore the personal narratives of individuals’ lived experiences to uncover and understand how the individuals make meaning from their experiences (Eatough &
Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). IPA research is a flexible model that first provides an opportunity to give voice to the participants’ stories, then uses an idiographic approach of analysis through which the researcher makes sense of the stories through dynamic and iterative interpretation, thus permitting themes to surface that substantiate and validate the researcher’s conclusions (Smith, 2004; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Shinebourne, 2011). IPA provided a stage for calling attention to the individual experiences of successful low-income community college students and, by looking at multiple individual instances, the researcher was able to identify common ideas that existed within the collective experiences. Even though each student’s experience was contextualized within their unique circumstances, the commonalities shared by all of the economically disadvantaged participants added depth and validity to the interpretative analysis. It follows that, by sharing the interpretations and meaning-making of the experiences of success, the researcher met a goal of creating new knowledge that can inform practice and help community college practitioners develop services and interventions that advance persistence and effectively promote success for millions of economically disadvantaged individuals.

**Use of the IPA strategy -- data collection and analysis.** An IPA methodology guided the formation of questions for participants, the methods used to collect data, and the steps used to analyze the data in this research study. The phenomenological component of IPA provided a pathway for the researcher to chart “the participants’ concerns and cares – their orientation toward the world – in the form of the experiences they claimed for themselves (e.g., ‘How has this phenomenon been *understood* by this person?’)” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 117). The research questions were open-ended, constructed to narrow down the focus of the central research question, and designed to avoid limiting the participants in fully expressing their perspectives.
Data collection and analysis followed IPA recommended research standards. Data collection in IPA consists of various approaches for gaining a rich understanding of the cognitive world of the study’s participants. A common approach for collecting data in an IPA study is to use semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2004; Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Finlay, 2009; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Larkin et al., 2011; Shinebourne, 2011). In addition to semi-structured interviews, IPA researchers may also utilize focus groups and examine diaries and other narrative accounts of participants’ stories (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Finlay, 2009; Larkin et al., 2011; Larkin et al., 2011). IPA studies require intensive, detailed, and interpretative analysis of the participants’ accounts. Larkin et al. (2006) suggested that IPA studies should provide “overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial ‘description’ about a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context” (p. 104). To that end, the analysis for this study located the participants’ descriptive narratives contextually and provided a critical commentary of the meaning behind the participants’ claims in relation to the phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006).

Participants

Participants in IPA studies are chosen because they can speak genuinely and deeply about the research topic (Smith et al., 2009). The key component of an IPA analysis lies in the researcher’s interpretation of the participants’ lived experiences of a particular event (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Larkin et al., 2011). To that end, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) asserted: “Less is more in IPA: fewer participants examined at a greater depth is always preferable to a broader, shallow and simply descriptive analysis of many individuals” (p. 756). Therefore, IPA samples are generally small and homogeneous, allowing for intense engagements with the participants and detailed
interpretative analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) confirmed that three to six participants are an appropriate sample for IPA studies, while other researchers have suggested eight to twelve. The researcher for this study initially recruited 15 students, selecting the first eight students who accepted the invitation to participate in the study. The following sections provide additional details about the research setting chosen for this study and the characteristics of the participants of the study.

The Research Setting

The research site selected for this study is one of the 58 two-year, public institutions that comprise the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). The researcher obtained permission from the institution’s president to access the site and conduct this study, and secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from her institution prior to beginning this research. The college is a mid-sized, suburban institution located in the central region of the state, and it is ranked the ninth largest community college within NCCCS, based on student headcount and full-time equivalent (FTE) population of degree-seeking, credit students. In Fall 2015, the college enrolled 5,180 undergraduate degree-seeking students and reported a 12 to 1 student-to-faculty ratio (NCES, 2016b). According to data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the college’s total cost of tuition and fees for full-time, in-state students for academic year 2014-2015 was $2,442, and 69% of the undergraduate student population received some form of grant or scholarship aid, while 58% received Pell grants (NCES, 2016b).

While the national three-year graduation rate for two-year institutions was 27.9% for the Fall 2011 cohort (NCES, 2016a), the completion rate for the subject institution was only 13% (NCES, 2016b). The 2016 Performance Measures for Student Success report, released by NCCCS in 2016, presented curriculum completion data for each of the 58 colleges within the
system (NCCCS, 2016). For the Fall 2009 student cohorts, the NCCCS baseline was set at 35.9%, or two standard deviations below the system mean, and the NCCCS system excellence level was 51.9% or one standard deviation above the system mean. The cohort for the institution proposed as the research site for this study included 1,534 students; only 22.2% of the students at the subject institution graduated (NCCCS, 2016). However, another 14.5% of students from the Fall 2009 cohort transferred to a four-year university, and the institution retained an additional 1.4% from the cohort. Therefore, the college’s 38.1% for this measure was above the NCCCS 35.9% baseline.

This type of institution was ideal for this study for two primary reasons. First, a high percentage of the student population receives financial aid, and more than half of the population is low-income, as evidenced by the large percentage of Pell recipients. Additionally, the college’s overall three-year graduation rate is significantly lower than the national average.

**Characteristics of the Participants**

This study secured a homogeneous sample of eight low-income students who graduated during the previous term from their program of study at an urban community college in North Carolina. A uniform sample is most suitable for IPA because it permits dialogue about both similarities of the group as well as differences in the setting (Smith et al., 2009). Accordingly, this study recruited successful, low-income students. The “successful” students in this study had recently graduated when the data was collected. Low-income students are defined as students who qualify for the maximum federal Pell grant award.

The student population at the research site ranges in age from dually enrolled high school students who are younger than 18 to senior students over 65 years of age. Sixty-three percent of the student population is 24 and under, 34% is 25 and over, and 3% is age unknown (NCES,
While the age-ranges of the student population is diverse, gender and ethnicity are much less so; in Fall 2015, 62% of the student population was female; 65% identified as White, 18% Black or African-American, 10% Hispanic, and the remaining 7% self-identified as multi-racial, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, non-resident alien, Native Hawaiian, or unknown (NCES, 2016b). The majority of the student body, 66%, attended school part-time (NCES, 2016b).

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of successful, low-income, community college students and to generate knowledge that will help student services practitioners create and enhance programs to help low-income students graduate. Low-income students who were able to successfully overcome inherent risks and barriers threatening to derail their academic pursuits provided the ideal group of participants for this exploration. The average age of community college students in the United States is 29 years old (AACC, 2015), and, at the time of this study, the average age of students at the institution was close to that, at 28 years old. Adult students are characterized as 25 years old or older and possess at least one of these characteristics: they work full-time, attend school part-time, raise children, have returned to school after some time away, or they are independent students responsible for supporting themselves financially (Kasworm, 2003). Adult students are less likely to persist to completion, even though they tend to have higher grade point averages (Capps, 2012; Hansen et al., 2014; Welch, 2014). Low-income students who work at least 30 hours per week and attend school part-time are at a higher risk of dropping out (Kezar et al., 2015). Therefore, in addition to being successful and low-income students, the participants for this study were adult students who were 25 years old or older, and who possessed at least one of Kasworm’s (2003) characteristics for being classified as an adult student. The participant pool consisted of both male and female
students who worked at least part-time while attending school either part-time or full-time. This rationale for this approach to selecting participants was to provide a sample that was representative of the college’s students, and that was distinct enough to allow for a rich exploration of the inherent risks and barriers faced by the typically diverse community college population.

**Sampling procedures.** Purposeful sampling, a common technique for qualitative inquiry and the practice most often used for IPA research, was employed to recruit participants for this research study. Creswell (2015) asserted that the intent of qualitative inquiry is “to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 204). The best way for a researcher to explore the central phenomenon is to purposefully select individuals who have been a part of the phenomenon under study and who are therefore most qualified to speak about their experiences and provide information that informs and facilitates learning (Creswell, 2015). Participants in the study were offered a $25 gift card to thank them for the time needed to participate in the entire study process. The following steps were used to recruit participants:

1. An invitation to participate in the study was Emailed to the college Email address of 15 students who met the sampling characteristics described above (see Appendix A). The communication briefly described the study and explained to interested students how to contact the researcher. The reason for sending the invitation to 15 students was the probability that some students would decline to participate.

2. The researcher received eight responses from the first batch of 15 students.

3. Within 24 hours of receiving a response to the invitation to participate, the researcher sent a follow-up Email with more details about the study, including an informed
consent form (see Appendix B). The researcher answered any questions posed by the respondent and scheduled an initial meeting.

4. If the initial invitation to participate had not yielded eight participants within two weeks from the initial communication, the researcher would have completed steps one through three again with a new set of 15 possible participants, and would have continued to reiterate this process until eight participants agreed to participate.

Procedures

This section presents a detailed, step-by-step guide of how this research study was conducted. The first step was to secure Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at both the research site and the researcher’s institution before initiating the recruiting and interview process. The study complied with all guidelines for protecting human participants. This section proceeds with an outline of the approach the researcher used for: (a) data collection; (b) data analysis; (c) ethical considerations; (d) trustworthiness; (e) potential research bias; and (f) limitations.

Data Collection

Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) pointed to the importance of personal interviews with a small sample of participants and a few questions in an IPA study. Larkin et al. (2006) documented that it is also important to capture verbatim accounts from a small group of participants to genuinely understand their perceptions of the phenomenon. For IPA to be truly effective, it is essential for the researcher to engage sensitively with the participants (Shinebourne, 2011) and to use flexible interviewing techniques that allow unanticipated themes to emerge (Smith, 2004). Semi-structured interviews are thus an effective technique to use when collecting data in an IPA study (Smith, 2004; Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Biggerstaff &
Thompson, 2008; Finlay, 2009; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011; Larkin et al., 2011; Shinebourne, 2011). This means the researcher began by using general prompts for the conversation while simultaneously allowing the participant to sculpt the conversation with considerable freedom (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). Multiple semi-structured interviews were utilized for this study, as detailed in the data collection process under that sub-heading below. This data collection method allowed the researcher to explore specific accounts of individuals’ stories focused on specific situations and events and generate detailed, descriptive stories and verbatim, nuanced accounts of autobiographical narratives. Additionally, for this study, the researcher retrieved demographic, program of study, grade point average (GPA), and enrollment data from the institution’s management information systems (Butin, 2010), and elaborated on ideas and internal dialogue by utilizing a reflective memo technique of qualitative data collection (Creswell, 2015).

**Data collection process.** This study utilized Seidman’s (2012) modified, three-interview structure for qualitative research with all interviews being digitally recorded using two digital recording devices, (one served as backup), and with participants signing informed consent forms prior to the initiation of the interview. Seidman (2012) established a modified three-interview approach that: (a) establishes the context for the participants’ experience in the first interview; (b) provides the opportunity for the participants to reconstruct their experience within that context in the second interview; and (c) encourages deep reflection by the participants in the third interview to allow them to make meaning from their experiences. These are the steps that were used for data collection in this study:

1. The researcher conducted qualitative interviews that were both structured and flexible to allow the researcher to gain relevant data about the central phenomenon through
specific questions, while also providing space for the conversation to go wherever the participants’ insights and reflection took it (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith et al., 2009).

2. Once the researcher had eight committed participants, she scheduled and completed initial interviews during which the researcher asked each participant to select a pseudonym (Creswell, 2015) for the purposes of confidentiality. The researcher also discussed the study in more detail and answered any questions that the participants had, while collecting biographical and demographic data (see Appendix D) and obtaining signed informed consent agreements from each participant (see Appendix B). This initial interview allowed the researcher to explain her goals in conducting this study while providing an opportunity to establish the foundations of a relationship with the participants. The initial interviews took approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The researcher maintained the participants’ names and pseudonyms in an encrypted password protection software program that was only accessible by the researcher or her primary investigator (her academic supervisor) with a valid password.

3. The researcher used the college’s management information system database to supplement data from the initial interviews (Butin, 2010). This data was used to validate the participant’s enrollment and demographic data.

4. Once the initial interviews were complete, the researcher completed in-depth interviews with each participant. The questions were open-ended, and the researcher was an active listener, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009). The questions were designed to explore the central research question, and the researcher used prompts
that encouraged the participants to provide details about their experiences as successful, low-income community college students, while also allowing reflective space for the participant to be free to share information that emerged organically through the conversation. In this way, the participant and the researcher were able to make sense of the meaning from the students’ recollections and reflections. These interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

5. The researcher used the REV.COM online transcription service to transcribe each interview, and the researcher Emailed an interview transcript to each of the participants. A summary of the essence of the interview, with the researcher’s thematic interpretations, were included in the Email, along with an invitation for the participants to react both to the transcript and to the summary by confirming, clarifying, or disagreeing with the content. This step fulfilled the rigor of member-checking by providing the transcript for the participants’ review and asking the participants to confirm the validity of the researcher’s summarized interpretations (Creswell, 2015). The researcher responded to all issues or concerns related to the data that was identified by the participants and offered them the choice of responding in writing or meeting in person to review and discuss. All of the participants chose to respond in writing.

6. The researcher maintained field notes to capture specific details and nuances during interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

IPA interpretations should be grounded in data and contextualized by existing literature, and the final interpretation should present a clear and coherent argument, even though the
researcher may include ambiguities and contradictions due to the different perceptions of the participants (Shinebourne, 2011). Larkin et al. (2006) suggested that IPA studies provide “overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial ‘description’ about a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context” (p. 104).

The seminal author credited with developing the IPA model, Jonathan Smith, described the analytic process of the IPA researcher as an iterative cycle characterized by idiographic, inductive interrogation (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2007). Existing literature has not established one specific method for IPA data analysis, however, and in fact, flexibility in the researcher’s analytic approach in IPA is one of the method’s distinguishing characteristics. Smith et al. (2009) did develop a five-stage heuristic structure for analysis, based on a set of standard strategies for analysis; it was designed to be flexible. This framework encourages a joint undertaking between the analyst and the participant in which the researcher engages reflectively with the participants’ stories. Smith et al. (2009) described this shared process of analysis: “Although the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience, the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking – this is the double hermeneutic” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80).

Data analysis for this study followed the five-step process developed by Smith et al. (2009) as presented below. IPA is “as much a way of thinking about and seeing, as of doing something” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 81). To that end, this step-by-step strategy facilitated the analytic process, but the researcher remained flexible and was able to adapt the process when the data required it. Due to IPA’s idiographic commitment, this process meant the researcher had to work through each participant’s case individually before making connections between themes
Step one. The first step of the process was to actively engage with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcript of one of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). First, the researcher recorded their initial reactions and most potent observations about their experience with the interview in a notebook. Next, the researcher listened to the entire recorded interview while reading the transcript and recorded interpretations in a notebook. The researcher re-read the transcript, made additional notes and did her best to thoroughly immerse herself in the participant’s world (Smith et al., 2009).

Step two. The second step was the most detailed and required a substantial amount of time because it involved an exploration of the language used and the semantic content of the first transcript, identifying and noting “specific ways by which the participant talks about, understands and thinks about an issue” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). The researcher’s aim was to develop a complete and inclusive set of interpretative notes and detailed comments about the data. The interpretative note-taking process involved: (a) examining the language used; (b) framing the language within the context of the participant’s lived experience; and (c) identifying intangible impressions that allowed the researcher to connect patterns of meaning from the account (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher captured three distinct types of comments: (a) detailed comments that described the interview’s content; (b) linguistic comments that examined the use of language; and (c) conceptual comments that probed and questioned the participant’s story. To facilitate this process, the researcher utilized a qualitative data analysis software tool: MAXQDA.
Step three. The third step focused on identifying emergent themes by shifting from working primarily with the interview transcript to analyzing the exploratory comments developed in the previous steps (Smith et al., 2009). In this step, the research became more collaborative, as the researcher was more closely involved in the resulting analysis. Using the data collected, the researcher created memos (Creswell, 2015). Memoing is a common grounded-theory research technique in which the researcher captured vital concepts and wrote short phrases that she then used to identify dominant, emergent themes that rose from the data (Creswell, 2015). The researcher focused on crucial, individual points within the text, remembering “the hermeneutic circle where the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). The goal of this step was for the researcher to describe and interpret what she had identified was most important from the participant’s account of their lived experiences, in an iterative process with her notes and impressions of the participant’s telling of their story.

Step four. In step four, the researcher searched for connections arising from emergent themes identified in the previous step, still within the individual interview. The researcher developed a map that drew the critical themes together and created a structure that pointed to the most critical facets of the individual’s narrative (Smith et al., 2009). During this increasingly interpretative stage, the researcher employed specific techniques to identify patterns and look at connected themes including abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function. During this part of the analysis, the researcher made notes in a research journal about how the analysis was completed and provided detailed commentaries about the analytic process. The result was a graphic representation illustrating the emergent themes and the structure of their interconnectivity (Smith et al., 2009). Once step four was
completed, the researcher began the process again with the next participant’s interview and continued to progress through steps one through four until all cases had been thoroughly analyzed before moving to step 5, the final step of the data analysis process.

**Step five.** The objective of this final step of the analytic process was to identify patterns across the participants’ cases. The researcher compared each of the graphic illustrations created in step four to theoretically assess shared themes and identify the ones that were representative of higher-order theories. During this phase, the researcher searched for the most powerful and compelling themes and developed a graphic representation that clearly identified the connections between the individual cases (Smith et al., 2009).

**Presentation of findings.** The way in which the IPA research findings are presented is a critical component of the explorative process. Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999) suggested that “the division between analysis and writing up is, to a certain extent, a false one, in that the analysis will be expanded during the writing phase” (p. 76). The final step of the analysis process for this study was the completion of a narrative analysis, which is the conventional approach for the presentation of findings of an IPA study (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriquez, 2011; Larkin et al., 2011). The written analysis established a convincing argument to the reader of why the participants’ stories and the researcher’s interpretative analysis are important; it clearly delineated the boundaries between the respondents’ actual words and the researcher’s idiographic analysis and subsequent interpretation (Smith et al., 1999). The themes and sub-themes derived from the analysis were presented with the findings as additional support for the interpretative narrative (Smith et al., 1999; Smith, 2004; Larkin et al., 2006). The themes and patterns of themes that emerged from the different individual cases formed the basis of the researcher’s analysis and reflections on the
data. Additionally, the narrative portrayed an engaging analysis that clearly illustrated the participants’ engagement with and understanding of their relationship to the study’s central phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2011).

Tinto’s theory of student departure (1993) and Bourdieu’s (1986) theoretical concept of habitus, as discussed in Chapter 1, guided the discussion of the key findings from the study. These theories provided the researcher with two lenses to frame the understanding of how the shared outlook and experiences of socio-economically disadvantaged students influenced the students’ ability to successfully transition into college culture, thereby increasing the likelihood that they would persist to graduation. Smith (2011) asserted that an IPA narrative should fully engage the reader, so they feel like they have “learned in detail about the participants’ experience of the phenomenon under investigation” (p. 24). For the final presentation of findings for this research study, the researcher utilized a variety of techniques to present a compelling story, including powerful quotations from the participant interviews and interpretative accounts connecting the themes through the theoretical lenses.

