PERSISTENCE IN THE SOPHOMORE YEAR FOLLOWING TRANSITION FROM SUCCESSFUL FIRST-YEAR PROGRAM

A thesis presented

by

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To
The School of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

In the field of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston Massachusetts
May 2015
Abstract

The second year of college is largely viewed as challenging and difficult for sophomores, yet institutions tend to provide less support to students at this point than they provided in the students’ first year. Institutions front-load many of their services and support programs to create a positive collegiate experience for first year students, but fail to carry these through into the second year. Consequently, the problem of attrition may surface during the sophomore year.

This interpretative phenomenological research study explored the perceptions and experiences of sophomore students in a large urban institution in the Northeast. The research data were derived from in-depth individual interviews of 12 students in the second semester of their sophomore year who participated in a first year college program. An analysis of the qualitative data was used to understand their experience in the second year.

The primary research question that guided the study is the following: How do sophomore students at a large urban institution perceive and describe their experience in the second year?

Utilizing Schaller’s sophomore development theory as the theoretical framework, the researcher collected thick descriptive data on the participants’ experiences. Through the analysis of the data, six emergent themes were identified to contextualize their experiences. The findings of the study showed that sophomores were undergoing internal transition and were still in need of support beyond the first year. Sophomores were going through different developmental stages related to relationships and belonging, development of self, selection of major, career choice, academic involvement, student life, and coursework. The study also revealed that at the same time as they were undergoing these developmental changes and trying to meet academic expectations, the support and guidance lessened. This study serves to provide educational
leaders and policy makers with information about sophomores and to guide decisions on programs and services that would be relevant to this population of students.

*Keywords:* attrition, higher education, persistence, retention, first year, second year, sophomore, student development theory, transition.
DEDICATION

For my dear mother who
has been such strong source of support
and strength in every aspect of my life
For her unconditional love, prayer, and encouragement
that has helped to sustain me throughout this journey
I love you with all my heart.
Joyce Stephenson
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank God for giving me the wherewithal to start this journey and seeing me through to its completion. As Lao Tzu states, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” This journey started with taking that one step further to fulfilling my dream of earning a doctoral degree, and I have many people to thank for not just standing on the sidelines but walking this journey with me.

To my advisor, Dr. Carolyn Bair, who worked tirelessly with me and who pushed me to perfection. Thanks for facilitating those stimulating discussions on Go-To-Meeting. At the end of those conversations my mind would become laser focused and I would be mentally stimulated and charged to take my research in directions I never thought I could. Thanks, Dr. Bair, for being an excellent advisor in the process. In our first meeting you encouraged me to be open. I trusted you and you were able to take me there. I learned to start thinking and analyzing more. Additionally, your constructive comments and feedback have undoubtedly helped me to produce an excellent research that I am most proud of. Thanks to Dr. Leslie Hitch, my second reader, for collaborating so well with Dr. Bair. I welcomed every suggestion and comment you added to make this come to fruition. Your input was invaluable.

Dr. Stephen Joyner, you have been a tremendous support as a member of my committee and in my personal development. Thanks for being a great mentor, for serving so willingly on my committee, and for encouraging me throughout the journey to just write every day to stay connected to my research.

To my special friend George, thanks for being a paragon of strength. You encouraged me to stay confident in my ability to achieve. You reminded me that I could do anything that I put my mind to. Thanks for your unwavering support and for the days you stood by me so I could
complete this research. For understanding that there were months during this journey when I was too busy to have fun. For truly keeping me focused on my goal and believing in me and for being a motivational force.

None of this would be possible without the sincere love and understanding of my family members: my sisters Carla, thanks for reading my draft when I needed a second pair of eyes, Aretha, for always having my best interest at heart and for keeping me grounded by asking “Where are you now?” Lisa, who will always ask “How are you doing sis?” To my dear niece Brianna, for saying those “Hail Marys” when I was faced with adversities along this journey. To my dad, who understood that I needed the time to get this done.

To my wonderful supportive colleagues at work. Thanks Renee, for constantly being a voice of encouragement, cheering me on, and supporting me and stepping in during the days or weeks I needed to be away from the office to complete my dissertation. Natalie and Denyse, for never letting me rest but remaining a constant force in encouraging me along the way so I could stay motivated.

Additionally, thanks to the NEU family, the Warrior Writers and NEU Thesis Writers, for the communal support and for creating a virtual avenue that allowed us to lift each other up in the process and at times release our stress when we needed to. Thanks also to Carrie, for the meticulous work you put into editing my first draft and reviewing my final draft. I certainly appreciate your work and timely delivery. Finally, thanks to my study participants, who willingly shared their experiences as sophomores. This study would not have been possible without your contribution.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>(3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Introduction</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Study</td>
<td>(11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Significance</td>
<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem of Practice</td>
<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schaller’s Sophomore Development Theory</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>(20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>(20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: Literature Review</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sophomore Slump Phenomenon</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence in the Second Year</td>
<td>(23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Engagement</td>
<td>(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Integration</td>
<td>(25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Issues for Sophomore Students</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Challenges</td>
<td>(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing a Major</td>
<td>(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Concerns</td>
<td>(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Development</td>
<td>(29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Motivation</td>
<td>(30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Challenges</td>
<td>(30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of Sophomore Research</td>
<td>(31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Literature Review</td>
<td>(32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: Research Design</td>
<td>(33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>(33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
<td>(34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

Student persistence is a frequently discussed and researched phenomenon that remains a nettlesome problem in higher education. First year persistence is well documented and researched in the persistence literature. The extensive bodies of research and theories on the first year experience captured the attention of many in the higher education circle and influenced the development of first year initiatives and retention strategies to improve the rate of persistence during the first year (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton & Hirschy, 2004; Pascrella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1975). However, the research on the second year experience and persistence of sophomores remains sparse. Therefore, attending to the sophomore year should be the next reasonable step toward improving the rate of student persistence and ultimately graduation in higher education. Universities need to focus more attention on sophomores, a group of students who historically have been overlooked in higher education. Sophomores are a uniquely vulnerable group who experience increasing levels of dissatisfaction, challenges, and attrition, yet institutions tend to provide the least amount of support to students in the sophomore year (Boivin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006).

Colleges and universities have operated under the belief that first year programs were successfully addressing students’ needs and that students had consequently made a successful transition to college (Hunter, Tobolowsky, & Gardner, 2010). However, colleges are presently experiencing a very different pattern in attrition. Dropout rates in colleges are now peaking during and after the sophomore year (Pattengale, 2000). The U.S. Department of Education statistics showed that about two-thirds as many students who drop out of college do so in their second year in comparison to their first year (as cited in Lipka, 2006). Consortium for Student
Retention Data Exchange (2007) reported that at four-year institutions, while 80.4% of freshmen who enrolled in 2004 returned as sophomores in 2005, only 70.9% were still enrolled as juniors in Fall 2006. Students are leaving during or after their second year in spite of the exposure to first year programs. With the renewed commitment to making retention and completion a campus priority, understanding the sophomore experience and second year students’ specific needs may help to promote academic success toward degree completion.

Organized

The following thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter includes the background to the study, statement of the problem of practice, a justification for the research, the existing gaps in the current research on the sophomore experience, the research question, and the theoretical framework. Schaller’s sophomore development theory was selected to inform the investigation and used as a lens to frame the study.

The second chapter examines the literature review on sophomores. Three strands of literature are reviewed to situate the research in a broader context. First, the literature on persistence in the second year and drop-out behavior in the second year are reviewed. Second, the literature on the sophomore slump phenomenon is examined. Third, the literature on the critical issues affecting sophomores is reviewed to understand how these issues impact the second year experience and the importance of providing a positive collegiate environment for sophomores.

Chapter three describes the chosen methodology, interpretative phenomenological analysis, and the application of this methodology to explore how sophomore students made sense of their experiences in the second year. A detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis procedure is included, along with a description of the strategies that were implemented to
maintain the validity and credibility of the study. Chapter three also highlights the research question.

The fourth chapter presents the findings, including stories of the participants and the analysis of those findings, which resulted in the emergence of themes.

Chapter five includes a discussion of the findings from chapter four and places those findings in the context of the theoretical framework and the literature review. Implications of the findings for professional practice and recommendations for future research are also included in chapter five.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

**Problem of Practice**

The second year of college is viewed as a period of transition, adjustment, and confusion for students who find that the safety net and security provided through structured first year programs are no longer available. As students search for a sense of purpose and meaning in selecting majors, developing new friendships, exploring career interests, and identifying financial solutions for educational expenses, they can become disillusioned and overwhelmed by their new reality. Freedman (1956) is credited for discovering that second year students can become disengaged and less satisfied with their collegiate experiences. His study explored the stages of students’ collegiate experience at Vassar College. He found that sophomores who lacked clarity in their reasons for attending college, or failed to declare a major, displayed feelings of inertia, confusion, and stress, which according to Freedman (1956) is characteristic of the sophomore slump. Additionally, students during the sophomore year were focusing on challenging courses within their field of interest. Freedman found that if students are not ready
to face these demands they may become dissatisfied with their collegiate experience and succumb to the sophomore slump (1956).

Sophomores experience a whole new set of challenges as they return to the college campus. They experience academic, social, and identity crises. This is a period in which students experience apathy and frustration that their high expectations of college are in stark contrast to their experienced reality. Sanchez-Leguelinel (2008) stated that stress over their inability to develop their academic, social, and personal lives causes many students to drop out of college during their sophomore year. Analyzing and understanding these issues are critical to the learning, persistence, and success of sophomore students (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006).

The proposed research study is designed to investigate issues and concerns of students in their second year in a large urban institution in the Northeast that offers rich first year programs, but loses students in their sophomore year. The persistent rate of first year students remains comparatively strong; however, there is a drop in the second year rate of persistence. The Fall 2010 and 2011 cohort one-year persistence showed an increase from 82.2% to 84.2% (Institutional Planning and Research, 2012), which suggests that the students are benefiting from the institution’s structured first year programs. On the other hand, the two-year persistence rate dropped from 70.4% to 69.6%.

Completion rates during the second year are crucial in light of the growing discourse on college completion, student loan debt, college costs, and the advantages of obtaining a college degree. In recent years, it has become clear that the quality of the second year experience can affect student persistence; and researchers have recommended that more attention be focused on post-freshman persistence (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Roney, 1986; Seale, 1984; Wilder, 1993).
The changing events of declaring a major, clarifying goals and purpose, and narrowing career options can become a source of stress for students in their sophomore year, especially where institutional support is limited (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000; Gardner, Pattengale, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010).

The intent of the study was to examine students’ perceptions and understandings about their experiences in the sophomore year, to gain insight into the transitions they are making as sophomores, and the continued need they may have for faculty and staff to incorporate programs, services, and interventions that might be helpful as they make the “sophomore transition.”

**Theoretical Framework**

A review of the literature reveals that no single theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of the sophomore experience. Several theoretical models are cited to explain the experiences of sophomore students. Scholars have referenced the transitional theories (Bridges, 1980), student development theories (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Rieser, 1993; Lemons & Richmond, 1987; Schaller, 2005), and retention theories (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993) to study sophomores and their unique needs. The theory used to frame this research study was Schaller’s sophomore development theory.

