EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AN ALTERNATE ADMISSIONS PROGRAM ON SELF-EFFICACY AND PERSISTENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

In 2015, the United States marked the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Higher Education Act. The goal of the legislation was twofold: to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary and higher education (Pub. L. No. 89-329). Title IV of the Higher Education Act dealt with providing students with financial assistance and created the federally funded Student Support Services program, whose goal is to assist first-generation college students from low-income families to be successful once they have gained access to college. Previous research on Student Support Services programs has largely concentrated on the academic components of the programs and how students have benefitted from achieving higher grade point averages. This study examined the impact various components of the program, both academic and non-academic, had on students’ self-efficacy and persistence because research has shown that first-generation students usually have lower self-efficacy. The focus of this study is a program at Eastern Connecticut State University, the Summer Transition at Eastern/Contract Admissions Program, which provides first-generation and low-income students who do not meet regular admission standards the opportunity to attend college. The phenomena of how participation in a Student Support Services program influenced Eastern Connecticut State University students’ self-efficacy and persistence was viewed through the lens of Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory, in particular through the construct of self-efficacy.

**Keywords:** First-Generation College Students (FGCS), Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Persistence, Self-Efficacy, Student Support Services programs (SSS)
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Chapter One: Introduction

In 1848, the great American educator Horace Mann declared, “Education then, beyond other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery” (Rhode et al., 2012). One hundred and sixty-three years later, former United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan proclaimed, “In America, education is still the great equalizer” (Rhode et al., 2012). Swail (2000) noted education can be considered a true guarantee of a better life, and once obtained, it can never be taken away. Education holds the key to achieving the American dream of upward mobility and “has a reciprocal effect by forever changing the social and cultural dynamic of not only the beneficiaries but also of the people within those individuals’ social circle, especially immediate family” (Swail, 2000, p. 86).

McDonough (1997) argued that “a college education is a cultural asset critical in social mobility” (as cited in Cowan-Pitre & Pitre, 2009, p. 106).

The Higher Education Act (HEA) marked its 50th anniversary in 2015; as a result of this landmark legislation, millions of middle and low-income students have been afforded the ability to pursue higher education. Title 4 of the HEA, the Student Assistance Act, created the federally funded TRIO programs, one of which is the Student Support Services program (SSS). Since 1965, Title 4 has undergone numerous reauthorizations, a process that prevented the act from expiring while at the same time kept the legislation current so that it could have the most impact on students (Cervantes et al., 2005). The 1992 legislative reauthorization pertaining to SSS programs stated their purpose was to “(a) increase college retention and graduation rates for eligible students, (b) increase transfer rates of eligible students from two-year to four-year institutions, and (c) foster an institutional climate supportive of success of low-income and first-generation college students” (Chaney et al., 1998, p. 198). One of the most successful TRIO
programs is Student Support Services/Educational Opportunity programs (SSS/EOP), which serve first-generation, low-income students by assisting them in gaining admission to college and then supporting them academically and socially so that they can be successful and persist. Studies have shown that these types of programs have been successful in improving both access and persistence for the students they target (Ackermann, 1991; Garcia, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole et al., 2008).

Previous research has concentrated on the academic component of these programs and how students benefitted from the support needed to achieve higher grade point averages. The problem of practice underlying this study is a perceived need for more information about how self-efficacy impacts first-generation, low-income college student decision-making and persistence. In an effort to fill this gap, this study examined the role of an alternate admissions program in influencing the persistence of first-generation college students with emphasis on the role self-efficacy plays in their decision process.

**Justification of the Problem**

The United States boasts one of the highest participation rates in higher education in the world. Approximately 15 million students are enrolled in colleges and universities, and of this number, nearly 1.6 million are considered low income (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Mortenson (2007) noted that the number of first-generation students enrolling in higher education increased by 60% from 1970 to 2005. However, completion rates from the same period paint a different picture; they rose from 6% to just 12% for this group. Clearly, the rate of enrollment far exceeded the rate of completion. These results indicate that the problem of persistence is only being partially addressed for first-generation, low-income students.
For our society to benefit, these students need to be supported from the first day they enter college until the day they complete their degree. This bold claim has proven true at Eastern Connecticut State University, the site of this study, where a Summer Transition to Eastern/Contract Admissions program (STEP/CAP) provides an alternative to the regular admissions process for students who show potential. This program, which has been in existence for 37 years, has proven to be successful since it embodies what Southern Vermont College President Karen Gross believed is key to the success of first-generation students:

Anyone thinking about helping these students has to think beyond a program or an initiative to a set of initiatives that, together, form a social safety net that will help these students make it to and through college. Any effort has to be systemic and systematic.

The success of first-generation students on year-to-year retention numbers is not enough, what you really need to look at is retention over four years. (Opiede, 2015, p. 1)

Student Support Services/Educational Opportunity programs act as a retention strategy for first-generation students, and they have proven to be successful (Garcia, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole et al., 2008). Previous research pertaining to them has focused on measuring outcomes of specific programs based on standards established by the U.S. Department of Education. This research concluded that students in SSS/EOP have higher rates of persistence and degree obtainment when compared to their first-generation, low-income peers who did not participate (Chaney et al., 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In a review of studies conducted on summer bridge programs, a major component of SSS/EOP, Sablan (2014) noted that the majority of studies were focused on the academic curriculum components of the programs. This research was valuable since it provided a link between the program and its goal of improved grade point averages and retention of participants. However, academic curriculum
is only one component of the program. They also offer a cadre of services, including faculty and peer mentoring, counseling on matters related to financial aid and careers, and opportunities to attend social and cultural events (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Research has highlighted how certain components of SSS/EOP, such as workshops and access to social and cultural events on campus, positively impacted students’ persistence (Chaney et al., 1998).

As college administrators struggle with finding ways to increase the persistence of first-generation, low-income students, every strategy needs to be explored. Even though SSS/EOP have proven to be a successful retention strategy, one area where research is limited is the impact these programs have on students’ cognitive process of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). College self-efficacy “has been operationally defined as a student’s degree of confidence in performing various college-related tasks” (Solberg & Villereal, 1997, p. 184). Over the last several years, the influence a student’s self-efficacy has on their motivation to learn and their level of achievement has been the subject of numerous studies, the findings of which have concluded “that self-efficacy plays a predicting and mediating role in relation to students’ achievements, motivation and learning” (van Diether et al., 2010, p. 97). Bandura believed that self-efficacy can have an impact on students’ “coping behavior, skill level, performance and task persistence” (as cited in Hellman, 1995, p. 70). However, the effectiveness of SSS/EOP on students’ self-efficacy and whether it impacts their persistence is under-analyzed.

Research specifically on the role of self-efficacy in the lives of first-generation students is lacking. Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) cited a study by McGregor et al. (1991) as being one of the few studies that addressed first-generation students’ self-efficacy. The study concluded that first-generation students had lower self-efficacy scores than their peers whose
parents had attended college. The researchers attributed the difference to the fact that non-first-generation students had the advantage of being able to receive college guidance from their parents, which resulted in their having a higher level of confidence. This in turn led to positive feelings that enabled them to adjust and be able to succeed in college. Phinney and Haas (2003) studied the coping strategies first-generation students employed in adjusting to college and the influence these strategies had on their self-efficacy. Hellman (2005) examined the academic self-efficacy of first-generation students and concluded they had low self-efficacy. This was compounded by the fact that “they are filled with self-doubt and often do not seek assistance, as evidenced by the lack of participation in campus organizations” (p. 73). Research on the topic of self-efficacy has shown that it plays a key role in students’ learning, achievement, and persistence (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991). While research on SSS/EOP has demonstrated that they are an effective retention strategy for first-generation students, additional research dealing with student persistence concluded that integrating students into the life of the campus positively impacts their persistence (Tinto, 1993; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). The various modules that comprise an SSS/EOP offer academic support and co-curricular experiences in an effort to provide students with opportunities to become socially integrated into the institution. These opportunities emphasize the four sources key to self-efficacy: performance outcomes (past experiences); vicarious experiences (modeling by others); verbal persuasion (coaching and feedback); and psychological feedback (emotional status) (Bandura, 1997; Redmond, 2015).

This study explored the opportunities the SSS/EOP provided and whether the program helped increase persistence and self-efficacy. Studies have shown that high self-efficacy is positively linked to academic success and persistence (DeWitz, Woolsey, & Walsh, 2009) and that self-efficacy has a positive impact on student’s achievement and retention (Pajares & Miller,
Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that examined the relationship between self-efficacy and academic achievement and found a positive correlation. In addition, studies of students pursuing degrees in science and engineering conducted by Lent, Brown, and Larkin (1989) revealed that self-efficacy played a key role in both the students’ desire to persist and their academic achievement.

This study also fills a void in current research highlighted by Sablan (2014), a lack of qualitative research on SSS/EOP and, in particular, phenomenological research. In addition, there is a gap in the literature concerning programs specifically targeted at first-generation students and the impact they have on students’ self-efficacy and persistence. The study provides administrators and others responsible for the program information concerning the participants’ views about their personal experiences and the impact these experiences had on their persistence and self-efficacy. It also contributes to best practices in retention since strategies that work for first-generation students are transferable to the entire student population (Thayer, 2000). Finally, the study gives students a voice since the vast majority of past studies have concentrated on quantitative research.

**Significance of Research Problem**

The problem at the center of this study is significant because the number of first-generation, low-income students is continually rising, and this group of students faces a number of barriers in their desire to obtain a college education. In 2008, there were more than “4.5 million low-income, first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary institutions—approximately 24 percent of the overall undergraduate population” (Engle, 2008, p. 8). According to a 2003-2004 report issued by the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, these students differ from their non-first-generation peers since they “are more likely to come from
minority backgrounds, be non-native English speakers and to have been born outside the United States” (Engle, 2008, p. 8). All of the aforementioned factors can contribute to low self-efficacy. Research highlights the fact that first-generation students start their college career less academically prepared than their peers and have lower self-expectations (Choy, 2001, p. xxiv). It follows that “given the challenges first-generation college students experience, it is reasonable to conclude that beliefs (internal cognitive process) about their abilities are negatively affected, resulting in lower academic performance” (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007, p. 8).

In response to the increasing number of low-income, first-generation students seeking to obtain a college degree, administrators need to not only address their academic skills but also implement strategies that increase their affective cognitive skills, in particular their self-efficacy. In order for universities to assist these students, they need to develop and evaluate new retention strategies while expanding programs that have proven successful. Studies have shown that SSS/EOP have an excellent history of meeting the needs of first-generation, low-income students and are positively linked to their retention and persistence (Garcia, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Walpole et al., 2008). Demographic information indicates that today’s students are more likely to be from minority groups, be the first in their family to seek education beyond high school, and need both financial assistance and remediation to be successful (Williams, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative that researchers explore strategies to increase the persistence of this population.

Some first-generation college students have been raised to believe that higher education is beyond their grasp, when in reality they have the aptitude to succeed. On multiple levels, this group of students receives minimal support in pursuing a college degree. Research has highlighted the fact that first-generation students and their families lack “college knowledge,”
the information they need to aid them in the process of applying to college. First-generation students often have no knowledge of how the financial aid process works. Also, students and their parents may not be aware that taking college preparatory courses is essential to their success once they enroll in college. In addition, the research has concluded that many first-generation college students are academically under-prepared since, in most cases, they have not followed a college preparatory curriculum in high school (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009; Vargas, 2004). These students often attend schools where guidance staff are overburdened with their case load of students and need to focus on administrative and discipline issues rather than providing students with the one-on-one attention they need to assist them in deciding if they should go to college and then help them to apply (Vargas, 2004). A report by Haskins et al. (2009) noted that at high schools that served mostly minority students from low-income families, the counselor to student ratio was 1,000 students to every counselor versus the national average of 470 students to every counselor. This statistic highlights the fact that first-generation students who often require more assistance and encouragement to complete the college application process are at a distinct disadvantage when pursuing higher education. A 2013 study that measured the impact of high school counselors on college enrollment concluded that by providing one additional counselor at the high school level, the school's college enrollment could be increased by 10% (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013).

Students who qualify to participate in SSS/EOP come from families described as low-income. Research has shown that children from this type of demographic background are “ill prepared cognitively, motivationally and socially to meet normative educational demands” (Bandura, 1997, p. 252). In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education addressed the issue of
students from low-income communities being underprepared for college by instituting the Ladders to Opportunity program, noting that:

At each stage of their educational lives, students growing up in low-income communities fall behind their peers. They participate in early learning at far lower rates, enter school less ready, and are more likely to drop out. For those low-income students who graduate from high school, they are less likely to go to college, and less likely to graduate. (para. 2)

Unfortunately, low-income families often lack the resources necessary to provide their children with enriching educational experiences outside the classroom. The issue is further compounded by the fact that some parents “have a low sense of efficacy that they can influence their children’s learning” (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992, as cited in Bandura, 1993, p. 246). Bandura (1997) further noted that staff in schools serving poor and minority students tend to “have a low sense of efficacy to educate poor and minority students and do not expect much of them academically” (p. 252). If first-generation, low-income students are to succeed in college, they first need to believe they are capable of achieving and be exposed to activities and interventions that raise their self-efficacy. The components of SSS/EOP provide students with social, emotional, and psychological support, as well as cultural enrichment opportunities through targeted interventions. These programs offer both adult and peer mentoring, counseling, and advising services, and they provide opportunities for students to be exposed to social and cultural programs and academic tutoring. These components collectively address aspects of students’ lives by assisting them “to build confidence in their own abilities and worth, improve their academic and personal growth, and plan their career development with realism and decisiveness” (Boughan, 1996. p. 1). Although sufficient direct funding for cultural and social
opportunities is not always part of the SSS/EOP budget, administrators of the STEP/CAP program have included the cultural enrichment component as part of their budget when they seek grants. They do this in order to ensure the participants have a well-rounded educational experience. Participation in this type of program will hopefully have a positive impact on students’ self-efficacy, which will result in improving their persistence rates. Self-efficacy has a far-reaching impact on first-generation students since it influences not only their academic performance in college but also their interpersonal relationships with roommates and faculty members (Solberg & Villarreal, 1997). Russell and Petrie (1992) “consider self-efficacy expectations as an important academic factor in the promotion of personal adjustment among college students” (as cited in Solberg & Villarreal, 1997, p. 184). This is a reasonable assumption to make since students who are comfortable in their environment and confident in their skills are more likely to attempt skills outside their comfort zone. Self-efficacy also plays a key role in how well first-generation college students become both socially and academically integrated into the campus community. Bean and Eaton (2002) proposed a retention theory based on four psychological theories, including self-efficacy. They hypothesized that if a student’s self-efficacy increases so will their academic and social integration, two keys to retention and persistence. They believed that “programs are effective when they assist students in gaining positive self-efficacy, approaching rather than avoiding social and academic activities, developing an internal locus of control with regard to social and academic matters, and developing positive attitudes toward being at school” (Bean & Eaton, 2002, p.78). Administrators and staff of SSS/EOP realize the importance of integrating first-generation college students into the campus community and provide these students the support they need for integration to be successful.
This problem is also significant for financial reasons. Since SSS/EOP are funded by federal and state governments, they are affected by new accountability standards for higher education that link funding with persistence and completion rates. In order to continue to receive adequate funding, programs must show their value. Research dealing with the adjustment of Hispanic students to college has shown that self-efficacy “is an important determinant in personal adjustment as measured by psychological and physical outcomes” (Schwarzer, as cited in Solberg & Villarreal, 1997, p. 183). Researchers have noted that interventions that help students develop their self-efficacy can be cost effective, since in a number of instances, staff and resources are already in place and their focus just needs to be redirected (Bandura, 1992; Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992; Kavanagh, 1992; Schwarzer, 1992). Today on college campuses, many strategies are already in place to assist in student retention, such as counseling centers and first-year experience programs, and these programs can implement strategies aimed at increasing students’ self-efficacy (Solberg & Villarreal, 1997). Thayer (2000) found that strategies that are tailored for first-generation students are transferable to the general student population, while traditional retention strategies in place at institutions often fail to meet the needs of low-income, first-generation students. However, SSS/EOP have been specifically designed to address the unique needs of low-income, first-generation students and can be instrumental in their development of self-efficacy. The modules that comprise the program emphasize the core self-efficacy expectations of performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and psychological feedback that can be directly linked to the student’s expectations.

The literature clearly has established a link between self-efficacy and persistence and pointed out the need to assist first-generation students in increasing their self-efficacy. The problem is significant to scholar practitioners, since if they can identify the components of
SSS/EOP that address this need, they can place stronger emphasis on them when assisting students.

**Positionality Statement**

Positionality refers to race, gender, class experience, levels of education, sexuality, age, and ability, all of which “have an impact on the ways we do our research and how the people we work with perceive us” (Skelton, 2001, p. 89). According to Gadamer (as cited in Briscoe, 2005), the unique identity of the researcher is what influences their view and understanding of the world. No matter how hard they strive to be neutral when dealing with a new situation, a researcher’s views and understanding are greatly influenced by their personal history and life experiences. This line of reasoning aligns with Kincheloe and Steinberg, who believed that a key premise on which positionality is based is the fact “that individuals construct an understanding of the world and perceive themselves to occupy a particular location within the reality they construe” (as cited in Parsons, 2008, p. 1129). Briscoe (2005) pointed out that the two main components of positionality are the demographic positioning and ideologies of the researcher. She concluded that demographics such as gender, ethnic origin, age, and income are all factors that influence positionality. Furthermore, demographic factors influence the history and life experiences of the researcher, which in turn impacts their ideologies.

Since the life experiences of an individual shape their research, it is important to note I work in a higher education setting and deal with students on a daily basis. I have a master’s degree in organizational management and a desire to see students succeed in their pursuit of a college degree. Unlike the majority of students I have contact with, I was not a first-generation college student, and both of my parents hold advanced degrees. They also had successful careers in higher education. My father retired as the Vice President of Student Affairs at a large,
metropolitan university, and my mother is the Director of Alumni Affairs at a regional, comprehensive public university. From an early age, I was exposed to higher education and the advantages it provided.

My elementary school years were spent in a large, urban district that was rated among the lowest in the state. In middle school, I moved to an affluent suburb, where the school system is always ranked as one of the best school districts in the state (according to the U.S. Department of Education, based on data provided by the school district for the 2013-2014 academic year). In my first school district, I was always at the top of the class. The work was easy, and I really did not have to put a great deal of effort into my homework. Needless to say, I was confident and felt good about my achievements, which resulted in a high sense of self-efficacy. However, this changed when I moved to a new school district, where I quickly discovered I was behind my peers in some subject areas, most notably math. Although math was never my strongest academic subject, I previously had a B average. After a few months, I was no longer confident of my academic abilities and doubted I could pass the class. I was fortunate that my teachers and parents realized I was struggling, and working together, they provided the necessary resources (i.e., tutoring and emotional support) so that I could be successful. When my self-efficacy was low, these interventions assisted me to believe that it was possible to master the class content and achieve success.

Low-income, first-generation students face many barriers in their quest to obtain a college degree, including lack of informed parental support since parents do not have the knowledge of how college works and, sometimes, teachers’ support. In many cases, this often contributes to the fact that first-generation students enter college with low self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) noted that in the case of first-generation students, their teachers and parents do not
provide the support necessary for them to believe they can achieve, resulting in low self-efficacy. Based on SSS/EOP’s stated mission and goals, I believe it provides a valuable experience for first-generation students who may have low self-efficacy, enabling them to gain confidence in their abilities to complete tasks and achieve success. Further investigation is warranted to determine to what extent SSS/EOP benefit first-generation, low-income student persistence and self-efficacy.

One of the biases I bring to the study is never having experienced what it is like to not consider attending college as a natural next step after high school. Also, I only briefly experienced a period in life when I was not confident in my ability to enroll in college and succeed. Unlike this study’s participants, I do not have a concept of what it means to have a family that does not support their desire to obtain a college degree. For many of the participants in this study, their family members have no real understanding of what takes place on a college campus. Some would rather have their son or daughter join the workforce after high school to help support the family. While working with this population can prove challenging for me since my background is very different from theirs, at the same time it has provided me with an opportunity since my life experiences will most likely not mirror theirs. This hopefully has enabled me to examine the information I gathered from an objective viewpoint. Briscoe (2005) stated, “An author’s demographic positioning is cause for suspicion, but not the grounds for indictment” (p. 38).

Viewing the research project from an institutional perspective as a faculty member at a state-funded university, I believe it is imperative the institution provides funding and other resources for additional support services that should be made available to under-represented, low-income groups. Members of these groups should be provided with the opportunity to
participate in a program that offers a summer transition experience between high school and college, as well as tutoring support, peer mentoring, and other services beginning on day one of their college career and ending when they receive their diploma. Although I believe it is the responsibility of a college’s administration and faculty to promote programs that lead to persistence of first-generation students, at the same time I am realistic about the financial constraints they face and the fact that programs must be fully vetted and be able to show just what value they provide for student participants. On one hand, I am an idealist who wants all students to have the opportunity to attend college and succeed, but I am also a realist who knows that college is not for everyone and the decision to attend college and complete a degree needs to ultimately be made by the student. We can offer support and encouragement, but in the end, the student has to want to succeed if they are to be successful.

In closing, it is the researcher’s responsibility to constantly assess how and where their own positions, beliefs, and voice are in relation to the study. This constant assessment serves to expose hidden biases that a researcher might not be aware they possess.

**Research Questions and Goals**

The overarching research question that this study sought to answer is:

How do students in an alternate admissions program for first-generation, low-income students believe the services provided by the program influenced their self-efficacy and persistence from freshman to sophomore year?