**Ethical Considerations**

Creswell (2015) identified several ethical issues that researchers should consider when conducting fieldwork. First, it is essential that the researcher remain open and transparent about the methods they will use to gather data, conveying the purpose of the study and all other details of the study to the participants. The researcher has a responsibility to the academic community to conduct research ethically, without deceiving the participants or the readers and without misrepresenting the participants. It is common for researchers to provide fair remuneration to the participants or to find a material way to reciprocate to the participants in a way that meets their needs. The researcher should also be aware of and find ways to mitigate any adverse
repercussions to the participants that may result from the presentation of the research (Creswell, 2015).

The researcher took all possible measures to protect the participants’ identities and to maintain their full confidentiality. This was accomplished by maintaining the participants’ names and pseudonyms in an encrypted password protection software program that only the researcher and her advisor were able to access. All electronic research files and notes were stored on a secure and encrypted network and backed up on an external storage device in a secure and private location. Appropriate security features, including password protection for all files and electronic storage locations, were utilized, and physical documents including consent forms, field notes, reflective memos, etc. related to this study were stored in a private and locked file cabinet with the researcher maintaining exclusive possession of the key.

**Trustworthiness**

The purpose of this study was to explore the subjective experiences of lived experiences of successful, low-income community college students. Ely (1991) suggested that trustworthiness for a qualitative researcher is a concern throughout every stage and during each activity of the research. Ely (1991) asserted, “it is a personal belief system that shapes the procedures in process” (p. 93). The primary goal of trustworthiness in any research study is to ensure accurate, credible, and reliable collection of data and presentation of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher took multiple steps to maintain trustworthiness during the entire research project, including the following, which are further detailed in subsections below: (a) sustained engagement with participants and member-checking to maintain credibility; (b) thick description to affirm transferability; (c) internal audit procedures to uphold dependability; and
(d) reflexive journaling to support confirmability. Additionally, the researcher adhered to Yardley’s (2000) principles for validity in qualitative research:

- **Sensitivity to context:** The researcher showed sensitivity to the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants.
- **Commitment and rigor:** The researcher took the interview process seriously and demonstrated “considerable personal commitment and investment in ensuring the participant is comfortable and in attending closely to what the participant is saying” (Smith et al., 2009, p.181).
- **Transparency and coherence:** The researcher clearly described all stages of the research in the final presentation of the study, including a careful description of how the participants were chosen, the way the interviews were scheduled and conducted and the steps used to analyze the data (Smith et al., 2009).
- **Impact and importance:** The researcher aspired to tell the reader something is useful and important as well as being interesting (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher strived to touch the reader, in keeping with Finlay’s (2009) assertion that, “Research, which doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing any more” (p. 15).

**Credibility.** Credibility in qualitative research addresses how well the researcher demonstrated an authentic representation of the central phenomenon; it is essential for any research project (Shenton, 2004). Validation processes were utilized throughout the entire research process to ensure that findings and interpretations accurately and consistently represent the participant’s reality (Creswell, 2015). Sustained engagement with the study participants and member-checking was utilized in this study to ensure credibility.
Since all the participants in this study were from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, they may have felt self-conscious, embarrassed, or uncomfortable sharing their lived experiences with the researcher. It was critically important for the researcher to be aware that these feelings may be present and to take the time that was required to connect with the participants, building a trusting relationship and creating a comfortable environment for them to facilitate open discussion. The majority of the data for this study was collected during in-depth interviews with the participants, but additional data was also gathered in the initial interview and subsequent follow-up Emails or verbal conversations. Therefore, the participants had multiple opportunities to share their lived experiences in both written and verbal communications. These various interactions helped the researcher develop a thorough understanding of the participants’ understanding of their lived experience (Creswell, 2015).

Member-checking is a standard way to corroborate findings and validate a researcher’s conclusions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ely, 1991). Following each initial interview, the researcher developed a summary of the essence of the interview and provided the summary along with a transcript of the interview to each of the participants. The researcher asked the participants to review and react to both the summary and the transcript. This member-checking step allowed the researcher to address disagreements, to confirm the content, and to make corrections as needed (Creswell, 2015). The researcher responded to all participants’ comments and offered each participant the choice of responding in writing or meeting in person to discuss and clarify any information they wished to share.

Transferability. In qualitative research, transferability refers to generalization, specifically: how easily can the results of the research be transferred to additional contexts? To ensure transferability, the researcher utilized a thick description technique by providing rich,
detailed, and comprehensive descriptions of lived experiences with enough specificity about the context of the fieldwork to allow the reader to determine if the study’s environment is transferable to another situation and therefore the findings can be justified as applicable elsewhere (Shenton, 2004). The concept of thick description is common across numerous disciplines and many paradigms of inquiry including phenomenology (Ponterotto, 2006). The essence of a thick description is that it accurately portrays and interprets social actions, thoughts, and emotions within a context and among a group of observed participants (Ponterotto, 2006). Ponterotto (2006) asserted, “thick description accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher’s understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place” (p. 543). This study used thick description to illustrate the participants’ thoughts and feelings to thoughtfully and creatively depict the context for the social interactions of the participants in a way that allowed the reader to mentally place himself or herself in the research setting (Ponterotto, 2006).

**Dependability.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that credibility and dependability in qualitative research are so closely tied together that if you demonstrate credibility, you have gone a long way towards demonstrating dependability. To specifically address dependability within this study, the researcher created an internal audit trail providing extensive detail about the research study (Shenton, 2004; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The comprehensive internal audit trail for this study included: (a) documentation on the specific purpose of the study; (b) descriptions of why and how the participants were chosen; (c) details about how the data was collected and how long it took to collect the data; (d) thorough explanations of the data analysis techniques; (e) discussions about the interpretation of the data and the presentation of the analysis and findings; and (f) detailed descriptions of the techniques used to confirm data
credibility (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Other researchers are able to use this in-depth audit trail to repeat the study, and it provides an opportunity for the readers to assess the effectiveness and validity of the practices used in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

**Confirmability.** Confirmability refers to the steps taken by the researcher to ensure that the study findings are not biased by the researcher’s preferences (Shenton, 2004). The first step in ensuring confirmability in this study involved the researcher admitting her potential biases and predispositions by disclosing a detailed account of positionality. Additionally, within the research report, the researcher acknowledged beliefs that supported the decisions made, identified reasons for choosing specific methods, described attitudes that influenced interpretations, and revealed theories that were not sustained by the data (Shenton, 2004).

Thomas & Magilvy (2011) suggested, “reflective research allows a big picture view with interpretations that produce new insights, allowing for developing confirmability of the research and, overall, leading the reader or consumer of the research to have a sense of trust in the conduct credibility of findings and applicability of the study” (p. 154). Reflexivity involves critical self-reflection by the researcher to uncover how preconceptions affect the exploration (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study. Immediately after each interaction with a participant, the researcher recorded reflective commentary in a research journal, detailing personal feelings, insights, and potential biases (Shenton, 2004; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Instead of making potentially biased judgments during the interview, the researcher made a conscious effort to follow the participants’ lead during the interview and asked for clarification of metaphors, misunderstood terms, or slang words (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

**Potential Research Bias**
Takacs (2002) asserted, “few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of our own perspective – to be able to identify assumptions that we take as universal truths, but that instead have been crafted by our own unique identity and experiences in the world” (p. 169). The unique experiences of this researcher’s life define who she is personally, and frame whom she has become as a scholar-practitioner at a suburban community college. The researcher’s upbringing as a poor, white girl, in a tight-knit Christian family, on a small Southern farm, in the rural North Carolina during the 1960’s and 1970’s, inevitably and indelibly impacted her identity. The turbulent environment of that era in America afforded the researcher numerous opportunities to witness firsthand the cruelty of social prejudice, racial bigotry, and marginalization. Those experiences created an aspirational motivation for her to serve as an advocate for the oppressed and marginalized.

The opportunity to attend college through the help of federal financial assistance (Pell grants), and academic scholarships, offered the researcher hope for a better life and a measure of economic stability that her parents and grandparents never realized. After spending the first half of her adult working life in corporate America, the researcher found her way to the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) in 1996. The researcher is committed to the open-access community college model and is steadfastly supportive of the power of education to transform lives for economically disadvantaged, minority, and other marginalized populations. In the words of one of the researcher’s most favored quotes by Nelson Mandela: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” That credo resonates with the researcher because of the impact that education had on her life personally, and it fuels her passion for helping other disadvantaged students create a pathway to a more sustainable economic future by taking advantage of all that community colleges can offer them.
Fetterman (2010) concluded that the choice of what we study is itself a bias, suggesting that we begin with preconceived notions and biases, and “biases serve both positive and negative functions” in our research (p. 1). The choice of this thesis topic by this researcher affirms Fetterman’s (2010) conclusion and illustrates the importance of controlling for bias and predispositions within the research study. In this IPA study, the researcher co-constructed findings through interpretation of the participants’ lived experiences. The researcher was afforded the opportunity to empathize and identify with the participants through interaction and discourse, thereby gaining deeper insight and meaning from the accounts of their lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005).

Based on her background and current professional career, it is reasonable to assume that the researcher was able to identify with the experiences of the participants personally. She has strongly held convictions about education and specifically about community colleges that have the potential to bias her interpretations and analysis. It was critically important for the researcher to remain true to the voices of the participants and to guard against allowing her related experiences to influence the narratives and the meaning-making of the narratives. The researcher developed comprehensive steps to ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of this study, and she was committed to ensuring the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations of this research study. First, the sample size was small because IPA emphasizes the importance of an idiographic focus. Therefore, this study reflected some of the experiences of eight successful, low-income, community college students. Second, because the comfort level of participants asked to discuss their socio-economic backgrounds
varied, a larger sample might have produced richer and more in-depth interview data. Third, community colleges are “community-oriented,” meaning they adapt to the communities they serve. Therefore, the results of this study may be influenced by the unique attributes and qualities of the subject institution. Fourth, while the researcher’s choice of two theoretical frameworks helped her focus on her goal of understanding the experiences of eight successful, low-income community college students, the choice of these two particular frameworks also limited what she investigated. Finally, the researcher in this double hermeneutic IPA study made the interpretations that resulted in the findings, while other researchers focused at varying levels on the same data might develop divergent interpretations.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of successful low-income community college students and how they negotiated that successful path. The IPA methodology chosen for this study gave voice to the participants and allowed the researcher to construct meaning from their understanding of how they achieved success. Standard IPA data collection and analysis procedures were followed, and because of the active role required of the qualitative researcher in an IPA study, controls to limit researcher bias were taken. Despite the limitations noted above, this study contributes to research aimed at understanding the experiences of successful low-income community college students and helping student services practitioners create and enhance programs that help low-income students persist to completion.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research study was to understand the experiences of successful, low-income, community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. Knowledge generated from this research is expected to inform the provision of support systems in place for low-income community college students and help student services practitioners create and enhance programs aimed at assisting more low-income students to stay in school and graduate. The researcher chose the qualitative lens of IPA to analyze the results from in-depth interviews with eight successful low-income students who recently graduated from the institution that is the site of this study. The study participants described their lived experiences by responding to 11 interview questions designed to answer the study’s central research question: How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success?

A thorough analysis of the data yielded three superordinate themes: the imprint of being low-income; the importance of supportive relationships; and the impact of institutional support systems. Within these three superordinate themes, eight subordinate themes emerged: limited choices; self-motivation and self-determination; work ethic; self-doubt and fear; family support; peer support; faculty and staff support; the positive impact of institutional support; and the negative impact of lack of institutional support. Table 1 outlines the superordinate and subordinate themes and details their occurrences within the interviews. The table shows that each of the superordinate themes was present in all of the participants’ interviews, and the subordinate themes surfaced in more than half of the participants’ responses.
Table 1
Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Clay</th>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>James</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Nova Lee</th>
<th>Lily</th>
<th>Poudric</th>
<th>Katie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The imprint of being low-income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1A. Limited choices</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>1B. Self-motivation and self-determination</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. Work ethic</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1D. Self-doubt and fear</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The importance of supportive relationships</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. Family support</td>
<td></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>2B. Peer support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C. Faculty and staff support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The impact of institutional support systems</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>3A. Positive impact of institutional support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3B. Negative impact of lack of institutional support</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chapter explores each superordinate and subordinate theme in-depth. The researcher used excerpts from the interview transcripts to illustrate how the students made sense of their persistence toward successful completion. Throughout this chapter, direct quotes from the
participants’ stories provided evidence supporting the researcher’s findings, preserving transparency and validity.

The Imprint of Being Low-Income

The participants in this study shared one characteristic that shaped their lives more than any other: they all grew up in low-income homes. The imprint of being low-income emerged as the first superordinate theme in the interviews. This theme surfaced as participants described how they recalled what life was like for them growing up. Even though most of the participants talked about not being conscious of being poor as young children, they explained that, as they grew older, they understood how their family was “different” from others. As the students began to realize that their friends had material items they could not afford, most still remembered their childhoods fondly, and they were more apt to want to talk about their close-knit and supportive family relationships than to readily discuss their financial hardships.

Most of the students grew up accepting that for them, the only option after high school was to find a job and work. As young adults, the only future the students could envision was shaped by their experiences living in a low-income environment. In this context, their visions for their futures largely mimicked pathways through life akin to what their parents or other family members had experienced. Therefore, their expectations were limited, and they largely focused on securing any available job as quickly as possible without considering how education could prepare them for a better or more sustainable career path. All the students admitted that they could not imagine what they did not know, and they did not have a frame of reference for what a different path could look like, so they accepted the only future they could visualize. For most of them, that meant working was the priority and attending college was positioned as a dream that was unattainable. The student interviews revealed how the imprint of growing up in a
low-income family influenced their thoughts and attitudes about postsecondary education and often created a personal belief that higher education was not for them. The following sections describe each of the four subordinate themes in more detail.

**Limited Choices**

The students’ described their postsecondary options as limited or even non-existent because they did not view higher education as an affordable option. All the students needed financial help to afford college, and the majority said they could not depend on any monetary support from their families. James felt like his grades were good and, academically, he was prepared for college, but he also acknowledged money was the greatest obstacle, saying, “I think the only real barrier was the money.” Lily described coming to terms with her limited choices: “I was going to have to work hard to get where I wanted to be” and “Mum couldn't pay for the college I wanted to go to.” Clay talked about dreaming of going to college even though her parents had told her and her siblings that “they didn’t pay for our college.” She said that she understood she would need to fund her own education: “So I was going to go to college on a swimming scholarship, but I lost it because I hurt my shoulder.” After her injury, Clay had planned to go to the local junior college, but in the end, she decided she would not be able to make it on her own, and she joined the Navy instead.

While the students struggled to find viable solutions to help them pay for their education, eventually they were all able to develop a workable financial plan. Clay said she “knew that I was going to have to do it on my own,” so, her decision to enlist in the Navy like her father was in part an opportunity for her to pay for college. She explained, “I knew that they would pay for my schooling if I enlisted, I’d have my GI bill.” Poudric also chose a military pathway, enlisting
in the Marines because, “I did want to go to school, I did want to work with computers, and there was no way I could do it without some sort of help . . . I figured, kill two birds.”

While Clay and Poudric chose to join the military to secure veterans’ benefits to pay for college later, other students said they realized they could rely on need-based grants, scholarships, and loans because they were low-income. James depicted financial aid as his only opportunity saying, “I would not have been able to go without the Pell grant and without financial aid, like the student loans. I would not have been able to go, period.” Laura said she was only able to attend college because of Pell grants and the school’s scholarship that she received. Although students found different ways to overcome the financial barriers to their education, it is important to understand that, because of their pasts, “money” was foremost in their vision of themselves as higher education participants.

Even after securing financial resources, the students still expressed feeling like their choices for where they could attend college were limited, and most chose the community college because they felt like it was their only feasible option. After her hopes to attend a university on a swimming scholarship were derailed due to an injury, and prior to deciding to enlist in the Navy, Clay stated that she felt like her only option was to attend the local junior college. Likewise, Poudric chose a community college because it was less expensive, and he would be able to use his veteran’s benefits there. Laura, meanwhile, said she knew “community college was going to be the direction I had to go in.” Nova Lee decided to attend a community college for similar reasons, saying, “My original reason for signing up with the community college was money. Even though it's on par [academically] with state schools, it was still not as expensive.”

During the interviews, another important aspect emerged regarding why the students felt they had limited choices. The students observed that they lacked influences in their lives –
individuals who urged them to think beyond their existing situation or who understood how to support their dreams of building a future that was outside the margins of their socio-economic position. For example, Nova Lee recalled being told to “get good grades, and you're supposed to go to college,” but she said she didn't know how to go to college, and no one in her world could tell her how or why. She said her aunt would say, “Just do it, you're supposed to do it,’ but they couldn't tell me how because they had never done it.” While Laura described her mother and grandmother as supportive of her dreams, she also came to realize that they inadvertently created barriers that kept her from being able to pursue these aspirations effectively. She said she realized this when she sought therapy to help her deal with major issues from her childhood that included being molested as a young child and becoming a teenage mother when she was 16. Her therapist recognized that Laura had been stuck in the role of taking care of other people her whole life and that the burden of keeping her family together had kept her from doing anything to help herself advance. Laura said the therapist asked her, “If you could do one thing, what would you do?” She told the therapist she would go to school and become a nurse, and the therapist helped her figure out how to pursue that goal. Laura credited that experience as a turning point in her life because it helped her move forward with goals and objectives, and it raised the expectations she had for her life.

Katie’s story is perhaps the best illustration of how the students lacked encouragers and supporters for their aspirations. Katie grew up on a small tobacco farm in rural North Carolina. Her father left the family when she was approximately eight years old, and she was raised by her single mother. Katie said she always dreamed of going to college, even though she knew it would be a struggle financially. Katie shared that her mother and other family members encouraged her dream, to a point. They urged her to be independent and to take care of herself,
as long as it was in a profession that was “needed.” However, Katie wanted to be an artist, a profession that was not valued in her family or in the small, country community where she lived because, “if I wasn't going to grow up and be a nurse, or an accountant, or somebody with a job that is always needed, then what was the point?” Katie did not have anyone in her life who supported her dream to expand her world beyond the confines of the family tobacco farm and the rural area where her family had always lived. Consequently, she dropped out the first time she enrolled in college because she was in a social work program that made her mother happy but that (she said) did not allow her to “be who I am.” Katie said that “growing up impacted me mostly in just putting a lot of fear in me and making me afraid to pursue what I really wanted to pursue…I never really let myself think too big.”