Sophomores have been identified as having the greatest needs of any class (Juillerat, 2000). The sophomore year is viewed as a time for career exploration and decision-making. It is beneficial to understand what students perceive and experience during these changes; hence, Schaller’s (2005) theory of the stages of development is ideal for contextualizing sophomores’ experiences.
Schaller’s Sophomore Development Theory

Schaller’s (2005) work on the development of second year students is grounded in research related to the development of identity (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) and psychosocial development research on college student reasoning and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

Schaller’s theory examined the developmental stages and the identity issues faced by sophomores as their lives progress, how they define themselves, their relationships, and what they want to do in life. Schaller’s theory emerged from findings of a qualitative study that explored the experiences of traditional-aged sophomores at a four-year residential college at the University of Dayton in Ohio. She concluded that sophomores struggled to establish healthy relationships, a sense of self, a connection to academics, and overall balance (Schaller, 2005). Schaller (2005) suggested that sophomores could move among four different stages relating to themselves, their relationships, their academic experiences, and their decisions. Schaller and Wagner (2007) also applied this four-stage sophomore development theory to understand the experience of sophomore resident assistants and their ability to balance the stages of development with their responsibilities. They concluded that sophomores in these positions need specific support as they navigate through their own developmental challenges and the responsibilities that come with being a resident assistant.

According to Schaller (2005), students can experience multiple stages at any given time; but usually one stage is more prominent for sophomores. Schaller (2005) found that development occurs when students start progressing from random to focused exploration through active reflection. Students begin to take initiative and responsibility for their decisions, plans, and actions. As students move through each stage, they learn to think and act intentionally and
independently about decisions related to their relationships, majors, and careers, now and in the future. By advancing through these stages, students will ultimately feel confident about their choice and their future, learning eventually that making commitments will positively influence their second year experience.

Random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment are the four stages of development through which students are most likely to advance during the sophomore year. According to Schaller (2005), while students progress through these four exploratory phases, they are not always experienced sequentially.

Random exploration is the phase characterized by an interesting combination of exuberance and lack of reflection often observed during the first year. Students in this stage randomly explore relationships with others as well as their newfound freedom from their parents. During this time, sophomores are aware of pending choices but opt to delay decisions and engage in minimal reflective self-exploration. When students complete the first year, they gain knowledge, information about self, peers, and the world, and they are now faced with the dilemma of processing the information (Schaller, 2005).

This leads them to the stage of focused exploration. Students become self-evaluative, self-critical, and responsible. However, this may not be true for all sophomore students. This stage can become one of frustration because true reflections begin here, yet sophomores may still lack direction. Sophomores begin to feel pressured into choosing a path, and they may consequently become overwhelmed at the number of choices and opportunities that are available. They begin questioning themselves about their direction and their past decisions; and they are actively seeking understanding of themselves, their relationships, and their futures (Schaller, 2005, p. 18). Sophomores appear to experience some degree of ambivalence during this stage
because they are no longer freshmen and they are trying to establish their positions as major declared upperclassmen.

The third stage is recognized as tentative choice. Students should really be at this phase by the end of their second year; therefore, this is considered an important stage for sophomores. Schaller (2005) stated that during this period students should have a more defined picture of the future and should feel a sense of responsibility for themselves and their learning. They should carefully examine decisions and place these decisions in the context of their own values and interests. Institutions at this point compel students to expedite their decision-making on their major and career path. Students tend to be more cognizant of their responsibilities and oftentimes become anxious about the uncertainty of their choices. Those who are advanced in this stage begin to feel more comfortable with their decisions.

The final phase is called commitment. According to Schaller (2005), this is the ideal stage, where second year students really function; but very few make it to this point by the end of the second year. During this stage, the level of engagement in the direction of their lives increases and students will feel confident and resolute in decisions concerning their future. They have a clear plan and direction of where they are going and how to get there. Commitment to an academic major or extracurricular activity is indicative of this period. Some students, because of the pressure to make a decision, may do so without considering other options, for the sake of getting a sense of relief. Essentially, all second year students will not progress at the same pace. Some students will advance quickly while the progress may take longer for others. Figure 1 depicts the different stages of development and the period in which students could be experiencing each stage.
Because Schaller’s theory (2005) evolved through her research at a small private residential college, she recommended further exploration of her theory to include diverse institutions and diverse samples of sophomore students.

Figure 1 Schaller’s Stages of Sophomore Development Adapted from Schaller (2006).

The figure above highlights the four stages that second-year students will progress through as they try to make decisions between multiple academic majors, define their purpose, and relationships.
Summary of the Theoretical Framework

Schaller’s sophomore development theory (2005) was ideal to create a framework for understanding the collegiate experience and needs of sophomore students in this study. The theory establishes a frame of reference about the interpersonal and intrapersonal changes that occur while sophomores are in college. Schaller’s sophomore development theory uses a holistic approach to provide insight into the second year experience and serves as a helpful framework for understanding the stages of development that may occur. What are the challenges sophomores may encounter in a large urban institution? Are sophomores still in need of additional support even after exposure to intentionally well-structured freshman year experience courses, programs, and support services?
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Overview

In this literature review, persistence is defined in terms of students moving to the next level in their studies, or persisting in college from term-to-term or year-to-year. This literature review examines three strands of related information: the sophomore slump phenomenon, scholarship on persistence, and dropout behaviors in the second year. Finally an overview of the specific issues affecting sophomores is discussed.

The Sophomore Slump Phenomenon

The sophomore slump is certainly not a new phenomenon. The sophomore slump phenomenon is grounded in Freedman’s 1956 historic work on students’ adjustment characteristics during the different stages of their college career. His research on students’ passage through college suggested that their needs and adjustments are not the same at various points of their college career. Sophomores, according to Freedman, were the least satisfied with their college experience. He suggested that students who are ambivalent about their reasons for attending college or indecisive about a major could experience apathy and stress in their second year. Similarly, Feldman and Newcomb (1969) outlined that the sophomore year was a time for dissatisfaction with both the institution and personal experience at college. Margolis (1976) expanded the research on sophomores and was the first to assert the need for sophomore-specific counseling, with added focus on their social, academic, and personal identity crises. Lemons and Richmond (1987) defined the sophomore slump as a “period of developmental confusion resulting from students’ struggles with achieving competence, desiring autonomy, establishing identity, and developing purpose” (p. 15). More recently, Gump (2007) asserted that the sophomore slump commonly occurs when second year undergraduate students struggle anew to
adjust to college life without supportive transition initiatives and programs designed to reduce attrition rates.

Understanding the sophomore slump will help detect the reasons for student departure in the second year after extensive exposure to rich first year programs. According to research conducted by Schreiner (2007a), about 20-25% of second year students experience the slump. The results from her annual spring surveys showed that at 100 colleges, students who reported dissatisfaction or disillusionment experienced shock at losing the intense institutional attention and support they had received as freshmen. Schreiner (2007a) defined slumping as a motivational, emotional experience. Sophomores are not feeling the connection they had during the first year. They are no longer in the honeymoon phase, but are awakened to the reality of their environment and collegiate experience. Coburn and Treeger (2003, p. 247) described the sophomore year as “the transition between wide-eyed awe and upper-class confidence.” Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin (2007), in their research, concluded that sophomores felt invisible and lost. Additionally, institutional attention lessened and the students felt they were not getting the support needed to make critical decisions in their second year.

Although scholars have different perspectives on what constitutes the sophomore slump (Flanagan, 1991; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gardner, Pattengale, & Schreiner, 2000, Juillerat, 2000) it is necessary for institutions to understand how sophomores are functioning within their own environment. Each institution has its unique organizational culture and structure; therefore, it is essential to examine sophomores in the context of the existing campus environment. Understanding sophomores’ experiences also requires exploring the institutions’ role in lessening or compounding the challenges of the second year (Gansemer-Topf, Stern & Benjamin, 2007).
**Persistence in the Second Year**

Several factors were identified in the general persistence literature to explain the reasons for student departure. However, scholars who have explored the sophomore year experience have documented issues directly related to attrition within this group (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000; Gardner, 2000; Garunke & Woosley, 2005; Lipka, 2006; Pattengale, 2000, Schaller, 2005; Wilder, 1993). Juillerat’s (2000) research identified increased tuition costs, selection of major, and housing issues as significant challenges for sophomores. Garunke and Woosley (2005) inferred that commitment to an academic major and meaningful interaction with faculty and staff members were notable predictors of academic success in the sophomore year and factors that could affect persistence.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) said that an institution’s commitment to the welfare of students tends to influence their departure decisions. Some students, they contended, are at a greater risk of departure if they are dissatisfied with their overall collegiate experience. Sophomores are a vulnerable group to attrition when they are dealing with identity issues, have reduced academic performance, and are dissatisfied with the institution (Anderson & Schreiner, 2000; Boivin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000).

The consequences of the academic challenges coupled with a reduction in support services often lead to disconnect and possibly to attrition from college (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008). Lack of engagement is also strongly linked to attrition. Ennis-Mcmillan, Ammirati, Rossi-Reder, Tetley, and Thacker (2011) concluded from their research on engaging sophomores with liberal learning that second year challenges require second year support. Their qualitative research explored sophomores’ experiences after being engaged in established first year programs at four institutions with similar characteristics. The first year programs, according to
Ennis-McMillan et al. (2011), were successful in enhancing student engagement and achievement; but for many the impact did not carry through to the second year (p. 5). The findings from their research suggested that the second year poses different challenges as students begin questioning their purpose and direction at the same time their institutions are providing less support, structure, and guidance.

Using the case study approach, Gohn, Swartz, and Donnelly (2001) investigated second year student persistence at a four-year institution in the Mid-South, and discovered that respondents who were more confident about their choice of major and career as well as academic success had a better college experience and were more inclined to persist. Similarly, if students felt connected and incorporated into the college community both socially and intellectually, they were more likely to persist. Satisfaction with connections and interactions among students, faculty, and peers were also viewed as important. Furthermore, students who struggled with defining how their abilities matched their career goals or had lower confidence in graduating reported feelings of frustration and were more likely to depart from the institution (Gohn, Swartz & Donnelly, 2001).

Boivin, Fountain, and Baylis (2000) studied sixty students who left a small liberal arts college in Michigan during and after their sophomore year over a two-year period. The students identified issues specifically related to the institution and the inability of the institution to meet their needs as reasons for leaving. The challenges identified by these students might be their inability to commit (although they were aware of what they were interested in and good at doing), lack of opportunities for leadership, and lack of faculty involvement. Further, the students who successfully handled their personal transition issues in the first year were aware of what higher education ought to afford them (Boivin et al., 2000). Increasing awareness and
expectations, according to (Boivin, et al., 2000), forced students to assess the adequacy of the institution in meeting their needs.

**Academic Engagement**

Academic engagement is broadly perceived as an overall involvement in academic life as it relates to satisfaction with intellectual development or with the academic systems. Some scholars view components of academic engagement as task management skills (Garavalia & Gredler, 2002), seeking help from peers (Larose, Robinson, Roy, & Legault, 1998), interactions with professors (Strage, 1999), and academic course engagement (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009).

Academic success is influenced by the degree to which students become engaged and involved in academics or other socially-related activities of college life (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Student engagement is considered one of the key constructs in research on motivation and is perceived as the tendency to be behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively involved in academic activities (Thijs & Verkuyten, 2009). Therefore, students who are more engaged will demonstrate more effort, experience, positive emotions, and attentiveness in classroom settings (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Shulmann, 2002; Thijs & Verkuyten, 2009).