The main goal of the study was to document how subjects perceived the experience of participating in SSS/EOP and in what way, if any, the experience influenced their persistence and self-efficacy. A secondary goal of the study was to determine the role the nonacademic
components of the program played in influencing students’ sense of self-efficacy and how this in turn influenced their desire to persist.

**Theoretical Framework**

Albert Bandura’s social learning theory provided the framework for this study. The theory states that environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior. Learning is reciprocal and takes place in a social context where individuals can learn from one another by observing, mimicking, and modeling behaviors. Particular attention is paid to the construct of self-efficacy, which directly relates to how an individual perceives they can execute certain behaviors that will allow them to reach a goal (Bandura, 1977, 1986).

This study explored how participation in the SSS/EOP and the social and academic integration opportunities the program provided impacted students’ self-efficacy and persistence, in particular, how the experience influenced their behaviors, attitudes, emotional reactions, and ultimately their self-efficacy. Maisto et al. (1999) noted, “The body of literature on social learning theory is quite extensive, and this broad theoretical approach has often been tailored to specific situations” (as cited in Ward & Gryczynski, 2008, p. 365).

Social learning is learning that takes place in social contexts. Bandura (1977) summed up his theory in this statement: “Most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p. 22). Bandura (1977) believed that throughout a person’s lifetime, consistent interaction with the behavior of others leads to an individual adopting or imitating the behaviors depending on whether they choose to do so. He defined the change that occurred in behavior as “learning” and divided the process of learning into four parts: attention, retention, production, and motivation. He postulated that in order for
an individual to learn from others, they need to pay attention to the behavior they sought to model and be able to commit what they saw the model do to memory, then they needed to be able to translate their understanding of what they saw into overt behavior. Finally, the individual needs to be motivated, “since an individual is more likely to attend to, remember, and engage in the modeled behavior if they are motivated to do so, and doing so will result in rewarding outcomes” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, p. 5).

In the late 1970s, Bandura expanded his original theory to include what he believed to be an important element missing from social learning theories’ “self-beliefs” and renamed the theory Social Cognitive theory to reflect the importance of “cognition in learning, motivation and behavior” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, p. 3). He expanded the framework to account for the interaction between “environmental, personal and behavioral influences; this dynamic interplay is referred to as reciprocal determinism” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007, p. 3).

Bandura (1977) identified modeling as a type of vicarious learning, which he describes in the following statement:

By observing a model of desired behavior, an individual forms an idea of how response components must be combined and sequenced to produce the new behavior in other words, people guide their actions by prior notions rather than by relying on outcomes to tell them what to do. (p. 35)

According to social learning theory, individuals are constantly learning by means of communication, observation, and interaction with others through social mechanisms that do not require direct reinforcement, a concept referred to as vicarious learning (Ward, 2003). The theory postulates that it is not necessary for individuals to imitate behaviors for learning to occur. Observation of the consequences of the behavior serves as a catalyst for individuals to determine
the rewards and consequences associated with particular behaviors and to decide for themselves if they wish to model the behavior.

**Construct of Self-Efficacy**

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy beliefs as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). He noted “that what people think, believe and feel affects how they behave” (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). These beliefs allow people to determine how much effort they put into a given task based on what they believe the outcome will be. Bandura noted that individuals work harder and persist if they believe they will be successful. On the other hand, if an individual meets with failure and is not successful, they are unlikely to persist (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1977) outlined the four sources of information that individuals use to determine their self-efficacy as performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and psychological feedback. He believed that performance outcomes were the most influential source of self-efficacy and noted,

Mastery experiences are the most influential source of efficacy information because they provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can master whatever it takes to succeed. Success builds a robust belief in one’s personal efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established. (Bandura, 1997, p. 80)

The second source of information individuals rely on to judge their self-efficacy is vicarious experiences, which allows individuals to view the performance of other people similar to them and then compare their performance to the other person. This type of information is most helpful if the person the individual is comparing themselves to comes from a similar background.
It should be noted that modeling can assist in not only increasing self-efficacy but also in lowering it if the model meets with failure (Bandura, 1977).

The third information source is verbal persuasion. Individuals who receive encouragement from others that they have the necessary abilities and skills and can succeed at a given task are, according to Bandura (1997), more likely to put forth a greater effort since they do not doubt their capabilities. The fourth information source that influences self-efficacy beliefs is psychological feedback. Bandura (1997) postulated that a “major way of altering efficacy beliefs is to enhance physical status, reduce stress levels and negative emotional proclivities and correct misinterpretations of bodily states” (p. 185). He stated, “It is not the sheer intensity of emotional and physical reactions that is important but rather how they are perceived and interpreted” (Bandura, 1997, p. 108).

As noted previously, self-efficacy theory is a construct of social cognitive theory, which can be adapted to study many different situations. Gist and Mitchell (1992) employed self-efficacy theory to study human resources management and organizational behavior and developed what they considered “a simplified view of the process by which self-efficacy is formed” (p. 189). In addition, Schunk (1995) described in depth how self-efficacy could factor into creating behavioral change. Figure 1 illustrates how self-efficacy relates to achievement behavior. The model shows the different levels of self-efficacy that individuals have at the beginning of an activity based on their previous experiences. The important point Schunk made is that “self-efficacy is affected by the type of support persons receive from significant individuals in their environment” (p. 113). Students with strong parental and teacher support are able to gain access to resources that will assist them in learning “self-regulatory strategies that
enhance skill acquisition and refinement” (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, as cited in Schunk, 1995, p. 113).

Figure 1. This diagram provides an excellent example of Bandura’s self-efficacy theory in relation to achievement behavior. Adapted from “The Model of Achievement Behavior Highlighting the Role of Self-Efficacy,” by D. Schunk, 1995, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 7(2), p. 113.

In a relationship analysis based on Bandura’s (1982) explanation of the hierarchal order of experience’s influence on an individual’s self-efficacy, it is interesting to note “mastery experiences (personal attainments) are viewed as providing the strongest information followed in degrees of influence by vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal” (Gist & Mitchell, 1992, p. 190).

Why the Theory is Applicable for this Study

The theory of social learning or social cognitive learning is appropriate because, as noted by Bacharach (1989), environmental, behavioral, and cognitive constructs are well defined.
Furthermore, these constructs meet the operational criteria of good clarity and parsimony (Bacharach, 1989). Bandura’s social cognitive theory also meets the criteria of both utility and falsifiability. As Bierstedt (1959) pointed out, utility may be viewed as "the bridge that connects theory and research" (p. 125) and at the core of this connection are explanation and prediction. That is, a theory is useful if it can both explain and predict (Bacharach, 1989). Falsifiability determines whether a theory is constructed so that empirical refutation is possible. As Popper (1959) maintained, “It must be possible for an empirical scientific system to be refuted by experience” (p. 41). Social cognitive theory meets all of these criteria because it provides a workable theoretical framework since it “approaches the exploration of human behavior in terms of a continuous (reciprocal) interaction between cognitive, behavioral and environmental determinants” (Bandura, 1977, p. vii).

Bandura’s social cognitive theory is suitable for this study since it provides the framework to explore how the behaviors, attitudes, emotional reactions, and self-efficacy of students who participated in the program are influenced by their experience. Modeling is a type of vicarious learning, which is a key component of social learning theory, and research has shown that, “an individual’s self-efficacy expectations can be influenced by a model” (Bandura, 1977, p. 79). An individual’s self-efficacy expectations can be defined as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (Bandura, 1977, p. 79). As role models, students’ mentors are in the position to have a great deal of influence on them.

The construct of self-efficacy is appropriate for the study because, as Pajares (2002) noted,
Social cognitive theory posits that factors such as economic conditions, socioeconomic status and educational and familial structures do not effect human behavior directly. Instead they affect it to the degree that they influence people’s aspirations, self-efficacy beliefs, personal standards, emotional states, and other regulatory influences. (p. 2)

The statement above is particularly appropriate to the study of first-generation students from low-income families since the factors of economic conditions, socioeconomic status, and educational and familial structures all appear to negatively impact these students’ sense of self-efficacy, and one goal of SSS/EOP is to help mitigate these previous conditions and have the students begin to believe in their personal capabilities to succeed despite the odds.

The goal of this study is twofold: first, to determine the effectiveness of participating in the SSS/EOP on student persistence and if participation positively influenced the subjects’ self-efficacy; and second, to determine what specific components of the program influenced the subject’s self-efficacy. Since the program is not strictly academic based, this information is valuable for administrators to have for a number or reasons. Bean (2005) stated, “Few would deny that the social lives of students in college and their exchanges with others inside and outside the institution are important in retention decisions” (p. 227). Student Support Services/Educational Opportunity programs take a holistic approach to students’ learning by providing valuable experiences outside of the classroom. Allowing administrators and faculty members the opportunity to learn how the subjects viewed their experience in the SSS/EOP and what they consider to be the main components that led to their persistence and impacted their self-efficacy provides them with vital information as they develop new programs and enhance existing ones to meet the needs of first-generation, low-income students.
Definition of Terms

**Academic self-efficacy.** An individual’s confidence in his or her ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a chosen level (Schunk, 1991).

**Educational Opportunity Program (EOP).** A program “designed to improve access and retention of historically low-income and educationally disadvantaged students. EOP students have the potential and demonstrated motivation to perform satisfactorily, but they have not been able to realize their potential because of their economic or educational background” (California State University, n.d., para. 1).

**First-generation college student.** The federal government defines a first-generation student as “an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual who’s only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (Higher Education Act of 1965, Sec402B [6] g1 [a]).

**Low-income students.** Students whose family income was below 125 percent of the federally established poverty level for their family size (Choy, 2001 p. iii).

**Self-Efficacy.** “One’s beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over task demands” (Bandura, 1990, p. 316).

**Student persistence.** The National Student Clearing House Research Center (2014) defined persistence as “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution—including one different from the institution of initial enrollment—in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year” (p. 7).
Student support services (SSS). A program designed to “increase college retention and graduation rates for eligible students, and foster an institutional climate supportive of success of low-income and first-generation college students” (Chaney et al., 1998, p. 198).

Under-represented students. This term refers to minority students of color, i.e., African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans (Choy, 2001; Kojaku & Nunez, 1998), who not represented in the college population in the same percentage that they are in the state’s population.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The intent of this review of literature is to provide the reader with background on how the persistence and self-efficacy of first-generation college students can be impacted by participation in an Educational Opportunity program (EOP). The review includes four conversations of extant literature pertaining to research on student persistence, first-generation college students, student self-efficacy, and EOP. These conversations embody the main elements that form the basis for this inquiry.

The first conversation deals with the lack of student persistence, a major problem facing college administrators. This problem affects a number of college students, not just first-generation students; however, research has shown that the first-generation population is less likely to persist than their peers who are non-first-generation students. The second conversation details the characteristics of first-generation, low-income students and the barriers they face in their quest to achieve the American dream of earning a college degree that will improve their lives. Student self-efficacy is explored in the third conversation and the way in which this important cognitive skill assists students in persisting to complete a degree program. Finally, the last conversation examines EOP, one strategy that can impact the self-efficacy and persistence of first-generation, low-income students from underrepresented groups. The mission of EOP is to provide this population of students with the support services they need to be successful and persist to complete a degree. Educational Opportunity programs were developed to serve students from this demographic background, and the literature provides descriptive information concerning the issues they face. Once first-generation students are granted access to higher education, student services programs like EOP can help to ensure their retention and the completion of a degree. The literature identifies a number of strategies employed by an EOP to
meet the needs of these students and help them to achieve this goal. The program strives to integrate students academically and socially with the campus community, and the literature addresses the benefits of this integration as well as the unique struggles faced by first-generation students as they try to fit into the culture of the institution. The components that comprise an EOP are discussed with special emphasis on peer mentoring, a major component of the EOP at Eastern Connecticut State University, which was the location of this study.

**Student Persistence**

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) (2014) has defined persistence as “continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution—including one different from the institution of initial enrollment—in the fall semesters of a student’s first and second year” (p. 7). With increasing pressure on colleges and universities to show results in order to receive federal and state funding, persistence of students has become a major topic higher education administrators need to address. Kuh et al. (2005) noted that for decades the college graduation rate has hovered around the 50% mark. Of note is the fact that this number has remained unchanged, even though the four-year metric that was used in the 1970s has been changed to a six-year metric in order to better accommodate today’s college students.

The NSCRC cited a 2012 report issued by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which highlighted the fact that even though the United States has one of the highest participation rates in the world for students seeking higher education, the country ranks 15th in degree completion (Shapiro et al., 2013). Vincent Tinto (2005), in the forward for *College Student Retention: Formula for Student Success*, noted the main reason universities are under pressure to increase persistence rates is the downturn in the global economy. As a result of
a poor economic climate, federal and state governments are decreasing financial support for higher education, while at the same time attempting to put in place a system of institutional accountability that would include graduation rates as a measure. Another reason is the growing popularity of “ranking systems” for colleges and universities, which rate institutions on a number of factors, including graduation rates. For institutions seeking to attract students, these rankings can be crucial. Finally, and probably the reason that has the greatest impact on institutions, is the fact that they base their budgets on the number of students enrolled. In order to maintain a stable budget that ensures they can continue to deliver a quality education, they must retain students (Seidman, 2005).

Over the last 40 years, researchers have sought to answer two questions: Why do students leave college, and what can be done to halt the trend? Sanchez, Bauer, and Paronto (2006), citing a 2002 U.S. Department of Education study, noted that 32% of students left institutions of higher education within three years of enrollment and did not receive a degree. The costs associated with their departure has had adverse effects both on their personal finances as well as those of the institution. As a result of not earning a degree, the earning power of these students is lower, and in many cases, they are responsible for paying back thousands of dollars in student loans. Institutions who lose students as a result of attrition must deal with the loss of the tuition dollars the students would be paying, and this could ultimately result in budget cuts that impact the quality of education the institution can provide.

Today our country is at a crossroads, suffering from the results of the global economic downturn and dealing with the fact that in order for the United States to maintain our competitive edge in a global economy, we must ensure we have an educated workforce that can lead us into the next century. One way we can ensure a qualified workforce is to focus on increasing the
number of adults who obtain a post-secondary degree. Recently, institutions of higher education have been joined by other stakeholders, including the federal government, numerous state governments, and private foundations, in initiating programs aimed at raising the college completion rate to between 55% and 60% by 2025 (Shapiro et al., 2013).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that degree completion increased nationally from 33% in 1995 to 46% in 2015. However, when the statistics are analyzed, the report shows a disturbing trend for first-generation students, who are mainly minority students from low-income families:

36 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds had attained a bachelor’s or higher degree. The percentage of White 25- to 29-year-olds who had attained this level of education increased from 1995 to 2015, as the size of the White-Black gap in the attainment of a bachelor’s or higher degree widened from 13 to 22 percentage points and the size of the White-Hispanic gap widened from 20 to 27 percentage points. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015, para. 4)

These statistics validate the fact that first-generation students, who are most often members of minorities in the lower-income quartiles (Bui, 2002; Orbe, 2004), are not completing degrees at the same rate as their non-first-generation peers. The Pell Institute (Eagle & Tinto, 2008) issued a report on equity in education which cited the fact that only 9% of students whose family income is in the lowest quartile complete a bachelor’s degree by the age of 24. At the same time, their peers whose parents are in the highest-income quartile have a completion rate of 77%. They further noted that the students of families in the highest quartile completed bachelor’s degrees at a rate eight times greater than their first-generation peers in the lowest income quartile. Even more disturbing is that in 1970, the students in the higher-income bracket were six times more
likely to complete bachelor’s degrees. These statistics indicate that first-generation students are falling further behind their non-first-generation peers in persisting to complete a college degree.

The issue of persistence is not a new concern for higher education administrators, and in an effort to address it, researchers have sought to identify reasons why students do not persist at a university and the way in which programs can be implemented that would address the problem. In the late 1960s, William Spady (1970) developed a sociological model of the drop-out process based in part on Durkheim’s theory dealing with the social nature of suicide. He referred to the model as social integration (Spady, 1970). Spady’s initial work laid the groundwork upon which Vincent Tinto built his Student Integration Model, which he introduced in 1975. Today the model continues to be refined based on the input of other researchers.

According to Thomas (2000), the majority of literature dealing with the issue of student persistence places emphasis on the integration of students into the campus community. He cited Tinto’s Model of Student Integration and Bean’s Student Attrition Model as the two main models of student persistence. The models concur that student persistence at an institution is influenced by the attitudes of the peers with whom students interact and the pressure those peers place on the student. Both theorists believed that peers can definitely influence a student’s sense of commitment to an institution. The models differ in that Tinto’s places more emphasis on “within institution peer culture, while Bean’s places more emphasis on the role of external forces in the persistence process” (Thomas, 2000, p. 592).

Citing the research of Martin (2009), Petty (2014) posited that social integration is as important as academic integration and serves as a factor in motivating first-generation students to remain in college and ensure that they succeed. The research concluded that if a student feels alone and isolated, they will not enjoy the college experience. Furthermore, Petty cited the
research of Hodges-Payne (2009), which documented that motivation increases when students “are socially integrated into college with a sense of belonging” (Petty, 2014, p. 260).

The literature has established that first-generation students face unique challenges as they often feel they do not fit into the culture of the institution, which can lead to their having a sense of not belonging (Lippincott & German, 2007; London, 1989; Petty, 2014). Stebleton et al. (2014) conducted a study at a large research university to determine if first-generation students, when compared to their peers who were non-first-generation students, differed concerning their sense of belonging, satisfaction, and stress level and if they experienced depression. The researchers concluded that first-generation students had “lower ratings for sense of belonging and satisfaction and higher rates of feeling stressed, depressed or upset when compared with non-first generation students” (Stebleton et al., 2014, p. 14). In addition, the study noted that the fact that first-generation students were less likely to live on campus negatively impacted their ability to take part in academic and social engagement activities. In particular, Stebleton et al. concluded that if the students were more engaged socially, it would lead to higher rates of “sense of belonging and satisfaction” (p. 15).

Adams et al. (2016) researched the relationship between financial strain, psychological symptoms, and academic and social integration of undergraduate students. The results of their study revealed that financial strain definitely impacts academic and social integration. The researchers acknowledged that Student Support Services (SSS) provide students with workshops that help them to learn how to navigate the financial aid process and provide information on available scholarships. However, they recommend that the SSS staff go further and collaborate with College Health Services to identify students dealing with perceived levels of stress and
assist them in obtaining help from counselors. The study concluded that when students’ high
stress levels are addressed, it assists them in dealing with academic and social integration.

National statistics released by the NSCRC in July 2014 indicated that more students than
ever are leaving universities at the end of their freshman year. The first year is often used as a
barometer since it is considered to be the most difficult for students based on the fact that they
are making the transition from high school to college. Acknowledging that students often leave
one institution and enroll in a different one, Fain (2014) pointed out a troubling statistic: “68.7
percent of students who first enrolled in the fall of 2012 returned to any U.S. institution the
following fall. That number, which is the national ‘persistence’ rate, was down from 69.9 percent
for students who enrolled in 2009” (para. 3). With universities struggling to retain students, all
options need to be explored concerning the types of support first-year students need to make the
transition from high school to college as seamless as possible. Additionally, with the ever-
changing demographics of higher education, attention needs to be paid to students from
underrepresented groups and first-generation and low-income students. These students are four
times more likely to drop out of college than their peers who are not members of one of these
subsets (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Furthermore, these students present college administrators with
unique challenges that are vastly different than those of traditional first-year students. Both
Thomas (2000) and Stebleton and Soria (2012) noted that it is important for student affairs
professionals to not only connect first-year students with the university but also take the extra
step and assist the students in creating a portfolio of relationships on campus that enables them to
have access to key campus resources in order to further their academic and social integration.

Kuh et al. (2008) conducted a study of first-year students to explore the impact of student
engagement on grades and persistence. Their results determined there was a positive correlation
between students engaged in educationally purposeful activities and their grades and intention to persist at the institution. Further, the results indicated a compensatory effect for first-year students, in particular those who exhibited risk factors for success, such as being low-income and first-generation students. The researchers concluded that students would benefit from a collaborative effort between academic faculty members and student affairs professionals that would create a connection between work in the classroom and the activities and culture of the campus. Also, they highlighted the fact that faculty members should be encouraged to assign work that fostered collaboration by students. The value and influence of peer interaction on college students has been acknowledged in the literature (Astin, 1993), and the study indicated that this interaction could benefit students by “reinforcing their educational expectations” (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 557).