In summary, throughout the conversations with the students, it was evident how the imprint of being from a low-income background had significantly impacted their perceptions of the higher education choices available to them. Notably, the students did not express concerns about their ability to handle the academic rigor of college, focusing instead on money and the need to work as the primary factors limiting their postsecondary options. All these students were able to effectively mitigate the financial barriers through a variety of ways, including taking advantage of need-based financial assistance and earning veteran’s benefits by serving in the military prior to going to college. However, even after successfully navigating the financial hurdles, most students stated that they continued to feel like their choices were limited because they viewed the community college as their only option.

**Self-Motivation and Self-Determination**

Notably, all eight of the participants interviewed described their underprivileged background as a primary factor in their success at the community college. This subtheme
emerged in various ways, particularly as the students talked about their childhood and teenage years, and as they shared their perceptions about how their background influenced their college experience. All eight students credited self-motivation and self-determination with helping them succeed in college, and each student also attributed growing up in a disadvantaged environment as the reason why they valued and demonstrated those characteristics. Following are examples of how the students recognized self-motivation and self-determination as integral to their collegiate success and stemming from their lower-income situation.

The participants viewed a college degree as the first step towards getting a job, entering a new career, or advancing in their current career; ultimately, they desired to increase their incomes. For example, Mark had worked at a fast food restaurant during high school and, after graduating, he continued to work there while he also continued to live with his parents. He said, “I think it was just because it was familiar, it was comfortable, I stayed there. But I really wasn't, financially, in a good spot.” He recalled his father giving him a timeframe to move out and live on his own, and he explained that made him realize he was going to need a decent job:

Because I was barely getting by, just had enough just to, pretty much, get around, save up a little money. So, I went to work, actually, at a plant down in Harrisburg and worked there for about two years. And that was really rough because it was like lots of humidity . . . Just terrible working conditions. And that is actually what stuck out to me . . . I'd be working sometimes fifteen hours straight non-stop, I was on the assembly line . . . it was just really rough conditions, rough environment, and stuff. I think the wage that I made there was about $10 an hour coming in, and then I think I bumped up to about, around roughly $11. And I remember just thinking, “I don't like where I'm at in life, you know, what do I
want in life?" And I remember looking across and seeing one of the older guys, he was about probably in his 70's or 80's, and he would like fix and work on the press machines. And I remember seeing him walking by, and I thought to myself, "That's gonna be me . . . if I don't do something."

Realizing he needed to do something to avoid ending up in a job that he perceived as a “dead-end” prompted Mark to explore his postsecondary options at the community college.

Poudric had been medically discharged from the Marines due to injuries he sustained while deployed overseas. He had served in the Military Police and had planned to continue his criminal justice career when he left the service, but his injuries prohibited him from doing so. He needed a job that did not require a great deal of physical stamina, and he explained that he was attending college so he could move into a career that would provide a comfortable way of life for his family. Poudric said, “I’m going [to college] because I want to be here because it's going to do something for me." While Mark and Poudric saw a college degree as a launching point for their careers, Clay and James chose to earn a degree to help them advance in their existing professions. At the time of the interview, Clay had worked for a non-profit for several years, and the agency had clearly indicated that a college degree was a requirement for her to move up. She explained, “In order for me to succeed at my non-profit job where I am, I need a degree. They don't care where you get it. They just want you to get it.” Clay also identified being determined to succeed as the single most important thing that kept her in school, saying, “I didn’t want to quit; I didn’t want to be a failure.” Like Clay, James saw his degree as a way for him to advance his career in law enforcement more quickly, as he described, “I feel like having the degree is just another thing that’s going to help prepare me.” James also framed self-
determination in terms of what he learned as a child and young adult in a lower-income family, saying, “If it’s something you want, you have to do it. Nobody’s going to hand it to you . . . so you have to be very motivated and dedicated.”

Five of the eight students discussed how growing up in a lower-income family had instilled in them the desire to be a positive role model for their children. Most of the students remained self-motivated and self-determined throughout their community college experience, in large part because of a strong ambition to set a good example and motivate their children also to pursue a college degree. At the time of the interview, Clay had a son who was in high school and who was unsure about whether he wanted to go to college. Clay was adamant about modeling higher education success for him, describing her objective as “commitment to my son, commitment to myself” and saying, “I wanted to show my son that yes, it could be done. It was going to be hard, but it was going to be worth it.” Similarly, Lily described a steadfast devotion to proving to her children that they could have the opportunity to earn a college degree and create a stable financial future for themselves. She said she wanted to “show them what could be done. Show them that even with where we come from, you can still do what you want regardless of what money you have.” Nova Lee, meanwhile, poignantly described how successful she felt when she graduated because her children were proud of her accomplishment:

The day I graduated, my nine-year-old said, “Mommy, I'm so proud of you. I can't wait to go to college.” And, I was so happy that it mattered. And my daughter said, “Mom, your speech was so great. Do you think that I will be able to speak at my college? What are the grades I have to make in order to stand on the stage?” And all I could do was cry. And I just thank my husband and my children, because, it actually mattered to them to see their mom finish. I didn't know if it
would. So, anyway, I held on for them. And I didn't quit because I couldn't tell them not to quit.

Katie acknowledged similar feelings when she talked about being a role model for her young son. She described being recognized for her art and being nominated for a leadership award around the same time that her young son graduated from kindergarten and won a class award: “He was so proud to show me because I had shown him all the things I was experiencing.” Poudric’s perspective on being a role model for his children was grounded in the way his father had provided the same example for him. He admitted that his father pushed him to go to college, saying, “He always taught me the benefits of school and how it will kind of help me look towards other people . . . it will look better when you’re looking for employment.” Poudric said he wanted to be that same kind of role model for his children.

In summary, each of the examples above demonstrates how the students viewed college as a vehicle to help them establish a more lucrative career and a better life for their families, while also affording them the opportunity to become a positive role model for their children. It became clear during the interviews that all eight students were driven by a passionate desire to move out of the lower-income strata that they had grown up in, establish a financially stable position for themselves and their families, and teach their children a new way to direct their futures. While the students’ narratives included numerous examples of the negative imprint of growing up low-income, the antithesis is demonstrated by the steadfast self-motivation and self-determination exhibited by the participants in this study. The researcher suggests that the participants’ past, their upbringing in a low-income family, clearly shaped their perception of their present and strongly influenced their choice to remain self-motivated and self-determined to succeed.
Work Ethic

A strong work ethic was the third subordinate theme that emerged and demonstrated the imprint of a low-income background. When the participants were asked to reflect on how their low-income upbringing had influenced their persistence to completion, over half of the students described a connection between their lower-income position and their perceived work ethic. Five students remarked that when they were children, they were taught to work hard and be committed to doing their best in every task handed to them. Those students associated their dedication to a strong work code and to work principles with helping them persist and earn their degrees.

When asked to describe what he attributed to his success in college, Mark reflected on his mother telling him that he could accomplish anything he wanted, if he was willing to work hard. He said he would tell his fellow college students that they could “be anything that they want to be, or do anything that they want to do . . . if they work hard enough.” Nova Lee explained how growing up poor meant that she had to “work a little bit harder,” and she said, “I feel as though I work harder because I am not entitled.” She went on to describe her experience of always having to work for what she had: “Nothing has ever really been handed to me . . . I think that matters . . . When you see something you want, you work a little harder to get it, because it’s what you’re used to doing.” James said, “I learned at a young age, if you want something, you have to work hard for it,” and he made a direct connection between a willingness to work hard and the ability to succeed in college. He emphasized, “Your work ethic has to be on pointe, or you will not make it. Or you won't do well, at least.” James also shared an impassioned description of the work ethic he learned from his parents:
Everybody worked, and when I say my mom was a stay-at-home mom, that's the hardest job there is because I see it. My wife's a stay-at-home mom, and I see how that is. I couldn't do it. And my dad was a hard worker. He didn't complain about anything. He got up every day and went to work. I don't even remember him laying out sick or nothing. He just went to work.

James considered his hard work as a primary reason he succeeded in school, reflecting, “You don’t get to where I’m at as fast as I did without being a hard worker.”

Two other students, Poudric and Lily, ascribed their work ethic to their experiences growing up in a lower-income family. Poudric suggested that he would not have done as well in college if he had not had to work hard to achieve his degree: “If I didn’t have to work to be here, then I don’t think I would have worked as hard while I was here.” Lily said that she appreciated how hard her parents worked and declared, “It makes me work harder.” However, Lily also said she did not want to work hard in the way she watched her parents work, only living paycheck to paycheck. She said she was motivated to work hard in college so she could secure a job that allowed her to make more money and spare her family the stress of living paycheck to paycheck. Lily said, “I did not want to live paycheck to paycheck . . . That is something that motivated me to work hard.”

In summary, the imprint of growing up in a low-income setting was evident in the participants’ narratives describing how they had watched their parents work hard yet still struggle financially. The students shared stories illustrating how their disadvantaged backgrounds shaped their work ethic, and they expressed how they viewed their willingness to work hard as a key component of their collegiate success.

Self-Doubt and Fear
Half of the participants acknowledged feelings of fear and self-doubt. Those students expressed their fear and self-doubt in various ways, including feeling isolated because they did not fit in, feeling as if they were not smart enough, doubting that college was an option for them, worrying that they would never finish, and fearing they would disappoint their family members. As the narratives unfolded, it became clear that the students’ fear and self-doubt emanated from their experiences growing up in a low-income environment, and this manifested itself in different ways based on the students’ individual circumstances. As the students reflected on how their insecurities threatened their persistence, they were able to articulate how they conquered their fears and quashed their self-doubt before it derailed their success. Notably, both dynamics in this duality – the will to succeed and doubt regarding success – originated in their status in a low-income family growing up.

When asked to describe what her life was like growing up, Nova Lee shared the most emotional story. She started by saying, “My life was very lonely…Nobody ever put me first.” Because of her mother’s drug addiction, she was forced to live with relatives whom she described as “overprotective and slightly abusive.” Nova Lee talked about spending “a lot of time alone with my own thoughts as a child,” and she credited the adults in her life with teaching her what not to be. Nova Lee seemed to have difficulty articulating her thoughts and was visibly upset as she continued to describe her upbringing, especially when she talked about her relationship with her family, at one point saying, “I just never really quite fit in.” She was placed in gifted programs beginning in first grade, and she said that the children in those programs were predominantly White while she is African-American. Nova Lee remembered feeling like she did not know how she got there and said, “I always felt like I wasn’t smart enough.” Notably, Nova Lee seemed more comfortable and at ease when she talked about her friends and their
families, and she acknowledged, “I was fortunate to be around other students who had families who valued education.” She described how her solitary childhood created her feelings of fear and self-doubt. She explained in detail:

I think later on, self-diagnosed actually that played a role in why I fell short in some things, because I never quite felt good enough, or like I belonged where I thought I would be, or should be . . . whatever struggle I went through, I thought I deserved it, and I didn't deserve to be better . . . I grew up knowing what I didn’t want to be versus what I wanted to be.

Katie also explained that she dealt with feeling alone and isolated, both within her family at home and at the private girl’s academy she attended. Katie talked about being a lower-income scholarship student at the academy while the majority of students there were from wealthy homes and other countries. She remembered it fondly to a point, saying how exciting it was that the other girls “could share with me all these places that they had traveled in the world and all these things they had seen and done.” However, she said, “it was very known that we were not the same” because her peers also lived on campus and drove luxury cars, while she commuted and drove a used and modest automobile. Katie recalled feeling like, “I could see all the things that I would love to do and . . . I would never get to do that . . . Honestly, I never thought I would amount to a whole lot.” When asked how her upbringing affected her higher educational pursuits, Katie shared that, “I think growing up impacted me mostly in just putting a lot of fear in me and making me afraid to pursue what I really wanted to pursue.”

Laura shared that she constantly worried whether or not she would be able to finish her degree saying, “It was in the back of my mind.” She talked about being apprehensive about her ability to persist to completion: “I always had that doubt . . . ‘I’m never going to finish. I’m
never going to get what I want.’” Laura started and stopped her collegiate career several times. She said she would start college and then something would happen, usually with a family member, and she would quit college to take care of the family member. Mark also dropped out when he first attended college, and he attributed dropping out to fear and self-doubt. He said he decided he would give college a try, but he said, “There was always kinda this looming thing over my head that education was something I couldn’t do . . . I could try, but I didn’t think it was gonna happen.” Mark said he talked himself into dropping out by convincing himself college was not for everyone, and he said “I just thought, ‘Well you know what? I just don’t know if college is for me.’” When he eventually went back to college several years later, he said he still struggled with doubting that he was “college material,” but he had faculty advisors who supported him and encouraged him by telling him he was indeed college material and he could succeed if he was willing to persist.

In summary, the imprint of growing up in a low-income family was evident in the way half of the participants described being fearful and doubtful of their ability to complete a college degree successfully. In addition to growing up in families with limited financial resources, the students also lacked family role models who had graduated from college or who knew how to help them traverse their emotions when they felt afraid or insecure. Several students also described feeling isolated, as if they did not fit in, in part because unlike them, their peers were from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds with parents who had completed college degrees. Several students in this study conquered their fear and self-doubt, in large part, because they deliberately chose to act differently than the role models they had grown up within their disadvantaged social class.

The Imprint of Being Low-Income Conclusion
The participants’ accounts revealed how the imprint of being low-income influenced, both positively and negatively, their successful persistence to completion at the community college. Growing up in a financially disadvantaged household affected how the students viewed their college choices and accounted for the reason why the majority of the students chose to attend a community college over a four-year university. The imprint of growing up in a low-income family had a significant impact on the students’ abilities to envision what their futures could look like, especially when they first began their collegial journeys. All but two of the students had parents and others in their lives who worked hard to provide for their families and who encouraged their children to work hard too, but who also had low expectations of what they thought their children could accomplish. None of the students had anyone who inspired them to think outside the boundaries of the world from which they came. In other words, the students lacked role models who taught them to look beyond their existing station in life and consider how education could help them secure a better job and build a more sustainable career path and future for their families.

Additionally, the interview narratives illuminated the students’ committed spirit and revealed a strong connection between their passion for bettering themselves and their disadvantaged backgrounds. For each of the students, the imprint of growing up in a lower-income home had fostered resiliency that was manifested in self-motivation and self-determination. Therefore, while growing up in an economically disadvantaged family was a negative factor, it was also a positive because the students became committed to finding ways to halt the cycle of poverty. The students’ low-income upbringing made them self-motivated and self-determined to create a more prosperous future for themselves and their children, and they viewed education as a pathway to sustainable careers.
Additionally, most of the students credited their lower-income upbringing with instilling in them a strong work ethic. They saw hard work as a way for them to create a pathway to a life of greater prosperity than their parents had realized, and as a way to move past living paycheck to paycheck. The students’ self-motivation and self-determination, along with their work ethic, were primary factors in the students’ ultimate success. The subordinate theme of fear and self-doubt also prevailed in half of the students’ accounts. By working hard and staying self-motivated and self-determined, the students were able to overcome their fears, push the self-doubt aside, and find a successful route to completion. The researcher concluded: (1) the low-income students’ social class greatly influenced the students’ perceptions and thoughts about their postsecondary opportunities; and (2) the students’ low-income upbringing meaningfully impacted the ways they chose to act and react when faced with complications threatening their ability to persist to completion.

The second superordinate theme arising from analysis of the interview transcripts was the importance of supportive relationships. The next section describes this theme and the three subordinate themes.

**The Importance of Supportive Relationships**

The second superordinate theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of supportive relationships. This theme surfaced as the students described how they overcame obstacles and stayed on track, successfully completing their degrees. Each student stressed how important it was for them to have people supporting and helping them navigate barriers and circumstances that threatened their persistence. All but one of the students recognized members of their families as their primary supporters. However, every student identified student peers or faculty and staff at the college who had encouraged and helped them. Several participants
described how they stumbled academically and needed academic assistance, but all of the students shared compelling stories about personal situations that threatened their persistence, attributing support from family, peers or faculty and staff with keeping them in school.

The participants in this study were all adults, and the individual trials and struggles they faced were what might be termed as, “life happens” setbacks: personal adversities such as financial problems, health complications, life balance issues, and setbacks linked to illnesses or issues within their families. For example, three students had parents who became severely ill while they were in school; one student had a child become ill while they were a student; one student was diagnosed with and treated for cancer while continuing to go to school. Supportive relationships clearly make a difference when students face life happens obstacles, often being the determinant factor in their ability to persist to completion. In each of the interviews, it was clear that the participants did not think they could have independently made it through their programs. All of the students recognized the importance of supportive relationships and shared noteworthy accounts detailing how their support systems sustained and buoyed them when they needed it most. The following sections illustrate the three subordinate themes: (a) family support, (b) peer support, and (c) faculty and staff support.

Family Support

All the participants acknowledged their families for supporting them and helping them overcome obstacles that could have hindered their ability to continue in school. Sometimes, the support took the form of encouragement, as family members inspired the students to keep going and not give up on their dreams. Mark shared a touching account of how his mother always believed in him and “was always like really encouraging” while his dad was “a little more realist.” He emphasized the importance of his mom telling him, “You can do anything you can
set your mind to . . . if you want to.” Lily also valued her mother’s support, recounting how her mother had gone back to school in her thirties, after her family declared bankruptcy, eventually receiving her master’s degree. Lily said, “She’s my inspiration.” Lily also recalled that her strong academic ability growing up caused her parents to “assume” she would go to college.

Unlike Mark and Lily who had grown up in traditional, two-parent homes, Laura had lived with her grandmother starting when she was five years old. She credited both her mother and her grandmother as her greatest familial supporters: “The support system I had was amazing.” Laura especially acknowledged her mother’s influence and expressed her pride in her mother’s accomplishments. She remembered her mother earning her high school equivalency and her paralegal associate’s degree while Laura was in high school. Laura recounted how her mother motivated her saying, “My motivation was that if my mom could do it at her age . . . being a single mother of four, I can do it as a single mother of one.”

Poudric acknowledged the importance of his family’s support, but for him, his father was the role model he remembered most. He described how his father went back to college and how his example proved to be influential and inspirational for him during his time considering going to college after he was medically discharged from the Marines. Poudric recalled his father was able to go back to school while working a full-time job and supporting his family and he said, “I didn’t really see an excuse not to.” Poudric also recognized the support of his mother, wife, and brother saying, “My family was thrilled I was going to school, and they always pushed me [and told me] ‘Keep going; you're doing great.’” Clay similarly recalled how her entire family was supportive of her while she was in college, saying, “I spent many different nights at different family's [houses]. All of them were very supportive.” She also recalled their pride in her when she walked across the stage at graduation to receive her associate’s degree, but she said they
were not ready for her to quit yet, saying, “My parents, when they found out I was graduating said, ‘And you’re going to continue college?’, and I said, ‘Yes.’”