Academic engagement is as important to sophomores and to any other class of students. Much of the research shows that sophomores tend to be more disengaged than other students because they are dealing with the reality of the sophomore slump (Freedman, 1956; Gump, 2007; Lemons & Richmond, 1987).

**Social Integration**

Social integration and involvement are pivotal in the persistence literature (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Social integration, as defined by DaDeppo (2009), is the interaction between the individual and the social system of the institution, including peer
groups, faculty, administrators, and extracurricular activities. The degree of comfort that students feel on campus will determine their level of social integration.

In the second year, social integration and involvement become a challenge because there are fewer opportunities and resources available to become socially engaged on campus. Casper, Khoury, Lashbaugh, and Reush (2011) claimed sophomores find themselves socially disconnected. They may have lost informal contacts from the first year due to changes in living arrangements, discontinuation of learning communities, enrollment in larger classes, and fewer programs and initiatives to support them (Casper et al., 2011). This is a stark difference from the environment of the first year in which students are presented with a vast array of programs and support to bridge the gap between secondary experience and the post-secondary experience (Hunter et al, 2010; Tobolowsky, 2008). These structured opportunities, according to Casper et al. (2011), help students feel committed to their institutions and ultimately influence their decision to persist. Foubert and Grainger (2006) found that involved sophomores demonstrated greater development in academic autonomy and lifestyle planning than less involved students. Social integration appears to have contributory effects on student development.

**Critical Issues for Sophomore Students**

An emerging body of research suggests that the sophomore year is the period in which students need to be astute in their decision-making and develop a sense of meaning and purpose about their education, where they are going, their life goals, and their career (Gaff, 2000; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Pattengale, 2006; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Reynolds, Gross, & Millard, 2008; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). Sophomores encounter some of the same challenges as other undergraduate students, but scholars identify three distinct areas in which they face unique challenges: academic, developmental, and institutional (Pattengale, 2000).
**Academic Challenges.** Challenges related to academic performance are identified as one of the concerns in the sophomore year (Adelmann, 2006; Bean, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pattengale, 2000). Because the support and the attention tend to lessen in the second year, students can become overwhelmed with trying to fulfill their academic obligations. Schreiner (2007b) describes this experience as sophomores entering into the “academic twilight zone.” She contended that sophomores’ curriculum workload intensifies in its rigor because they are dealing with the demands of major courses and general education courses they avoided in their first year. Additionally, the grades and GPA received in the first year can affect their academic performance in the second year.

**Choosing a major.** Deciding on a college major is a recurring theme in the literature on sophomores (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Garunke & Woolsey, 2005; Schaller, 2005). The choice of a major is a significant personal decision faced by second year students, especially for students who underperform during the first year, those who have not selected a major of their choice, or those who decide to change academic focus from their initial choice upon entering college. Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller, and Schreiner (2010) posited that the selection of a major can be a complex process. Selecting a major requires students to have the academic ability for specific coursework, awareness of available options and strong decision making skills, particularly in balancing interest with future career or life goals. Gaff (2000) stated that sophomore students begin questioning the relevance of certain courses that are not highly valued by faculty or not connected to their major. They view taking general education courses as delaying early integration into their major field of study. Sophomores, according to Gaff (2000), lack the benefit of an intentional curricular structure and feel as though they are in a “curricular dead space” (p. 43).
Coburn and Treeger (2003) associated major selection with establishing an identity. The process of choosing a major, according to Coburn and Treeger (2003), not only means choosing a course of study, it means selecting a niche on campus—establishing an identity. When students encounter each other they are generally interested in learning about each other’s major. Coghlan, Fowler, and Messel (2009) asserted that sophomore students without a declared major may find themselves wandering in academic wilderness because they no longer qualify for the wealth of support services offered in the first year and they are yet to find a home in an academic department. Remaining incorporated in the intellectual and social life of the institution is still essential in the second year.

The second year can be a stressful period for some students because they are pressured to pick the most appropriate major (Hunter et al., 2010). Indecision about choosing a major may be perceived as sophomores weathering the developmental crisis of meaning and purpose (Schreiner, 2007b). Sophomores may also face the challenge of not being accepted into their major of choice, or they may no longer be certain that their initial choice was appropriate. Schreiner (2007b) contends that it is often in the sophomore year that a student begins to realize that his or her plans for a certain major may not materialize. Additionally, sophomores sometimes wake up to a disappointing academic reality but do not have a “Plan B” (p. 2). Whereas the main challenge for first year students is to connect to the institution, the challenge for sophomore students involves committing to a major or discipline that will support their professional trajectory (Hunter, et al. 2010).

**Developmental Concerns**

The principal areas of development identified for sophomore students are competence, autonomy, purpose, and establishing identity (Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Fur & Gunnaway,
1982; Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Sophomores may deal with identity crises created by periods of confusion and uncertainty (Furr & Gunnaway, 1982); struggle with their identity development (Coburn & Treeger, 2003); and encounter personal relationship problems (Richmond & Lemons, 1985). Richmond and Lemons (1985) emphasized that developing purpose is a major developmental task for sophomores. These developmental challenges are distinct from what they experience in the first year because the focus in the second year tends to move beyond managing the transition to college to focusing on clarification of purpose.

For sophomores, developing competence involves excelling in any given task such as academics, athletics, or student organizations. Sophomore students who are unable to find an avenue in which to excel will become susceptible to "falling in the slump" because of dissatisfaction and self-consciousness (Fisher, Raines, & Burns, 2011). Second year students feel pressured when having to plan for internships and careers, learning about themselves and clarifying their values. Flanagan (1991) outlined that the sophomore year may be particularly difficult because the novelty of college has worn off and the reality of what needs to be done sets in. According to Schaller (2007), sophomores deal with the pressure of negotiating three key developmental areas: psychosocial, intellectual, and moral. The developmental tasks include career development, student motivation, and students’ social integration and involvement.

**Career development.** Students who are more autonomous are more certain of their career direction (Guay, Ratelle, Sevecal, Larose, & Deschenes, 2006). Students who still have strong connections with parents will have a particular challenge developing autonomy. Hunter et al. (2010) outlined that students who are prepared to make decisions about their future career and choose an academic path in support of that career are most likely to persist through their college
experiences. Students who lack emotional independence tend to struggle with indecisiveness, which ultimately impacts their ability to make decisions about their future.

Chronically-undecided students tend to have low levels of autonomy (Guay et al., 2006). It is believed that sophomore students who remain undecided at the end of the second year face particular challenges. Such students are more likely to withdraw from school or select any major that would allow for career decision making later (Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller, & Schreiner, 2010).

**Student motivation.** Student motivation is connected directly to persistence (Hunter et al, 2010). Students who are motivated and who meet parental expectations tend to have stronger college commitment (Casper, Khoury, Lashbaugh, & Reush, 2011). Students who are more motivated tend to define and set their goals. Sophomores who are at the stage of tentative choice have a sense of direction, feel assured about their choices, establish clear expectations, and are more likely to persist and complete academic goals (Schaller, 2007). Ishitani (2008) suggested that sophomore students who are unclear about their educational goals are 1.3 times more likely to leave their first college during or after the second year than students who have clearly defined their educational goals.

**Institutional Challenges**

Research on institutional practices shows the profound effect institutions can have on students. Institutional policies and administrative support can either help or hinder students’ persistence and success in their second year (Juillerat, 2000). The two primary institutional challenges that are widely discussed are financial issues and students’ satisfaction with the institution. Financial stressors range from disappointments when scholarships and grants are lost to the confusion of taking out loans. Some students also begin to question the financial return on
their investment. There is evidence to suggest that students who receive financial aid and grant aids are more likely to persist to graduation (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2006; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005). Students are nearly twice as likely to persist between the second and third years if they receive financial aid (DuBrock, 1999; Ishitani & DeJardins, 2002).

Juillerat (2000) claimed that sophomores at public colleges value a system that works well, is easy to negotiate, and is responsive to students. These students also agreed that approachable faculty and excellent instruction are noteworthy and valuable. Juillerat (2000) found that sophomores at private colleges had a higher expectation from the institution and required more attention and guidance, neither of which seems to be fully addressed by public or private institutions. Boivin, Beuthin, and Hauger (1993) stated that sophomores, more than any other class of students, identified problems related to the institution and its ability to meet their initial expectations as reasons for leaving the institution.

Overall, sophomores place a high value on an environment that promotes intellectual growth; valuable course content and excellent classroom instruction; knowledgeable, fair and caring faculty; an approachable and knowledgeable advisor; tuition that is a worthwhile investment; adequate financial aid; a smooth registration process with a good variety of course offerings; and an enjoyable school experience (Juillerat, 2000).

**Limitations of Sophomore Research**

Although much has been written on persistence of students in the first year, major gaps in the persistence literature exist on students beyond the first year. Problems with attrition exist in subsequent years even when students have been successfully engaged in the initial collegiate experience (Nora, Barlow & Crisp, 2005). There is, however, very limited empirical evidence on second year students and the programs designed to help them.
Summary of Literature Review

In summary, Adjustment issues, academic demands, student engagement, faculty involvement, students’ overall satisfaction with the institution, and financial management experience are factors that have been identified as related to attrition in the second year. Students who exhibit low confidence in their transition experience to the second year, those who feel their needs are not being met, and those who struggle with academic demands are less likely to persist.

This review of literature highlights sophomore students’ experiences and needs. Sophomore students in general may face multiple challenges that are unique to them and can affect social decisions and academic progress during the second year of college.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate and identify the experiences articulated by sophomore students in a large urban public institution in the Northeast. The researcher gathered information from students on how they perceived their second year experience, including the support provided by their institution to promote academic success and persistence. The primary research question that guided this inquiry was the following: *How do sophomore students at a large urban institution perceive and describe their experience in the second year?* Students who are currently enrolled in the institution were participants in this study.

The methodology that was chosen for this research study is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to study the lived experiences of sophomore students. The goals of the research included the following: generating and collecting primary qualitative research data on the experiences of second year students; applying the interpretative phenomenological analysis to the data; identifying the key themes of students’ experiences in the second year; describing the experiences of sophomore students; and providing discussion based on the findings in the study, the theoretical framework, and existing research. IPA is an ideal approach because interpretative phenomenological analysis is consistent with the epistemological position of the researcher and the research question. The question focused on the students’ understanding of their experiences and sense-making activities, which is the very essence of IPA.

Research questions for studies using interpretative phenomenological analysis should focus on personal meaning and sensemaking in a particular context for people who share a particular experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis

IPA was chosen as a research method for this study, which was designed to investigate sophomore college students’ interpretation and description of their experiences in the second year. Focusing on meaning is central to what is known as the “interpretative” approach to social science (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979).

Qualitative research embodies the complex meaning people make of interactions and experiences in social settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To this end, the research was situated within the social constructivist paradigm. The researcher relied on the subjective descriptions of the participants to understand how they viewed their experiences in the second year of college and the degree to which these elements either hindered or contributed to their academic success and their ability to persist in the sophomore year. In the constructivist paradigm, multiple perspectives involved in the case are sought to gather collectively agreed upon and diverse notions of occurrences (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivists claimed that truth is relative and that it is dependent on one’s perspective (Charmaz, 2006). This paradigm recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but it does not entirely reject some notion of objectivity (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Phenomenological analysis has its roots in psychological research and is undergirded by three theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The approach is concerned with understanding people’s experience of events, relationships, or processes that are significant to them and the meaning they attach to them (Smith, 2004).