When comparing the factors that play a role in the persistence of first-generation students and non-first-generation students from their first year of college to their second year at four-year colleges and universities, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) concluded there were major differences between the two groups. This conclusion was reached based on an examination of data gathered from the 2002 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey. The researchers sought to find what factors served as determinants for both groups. They utilized a set of variables to determine a student’s initial commitment to the institution that included financial, academic, and social reasons students had for selecting the institution. They repeated the same set of variables to determine a student’s probability of retention at the institution. Selected results indicated that approximately 76% of the first-generation students returned for their second year as compared to 82% of their non-first-generation peers. Some interesting findings for first-generation students that emerged were that 14.7% of the returning first-generation students were raised in homes
where the primary language spoken was not English. White first-generation students were 34.5% more likely to persist than their Hispanic first-generation peers. For every $10,000 in the overall increase in family income, it was 2% more likely a first-generation student would persist. In a striking statistic, the study revealed that 18.3% of first-generation students who selected an institution based on the fact they could live at home were more likely to persist. First-generation students also had higher persistence rates at public versus private universities. In a final analysis of their finding, the researchers concluded that first-generation students “may connect more to the local ingredients and aspects of family and school environments associated with their college-going behaviors” (Lohfink & Paulson, 2005, p. 419). These findings support the fact that family relationships play a major role for first-generation students in deciding to attend college and then persist and obtain a degree. It is also evident that minority status and level of income clearly impact persistence (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Clearly the rate of college persistence is a national problem that needs to be addressed for all students, but in particular, college administrators need to be aware of the challenges faced by the fastest growing group of future students. Engle and Tinto (2008) classified these students as members of underrepresented groups who are from minority and low-income families and note the students will most likely be the first in their family to attend college. Pascarella et al. (2003) concluded that “being a first-generation student confers its greatest liability in [the] initial adjustment to, and survival in, postsecondary education” (p. 429). If college administrators and faculty are aware of the challenges first-generation students face and are prepared to address them from the first day of class, these students have a much greater chance of persisting. The following section presents some of the unique barriers that these students face and highlights the persistence rates for this group versus their non-first-generation peers.
First-Generation College Students

Numerous definitions are used when defining “first-generation students,” but for the purpose of this study, I use the definition approved by the federal government:

A first-generation student is an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree, in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual who’s only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree. (Higher Education Act of 1965, Sec402B [6] g1 [a])

A longitudinal research study conducted by Mortenson (1998) concluded that 74% of students in the top bracket for family income completed a baccalaureate degree, while only 5% of students whose family income was in the bottom quartile completed a baccalaureate degree. Research has shown that this group of students often enters college at a distinct disadvantage. Terenzini et al. (1996) found that first-generation students, when compared to traditional students, exhibited a number of disturbing characteristics, including lower critical thinking skills, weaker cognitive skills in content areas of math and reading, and lack of support and encouragement from family members to attend college. In addition, they spent less time interacting and socializing with peers and did not engage professors in conversation. The results of the longitudinal study concluded that outside of the university environment, first-generation students were less likely to encounter experiences that would lead them to want to persist in college and be successful. In addition, the friends they had prior to enrolling in college were less likely to be supportive of their decision to attend and persist in college.

Utilizing data from the National Education Longitudinal Study Postsecondary Education Transcript Study, Chen (2005) found “that only 24 percent of first-generation students who graduated from high school in 1992 and enrolled in college earned a bachelor’s degree by 2000
compared to 68 percent of students whose parents went to college” (Engle, 2008, p. 26). Today, approximately 30% of the students enrolling in colleges and universities are first-generation students. Of that number, 24% are classified as both first generation and low income. According to NCES, only 11% of the population will graduate in 6 years. This number represents less than 25% of first-generation, low-income students who enrolled in college as compared to a persistence rate of 68% for non-first-generation students (Opidee, 2015).

The socioeconomic differences between first-generation students and their middle and upper-income peers were highlighted in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which concluded “fully 63 percent of students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile took a developmental course in college compared with only 25 percent of students in the highest quartile” (Roderick et al., 2009, p. 189). Terenzini et al. (1996) noted that first-generation college students are weaker in academic content areas. As a result, these students need to take remedial classes, and statistics cited by Schreiner et al. (2011) indicated that “only 26.2% of students who take at least one remedial course graduate from college compared to a 59.4% graduation rate for students who do not require remedial course work” (p. 321). Based on their academic preparation, first-generation students are clearly at a distinct disadvantage when they enter college, which negatively impacts their ability to persist.

Stebleton and Soria (2012) conducted a study to determine if the academic obstacles faced by first-generation students when compared to non-first generation students were significantly different. When examining the predictors that differentiated first-generation students from non-first generation students, the following was noted: in most cases, first-generation students did not follow a college preparatory curriculum in high school, resulting in cases in which they were academically under-prepared for college course work (Jenkins,
Mlyazaki, & Janosik, 2009). These students often face conflicting emotions as a result of dealing with the culture of their family and friends versus the culture of higher education institutions (London, 1989). These emotions, according to Lippincott and German (2007), can cause the students to feel alone and isolated in their new surroundings and may in some cases lead to the student experiencing depression. The study, which was conducted at six research institutions, concluded that the following obstacles were encountered significantly more among the population of first-generation students: “competing job responsibilities, family responsibilities, weak English and math skills, inadequate study skills, and feeling depressed, stressed, or upset” (Stebleton & Soria, 2012, p.12). In order to effectively assist students to deal with these obstacles, the researchers encourage frontline professionals to first be aware of the obstacles, then develop interventions to assist the students in their transition to college. Some of their specific recommendations are encouraging first-generation students to take advantage of social and academic engagement opportunities, such as becoming part of a learning community or visit the writing center to obtain assistance. In addition, they stress the value of peer mentors who can relate to first-generation students having experienced what they are dealing with firsthand. They also recommend informing the students about the myriad support services available and encouraging them to take advantage of them. Finally, learning center professionals should assist students in building their self-confidence and increasing their self-efficacy. Fortunately for first-generation students, EOP address the findings of this study with interventions that are already in place.

The families of first-generation students in a majority of cases cannot offer students the appropriate encouragement since they lack knowledge about the college-going experience. Hossler et al. (1999) stated that “parents who have gone to college are familiar with the
experience and are better equipped to explain to their children how the college system is structured, how it works, and how students can prepare for it” (as cited by Engle, 2008, p. 26).

Engle (2008) noted that parents, teachers, and school personnel influence students and can play a significant role in whether or not they make the decision to attend college. Drawing on the research of Horn and Nunez (2000) and Hossler et al. (1999), Engle concluded that the "level of encouragement to go to and prepare for college received from school staff is greater for students with higher levels of academic performance" (p. 30). It follows that since first-generation students in most cases have lower levels of academic achievement, they are not encouraged by school personnel to pursue higher education.

In recent years, administrators and researchers have acknowledged the fact that students begin to plan for college as early as middle school and have focused their research on first-generation middle school students. They hope that by calling attention to this group, interventions such as TRIO Talent Search will be developed to provide this population with the information they need to make an informed decision concerning their future educational goals. A study of prospective first-generation college students conducted by Gibbons and Borders (2010) researched a group of middle school students who would be the first in their family to attend college and concluded that the students had lower self-efficacy than their non-first-generation peers. They note this finding is significant since self-efficacy plays a large role in future career and educational pursuits and is a factor in the goals and interests students pursue (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). In response to a question concerning what they perceived as barriers, the prospective first-generation students noted family issues, finances, and lack of positive role models; in fact, they elaborated and noted that they specifically had negative education role models, lack of desire to attend college, and lack of preparation and guidance in
pursuing a college degree. These barriers were notable since their non-first-generation peers noted only finances and stress as barriers to pursuing a college education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). The researchers concluded their findings were significant since pre-college first-generation students indicated a positive correlation between the support of school personnel and positive outcome expectations. Therefore, this correlation “suggests school environment can be a powerful influence on college going expectations” (Gibbons & Borders, 2010, p. 206).

Furthermore, if the students feel supported in their current educational setting, the researchers posited that it would assist them to believe that college offers the same environment.

Fan and Williams (2009) conducted a study of 10th grade students to determine the influence parental involvement had on the students’ self-efficacy, motivation, and intrinsic engagement in math and English. Their findings supported the fact that when parents are involved in school activities, it results in a reinforcement of the bond between a student’s home life and school life. In addition, it shows both teachers and students that parents value the education their children are receiving. Fan and Williams concluded that “this involvement might lead to children setting higher academic goals and feeling more confident about their ability to achieve these goals” (p. 70).

In many cases, the parents of first-generation students often do not have access to a computer, nor are they familiar with navigating the Internet. This lack of technological knowledge and access can create an informational barrier for families of first-generation, under-represented students since a majority of colleges today communicate with perspective students using electronic methods (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
Ward (2006) reviewed a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2002 and concluded that the finding of parental education as a major predictor of access to higher education and ultimately attainment of a four-year college degree was significant. Ward posited, "This finding suggests a generational effect. That is, increased educational attainment among low-income minority young adults (particularly those who are likely to become parents) and subsequent enrollment into postsecondary education hinges on our ability to reduce the proportion of students disadvantaged by their parent’s level of education." (p. 52)

Richardson and Skinner (1992) outlined the following attributes of first-generation students: they often are commuters who come to campus just to attend their classes, and they are only familiar with the buildings where their classes are held and rarely interact with faculty. Results of a study they conducted found that first-generation students felt faculty were “busy and not interested in wasting time with them” (as cited in Longwell-Grice, 2008, p. 416).

Today many first-generation students elect to attend college as a means of securing their economic future and enhancing their social status (Harlow & Bowman, 2016). In order to determine if first-generation college students differed from non-first generation students in career decision self-efficacy and career maturity, Harlow and Bowman (2016) conducted a study at a midsize university located in the Midwestern United States. Their results indicated that overall both groups had an adequate level of both career maturity and career decision self-efficacy. However, upon deeper analysis, first-generation students exhibited lower levels of career maturity than their non-first-generation peers (Harlow & Bowman, 2016). The researchers concluded that this group of students would most likely benefit from career counseling.
In “Rethinking College Readiness,” Conley (2008) observed that first-generation students who struggle to become successful in college, especially during their first year, often fail and become alienated, which results in them dropping out. Based on this finding, Conley concluded that first-generation students who can interact with their peers and faculty members, have knowledge of how the system works, and can take advantage of support services offered will meet with success in college and persist. Educational Opportunity programs are structured to provide the resources students need to meet the criteria for success that Conley has outlined.

A longitudinal study was conducted over a 35-year period from 1971-2005 that utilized survey information collected using the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s Freshman Survey instrument. The group surveyed were first-time, full-time students attending four-year institutions in the United States. The results of the study both confirmed a number of previous research findings and provided valuable insights into developing trends among first-generation students who are entering four-year institutions. The data provided information on topics such as what motivated students to attend college, their concerns over financial issues, the support they received from family members, and their academic preparation prior to entering college (Saenz et al., 2007). Previous research studies found that first-generation students were hindered in their quest to attend college because they did not receive encouragement from teachers, guidance counselors, family, and peers (Choy, 2001).

The current study showed a trend towards students receiving more encouragement and support from the groups previously noted. Of significance is the fact that first-generation students placed a much greater importance on the assistance received from family and school personnel when compared to their non-first-generation peers (Saenz et al., 2007).
The trend in the survey data showed that as the years progressed, both first-generation students and their peers who were non-first-generation students indicated that their families’ desire for them to attend college played a large role in their decision to pursue higher education. The survey results indicated that in 2005, 47.0 percent of first-generation students (vs. 43.0 percent of non-first generation students) reported this as a very important reason for attending college. It is important to note that this trend has reversed for the two groups – first generation students are now more likely to report parental encouragement as a very important reason for going to college (Saenz et al., 2007, p.15).

Sanez et al., (2007) concluded that the findings of their longitudinal study showed the shift over time and parents of first-generation students no longer attempt to deter their children from attending college, and even though they may lack “college knowledge,” they are very supportive of their children seeking a college education.

The survey results indicated that first-generation students tend to work at least 20 hours a week and are very concerned with the cost of attending college and how they can finance their education. Finally, the survey conveyed that first-generation students reported spending less time on studying and completing homework assignments during their senior year of high school than their non-first-generation peers. Furthermore, the survey indicated that although high school grade point averages are rising for both groups, the gap between the two groups is growing larger. This led Saenz et al. 2007 to conclude that “because high school GPA has been demonstrated to be one of the strongest predictors of college GPA (Astin, 1993), first-generation students may face some academic disadvantages compared to their counterparts” (p. 29).
Researchers have identified a number of obstacles that first-generation, low-income college students face and need to overcome if they are to be successful. In the following section, the literature reveals how low self-efficacy influences students.

**Self-Efficacy**

Albert Bandura defines self-efficacy as “one’s beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over task demands” (Bandura, 1990, p. 316). Bandura first introduced the construct in 1977 as part of his theory of social learning, which posits that individuals are constantly learning by means of communication, observation, and interaction with others through social mechanisms that do not require direct reinforcement, a concept referred to as vicarious learning (Ward, 2003). He asserted that “people’s level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true” (Bandura, 1997, p. 2).

The four sources of information that contribute to an individual’s self-efficacy have been identified as mastery experiences, observational or vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and psychological feedback (Bandura, 1997). He noted further that of the four information sources, mastery experiences played the largest role. Since Bandura introduced the theory of self-efficacy in 1977, research has been conducted in areas as diverse as medicine, sports, business, and careers to determine the impact the construct has on individuals and their achievement levels. In the area of education, studies to determine the role self-efficacy plays in students’ achievement and persistence to complete tasks are being conducted, seeking ways teachers can engage students and assist them in reaching their potential.

Schunk (1987) developed a model to describe the “reciprocal influence between self-efficacy, task engagement variables and achievement behaviors” (p. 179). He described his
model using the example of a student learning on a new educational concept. Students arrive with different beliefs concerning whether they can be successful based on their prior experiences. Once engaged in the learning process, they are influenced by social and institutional variables. As the process evolves, students receive cues as to how they are performing required tasks. The cues the students receive are based on the four sources of information that Bandura believes contribute to self-efficacy. The students use the information they obtain to ascertain their efficacy for future educational activities.

Recognizing the positive role self-efficacy can play in influencing a student to believe they can undertake a difficult task and persist to achieve a goal, researchers have undertaken studies with specific student populations. Studies conducted by Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) and Pajares and Miller (1994) concluded that self-efficacy has a positive impact on student’s achievement and retention. Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) found there was a link between a student’s sense of self-efficacy and the goals they set for themselves academically. The higher the student’s sense of self efficacy, the more difficult goals they set.

Zimmerman (2000) stated that “self-efficacy is assumed to be responsive to changes in personal context and outcomes, whether experienced directly, vicariously, verbally, or physiologically,” and as a result, “self-efficacy beliefs are studied as indicators of change during instructional interventions” (p. 88). Numerous studies to date have established the positive outcomes educational interventions can have on students’ self-efficacy and how a heightened sense of self efficacy can impact a student’s academic achievement and persistence.

In 2009, Dewitz Woolsey and Walsh studied the relationship between the construct of purpose in life and college students’ self-efficacy beliefs. The researchers believed that by studying the relationship, they would be able to identify first-year college students who were
struggling to adjust to college. The study was framed by Victor Frankl’s construct of purpose of life, “without a sense of meaning, an individual would experience existential vacuum, which is primarily manifested as boredom and to an extreme extent, distress or anxiety” (Dewitz et al., 2009, p. 22). They developed four hypotheses that analyzed the relationship between purpose in life, college self-efficacy, social self-efficacy, general self-efficacy, and social desirability. The findings concluded that all three types of self-efficacy were positively and significantly related to purpose in life and that as a student’s scores increased in each area of self-efficacy, so did their purpose in life scores. The results led the researchers to assert that interventions to assist students in their adjustment should be developed based on self-efficacy theory. They further noted that when students have high self-efficacy, they experience success both in the classroom and in their lives outside the classroom.

Komarraju and Nadler (2013) established that students who have high self-efficacy also believe that intelligence can be changed based on effort, whereas students with low self-efficacy believe that intelligence is fixed and effort does not have a positive impact. They state that “training students to strengthen their self-efficacy and their belief that they have the ability to determine their performance can facilitate valuing efforts and hard work” (p. 70). The study further added to the literature by concluding that students who have higher self-efficacy also show a willingness to undertake difficult courses and have a high level of academic performance.

To date, limited studies have examined the relationship of self-efficacy and the experiences of first-generation college students. It has been reported that first-generation students, when compared to their peers who are non-first-generation students, have lower self-efficacy (Hellman, 1996; McGregor et al., 1991). Additionally, research by Pajares (1996) and Schunk (1995) highlighted the fact that self-efficacy influences students’ “academic motivation,
learning and achievement” (Wigfield, Eccles, & Pintrich, 1996, p. 149). Pascarella et al. (2004) stated that although “we appear to know much about the FGC [first-generation college] students with respect to their academic preparation, transition to postsecondary education, and progress towards degree attainment, surprisingly little is known about their cognitive and psychosocial development during college” (p. 250). Wood et al. (2010), drawing on the research of Jerusalem and Schwarzer (1992) and others, noted that “scholars have theorized that greater levels of self-efficacy leads to enhanced academic outcomes (e.g., academic integration, achievement, engagement, and persistence)” (p. 3).

Considering that limited research has highlighted the fact that first-generation students have lower self-efficacy when entering college than their peers, it is important to understand what factors influence this important skill. Family represents the first impact on an individual’s self-efficacy. Schunk and Pajares (2002), citing Bandura (1997) and Meece (1997), stated that family members who provide children with a supportive environment foster a sense of curiosity that allows children to have mastery experiences that will positively impact their sense of self efficacy…. They consider the influence to be bidirectional whereas children who are naturally curious and seek to explore new activities will in turn be met with parental responsiveness. (p. 151)

Unfortunately, research has shown that students from low-income families are often “ill prepared cognitively, motivationally and socially to meet normative educational demands” (Bandura, 1997, p. 252). A contributing factor to this could be the fact that parents are unable to offer their children activities outside of the classroom experience due to financial constraints. Research has concluded that the parents of low-income students “have a low sense of efficacy that can
influence their children’s learning” (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992, as cited in Bandura, 1993, p. 246).

Peers also influence the self-efficacy of first-generation students. Coleman, McDill, and Rigsby (1973) noted that a considerable amount of research on the pre-collegiate level has indicated that students are influenced by their peer groups and that this influence can be used to “enhance student involvement in the learning process” (as cited in Astin, 1984, p. 528). Schunk (1995) posited that “observing similar others succeed can raise the observers’ self-efficacy and motivate them to try the task because they are apt to believe that if others can do it they can as well” (p. 2).

Schools play a large role in the development of students’ self-efficacy. Schools that provide students with a positive and supportive environment set the stage for self-efficacy to be effective (Bandura, 1997). In the case of first-generation students from low-income backgrounds, this is not always the case. As Bandura (1997) noted, staff in schools serving poor and minority students tend to “have a low sense of efficacy to educate poor and minority students and do not expect much of them academically” (p. 252).

Solberg and Villarreal (1997) conducted a study to determine the impact of self-efficacy on the personal adjustment of Hispanic students to college. The researchers were aware that the transition from high school to college can be stressful for students and wanted to examine if self-efficacy beliefs eased this transition for Hispanic students, who are considered members of an underrepresented group. Their findings supported the hypothesis that self-efficacy expectations would have a positive impact on distress ratings for Hispanic students. This led the researchers to conclude that a high level of self-efficacy could not only positively help students deal with the stress of college, but also it could influence their persistence (Solberg & Villarreal, 1997).
Research by Schreiner et al. (2011) highlighted the fact that students who have positive interactions with faculty and staff both inside and outside of the classroom develop a sense of confidence that the university cares about them. Drawing on previous research by Bean and Eaton (2002), Schreiner et al. concluded that this “in turn bolsters the students’ sense of self efficacy that they can survive and even thrive in the organization (p. 323). Research by Braxton et al. (2004) concluded that as a result of their heightened self-efficacy, students are more likely to become socially integrated into the campus community, and this social integration can positively equate to persistence (Schreiner, 2011). This is noteworthy since Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation students, when compared to their non-first-generation counterparts, were less likely to be academically and socially engaged with the campus and that this contributed to their not persisting.

In a study of first-year, underprepared students, Meizer and Grant (2016) concluded that underprepared students struggled with career decisions and did not seek to find work in areas related to their career interests. These students did not avail themselves of available support services, such as mentoring and tutoring, during their time in college. The findings suggested that this population of students could benefit from improved decision making by delaying gratification, receiving guidance regarding fulfilling responsibilities, and acting conscientiously when faced with challenging situations. Meizer and Grant further concluded that underprepared students “expressed less guilt regarding these characteristics” (p. 102). This could be a result of the fact that due to their low self-efficacy, they do not expect to be successful. The researchers recommended that college personnel institute support systems to assist underprepared students to reach their full potential.
Unfortunately, today for many first-generation, low-income students from underrepresented groups, access to college and assistance to complete a college degree is still not a reality. With the rising cost of tuition, they cannot afford higher education even with assistance. Research by Kuh et al. (2007) highlighted the fact that the ability of students to attend college is influenced by the availability of financial aid. In addition, with more students from low-income families entering college, there has been “a decline in the average level of academic preparedness” (Baum et al., 2013, p. 20). A main component of the Higher Education Act is Title 4 (the Student Assistance Act), which established SSS and other efforts such as EOP bridge programs. Both programs provide first-generation students with special assistance to gain admission to colleges and to have the tools they need to ensure their persistence and success. Researchers McKenna and Lewis (1986) noted that it is imperative that first-generation students be introduced to college on a multitude of levels: socially, academically, culturally, and emotionally. Research has proven that students who participate in EOP face a smoother transition from high school to college and have better persistence rates (Ackerman, 1991; Garcia, 1991; Walpole et al., 2008). The next conversation about the literature explores in depth EOP and the various components that comprise the programs.