The student accounts above demonstrate the importance of supportive parental relationships for providing motivational backing and inspiring students to persevere through challenges. Two participants, Nova Lee and Katie, did not have encouragement from their parents, but nonetheless, they described the significance of the familial support they received from their spouses and children. Notably, both students also shared how they learned what they did not want to do when they grew up with the examples their parents and other family caregivers provided. Nova Lee became distressed as she movingly described her upbringing:

My life was very lonely, would be a word that I would use. I am one of four children by my mother, but I was not raised by my mother. So, I spent probably the first 10 years of my life with an aunt and a cousin who raised me, for the most part. My mother had a really terrible drug habit. She kept my other three siblings, but now I realize it's a blessing she did not keep me . . . It was very lonely because the people that raised me were overprotective and slightly abusive. So, I just spent a lot of time alone with my own thoughts as a child . . . And so, I knew what I didn't want to be, but not necessarily, what I wanted to be.

Nova Lee also talked about how her childhood shaped the way she later viewed her roles as a wife and mother. She said her family was “very traditional,” and described how important it was for her to have her husband “just providing and being the here to everybody . . . because I didn’t have them growing up.” Nova Lee shared the above description of her family structure as she recalled her husband supporting her by allowing her to quit working while she completed her degree. She described how hard that sacrifice was for her family saying, “We were on food
stamps for a while,” and she credited her husband with making that sacrifice for her so she would be able to focus on school and on completing her degree.

Katie grew up in a single-parent home, in a very rural area in North Carolina, with her mother and her aunts as her primary role models. Like Nova Lee, Katie talked about being lonely, but for a different reason. She described her upbringing, stating: “I think growing up impacted me mostly in just putting a lot of fear in me and making me afraid to pursue what I really wanted to pursue.” Katie wanted to be an artist, but she said her family did not value art as a way for her to be able to make a living and take care of herself. Even though they supported her wanting to go to college, her mother and aunts insisted that she pursue a degree that would lead to a job that is “always needed.” Katie recounted her mother’s reaction when Katie told her she wanted to be an artist, saying, “When I told my mom that I wanted to be an artist, and I love art, she said, ‘Honey, that's like telling me you want to grow up and be Mariah Carey.’” Katie described her husband as the first person to support her passion for art, saying, “My husband was finally somebody in my life to say, ‘Do what you want to do, and be whoever you are, and don’t feel bad about it.’” Even though her family has accepted her decision to pursue a career in art, Katie indicated that her husband is still the only one who is truly supportive of that decision.

In summary, most of the participants acknowledged they needed help during their college matriculation and recognized the support they received from their family members as invaluable. Notably, most of the students shared stories about how their families supported them in succeeding but did not focus on material kinds of support. Instead, they described the encouragement they received from their family members. Notably, the importance of familial support in the students’ success became a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Familial
support systems clearly have a positive impact on success for low-income community college students.

**Peer Support**

In addition to depending on their families for encouragement and motivational support, more than half of the students discussed the supportive peer relationships they developed while pursuing their degrees and about what they gained by reciprocally supporting their peers. Two participants, Laura and Nova Lee, completed nursing degrees at the institution that is the subject of this research study. The nursing program is a tightly knit cohort model, and students within each cohort attend all their classes and clinical practice labs together. These two students were particularly focused on how peer support constituted a critical component of their success. Laura dropped out when her mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and when she returned to school, she shared that the nursing students from her first cohort became her “big sisters and brothers,” saying, “They still supported me through that whole time,” even though she was no longer in their classes or clinical practices. She also described how those students gave her books and told her to call them if she needed anything, saying, “It was the constant encouragement, the constant motivation that ‘You can do it! You got it! We’re here for you, if you need us for anything, call us,’ that helped me push forward and push through.” During her final year in school, Nova Lee served as a student ambassador and in that role, she represented the college at internal and external events. She talked about how representing the college as an ambassador afforded her the opportunity to engage with her fellow students in a leadership capacity. She described interactions with students where she played an advisory role, and she remembered those contacts being self-motivating, saying, “I would give advice, ‘You know, you
could do this and do this and be done faster.' Then I would think to myself, ‘Hmmm, maybe I should take on a little bit more, and I can be done faster.’"

Poudric and Katie were also leaders among their student peer groups, and they described their experiences in much the same way as Nova Lee, recalling opportunities to engage in a leadership role with their student peers as positive, self-motivating, and personally rewarding. Poudric said, “A lot of them [students], before they went to the supervisor, they usually came to me for questions first, so I was almost a go-between.” He expressed pride at being recognized as an accomplished peer who could help them, and he talked about that experience as self-gratifying. Even after he graduated, Poudric recalled getting emails asking for help from some of the students still in the program and from some of the recent graduates. He indicated that he was happy to help them because he felt like he was paying it forward. Likewise, Katie talked about how she also wanted to give back to other students because of the support and encouragement she had received when she was a new student. For Katie, enrolling in the arts program at the community college had been a huge step because her mother and all her family members, except her husband, had always discouraged her from pursuing her artistic passion, insisting she needed to prepare for a “necessary” job instead. She described feeling like she had never had a voice and acknowledged her time at the community college as giving her a voice. Katie shared the following account to illustrate how she used her voice and the newfound confidence she had developed as a student to support her peers, and how, at the same time, she found personal satisfaction and encouragement:

Just being around other students who really maybe don't have the same confidence that I have now, or that have never sold a piece of art. Since I started at the community college I know for a fact that I've helped at least six students
sell their first piece of art, and three have taught their first class, and several of them have started different forms of art that they have never done before, or considered doing. But I've brought them in and shown them this is where you buy this stuff, this the best way to do it, this is how you do it, and that has brought me -- that makes me want to keep going because I know I have something to say. And I didn't always have something to say, but now I do, and when I do I know that it's helping somebody. And so just those experiences with my teachers and my peer group have really pressed me, and then sometimes I think well, God, if he can do well surely, I can do it.

In summary, participants who took time to engage with their peers recounted stories that showed how supportive relationships with peers were important to their success. Peer support was identified as a crucial component of success for the nursing students, suggesting that a close-knit cohort model like the one used for that program, promotes an additional layer of support that increases persistence for low-income students. Remarkably, while some of the examples from the interviews described how they received support from their classmates, most of the illustrations described how the participants had benefited by being the ones to provide support to their fellow students. Regardless of whether the participant was receiving support from a colleague or giving support to a colleague, the students’ accounts emphasized the recurring theme of peer support as a facilitator of success.

**Faculty and Staff Support**

Over half of the participants depicted faculty and staff support as fundamental to their ability to persist to completion. While the students had some negative experiences with both faculty and support staff, most of the students agreed that positive interactions with faculty and
staff made a difference in their ability to navigate around obstacles and find solutions to mitigate barriers that stood in the way of their success. The excerpts that follow illustrate how this theme was clearly evident as students described faculty and staff whom they perceived genuinely cared about them and wanted to be part of their success.

Laura talked about her experience at other schools where she was “known by my number.” She encountered a much different experience when she came to the community college, and she described the impact it had on her:

But, then going to a community college, where my instructors know who I am . . . when I see them out in public they speak, they hug, they tell me that if I need anything, they're there. And not just my instructors, I mean, when I walked through the doors of the facility, and I was greeted, from the first time I opened the door and said, "Hi," and I was told, "Hi, how can we help you? What would you like to do? Where do you need to start? What's your name?" . . . It was just that they remembered who I was from walking through that front door. And every time I came back, I was not just greeted by, "Hi, hello." I was greeted with "Hi Laura, welcome back!" Like, they remembered who I was when I came back. So, that too was like, "Oh my . . . This is like home. This is like high school. This is going to be a breeze. I'll be able to do this," you know, and "I'll have the same support system."

Sadly, when Laura was in her second semester of school at the institution that is the focus of this study, her mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given six months to a year to live. Faced with this devastating event, Laura was not able to handle the stress of dealing with her mother’s diagnosis and helping her mother develop a treatment plan while also maintaining a
passing grade in school. Laura described learning from her instructor that she had failed her final exam, saying, “I ended up failing my final exam, and my instructor called me on the phone, and she was crying, and I was crying, and she said, ‘I want you to come back. You’ve got to come back and finish.’” Laura expressed feeling that not only had she failed herself but that she had also “failed the program,” and she described being moved and humbled by her teacher’s empathy and support. Laura said that her instructors continued to offer her “constant encouragement” and “constant motivation” even while she was out attending to her mother’s needs. She recalled them saying to her, “You can do it! You’ve got it! We’re here for you if you need us for anything – call us,” and she said, “That helped me push forward and push through” until her mother was stable and she was able to return to the program.

Nova Lee talked about “the community college atmosphere,” saying, “the staff is very understanding to the fact that you may not be technologically savvy; that you may need a little more support in something as simple as registering for class.” She also recalled how her instructors “cared about what they were teaching.” While Clay shared that she encountered inconsistency issues among faculty and disparate advice from advising staff, she also described valuable interactions with a statistics instructor and a library resource assistant that she credited with helping her throughout her matriculation. After earning a D and an F on the first two tests in the statistics class, Clay realized she needed to ask for help or she was not going to pass the class, so she reached out to her instructor who quickly realized that Clay did not understand how to take the type of notes that would help her learn the material. Clay described the statistics instructor and the resource assistant as simply, “phenomenal” in the support they provided. The instructor, she related, went as far as teaching the art of taking notes, a skill that transferred beyond statistics into Clay’s other courses. She said that the support she received from the
instructor and assistant was invaluable to her because she could use both the note-taking and search techniques in the remainder of her classes. Clay also talked about her chemo-brain diagnosis, a learning disability resulting from her cancer treatment several years ago. While she was able to learn and comprehend the material as presented by the teacher and in the text, she did not do well on written tests. Clay was referred to the disability services department, and she described the meaningful and beneficial support from the disability services staff members who authorized a testing accommodation for her without making her feel “stupid.” Clay shared her positive and supportive experience, relating:

They didn't make me feel stupid, which I did well enough on my own. I didn't need anybody to help me with that, ‘cause that's my thing. I felt inadequate and stupid . . . ‘cause when we were in the class, I was getting it. As soon as I took the test, I lost it. And that's where the instructor was like, “You get this because you can explain it to people.” But as soon as I'm put in front of a test I stress and panic. All I asked for was a quiet place to remember the formulas. I didn't want the answers. I just couldn't always remember the formulas, so I was allowed to have a sheet of paper with the formulas on it and a quiet space [to take tests].

Lily suffered two medical setbacks while she was a student: she injured her back, and she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She described being diagnosed with cancer during the second semester of her mechanical engineering program saying, “I was in and out of hospitals, and I had a hysterectomy on Friday, and I was back in class on Monday because I didn’t want to miss my Math class.” She felt like she needed to be in the class because she was struggling with Math. Lily described her instructor as very supportive saying, “My teacher was very understanding, she let my husband carry my books for me because I couldn't.” Lily said that she
would not have been able to stay in school if she had not received what she described as her teacher’s “above and beyond” support. At the end of the interview, when asked if there was anything else that she wanted to share to help the researcher understand the experiences that had helped her stay in school and persist to completion, Lily said, “The help from the faculty that go the extra step . . . the ones that took that extra effort really helped me.”

Poudric talked about how instrumental the faculty members were in keeping him motivated and doing a good job teaching, and he said, “I have yet to have a bad instructor.” He also recalled how his remedial English instructor continued to support him by reviewing papers from other classes and helping him whenever she could. However, Poudric saved his greatest accolades for the Veterans affairs counselor in the financial aid office. Poudric had a wife who had a part-time job and two young children, and he said he only worked as an unpaid intern while he was in school, so money was extremely tight. He could not afford to take classes that his Veterans Administration benefits would not cover. Poudric said that his Veteran’s counselor went out of her way to make sure his schedule would be approved saying, “If something is not right or if a course isn’t going to be covered, then she’ll send me an email . . . and we’ll get it straightened out before anything comes up.”

Katie shared a negative story about her experience with an advisor before she had applied and registered for classes, but she said of her overall experience at the community college, “I love school now, I love it! And I mean if I had millions of dollars I would just stay in school forever and ever and ever!” She had nothing but high praise for both the business and the art faculty and the faculty advisor that encouraged and supported her throughout her degree pursuit. Katie started as a business major, in large part because of her family’s insistence that she needed a “real” career path, and she recalled a story about her international business instructor who
taught them “about all these different cultures and ways to engage them.” She says that she felt like, “here I was again, being opened up to the world and not just stuck in this box.” Her instructor encouraged her to run for student government because he had faith in her, and she said that was the first time that somebody from any college had ever had faith in her.

In summary, most of the participants described how supportive relationships with staff and faculty positively influenced their success. The students proactively responded when they perceived staff and faculty cared about their success and were willing to work with them to overcome obstacles. The participants faced challenging illnesses, financial constraints, and a variety of other hindrances that could have easily disrupted their advancement in school, had it not been for the staff and faculty whom they described as being willing to go “above and beyond” what was expected to help them find a way forward.

The Importance of Supportive Relationships Conclusion

The superordinate theme, the importance of supportive relationships, emerged as a prominent element in the students’ overall experiences of success. Student narratives clearly demonstrated the impact of the three subordinate themes: family support, peer support, and faculty and staff support. The different support groups provided various kinds of assistance and the students’ experiences with the assorted groups differed. However, all the students attributed some measure of their success to the help and support they received from one or more of the subordinate groups. Clearly, the students coveted inspiration and motivation more than anything else from their family supporters. The students responded confidently and powerfully when their families encouraged them to stay the course and not give up when they faced obstacles.

Remarkably, the importance of peer support was most often acknowledged when the participants described how they had offered peer support rather than when they had received
support from their fellow classmates. The act of “paying it forward” was the primary aspect producing self-motivating and rewarding emotions from the students as they shared how their advice to their peers resonated with them and reinvigorated their impetus to persist. In other words, the students gained as much encouragement from offering support to their peers as they did from their peers’ support. Most of the participants also recognized the importance of having supportive faculty and staff who were willing to work with them to find appropriate and often creative solutions for their distinctive, individual problems. Generally, family support offered inspiration, encouragement, and motivation; peer support provided practical assistance and pragmatic help; faculty and staff support extended strategic relief and tactical aid. The subordinate themes collectively formed a robust and crucial supportive relationship system capable of sustaining the students on their completion journeys. Ultimately, all the students’ narratives acknowledged the critical role supportive relationships played in mitigating the mixture of hurdles, barriers, and obstacles that loomed in their pathways to success.

The final superordinate theme arising from analysis of the interview transcripts was the impact of institutional support systems. The next section describes this theme and the two subordinate themes of the positive impact of institutional support, and the negative impact of lack of institutional support.

The Impact of Institutional Support Systems

As the students shared their experiences, the impact of institutional support systems surfaced as the final superordinate theme. The institution that was the site of this study offered an array of support services designed to facilitate student access to assistance and to strengthen student success. All eight participants described interactions with the institution’s services, but the students’ accounts of their experiences with the various support mediums varied widely.
Regardless of whether the students remembered their dealings with the college’s support systems as affirmative or deleterious, it was clear that they believed their interactions with institutional support services influenced their ability to achieve their goals at the college. Numerous departments and programs were mentioned during the interviews, but the following four support systems emerged as the primary services impacting the participants: financial aid, academic and career advising (including counseling and disability services), library support and tutoring, and academic clubs and student organizations. All the students described positive encounters with the college’s financial aid services and with the academic clubs and student organizations. However, the participants’ recollections of their contacts with academic and career advising and the library support and tutoring were mixed, and unfortunately, the students recalled more negative than positive interactions with the advising services provided by the college.

The students’ stories regarding their use of institutional support services were generally more positive than negative, and one consistent theme amongst the students was the shared feeling that people at the college genuinely cared about them. It was evident throughout the participants’ narratives that the students needed and valued the institutional support services provided by the college. Additionally, the students’ experiences with the college’s support systems clearly had either a positive or a negative impact and ultimately on how and when they were able to complete their degrees. The following sections describe, in detail, the two subordinate themes: the positive impact of institutional support, and the negative impact of lack of institutional support.

**Positive Impact of Institutional Support**

Most of the stories shared by the students about their experiences with the institution’s support services pointed towards affirmative perceptions of the systems the college had in place
to help the students succeed. The participants in this study were low-income students and Pell grant recipients and, as a result, all had knowledge about the financial aid services. None of the participants shared negative impressions about the support they received from financial aid. In fact, most of the students perceived their encounters with financial aid as critical components of their success. Likewise, the students generally described constructive and engaging interactions with academic clubs and student organizations that had a positive impact on their persistence, and none of the students’ accounts demonstrated negative feelings about clubs or other student organizations. With regards to their impressions of the services provided by academic and career advising and the library support and tutoring, the student’s opinions were split. However, many did view the services they received from these departments as important to their overall success. The following subsections demonstrate the students’ impressions about the positive impact for each of these four institutional services: financial aid, academic and career advising (including counseling and disability services), library support and tutoring, and academic clubs and student organizations.

**Financial aid.** All the participants in this study were low-income students who received full Pell grant funding to help them afford college. Without Pell aid, all the students readily admitted they would most likely not be able to go to college, and even with the financial assistance, most of the students described financial struggles while attending school. James credited his work ethic and self-determination as the primary reason he was able to finish his degree, but he qualified that assertion by saying, “I'd say the only other big thing that kept me in it 100% was receiving the Pell grant, because I wouldn't have been able to even go without that.” For these low-income students, financial aid services were arguably the most important element of the overall institutional support system provided by the college. If the students were not able
to get financial assistance, or if they lost their financial aid eligibility, they would most likely not have been able to remain in school.

Federal financial aid rules and regulations can be daunting, but James also shared how he liked working with the financial aid staff because they were friendly and informative. Additionally, he appreciated the straightforward and easy processes in place for financial aid applicants saying, “I think they’ve done a really good job with that.” Similarly, Laura described her positive experience when she realized she had used all her Pell eligibility and feared she would not have the resources she needed to complete her degree:

I had maxed out my Pell grant because I had been in and out of school so much, and I went to a financial aid office and explained to them what was going on . . . and I didn't know how I was going to finish school. And the president of the financial aid office emailed me and told me she wanted me to fill out these scholarship applications, to do a survey, and to also write a letter about why I felt I deserved the scholarship. And I did everything she told me, and I ended up getting scholarship money to help me finish school . . . had I not gotten that scholarship, I would have never been able to finish school. I would have never finished nursing school.

Poudric had served in the military; therefore, in addition to receiving Pell grant assistance for school, he was also eligible for Veterans benefits. He described the importance of the support he received from his Veterans Affairs counselor saying, “She knows exactly who I am . . . as soon as I pick my classes, I go and see her, and I let her know this is it. She'll review that to make sure everything's okay.” If he started a class that was not approved by the Veterans Administration, his VA benefits would not pay for the class, and that would have created a
considerable financial problem for Poudric’s family. Nova Lee was complimentary of the financial aid staff too, but she also shared affirmative insights about the availability of financial assistance for students at the institution. She talked about the availability of scholarship money for low-income and adult students, as compared to her experience with four-year scholarships, saying, “There are things set up to help . . . more scholarships set up for more people.”