The aim of phenomenology is to uncover the meaning of an individual’s experience of a specified phenomenon or phenomena by focusing on a concrete experiential account grounded in
everyday life occurrences (Langdridge, 2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis is, therefore, connected to the core principles of phenomenology by focusing on a person’s direct experience and by allowing research participants to communicate their stories in their own words (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology aims at providing a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences and asks the questions “What is this or that kind of experience like?” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 42). Phenomenology, according to Van Manen (1990), differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way individuals experience the world pre-reflectively without classifying, taxonomizing, or abstracting it. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) asserted that “we should not try to fit things into our preexisting categorization system, but we should endeavor to focus on each and every particular thing in its own right (p. 12). This aligns with Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy in which individuals turn reflexively, turn inwards, and turn away from the objects of the world and turn toward the perception of these objects (Smith et al., 2009).

Using the phenomenological approach allows a researcher to identify the subjective experience, describe it, and understand the meaning ascribed to the experience. The phenomenological method of inquiry facilitates the collection of data and analysis that will present the participants’ experiences exactly from their particular perspective. IPA is phenomenological in that it is concerned with individuals’ perceptions of events or objects, which in this case involves participants’ responses on how they perceived their experiences as second year college students (Smith et al, 2009).

Hermeneutics is the second theoretical underpinning of IPA. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Interpretative phenomenology has emerged from the work of hermeneutic philosophers including Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1976) and Ricoeur (1981), who argued that
meaning is embedded in the world of language and social relationships, and the inescapable historicity of all understanding. “The meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation,” said Heidegger (1962, p. 37). One has to interpret participants’ experiences in the context of their existing world. This poses a challenge for both the researcher and participants because it is impossible to disconnect from their history to reveal some fundamental truth about the lived experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Bracketing and setting aside prior assumptions can become difficult because all inquiry starts from the researcher’s perspective, based on their experience. The researcher should, however, identify the basic understandings of a particular phenomenon and acknowledge these previous assumptions that may not come to light until data collection and analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For IPA researchers, capturing another person’s experience cannot be absolute and definitive because the researchers themselves, regardless of their efforts, cannot completely escape the contextual basis of their own experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

IPA is considered interpretative because the researcher has to gain access to the participants’ world, and through their accounts, interpret the texts of their lives (Manen, 1990). The researcher aims to assume an insider perspective and, according to Manen (1990), mediate between different meanings of the lived experiences. Interpretative phenomenological analysis also involves a two-stage interpretation process through which the researcher tries to interpret each participant’s sense-making activity. This method, also described as double hermeneutics by Smith (2004), refers to a twofold sense-making process. The process involves the researcher trying to make sense of the participants’ making sense of their own experience. Heidegger, one of the leading hermeneutic theorists, viewed IPA as being concerned with examining how a phenomenon appears and the implications it creates for the analyst in facilitating and making
sense of this appearance (as cited in Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Smith and Osborn (2008) described IPA as an idiographic inquiry because of the concern with the particular. It focuses on the distinct experiences of particular people and the particular context and relationship in which these experiences occur (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The commitment to the particular, according to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) is twofold. There is a commitment to the depths of the analysis and there is a commitment to understanding how someone’s experience with a phenomenon (an event, process, or relationship) is understood from the perspective of that particular person within this context. The first layer of commitment is accomplished through the researcher’s attempts to gain unique insight into the world of the participant and to identify and describe the reactions and perceptions of each participant in detail (Maxwell, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). This approach starts with a detailed examination of one case or participant until some degree of saturation has been achieved before moving on to a second case. The latter is accomplished by using a small purposively selected and carefully situated sample (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In summary, IPA is phenomenological in that it seeks to explore an individual’s personal perception or account of an event rather than attempting to present an objective record of the event. While trying to get close to the participant’s world, access is dependent on the researcher’s own conceptions in order to make sense of that other personal world through an interpretative activity. IPA is also distinct through its idiographic characteristics because of its concern with detailed analysis of the case either as an end in itself or before moving to similarly detailed analysis of the case (Smith et al., 2009).
Study Site

The study site for this research was a large four-year public institution located in the Northeastern United States. The college has a student population of over 17,000, composed of both graduate and undergraduate students. The study focused on traditional-aged male and female undergraduate students in their sophomore year. The location was selected as the study site because of discussions with the vice president of Enrollment Management on the institution’s experience with departure of sophomore students and the growing concern in understanding the issues and needs of sophomore students. As discussed earlier, much success has been gained from the rich first year programs that exist at the institution. However, there is a drop in persistence beyond the first year and this has captured the attention of college officials, prompting administration to shift the focus from constantly recruiting new students to retaining the currently-enrolled student population.

Participants

A purposive sample of traditional-aged students in the second semester of the second year participated in this study. The inclusion criteria were as follows: students who were registered in the second half of the second year, students who participated in the first year experience program, and students who represented different majors.

The sample was selected purposefully so students could offer insight into their particular experiences. The individuals all experienced the same phenomenon and should be able to articulate their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Purposive sampling is used when the researcher is studying a particular phenomenon and wants to ensure that examples of it are present in the study (Albright, Pitney, Roberts, & Zicarella, 1998). The aim of this study was to understand and to make sense of students’ experiences in their second year. Consequently,
participants were identified on the basis that they had the potential to purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and the central research question in the study. The participants selected were able to reveal their experiences toward the end of their sophomore year at this particular institution. The purposive sampling technique is also appropriate for the constructivist approach. The benefit of purposive sampling is that any common pattern that can emerge from great variation is of particular interest and value in capturing the core experience and central shared dimensions of the setting or phenomena (Patton, 2002). The goal was to select and study an adequate number of participants to conduct an in-depth study with resulting rich data to address the research questions framing the study.

The sample selection is consistent with the IPA orientation since the goal was to gain a full understanding of the participants’ perception of their experience as sophomores. Small samples are commonly advocated for IPA studies (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008), which is also consistent with the idiographic approach and the need to produce a detailed interpretation of the cases. A small sample should provide ample opportunity to identify themes as well as to conduct the analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended that sampling be conducted only to the extent of saturation and redundancy with sufficient participants to understand the phenomenon of interest. Having too large a sample would be time-consuming and would not allow for a detailed case-by-case analysis of the individual transcripts. The aim of the research study was to present details about the perceptions and understandings of the group rather than make general claims prematurely (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Five or six participants were recommended as a reasonable sample size, especially for a student project using IPA. However, in order to harvest rich, thick data the researcher chose a sample size of 12 participants.
**Data Collection**

Consonant with IPA is the intense qualitative analysis detailing the accounts of experiences derived from participants. The most common method used for data collection is in-depth semi-structured interviews. Smith and Osborn (2003) identified semi-structured interviews as the exemplary method for IPA. Semi-structured interviews allow for an open exchange and dialogue between the researcher and the participants.

The interview protocol for this study included open-ended questions. Through an open-ended interview process the researcher had the opportunity to present rich description and individual narratives on the perceptions and experiences of students in their sophomore year. The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were digitally recorded.

**Document Analysis**

Merriam (1998) asserted that semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews are widely used in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews allow different sections to cover highly-structured data collection, as with demographic questions and less-structured sections that cover lists of questions or issues to be explored during the interview (Merriam, 1998). Semi-structured interviews consist of lists of open-ended questions, which are used to support the research questions and the purpose of the study. The open-ended nature of the questions provides opportunities for both the interviewer and interviewees to discuss the students’ experiences and feelings about their sophomore year. Conducting an effective interview was essential to the data collection process; therefore, strategies were used to ensure that questions were fully answered. The interviewer probed interviewees when they had difficulty answering a question or hesitated. Three types of probes used by the interviewer were as follows: detail-
oriented probe, elaboration probe, and clarification probe. Probing was utilized to clarify the interviewer’s understanding of certain responses.

An interview guide was used, which, according to Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990), is warranted for laying out the major areas of research inquiry to ensure that vital issues are covered in each interview. The interview guide for the study (Appendix D) included general questions about the participants and interview questions designed to help address the overarching research question.

Extended time was spent with the participants to verify perspectives and to allow them to become comfortable with the researcher. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this as prolonged engagement. Basic questions about themselves and their courses were asked to build the comfort level of participants with the researcher. According to Krefting (1991), the extended rapport time is helpful because participants may volunteer different and often more sensitive information than they do at the beginning of the interview process. The researcher was able to learn more about a participant’s experience with the sophomore slump through prolonged engagement. The participant volunteered the information at the end of the interview. Through prolonged engagement, the researcher was also able to reframe questions for more detailed and personal responses.

**Recruitment and Access**

After receiving approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board and the study site Human Subjects Review Board, participants who met inclusions were contacted by email and asked to participate.

Since the site was at the campus community where the researcher works, recruitment was coordinated with the computer center and the First College Year program to gain access to
recruiting the participants. Generating a report to identify second-semester sophomore students was the first step in identifying participants for the study. An email invitation was sent to these students explaining the purpose of the study and the benefits of conducting the study. A request was made for volunteers to participate in the 60-90 minute interview sessions. Participants who indicated interest were contacted by phone, and a date and time was arranged to discuss the goals of the study and the consent form (Appendix B). The meeting was conducted in a room at the research site during regular hours of the day convenient to both the researcher and the participants. During the meeting, the researcher discussed the consent form in depth and provided clarification on any questions or concerns participants may have had. Participants were made aware of their rights and were assured it was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. Participants who agreed were asked to review and sign a consent form that provided an overview of the purpose of the study, risks, benefits, and rights of voluntary participation, and confidentiality. After this meeting, the researcher scheduled the individual interview sessions.

Interviews were conducted over a two-month period at the site in an office on campus. During the interview sessions, the researcher asked each participant to verbally respond to a series of questions outlined in the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). A $25.00 gift card was offered as an incentive to get students to volunteer their time to participate. The gift cards were issued at the end of the interview process. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim using Rev.Com professional transcription service.

**Data Storage**

The researcher ensured that the electronic data were kept on a password-protected computer, and the paper copies were kept in a locked file cabinet. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Information that could be used to identify any individual
participant was eliminated from the dataset, and numerical codes were assigned to protect the identity and anonymity of each participant. Creswell (2003) outlined that data storage is an integral aspect of a research study’s integrity. Once the dissertation is completed in accordance with Northeastern IRB standards and is published with ProQuest, all the electronic files will be erased and the paper copies shredded. However, signed consent forms will be retained in a locked file cabinet for three years following the completion of the study, consistent with Northeastern University’s requirements. The researcher will be the only individual with direct access to the password-protected computer files and the locked file cabinet containing paper copies and signed consent forms.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, numerous frameworks have been developed to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the strategies for establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. General guidelines have also been established to critically appraise qualitative studies (Creswell, 2009). According to Baxter and Jack (2008), elements can be integrated to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The appropriate elements to IPA were accurately applied to maintain credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

Member checking was incorporated in the process. Interpretation of the data was shared with the participants to create the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation and, where applicable, contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study. Of the twelve participants, seven responded with comments, the others did not respond. The ability of the informants to recognize their experiences in the research findings was central to the credibility of qualitative research.
The researcher also applied Krefting’s process of double coding. According to Krefting (1991), double coding is used to analyze a set of data and then after a period, return to code the same data set and compare the results. The researcher, using the MAXQDA software, coded each transcript after each interview. Once all the interviews were completed, a second round of coding was applied to compare the results. Leininger (1985) emphasized the importance of identifying patterns, themes, and values in qualitative research. The process pattern theme and value identification occurred at the point of analyzing the data that were transcribed from the interviews conducted. The researcher realized that the same codes were emerging and was confident in the credibility of the themes and patterns that emerged.