**What is an Educational Opportunity Program?**

As institutions strive to retain students, it is imperative that they develop and implement strategies that assist in achieving this goal. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) found that “a significant portion of student attrition might be prevented through timely and carefully planned institutional interventions” (p. 61). Educational opportunity programs are one intervention that is effective. These programs not only bridge the summer between high school graduation and the start of freshman year of college, but also continue to provide services for students from the start
of their college career until graduation day. Research has proven that summer bridge programs are a positive factor in college retention (Ackerman, 1991; Garcia, 1991; Robert & Thomason, 1994; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996). In addition, research has highlighted the fact that students who participate in EOP have shown higher persistence and degree attainment than their peers who did not participate in the programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

An EOP provides first-generation students with a vehicle to build social and cultural capital (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). Bourdieu defined social capital as an individual’s social networks and acquaintances (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). He noted that students from low-income families are often disadvantaged since their socioeconomic environment does not provide them with the tools necessary to succeed in school, such as a supportive family, academic support, and successful role models (Cabera et al., 2006). It is Bourdieu’s (1977) contention that schools, by failing to teach students the importance of cultural capital, not only “reproduce existing inequalities but make it difficult to break the circle in which cultural capital is added to cultural capital” (as cited in Cabera et al., 2006, p. 83).

According to Portes (1998), social capital is the knowledge gained from and the access provided by an individual’s social network. This is noteworthy since first-generation students often only know acquaintances from their homogenous background. Therefore, it would be difficult for them to build social capital unless they ventured outside their own milieu. Lin (2000) noted that since students are only exposed to students of similar backgrounds, this can cause their social capital to be reduced. Dryfoos (1990) concluded that students could be considered as high risk for failing in school based on their peer group and the quality of the neighborhood in which they reside. Research has concluded that the majority of first-generation students are hampered by the fact that they are not familiar with and “struggle to navigate the middle class culture of
higher education, learn the ‘rules of the game,’ and take advantage of college resources” (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014, p. 944).

Soria and Stebleton (2012) conducted a study that sought to answer two questions, first: “are first generation students less likely to persist from their first year to their second year as compared with their non-first generation peers? Second, are there significant differences in regard to their levels of academic engagement?” (p. 674). In response to both questions, first-generation students had both lower persistence rates and were less academically engaged than their peers. A major deficit was apparent in the way first-generation students interacted with faculty, thus creating their level of academic engagement. This group was less likely to take part in and ask questions during classroom discussions. Also, they had difficulty integrating knowledge obtained in other courses with the course material from their current course. The researchers attribute the failure of students to engage academically to the fact that first-generation students lack social capital. They cited research by Stanton-Salazar and Dornbush (1995), which found that this situation can be remediated by providing opportunities for first-generation students to interact more frequently with faculty (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). The researchers further concluded that a student’s sense of belonging was closely aligned with their academic engagement. They believe that the more faculty engage this population of students, the greater their sense of belonging will be and the more likely they are to persist to graduation.

Cultural capital is closely aligned with social capital and, in many cases, is rated on the amount of education an individual has acquired (Stolle-McAllister, 2011). This aligns with Bourdieu (1977), who argued that “because schools are institutions that are structured on a middle-class (or higher) orientation, middle class families and their children understand the cultural and social nuances of how they operate” (Loza, 2003, p. 46). Research has concluded
that social and cultural capital influence students’ lives and play a role in their success or failure in college.

The influence of cultural capital was examined by Collier and Morgan (2007) in a study dealing with mastery of the “role of college student” by traditional and first-generation college students. Specific emphasis was placed on how the students viewed the expectations of faculty members. The results indicated that the cultural capital traditional students had obtained from their families and other resources allowed them to have a much deeper understanding of what the faculty member expected from them. They concluded that traditional students’ use of the cultural capital they had acquired over the years gave them an advantage in being successful and persisting. They noted that this supports Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction “where those that come from an advantaged background maintain that advantage into the next generation” (Collier & Morgan, 2007, p. 442). The problem now is to design strategies that address this issue as a remedy to reverse this disturbing trend.

One strategy that is being explored is offering programs on multicultural education that provide students with knowledge on how their different backgrounds are all significant. Research conducted by Stephens et al. (2014) highlighted the fact that often first-generation, low-income students are at a disadvantage when they enter college because institutions of higher education are reluctant to acknowledge that a student’s social class can impact their educational experience. As a result, the researchers concluded that in many cases first-generation students do not understand why they are struggling. In order to assist these students in their transition to higher education, the researchers designed a study with the goal of showing students how their diverse backgrounds matter and to hopefully provide them with the psychological resources that would
make their transition to college less stressful, while at the same time showing them the benefit of talking advantage of campus resources to assist them in improving their academic integration.

Grier-Reed and Ganuza (2012) developed a career course for students enrolled in an SSS program that allowed them to construct identity across contexts by using their own personal information to guide their career direction. The course acknowledged the importance of cultural capital, developing identity, and establishing supportive peer relationships. Since college and career decisions can often cause first-generation students culture shock, the course sought to help them establish and “retain a sense of intergenerational identity” (p. 465). The results of the study, whose goal was to determine the success of the course, concluded that overall students’ confidence improved in the main areas of focus. Students who completed the course were more confident than when they entered that they had the “ability to assess their skills, and strengths, set goals, plan, and problem solve” (Greer-Reed & Ganuza, 2012, p. 469).

First-generation college students from Appalachia are a unique subset of first-generation students who have met with success in persisting and completing a college degree. Hand and Payne (2008) conducted a phenomenological study of participants in the SSS program at a major university located in the Appalachian region. The study provided an interesting perspective on the students’ concerns and the way in which they see themselves as first-generation college students. The students all expressed a strong sense of their home culture and family. Their parents wanted them to earn more money and have a better life than their own. The students were all raised in Appalachia and were from low-income families, so they naturally were concerned about paying for their education, and all but one participant in the study worked to supplement their scholarships and loans and cover living expenses. The researchers noted that the students all took responsibility for their work and were motivated to succeed. Of importance was the
finding that the students perceived the SSS program as a place where they were able to receive emotional support and build relationships. The students noted that as a result of the encouragement they received through the program, they increased their efforts to interact with their professors both in and outside the classroom.

This study examined the Summer Transition at Eastern/Contract Admissions Program (STEP/CAP) at Eastern Connecticut State University through the theoretical lens of Bandura’s social learning theory. Bandura argued that individuals are products of their social networks. A vital component of EOP is the fact that they provide students the opportunity to build a strong sense of self-efficacy. This goal is achieved through the use of mentors and peer mentors, who offer continuous support and encouragement and show the students that they can indeed succeed and have a chance in college. The peer mentors also convey valuable “college knowledge,” which according to Roderick et al. (2009) provides first-generation students with an understanding of acceptable college norms and culture. First-generation students who form relationships with other first-generation students allow themselves, according to Cushman (2007), “to feel as if they are staying true to their own sense of self” (as cited in Woosley & Shelper, 2011, p. 703). Cushman’s study “indicated that first generation students may feel their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders” (as cited in Woosley & Shelper, 2011, p. 703). Cushman’s research highlights the myriad conflicting emotions that first-generation students need to deal with along with the stress that naturally accompanies students’ transition to college. This situation only adds to the issues impacting their success and makes their integration into the campus community more difficult.

Miliem and Berger (1997) highlighted the results of research conducted by Davis (1991) and Taylor and Howard-Hamilton (1995), which provided evidence that African American
students who were involved in campus activities had a lower dropout rate. Also, African American students who were enrolled in predominately White institutions where they were actively involved in campus activities such as clubs, community service, and sports were more likely “to develop a positive racial identity” (Miliem & Berger, 1997, p. 644). The research of Taylor and Howard-Hamilton emphasized the positive correlation between campus involvement and retention of African American students at institutions where they are considered members of an under-represented group.

In response to evidence that involvement can lead to retention, Patrick Velasquez designed a bridge program at the University of San Diego that addressed not only the academic and social issues faced by first-generation students, but also the cultural issues that can impact their retention, persistence, and ultimately their completion. The program has a high rate of success, which can be attributed to the fact that it deals with all the areas first-generation students might have difficulty adjusting to in college (McCurrie, 2009).

Saint Joseph College, located in Vermont, has undergone a transformation in the last four years. Today many of their students are first-generation students who can attend the college because of the Provider Scholarship Program, which provides students with the opportunity to receive the scholarship based on “demonstrated intellectual curiosity, personal and professional growth and community engagement” (Cherry et al., 2015, p. 2). Students’ scholarships increase every year and are renewable as long as they maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA, perform a minimum of 15 hours of community service for the semester, participate in at least one extra-curricular activity, and participate in career preparation. The college has reported that the program’s success is possible because of the support of faculty and staff in desiring to see an increasing
number of first-generation, low-income students succeed, and it noted that the program has been implemented with little impact on its operating budget.

**Components of Educational Opportunity Programs**

As institutions strive to retain students, it is imperative that they develop and implement strategies that assist in achieving this goal. Educational Opportunity programs are an intervention that is gaining in popularity. They not only bridge the summer between high school graduation and the start of freshman year of college, but also continue to provide services for the students until graduation day. Research has proven that SSS/EOP programs are a positive factor in college retention (Ackerman, 1991; Garcia, 1991; Robert & Thomason, 1994; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996).

Kallison and Stadler (2012) noted that EOP provide students with “academic instruction, tutoring, study skills instruction, and mentoring/counseling/advising” (p. 343). A cornerstone of EOP is the academic component, which provides students assistance in reading and writing on the college level. In a summary of the best practices to employ in college teaching, Drummond (1995) cited the value of mentorship, academic counseling, and individual tutoring, all of which are components of EOP (as cited in Michael et al., 2010). Today, lawmakers seeking to curb what many believe is out of control spending on education have targeted remedial education as an unnecessary drain on state budgets. McCurrie (2009) cited the Spellings Commission Report, released in 2006 and named after then United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, which raised questions about the effectiveness of summer-bridge programs, the cornerstone of the majority of EOP. At the same time, the report criticized colleges and universities for their failure to recruit and retain first-generation students, the population that EOP serve. In light of this criticism and since federal and state funding is essential to EOP, college administrators are
anxious to show the value of EOP. Conley (2008) defined college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed without remediation—in a credit bearing general education course at a post-secondary institution” (p. 24). Research has shown that students who enter college underprepared to meet the expectations of college courses have a negative impact on graduation rates.

Educational Opportunity programs provide students with academic and social skills that they need to succeed in college prior to the start of their freshman year, then offer support to participants as they progress through college. The goal is to promote college access, retention, and completion rates for low-income, first-generation students from underrepresented groups (Garcia & Paz, 2009). The majority of programs adhere to the philosophy of Tinto (1997): that by ensuring a supportive and motivating environment for first-generation students, these students will achieve “academic and social integration.” Drummond (1995) stated that “student engagement and a student’s sense of personal responsibility are significant factors in academic success” (as cited in Michael et al., 2010, p. 971). Engstrom and Tinto (2008) noted that providing access without support is not providing real opportunity for first-generation students. Studies have highlighted the psychological benefits first-generation students garner from seeing students who come from backgrounds similar to theirs enter college and succeed (Oyserman & Destin, 2010; Stephens et al., 2012). Hu (2010) conducted a study to determine the relationship between student engagement in social activities and their persistence in college. A major finding was that students who had high levels of engagement in social activities were likely to persist and complete a degree program. When academic engagement was factored in with social engagement, it is noteworthy that the group of students who exhibited low-middle academic engagement along with high social engagement had the highest rate of persistence, 97.1% (Hu,
This finding reinforces the theory that for a student to meet with success, they need to be both academically and socially integrated into the campus community. This belief also impacts the students’ self-efficacy beliefs by providing positive mentors and models.

Recent research has highlighted the fact that a difference exists between how students from different social classes are able to adjust both academically and socially to college. The research is valuable since “the culture of most higher education institutions reflects Caucasian, middle-class values” (Townsend & Wilson, 2008, p. 407). It is imperative that college advisors know and are able to assist students who are having issues becoming integrated into the campus community. Soria, Stebleton, and Huesman (2014) wanted to identify the different factors that impacted both social and academic integration since they have been identified as having an impact on student persistence. The results of their study indicated that in both instances of academic and social integration, students from working-class backgrounds had less of a sense of belonging on campus and were overall less satisfied with their educational experience. This finding is troubling since previous research highlights a positive correlation between sense of belonging on campus and a student’s persistence to graduation (Soria et al., 2014, p. 229).

Programs that succeed and whose students achieve significant rates of persistence in college “share several principals: clear mission, strong leadership, sound funding, diverse partnerships, wide services, dedicated staff, and long term commitment” (Malone, 2009). Summer bridge programs, the cornerstone of most EOP initiatives, were the subject of a study conducted at the California State University System’s 19 campuses. The study measured three areas of integration: academic, social, and institutional. Results indicated that the services of programs whose focus was to improve a student’s basic skills while simultaneously integrating
them with the campus community resulted in noteworthy increases in retention rates for first and second-year students (Garcia, 1991).

A study conducted by Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski (2007) highlighted best practices for staff to employ when working with EOP students. They recommended that counselors act as role models for their students. The study highlighted how an EOP counselor “modeled how to negotiate the system providing a social learning opportunity for the students” (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007, p. 583). This practice aligns with Bandura’s social learning theory, which stresses how both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior. It focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context, and it considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling (Abbott, 2007). Students develop a higher level of self-efficacy by having the opportunity to master skills in a supportive environment that encompasses vivacious as well as persuasive experiences.

Educational Opportunity programs attempt to provide students with social support, which Sarason, Levine, Basham, and Sarason (1993) defined as “the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us” (as cited in Grant-Vallone et al., 2004, p. 256). This type of support is vital to assisting first-generation students with their adjustment to college life and has a positive effect on their self-efficacy. A 1997 study conducted by Muraskin identified the following best practices that successful SSS programs employed:

- The importance of organizing to promote positive academic experiences for students early in their freshman year.
- Project participation in the college admissions process for at-risk students.
• Pre-freshman year academic and social preparation.
• A major project role in participants’ initial course selection.
• An intrusive advising process throughout freshman year.
• Provision of academic services that buttress the courses in which the participants are enrolled.
• Group services that extend service hours and build cohesion among participants.
• A powerful message of success through conscientious effort.

A survey of students who participated in the federally funded TRIO Horizons Student Support program at Purdue University, the goal of which is the retention of first-generation, low-income students, indicated that they felt the most valuable benefit they received was the fact that “just knowing help was available” provided a sense of security (Dale, 1996, p. 10). Making a connection with someone on campus, a fellow student, a faculty or staff member, or an administrator, provides first-generation students with a sense of security that they have a support system. Research conducted by Levine and Nidiffer (1996) on first-generation, low-income students supports this hypothesis; they concluded that “it was the human contact that made the difference” (p. 65).

One major component of EOP is peer mentoring. Bean (2005) stated, “Few would deny that the social lives of students in college and their exchanges with others inside and outside the institution are important in retention decisions” (p. 227). One way to integrate students into the campus community is through peer mentoring, an integral component of EOP. Johnson noted that “mentoring was first studied in higher education in 1911 at the University of Michigan by faculty in the engineering department; however, it was not until 1988 that an attempt was made to identify roles and functions of mentoring in the education literature” (as cited in Crisp & Cruz,
2009, p. 535). Today institutions of higher education are faced with the dual dilemma of shrinking monetary resources coupled with increased pressure to retain students and therefore increase graduation rates. The concept of peer mentoring is a method that institutions can employ to provide a valuable service to their students at a relatively low cost, while at the same time achieving their goals of increasing student retention rates and persistence.

Shojai et al. (2014) believed that mentoring relationships described as developmental, where human interaction is reciprocal, can be an integral component in programs designed to improve the academic performance of college students who have been identified as at risk. They base their theory on the premise that after conducting t-tests they found an increase in the GPA of student mentees post-mentoring for at least three semesters during which time no other interventions took place. Research by Cushman (2007) highlighted the fact that first-generation students who are able to establish and maintain mentoring relationships with their peers who are also first-generation students “feel as if they are staying true to their own sense of self” (as cited in Woosley and Shepler, 2011, p. 703). Furthermore, if these students are also able to establish mentoring relationships with faculty members, research has shown they are likely to persist after their first year.

Peer mentoring that addresses academic and social integration of students hopefully provides an intervention that has a positive impact on reducing attrition. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) postulated that institutions are in a position to address and prevent attrition by instituting well-planned and timely interventions, and the peer mentoring component of EOP programs meets this criterion.

In a peer mentor relationship, the mentor is the mentees’ equal and therefore has no formal authority over them. However, it is expected that the mentor will have more experience
and a certain level of achievement in the environment in which the mentoring takes place. Jacobi (1991) described the mentor/mentee relationship as a reciprocal, one where both receive benefits from the relationship. This is similar to the reciprocal relationship Bandura described in his theory: the relationship takes place in a social context and involves modeling and observing behaviors. Jacobi outlined specific functions of the mentor, one or all of which may be present in the relationship. These functions apply to university staff, faculty, and peers, all of whom serve as mentors in the program. A mentor provides “emotional and psychological support, direct assistance with career and professional development and role modeling” (Jacobi, 1991, p. 513).

Eighteen years later, Crisp and Cruz (2009) updated Jacobi’s 1991 research and concluded that the three components she had identified as being the foundation of mentoring were still supported by the literature. They noted “findings indicated a positive relationship or an impact of mentoring on student persistence and/or grade point average of undergraduate students” (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p. 532).

Peer mentoring differs from traditional mentoring. Because the mentor and mentee are close in age, they often develop a relationship since the mentor can use their own experiences to relate to the mentee and often they can be more empathetic to the situation the mentee is experiencing (Angelique et al., 2002).

Coleman, McDill, and Rigsby noted that a considerable amount of research on the pre-collegiate level has shown that students are influenced by their peer groups and that this influence can be used to “enhance student involvement in the learning process” (as cited in Astin, 1984, p. 528). Most peer mentoring programs focus on two areas, which include “providing advice, support and information related to course work, task accomplishment, study skills, or a
psychosocial function (providing emotional and psychological support)” (Kram & Isbella, as cited in Terrion & Leonard, 2010, p. 85).

The aim of the peer mentoring relationship is to pair first-generation students needing assistance in academic courses or with social issues related to adjusting to the college environment with first-generation students who are more experienced upper-class students (Terrion & Leonard, 2010). Persistence and completion rates are two measures that universities use to determine if they are successfully meeting the needs of their students. Lang and Ford identified the following factors that have an effect on student success:

1) The inability to meet university academic standards, 2) the inability to adapt to a new social and academic environment, 3) changes in personal goals and aspirations, 4) lack of motivation and clearly defined goals, 5) priority of other commitments such as work, or family, financial difficulty, 6) incongruence between an institution’s orientation and approach desired by the individual. (as cited by Salinitri, 2005, p. 854)

The factors Lang and Ford identified fit the profile of a first-generation student. Based on this information, Salinitri developed a pilot peer mentoring program to assist low-achieving, first-year students in coping with issues that could have a negative impact on their college experience. The results of the study indicated that the mentors had an overwhelmingly positive effect on assisting their mentees in identifying and accessing resources that were available at the university. Having experienced what the mentees were going through, the peer mentors provided invaluable advice and guidance in setting up schedules, time management skills, and study habits. Additionally, the mentees reported that by having mentors who shared their personal experiences with them, they had a positive role model (Salinitri, 2005). Based on Jacobi’s
criteria for what areas a successful mentor should address, this group of mentors definitely provided their mentees with a valuable experience.

Sanchez, Bauer, and Paronto (2006) conducted a study over a four-year period that addressed the effect of peer mentoring, which they viewed as a positive intervention on the attitudes and behaviors of students and the way in which it eventually impacted issues that were pertinent to the higher education setting but had not been fully explored before their study. The study focused on a mentoring model that was based on “an established theory of human behavior and present information on the attitudinal and behavioral effects of a formal peer mentoring program of university students in a large Midwestern school of business” (Sanchez et al., 2006, p. 25). Researchers stated that “peer mentoring programs hold the potential to increase student involvement for both mentors and protégés” (Sanchez et al., 2006, p. 26). The results of the study indicated that the low-cost peer mentoring program had a positive effect on both students’ retention and persistence. Students reported a high rate of overall satisfaction with their experience at the university. The study concluded that peer mentoring programs did indeed have a positive impact on student retention rates, while at the same time offering university administrators an inexpensive way to achieve goals set by the institution. It was the hope of the researchers that their study would provide valuable information to administrators seeking a low-cost program that had a positive effect on student retention and persistence.

In addition to providing a successful retention strategy, peer mentoring programs provide a number of benefits to all the participants. Research conducted by Pope has shown “those students who are involved in mentoring programs are more fulfilled by their experiences in college than individuals who are not involved in these programs” (Budge, 2006, p. 78). The training peer mentors receive is essential to their overall experience and assists them in building
valuable skills for dealing with various situations that might occur. Peer mentors often noted that they relied on previous peer mentors as role models to determine what tactics worked and which ones did not (Benjamin, 2007).

In a 2007 study, Terrion, Philion, and Leonard noted that “the mentoring experience enabled peer mentors to establish and maintain networks, or social capital, throughout the university” (as cited in Terrion & Leonard, 2010, p. 86). Mentors in peer mentoring programs indicated that the opportunity to develop their communication and interpersonal skills was a major benefit. Of interest was the fact noted by McLean that both the mentors and mentees believed the experience provided them the opportunity to “expand other qualities such as patience and compassion, maturation, time management, and greater responsibility” (as cited in Budge, 2006, p. 75). Additionally, mentors who revisited an academic course while assisting a mentee had the opportunity to gain deeper knowledge of the subject material while expanding their knowledge base (Page & Hanna, 2008).