All the participants acknowledged that financial assistance was necessary for them to be able to pursue a college degree. Additionally, the students agreed that the support they received from the financial aid services at the institution had a positive impact on their progress and contributed to their ability to succeed. Financial aid is perhaps the most crucial support service impacting the success of low-income community college students with limited financial resources because financial assistance helps students secure the money they need to afford college.

Academic and career advising (including counseling services). Most of the participants’ narratives included negative experiences with the college’s Academic and Career Advising center (ACA) services, but four students shared their thoughts about how the advisors had made a positive difference for them. Nova Lee, a nursing student who planned to transfer to a four-year university and eventually become a nurse practitioner, described her impressions of the college’s academic and career advising, stating, “Even with the advisors, they’re well-versed.” She shared how the advisors would steer her away from courses that might not transfer and said, “I was advised appropriately,” and “it was just a good experience for me.” Lily shared similar thoughts on the importance of the advising service saying, “I had a goal in mind, and they just built on that goal.” She appreciated the way the advisers helped her create a two-year
academic plan, recalling, “they help you, and they show you, and they plan all of your schooling and your classes for the next two years as what you should be doing at this semester.”

James expressed that he felt he had been a victim of bad advising at the college that had nearly cost him money, as well as additional time to complete his degree. Due to that negative impact, James said he was particularly careful about who he was willing to work with on the advising team. He only trusted one of the advisors to assist him towards completion and to help him stay on the accelerated track that he had developed. James said that particular advisor “gave me the right advice,” and “he even helped me with going to the four-year school.” Notably, James and several other students were very forgiving, even tended to shoulder some of the blame when describing undesirable outcomes resulting from the service they received. For example, James described a negative experience in which an academic advisor suggested he register for a particular class saying, “This looks like a nice class . . . I think you’d like this class.” James was clearly frustrated as he recalled the exchange because the class was not part of his degree pathway and taking it would have meant that he would use his financial aid to pay for a course that did not count towards his degree, ultimately costing him more money and time to achieve his degree goal. However, even though he was frustrated, he ended the story by saying, “It wasn’t necessarily like the college’s fault or anything, it’s just, I don’t think they understood that that’s important to people.” Meanwhile, Laura provided a moving account of how the disability services component of academic and career advising had provided support to help her through an exceptionally challenging personal conflict. Laura described her experience this way:

I had a couple incidents happen [when I was in school] where my son attacked me . . . and it [school] was my safe haven at that time, and I went to school, and they got in touch with the counselor, and I mean, she came and talked to me, and I
started [meeting with her] once a week, every week. And that also allowed me to kind of open up about my past abuse that occurred within my family, and that surrounded my son. And, it just provided that support to be able to have somewhere to go and someone to talk to when I really needed it most.

Laura also said the counselor was able to give her information that helped alleviate some of her fear, understand how to protect herself, and feel like she could stay in school.

The students’ accounts of the support they received from the college’s academic and career advising were inconsistent, but it was clear that many students did benefit from the services provided by the ACA Center. The students who had positive experiences with advising shared accounts of how the services provided by the college guided them through their course pathway and contributed to their ability to achieve their goals. Clearly, the interview transcripts affirmed the importance of sound educational advising for helping low-income community college students define their goals and develop an educational plan to achieve their goals in a timely manner.

**Library support and tutoring.** The students’ stories showed that most of the obstacles they faced involved non-academic issues. However, half of the participants described how they needed academic support and, moreover, how they found the extra support they needed in the library and the tutoring center. The college had library services available on all campuses, providing research support and other learning resource services for students as well as housing the institution’s tutoring services. For Mark, Clay, Poudric, and Nova Lee, the services provided by the library support staff and the tutors made a difference in both their subject comprehension and in their ability to move forward in their coursework. Their illustrative stories below, provide
examples of why these institutional support services are essential for the success of low-income community college students.

Clay had a documented learning disability resulting from chemotherapy treatment she received years before she began her degree program. She shared how the tutoring center was vital to her because she had trouble sometimes due to her “chemo-brain” disability. She said, “They were very helpful . . . I used the tutoring a lot and [had] mostly positive experiences. I’d say 98% of it was positive.” Mark agreed, and he described his struggles with grammar saying, “Grammar was always something hard for me . . . I used the tutoring center a lot and [had] mostly positive experiences. I’d say 98% of it was positive.” Mark explained the impact tutoring services had on him saying, “they would kind of teach you, but you didn’t realize you were being taught, so it was like you were getting tutored and taught at the same time.”

Nova Lee was an A student in the nursing program, but she said that she too needed extra help for a few of her classes. She talked about the faculty and library staff communicating to the students about the services available in the tutoring center saying, “They’re like, listen, tutoring is available. There is no reason for you guys to be failing.” Nova Lee shared how she was impressed with the quality of the extra help she received in tutoring and also mentioned that it was free, which was also crucial to her. She shared the touching illustration below about struggling with science and math, and when she was struggling, Nova Lee utilized the tutoring services that the college provided. She explained how they made the difference for her:

They knew me by name. I used it quite often for my sciences and my math, and it was very, very helpful. And I screamed to the rooftops . . . you guys, even 30 minutes there made all of the difference in the world . . . All the difference in the world. It was very helpful, and they were very in sync with what was being
taught, and the method that was being used [in the classroom]. They were amazing, and then, some of the instructors even volunteered in there, so it was great . . . Math and science were always hard for me . . . but having that tutoring service, I made an A in chemistry . . . and then a B in statistics. But I utilized that tutoring service for anytime I had trouble.

Poudric said he never used the college’s tutoring services, but he did have positive experiences with the support services offered in the library. He appreciated the directness and simplicity of the library’s service delivery and the specific, necessary guidance they offered.

Likewise, Clay also took advantage of the support services available through the library and said she believed they helped her succeed. Specifically, she praised the library resource assistant at the front desk who “showed me how to log in and then how to maneuver my way around” to locate articles for a paper she had to write in English. Clay animatedly described the woman as “great . . . phenomenal.” She said, “I was like, ‘Oh boy!’ She showed me how to refine it down . . . I got an A on that paper!”

Clearly, the library support and tutoring services provided by the institution helped the students overcome academic barriers. Students who required extra assistance to understand core competencies or find resources for assignments would indeed have been disadvantaged without these institutional supports.

Academic clubs and student organizations. The community college that served as the research site for this study provided numerous opportunities for students to engage in academic clubs and student organizations including Student Government Association (SGA), the Society of Leadership and Success (SLS), honor societies, subject-focused clubs, and internship programs. While many of the participants in this study said they found it difficult to take time
away from other competing priorities to engage in extracurricular activities regularly, more than half of the students stated that they did have the opportunity to participate in these organizations or in sponsored events. Laura, Nova Lee, Lily, Poudric, and Katie described their engagement with academic clubs and student organizations, and all of them recalled positive experiences with these institutional support services. While the excerpts from the students’ narratives that follow, validate the affirmative influence of academic and social integration on low-income community college students’ persistence, other successful students conveyed that they did not have time for academic or social integration.

Laura was in SLS and a member of the student nursing association. She shared how SLS motivated her, saying, “I was part of that organization, and they also encouraged me to keep going forward and to keep my goal, and to never give up, and to know that I’m not alone and that they’re always there for me.” The nursing association gave Laura the opportunity to give back to the community, and she fondly remembered the occasions when she had to “teach them how to use walkers and canes” and the times she worked with diabetes patient to “teach them how to use the equipment and know when to call the doctor.” Laura was one of the few participants in this study who found time to also participate in SGA-sponsored, off-campus events. She shared how the SGA’s Five Dollar Fridays allowed her to get to know other students because she was able to “talk to different students” and “hear their stories and know that we were in this together.”

During her final year at the college, Nova Lee was chosen to serve as a student ambassador, a role which included both a scholarship and a stipend. She talked about how being an ambassador was “an amazing experience,” which involved serving as “that bridge between the student body and faculty and board members . . . to represent the college in a positive way.” The opportunity, she analyzed, expanded her involvement and increased her sense of
responsibility. Nova Lee was also in the nursing honor society and the student nurse association, like Laura. These two clubs gave her the opportunity to participate in community service events. Nova Lee was not actively involved during her first year at the college, and she shared that she felt being more engaged earlier on would have helped her complete her degree sooner, saying, “I found, just looking back, had I been involved sooner, I think that maybe I could have finished a little earlier.” She attributed that insight to the “sense of responsibility” she gained from her involvement in these two clubs saying, “Having a sense of responsibility outside of self really pushes you to . . . be a little better, I guess.”

Lily said she did not have additional time due to her family and work commitments, but she did take time to participate in several program-specific clubs and programs: a balloon program for welding, a race car program for machining, and a mechatronics project to create an entirely automated conveyor system. She said those opportunities “made what I was doing more tangible; I was putting what I was learning to use.” Lily graduated with two degrees, an Associate Degree in General Education and an Associate’s in Applied Science degree in mechanical engineering. Additionally, she also earned three certifications in mechatronics, computer-aided machining, technical drafting, as well as becoming a certified computer numerical control operator. She credited her engagement in the extra service programs provided by the college as key to her motivation to finish her mechatronics certification: “I didn’t have to finish the mechatronics but that engagement, it definitely made me want to finish my mechatronics so that I could use it.”

Like Lily, Poudric had a family, and he shared how his family commitments were a priority that competed with his availability for extracurricular activities. Speaking about his family, he said, “I think they needed me a little bit more than I needed to be a part of something
else with the school.” Poudric did, however, participate in the institution’s internship support program, and he credited that program with helping him secure a job after graduation saying the internships that he completed “added to my resume, and slowly built me up and gave me what I needed, and it eventually worked out to where I am now – that position that I’m at was completely from internships and the experience from it.”

Katie did not think the SGA would help her “advance as much as somebody else would be able to,” but she saw value in club activities, so she worked with the art faculty to start an institutionally supported art club. She described the positive impact that had on her as a student:

I started the art club . . . and we do open studio every Friday. Students can come in and work on their own, so they can get some help from whatever teach might be fluttering around. But I spent a lot of time being the teacher in open studio, and sort of helping, and I really had a lot of fun.

Some of the students in this study expressed that they did not have the personal capacity required for them to participate in academic clubs or student organizations because they had higher priority work and family priorities. However, it became apparent, from more than half of the students’ stories, that those types of college-supported programs made a positive impact, primarily through their ability to motivate and inspire students to stay the course. This study clearly shows duality: half of the students acknowledged academic and social integration as an important contributing factor in their success; the other half admittedly did not have time to take advantage of integration opportunities and did not ascribe relevance to their lack of participation in academic clubs or student organizations. Therefore, participation had a recognized positive influence on persistence, whereas lack of participation had no impact.
In summary, all the students recalled the positive impact of institutional support services on their successful journey at the institution. Unfortunately, the participants in this study were low-income, adult students, and they all expressed how difficult it was for them to find more time to spend on their academic pursuits because of competing family and work priorities. The interview transcripts, however, demonstrated that the students recognized the positive benefits they gained when they took advantage of institutional support services. This study suggests that low-income community college students can benefit from assimilating within the academic and social systems of their institutions and further proposes that student retention can be a direct result of a college’s thoughtful and intentional efforts to help students integrate academically and socially. However, the researcher also concludes that academic and social integration, though positive for students who choose it, is not a necessary component of success for all low-income, adult, community college students.

Negative Impact of Lack of Institutional Support

The second subordinate theme associated with the importance of institutional support is the negative impact of lack of institutional support. The participants shared many stories of how institutional support services made a positive difference in their collegiate experience and how their use of the provided services influenced their successful journey. However, more than half the students also shared stories about how a lack of institutional support hampered their journey, sometimes even causing a delay in their degree completion. Most of the disapproval expressed by the students centered around their experiences in two support areas: academic and career advising, and library support and tutoring. Notably, most of the students also talked about having difficulty knowing how to get institutional support when they needed it. While the same students shared positive accounts of their interactions with the institution’s support services,
Clay, James, Lily, Poudric, and Katie also shared specific examples, some egregious, of how a lack of appropriate institutional support deterred their persistence and negatively impacted their completion journey.

Clay shared several negative stories about her experiences with the college’s institutional support systems. One of the incidents she described frustrated her but did not have a significant impact on her success, while the other example created a costly and deleterious situation that adversely affected Clay’s transfer to a bachelor’s program. The first instance was related to Clay’s use of the college’s library support services. While she shared one positive experience with library services and tutoring, Clay expressed her irritation with the lack of consistency she found in their support delivery when she went to the library to get help with a research paper. Clay described the staff person in the writing center as a “super nice lady” who “had no clue.” She said the front desk assistant showed her how to find the articles she needed for the paper, but described the “writing lady” as having “no idea,” adding, “And I remember standing there going, ‘Wow, I took the day off to come see you, and you have no idea how to help me.’” Clay said her experience with the staff person in the writing center was frustrating, but her experience with “bad” advising made her angry and created a financial hardship for her when she transferred to a four-year program for her bachelor’s degree. Clay described how she had a son who was a senior in high school when she graduated from the community college. Her son planned to go to a four-year college, and she wanted to be able to help him financially, so she had been cautious with her educational expenses, relying on Pell grant monies only, choosing not to finance her degree with loans. However, Clay wasted three semesters of her time because she received bad advice from one of the academic and career advisors. As a result, not only did it take her longer to complete her degree because she took a year of credits that did not count toward her degree,
but Clay said, “Now I only have two and a half years to finish my bachelor’s” before she reaches the lifetime maximum Pell eligibility. Clay described feeling angry at being misdirected regarding classes and said a family member of hers “had some choice words” when she learned about this glitch from Clay. While Clay said she “enjoyed some of the classes . . . but they weren’t what I needed.”

While Poudric and James also shared negative stories about their experiences with advising or about their lack of academic and career advising support, fortunately, their stories did not include consequences as detrimental as Clay’s. Poudric’s concerns centered on a lack of institutional support for advising because at the time, advising was not mandatory, so students had the ability to apply and enroll online without working with an advisor, and that is what Poudric chose to do. He said he was “just randomly picking” his classes until he enrolled in a class and the instructor told him “that’s not gonna work.” Once he connected with the instructor, Poudric said it was much easier because she worked with him to develop his educational degree plan outlining “semester by semester, every course I needed.” Poudric said he did not have any support with how to apply or how to register, other than one group session called “GPS” that he attended along with a large group of other newer students. He complained about the GPS session saying, “But I didn’t have a major picked and . . . that was about as specific as it got at that point.” Poudric also described the GPS session as a tool rather than as a session dedicated to advising, saying, “It was more of a ‘This is how the website actually works’ [session], it wasn’t ‘This is to help you.’”

James was frustrated by the inconsistency he received in academic and career advising. Eventually, he found one advisor that he trusted to help him stay on track for his degree, but he expressed dissatisfaction at having to “find” someone. James said there was not a specific plan
that met his individual situation because he was working simultaneously on his associate’s and bachelor’s degrees, so he had to go through the school’s website catalog and other web resources to create his plan on his own. He said, “It didn’t seem I could find anybody that was helping me . . . And it was imperative that I can’t pay . . . if it’s not going towards my degree.” He shared how difficult it was for him to know if he was picking the right classes each semester and how frustrating it was for him to have to seek out the support he needed:

Picking the right classes in the right timeframe, because sometimes I was taking eight-week classes a lot of the time, and they might not offer it in the fall, or they might not offer it in the summer. And so when I started laying out the timeline of these classes, I went back to that other counselor [advisor] . . . And said, . . . "I just signed up for these two classes, but they're offering them in the summer. And these other classes, they're only offered in the spring. That's going to put me back.” I had to figure that out. And the only reason I figured that out was because I wanted to make sure that I knew all the classes I was taking for the whole year.

Since James was also attending classes at a four-year university, he knew the advising and registration processes could have been more straightforward, because it was easier for him at the other institution. He said he was given a plan of his course sequence at the university, and he said, “Everything in advance is already signed up for.” James said he was irritated and he did not understand why it was so difficult for the advisors at the community college to provide accurate support. He said advising was ineffective because the advisors asked him what he wanted to take instead of telling him, “this is the degree you’re going for, here’s a map.” James said, “To me, somebody could sit down and build that in no time . . . just lay it all out, it would be so much easier.”
Lily and Katie also shared discouraging stories about their contact with library support and tutoring services, and academic and career advising, respectively. Lily said that most of her experience with tutoring was positive, but she was disturbed by one instance that made her feel like the services the college offered were not consistent. She described going to the tutoring center because she needed help with one of the higher-level math courses. She said that many of the math faculty also served as tutors, but a student could not depend on having a math faculty member as a tutor. She expressed how bad the tutor made her feel because she talked down to her: “I think it was just personality clash because she was just very down talking like you know, ‘I can’t believe you didn’t know this.’” Lily said she felt disrespected, but that as an adult, she kept it in perspective and continued to use the tutoring services. However, she suggested that if her daughter, who was also a student at the same college, had an experience like hers, she would not have gone back like her mother.

Katie shared a story that showed how she felt disrespected, this time by the first and only academic and career advisor she worked with at the college. She attended a university before coming to the community college, but she never graduated, and she had been out of school for a long time. Katie was having trouble deciding between majoring in business or following her passion for art by choosing the fine arts transfer major. She described her first encounter at the college like this:

And so when I came back to the community college, I just got in my car one day and drove over. And when I came in I sat down with an advisor; it was like the last day to register for school. And I said, "This is who I am, I live here in town. I have two children that I'm responsible for, and I have my own business, and I'm trying to decide if I should study business, because I don't really know a lot about
business, I mean I make a product, but as far as marketing myself I don't know a lot about that. So should I study business, or should I study art, and try to make my product better?” The advisor said, "Well, what's your main concern?" And I said, "Well at the end of all of this, I just want to be able to pay my bills." And she said, "Have you ever thought about waiting tables?" And I said, "Yeah, I've waited tables a lot." And she said, "Well you know, that's good money."

After that exchange with the advisor, Katie said, “I went home, and I was just heartbroken, and I told my husband, I said, ‘As it turns out, I’m never going to be anything.'” Fortunately, Katie said she was older and wiser, and her life’s experiences were in the back of her mind telling her that was not true. She described telling herself, “That’s not right. If I do that then I’m staying right where I am, nothing is going to change for me if I do that, and I need to knock down some doors.”

In summary, while the negative experiences that these students described did not stop them from persisting and earning their degree, in each example, the lack of appropriate institutional support did create a lasting negative impact for them. Just as it is important to understand how the institution positively impacted students’ success, it is also essential to be aware of the ways institutional supports or a lack of institutional supports hampered students in reaching their goals in a timely manner.