The Position of the Researcher

As the researcher, I was in a unique position because I have worked at the college where the study took place for over six years and I am aware of attrition issues, particularly as they pertain to sophomores. It was necessary to bracket my assumptions and start anew without biasing my judgments. Additionally, I had to lay aside what I already knew about the sophomore experience and stay open to the information that was revealed from the data as presented by the student participants. When conducting an IPA research study, the researcher needs to bracket: that is, put aside his or her own experiences, preconceived ideas, and prejudices about the phenomenon of interest, and to study the phenomenon through fresh lens (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In the process of bracketing, the researcher does not influence the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon. Instead, each participant should present the researcher with a fresh perspective of their experiences through their own reality, thereby leading to the development of common themes between and among the participants (Creswell, 2009). Bracketing will help the researcher suspend prior assumptions and perceptions, beliefs, and
prejudices so that they do not influence the interpretation of the respondents’ experiences.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The procedures for the study were carefully applied according to the human subject guidelines and included the protective practices of debriefing participants on the purpose of the study and their rights to deny or discontinue participation in the study. The first step toward protecting the human subjects was obtaining prior approval from the Institutional Review Board of both institutions before recruiting participants.

Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in the study. Participants were alerted to the nature of the study and were included in the study only based on their desire to volunteer. They were protected throughout and will continue to be protected following the completion of the research study. Following the conclusion of the study, results will be shared with the institution. Participants’ rights and anonymity was protected during every stage of data collection, presentation, and discussion of findings.

**Data Analysis Process Overview**

“Data analysis involves organizing what has been seen, heard, and read so that one can make sense of what has been learned” (Glesne, 1999, p. 130). The interpretational data analysis approach was used. Interpretational analysis involves developing categories, coding segments, and grouping. The analysis for this research study was aided by the MAXQDA computer program. The first step in the process was to assemble all the data and disaggregate the data into descriptive forms. The data were studied to allow for the emergence of constructs, themes, and patterns that were used to describe and explain students’ experiences.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) asserted that there is no single prescribed method for analyzing data using IPA approach. There is flexibility in the analytic process. They
emphasized also that the very essence of IPA is essentially the analytic focus on the participants’ attempts to make sense of and interpret their own experiences. For this particular study the analysis was iterative and inductive, and the step-by-step guide recommended by Smith et al. (2009) was applied. While the steps served as a guide to manage the analytic process, they were not linear but offered different vantage points for data reduction and analysis. (p. 81).

The first step in the IPA analysis was immersion of the researcher in the original data (Smith et al., 2009). This involved reading and re-reading the first written transcript, as well as listening to the audio recording at least once. During that phase of the analysis, journaling was used to keep notes on the powerful recollections of the interview experience and on some of the initial and most striking observations about the transcripts. This helped with bracketing and focusing on the data, and it allowed the researcher to become actively engaged with the data. The second step, as outlined by Smith et al. (2009), involved initial noting on the semantic content and language used on an exploratory level. Having an open mind was important in order to note things of interest within the transcript. At this point, the researcher began to develop a growing familiarity with the transcript to identify specific ways by which each participant talked about, understood, and thought about an issue. Both steps one and two occurred simultaneously in the analysis process because the researcher began taking notes once reading began. These notes and comments continued with subsequent readings.

Continued engagement with the data and comprehensive exploratory comments led to significant growths in the data set. The researcher moved to the next stage of analysis: identification of emergent themes. This phase shifted the focus and attention to working primarily with the initial notes rather than the transcript. While looking for emergent themes, the researcher also started looking at mapping the interrelationships, connections, and patterns
between exploratory notes (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). This led into the next stage of searching for connections across emergent themes and bringing them together. The process of bringing these themes together was quite flexible, but the aim was to draw together the emergent themes and produce a structure that would identify all the most important aspects of the participants’ accounts (Smith et al., 2009).

Since IPA research typically uses multiple cases (Smith et al., 2009), it is necessary to move to the next participant’s transcript or account once the previous emergent theme is completed. While it is difficult to separate oneself from what has already been found, Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of treating each case for its own merit by bracketing the ideas emerging from the analysis of the first case while working on the second case. This is in keeping with the idiographic features of IPA. In order to facilitate the emergence of new themes, it was necessary to apply the systematic rigor of the steps outlined in the analysis process.

The final phase of the analysis process was looking for patterns across participants. Here the analyst was looking for connections across themes—how a theme in one case helps illuminate a different case, and which of these is more dominant. If a theme is only relevant to an individual case, it should not be ignored. Rather, it is still necessary to place value on these themes so that you may refer back to them (Smith et al., 2009).

For the purpose of this analysis the researcher applied the method described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. Using the MAXQDA software, themes were identified through line-by-line coding of the transcript. Numerous themes emerged and were listed in the order in which they were identified. Charmaz (1983) also described this as “simply the process of categorizing and sorting data” (p. 111), whereas codes are described as serving to “summarize, synthesize,
and sort many observations made out of the data” (p. 112). Coding, therefore, creates the opportunity to identify the findings of the study.

The identified thematic labels allowed for the next step of clustering and categorizing the themes to capture the experience of the group. These specific categories were derived from terms used in the texts, descriptive labels, statements, or quotes from the interviews. The goal was to learn from participants the factors that contributed to a successful sophomore-year experience and the challenges they encountered during that year. Creswell (2007) outlined the importance of using categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns. Once all the transcripts were coded, the themes were reviewed; and related themes were grouped together to develop what Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) refer to as superordinate themes. Using the MAXQDA program, the researcher identified the themes that emerged to answer the research question: How do sophomore students at a large urban institution perceive and describe their experience in the second year? Are they still in need of support even after exposure to rich first-year programs?

Summary

The philosophical underpinnings of this study involved interpreting and understanding participants’ experiences as sophomores. The interpretative phenomenological approach used for this study was ideal to understand and learn, directly from the participants, their perspectives on the factors that contributed to a successful sophomore year experience and the challenges they faced as they worked toward their degree completion.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter represents the narratives of 12 sophomores who reflected on and shared their perceptions of the second year experience: what they experienced, how they viewed the second year, changes that occurred as they advanced from the first year to the second year, and their own understanding of their experience as sophomores. It is through these narratives that the researcher saw the emergence of various themes and their connections. The narratives represent how participants viewed themselves in the second year; the personal, institutional, and academic challenges they encountered; the decisions and choices they made; the relationships they developed; and how they felt about their transition to the second year and the differences in their experience from the first year. Prefacing these narratives is a table showing the distribution of participants and their characteristics.

The following chapter will detail the findings on how participants made sense of their second year experience.
### Table 1 Participants’ Characteristics

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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
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This table shows the distribution of participants, which is consistent with the student population at the institution. The students who participated in this study are traditional-aged students representing different majors.
Reflections of College Sophomores

Participant Profiles

**Brian.** Brian, a speech pathology major, is a traditional-aged student residing at home with his parents, whom he described as being too overprotective, especially since he viewed himself as an adult with confidence about what he wants and about his future. While he was able to make an independent decision about his major, he expressed concerns about his parents’ inability to give him more autonomy in his journey. He expressed his resentment in having to deal with conflicts that emerged with his parents because of their inability to relinquish parental control. Brian attributed their control to the cultural child-rearing practices of the Indian culture.

Brian described himself as being focused on his major and future plans as a second-year speech pathology major. Advancing on to graduate school was one of his major goals, which he refers to as a “Big Idea.” “One of those things was graduate school; in the first year I didn’t think much.”

In the sophomore year he felt more settled in academically: “This is when I started thinking more long term. I made a list of goals in my life that I’d like to accomplish by a certain time.” In addition to his academic plans, he saw himself as being more confident and as feeling better about himself as a sophomore because he was able to declare his major. Making the decision to choose a major gave him purpose and direction. He saw growth in his skills and his own psychological development.

When discussing his perception of who he had become, he felt he had started acquiring more skills in managing his time, classes, and work. He expressed that he was slowly acquiring the skills and maturity he would need for graduate school as he continued in the courses that led to his career path.
Brian had his fair share of challenges in the second year. Coupled with conflicts with his parents, he had to deal with advisement issues and the lack of information and assistance in the major he selected. He recommended more campus-wide attention on declaring majors and on having enough advisers to guide students as they decided on the critical path to their future success. He proactively did his own research on the speech pathology program and learned about the requirements. He pointed out: “I did my own research online and found the speech department, and spoke to a speech advisor. In the freshman year, counselors advised me that students take random classes.” While Brian felt that there was a lot more attention to students in the first year, he did not feel that sophomores needed the same degree of handholding as the first year students, but rather reinforcement on what was necessary for sophomore success:

If you can recite those resources again, repeat them; because maybe in the freshman year when you speak about the Magner Center and internships, people might not know because they are just freshman. When we are sophomores, this is the time where we want to look into that stuff. I felt that if I had someone to talk to personally that would have been very helpful. I would not have to go what I went through. An adviser in the speech pathology department would have been good. I would like there to be more researchers to be focused on the students. Other schools have done this and have come up with creative ideas: For example, advisers assigned to students in the dorms, and they have specific advisers.

Managing his time and balancing time between assignments was more difficult for Brian when he was a sophomore because courses were more intense. He considered sophomores to be in need of someone such as a mentor to talk to in general, both about academics and personal life issues: “Not even just a counselor, just someone maybe even in the same major.”
deeper connection with the faculty in his sophomore year and felt that this is important. His comfort level with faculty made it less intimidating and he was able to relate more to faculty.

In the second year, just because, as I got used to seeing them, and they got used to seeing me, then I felt more comfortable. I was able to ask more questions, especially relating to a major.

While Brian had never heard of the sophomore slump, his definition was “sophomores tend to get lazy or feel dissatisfied about something.” He related his own personal account of what he experienced. His struggles with gaining more autonomy from his parents and settling on an institution that his parents wanted him to attend lingered on into the second year. In his first semester he joined clubs, which created problems with his parents because he had to deal with their frequent disapproval when he got home too late, even though he was five minutes away from school. Since he was forced to attend a school close to home, he still carried over thoughts on whether he was in the right place. As he puts it, “I did not have a ’sense of pride’ for ABC College:

I still think about it and I have the thoughts whether I need to be here. It decreased a lot since the second year and I was able to focus more. In the first semester of the second year I was at a low point and I had to seek counseling. I needed someone to talk to so I went to the personal counseling. I tried to talk to my mom about it but I never got anywhere. It was good to talk to someone about this. I was at a low point in the first semester of my second year and felt the need to talk to someone.