The positive impact on retention rates of American Indian students who had participated in a peer mentoring program confirmed the “effectiveness of peer mentoring programs in enhancing student integration and persistence” (Shotton et al., 2007, p. 84). Villalpando noted that “peer groups empower and nourish academic success and foster the development of critical cultural consciousness by understanding the member’s condition as racialized students within the academy” (as cited in Shotton et al., 2007, p. 84). In a literature review conducted by Crisp and Cruz (2009), the authors indicated that overall the “findings have been positive and have indicated a positive relationship or an impact of mentoring on student persistence and/or grade point average of undergraduate students” (p. 532). Kirkham and Runge (2008) stated that “the greater the student involvement in activities outside the traditional lecture or tutorial the
greater their acquisition of knowledge, development of relevant skills and likelihood of remaining at the university” (p. 40). The peer mentoring component of EOP provides benefits to both first-year, first-generation students and upper-class, first-generation students, assisting both groups in persisting and meeting with success in college.

Conclusion

The review of literature has shown that even though first-generation students face a number of barriers in their journey to obtain a college degree, they can succeed. It is important for programs such as EOP to not only assist students academically but also implement strategies that increase their self-efficacy. Educational Opportunity programs have proven to be a successful strategy and ensure that access does indeed equal opportunity.

The literature has indicated that EOP have been successful, but it has left unanswered questions concerning exactly what strategies work best for participants. Components of successful programs include summer bridge programs, assisting first-generation students in adjusting to college life, aiding students in accessing assistance with their academic course work, providing tutoring, and allowing students the opportunity to collaborate on class projects with their older peers. The benefits of the programs have proven not only to be beneficial to the students personally but also to society as a whole by allowing more first-generation students to obtain college degrees.

Current research has indicated the need for further study on the influence that participation in EOP has on students’ persistence and self-efficacy, in particular, the impact that opportunities provided by the program outside actual classroom time and tutoring have on participants’ decision to persist. By conducting this case study, I hoped to be able to provide students who participated in the program, successfully completed their first year, and returned to
the sophomore year a voice in relating exactly what aspects of the program benefitted them and which ones did not. As more and more first-generation students from under-represented groups enter college, the answers to this question will play a major role in how programs are developed to address their needs.
Chapter Three: Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand how and why the strategies and interventions employed by an alternate admissions program (STEP/CAP) at Eastern Connecticut State University enhanced the success of students, in particular the students’ self-efficacy. The study focused on three research questions:

1. How do students in an alternate admissions program believe the services provided by the program influenced their success and desire to persist?
2. What services and interventions did students find most helpful?
3. How do the services and interventions that are provided by the program impact the students’ self-efficacy?

Qualitative methodology provided an opportunity for me to explore the effect participation in the STEP/CAP program had on individual student’s self-efficacy and to focus on a single concept.

Patton (2015) described qualitative inquiry as the naturalistic study of individuals or programs that provides information about the phenomenon that is the subject of the study. In his 2002 book *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, he stated:

Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting-what it means for participants to be in the setting. The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 49)

The design is flexible, and the researcher is the main instrument of data collection.

Patton (1999) acknowledged that the “personal experiences and insights of the researcher are an
important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon under study” (p. 299). Creswell (2012) noted that during the study, “Questions and purpose may change because the qualitative inquirer allows the participants to set the direction, and in doing so the researcher learns the participants’ views rather than imposing his or her own view on the research situation” (p. 131). This flexibility allows the researcher to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon that is being explored. Because the method is a holistic process, it provides the ability to explore the whole problem and not just specific variables. A qualitative research study provided a complete understanding of the program, its outcomes, and how participants believe it influenced their self-efficacy and success.

As qualitative research tends to be scrutinized more than quantitative research by the members of the scientific community, steps were taken to ensure the validity of the study (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

**Research Paradigm**

Research paradigms are based on the philosophies of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. This study was framed using the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm. According to Ponterotto (2005), this paradigm serves as both the foundation and anchor for all qualitative research. Constructivism “adheres to a relativist position that assumes multiple, apprehendable and equally valid realities” (Schwandt, 1994, as cited in Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) noted that the constructivist paradigm embraces the three philosophies’ ontology since it acknowledges that there are multiple realities, its epistemology because it is based on the fact that the researcher and the study participants co-create the understandings, and finally axiology, which encompasses the researcher’s values and ethics. This paradigm employs a naturalistic methodology.
The paradigm was best suited for this study since the goal is to explore the impact participation in the STEP/CAP program at Eastern Connecticut State University had on students’ self-efficacy and persistence. According to Bruning et al. (1999), “in the constructivist view, learners arrive at meaning by selecting information and constructing what they know” (p. 215). Constructivism, as described by Lincoln and Guba (2000), is a way of viewing the world through realities that individuals socially construct from their experiences. Faux (2005) provided an all-encompassing description of constructivism when he stated, “the subject is the meaning maker, and whatever meaning is imposed may come from a seemingly endless source of experiences” (p. 1). The study explored the “lived experiences” of the participants from their unique perspectives. The constructivist paradigm afforded the opportunity to examine multiple realities about the students’ experiences in the program, which each one has constructed from his or her own personal experience.

The interpretive paradigm does not believe there is one truth that can be discovered, but that reality is “constructed in the mind of the individual” (Ponterotto, 2005, pp. 129-130). Burrell and Morgan (1979) stated that the interpretivist paradigm is considered subjective in nature and often linked with qualitative research. As Butin (2010) noted, the role of the researcher from an interpretivist perspective is to “accurately and thoroughly document the perspective being investigated” (p. 66). The paradigm provided the opportunity to obtain an understanding of how the actual experiences and interventions provided by program under study influenced each student’s sense of self-efficacy.

**Research Design**

The research employed a case study design. Merriman (1988) defined a “qualitative case study as an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or
social unit” (p. 21). She noted that a case study is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, meaning the main focus of the study is a particular program, in this case the STEP/CAP alternate admissions program, and it is descriptive since I provide rich thick descriptions to report the findings. The description, unlike that of a quantitative study, does not utilize numbers but rather words and phrases to provide analysis of the data gathered. Finally, a case study is heuristic and provides information that allows the readers to draw conclusions from the data and hopefully allows them to affirm what they believed or to draw new insights into the phenomenon that is the center of the study (Merriam, 1998).

The knowledge and information obtained from case study research, according to Stake (1981), differs from that obtained using other research methods because it is:

More concrete – Case study knowledge resonates with our own experience because it is more vivid, concrete and sensory than abstract.

More contextual – our experiences are rooted in context, as in knowledge in case studies. This knowledge is distinguishable from the abstract, formal knowledge derived from the other research designs.

More developed by reader interpretation – readers bring to case studies their own experience and understandings, which leads to generalizations when new data from the case are added to old data.

Based more on reference populations determined by the reader - in generalizing as described above, readers have some population in mind. Thus, unlike traditional research, the reader participates in extending generalizations to reference populations (Stake, 1981, pp. 35-36; Merriam, 1998, pp. 31-32).
Stake (1995) classified case studies into three categories: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. This study is an intrinsic holistic case study with embedded units that allows the study of the individual components that collectively comprise the program and examines if any one component had a greater impact on students’ self-efficacy or it was impacted by all components fairly equally. Baxter and Jack (2008) noted that the opportunity “to look at sub-units that are situated within a larger case is powerful when you consider that data can be analyzed within the subunits separately (within case analysis), between the different subunits (between case analysis) or across all of the subunits (cross-case analysis)” (p. 550). Being able to analyze the data in this manner helped to further illuminate the topic of the case study.

The subject of this study was the alternate admissions program STEP/CAP, and the purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of how strategies and interventions the program employed impacted students’ self-efficacy and success. Baxter and Jack (2008) noted that this type of case study is used when the researcher believes the case itself is of interest and is not attempting to “come to understand some abstract construct or generic phenomenon. The purpose is not to build theory (although that is an option; Stake, 1995)” (p. 549). Cousin (2005) noted that an intrinsic case study can be used to help evaluate the program “because it can be about assigning worth to a particular set of activities and experiences” (p. 422). Based on Cousin’s description, this approach is a perfect match for learning about the different components of the program and how they impacted students’ self-efficacy.

Case study research also sets certain boundaries such as the time span over which the study occurs and the physical location of the study. This allowed the researcher to be able to observe the students at all of the activities the program offers and not be limited to strictly observing them in the academic setting. This is important since a good deal of the program is
designed around activities that are outside the classroom setting in order to address the social integration of students into the campus environment.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were sophomore students enrolled in the STEP/CAP program who completed both the mandatory summer program prior to their freshman year and their freshman year at Eastern Connecticut State University. I advised them that I was interested in learning about their life experiences participating in the program while working towards a degree. In particular, I wanted to focus on how the services and interventions offered by the STEP/CAP program impacted their success and sense of self-efficacy. I provided a detailed explanation of what self-efficacy beliefs are that included a definition and examples in non-technical language. I also reviewed with them the goals of the study.

I asked the participants if they had any questions or needed clarification on anything I had explained so far. Next, I reviewed the informed consent form with the participants and advised them that this document described the benefits and risks, if any, involved in their participation in the study (Appendix A). Also, it noted that participation is voluntary and that at any time they were free to withdraw from the study and no punitive action would be taken. After providing this explanation to students, I requested they read the form and let me know if they had any questions or concerns before they signed the form.

**Recruitment and Access**

The ideal number of participants for the study was 7-8. This number of participants meets the criteria outlined by Seidman (2006) of sufficiency and saturation of information. Sufficiency is defined as “sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect the experiences of those in it”
Saturation of information occurs when at a point in the study when the information the researcher begins to hear becomes repetitive (Seidman, 2006).

The group who participated in the program ranged from 18-25 years of age. The inclusion criteria for students interviewed was: they were enrolled in the alternate admissions program STEP/CAP, they had completed the mandatory six-week summer program before freshman year, and in fall 2017, they were a sophomore in good standing. This group of students was pre-screened by an admissions committee to ensure they meet the criteria for admission to the STEP/CAP program, which according to the Eastern Connecticut State University website (2017) was that a student must meet one of the following criteria: the first in their family to attend college, from a low-income family, or a member of a group that is traditionally underrepresented group on college campuses. In order to be considered for the program, a student applies using the regular Eastern Connecticut State University admissions application, which is then reviewed by admissions staff, who then forward the applications of students they believe would benefit from the program to the STEP/CAP staff for their review. If the staff feels the student is qualified, they are invited to campus for an interview. There was no exclusion criteria since I only contacted students in the program who met the above-noted criteria.

The study employed a purposeful homogenous sampling strategy, and the participants were contacted via referral from various gatekeepers (i.e., program staff and administrators). Creswell (2012) noted that the strategy behind homogenous sampling is to allow the researcher to conduct sampling of individuals who are members of a subgroup with defining characteristics. This method provided the opportunity to do an in-depth study with a small, select group. Smith et al. (2009) noted that the participants should be selected on the basis that they can provide a particular perspective on the phenomena that is the topic of the study. Merriman noted that
purposeful sampling is utilized when the researcher seeks to “discover, understand, or gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77).

The program administrator helped by providing lists of students and their university emails, which allowed me to send my recruitment letter to them from my Northeastern email account. The email I sent students is contained in Appendix B. It described and explained the study and included my contact information. Once 10 students emailed my husky.neu.edu email address to volunteer, I ceased recruitment efforts. I sent only one email to lessen any appearance of coercion. If my initial email did not yield enough participants, I planned to ask students who had agreed to participate to contact their friends in the program. This method of having perspective participants contact other perspective participants is referred to as “snowball sampling” (Creswell, 2012). I included this request to ensure I reached as many students as possible. According to Astin (1994), during the college years a student’s peers represent the group that has the greatest influence on their development. If a student was considering participating, being asked by a member of their peer group to take part might give them the incentive they needed to participate. Throughout the recruitment process, it was made clear to students that if they opted not to participate, it would in no way negatively impact their standing in the program. Also, if at any point during the study they felt uncomfortable, they could withdraw and face no penalties.

I offered a $25 Visa gift card as an incentive to participants. The participants received the gift card at the conclusion of the study after they reviewed and verified the transcript of their interview to ensure accuracy.
Data Collection

Each participant was asked to take part in one interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview took place at a mutually agreed-upon location on the Eastern Connecticut State University campus and was audio taped. I used two recording devices to ensure that if one failed it did not negatively impact the interview process. Open-ended questions were asked since they allowed for explanations and descriptions to emerge from the process. As part of the interview process, I made notes on any observable body language and emotion shown by the respondent. These notes are anecdotal and served to provide supplemental information to complement the transcribed interviews. Patton (1990) stated, “The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind…. We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe” (p. 278). The interview was divided into three segments: the first concentrated on the students’ experiences prior to entering the program and while a student was a participant in the program; the second part focused on what services and interventions of the program students found most valuable; and in the third segment, I asked the students to describe how their overall experiences in the STEP/CAP program had impacted their success, self-efficacy, and persistence to date. As Seidman (2006) noted, “Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation” (p. 18). If a solid foundation has been created, participants are able to reflect on their present life as a result of having explored their past, while at the same time explaining details of their current life experiences. This allows them to reflect on where they are now in their life journey.

Approximately two weeks after the interview, students were emailed transcripts of their interview to an email address they provided. At this point, students had the opportunity to
review the transcript and note any inaccuracies or misinterpretations. If edits were noted, I made
them and resent the transcript to the participant for verification.

Participants were assured anonymity, and the study was explained in detail to them before
they signed the informed consent form. The participants are only identified by pseudonyms in
order to ensure their anonymity.

I had the transcripts professionally transcribed. A protocol for all interviews was
developed and strictly adhered to (see Appendix C). An integral component of the protocol was
the introduction of the concept of self-efficacy. Bandura’s (1990) definition in my opinion is the
most comprehensive: “one’s beliefs in one’s capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive
resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over task demands” (p. 316). Prior to
the beginning of the interview process, I introduced this definition to each participant and asked
if they had any questions. This ensured that all participants were using the same definition as a
frame of reference for what self-efficacy entails. The interviews took place in a neutral, safe
location agreed upon by both parties. I asked open-ended questions, and the interview was
recorded with the participant’s permission.

Field observations of participants in their natural settings, i.e., classrooms, the STEP/CAP
program center, and various locations on campus, were conducted. Field notes were constructed
following Wolfinger’s (2002) suggestion that the researcher continuously during the observation
take notes including as much detail as possible to ensure the notes are as comprehensive as
possible. This data source in addition to the data from the interviews provided me the
opportunity to observe the participants’ behavior in their natural environment.

The third source of data collection was documentary materials, which included
brochures about the program, contracts the students must sign in order to be accepted into the program, and promotional materials that highlight the nonacademic components of the program.

**Data Storage**

All written field notes, transcriptions of interviews, and audio tapes have been stored in a locked cabinet, and I am the only person who has access to them. Any audio or text files that have been stored on a computer are password protected. After the study concluded and my dissertation was defended, all electronic files were destroyed and digital recordings were erased. Per the policy of the Northeastern University Institution Review Board, the signed consent forms will be maintained for three years, and scanned copies will be stored electronically in a password-protected file. Paper copies are stored in an envelope in a locked storage cabinet located in my home office, and I am the only person who has access to the cabinet. The date indicating the month, day, and year that the contents of the envelope can be shredded has been displayed on the envelope.

Historical documents were reviewed in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how the program functions. All necessary permissions were obtained in order to access the files. Finally, the following principles for data storage and handling, as recommended by Creswell (2012) were strictly adhered to:

- Backup copies of computer files will be maintained (Davidson, 1996).
- High quality audio tapes will be used for audio recordings. Prior to the interview session, all equipment will be checked, and I will check to make sure the tapes used are compatible with the transcriber’s equipment.
- A master list of the types of information collected will be created.
A data collection matrix will be created to serve as a visual aid to locate and identify the information collected for the study.

By following the procedures outlined for data collection, storage, and management, I addressed ethical issues of the study should they arise.

**Data Analysis**

Sutter (2006) described the process of data analysis as a means to discover “patterns, coherent themes, meaningful categories, and new ideas and in general uncovers better understanding of a phenomenon or process” (p. 327). In order to achieve this goal, data analysis was conducted simultaneously as the data was collected. As Merriman (1998) noted that due to the nature of qualitative research, the problem being studied is known to the researcher, and the participants in the study have been selected because they have knowledge of the problem. The unknown is what the researcher will uncover, therefore collecting data at the same time as analyzing it allows the researcher to avoid what Merriman (1998) referred to as unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material. According to Merriman, “data that have been analyzed by being collected is both parsimonious and illuminating” (p. 162). This case study utilized a combination of data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document review.

I analyzed the data following Merriam’s (1998) method of “consolidating, reducing and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (p. 178). The analysis of the data utilized the general inductive approach, which Thomas (2006) described as a “convenient and effective way of analyzing qualitative data” (p. 246). Thomas further noted that an inductive analysis involves “approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes or a model through
interpretations made by an evaluator or researcher” (p. 238). The following is a description of how I executed the analysis of data: after each interview was transcribed, I read and then reread the transcript several times. Next, I coded the interviews one at a time using a combination of In Vivo and descriptive coding strategies. By using In Vivo coding, a researcher is able to, as Saldana (2009) noted, have the ability to “prioritize and honor the participants’ voices” (p. 77). The descriptive coding process provided a method for summarizing the primary topic of each passage. When this process was completed, the interviews were reviewed again. During the interview and coding process, I made memos as necessary to add clarity to the process. The purpose of the coding process was to capture the essence of a participant’s experience or description.

A contact sheet was made to help organize my field notes; following the suggestion of Miles and Huberman (1994), it consisted of information on the date of the observation along with my notes on what key concepts that emerged from the observation were and links the concepts provided to other data collected.

**Trustworthiness and Validity**

In qualitative research, validity, accuracy, and credibility of results are linked to trustworthiness. According to Guba (1981, as cited in Shenton, 2004), the key to achieving this goal is found in the four constructs that researchers can employ to ensure the trustworthiness of their study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following measures were implemented to assure validity and trustworthiness in this qualitative case study.

By using triangulation, I was able to corroborate the information obtained from individual interviews, data collection methods, and the types of data collected during the study (Creswell, 2012). Creswell noted that by employing multiple sources of information and
examining the evidence to find a theme, the researcher can perform triangulation, which will help to ensure “the accuracy of the study because the information draws on multiple sources of information, individuals or processes” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). The use of different sources also helps to uncover similar themes and thus provide validity the research (Creswell, 2012, 2013). For the purpose of this study, participant interviews, observations, and historical documents pertaining to the program provided the three main sources of data to be analyzed.

The main source of data was drawn from individual, semi-structured interviews. According to Smith and Osborn (2007), “this form of interviewing allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise” (p. 57). I obtained archival materials maintained by the program’s directors that provided valuable historical information about how the program was structured. In addition, the tactics outlined by Shenton (2004) were incorporated to ensure that participants provided honest answers during the interview process. These tactics include continuously providing opportunities for the participants to opt out of the study, setting as a goal the establishment of a rapport with participants from the start of the study, and assuring them that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions (Shenton, 2004). Utilizing these tactics added to the quality of the data obtained from the interviews.

Member and stakeholder checks were employed to enhance the credibility of the study by allowing “participants and others who may have specific interests in the evaluation to comment on or assess the research findings, interpretations and conclusions” (Thomas, 2006, p. 244). Although Creswell (2012) recommended involving one or more participants in this process, all of the participants were given the opportunity to check the transcripts of their
interviews to ensure accuracy of the transcription process. Participants also had the opportunity to review and comment on the themes that emerged from the coding process to make sure that my interpretation mirrored their true feelings. Review of transcripts and themes by the participants meets the criteria that Carozzi outlined in 1978. He concluded that the findings of a study could be validated by allowing participants to review the transcripts to ensure the researcher accurately portrayed their experiences (Shosha, 2012).

Peer review was also conducted. A peer who is familiar with the program that is at the center of the study reviewed my research study and findings. Hopefully, they were completely honest. I know that they “asked the hard questions about methods, meaning and interpretations” (Creswell, 2012, p. 251) and provided me with a sounding board that I was able to use to work through questions I had concerning all aspects of the study.

Finally, the following measures were incorporated to ensure trustworthiness based on the four principles of sensitivity, commitment and rigor, transparency, coherence and impact, and importance outlined by Yardley (2000) and elaborated on by Smith et al. (2009). Sensitivity to context occurs when the researcher shows sensitivity to the “socio-cultural milieu in which the study is situated, the existing literature on the topic, [and] the material obtained from participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 180). Researchers demonstrate sensitivity to context through the interview process (e.g., using suggested, tried interviewing methods), during analysis using “immersive and disciplined attention” and through “an awareness of the existing literature” (Smith et al., 2009, p.181). Special attention was paid to the theoretical literature since the subject of the study is relatively unexplored using qualitative research methods.
Commitment and rigor was shown by the careful attention devoted to data collection. This refers to the thoroughness of the study (Smith et al., 2009). Rigor of the study can also be demonstrated by the interviewing techniques employed.

Transparency and coherence aid in creating trustworthiness. The two elements refer to the clarity and description of the research phases during the write-up. The fourth principle put forth by Yardley is impact and importance. Impact and importance serve to answer the question, Will the reader learn something useful and important from the research?

Transferability of results of a qualitative research study are, in most cases, hard to achieve since the sample size is generally small and the resulting findings are specific to that sample. However, as Smith et al. (2009) noted, if the analysis and findings of a study are presented clearly and concisely and grounded in the extant literature, a reader should be able to make connections and determine if they can transfer the results to a population they serve.