**The Impact of Institutional Support Systems Conclusion**

Since the participants in this study were all low-income adult students who faced numerous, “life happens” events during their journey to completion at the community college, the importance of institutional support quickly emerged as a superordinate theme. It was apparent from their stories that both positive and negative experiences with institutional support
services had a lasting, and sometimes detrimental, effect on the students. The students’ narratives validated the importance of active institutional support for helping students overcome obstacles so they can persist to completion. Additionally, the students experienced more positive results when they developed healthy and trusting relationships with the staff and faculty providing the support services. Based on the interpretations of positive institutional supports made by the students, proactive service models were necessary, but they were apparently limited or non-existent in many support areas at the college. The interviews indicated that the college could serve students better and help more students persist to completion if they adopted proactive and relational models of institutional support.

Most of the students discussed not knowing what support services were available or, if they were aware of the services, they said they did not know how to access them. If students do not know how to access services, the services may as well not exist. Additionally, all the participants for this study were low-income, and only one was not a first-generation college student. Research has shown that low-income, first-generation students do not typically have support systems to help them maneuver the complexities of higher education knowledgeably, and that was true for the participants in this study. These students could not depend on having someone to tell them about available resources or direct them regarding how to take advantage of the support services provided by the college. Institutional services cannot be efficient if students do not know they exist or how to access them. Therefore, the college would better serve students by finding ways to communicate more effectively about the institutional support they provide.

More than half the students interviewed shared negative opinions about the services they received from the college’s academic and career advising services. The main problem, from the students’ perspective, was inconsistency, and this was also noted in relation to the institution’s
tutoring services. Based on the students’ recollections, the institutional model for advising was ineffective for two main reasons. First, students were not required to see an advisor, creating the possibility that they would enroll in courses that were not part of or necessary for their degree program. Second, it appeared that some advisors did not “advise,” choosing instead to ask students what courses they wanted to take instead of working with them to develop a comprehensive and directed educational plan for them based on a predetermined pathway of approved courses for their program of study. The importance of the superordinate theme of institutional support was highlighted by the students’ identifying a lack of reliable, consistent advising.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. Using the research methodology, IPA, the researcher explored the central research question: *How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success?* The researcher utilized two theoretical frameworks: Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (1986). Bourdieu’s theoretical construct of habitus provided a conceptual lens for observing how the low-income students’ perceptions, thoughts, reactions, and actions affected how they integrated, socially and academically, into the institution. Tinto’s theory of student departure provided a theoretical framework for analyzing how social and academic integration influenced the low-income students’ capacity to persist to degree completion. The findings from analysis of the interview transcript data are presented in this chapter.
The researcher conducted in-depth, semi-formal interviews, lasting for 60 to 90 minutes, with eight successful low-income students who had recently graduated. Seven interviews were completed in-person and one interview was via telephone. Following transcription of each interview by REV.COM, an online transcription service, the researcher emailed a summary of the essence of the interview and the researcher’s thematic interpretations, along with a copy of the interview transcript to each participant. To facilitate member-checking, the researcher asked each student to react to the summary, the thematic impressions, and the transcript by confirming, clarifying, or disagreeing with the content. Each participant clarified or confirmed all data.

Data analysis followed the six-step process for IPA developed by Smith et al., (2009) which allowed the researcher to remain flexible and adapt to the process when the data required it. Due to IPA’s idiographic commitment, the researcher worked through the interviews individually, becoming fully immersed in each participant’s distinct story, and interpreting the most important facets of the student’s account of their lived experience. The researcher developed notes and impressions of each participant’s telling of their story and used all the data from each individual case narrative to make connections with emergent themes. Thematic coding was facilitated using the MAXQDA qualitative analysis software tool. In the final step of the analytic process, the researcher identified patterns across all the participants’ cases, theoretically assessed shared themes, and identified the connected themes that were the most powerful and compelling.

Throughout the research process, the researcher utilized several techniques to aid in the trustworthiness and dependability of the study including: (a) member-checking to maintain credibility; (b) thick description to affirm transferability; (c) internal audit procedures to uphold dependability; and (d) reflexive journaling to support confirmability. The comprehensive
internal audit trail for this study includes: (a) documentation on the specific purpose of the study; (b) descriptions of why and how the participants were chosen; (c) details about how the data were collected and how long it took to collect the data; (d) thorough explanations of the data analysis techniques; (e) discussions about the interpretation of the data and the presentation of the analysis and findings; and (f) detailed descriptions of the techniques used to confirm data credibility (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The findings related to how successful low-income students made sense of and explained their academic success included the following three superordinate themes and nine subordinate themes: (1) the imprint of being low-income including (a) limited choices, (b) self-motivation and self-determination, (c) work ethic, (d) self-doubt and fear; (2) the importance of supportive relationships including (a) family support, (b) peer support, (c) faculty and staff support; and (3) the impact of institutional support systems including (a) the positive impact of institutional support, and (b) the negative impact of lack of institutional support.

The subordinate themes, “self-motivation and self-determination,” and “work ethic” are representative of how the students were emboldened to overcome fear and push self-doubt aside in order to find a successful pathway to completion. The students’ strong work ethics, as well as their self-motivated and self-determined spirits, grew in large part out of their low-income upbringing. Students expressed that they believed that they could create a life of greater prosperity for themselves than their parents had known as long as they were willing to work hard. Their disadvantaged upbringings inspired them to end the cycle of poverty by being self-motivated and self-determined to stay the course, even when they faced obstacles. Even though the subordinate themes, “limited choices,” and “self-doubt and fear” are reflective of factors that threatened to derail their aspirations, the students persevered because they saw a higher
education degree as their pathway to middle-class life and a more prosperous and sustainable future.

In the subordinate themes, “family support,” “peer support,” and “faculty and staff support,” the student narratives clearly demonstrated the importance of supportive relationships. The students described how each group provided a different type of support, but all of the backing they received helped them overcome different kinds of obstacles. Family members generally provided inspiration, encouragement, and motivation; student peers typically provided practical help and assistance; and faculty and staff usually provided strategic or tactical help. Collectively, the subordinate themes, “family support,” “peer support,” and “faculty and staff support” illustrated a crucial, multifaceted system of supportive relationships that these low-income students depended on, and moreover, that they viewed as crucial to their success. The researcher suggests that the institution could develop methods for sharing information with students during the admissions stage that effectively communicates the importance of supportive relationships with family members, their peers, and faculty and staff. Many low-income students are also first-generation students who do not have parents or other role models to advise them about what to expect in college. Therefore, the institution can make a difference for the students by helping them understand the potential obstacles they may face and the remedies they have for conquering them.

A major finding uncovered through analysis of the interview data was the superordinate theme, “the impact of institutional support.” In the subordinate theme, “the negative impact of lack of institutional support,” students shared obvious examples of how a lack of consistent, effective, and proactive support systems impeded their completion journey. Conversely, in the subordinate theme, “the positive impact of institutional support,” students revealed how valuable
proactive, relational support systems were for their continued success. The students clearly responded more positively when they developed trusting relationships with faculty and staff, such as the relationships with financial aid advisors that several students described. It was also clear that a proactive approach was most effective because the students’ backgrounds did not include role models to help them navigate the complexities of higher education. Basically, students did not know what they did not know, so they needed to be able to depend on the institution to tell them what help was available and sometimes, to help them even understand that they needed help. For example, it was evident that students needed consistent, dependable, and proactive advising so they could safeguard their limited financial resources and not waste their time. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, knowledge generated from this research is expected to inform the provision of support systems in place for low-income community college students and help student services practitioners create and enhance programs aimed at assisting more low-income students to stay in school and graduate. This research clearly shows the importance of consistent, effective institutional services in the areas of advising, financial aid, and learning support systems.

This study’s literature review supports the importance of strong institutional support systems that help students mitigate barriers to persistence (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Miller et al., 2005; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Additionally, the literature demonstrates how new and emerging efforts to advance completion would benefit from development of support systems that promote self-efficacy, aid students in planning, and endorse social and academic assimilation ((Boland & Kinnon, 2014; Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Miller et al., 2005; Williams & Bryan, 2013). In conclusion, the researcher contends that a comprehensive system of proactive,
relational, and consistent institutional support services would offer significant benefit for students by helping them navigate around academic and, “life happens” obstacles.

Chapter five will discuss how the findings are situated within the current literature, offers implications of these findings for practice, and suggests areas for future investigations as indicated by the research.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. This study combined Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of habitus to understand how the shared outlook and experiences of students from low-income backgrounds influenced their ability to make a successful social and academic transition into the college culture. It also examined how the influence of the students’ upbringing and their cultural transition influenced their ability to persist to community college completion. The two theoretical frameworks guided the development of this study’s interview questions and subsequently directed the participants’ responses.

Through the qualitative methodological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study explored the lived experiences of eight successful low-income students who had recently graduated. The researcher sought to understand how the students perceived their successful journeys to completion and how they defined their academic success. The central research question that guided the study was: How do low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees make sense of and explain their academic success? Through in-depth interviews, each participant described their lived experiences of success at the community college with rich descriptions. The researcher analyzed the individual stories of each participant and identified common ideas that existed across the collective experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The data yielded three main themes and nine subthemes: (1.) the imprint of being low-income, including (1a.) limited choices, (1b.) self-motivation and self-determination, (1c.) work ethic (1d.) self-doubt and fear; (2.) the importance of supportive relationships including (2a.) family support, (2b.) peer support, and (2c.) faculty
and staff support; and (3.) the impact of institutional support systems including (3a.) the positive impact of institutional support, and (3b.) the negative impact of lack of institutional support.

These themes resolved the central research question by suggesting that low-income students plot a successful course for their community college journey by remaining self-motivated and self-determined to work as hard as necessary to overcome their fears and push their self-doubt aside; they ultimately earned a degree to help them secure a sustainable job and create a better future for their families. These themes further submit that students recognized the importance of a multilayered system of supportive relationships that provided practical and tactical support through inspiration, encouragement, and motivation. Finally, these themes suggest that students navigated their successful community college pathway by utilizing institutional support systems to help them surmount past academic and “life happens” challenges, as well as academic and personal obstacles threatening their persistence.

This chapter is organized by the identified findings, within the context of the study’s two theoretical frameworks, and it is simultaneously situated within past literature. The researcher provided a discussion of how each finding clarified or problematized the conclusions from other research studies. This chapter also presents the implications of these findings for the practice setting and provides specific examples of how the findings may be used in the practice setting. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research. The next section presents the first superordinate theme, “the imprint of being low-income,” in relation to its position within prevailing literature.

**The Imprint of Being Low-Income**

The first primary theme in the current study, “the imprint of being low-income,” reflected the one characteristic that shaped the lives of the successful students more than any other factor:
they grew up in low-income homes. The subthemes, “limited choices,” “self-motivation and self-determination,” “work ethic,” and “self-doubt and fear,” revealed how the imprint of growing up in an economically disadvantaged household influenced, both positively and negatively, the ways the students viewed their successful persistence to completion at the community college. Growing up in a low-income family obstructed the students’ visions and goals for their future because they did not have role models who could teach them how to look beyond their current situation and envision how a college degree could help them secure a better job to build a more sustainable future for their families.

The students described how their low-income backgrounds also shaped their passion for bettering themselves by instilling in them a strong work ethic and fostering self-motivated and self-determined spirits that helped them take advantage of the opportunity that higher education offered as a pathway to a more prosperous future for themselves and their children. Even though growing up poor created a sense of limited choices for the students and increased the students’ fear and self-doubt, they held fast to the promise of a brighter future, by working hard and remaining self-motivated and self-determined to use higher education as a springboard to a brighter future.

In relation to the first subordinate theme, “limited choices,” the participants in this study viewed their ability to attend any institution other than the community college as non-existent due to the high cost of other higher education options. All the students could not afford college without financial help, and most said they could not count on monetary help from their families. Even after finalizing a plan to secure financial resources to cover their postsecondary pursuits, most of the students still expressed that they felt like their choices for where they could attend college were limited, and they chose the community college because they believed it was their
only feasible option. The continuum of literature is aligned with the findings of this subtheme. The foundational core of the community college model is built around the principle that everyone deserves access to postsecondary education; therefore, community colleges are designed to provide affordable access to education, especially for lower-income individuals (Kipp et al., 2002; Horn & Nevill, 2006; Boggs, 2011; Meier, 2013; McKinney et al., 2015). Several studies have found that the relatively low cost to attend a community college makes these institutions the postsecondary option chosen most often by low-income students (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015). In 2008, 52% of low-income, post-secondary students attended community college (Portraits, 2011), probably because the average tuition at community colleges was 175% less than the average cost at four-year institutions (Boggs, 2011). Additionally, community colleges are designed to be accessible, allowing students to live at home while attending school (Miller, 2009; Boggs, 2011). The subtheme “limited choices,” aligns with the theoretical concept of habitus which suggests that predisposed norms and tendencies within social classes influence both students’ attitudes and their behaviors, and shape an individual’s understanding of the world while also guiding their choices.

Unanimously, the students in this study credited the second subtheme, “self-motivation and self-determination” with helping them persist to completion, and each student attributed their disadvantaged upbringing as the primary reason why they valued and demonstrated those characteristics. The students described college as a means to help them pave a pathway to a more prosperous career and create a better life for their families. The students described their upbringing as a powerful motivator for them to become a positive role model for their children and expressed a strong desire to teach their children to aspire for more and show them how to approach their futures differently by setting an example for success. Growing up in an
economically disadvantaged household was clearly the driving force behind the students’ passion for establishing a financially stable position for their children and moving their family beyond the lower-income strata they had grown up in.

With regards to existing research, the finding that self-motivation and self-determination guide the success of low-income students is closely aligned with the concept of academic hope (Hansen et al., 2014). Academic hope refers to the optimistic thinking that successful students recognize as instrumental in helping them succeed despite barriers. Essentially, numerous studies have affirmed that the act of students’ believing in their ability to achieve their goals influences persistence by cognitively motivating them to develop stratagems to move toward their goals and help them overcome obstacles blocking their persistence (Feldman et al., 2009; Rand, 2009; Snyder et al., 2008). Other studies have recognized the effect of aspiration capital on helping disadvantaged populations persist in college, regardless of the personal and professional difficulties they encounter along the way (Summers, 2003; Yosso, 2005). Like academic hope, aspiration capital describes how students’ aspirational hopes and dreams help them press on even when faced with significant obstacles (Kefallinou, 2009; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Simmons, 2013), which coincides directly with the findings outlined in this subtheme.

In contradiction to this subtheme, however, several studies have concluded that an individual’s desire and motivation have little to do with why community college students drop out (Garza & Landeck, 2004; Miller et al., 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). The findings from this current investigation challenge the previous research; the students in this study clearly acclaimed their own self-motivation and self-determination as primary reasons as to why they did not drop out when faced with barriers impeding their persistence. Additionally, Collins (2009) presented evidence that it is difficult to move in social standing because of the theory of
social reproduction, which suggests that social inequality is reproduced and passed down through generations. The results of the current exploration contradict the analysis presented in Collins (2009); the students in this study acknowledged the hard work and commitment of their parents as a predominant motivation for them to complete their degrees so they could move up in social standing. This study confirmed the conclusions from numerous other studies showing how academic hope, aspiration capital, and self-efficacy are common characteristics for successful community college graduates, regardless of their socioeconomic standing (Feldman et al., 2009; Kefallinou, 2009; Martin et al., 2014; Rand, 2009; Sandoval et al., 2014; Simmons, 2013; Snyder et al., 2008; Summers, 2003; Yosso, 2005). The researcher suggests that the subtheme, “self-motivation and self-determination,” aligns with the theoretical construct of habitus because the participants’ past upbringing in a low-income family, clearly shaped their perception of their present and strongly influenced their choice to remain self-motivated and self-determined to succeed.

The third subordinate theme, “work ethic” provides evidence that disadvantaged upbringings foster a strong work ethic. The students in this study clearly viewed their willingness to work hard as a primary reason for their success, and they strongly valued their work ethic. The students recognized a direct connection between their low-income status and their need to work hard, suggesting that, because they were poor, they would need to work harder than other students. Furthermore, the students described their work ethic as being ingrained in them by their parents who worked diligently and continuously, even though they still struggled financially. Finally, the students expressed that they believed they needed to work hard to produce the same quality work as other students who had grown up in higher socio-economic households. The theoretical construct of habitus asserts that individuals’ actions are
subconsciously intentional; the researcher suggests that the subtheme, “work ethic,” demonstrates that assertion and thereby affirms a key concept of the theoretical construct of habitus.

The literature affirms the predisposition for low-income students to place a high value on a strong work ethic and, moreover, confirms that low-income students often choose to work while they are in school because of the value they attribute to working. The students in the current study connected their work ethic to helping them stay committed to doing their best and motivating them to finish what they had started. Additionally, the students described how they learned at an early age that when they want something, they have to decide how to achieve it and then work hard to meet their defined goals.

State and federal funding for higher education fall short in fulfilling the financial needs of low-income students, creating an affordability gap that makes it difficult for them to pay even the lowest tuition and fees at community colleges without working (Baird, 2006; Fike & Fike, 2008). However, several studies have established that, even though federal, state, and college-based financial aid programs reduce the need for some students to work, many lower-income students choose to work because of the value they place on maintaining a respectable work ethic (Kasworm, 2010; Perna, 2010; Walpole, 2011), a dynamic clearly revealed in the findings of this study.

While previous research does not directly contradict this study’s assertion that a strong work ethic has a positive impact on student success, other studies have shown that students who work while attending school are at a higher risk for dropping out than students who do not work (Swager et al., 1995). Additionally, students who work over twenty hours each week have lower GPAs than those who work less (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Schmid &
Abell, 2003; Voorhees, 1987). Other studies have concluded that adult students are less likely to persist than younger college students, or if they do complete, they take longer to graduate because they are more likely to attend school part-time while working part-time or full-time (Capps, 2012; Martin et al., 2014).

The final subtheme, “self-doubt and fear” provided evidence that low-income students tend to feel isolated and like they do not fit in, while also worrying about not being smart enough for college. Students in the current study said they feared they would not finish and would thus disappoint their families. It was evident that the students’ negative feelings, as evidenced by the “self-doubt and fear” subtheme, arose from their low-income background in much the same way as the positive feelings demonstrated by the “self-motivation and self-determination” subtheme, originated in their low-income upbringing. The students in this study lacked family role models who understood higher education or knew how to help the students navigate their fears and insecurities. Scholars have identified familial support networks as an important factor in college student success. However, disadvantaged populations rarely have family support capable of helping them move beyond the obstacles deterring their persistence (Dayton, 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Additionally, the students recognized that many of their peers were different from them because they came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Feeling different caused them also to feel isolated, exacerbating their feelings of self-doubt and fear.