Overall, one of the most positive experiences for Brian was settling on a major and getting help with his personal issues.
Carlene. Carlene, also a traditional-aged student, believed that the sophomore year was when she started learning about who she was: “I learned a lot about myself and who I think I want to be and who I think I want to become, and learned to be more confident in my academic work.” Like other traditional-aged students, she explored classes in her first year and decided to double major in theatre and business. She decided to double major because she was still struggling with deciding what she wanted to do. She has one major declared, the business major, because the process was straightforward. There are more steps involved in declaring the major in theatre. The most important thing for her in the second year was defining her purpose, and this came when she was able to declare her major. She wanted to prepare for her future and aspired to achieve those goals: “I wanted to make sure I knew and I wouldn’t have to change later on; I wanted to make sure I chose a good one that I would be stable with and offer stability in the future.”

Carlene’s experience as a sophomore involved dealing with institutional challenges, living arrangements, and the changes that occurred as she transitioned to another year in college. The timeline in declaring a major for her was tedious. She described the process as confusing:

I went to the adviser and she was like, “just declare the beginning of your junior year.”

But all my friends were telling me you need to declare it at the end of your sophomore year. I did not know how to do it.

Carlene expressed that the message of declaring a major needed to be emphasized consistently in the second year:

I think it was told to us, but you don’t really think about it until last minute. Maybe from the beginning of the sophomore year to the end of the sophomore year, even professors should remind you.
Her overall impression was that the first year was easier because she was just beginning college and was excited. She dormed during her first year, but in her sophomore year, her living arrangements changed. She was living with her dad. She attended classes during the week and worked on weekends. In the first year she felt more together with the same students, but after completing the first year classes she never saw them again. Carlene experienced an initial sense of disconnect in the second year: “In the second year, the togetherness is missing because students have different schedules, and you become busy with your own concerns and classes.”

Carlene outlined that the demands on her time to complete work and assignments grew more in the second year, especially since her living arrangements changed and she had to travel. She described it as: “I had to multi-task, but it helps me grow.” She felt it was a nice transition to the second year: “Second year wasn’t easy, but it was a nice transition”.

Carlene discussed her own awareness of what it would take to be successful in the second year. In the sophomore year she felt that she had to be truly serious because the academic demands are greater: “In the sophomore year, that’s when the work really started.” While she was dealing with this change, Carlene believed that the sense of care and concern displayed by the College in the first year was nonexistent in the second year. She presented her own account as she experienced it:

In the first year you are more supported and welcomed. “Oh my gosh!” they made you feel like you made the best choice ever coming here. “Let us show you how awesome we are.” Then you get kicked to the side a little in your sophomore year. In the first year they tell you everything and welcome you with open arms. In the second year they don’t really tell you anything. It’s like you move from ‘welcome to college’ to just being in college.
Carlene felt that a little more encouragement is needed to get one started in the second year: “Words of encouragement, I guess; events and activities for the second year; not the hand holding like the first year.” While the message for freshmen is “Welcome,” the message for sophomores should be: “You are in college.” “Let us help you grow.” “Let us help you become the adult, because you are almost twenty.” Carlene felt strongly about the institution paying some attention to sophomores, since this is the year students’ are likely to transfer: “If someone wanted to transfer, they would most likely think about it in the sophomore year.”

Two of her major concerns were financial aid and living arrangements. She was always behind in completing her financial aid on time and she was concerned about her living. She felt like she needed to be independent. She was concerned that her father was really burdened with taking care of her financial needs after he had an accident and was released from his job. “The second year just came with a different level of stress, so I had to learn the importance of managing stress.”

Carlene’s connection to faculty was deeper in the second year. Establishing new friendships and relationships was effortless, and she credited this to participating in the First-Year Learning Communities. Academically, she had strong ambitions in maintaining a good GPA. Setting this goal allowed her to truly monitor her work. Coming from the freshman year with A’s set the bar for her.

Carlene had not heard of the sophomore slump. She was able to put her own definition to this phenomenon: “It’s like senioritis in grade school. You just do the bare minimum.” She gave her own account of her experience with the slump:
There were times when I was just too tired. I knew the work had to be done because bad things would happen if it wasn’t. Dropping out was not an option. “Why would that be an option?” You’re, like, halfway there.

Carlene valued the importance of completing a degree, and she felt she could accomplish more with one because of the knowledge that comes with obtaining her degree.

She shared that her friends had their moments in the slump and stayed there longer than she had, and one or two left. Carlene advocated for an increase in institutional involvement in providing assistance toward sophomores’ growth and development. Events such as major fairs and career workshops would be welcomed for sophomores. Carlene felt she was ready to transition to the second year but was disappointed that there was a lot less guidance for sophomores.

**Grace Ann.** Grace Ann, a traditional-aged sophomore, had random thoughts and lacked direction in the first year. She struggled with the decision of becoming a doctor, lawyer, or creative writer. Grace Ann recognized that she needed to make this decision in the second year. She viewed her sophomore year as progressing and decisive:

In the beginning it is okay to be a little confused and not sure about your major. In the sophomore year it was like reality hit. I need to figure things out. I do not want to be here forever. I feel like moving to the second year is a big stepping-stone.

Grace Ann described the pressure she received from her mother to move into the medical field, but she was certain in her second year that she wanted to pursue creative writing because she was passionate about it. She agreed that moving into the medical field would afford her more opportunities, but she wanted to pursue an area that was her passion. Being emotionally
connected to her major and the courses in her major was important for her. She did not have that connection with the science courses.

She felt that the foundation she received in the first year helped her to transition into the second year. When she transitioned, she experienced more growth and independence, and was more reflective and focused on what she wanted to do:

I started to think more about what I wanted, more about the things that I wanted to learn.

I was excited because I found what I really wanted to do. I felt more confident because I was happy about what I was doing.

Grace Ann’s strong investment in the creative writing course meant also that she was very concerned about her grades: “When I started getting into my major classes I was, “No I should get A’s.” She struggled with one of her major courses because of the demand and volume of the work, but she had support from her peers in the course.

Grace Ann shared that her level of involvement was greater in the first year because there were more events and opportunities to socialize and meet friends. She experienced a void in the second year. There was less involvement and connection with friends because she grew further away from friends in the first year. Forging new relationships was necessary for her in second year. Her relationships with faculty were stronger in the second year because she was more comfortable:

You go from saying “Mrs. Something” to just saying “professor.” It was all new in the first year, but in the second year it was more. This is okay. I guess I was feeling more knowledgeable about campus and how to interact with professors, and that they are not so scary.
The move from freshman to sophomore was a major transition for Grace Ann. She indicated that more sophomore events needed to be visible to students:

To keep sophomores more informed about what they need to do and just getting through the second year. Question and Answer sessions would be helpful for sophomores. Academic and personal challenges were very much a part of Grace Ann’s sophomore experience. She went through life-changing challenges such as getting married, moving from her parents’ house to start a life of her own, dealing with her parents’ objection to her decision to marry early. This forced her to catch up with her reality. She said “I guess it was more like ‘you’re not in high school anymore.’”

Grace Ann was making life-changing decisions on her academic path and career as well as dealing with the changes that came with being married and living with a husband. Grace Ann encountered financial difficulty, time management issues, and the stresses of defining her purpose and dealing with an intimate relationship. Grace Ann found herself at the point of being more reflective and decisive about her life and its direction. She had never heard of the sophomore slump but aptly described it: “I could think of two different things—one is that maybe someone gets lazy within the second year and feels like it is not that exciting anymore.”

She suffered the slump in the first semester of her sophomore year. The struggle with the organic chemistry course was a major source of distress. In the beginning, she convinced herself that it would be okay and things were great until the grim reality set in when she received her grade from the first quiz:

I was … but I studied so hard for this. What is this? I was “Wow,” I’m not going to do well in this. I thought to myself, I am going to fail. I don’t know if this is what I want to do anymore and this is where I started changing my mind and dropped the course.
She felt like she was letting her mother down because of her parents’ expectations for her to follow in their footsteps and become a doctor. Grace Ann shared her experience of volunteering in the hospital in the emergency room where she witnessed the bad experiences in the emergency room. She quickly came to the decision this was not what she wanted to do: “I realized, I looked around and said this is not for me, not where I want to be.”

Grace Ann described her sophomore year as life changing: a big transition academically, emotionally, and financially. The most life-changing experience for her was getting married and moving out, and dealing with the fact that her parents did not accept her decision. The most important thing for Grace Ann was her independence and getting her parents’ support on her decisions.

**Jacob.** Traditional-aged student Jacob described himself as having a much better experience in the sophomore year. His transition differed from that of the other interviewees because he spent much of his first year in the Study Abroad program, which made him stronger and better prepared for the challenges of the second year:

I was able to get everything done, obviously. There was some pressure. It was tougher, definitely, but I was able to do well. Thank God I utilized my time well and developed good study habits, which I did not have in the first year. I wasn’t wasting time in my sophomore year because I knew by then how the system worked. I knew at this point exactly what I wanted to do.

He recounted that in the first year he enjoyed the core classes but his focus changed: “My focus has changed to if it is not a math course and I don’t need it in my future job or career I don’t ‘care’ so much.” He had a stronger investment in his major courses. While he wanted to get A’s in other courses, his goal was to obtain more than an A in the courses for his major: “I
want to do more than just an A. I want to understand it and retain it and have a deeper knowledge.”

Jacob explained that he understood the philosophy behind a well-rounded education, but having a deeper connection to his major courses was important, and for him there was no compromise. While he did well in the science courses, he felt a deeper connection to pursuing math and declaring as a math major since the courses supported his career trajectory. Ultimately, Jacob is working toward becoming an actuary.

He proceeded with giving a lesson on the responsibilities of actuaries and what it took to be credentialed. This demonstrated the depth of his commitment and confidence in both the major and his career choice. He worked to ensure all courses were geared toward his major. He was clear, too, about the direction in which he wanted to take his career. Jacob described himself as demonstrating maturity in the second year: “Definitely more confidence in my abilities and in my results.”

His confidence in his direction influenced his decision to assume leadership responsibilities by starting an actuary club to create a more cohesive community for the small major. He was scheduled to have his first meeting the day of the interview.

James. James is a traditional-aged student majoring in computer science. He was very reflective on making his decision about his major: “I was searching what I would like to do in my life and, computer science; it appeared as the best choice.”

While he was trying to define his major he remained thoughtful about the social aspect of his life:
I was not only searching to make decisions on just major, I was searching my life, in my social life, and family. I wasn’t sure 100% about my major until I thoroughly searched myself, sought advice from faculty, staff, and other students.

His experience with academic advisers was mixed. He thought that the advisers in the advisement center were helpful to a point while he was trying to decide on his major; not so much faculty advisers. He did not think faculty advisers in the academic department were knowledgeable enough. Now that James was focused on his major, he could turn his attention to the future. His goal was to complete an advanced degree.

Receiving quality and reliable information from the departments and advisers was essential for James as he made conscious decisions on doing the right thing to accomplish his goals of obtaining a graduate degree and ultimately a career in computer science: “I’m thinking about it right now but I’m not sure this is good [for the] college to have the advisement in the computer science department.” James felt that sophomores are still in need of direct advisement, and academic, and psychological counseling because students get frustrated with the college and course work as it gets more intense:

You can see at the beginning of the semester everyone is happy, but during the final week, for example, for me it’s scary to go out in the morning commuting by bus to reach campus in time for final exams at 8:00 a.m. Thinking about finals scares a lot of people. James experienced a great deal of anxiety in successfully completing the sophomore year because delaying making decisions could affect how long he remained in college.