I made sure to employ at least two of these procedures to guarantee validity and trustworthiness since this is the number recommended by Creswell (2012).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

My primary responsibility was to protect the individuals who participated in this study. In order to achieve this goal, I implemented the following steps. First, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University. Once I had obtained permission from Northeastern University to proceed with my study, I next applied to Eastern Connecticut State University's Committee on the use of Human Subjects in Research and presented my IRB-approved application from Northeastern University to them for review. On the campus of Eastern Connecticut State University, the federally mandated institutional review board is the Human Studies Council, and their role is to facilitate and authorize university-sponsored
research that respects the welfare and autonomy of human participants (Human Resource Council Institutional Review Board, 2013). This committee serves as the official institutional review board on campus. After consulting with the chair of the committee, I was informed that they wanted only one application to be in effect and would defer to Northeastern and put their approved one on file.

Participants in the study were recruited from sophomores in good standing who had participated in the STEP/CAP six-week mandatory summer program and then successfully completed their freshman year at Eastern Connecticut State University. Their participation was voluntary and presented no obvious risks to their wellbeing. The following protections were put in place to ensure the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice. Autonomy was ensured by treating all participants with respect by carefully and completely explaining the informed consent form so that they had the opportunity to make their own decision on whether or not they wished to participate. Every effort was made to eliminate the possibility of participants feeling any coercion to participate. I knew I had an obligation to ensure that the participants were provided with information not only when I reviewed the informed consent form with them but also throughout the study. Creswell (2012) noted that during the study “questions and purpose may change because the qualitative inquirer allows the participants to set the direction, and in doing so the researcher learns the participants’ views rather than imposing his or her own view on the research situation” (p. 130). Being aware of this, I had the obligation to keep participants updated so they could make informed decisions concerning their ongoing participation. Furthermore, I needed to make sure participants understood that if at any time the study took a direction they were uncomfortable with, they could withdraw and they would not be penalized in any way for their decision.
During the study, participants were identified by the use of pseudonyms in all field notes and transcripts to ensure anonymity. This met what Orb et al. (2001) described as “a moral obligation” to protect participants’ identities (p. 95). Any audio tapes of interviews were kept in a secured, locked location. Files stored on a computer have been password protected. Once the study was completed, audio tapes were destroyed. I conducted regular audits of the procedures to ensure participant anonymity during the study by verifying that all precautions were being followed on an ongoing basis. Participants were given the right to review the final study and request that any material they felt was personally damaging be removed. If direct quotes were used, the researcher obtained permission. Finally, I utilized peer debriefings to provide validity.

As noted earlier, there are no obvious risks for participants of the study. Rather, by ensuring their voices are heard, they can benefit future students and their families by allowing them to see how the program assisted them to increase their self-efficacy and persist. They also provided valuable information to the program administrators that provided information on what modules the students found most helpful. By participating, the students were able to draw attention to aspects of the program that benefitted them but are not measurable using quantitative methods.

**Conclusion**

This study provides the groundwork for exploring how participation in an alternate admissions program, STEP/CAP at Eastern Connecticut State University, influenced the self-efficacy of first-generation students. The study evaluated how the academic and social integration opportunities the program provided first-generation students influenced their behaviors, attitudes, emotional reactions, and ultimately their persistence. Research has supported the value of SSS/ EOP in assisting first-generation students to gain access to higher
education and persist to graduate; however, it is imperative colleges and universities realize the important role self-efficacy plays in students being successful and what components of support programs such as STEP/CAP positively influence this important affective skill.

Bandura’s (1997) social learning theory allowed me the opportunity to explore how the interactions of participants with peers, faculty, and staff influenced their self-efficacy, persistence, and completion. According to Bandura, environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence human learning and behavior, and learning occurs in a social context. Since first-generation students have characteristics that other members of their peer group do not, it is imperative they have the opportunity to learn by watching and modeling students from their same background.

I employed a qualitative case study design to obtain a detailed view of the program. By conducting a case study, I was able to study in-depth the STEP/CAP program, and from rich descriptions, hopefully I provided the reader with an in-depth understanding of what components of the program students found most beneficial. Also, the case study hopefully filled a void in the literature since currently “almost none of the studies conducted involved any ethnographic or phenomenological investigations of programs that might provide in-depth insight into the cultural and social experiences of students in these programs” (Sablan, 2014, p. 1047). This research is of national importance since it enhances the conversation of how this type of program provides access for first-generation students and also identifies the strategies that enable them to persist and graduate at the host institution. The quantitative data indicated that SSS/EOP programs definitely assist in raising access numbers for first-generation, low-income students from under-represented groups; however, it fails to indicate what the students who participate in the programs find most valuable. The goal of this study was to determine and make explicit the
components of the program the participants believed were the most beneficial. Hopefully, their personal insight answered a number of questions that can aid in allowing EOP to concentrate their efforts where students will get the most value and translate into higher retention and persistence rates. In electing to use a qualitative case study methodology, I knew the results of the study cannot be generalized to other programs. However, I believe that this is not a major issue since EOP are all unique to the college where they are located. The programs incorporate the same modules, but the delivery and emphasis placed on particular areas is determined by the administrators and faculty at the institution. The fact that participants’ voices will be heard adds to the literature and hopefully informs the literature on what strategies have the greatest impact on students.

Finally in closing, on a personal note, I learned a great deal by conducting this qualitative case study and believe Stake (195) perfectly summed up the function of research when he stated that “research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it” (p. 43). I hope this study has met accomplished and this lofty goal.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how and why the strategies and interventions employed by an alternate admissions program (STEP/CAP) at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU) enhanced the success of students with an emphasis on their self-efficacy. The study focused on these three research questions:

1. How do students in an alternate admissions program believe the services provided by the program influenced their success and desire to persist?
2. What services and interventions did students find most helpful?
3. How do the services and interventions that are provided by the program impact the student’s self-efficacy?

A case study was appropriate to answer these how and why questions. This chapter begins with an overview of the site of the study, ECSU in Willimantic, Connecticut, and a description of the STEP/CAP program. Brief biographies are provided for each of the seven participants, and finally, the themes that emerged from analysis of in-depth interviews, observations, and archival materials are discussed.

Overview of Willimantic, Connecticut and Eastern Connecticut State University

The state of Connecticut is the third smallest state in the country, and its residents enjoy a high standard of living and a high per capita income when compared to the rest of the country. The state also has one of the highest achievement gaps between low-income students and their peers from upper and middle-class families. Eastern Connecticut State University is located in Willimantic, the largest city in the northeast corner of Connecticut, which is often referred to as the “Quiet Corner” because of its rural nature. Willimantic was the home to American Thread Company, who in the late 1800s was the largest employer in the state and the largest producer of
thread in the world. When the company relocated to the South in 1985, the town’s economy faltered, and unemployment rose. In the early 2000s, the Hartford Courant ran an exposé on the out-of-control heroin epidemic gripping Willimantic. Concerned residents rallied and formed a task force to address the problem. Today, the city is attempting to revitalize its riverfront area and attract technology startup companies.

Eastern Connecticut State University, the smallest of the four universities overseen by the Connecticut Board of Regents, has an enrollment of approximately 5,300 students (90% of whom are residents of the State of Connecticut). The overwhelming majority of ECSU’s students are undergraduates, but programs leading to master’s degrees are also offered. The university was founded as a Normal School in 1889, and during its 129-year history, it has evolved from a school dedicated to educating teachers to “Connecticut’s public liberal arts college.” This is not to say the university does not still educate teachers and other professionals. It also provides a path for working adults to either complete their studies or obtain professional certificates. At ECSU, the ratio of faculty to students is 16:1, and the school boasts the lowest acceptance rate and highest four-year graduation rate of four state universities according to data from 2016. It also is ranked higher than its sister schools in the 2018 US News Best Colleges report. Eastern Connecticut State University promotes undergraduate research, and in 2018, 41 of the 44 student researchers representing Connecticut and presenting their research at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research were students from ECSU.

The physical campus is a mix of buildings dating from the late 1800s to state-of-the-art green buildings that blend seamlessly into the rural campus setting. Approximately 58% of the student body resides on campus, and that figure includes 75% of the freshman class.
Dr. Elsa Nunez has served as the sixth President of ECSU for the last 12 years. She is the first woman and the first Latina to lead the university. During her tenure, the ECSU has been successful in recruiting minority faculty members and has the highest percentage of faculty members from minorities of any college in the state of Connecticut. Her efforts to recruit and retain students from underrepresented groups have been extremely successful. In 2012, the Education Trust of Washington D.C. noted that ECSU had the largest gain in the graduation rates for Latino students in the previous six years, tripling from 20% to 58%.

**Overview of STEP/CAP Program**

The Alternate Admissions program at ECSU, known as the Summer Transition at Eastern Program/Contract Admissions Program (STEP/CAP), was founded in 1981. The program operates under the umbrella of the Academic Services Center and offers support to students who are from low-income families, the first in their family to attend college, or a member of a group that traditionally is under-represented on a college campus. For the program’s application process, students apply through normal admission channels to ECSU, and their application is reviewed by an admissions counselor. If the counselor believes they have potential but need some additional support, they refer the applicant to Dr. Rick Hornung, the Director of the STEP/CAP program, for further review. Dr. Hornung reviews the applicant’s materials and then invites qualified candidates to campus for an interview and additional screening. The student receives a decision within two to three weeks after meeting with Dr. Hornung. The program is funded by the university and serves approximately 65 students each summer, who receive some financial assistance to cover the cost of the six-week program and assistance with applying for additional financial aid for the academic year.
The summer program is a six-week, five-day-a-week residential program that takes place between graduation from high school and the start of the fall semester at ECSU. The students are enrolled in classes, the goal of which is to increase their math, writing, public speaking, and study skills. They receive six credits upon successful completion of the math and English classes. The classes in study skills and public speaking are noncredit classes. Students must complete the six-week program with a minimum of a 2.0 GPA to be admitted to the university for the fall semester. In addition to classes, students receive mentoring from both professional support staff and peer mentors. Additional topics covered in workshops include time management skills and how to complete forms to facilitate receiving federal financial aid. Students are also introduced to all of the academic support services on campus, such as the Writing Center and the Mathematics Achievement Center. Once admitted to the program, students sign a contract stating they understand the goals of the program and will adhere to all of its policies.

The program is designed to meet the individual needs of every student who enrolls. The summer program has a different theme each year, and students are required to read selective readings before the start of the program based on the theme. As the program progresses, additional readings are presented that expound on the original theme. The pre-reading component of the program provides a common topic for students to begin discussions and helps to break the ice.

Dr. Hornung summed the program up when he stated:

The STEP/CAP program is about asking students to change and begin making changes in their Lives. We challenge students to start walking in new directions by giving them opportunities to showcase their intelligence and drive through hard work. We have high
expectations, knowing that each student is capable of becoming a successful college student.

The STEP/CAP program boasts alumni who today are doctors, lawyers, college administrators, teachers, authors, and business leaders. The program administrators like to note that it is these successful professionals who, before completing the STEP/CAP program, were considered incapable of completing college-level work. These same individuals stay connected with the program and offer inspiration and guidance to every new class of STEP/CAP students.

**Participant Biographies**

The charts in Appendix A highlight the diversity of the students who participated in this study. The participants were almost evenly divided between males (4) and females (3). The group represented three different ethnic groups. The greatest diversity was in the majors they selected. Although there were only seven participants, eight majors were included since one student was leaning towards a major but also exploring all their options.

**Diann.** Diann was born in New York State and resided there with her parents and older sister until she was in fifth grade, when her family moved to Connecticut. One of the reasons the family moved was because her parents were not impressed with the quality of education their children were receiving. When they enrolled in public school in Norwalk, Connecticut, she noted that she was a year behind, and both she and her sister had to “play catch-up.” Diann was in fourth grade at the time. Her sister went on to earn a bachelor’s degree from Western Connecticut State University, and today, she works for a pharmaceutical company.

Diann was majoring in developmental psychology and minoring in English. Her high school experience was highlighted by being a member of Color Guard. She admitted that she did not like school and that she found the coaches of color guard to be more supportive of her
than her actual classroom teachers, except for one. Since her GPA was low, she believed that they expected she would go to a trade school for a subject like cosmetology. Her guidance counselor told her that to her face. She noted her school was over capacity and that teachers and guidance counselors only wanted to work with the students they felt had a chance of succeeding, and this was the group of students they paid attention to and helped with the college process. Her coaches were always supportive when she told them she wanted to attend college. When she was worried her GPA was too low, one coach responded that “I got my degree and my master’s,” and suddenly it seemed like a reality since someone thought she could succeed. During her senior year of high school, Diann received a letter from ECSU inviting her to learn more about the STEP/CAP program. She visited ECSU with a friend of her sister who had entered ECSU through the STEP/CAP program and graduated. She enjoyed her visit, and after deciding she did not want to attend any of the other three state colleges and that private college was not financially possible, she applied to and was accepted to the STEP/CAP program.

Simultaneously, she decided to enlist in the military since she had participated in ROTC while in high school. After high school, Diann joined the military and reported to basic training after completing the six-week STEP/CAP program. Her main reason for enlisting was to be able to assist her parents in paying for her education. She wanted to make sure that once she graduated, she would not be burdened with debt. However, she received a medical discharge before completing basic training, and therefore, she is only eligible for medical benefits from her time of service and no educational benefits. Although Diann’s parents were adamantly against her joining the military, she viewed it as a means to an end since she did not want to be in debt after college. Also, she had participated in ROTC in high school and enjoyed the sense of belonging somewhere that mattered.
Concerning the difference in academics from her high school to college experience, Diann explained that at ECSU, she feels she is contributing and her opinions are respected. In high school in classes such as English and psychology, “It was listening to this idea and then do this,” but now I am free to form my own opinion and say what I think.” She found the STEP/CAP program a valuable learning experience because after high school she did not feel prepared to begin college-level work and quickly realized that something she could ad lib about in high school was not going to work in college. The case she highlighted was the requirement for students to complete a 10-page term paper. She attempted to gloss over various components of the paper and quickly learned that what might have worked in high school was not going to work at ECSU.

Diann found the peer mentor component of the STEP/CAP program the most valuable for her. The fact that she could talk to someone her age who had been through the program made her feel secure and helped to ease her fears of the unknown. She did note that there was one peer advisor who had never participated in the program, and she did not feel at ease with her at all and believed the other program participants felt the same way. She questioned how this peer mentor could know what the students were experiencing since they did not come from a similar background and had never been part of the program. She credits one of the peer mentors with helping her to decide that majoring in psychology would be a good choice. She also noted that the study skills class was invaluable for her, as was the opportunity to meet students and faculty on campus and learn where everything was and what offices did before actually starting classes in September. The connections she made during the STEP/CAP program led to a position as a student employee on campus in the Office of Community Engagement, where she served as a
peer advisor (a student who talks with students when they feel they cannot talk to their faculty advisor). She felt overall the program increased her self-efficacy.

**Donna.** Donna is a first-generation student from Farmington, Connecticut, a suburb of Hartford, Connecticut, who faced some additional barriers not addressed in the literature I reviewed. Her parents are divorced, and currently, she lives with her father and grandmother on school breaks. Her mother left the state and resides with her younger sister in Florida. Her sister lacks social skills and suffers from a learning disability and post-traumatic stress disorder (as a result of her time in foster care and her parents’ divorce).

During her high school years, Donna spent time in the state foster care system. When she reunited with her father at the beginning of her senior year of high school, they lived in a car, and she spent time sleeping on friends’ couches, what students refer to “as couch surfing.” At one point, Donna and her father sought shelter in a homeless shelter, but because the shelter policies stated that men and women had to be separated and she was 16 years old, they could not stay together. Her father felt she would be in danger in the environment and decided they would be better off living in their car and allowing her to stay with friends when possible.

Donna believed that three women played an integral role in her high school experience; she credits her guidance counselor in high school with helping her to become the person she is today since she went above and beyond, making sure that even after hours Donna was okay. Through her guidance counselor, she formed a relationship with the guidance department secretary, who she remains in contact with even though she graduated two years ago. Finally, her history teacher, who was also the dance group advisor, made it possible for her to join the group, which provided her with an opportunity to meet other students and participate in an after-school activity, so she had a safe place to spend time when not in school.
Donna recalled that she did not have many friends in high school since the school had some cliques, and she felt definitely in the minority since 90% of the students were White and she is a student of color. Her goal was always to attend college, and it was reinforced by the negative experiences she had with some social workers while she was in foster care. She “did not want to get stuck in the system” and wanted her parents to be proud of her because she was able to do something that they had not done. Also, the responsibility she felt for her younger sister during their time in foster care strengthened her resolve to obtain an education to have a chance at a better life. With the assistance of her guidance counselor, she learned about the STEP/CAP program at ECSU and applied. Her counselor was fully aware of her living situation and how it had negatively impacted her senior year GPA, and with Donna’s consent, she spoke with Dr. Hornung, the STEP/CAP director, and advocated for Donna to be admitted based on her potential.

Donna believed her time in STEP/CAP was critical to allowing her the time to learn what being a college student was like, what resources are available, and how to be successful academically. In particular, she found the weekly group meetings that students and peer advisors had very helpful. She credits the peer advisors with helping to increase her self-efficacy; they encouraged her to join clubs, and today she is the president of the social work club and a member of the West African Dance Ensemble. Whenever she felt like she could not complete the STEP/CAP program, her peer advisor was there, encouraging her and letting her know that they had often thought of quitting but persisted and so could Donna. She found her freshman year challenging because instead of 90 students on campus, there were now 3,000. Throughout the year, she persisted knowing that she could always have the option of talking things over with
Rick and her former peer advisor. During freshman year, she attempted to participate in clubs but quickly lost interest.

Because she had Rick and her peer advisor to talk to, Donna felt “recharged.” This was a great comfort to Donna and allowed her to stay on task. She believes the support system that is part of the program is her foundation at ECSU and that the STEP/CAP program was the best part of her college experience to date. She became a sophomore in good standing working towards her degree in social work with plans to then seek a master’s degree.

**Sheila.** Shelia is an only child who was raised by her mother and father in Hamden, Connecticut. She is a sophomore English major with a minor in creative writing. Before attending ECSU, her entire educational career was in Achievement First schools, which according to their website are organized as charter schools whose goal is to provide equal educational opportunity and close the achievement gap for all children. The student body of Achievement First schools is overwhelming low-income students, the majority of whom are Black or Latino. The 35 schools that comprise the Achievement First school network are located in New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, and they place a strong emphasis on having all students attend college.

Shelia found the work in high school difficult but indicated her teachers were supportive, as were her mother and father. She indicated attending college was always her goal since Achievement First schools groom students from the day they begin their educational journey that the goal after 12 years is to graduate high school and attend college. As part of her high school curriculum, Shelia toured several area colleges, including ECSU, where she felt a real connection with the campus and believed that it would be the best fit for her. However, when she applied she was not accepted, but the admissions counselor offered her the option of applying through
the alternate admissions program STEP/CAP. Since she wanted to attend ECSU, she agreed to apply to STEP/CAP. She felt that the intensive six-week summer program prepared her well to face the academic demands once the fall semester officially started. The confidence she gained from completing college-level work before formally beginning her freshman year raised her self-confidence, and she began to believe she could handle the academic curriculum. During freshman year, Shelia admitted she had some issues, but knowing that Dr. Hornung, or as the students refer to him, “Rick,” was always available if she needed to talk provided her with an added level of comfort. That knowledge along with the fact that the program helped her to set goals and focus on her work provided her with the knowledge that she did not want friends in her life who were not willing to take their school work seriously and concentrate on obtaining good grades. For her personally, the program helped her to realize that she had to be able to be independent and work on her own, not just follow the crowd.

When asked her opinion of the STEP/CAP experience, she summed it up as follows: “I think it was their goal to make us prepared, and I was prepared. Being prepared has allowed me to believe I can be successful at Eastern, and I look forward to graduating.”

Kevin. Kevin was born and raised in Bridgeport, Connecticut and lived with his mother her boyfriend (who he noted was not his step-father). He was the youngest of four children; he has a brother who is eight years older than him and two sisters. His brother completed a degree at ECSU, and his two sisters both attended community college but never earned a degree. He attended a Catholic high school where the total number of students was 400 as compared to the three public high schools that serve the city of Bridgeport’s high school student population of approximately 7,200. Kevin admitted he did not reach his full academic potential and preferred the social aspect of high school more than the academic aspect. He enjoyed support from both
his counselors and teachers and the strict environment, which did not allow students to skip class and had policies in place that mandated if a student was failing a class they had to meet with their counselor.

Attending college was not something Kevin thought about. He decided that if he ever went, he would go to ECSU since he was familiar with it because his brother and cousin had attended the university. After high school, he took a year and a half off and watched as all his friends went off to college. It was at that point that he decided to learn more about ECSU. His brother was aware of the STEP/CAP program at ECSU and knew Rick, the director. He arranged for Kevin to visit the campus and meet with Rick. Kevin believed this changed his whole view of life and put things in a new perspective. His family, in particular his brother, were extremely supportive of his decision to attend ECSU, and he felt his brother wanted him to attend more than he himself wanted to attend. His family still has connections with the high school he attended, and when the faculty learned he was enrolling at ECSU, they were happy for him.

Upon entering the program, he had some concerns because he was two years older than the other students and knew he was never strong academically. He worried about his two-year gap between high school and college. However, once he was enrolled, the structure the program provided allowed him to blossom since he was able to get into the routine of getting up, attending classes, and completing assignments. He quickly adopted the attitude that to succeed he would have to work hard and sacrifice. He found the peer advisors extremely helpful because he felt the insight they provided was from the perspective of someone who had walked in his shoes. He bonded with one peer advisor who he credits with helping him to obtain a better self-image. Also, Rick, the program director, and a student he met in the STEP/CAP program, who
also lived in Bridgeport, were individuals he believed supported him. When he graduated from the program, he felt he “could conquer the world. I entered the program doubting my ability to successfully master the academic work since I never was strong academically in high school. Thanks in part to Rick always motivating me and turning all our interactions into teachable moments, I began to believe in my ability to succeed in college.”