The students’ self-doubt and fears aligned within past literature suggesting that the odds are in fact stacked against lower-income postsecondary students. Previous studies have demonstrated that social class is a primary determinant of success and that low-income students are less likely to complete than students from higher income backgrounds (MacLeod, 1995;
Walpole, 2003). Other studies have confirmed that low-income students tend to set lower postsecondary education expectations than their higher-income counterparts (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001). Additionally, existing literature provides evidence that supports the students’ fears that they may not be able to complete the requirements for their degree (Bundy, 2013; Hawley & Harris 2006; Miller et al., 2005; Walpole et al., 2014). Studies have shown that low-income students face more academic challenges than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Perna, 2005; Pierce, 2016), and economically disadvantaged students have more trouble completing postsecondary coursework and require more remedial interventions (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Seider, 2008; Walpole, 2011). The subtheme, “self-doubt and fear,” supports the theory of habitus, which proposes that an individual’s habitus, molded by their particular social setting, guides the way they perceive their world and view their position within their world.

In conclusion, the finding, “the imprint of being low-income,” supports existing literature. The participants’ experiences revealed how growing up in a lower socio-economic class influenced their success, both positively and negatively. Most of the students observed that they did not have individuals in their lives pushing them to think beyond their existing situation and/or to explore the possibilities for a future that was outside the margins of their current socio-economic position. While low-income students may be at a disadvantage because of their upbringing in a socially inequitable environment, their experience with social inequality growing up may also contribute to their self-motivation and self-determination to work hard in college to break the cycle of poverty and create a more desirable and prosperous future for themselves and their families. Given the evidence from previous studies that lower-income students are more likely to drop out than their higher-income peers, it was not surprising that many of the students
in the current study recognized that they often had to overcome their own self-doubt and fear in order to persist to completion.

The finding, “the imprint of being low-income,” aligns with the theoretical concept of Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of habitus which contends that: (1) an individual’s social experience within a particular socio-economic setting shapes their opinions and their understanding of the world, ultimately guiding their choices (Bourdieu, 1977; Throop & Murphy, 2002; Costa & Murphy, 2015), and (2) an individual’s perceptions, thoughts, actions, and reactions are guided by their continuing experience within their social structure (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Bourdieu (1986) also applied habitus to the field of education, suggesting that students from economically disadvantaged families are negatively affected by their underprivileged habitus. The theory postulates that lower-income students are more likely to struggle in college and less likely to complete their degrees because their habitus is not aligned with the institution’s values and expectations (Glaesser & Cooper, 2012). The negative consequence of the students’ low-income habitus was evident in the students’ feelings of self-doubt and fear and in their belief that their postsecondary choice was limited to a community college. However, in contradiction to Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of habitus, the students’ low-income upbringing also fostered positive behaviors such as cultivating resiliency that was manifested in the way the students maintained a strong work ethic, learned from their parents and remained self-motivated and self-determined to overcome barriers and persist to completion. Using the construct of habitus as a framework for interpreting how the students’ disadvantaged socioeconomic status influenced the way they thought about and perceived their success, the researcher proposes that a lower-income social class: (1) greatly influences students’ perceptions and thoughts about their postsecondary opportunities; and (2) meaningfully impacts the ways students choose to react and act when
faced with complications threatening their ability to persist to completion. In this way, this study adds to research explaining how low-income community college students overcome inherent risk factors and mitigate barriers to complete their degrees successfully.

The following section presents a discussion of the second primary theme, “the importance of supportive relationships,” as it is situated within previous literature.

**The Importance of Supportive Relationships**

The second main theme, “the importance of supportive relationships,” includes three subthemes: (a) family support; (b) peer support; and (c) faculty and staff support. Participants in this study stressed the importance of having cooperative relationships with individuals who could help them traverse barriers and circumnavigate obstacles that threatened their persistence. The students acknowledged the existence of various support groups that provided assistance. The first subtheme, “family support,” demonstrated how students craved inspiration and motivation from their familial relationships, responding confidently to their family’s encouragement when academic or “life happens” situations created an impediment to their persistence. Students who took time to engage with other students described the importance of the second subtheme, “peer support,” to their success. Notably, the importance of the “peer support” subtheme was evident in the way the students’ classmates supported them through academic or social challenges. However, the act of “paying it forward” by supporting their fellow students was more dominant as a factor of success for the participants in this study who described how they gained as much or more encouragement from helping other students as they received from their peers’ support. The final subtheme, “faculty and staff support,” was important to the students’ success because this group of supporters provided relief for both challenging academic and “life happens” difficulties. The students also acknowledged the positive impact of faculty and staff whom they
perceived cared about them and who wanted them to succeed. The primary theme, “the
importance of supportive relationships,” both aligned with and contradicted one of the
frameworks used in this study, Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, as described in the
following analysis of existing literature.

The literature reviewed for this study concluded that a low-income student’s desire to
remain in school and their institution’s quality of instruction both played a secondary role in
persistence for community college students because economically disadvantaged populations
rarely had family members capable of helping them overcome obstacles (Dayton, 2005;
Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Furthermore, personal or financial issues
were often insurmountable if students did not have effective familial or institutional support
networks (Garza & Landeck, 2004; Miller et al., 2005; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2014). This study
affirms the conclusions of existing studies in that the participants recognized the importance of
the support they received from family as integral to their ultimate success. However, this finding
stands in contradiction to Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, one of the frameworks used
in this study. Tinto (1993) asserted that postsecondary student departure is directly associated
with a lack of academic and social integration. This theory suggests that successful students pass
through three stages of integration: separation, transition, and incorporation (Kuh et al., 2006;
Milem & Berger, 1997). When students separate, they disassociate themselves from their
families, friends, and social communities. However, Tinto’s (1993) theory has been criticized
for being focused only on traditional four-year students (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Halpin, 1990;
McCubbin, 2003; Metz, 2002). This research study affirms the criticism with regards to the
importance of separation for low-income, two-year postsecondary students, suggesting the
antithesis: low-income community college students are more apt to successfully persist to degree
completion when they do not separate or disassociate themselves from their families, friends, and social communities. This is because supportive familial support systems help low-income students at two-year institutions transcend “life happens” barriers.

The subthemes “peer support” and “faculty and staff support” are strengthened by existing research and aligned with the framework of student departure theory (Tinto, 1993). Previous literature affirmed the importance of social interactions between students and their peers, finding that peer relationships fostered academic success and promoted persistence (Simmons, 2013). Likewise, regarding the subtheme “faculty and staff support,” previous research also emphasized the importance of helpful and empathetic faculty in helping students achieve their goals (Kezar, 2003; Simmons, 2013). Past research has confirmed the importance of social integration and supportive relationships as critical to student success, particularly for minority students and students from cultures outside the institution’s predominant culture (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Quaye et al., 2015; Jayakumar et al., 2013; Williams & Bryan, 2013). Kezar (2003) established faculty mentor programs as predictors of increased student engagement and leadership which contributed to increased persistence to goal completion. The “peer support” and “faculty and staff support” subthemes from this research study are also in-line with one of the frameworks used, Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure. Tinto (1993) suggested an implicit connection between students’ social integration within their student peer group and students’ motivation to persist past difficulties, and concluded that student retention is a direct result of purposeful interventions on behalf of the institution to integrate students into the institution’s academic and social culture (Metz, 2002; Long, 2012).

In conclusion, the primary theme, “the importance of supportive relationships,” furthers research aimed at identifying factors contributing to low completion rates at community colleges
by expanding the scholarly conversation, with a focus on the elements that promote success for at-risk students, like the low-income students involved in this study. Additionally, this study responds to the critique that Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure has only been applied in the four-year higher education space, by applying the theory to an exploration of two-year community college students. Directly contradicting Tinto’s (1993) conclusion on the imperative for separation from family and friends for four-year students, the two-year students in the current study did not disassociate themselves from their families; moreover, they clearly recognized the support of their families as a reason why they were able to complete their college degrees. Additionally, students acknowledged the importance of both receiving and giving peer support. Generally, the subtheme “peer support,” was manifested when students needed practical assistance or pragmatic help to overcome an academic or social challenge or threat. The “give and take” peer relationships served to keep the two-year students motivated to persist in the same way that other research has established a direct connection between four-year students’ motivation to persist and their social integration within their student peer groups. Regarding the subtheme of “faculty and staff support,” the students in this study credited empathetic faculty and support staff with playing a key role in helping them strategically and tactically negotiate roadblocks hindering their persistence. Analysis of the students’ narratives led this researcher to conclude that students from low-income backgrounds often lack confidence in their ability to succeed in college because of their upbringing in a social structure that does not generally include role models with college degrees. This conclusion aligns with the concept of habitus used to frame this exploration, which proposes that an individual’s habitus guides the way the individual perceives their world and their position within their world. The low-income students described feelings of self-doubt and fear arising from their disadvantaged upbringing, but they
acknowledged caring faculty and staff for helping them persevere past and overcome their fears. The purposeful attempts by college employees to help the students integrate academically and socially, and their encouragement to them to not give up when faced with obstacles, were important factors supporting the students’ successful completion. The researcher proposes that, when low-income community college students face academic or personal challenges, they are often able to negotiate obstacles if they have supportive relationships with their families, peers, and/or with college faculty and staff.

The following section presents a discussion of the final primary theme, “the impact of institutional support systems,” as it is situated within previous literature.

**The Impact of Institutional Support Systems**

The final primary theme, “the impact of institutional support systems,” is comprised of two subthemes: “the positive impact of institutional support,” and “the negative impact of lack of institutional support.” It was clear that the support systems provided by the college had an indelible impact on the students’ experiences, either positively or negatively. Four support systems emerged as the most impactful to the students: financial aid, academic and career advising (including counseling and disability services), library support and tutoring, and academic clubs and student organizations. These institutional support systems are designed to help students navigate college processes and mitigate barriers and obstacles jeopardizing their persistence. The participants’ stories showed that institutional support services were both necessary and valued. However, this study confirms that low-income community college students can be adversely impacted when institutional services fail to address the students’ needs appropriately, or when students do not know services exist or how to access them.
Previous studies have confirmed that community college students generally share various demographic characteristics found less frequently among students at four-year universities; these atypical traits create natural barriers that impact persistence and completion for community college students (Bozick, 2007; Bragg, 2011; Brint, 2003; Cox & Ebber, 2010; Fike & Fike, 2008; Garza & Landeck, 2004; Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Numerous studies promoted strong institutional support systems as imperative for helping students mitigate persistence barriers (Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Miller et al., 2005; Williams & Bryan, 2013). While risk factors for two-year postsecondary students include being older, attending part-time, and being first-generation students, existing research has identified socioeconomic status as the single greatest risk and the main predictor of non-completion (Nakajima et al., 2012). The current investigation affirmed other studies that have proposed community colleges provide the only affordable option for lower-income postsecondary students (Dowd & Coury, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015). In fact, the College Board (2016) reported that 31% of low-income community college students are in the nethermost income quartile in the United States (Ma & Baum, 2016, p.8). Previous studies have concluded that to help at-risk, lower-income students persist and complete their goals, practitioners need to understand the unique risk factors and experiences that lower-income students face (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Latz, 2012). Research has also established a need for support systems to include financial aid counseling, with a financial plan development component, to help students set and fulfill appropriate educational goals (Hawley & Harris, 2006; McKinney et al., 2015; McKinney & Novak, 2013); robust academic advising models are also essential to helping students establish appropriate goals and educational plans (Boland & Kinnon, 2014; Hawley & Harris 2006; McArthur, 2005).
With regards to the first subtheme, “the positive impact of institutional support,” within the primary theme, “the impact of institutional support services,” this study is consistent with extant literature as described above, and with Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure in the three ways listed here and examined below. Comprehensively, (a) this study validates the positive influence institutional support systems can have on successful completion for low-income students; (b) this study affirms the need for community college support models to be designed to meet the unique challenges of all community college students, but particularly for the large numbers of low-income students attending two-year institutions; and (c) this study aligns with Tinto’s (1993) assertion that colleges can positively influence persistence with deliberate institutional efforts to integrate students, both academically and socially. Existing literature has described “life happens” barriers, such as unexpected health issues, job layoffs, or childcare needs, as the most common obstacles faced by low-income students (Bundy, 2013; Hawley & Harris 2006; Miller et al., 2005; Walpole et al., 2014). Additionally, Engberg and Allen (2010) suggested that disparities in education exacerbate social inequality, and they asserted that low-income students need help navigating an unknown higher education system to avoid being further marginalized because they cannot figure out how to afford college. These findings were evident in the current study as students described how they would have never been able to go to college without financial assistance, and when they talked about how much they needed and appreciated the friendly and informed financial aid staff who made the financial aid processes seem straightforward and simple to maneuver. When analyzing the institutional support services that helped foster their success, the participants in the current study consistently described the relationships they had developed with supportive faculty and staff as essential. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that social integration is a critical
component of success and that social interactions between students and their peers, or between students and faculty, as well as faculty mentor programs, establish relationships that foster persistence (Kezar, 2003; Braxton, Brier, & Steele, 2007; Quaye et al., 2015; Jayakumar et al., 2013; Simmons, 2013 Williams & Bryan, 2013).

A review of prior research reveals divergent findings for why community college students, in general, fail to persist to degree completion. As described above, previous studies have concluded that non-academic, life happens issues are the most frequently identified reason why low-income students do not complete their degrees. However, other studies have identified a lack of academic preparedness as a primary predictor of non-persistence for community college students in general, and particularly for low-income students (Bragg, 2001; Hoachlander et al., 2003; Garza & Landeck, 2004; McArthur, 2005; Reason, 2009). There is a continuum of evidence from existing literature that has suggested that disadvantaged students, especially those from high-poverty school districts, require more remediation, have more trouble completing college-level work, and face more academic challenges in general than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (Engle & Lynch, 2011; Galentiono & Townsend, 2014; Perna, 2005; Pierce, 2016; Seider, 2008; Walpole, 2011). The current study affirms the need for both institutional support services to help students who are academically underprepared, and support mechanisms to help students overcome life happens obstacles. Providing one without the other is not enough to effectively resolve the challenges faced by economically disadvantaged students.

The final subtheme, “the impact of a lack of institutional support,” demonstrated not only the importance of providing effective institutional support services but also the critical need for institutions to ensure institutional support services adequately address the unique challenges
faced by low-income community college students. The current study revealed two main problem areas at the study’s research site related to this subtheme: (a) a lack of awareness of institutional support services; and (b) inconsistency in academic and career advising. First, students were not readily aware of the institutional support services available to help them, or how to get institutional support when they needed it. While any first-time college student may be unsure of the institutional support services available to them, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally have stronger familial support systems and are more likely to have parents, or other members of their families who have successfully navigated higher education, available and willing to help them. Low-income students are more likely to be first-generation college students (Cox & Ebber, 2010; Nakajima et al., 2012; Wirth & Padilla, 2008). Even when low-income students have strong familial support systems that assist in other ways, they may not have people to help them identify and take advantage of college support programs. This study proposed that recognizing this distinctive characteristic of low-income students can help community college practitioners develop effective communication protocols that proactively connect all students with available support services instead of waiting for students to search for help reactively.

The second issue identified in the current study and related to the subtheme, “the lack of institutional support,” was inconsistency in academic and career advising. This issue was also noted in relation to the college’s tutoring services, and it presented a significant issue for several participants who experienced negative consequences resulting from incorrect or inadequate guidance. Existing research has identified the importance of providing strong academic and career advising models for community college students that engage students, and that include career exploration, goal setting, and educational program planning components (Boland &
Kinnon, 2014; Hawley & Harris 2006; McArthur, 2005). Early alert systems to identify and quickly respond to barriers go hand-in-hand with robust advising practices and have been recognized as essential to continued postsecondary persistence (Hawley & Harris, 2006; Nakajima et al., 2012). The concerns expressed by participants interviewed for this study were consistent with findings from past research in which students simultaneously described the importance of academic advising in enhancing their ability to reach their goals, but also complained about poor, ineffective, and inadequate counsel (McArthur, 2005). Unfortunately, participants in the current study experienced several deleterious consequences as a result of flawed advising or poor service from the academic tutoring center. The negative outcomes caused a myriad of emotions that ranged from hurt, discouraged, and/or disrespected to amassing a year’s worth of credits for courses that did not meet the requirements for the degree program the student was pursuing. This study proposes that community colleges need to provide consistent and coherent academic and career advising, and academic tutoring; these services should be led by qualified and well-trained advisors and tutors to help all students, but particularly low-income community college students, develop and adhere to an educational plan that helps them achieve their goals in an acceptable and established time period.

In conclusion, this study confirmed the positive impact of a supportive community college culture that includes institutional support systems designed to navigate the unique academic and “life happens” challenges faced by low-income students. Additionally, the researcher suggests that the quality of the institutional support systems is as important as their availability and accessibility -- it is not enough to simply make support services available to students. College practitioners need to communicate support service information to students effectively, and they must also be aware of the harmful repercussions resulting from inadequate
and ineffective support. One of the frameworks for this study, Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, establishes the importance of both academic and social integration in a student’s ability to persist (Metz, 2002). In agreement with Tinto’s (1993) theory, this study suggests that low-income community college students can benefit from assimilating and integrating within the academic and social systems of their institutions; Tinto (1993) also affirmed that student retention could be a direct result of a college’s thoughtful and intentional efforts to help students integrate academically and socially. However, in contradiction to student departure theory, this research suggests that academic and social integration is not a necessary component of success for all low-income, adult, community college students.

Additionally, this study’s two frameworks, the theoretical construct of habitus, and the theory of student departure, delineate two important factors related to this finding: (a) that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to succeed because their habitus conflicts with the fundamental assumptions of educational institutions; and (b) that college students’ goals and experiences, along with their successful integration within the college culture, influence their persistence and completion. Therefore, the researcher contends that proactive and relational support structures for low-income community college students are better aligned with low-income students’ habitus, and they will, therefore, help students establish goals and integrate into the college culture, thereby improving their ability to persist.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students at one of the 58 two-year, public community colleges in North Carolina. The researcher chose the qualitative lens of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the factors that influence persistence from the internal perspective of
community college students who had successfully reached their goal and had recently graduated. Consistent with prior research, this study suggests that community college practitioners and faculty can create more effective support programs that will help low-income students stay in school and graduate by: (a) understanding how growing up poor influences students’ perceptions and thoughts about higher education, ultimately impacted students’ actions when faced with postsecondary choices and students’ reactions when faced with barriers jeopardizing their ability to persist; (b) creating opportunities for students to connect in meaningful ways with their peers in class; (c) developing faculty and staff mentoring programs to help students see that they are not bound by life circumstances, and instead have choices; and (d) recognizing the importance of proactive, relational, and consistent institutional services and support programs, especially in the areas of advising, financial aid, and learning support systems. The rich data obtained in this study support both frameworks guiding this research, the theoretical concept of habitus developed by Bourdieu (1986), and Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure. Additionally, the combination of these two theories created a unique context that substantiates extant research and expands on the application of both theories within higher education. This study proposes that an individual’s experiences growing up in a lower socio-economic environment limit the way they perceive what their future can be like and constrain their understanding of postsecondary opportunities, but they do not restrict an individual’s ability to assimilate into an unknown higher education culture and be successful.