James recounted that he was not as involved in campus life, and described his second year as a routine. This was partly due to the fact that he took on a part-time job. He was forced to develop the skills of balancing school and other everyday responsibilities:
So all it was for me, I came to classes and go home, because I had the part-time job and I had to do my projects with college, so I didn’t have time for my social life. My experience as a sophomore—it was just sitting in classes and going home.

He described himself as moving to another level of his personal development. Self-awareness and purpose were stronger for James. He made the connection between financing education and the benefit in the long run. He had a strong sense of responsibility to himself: “Taking computer science courses; you are realizing that this is costing me, but in the future it will help me.”

Establishing a sense of purpose early in the sophomore year was critical for James. Having a clear picture of the future was essential to successful course completion and graduating on time. He felt strongly about randomly exploring classes for two years:

Even though a lot of people suggest that you can take two years and learning different stuff and choosing a major is impossible because if you do the math in order to graduate in four years, you’ve got to choose in the first year.

Connection to his courses was deeper because he was more academically grounded. “Laxed” was his description of how he felt about the courses in the first year: “The grades from the core classes are still important, but not as important as the grades for my courses in my major.”

James was more concerned about understanding the content of his courses:

It is about understanding your courses and thinking what will happen if I get a “B” in one class and all my work during the year and a half will be fallen. It was scary at all levels.

Relationships were stronger and more meaningful for James as a sophomore because his sense of community was primarily the students he took the same courses with in his major:
Seeing the same students for the same classes who had similar interests, it was easier to establish relationships, as well as faculty connections, because you had the same professors for your major courses.

Although this was his second year, James had problems with financial aid and limited selection of courses. Both created much stress for him: “I had to track professors down to get over tally for my major courses and this was stressful.” Although James had not heard of the sophomore slump he considered it a time when students get depressed:

I think at some point I experienced this because during the second year no one is there to guide you. It is bad if it has to happen during your sophomore year and you can’t get over it.

James has never felt like dropping out; he stays because of his own motivation and his future plans for a job. He provided the following description of the sophomore year:

The end of transformation between the high school and college, and it is one step closer to the real life. You need guidance at some level; however, not the hand holding because you are a sophomore. You will need more advisement, especially in your major.

He believed, that as a sophomore if you need to find something you will find it: “If you can handle the thing by yourself, it is important for you to move forward. Even though there is not much guidance in the school, if you want to find something you will.”

Jane. Jane, a traditional-aged sophomore, was quite engaging and confidently shared her story on how she decided on her major: “I was not handling my pre-med classes well, so I turned to Plan B, which is psychology or sociology. After much advisement I chose sociology.” Although Jane chose sociology, it took her some time to select between the two. Her final decision came after she sought advisement and was sure that she was selecting the right major.
Her decision was also influenced by how connected she felt with the courses and how many
credits she had already accumulated toward either major. Jane described herself as being
confident about what she wanted to do and where she wanted to go:

In my freshman year it was a quick and fast adjustment. I wasn’t sure I knew what I
wanted to do, and I was having problems with my courses. The confidence in when you
know what you want to do makes everything else so much easier and so much better.
Yeah, I was really invested, and I don’t mind studying for three hours because I want to
do this. I don’t mind spending time in the library because I enjoyed what I was studying.

Jane recognized that her personal development really began in the second year. She
started coming into the person she was. She joined a Greek organization and found herself being
more socially integrated and using more of the campus facilities and resources:

Sophomore year you are developing and you are processing things around you
differently. In the sophomore year you are more conscious of your purpose and you
catch on. I learned in the sophomore year to take as much as you can. It’s a learning
experience; it is kind of growing-up type of development.

While this was a good year for her, it was not without its share of challenges. The financial aid
process and the academic advisement were at the top of her list: “The financial aid process is
frustrating because of the way they communicate to students.”

She was also concerned about departmental advisement and the need for more support and
resources in this area:

I feel when I go to the psychology or sociology department they should know more about
what I am talking about. I think it is helpful for sophomores especially, because you are,
I mean, you are only four semesters away from graduating.
Quite interestingly, she shared concerns about the misconception the institution has regarding sophomores:

I think people assume a lot because on the whole you have been in college for a year or you took College Now courses or something. They assume that you know what you know, but you don’t.

She could see the support in the first year, especially all the first year events. This, to her disappointment, did not continue into the second year: “It doesn’t come back during your sophomore year when you’re like, now I really don’t know what to do. I am in college; I have all these credits; but I have no clue what I want to do.

She relied on peer group discussions to keep informed and make decisions:

One thing that helped me was other people’s stories. Having someone who tracked you and encouraged you would be helpful. I feel like that’s the kind of thing that you get in the sophomore year, which will help you out more.

The process of declaring a major was tedious for her and she had to rely on the assistance of the academic advisors. She felt that more needed to be done to keep students informed about being prepared to declare a major:

I would definitely say to try and get in people’s heads about how they should take their courses. Doing workshops or explaining it in a large lecture hall or something in the beginning of the sophomore year so that people have time to either prepare or make decisions about their course-taking pattern.

Jane defined the transition to sophomore year as critical. It should be a time when sophomores feel like they belong and should be comfortable asking for help:
I think having open sessions where people could talk and be like “I really don’t know” would be helpful for sophomores, especially just because that is your transition to where it is like, “Okay, I know what college is about now; I know what they expect of me; now I need to know what I want to study.”

Jane felt great about how much she developed and was able to make decisions. The sophomore year was a year of transformation, a year where friends were different and friendships become more meaningful: “I was very aware that I needed friends who were like me. Yeah I have this course and I need to study; let’s go do it.”

She experienced a deeper connection with professors because of the smaller class sections:

You don’t have that kind of relationship in the first year. Then, in my sophomore year, it was kind of like everyone is here to help you. No one is going to intentionally harm you or fail you. That’s one thing I didn’t do in the first year—gone to a professor and been like “Hey, I’m having trouble in this course; could you help me or could you give me some other advice or extra tidbit.”

Jane gave a very candid description of her experience and perception of the second year. Sophomores, she realized, need to be at a place where they know the direction they want to go because they can land in a situation where they are running around trying to decide. Sophomores can land at the bottom of the priority lists because emphasis is on the new students and on students who are closer to graduating:

In the first year, as an incoming freshman you get a lot of support. In the junior and the senior year, you are pretty much on track because this is your major. As sophomores you are still looking for guidance, which is not necessarily there.
Jane has never experienced the sophomore slump but she provided her own definition: “My assumption would be that you are too comfortable and you go downhill from there.” The one word used to describe her sophomore year was “enjoyable.” She was realistic in her response:

There are always things that are also out of my control at some point, like financial aid. There is always that little thorn, but overall it was very enjoyable for me. It was a lot of work. I think me sticking it out comes from having an enjoyable second year. If I didn’t have an enjoyable second year, I probably wouldn’t be here.

**Karen.** Karen is a traditional-aged sophomore with a double major in education and sociology, who tutors in the learning center. She started the conversation about her major in the second year. She learned a lot from being in the first year program, which helped to create a platform for navigating the college environment:

My friends were like “Oh, how do I get to this class? How do I do this? What do I do with this? What do I do with that?” I’m like, “Just go to them they’ll help you with everything. I got all of that from INDS (Foundations for College Success and Lifelong Learning courses, taught in the first year). I became more familiar with how things work but the expectations were greater in the second year.”

Karen expressed that there is a general misconception around being a sophomore, because it is the belief that sophomores know all they need to. However, there are different things that she thought second year students are in need of, such as more advisement from the departments:

Freshman year you are told every step of the way, “Okay you will go here, you go there, you do that.” Sophomore year, you don’t really get help with, you know, everything or anything like that.”
She revealed that she advanced comfortably to the second year because of the preparation she had received in the first year program. Karen voiced her concern that sophomores need special support as they go through their developmental changes and move on to another phase of their college experience:

- Have more cultural events that would have students coming out to intermingle and socialize. Host an event in the Quad that would bring all the sophomores together and reintroduce their entry to college.
- Karen demonstrated that she has grown and developed. She did not view the second year as challenging, but it was a year in which she had to be more conscious in decisions and how she operated:
  - You kind of learn your study habits during the freshman year so that they prepare you for the second year. Okay, so you already know these are your skills, these are your weaknesses. You kind of work through this in your sophomore year, as well.
- Peer relationships were different for Karen in her sophomore year. She was comfortable with peers in the first year because they were people from high school; however, this changed in the second year:
  - Second year you start choosing different friends; high school friends go away after the first year because of the major changes, and we establish friendships as we bond as a group.
- Relationships with faculty members also changed in the second year: “You are more comfortable, and you know how to approach professors and talk to professors.”
  - Karen had never heard of the sophomore slump. Her definition of the sophomore slump was: “You are, like, in a slump during the sophomore year and you kind of, nobody’s really
encouraging you, supporting you, so you’re kind of down.” She herself has never felt this way, but she indicated that she believed a lot of students do. She considered herself as being lucky to not fall into the slump because she was engaged in the first year program and received a lot of information. She presumed that students who were not exposed to the first year program could have a more difficult experience trying to navigate the sophomore year. Students could fall in a slump if they were in classes they could not manage. Karen has never thought of dropping out because of her parents and her own expectations for college.

Karen established in the interview that she had a very good year in the second year but strongly concluded that one of the major areas for improvement is adding more advisers who have the time to assist students:

I think this would help sophomores because they go from a year of support and events made especially for them to, like, absolutely nothing. Peer mentoring in the sophomore year would also be helpful to students, similar to peer mentoring in the first year.

Christella. Traditional-aged sophomore Christella, a peer mentor for first year students, shared her experiences in the second year. Her views were interesting because while she was going through the transition to second year she was peer mentoring first year students. Christella, an environmental science major, characterized herself as being more knowledgeable about the campus and needing more advisement in the second year.

I would have wanted more advisement in the second year, especially advisement in the major department, as they did not know what to tell me in terms of the classes I needed to take. They did not know how to direct me.

She recounted that in the second year students are on their own:
In the second year you kind of realize that you are on your own. In the first year, you have the Freshman Year Learning Community and the INDS classes, but in the second year you have to figure out where the bursar is, complete financial aid, figure out the registration process, figure out what the registrar is, and get used to figuring out things on your own.

In addition to dealing with the institutional challenges, she was faced with the intense workload from her courses. Her major focus in the second year was graduate school, which was not a concern for her in the first year. Getting used to the campus was more a priority for her in the first year:

As a sophomore, you start thinking about your plans for after you graduate. In the second year I am thinking about what I would do if I study abroad and tell the scholars program what my senior thesis would be.

The connection to the campus grew more for Christella, and her connection with peers changed from the first year. She established new relationships. The deeper connections came from her participation in the peer mentoring program and in other extra-curricular activity: “I was able to make my own community by staying connected with the first year peer-mentoring program.”