**Raymond.** Raymond was born in South Windsor, Connecticut and raised in East Hartford, Connecticut. His family includes his parents, an older brother, and twin sisters who are younger than him. His older brother is a senior who received a full scholarship to play soccer at Central Connecticut State University.

Raymond is a commuter student who was drawn to ECSU because he was looking for a small campus where the student-to-teacher ratio was low. He enjoys having classes that have no more than 20 students. He was majoring in finance because he had been helping his father, who owns his own business and finds the work interesting and wants to help his family. However, once he achieved his goal of earning a degree in finance, he wanted to go back to a community college and earn a degree in nursing because he feels then he would be doing something he wants to do for himself.

His high school experience was, as he describes it, torture since there were so many cliques, and if you were not an athlete, it was difficult to fit in with a group. He found that some of his teachers were extremely supportive of him. However, the guidance counselors in his opinion were just reading out of a manual. He was never interested in attending college until his senior year, and he believes that his parent’s encouragement and having the opportunity to visit his brother at college and hearing his brother talk about the experience made him realize he wanted to attend. The guidance counselors told him everything he had to do to apply to college
but did not take the time to explain the process and why it was necessary and what the information would be used for and why it was important. On the other hand, his teachers took the time to review the materials with him and offered suggestions on how he could improve certain sections of his application. He applied to three of the four state universities and was accepted at all three; however, ECSU was a conditional acceptance based on the fact that due to his low GPA in high school he would have to gain admission through the STEP/CAP.

Raymond’s attitude was ECSU must want him to prove himself, and since it was his first choice, he applied to and was accepted into the program. His mom was very supportive and attended all the meetings for students and parents, assisting him to make sure everything was completed. His teachers were very supportive of his decision to participate in the program because they believed it showed he was willing to accept the challenge and work for what he wanted. The guidance counselor’s only feedback was that it was good he was attending college. Entering the program, he did not feel academically prepared after high school to do college-level work; however, after STEP/CAP, he said, “I thought I could do the work that is required to be successful in college.” To him, the most influential part of the program was the peer advisors because they helped him get into a routine and they were easy to communicate with because they were students just like him.

Academically Raymond found the STEP/CAP classes challenging and enjoyed the public speaking class because it gave him the confidence to stand in front of 20-25 people and speak. He enjoyed the fact that the program limited outside distractions such as TV, and this made it easier for him to complete his assignments along with the fact that he was in a room at night with other students who were also working on their assignments. This experience allowed him to build a bond with the other students and form lasting friendships that offered him support. They
were always there for each other, and he enjoyed the fact that throughout freshman year, he always had at least one or two of his friends from STEP/CAP in class with him, which allowed him to know that other students were experiencing the same things he was and he did not feel alone.

Raymond believed the program is responsible for increasing his self-efficacy because he was just not handed admission to ECSU—he had to earn it. He now can manage his time more effectively and plan what he needs to do to complete all his assignments on time. Rick, the program’s director, was the most important person to boost his self-efficacy because no matter what, he was always there for Raymond and never gave up on him. Also, the other administrators and teachers in the program helped to ease him into what was expected of college students and always encouraged him. To this day, Raymond utilizes the services offered by STEP/CAP and the advising center since he is more comfortable with the staff in these two offices than he is with his assigned academic counselor. The work in college stressed him out, but he always felt better knowing that Rick and the STEP/CAP staff as well as his friends from the program were there to support him and believe he will be successful.

Vanessa. Vanessa was born and raised in Manchester, Connecticut. She was the youngest of three children; her older brother was a truck driver, and her sister attended ECSU but never graduated. She was anxious to pursue a college degree because she felt it would be the best way for her to get a good job and succeed in life.

Vanessa’s high school experience was good, as she was a member of the softball team and enjoyed the service learning opportunities her school offered. Her teachers were supportive, and she admitted to having favorites who were more supportive than others. These teachers would reach out to her to make sure she was not only doing well academically but also socially
and emotionally, especially if they noticed that she was stressed, and they always encouraged her to do her best. She first learned about the STEP/CAP program when she received a letter in the mail explaining the program. Her first reaction was, “They believe I am not smart enough to get into Eastern on my own, so they want to give me a second chance.” She admitted this made her feel bad, but since she wanted to attend ECSU, she decided to attend the meeting on campus and learn more about the program. After the meeting, her parents paid a deposit, and she was registered to attend.

When she entered the program, she found the workload heavy and believed that by completing the program, she was over prepared for college. When she entered the program, her family, in particular her parents, were very supportive. She credited the program with instilling in her the fact that she was responsible for completing her work and teaching her valuable time management skills. The culminating assignment of completing a 10-page paper proved to Vanessa that indeed she was ready for college since she never had an assignment like it before. The program also assisted her in making friends. She described herself as not the type to go out and try to make friends, but in STEP/CAP, it just happened naturally, and she remains friends with students in her cohort to this day. Also, the fact that she earned six credits in the summer session was beneficial because she believed it gave her the opportunity to be ahead of the majority of incoming freshman.

Today, even though the program is over, Vanessa still sought out its staff to discuss issues she might be having and knew they were always there for her, which is a comfort. The component of the program she found beneficial was interactions she had with peer advisors dealing with both social and academic matters, particularly workshops they offered on filling out financial aid forms, study skills, and time management. The peer advisors led study groups and
explained all the services that the students could use through the Academic Service Center. The program also provided her with the opportunity to learn the physical layout of the campus as well as the location and functions of all the student support services offices.

Vanessa believed that STEP/CAP helped her to obtain good time management skills removed a good deal of stress from her everyday life, thus boosting her confidence. Another boost to her self-efficacy was the fact that she felt confident she could handle the academic workload and that she knew she had a great support team led by Rick ready to assist her. That support system also included the other participants in the program because they all supported each other since they wanted to succeed and knew how hard they all worked to achieve the goal. Being able to have a routine of getting up each day and completing a full schedule also gave her a sense of accomplishment, which made her surer she could succeed. During freshman year, she attributed her mastery of time management skills to providing her with the time she needs to have her work reviewed by staff at the writing center, so she handed in the best product possible.

**David.** David was born in Haiti and lived there until he was nine years old. His parents were divorced, and his mother moved to Hartford, Connecticut to care for her mother, who was sick. David remained in Haiti but eventually joined his mother. In Hartford, he lived with his mother, stepfather, grandmother, and two younger sisters. No one in his immediate family attended college, and he is the oldest child; however, his stepfather earned a law degree in Haiti.

When David arrived in the United States, he spoke Creole and French. He enrolled in school and credited watching television with helping him to learn the language. He related that the teachers and students in his school were all supportive of his efforts to learn the language, and he believed that also played a role in helping him master English. From the interview, I also learned that David excelled in math and was studying Algebra and Geometry while a third grade
student in Haiti. His ability in math helped increase his self-efficacy when he was struggling at times with learning English, and he noted that it was easy for him and he liked the fact that no matter where he lived, math was the same in every country. He attended the Greater Hartford Academy of Arts for high school and enjoyed the experience. David, who is an accomplished pianist, was able to take piano lessons daily as part of the curriculum. His second passion was biology, and he did well in those classes.

David noted that from as early as he could remember, both his parents were always asking the question, “What do you want to be?” This encouraged him to choose a goal, and at an early age, he decided he wanted to be an obstetrics and gynecology doctor. He decided on this career for two very different reasons, the first being that he was always fascinated by the concept of how babies were born, and second, he observed while living in Haiti that this was a profession that a person could have no matter how old they were. In Haiti, the majority of men were manual laborers and involved lifting and digging.

David chose ECSU for various reasons. The fact that his cousin had attended made him feel comfortable with the school. The size of ECSU was also a significant factor since he knew he thrived in small classes, and he wanted to make sure that actual professors taught the courses, unlike at the University of Connecticut, where graduate assistants taught lower-level classes. Also, the fact that ECSU had a state of the art science building was a plus.

When David applied to ECSU, he was contacted and offered the opportunity to apply through STEP/CAP. Although disappointed at first, he decided that since he wanted to attend ECSU, he would apply to the program. When he was accepted, his family was thrilled. He noted that his mom was very supportive and described her as the hardest-working woman he knew. All she ever wanted for him was to have a better life than her. David decided that if his
mom was willing to work hard to help him, then he would work even harder to make her proud. His father, even though he is in Haiti, kept in regular contact and was always encouraging him and checking in on him.

When David entered the STEP/CAP program, he felt prepared to complete college-level work but found that completing the work provided a big boost to his confidence. Also, the fact that he was able to form friendships with students in the program was a stress reliever when school started. In addition, the fact that he knew he could successfully do college work and knew how to access help provided him with the confidence he could be successful. A highlight of the program for David was the museum visit, where he saw a painting and had to write an essay about what he thought the artist was attempting to convey. In his words, this opened a whole new world for him. Also, the public speaking class contributed to his self-efficacy. Since English was his second language, he was not comfortable speaking in groups, but completing this class provided his self-efficacy with a real boost. He credited the program with definitely increasing his self-efficacy because to pass STEP/CAP, he felt you “have to do it all.” Rick played a prominent role in David’s life, especially when he felt stressed over not being able to register for a particular class or had financial concerns. Rick was always there for him and assisted in getting issues resolved.

Themes

Using inductive analysis after transcribing the interviews, I read and then reread each transcript several times, then I coded each one using a combination of descriptive and In-Vivo coding. From this process, four main themes along with some sub-themes emerged. The four main themes addressed the three questions the study posed on the impact the program and
services it provided have on students’ success, desire to persist, and self-efficacy and what components and interventions of the program students found to be the most beneficial.

**Support.** The main theme that resonated throughout the interviews was the support students received. Whether it was from family, Rick, peer mentors, university staff, or subject teachers, it was always there. The students all indicated that they had the support of their families to pursue a college degree. Some noted that their family enjoyed the fact that the program kept them well informed, and they always attended all the activities and meetings sponsored by the program. One mother had a copy of the academic calendar and would call her daughter to make sure she was preparing for midterms and finals once the official academic year started. Kevin, who commuted, said even though he was busy and in and out of his house at odd hours every day, his mother wanted to know how his classes were and if he was having any issues. Other participants indicated that a family member would check in on a weekly basis to make sure everything was going smoothly and that they were not having any issues. These findings differ from previous research that noted parents of first-generation students were not supportive of their children seeking higher education. The participants in this study indicated that their families wanted them to have a better life than they did and saw education as a way the way students could achieve that goal. Some families were grateful for the program because they felt there were some unknowns about college life, and the program not only assisted their student in making the transition from high school to college but also put them at ease that someone was looking out for their student.

Every single student noted how influential the Director of the STEP/CAP program, Dr. Rick Hornung, was in their lives and credited him with changing their lives for the better. They also noted that his support 24/7 helped them not only during the actual STEP/CAP program but
also to this day. They all knew that whenever they had a question or concern, he was only an email or phone call away. One student relayed that he felt every encounter he has with Rick becomes a teachable moment for him. The students appreciated the fact that one constant in their lives was having Rick on campus. They established a trusting relationship with him during the program, and if they ever needed encouragement, he was there for them. Another student described Rick as their right hand and said that they felt they would be very stressed if they did not know they could always count on him being there for them. Others considered him part of their extended family and credited him with helping them to believe in themselves and making them realize they can be successful and earn a college degree. One student summed up how the rest felt when he stated: “Rick was always there for us and still is, and most importantly, he never gave up on us.” He made the students believe they could be successful, and for that, they said they will always be grateful.

Peer assistants was the component of the STEP/CAP program students cited as being the most beneficial. The relationships they built to form the sense of community they did not view as a program component but rather something that came naturally. Since peer assistants were paid staff who were trained in their role, they felt comfortable citing them as a program component, and they all agreed it was the most valuable one. They felt comfortable being able to talk with someone who they knew had walked in their shoes. They found peer assistants to be knowledgeable and encouraging. Often when they thought they could not deal with a situation and wanted to quit, the peer assistants related a similar experience they had and how they dealt with it as a way of making the student feel that they too could overcome any adversity and persist. The students felt fortunate that they could deal with peers who were close in age, had come from a similar background, and had faced the same challenges that they did. They were
comforted in knowing that they had persisted; it gave them hope and encouragement that they could as well. Some peer assistants were also credited with assisting the students in choosing a major and helping them to get involved in campus organizations once the semester started. This support was ongoing, as a majority of the students continued to still seek out their peer advisors for guidance and assistance when an issue arose after the program ended. Knowing that they had the support of these various individuals helped the students’ self-efficacy and persistence.

**Being prepared.** This theme was prominent among respondents. The majority of the participants said they felt academically underprepared to complete college-level work, but STEP/CAP has a requirement that students complete a 10-page rhetorical analysis at the end of the six-week program. This requirement was mentioned by all of the participants as an assignment that at the beginning of the program when it was introduced they felt would be an impossible task for them to complete. As the program progressed and the participants learned time management and study skills, they developed strategies that allowed them to complete this assignment. This is just one example of how the students were given an opportunity to be successful. The sense of accomplishment and success they felt from being able to master the assignment helped to authenticate what Bandura considered the most influential component of self-efficacy: theory mastery experiences. If the students know and believe they can master a task they believe was impossible, it helps them to build confidence in their self-efficacy. Vanessa summed up the way the students felt about the assignment when she stated,

When Rick first said, “You guys are going to have a 10-page paper due at the end of STEP/CAP.” We're all like, “Ten pages, that's a lot.” But then it came, and after the whole summer of STEP/CAP, you realize, “Okay, this isn’t too bad.” We did it based on a book we read, and then coming to college, I was like,” I'm ready for this.”
The 10-page paper was the example students cited most often as a reason they knew they were prepared to complete college-level work; however, it was not the only one. They pointed out that the workshops on study skills and time management provided them with the strategies they needed to complete the assignment.

**Routine.** The students who participated in the study felt the fact they had to adhere to a routine was very helpful to them. Five days a week for six weeks during the summer, they would get up at 6:00 a.m. to be ready to meet for breakfast at 7:00 a.m. The schedule called for classes to begin at 8:00 a.m., then there was a break for lunch, and the academic classes ended at about 5:00 p.m. The students then had dinner and returned to the residence hall or went to the library to complete their homework. The students had to make sure they returned to the residence hall for a 9:00 p.m. curfew. They indicated that by having a routine, they were able to plan their day and prepare a schedule of everything they needed to accomplish. They were able to push themselves and step out of their comfort zone in classes. Kevin described how having a routine helped him to know what he had to do. He realized that to be successful he had to be ready to start class and complete all the class and homework assignments. He was willing to sacrifice, and he credited the fact that he was able to establish a routine at the start of his college career with helping him to be successful.

Once the students established their routine, they felt less anxious about being in the program and more at ease dealing with the college workload, which helped to reduce their feelings of anxiety. As Bandura’s research has shown, lower levels of stress can increase self-efficacy.

**College culture.** One finding that differs from the previous research is that every participant noted that their family was supportive of their desire to attend college. However, they
did note that although supportive, they were not able to help them with the process of applying or aid in helping them to understand what they might expect when they started classes. The STEP/CAP program proved invaluable to the students in helping them to gain college knowledge. They stated that they wanted to be successful and to have better lives and help their families, and the program not only assisted them but also involved their families in the process so they could be even more supportive of their students.

The fact that STEP/CAP introduced students to all the resources the campus has to offer was a component of the program the students found extremely helpful. A number of them noted that ECSU was their first choice for college because of its small size and the fact that a family member or friend had attended the school. First-generation students can often feel lost at a large university, and the transition from their high school to college is often made more difficult. Students believed by being introduced to campus life as part of a small program and learning what resources were available to them and meeting individuals who provided services lowered their level of stress about the unknown. After STEP/CAP, they knew just where to go to have questions answered and to seek assistance with both academic and social issues. The program also helped to introduce them to what clubs and extracurricular activities were available. Students noted that because they had the time to gain confidence in their academic abilities and learn about all the resources, they were much more confident that they could succeed when the fall semester began.

Community. The final main theme was the sense of community the students had as a result of participating in the program. One participant described their cohort members as almost like a family. Kevin cited the fact that it provided a real sense of comfort when the fall semester began to know that in many cases there was another person in one of your classes who was in the
program and knew the challenges you faced. Having the campus population swell from a few hundred students on a daily basis in the summer to a few thousand in the fall semester could have proved overwhelming to some students, but the fact that they were familiar with the physical campus and recognized both students and faculty on campus made their adjustment easier.

During the program, the students often completed assignments at night as a group. Diann recalled working on math homework as a group, and if one student figured the problem out, they would explain it to the other students. In her opinion, this helped students learn that it was okay to ask for help from others and that no one would look down on you if you did. The students also bonded around the fact that someone else was most likely dealing with the same issues they were and they took comfort in knowing they were not alone in facing new challenges. Raymond described the feeling of going to a new school where you have to make new friends and relearn everything, but STEP/CAP alleviated this for him and the other members of his cohort because they were able to establish relationships in the program, and when school started, they knew they had each other to depend on.

**Confidence.** All of the students interviewed stressed that the program provided them with the confidence they needed to know they could be successful in college. Their confidence was also bolstered by the fact that they knew Rick would be there if they needed anything, from a pep talk to help with financial concerns. Several noted that they have kept in touch with their peer advisors and did not hesitate to seek them out if they needed advice or just a friendly face that they know can relate to what they were going through.

Dave related that by being in STEP/CAP, he was able to learn on a small scale what college was like, and when the fall semester started, he was comfortable with the workload and his surroundings. He felt that without this introduction to college, he would not have been
successful. The students who were admitted to ECSU through the regular admission process have an orientation program that STEP/CAP participants also attend, but it does not include all the experiences the program offers, and the students I interviewed felt that if it had been their only introduction to ECSU and they just arrived on campus the first day of classes, they would never have succeeded.

**Underrepresented themes.** The five main themes that emerged from personal one-on-one interviews, field observations, and examining archival material form the foundation of the findings of this case study. However, several other themes emerged to a lesser degree but still should be noted. Three of the students, Vanessa, David, and Raymond, spoke about how not gaining admission through the regular admission process made them feel that the university felt, “We’re not smart enough to attend.” This belief was reinforced for them when they were accepted into other schools, in particular sister schools of ECSU. However, since ECSU was their first choice, they opted to attend the program, and all had the same feelings when they completed the six weeks. Vanessa admitted she entered the program with a negative mindset, but after six weeks, she forged relationships with some of the other students and today counted them among her closet friends. Also, she acquired a skill set that she believes has been a key component of her success in her academic work. In her words, a negative became a huge positive. Ray enrolled in the program with the goal that he would prove to both the university and himself that he could be successful in college. This desire provided him with the motivation he needed to excel in STEP/CAP. He felt that some students who were admitted through the regular process look down on students who participated in STEP/CAP; however, he views it as the participants in STEP/CAP had to prove themselves by working hard to gain acceptance to ECSU, and the other students just applied.
Students had concerns about incurring debt, and that led them to choose a state institution. They also noted that although the federal financial aid process was stressful and unfamiliar to both them and their families, Rick was always there to provide guidance and support throughout the process. Also, the workshops that the peer advisors ran provided the students with a detailed introduction to how they should complete the process and be able to see that a peer of theirs could do it gave them the confidence that they could as well.

Finally, a troubling theme emerged from at least two of the interviews, and it involved unsupportive guidance counselors in high schools. All seven of the participants could identify one or more teachers as being supportive of them in high school and helping them with the college admission process. Unfortunately, the same was not true when they were dealing with counselors.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the fact that various components, both academic and non-academic, that comprise the curriculum of the STEP/CAP program had a positive impact on students’ self-efficacy and persistence. When the students realized that they could complete college-level coursework, they had the motivation to continue to pursue their education. The fact that they also had the knowledge that Rick, his staff, and peer advisors would always be there to offer support meant a great deal to them. The transition from high school to college is difficult for many students, and the fact that this group of students faced the additional obstacles of lacking college culture, in most cases being academically unprepared, and financial concerns only added to their stress level. By having the opportunity to attend the STEP/CAP program, which is a holistic program that addresses all aspects of the student’s wellbeing to ensure they meet with success, these students proved that they were able to succeed and show that the program works.
Chapter Five: Discussion/Implications

Limitations of Study

This study was limited by the size of the pool available to be part of the sample since the participants had to be sophomores who successfully completed the mandatory six-week summer program and their freshman year of college. The total pool consisted of 38 students, and when they were contacted about participating, seven responded that they were interested. This raises the question of whether a student who did not have a positive experience simply did not respond to the request share their experiences.

As with the vast majority of qualitative research in educational settings, it is extremely difficult for other researchers to repeat the study since the program participants and possibly the staff will not be the same, and improvements are constantly being made that enhance the delivery of program services. Transferability of results is always a concern in qualitative research; however, in this particular study I do not believe it presents a limitation since each Educational Opportunity (EOP) program is structured by the individuals who administer it on a particular campus. This study highlights the components of the Eastern Connecticut State University program that the participants believe were the most beneficial to them. Anyone reviewing the study from a different institution can incorporate a component they believe might enhance their program. Therefore, I do not view transferability as a limitation to this study. Finally, as with all qualitative research since the researcher is the main instrument for data collection, there exists the possibility that their biases could impact the findings.