Furthermore, this study developed a deeper interpretation of how past experiences as low-income children affected the way students perceived the community college as their only option for giving them choices about their future. The results from this study demonstrated that, unlike students from other social groups who view their options as relatively limitless, low-
income students approach the community college as, truly, their only chance. This discovery is key; the qualitative difference between good and bad support services is crucial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, not merely an issue of convenience. Additionally, peer support is more than just a social plus for the low-income student; it bolsters and affirms their ability to succeed in what they perceive as their only option. Therefore, for these students, literally, *everything* is riding on their being successful.

This research demonstrates how low-income students attribute great value to support they receive from staff and faculty whom they view as genuinely caring about them and wanting to help them succeed and navigate the unknown higher education environment. The study also reveals the meaning low-income students consign to peer support, acknowledging the merit gained by both getting as well as giving support. The researcher suggests that one possibility for the dual understanding of the value ascribed to peer support by this study’s participants is that through both giving or receiving support, they were connected with other students in an unfamiliar, sometimes frightening, educational experience. For low-income students who admittedly struggled with self-doubt and fear, in large part because they grew up feeling “different” from their friends who came from families with more money, the notion that they “were in this together” was powerful; it finally put the lower-income students on equal footing with their peers and validated that they were no longer “different” after all, but truly a peer.

Past research has shown that postsecondary student completion is a major issue in academia, particularly for community colleges. Previous studies have also found that the diverse characteristics of community college students create inherent risks and barriers that contribute to the low completion rates at these commonly open-door institutions. Community college students from all backgrounds encounter obstacles and setbacks; however, this study specifically focused
on the unique challenges of one at-risk population -- low-income students. This research proposed that, unlike other at-risk students, low-income students do not generally have life experiences to guide them through college, and they typically lack role models who have knowledge that will help them navigate the unknown territory of higher education. Therefore, low-income students in particular need faculty and staff to help them visualize a future that is not bound by life circumstances; they depend on their collegiate role models to show them that they, in fact, have choices that can help them create a different future for themselves and their families. This study includes implications and recommendations for practice and for future research, which are discussed in the following sections.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The themes and subthemes that emerged from this study provide a deeper understanding of the problem of practice, and they helped the researcher develop recommendations for practice to inform the design and provision of support systems for low-income community college students. The recommendations aim to assist college practitioners tasked with creating and providing support structures that help low-income students stay in school and graduate. Additionally, the recommendations have implications for low-income students who recognize a postsecondary degree as a step towards a more prosperous future and a better life for their families.

This study and existing research confirm that growing up in a low-income family creates unique risks that can derail persistence to completion for this at-risk student populace. This research revealed how the imprint of growing up low-income shaped the way students perceived and thought about higher education, and how the students’ acted and reacted related to their postsecondary decisions, in response to obstacles threatening their persistence. Additionally, this
study and supporting previous literature demonstrate the importance of supportive relationships and the impact of institutional support systems as primary predictors of persistence for low-income students. This researcher suggests that understanding the imprint of growing up low-income provides a foundation that can guide community college practitioners to understand how to develop supportive relationships with low-income students, and how to build effective institutional support systems. The following sections describe three recommendations for practice developed from the findings of this study and from the continuum of previous research. The researcher also describes preliminary results for one of the recommendations that she has recently initiated at her institution because of the findings from this study.

**Recommendation one: Develop a proactive and relational student success team model for providing institutional support for student success.** Based on the findings from this research in conjunction with previous literature, this researcher strongly suggests that community college student services practitioners develop a proactive, relational team model that supports students from the initiation of the application process, through their matriculation, all the way to graduation. The data and analysis from this study indicate that proactive and relational support systems will benefit low-income community college students who do not have experiences or role models to help them navigate the complexities of higher education. Often, economically disadvantaged students do not recognize they are failing and do not know how to secure help. Additionally, lower-income students involved in the current study clearly responded more affirmatively when they were able to develop trusting relationships with faculty and staff. This researcher suggests that a team model, patterned after a case management approach, could help institutions maximize staff resources by distributing the responsibility of keeping track of students as they progress through admissions processes and as they encounter barriers while
completing their programs of study. The ideal student success team should include, at a minimum, an admissions guide, a financial aid advisor, an academic and career advisor, and a faculty advisor. Each success team would have students assigned to their “caseloads,” and together, should strive to: (a) build trusting relationships with their students; (b) guide students through admissions and financial aid processes; (c) help students with career clarity and the development of an educational plan; (d) check-in with students at critical points throughout each semester to make sure they are on-track; and (e) help students develop strategies and tactical plans for overcoming barriers impeding their persistence.

This researcher has developed a student success team model as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3 below.

Figure 2: Concept of Student Success Team Model. This figure represents proposed characteristics for a student success team model at a community college.
Phase one of this model was implemented at the researcher’s community college in Fall 2017; all Spring of 2018 applicants were assigned to one of the institution’s six success teams. Phase two of the model – adding a faculty advisor, a customer service representative, and an IT support technician to the team will be implemented by Summer 2018. While it is too early to have a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of the model, the initial results are impressive: (a) the percentage of students who apply and subsequently enroll, increased by 10%, from 39% in Spring 2017 to 49% for Spring 2018; (b) the college projects an increase of about 2% in full-time equivalents (FTE) for Spring 2018; and (c) the college projects an increase of about 5% in headcount for Spring 2018. Additionally, qualitative responses from students, staff, and faculty are overwhelmingly positive, especially those related to the students’ impressions of the proactive outreach and relational aspects of the model. While it is impossible to assign sole credit for the results above to the implementation of the student success model, since this was the only big change to admissions and enrollment processes applied for Spring, college
administrators are convinced that this new, proactive, relational approach has already had a substantial impact on their efforts to advance student success.

Recommendation two: Create institutional certification programs for professional and faculty advisors. Based on the findings of this study and previous research, the researcher suggests that community college student services practitioners responsible for providing academic and career advising services to students, develop institutional certification programs for both professional advising staff and faculty advisors. This recommendation addresses the identified need for consistent advising models that engage students and offer career exploration, as well as goal setting and educational program planning. This study confirms previous research that has identified robust advising as an important element of success for community college students, particularly low-income students. Additionally, this study revealed the harmful impact of inaccurate advising and ineffective support for educational program planning. This researcher suggests that low-income students, who balance competing priorities and responsibilities outside of college, are generally more focused on reaching graduation through the most direct and least costly route. Additionally, because these students’ backgrounds lack college role models and references, they are more likely to accept without question the recommendations of advisors whom they perceive have legitimate authority. This makes lower-income students especially vulnerable to bad advice. Institutional certification programs provide the consistent foundation needed to ensure consistency and quality of academic and career advising. The programs of study for the two certifications should be based on the institution’s advising model and should include an in-depth review of the college’s advising program mission, goals, objectives, student learning outcomes, and program learning outcomes, as well as topics relevant to academic
advising such as: career advising theory and practice, academic advising foundations, career development and career counseling, and multicultural issues.

**Recommendation three: Develop student peer-to-peer and faculty/staff mentoring programs.** Based on the findings from this study and previous research, the researcher suggests that community college students, particularly low-income students, will benefit from mentoring programs. The current study’s subthemes “peer support” and “faculty and staff support,” in conjunction with extant research, clearly establish that social interactions between students and their peers, or students and faculty, as well as faculty mentor programs, are predictors of success. As aligned with Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure, increased student engagement and integration within the college culture fosters persistence. This researcher suggests that community college practitioners can increase persistence in general, and particularly that of at-risk students, by creating opportunities for students to connect in meaningful ways with their peers and with faculty and staff. As previously mentioned, faculty and staff mentoring programs help students see beyond their existing life circumstances by showing them how they have choices to create a different future than perhaps they are able to envision on their own. This study also proved the positive effect resulting from both giving and receiving peer support. Therefore, this researcher concludes that mentoring programs, providing opportunities for both peer-to-peer support and faculty or staff guidance, would improve persistence by serving as vehicles for students in danger of dropping out to seek counsel and find solutions to resolve their problems. It is important to note, however, that this study and previous research confirms that low-income students tend to have competing priorities that limit the time available to them for extra-curricular activities. Therefore, this researcher suggests that community colleges develop
mentoring programs that are built into the students’ academic program rather than ones that require extra time commitments.

Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, this study’s findings were consistent with existing research on persistence; however, much of the existing research has and continues to focus on persistence at four-year universities; there continues to be a gap in research centered on persistence for community college students. Unlike selective admissions universities, the uniquely American, open-access community colleges, struggle with distinct challenges resulting from their inclusive philosophy. Open-door admissions, coupled with the relatively low tuition costs at community colleges, combine to create inherent challenges and risk factors for all community college students, especially low-income and other disadvantaged student groups. Consequently, community college completion rates continue to underperform when compared to four-year institutions of higher education. Therefore, it is important for future research to address the unique challenges to persistence faced by community college students in general and low-income students in particular. Furthermore, there is a need for studies incorporating larger samples and those involving repeated observation of community college persistence over a longer period of time; the implementation of sustained new practices must also be observed and documented, such as the student success team approach recommended by this study and initiated at the researcher’s institution.

Within the United States, a great deal of scholarly conversation and research has been centered around the “achievement gap” – the recognized disparity in educational performance for underrepresented populations, including economically disadvantaged students. Organizations that are engaged in higher education research and practice have acknowledged studies that
confirm the need for new strategies and tactical solutions to meet the needs of all students, particularly those approaches that address the unique challenges of marginalized populations. However, the postsecondary community has a long way to go to effectively close the attainment gap between privileged and underprivileged college students. Additional research is needed that focuses on understanding how to create policies and practices to increase student persistence to completion for disadvantaged populations, including low-income students, particularly at community colleges.

Higher education publications and journals such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* continue to share articles about the need for academia to adapt to and meet the needs of students involved in 21st Century learning. Additionally, there is a growing negative discourse portending dissatisfaction with the higher education system and proposing that postsecondary degrees are overrated and not important for success. In response to these mounting criticisms, research establishing the importance of higher education in the 21st Century is needed, along with research directed at examining institutional capacity for undertaking and sustaining systemic change.
Appendix A

Initial Recruitment Email to Potential Participants

[Date of Email]

Dear [Name of Student];

My name is Janet Spriggs and I am the Chief Operating Officer at your community college. I am also a student in Doctor of Education, Higher Education Administration program at Northeastern University, and I am currently conducting my doctoral thesis. I am researching the experiences of successful low-income community college students and the title of my thesis is “An Exploration of Persistence Among Low-Income Community College Students in North Carolina.” My goal is to help student services staff at community colleges create and enhance programs that will help low-income students stay in school and graduate.

Participants in this study must be low-income community college students who are within six months of completing their degrees. For purposes of this study, the definition of a low-income student is a student who qualifies for the maximum federal Pell Grant award. Based on the research criteria, I believe you are eligible to participate in this study, and I am sending you this letter to invite you to participate. I believe your experience as a successful student will provide invaluable insights to help bridge the gap in understanding which institutional services and programs are effective at helping low-income students mitigate barriers to be successful.

As a participant in this study, you can expect three in-person interactions. The first meeting will take approximately 30 minutes, and will allow me to explain the study to you in greater detail, clarify my role, and answer your questions. The second meeting will be an interview about your experience as a successful student lasting approximately one hour. The third and final meeting, will be an opportunity for me to share an overview of the data from the interview and ask clarifying questions in a meeting that should last between 30 minutes to one hour. In total, I expect your time commitment to be approximately two and no more than three hours.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. Your privacy is important to me. All information gained as part of this study will be held strictly confidential. To protect your identity, I will ask you to choose a pseudonym at our first meeting. As a thank you for your time and participation I will give you a $25 gift card at the end of our final meeting.

Thank you for taking your time to consider this invitation. If you would like to be a part of this study, please call me at 704-762-0023 or Email me at spriggs.j@husky.neu.edu, and I will share additional information and schedule a time for our first meeting.

Warm Regards,

Janet N. Spriggs
Appendix B

Signed Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education Program
Name of Investigator(s): Primary Investigator: Dr. Thomas Wylie; Co-Investigator: Janet N. Spriggs
Title of Project: An Exploration of Persistence Among Low-Income Community College Students in North Carolina

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 are a low-income community college student who will fulfill the requirements for your associate’s degree within the current academic year.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research study is to learn about and understand the experiences of successful low-income community college students. For purposes of this study, the definition of a low-income student is a student who qualifies for the maximum federal Pell grant award, and the definition of a successful student is a student who has completed almost all of their degree program requirements and is set to graduate during the current academic year. The goal of this research is to generate knowledge that will help community college student services practitioners create and enhance programs that will help low-income students stay in school and graduate.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in three in-person meetings with the co-investigator.

At the first meeting, you will:
1. learn about the study;
2. learn about the researcher’s role in the study;
3. be asked to select a pseudonym to be used in the study to protect your identity;
4. be asked to complete a biographic and demographic data questionnaire;
5. be given an opportunity to ask questions;
6. sign the informed consent agreement; and
7. schedule the second and third meetings.

At the second meeting, the co-investigator will collect data by interviewing you about your experiences as a successful, low-income community college student. Within one week from the second interview, the co-investigator will Email an interview transcript to you, along with a summary of the essence of the interview. You will be invited to react to the transcript and the summary by confirming, clarifying, or disagreeing with any of the content, either in writing submitted by Email to the co-investigator prior to the third meeting, or in person at the third meeting. The co-investigator will respond to any issues, concerns, or questions that you identify at the third interview.
At the third and final meeting, the co-investigator will:

(1) discuss your confirmation of the data;
(2) respond to issues, concerns, or questions that you have about the data; and
(3) ask follow-up questions if necessary.

Each of the interviews will be digitally recorded on a primary recording device and a backup recording device (in case the primary device malfunctions). This study does not offer you any inducement or payment, but you will receive a $25 gift card at the end of the third interview to thank you for your time and participation in this research study.

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

Each of the three meetings described above will occur at a time and place that is convenient for you. The first meeting will require approximately 30 minutes of your time. The second meeting is the interview, and it will take approximately one hour to ninety minutes. The final meeting is expected to take between 30 minutes to one hour. The total time required of you for these three meetings will be approximately two hours and is expected to be no more than three hours, over the course of a 3 to 4 week period.

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

The main risk associated with this study is the possibility of anxiety or uneasiness that you may experience discussing your struggles as a low-income student. The co-investigator will be respectful of the boundaries that you set during the meetings and interviews. You will be allowed to choose to skip any question that you do not wish to answer and the researcher will recommend resources to you if you would like to seek additional guidance for any issue or concern that you express.

**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 community college staff create and enhance institutional services and programs for low-income students. To that end, the findings from this study will be shared as appropriate with staff, faculty, and administrators to strengthen the collective understanding of the types of services and programs that will be most effective for low-income students.

**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.

At your first meeting with the co-investigator, you will be asked to select a pseudonym. The researcher will maintain all participants’ names and pseudonyms in an encrypted password protection software program that is only accessible by the researchers with a valid password. All electronic research files and notes will be stored on a secure and encrypted network and backed up on an external storage device in a secure and private location. Appropriate security features including password protection for all files and electronic storage locations will be utilized, and physical documents including consent forms, field notes, reflective memos, etc. related to this study will be stored in a private and locked file cabinet with the co-investigator maintaining exclusive possession of the key.

Each of the interviews will be digitally recorded on a primary recording device and a backup recording device (in case the primary device malfunctions). All meeting and interview digital recordings will be safeguarded as described above for electronic files and the hard copies of all transcribed interviews will be maintained and secured as described above for physical document. Upon completion of the third and final meeting, all digital recordings will be deleted from the two recording devices.

**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 your 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?
Include the name and viable contact information of one or more appropriate people. If there is a possibility of an emergency, be sure an immediate response is available.
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Janet Spriggs, the person mainly responsible for the research, at spriggs.j@husky.neu.edu or via phone at 704-762-0023. You can also contact Dr. Thomas Wylie, the Principal Investigator, at t.wylie@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?
You will be given a $25 VISA gift certificate as soon as you complete the final interview.

### Will it cost me anything to participate?
Your participation in this study will not cost you anything.

### Is there anything else I need to know?
You must be at least 25 years old to participate.

### I agree to part in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Follow-Up Email to Invitation to Participate

[Date of Email]

Dear [Name of Student];

A week ago, I sent you an Email about a research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral thesis. I am sending this Email to remind you about the study.

Thank you again for taking your time to consider this invitation. If you would like to be a part of this study, please call me at 704-762-0023 or Email me at spriggs.j@husky.neu.edu, and I will share additional information and schedule a time for our first meeting.

Warm Regards,

Janet N. Spriggs
Appendix D

Biographical and Demographic Data

I. Personal Information of Study Participants
   Today’s Date
   Full Name
   Chosen Pseudonym
   Date of Birth
   Gender
   Ethnicity
   Family Size
   Annual Family Income

II. Information About Participant’s Work Status
   A. Do you work while also attending school?
      ____ Yes  ____ No

   B. If YES, how many hours on average do you work each week?
      ____ Less than 10 hours per week
      ____ 10 to 20 hours per week
      ____ 20 to 30 hours per week
      ____ 30 to 40 hours per week
      ____ More than 40 hours per week

III. Information About Participant’s Educational Experience at the Research Institution
   A. When did you graduate from high school, or obtain your high school equivalency?

   B. When did you start attending this community college?

   C. Did you attend another community college before coming to this college?
      ____ Yes  ____ No

   D. If YES, what other college(s) did you attend?

   E. Are/were you a full-time or part-time student?
      ____ Full-Time
      ____ Part-Time
Both Part-Time and Full-Time over the course of matriculation

F. What degree will you/have you earned at the community college?
__________________________________________________________________

G. Did you receive the Federal Pell grant while attending college?
   ____ Yes   ____ No

H. What is your final GPA, or if you are still in school, what is your GPA as of
   the current term?
__________________________________________________________________

I. How many years did it/will it take for you to earn you community college
   degree?
__________________________________________________________________

J. During your matriculation at the college, did you have to stop-out for one or
   more semesters?
   ____ Yes   ____ No

K. If YES, how many semesters did you miss before you returned and why did
   you have to stop attending college?
   Number of semesters missed: _______________________________________
   Why did you have to stop attending college?: ____________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

L. While you were a student at this community college, did you utilize any of the
   following student success and support services?
   ____ Financial Aid Services    ____ Academic & Career Advising
   ____ Academic Tutoring Services ____ Counseling Services
   ____ Other Support Services (please describe): ___________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

M. While you were a student at this community college, did you participate in
   any Student Activities, such as Student Government Association (SGA) or
   student clubs?
   ____ Yes   ____ No
N. If YES, what Student Activities did you participate in?
   ____ SGA
   ____ Student Clubs (please list): ________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   ____ Other Student Activities (please list): __________________________
   __________________________________________________________________

O. Why did you decide to attend this community college?
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________
References


http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/Archive/FactSheet2012.pdf


Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE). (2017). *Making ends meet: The role of community colleges in student financial health*. Austin, TX: Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas Austin.