Suggestions for Future Research

Sablon (2014) lamented the lack of qualitative research on SSS/EOP programs that encompass a summer bridge program as part of the curriculum. Numerous quantitative studies
have been undertaken by government agencies that seek to gather data pertaining to how the academic components impact GPA and retention and persistence rates. These studies, although informative, especially when establishing levels of funding, fail to take into account the wider benefits students receive from participating. Additional qualitative studies will only add to the literature and provide the students with a voice in program development.

This study was limited to a specific group of students who had persisted to sophomore year. The decision to concentrate on this sample was made for two reasons, the first being as Astin (1993) noted, the highest attrition rate for college students occurs between freshman and sophomore year, and the program is structured to provide support through the freshman year (although students know staff is always there for them throughout their time at the university). In the future, a longitudinal mixed methods study that tracked academic progress via GPA and number of years it took participants to complete a degree would be of interest, especially one that encompassed a qualitative section that determined students’ opinions on how the program was structured and administered.

Also, of interest would be research on how many students participating in SSS/EOP had previously participated in one of the TRIO programs that serve middle and high school students. The goal of the research would be to determine if by starting to work with students and their families at this stage made a difference in their access and success when they entered college.

Finally, SSS/EOP are unique to individual campuses, so a study of the universities that comprise a system such as the Connecticut State University system, which is made up of 4 institutions, would be beneficial. The goal would be to determine best practices and then develop an overall template of them that would provide information that the individual schools could then tailor to their own campus.
Implications

This study sought to answer:

1. How do students in an alternate admissions program believe the services it provided influenced their success and desire to persist?
2. What services and interventions did students find most helpful?
3. How do the services and interventions that are provided by the program impact students’ self-efficacy?

To answer these questions, a qualitative study using case study methodology was employed. The setting of the study was ECSU, a regional public university that is one of four universities comprising the State of Connecticut University system, along with 11 community colleges. The institutions are overseen by a Board of Regents. This sample was drawn from students who were sophomores in good standing who had completed the STEP/CAP mandatory six-week program between graduating high school and the start of freshman year of college and then completed their freshman year in good standing. A total of seven students participated in the study, and one-on-one interviews that lasted approximately 45 to 50 minutes were conducted with each one of them. An interview protocol was developed so that all participants would be asked the same questions (Appendix C). After conducting an inductive analysis of the data, five main themes emerged as well as several underrepresented themes. Also, the components of the STEP/CAP program that the students found most beneficial to increasing their self-efficacy and persistence were identified.

The students all agreed that the academic component of the program was rigorous, and when they were able to master the curriculum in their classes, they realized they could handle college work, and it helped to increase their self-efficacy for the tasks. Participants noted that
establishing a routine was also important, and this relates to mastering a task by having the discipline to set a daily schedule and adhere to it. Along with mastering the task of establishing routine, students indicated that following the routine helped to relieve stress, which aids in enhancing self-efficacy.

Acquiring college culture was a crucial component of increasing self-efficacy. The students were introduced to the cadre of services available and the administrators and staff that were responsible for providing the services. This was just another way that the program helped to relieve stress on the students: by highlighting the fact that if they were having trouble with particular assignments, assistance was available to help them master the course material. Vanessa indicated that skills she acquired in the STEP/CAP program help her today because when she has an essay due for a class, she makes sure to complete the assignment at least a week in advance so she has time to drop by the writing center and have her work critiqued so she can improve the essay before it is due. The students also had the opportunity to learn about clubs and other extracurricular activities from the peer assistants who worked with them so when the academic year began, they already knew what clubs and activities they wanted to consider joining. This allowed for the integration of academic and social activities, which research indicates is a key element in persistence.

The sense of community among the members of the program staff and the students who participate in the program is overwhelming and the most valued component of the program. Students cited incidents where Rick, the program director, was there to boost their confidence and help make situations less stressful. David pointed out that when he was stressing about financial aid, Rick told him “to just concentrate on his classes. Make sure you get a good grade because I know you can, and let me worry about the rest.” Donna noted that any issue she had,
whether it involved relationships with family or friends, financial issues, or issues with a class, Rick was there for her. Always. “He has never shown me any reason not to trust him. Any reason not to believe that he can help me. He has never put me down. He has always been there for me.” She admitted trusting people is difficult for her as a result of being in the foster care system and homeless. Rick always provided her with the encouragement that she could succeed, raising her self-efficacy.

The peer advisors also helped to increase students’ self-efficacy, and Donna related the following story which highlights the important role her peer advisor, Alexis, played in raising her self-efficacy. Alexis addressed the stress Donna was feeling and utilized verbal persuasion to help her realize she could do the work. There was a point where Donna had a breakdown and felt she could not complete the STEP/CAP program. She was overwhelmed with the workload and believed she was not doing good work since at that point she had not received any grades. Alexis told Donna to

Breathe and relax. You're stronger than this. Whatever you've been through .... Because she didn't know my situation that much at the time. She was like, “Whatever you've been through, I'm sure it's nothing compared to this. I'm sure you have the drive and the capability to push through this assignment. You would not have been chosen for this program if you didn't show that potential.” She was just giving me words of encouragement, reminding myself why I'm here, and who I'm here for, and why I did this.

Vanessa described the peer advisors as role models, and it was comforting to her to know that they had succeeded in being successful at ECSU and had traveled a path similar to hers. These two incidents illustrate how verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences (which involve seeing a peer succeed) at a task can help bolster a student’s self-efficacy.
Finally, the students were exposed to classes that although they did not receive credit for definitely assisted in enhancing their self-efficacy. Several students mentioned the impact the public speaking class had on their self-efficacy. They entered the class feeling stressed because in some cases they were not even comfortable speaking in small groups and the thought of having to speak in front of the entire class petrified them. For David, who emigrated from Haiti when he was nine, English was not his first language. However, working with the teacher of this class, David gained confidence in his ability to speak and contribute to the conversation. He related that his teacher would not except the excuse, “I can’t do that,” so he had to push through, and the more he delivered speeches, the more comfortable he became, and he believes mastering the ability to speak in public was a major boost to his self-efficacy. Raymond spoke about his experience in the public speaking class and noted that the teacher just made the entire process so easy and that her verbal encouragement was what assisted him in overcoming his anxiety about speaking before a large group. Today, he has no problem volunteering to speak in front of his classmates.

Of the underrepresented themes that were identified, three were noteworthy. First, the feeling students had that they were not smart enough to attend ECSU because they had to enroll in the STEP/CAP program. This at first negatively impacted the student’s sense of self-efficacy, but they told me it proved to be a motivating factor for them to prove themselves. By the conclusion of the six-week program, the students admitted attending was the best decision they ever made, and they had increased self-efficacy because they were able to prove that they were college material. As Vanessa said, “A negative turned into a positive.” Second, financial concerns were often mentioned, but even though the students were concerned, they were all confident that no matter what Rick would handle making sure that they did not have to worry
about financial aid. During the time I spent observing the program, I noted that students would check-in with Rick about their financial aid and were always relieved after talking to him. The third underrepresented theme was the lack of support from high school guidance counselors. Previous research indicated that counselors could have low self-efficacy for working with students who were struggling academically. Also, overcrowding at high schools that serve students who are from under-represented groups taxes the resources of the guidance staff. Hopefully, counselors will someday be able to treat students as individuals and assist them to reach their full potential.

Significance of Project

This study was significant because the population of first-generation low-income students is the fastest growing population of students in higher education, and as this study pointed out, they face increased barriers to obtaining a higher education. Research conducted by Choy (2001) and Eagle (2008) has shown that this population is made up mostly of minority students, English is not their first language, they are academically underprepared to complete college work, and they have lower self-expectations. In recent years, more attention has been focused on a group of students who fit the description previously outlined, but they are covered under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, whose participants are known as “Dreamers.” These students entered the United States illegally, but under an executive memo signed by President Obama, they were granted a stay of deportation for two years with the opportunity to renew and were allowed to attend college and work. President Trump canceled the program that covered Dreamers in 2017, which means no one can currently apply to be part of the program. Also, individuals in the program as of March of 2018, when their two-year time frame is up, cannot seek a renewal. Students in this program are currently not eligible for federal
financial aid, but states administer their own financial aid decisions, and some states do grant
dreamers financial aid to attend college. In Connecticut, the request has been made of the state
to offer financial aid to Dreamers, and a bill was introduced at the last two sessions of the state
legislature but was never brought to the floor for a full vote because support was lacking.
Unfortunately, due to this dire fiscal crisis, State of Connecticut funding for the STEP/CAP
program ceased in 2017. Now STEP/CAP administrators rely on funding provided by the
university, the ECSU Foundation, and the ability of the students to obtain Pell grants and loans.
With the status of Dreamers in limbo at this point, SSS/EOP such as STEP/CAP at ECSU may be
faced with the decision of whether to offer aid to Dreamers. Since funds are limited and the
Dreamers do not qualify for federal grants and loans, it is unlikely they could attend the program
in significant numbers.

This study highlighted some interesting facts such as additional barriers first-generation
students face. One student in the sample noted that she had been homeless for the majority of
her senior year in high school and divided her time between “couch surfing” at the homes of
friends and classmates and living in a car with her father. This living situation added a level of
stress to her life and made concentrating on her academic work more difficult. It also shed light
on how concerned students were with having to deal with debt after they completed college.
Another participant joined the military simply because she wanted to be able to attend college
and know that she could be almost debt free when she graduated because she would be able to
use the GI bill towards her tuition. Unfortunately, a medical condition prevented her from
completing basic training, so she was not eligible to receive educational benefits. A third
student took a gap year off between high school and college because he was unsure of what he
wanted to do and was not confident in his ability to complete college-level work. These three
examples are cited because they illustrate that dealing with Gen Z students, those students born after 1995, is very different than dealing with the students who were the basis of previous research.

The traditional barriers identified as impacting first-generation students are identified as financial concerns, lack of familial support, college readiness, and lack of college knowledge. In this study, every participant indicated that at least one member of their immediate family was supportive of them attending college. They admitted that their family members might not possess “college knowledge” and did not understand what was involved in applying to college. However, they pointed out that their families took advantage of opportunities they had to meet with university personnel to better understand the entire college process from applying to financial aid to exactly what it would take for their student to be successful and persist to graduation. The structure of the STEP/CAP program acknowledges the importance of familial involvement and makes every effort to involve families, from their initial contact with the student right through graduation. Although none of the students who were part of the study had participated in a TRIO program prior to enrolling in STEP/CAP, I believe families of first-generation students can benefit from their participation in the TRIO pre-collegiate programs Upward Bound and Talent Search. The families of the students in this study all showed that they were supportive of their students, and this support could flourish if they have the opportunity to learn more about the process. By working with students and their families beginning in middle school, the college process can be explained and becomes more transparent so that they gain a rudimentary understanding of how things work and what needs to be done to move the process along.

Additionally, schools operated by organizations such as Achievement First are changing the landscape for first-generation students by engraining in them from kindergarten through
senior year of high school that the goal is to attend college. Shelia pointed out from her earliest memories in first grade, her teachers kept telling students "Hey, we're going to climb the mountain to college." It was their goal for their students, and her parents fully supported the goal. These schools admit students based on a blind lottery system, and once admitted, their parents agree to sign a symbolic contract that outlines their commitment to working together with the school, whose objective is to have all of their students graduate and attend college.

The study also highlighted the fact that some students are entering college lacking the academic skills necessary to be successful. States should review the curriculum being offered in high schools to ensure that every effort is being made to prepare students to gain admission to college and succeed in that is what they would like to do upon graduation.

Going forward, funding for the TRIO program is not guaranteed since it is at the mercy of the political process. President Donald Trump called for drastic cuts to the program last year. However, his efforts were blocked by members of his Republican party who not only vetoed the cuts but added additional funding for TRIO programs. For the programs to maintain stability, their funding cannot be allowed to become a political football.

The study also highlighted the fact that frontloading services for students worked in assisting them to meet with success. By helping students to acquire time management and study skills and informing them of all the services that were available to them to access if they were encountering difficulty in a specific course helped to increase their self-efficacy and persistence. Overwhelmingly, the students indicated that the aspect of the program they found most beneficial was working with the peer advisors, who were upper-class students who, except for one in each cohort, had participated in the STEP/CAP program. The students appreciated that they could talk to someone who had a similar background to theirs and who had been successful.
Today, retention and persistence of students are significant issues faced by universities, not only for first-generation students but also the student body in general. Peer mentoring programs provide a strategy that should be explored. The programs are cost-effective since they involve students and benefit the mentors by providing training that will help them to develop leadership skills. The mentees benefit from the experience of knowing they are not alone nor are they the first person to be experiencing the situation.

**Conclusions**

The STEP/CAP program at ECSU is structured to meet all the needs of the students, both academic and social. Participants lamented that at times when they are stressed or overwhelmed with school work, they wish they could return to the six weeks in the summer when their small group thought everything was possible. I believe the program highlights what Thayer (2000) pointed out, which was that strategies to retain and assist first-generation students are readily transferable to the general student population. With institutions dealing with issues of retention and persistence, they should borrow policies that STEP/CAP and similar programs have implemented to assist students. I would be remiss if I did not point out that a significant reason for the success of the STEP/CAP program over the last 37 years has been the three dedicated individuals who served as the director. They all had a passion for helping first-generation students achieve their potential, and from talking to students and reviewing archival materials, it was evident they succeeded. The students were eternally grateful that someone cared enough to help them and, more importantly, saw their potential and believed in them.
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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Name of Investigators: Dr. Lynda Beltz Ph.D., Principle Investigator, Robert Jost, Student Researcher

Title of Study: The Impact an Alternate Admissions Program Self-Efficacy and Persistence: A Case Study

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.

This study is being done to obtain a better understanding of how participation in the Educational Opportunity Program influenced your decision to persist and complete your college degree.

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

You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as being a participant in the STEP/CAP alternate admissions program at the University.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to determine the impact of the ECSU alternate admissions program on students’ self-efficacy and persistence, in particular to identify what modules of the program students believe were valuable in aiding them to date.
What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in the study, we will ask you to

- Participate in one face to face interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. During the interview you will be asked questions pertaining to your experiences before entering the University and enrolling in STEP/CAP, and your experiences while enrolled at the University and participating in STEP/CAP.
- The interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.
- Confidentially will be maintained and you will be identified by a pseudonym on all recordings and in all written materials.
- After the interview is transcribed you will be given the opportunity to review the written account for accuracy.

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

The interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon location and will last approximately 60 minutes. If a face to face interview is not possible, the use of Skype or some other form of technology will be explored.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort associated with the study. However, if at any time you are uncomfortable with the line of questioning please advise the interviewer and

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant in the study. However, the information you provide may assist the administrators of STEP/CAP in evaluating current programming strategies to be more responsive to student’s needs. Additionally, future students enrolled in the program may find your experiences helpful as they decide if they should participate in the program.
Who will see the information about me?

Throughout the study you will be identified by a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. 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. When I send the audio tapes to the transcriptionist, you will be identified by your assigned pseudonym. All written field notes and audio tapes will be stored in a locked cabinet and only I will have access to them. Any audio or text files that are stored on a computer will be password protected. At the conclusion of the study, all files will be destroyed with the exception of your signed informed consent form, which must be retained by me for 3 years after the conclusion of the study.

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

Your participation is voluntary and at any time you are free to withdraw from the study and no punitive action will be taken. If during the study you are uncomfortable with a line of questioning you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Robert Jost at 860-803-7769, email: Jost.r@Husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Lynda Beltz, L.Beltz@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Kate Skophammer, IRB Coordinator, Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.390.3450, email: k.skophammer@northeastern.edu You may call anonymously if you wish.
Will I be paid for my participation?
Yes you will receive a $25 gift certificate to the University Bookstore at the conclusion of the study.

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date

______________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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

______________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix B: Email to Prospective Student Participants

I am conducting a study to gain an understanding of how your participation in the ECSU STEP/CAP alternate admission program may have influenced your success to date, and in particular your sense of self-efficacy and persistence to complete a degree. Note, for this study, self-efficacy is defined as how you believe you have the power/ability to accomplish your higher education related goals. It is how you approach a task, because if you believe you will be successful in performing a task, you are more likely to choose that one over a task you are not confident you can successfully complete. Success equals high self-efficacy and failure is aligned with low self-efficacy.

The goal of this research is to determine if enrollment in an alternate admissions program had an impact on your self-efficacy and what if any impact this had on your desire and ability to persist and complete a college degree. In order to qualify for my study, individuals must be a participant in the ECSU alternate admissions program and successfully completed the six-week summer program and their freshman year and are now beginning their sophomore year.

The study consists of one interview, which will be conducted in person at a mutually agreed upon time and location on campus. The interview will focus on your life before enrolling in the program, your experience in the program, and provide the opportunity for you to reflect upon the meaning of these experiences. Approximately 10 days to 2 weeks after the interview you will be emailed a copy of the interview transcript to check for accuracy. Students who complete the interview process and review the transcript of the interview for accuracy will receive a $25.00 VISA gift card.
If you have any questions, or would like to take part in the study please email Robert.jost@husky.neu.edu or call 860-803-7769.

Confidentiality is guaranteed, and participants’ names will never be shared with others or used in the published results.

This study is conducted by Robert F. Jost, an Ed.D. doctoral candidate at Northeastern University and an alumnus of ECSU. This study has been approved by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board for research ethics (IRB# ?).
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

(which was read to students prior to beginning the interview)

Good Afternoon. First of all, I would like to thank you for agreeing to consider participating in my research study. You were contacted concerning the study because you have been identified as a student who participated in STEP/CAP, the alternate admissions program at the University, and successfully completed the six week summer program and your freshman year. The goal of the study is to explore how the interventions and strategies employed by the program influenced your success, in particular your self-efficacy. For this study, self-efficacy is defined as how you believe you have the power to accomplish your higher education goals. It is how you approach a task, because if you believe you will be successful in performing a task are you more likely to choose that one over a task you are not confident you can successfully complete. The more success you meet with when performing a task, the more likely you are to attempt a more complicated task, whereas if you meet with failure you are less likely to pursue that goal. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and be divided into 3 segments. In the first segment I am interested in learning about your life experiences prior to entering the program and while a student. During the second segment of the interview I will concentrate on the particular strategies and interventions employed by the program and ask you if you felt some were more beneficial than others. Finally, we will be discussing how the program has impacted your sense of self-efficacy and desire to persist and complete your degree. Now that you have information concerning the study I would appreciate it if you would read and sign the Northeastern University informed consent form. Essentially, this form describes the benefits and risks involved in your participation in the study. In addition, it notes your participation is
voluntary and that at any time you are free to withdraw from the study and no punitive action will be taken. With your permission audio recordings will be made of the interviews and professionally transcribed. Throughout the study you will be identified by a pseudonym and any information you provide will be strictly confidential. At this point do you have any questions concerning the informed consent form or the interview process?

**Interview Questions for** The Impact an Alternate Admissions Program has on Students Self-Efficacy and Persistence: A Case Study

**Interview – Part A (20 minutes)** - In this segment I am interested in learning about your life experiences prior to entering the program and while a student

**Questions:**

1. Where are you from now, and where were you raised?
2. How many people comprise your immediate family?
3. Did any of your siblings have a college degree?
   Did any of your siblings attend college but not to completion of their degree?
4. What are the words that come to mind when you describe your high school experience?
5. Did you find your high school teachers supportive?
6. How were they supportive?
7. When did you first begin to think about pursuing a college degree?
8. Can you recall why you started thinking that you’d like to go to college?
9. How did you learn about the alternate admissions program at ECSU?
10. Was your family supportive of your desire to enroll in the program?
11. Were some family members more supportive than others?
12. Did members of your peer group in high school consider applying for the ECSU program or to college? Did they do so?
13. Did you find your teachers and guidance counselor supportive of your decision to enroll in the ECSU STEP/CAP program?
Interview – Part B (20)

This part of the interview will be used to obtain information about your experiences while participating in STEP/CAP. Do you have any questions for me at this time? For the second part of the interview participants will be asked to share their experiences during their time enrolled in the STEP/CAP program and the University.

1. How would you compare the academic work at ECSU with your high school experience?
2. Did you feel academically prepared to perform college level work?
3. What components of the program do you find most helpful and why? Need to have them address tutoring, mentoring, counseling, social activities and other segments they claim to offer.
4. How would you compare the academic and social opportunities offered by the program?
5. What program components did you find most beneficial and why?
6. Do you believe the program increased your sense of self-efficacy? If so how was your self-efficacy increased?
7. Thinking back on your experiences so far in the program, can you identify any individuals or program component that influenced your ability to believe in yourself and your sense of self-efficacy? Elaborate?
8. During your freshman year? Were you confident in your ability to set goals and did you believe you could achieve the goals if you persisted? Do you believe this helped you to persist?
9. How did the following groups influence your sense of self-efficacy: peers, program administrators, family, and faculty?

Interview Part C (20 minutes)

The final segment of the interview will be used to provide you with the opportunity to reflect on the experiences we discussed and how they influenced your self-efficacy and life to date. This segment of the interview can be viewed as a culmination of the previous two segments.

1. Given what you have told me about your life prior to enrolling at the University and in the STEP/CAP alternate admissions program, how do you believe your participation in the program has influenced you self-efficacy and desire to persist and complete a college degree? Please give me some examples
2. How would you describe your overall satisfaction with the ECSU program you’re participating in?
Appendix D: Participants’ Demographic Data

Participants by Ethnicity

- White: 1
- Multi Race: 3
- African American/Black: 4

Participants by Gender

- Female: 4
- Male: 3

Participants by Major

- Psychology: 2
- Finance: 1
- English: 1
- Social Work: 2
- Biology: 1
- Exploratory Prof. Studies: 1