Her connection with faculty members also changed in the second year. She stated the following: “My connection felt deeper with faculty because my major was small.” Her involvement and connection with the university did not exempt her from challenges, and she pointed out that help is still needed in the second year:

Preparing students in the first year for what to anticipate in the second year would be helpful. In the first year you are told everything, but when you reach the second year you
realize that there are some things that are missing. You are missing information on certain processes—how to really register, how to declare your major. I think we need more sophomore campus activity to have students still feel more at home. It is a commuter school, so it is important to still keep students together.

Christella expressed some dissatisfaction with the quality of academic advisement, which she believed is essential, but oftentimes students are challenged by the process:

Getting assistance from the advisement center is helpful, but the process felt kind of bureaucratic in a way. It is hard to schedule an appointment for an adviser. Advisement was not helpful for major advising. They did not have much developed to help us as students in this major.

She was frustrated that they could not advise her on internships that were available:

I am thinking of participating in an internship, which is very relevant to my major. It was frustrating that advisers did not know what was available or what was happening. It was a bit disorganized.

Interestingly enough, she stated that she shared her experience with the first year students as a way of preparing them for what they could potentially encounter in their second year. She has heard of the sophomore slump and expressed that she never experienced a complete slump:

I felt like giving up because of the course load. I think that I was able to survive because I realized that in order to graduate I would have to maintain my grade and GPA. I never thought of dropping out, because I had established strong goals for graduating.

**Larissa.** Larissa, also a traditional-aged sophomore, described herself as a dedicated and focused student who is studious and hardworking. In addition to dealing with the developmental changes of becoming a sophomore, she had to manage the changes that came with being a
newlywed. She described her sophomore year as a time when she felt comfortable with herself and with the college environment. She perceived her experience as one in which she had to learn to get things done. She credited her proactive nature to her confidence. To survive the second year, she relied heavily on peer support because based on her experience the college was not “holding your hand”:

As a second year student, you have to go seek help. I felt welcomed in the first year. I had all my friends; it was like a continuation of high school. However, in the sophomore year I made new friends. I was welcomed and comforted more by my friends at this point because I kept being in the same place as they were—psychology majors.

Larissa established her academic plan and pushed to complete her courses because she was concerned about graduating on time. She valued relationships with professors, whom she thought were helpful and appeared less intimidating than they had seemed in her first year: “You ask for recommendation letters and they get to know you more.”

Larissa had never heard of the sophomore slump, but she believed that it means sophomores are “slacking up.” She never found herself slumping, but she believed her husband experienced the slump:

My husband took off a year from the sophomore year because he had to deal with registration blocks regarding his major. He was frustrated because he did not have the confidence to speak with individuals to advise him. He is just not as forthright as me to step forward and speak to someone about his issues.

Larissa acknowledged that the sophomore experience could be better if mentors were available:

“I would say personal advocates for people who actually can talk to you about their own
experience, and once you have someone encouraging you, like a real person encouraging you, it is always better.”

Michelle. Michelle identified herself as a marketing major. She is also a traditional-aged sophomore who chose marketing as a second option for a major; it was her “Plan B.” She changed from computer science to marketing, a major that she came to realize was more important for her. At the end of her finals she was convinced that she needed to change her mind about her major. Like other participants, she spoke to her peers and staff from the academic department while she was in the process of making a decision. The conviction that this was what she wanted to do motivated her to do her own research. She stated that she did her own research and this helped her to make a final decision. Michelle was focused on graduating on time and ultimately getting a job. That was her main concern in the second year: “It was the whole thing of graduating and getting a job. Not some kind of silly job, but a career and making something of myself with that career.”

While Michelle was going through the stages of deciding on her major, she still struggled with self-confidence and anxiety issues: “From time to time I was a little worried—what if I don’t get there. Then when I got these feelings I was able to go talk to someone.”

She defined her second year experience as a period of development and coming into her own, moving into adulthood and recognizing what she needed to do in order to be successful: “I feel like my sophomore year was the best because when I first started college I was just out of high school and I did not know.”

Michelle saw the sophomore year as the year she started developing. The first year was filled with insecurities. As she progressed on to the second year, she realized that the insecurities were still there and she made the conscious decision to seek help with anxiety and stress. In the
first semester of the second year she received help and was able to have a better experience in the second year. Suffering from test anxiety was crippling for her, and she realized that this would hamper her success and she sought help. Her anxiety issues affected her grades in the first year, but after she sought help, her grades got better in the second year. She had a better academic experience and better social experience because she was able to manage her stress.

Michelle saw her second year as maturing while in the first year she experienced the sheer excitement of being a college student. In the second year this excitement dissipated and her outlook on her college experience changed:

I think the major difference in the second year, I kind of matured. I think when you are a freshman you are like, oh, I am a college student, like, look at me. However, when I got into sophomore year, I took it seriously. I’m a college student; it’s not such a big deal. I just need to get things done.

Michelle described herself as becoming an adult officially:

Even though technically I am an adult when I go into college, sophomore year was like that’s it, I’m an adult. I have to take care of myself; and no more like, “Mom and dad; I need your help,” or whatever. I’m an adult, I have to take care of myself, and that was that.

Michelle was interested in careers and internships. Learning more about internship opportunities was critical to her. For her, more campus focus was needed on internships and careers:

More information about that, and being more aware of opportunities because I am interested in doing an internship soon, but I think learning about it once you go into your second year, you kind of inspire the students to like, oh, wow, this internship thing is
cool. It gets them into their career and it gets them more experience, so I think that is important for sophomores.

Getting good grades was essential to Michelle. Academically, the sophomore year appeared challenging for her because of the content and volume of the coursework. During her freshman year, she was satisfied with the introductory courses: “Freshman year, the courses are introductory so they’re not that difficult, but then you start getting more into them and it gets more serious, so the second year is more difficult.” Michelle felt more connected in her academic work as a sophomore, and she saw the relevance of her courses to everyday life and to her major.

She had an interesting perspective on her peers in the second year. As she moved into the second year, she was more selective in creating friendships. The focus was more on building purposeful relationships:

Well, the first year was like, wow, I’m in college. There’s so many people; let me make friends with all of them. But then in the second year you realize, okay, I shouldn’t be friends with some people. I feel like in the second year you kind of understand who to participate with and who to be friends with.

In the second year, she saw professors more as allies. In her first year, they seemed stern, and in the second year she was able to build relationships with the professors: “I had professors telling me to send them emails when I have an issue—whenever you want. Even if it’s random, I felt like it was closer with my second year.” She felt more connected.

Family support and support from faculty were very important, and Michele felt assured that she could rely on the support of her professors and family: “Like, ‘Hey, student, everything is going to be okay. We’ll help you through this.’ So I think this is the most important thing.”
One of her greatest challenges in the second year was registering for classes. The process was stressful because she was not always sure she would get the classes she needed. The registration process brought on much anxiety for her. Signing up for classes was a challenge because the system was difficult to work with:

In first year you get the attention; you are getting help with classes and registering for these classes; and then in the sophomore year they just kind of push you into things:

“OK, you do it; we’re not going to help you anymore.”

Michelle acknowledged that a little more help and support is still needed because sophomores are moving into another phase of college life, and they will still need help even at this point. For sophomores, this kind of transition is new, and support would be helpful.

Dealing with the way the college communicated with her was very difficult. Emails for her were typically late or not pertaining to her: “I would get email and I’d be like, wait I took care of that, why am I getting this again? And the anxiety starts.”

Michelle had never heard of the sophomore slump, but she acknowledged that she has had moments when she felt like abandoning her education:

I have one or two friends who, like, took it serious in the first year—taking notes, getting involved, and really studying; and come sophomore year, they are like whatever happens, happens.

Although Michelle never seriously considered dropping out, she did have days when she felt like not going to school, but staying home and doing nothing. The anxiety issues she suffered with had some impact on how she felt: “The anxiety really triggered everything. I didn’t want to see my professors; I didn’t want to go to school.”
**Pamela.** Pamela is a traditional-aged sophomore whose primary focus in the second year was getting positioned to graduate in three years. In her first year she did not feel the need to focus. In her second year she had an epiphany about the future and what she wanted to do:

For the first year I was just enjoying myself. It was just, okay, I have to attend class. I was not concerned about the future; but by the time the second year hit, it is like very soon. I start thinking about my future, what I want to do, where I want to go.

Pamela, a traditional-aged sophomore, had clearly established her own identity and started building new relationships with peers and faculty members. While she had a host of friends in the first year, this changed in the second year:

I barely speak to these people anymore. You have to establish new communications and relationships with people. You have to establish new friendships with students in the second year. It was easier to make friends in the first because we all had the same classes and were more or less doing the same thing. In the second year it is necessary to build different relationships because you are in a new phase of your academic life.

Relationship building with faculty was easier in the second year. Developing relationships with professors was important to her because she felt that connection to faculty was critical to her academic success:

In the first year you are hesitant and scared because you don’t want them to think you are dumb or stupid. You don’t want to come across as dumb. In the second year you feel more comfortable going to faculty to ask for explanation, and to challenge a grade and insist on an explanation on why I got this grade.

Pamela started feeling a deeper connection to academics, so her expectations about course content were crucial in the second year. Mastering her course content for her major was
essential. If she couldn’t do it she would become frustrated. She shared that teachers’ expectations of students’ course knowledge were also greater, but there were times when the expectations conflicted with the reality, which posed a challenge. Professors’ expectations on academics tend to be higher in the second year because they are teaching on the premise that students are coming in with previous knowledge.

For example, like, I took introduction to psychology in high school, so by the time I reached the second year I was doing experimental psychology, and they would expect you to remember stuff and it is like “Listen, it has been 30 years ago.” I don’t really remember every single detail. They would say “You know this already,” but I really didn’t. At the same time I felt that they were not willing to help you, or work with you. “You already know this.” Not really.

While she felt that her transition was acceptable, she showed disappointment that the emphasis placed on introducing the first year of college and establishing connection was not there to help students maintain the connection and momentum in the second year:

I definitely think that second year students get lost; and it is like, even now I am looking, asking myself how do I sign up for clubs, how do I do things, because all emphasis is on first year students. It would be good to have that opportunity to connect with more sophomores and to give general information on the sophomore expectations. There is the need to bond with others experiencing the same thing.

She acknowledged the success of the first year program in having peer mentors to assist students. She agreed that this level of mentorship should carry over to the second year because students can become too comfortable, and this is where they need guidance to make lifelong decisions. Sophomores, she stated, are left to figure it out:
I think having advisors and a road map similar to what we had in the first year would make a difference 100% in terms of my outlook on my courses in the second year. In the first year we had peer mentors who came to the classes who were in our shoes; and they knew what we were going through, so it was nice to hear about their experiences and for them to say “Oh, finals is around the corner. You need to start studying.”

In the second year there is no, like, role model type; you were on your own. There was no one there to guide you. Not having guidance was a challenge.

While she felt that she transitioned well to the second year, she still believed there should have been more sophomore-specific support. Support in the form of wanting more advisement and getting help with future plans, such as graduate school. She relied on friends who have been in her position to advise her:

I definitely think that I was prepared to transition to the second year, but it would have been nice to have a safety net, just someone you could talk to, just someone to tell you that this is what to expect.

Connection with the college in the second year is important to Pamela, but she thought there was more done to establish the connection in the first year but less done to maintain the connection:

I definitely think that there should be just an event for second year to even meet people who are going through the same things that you are, people who have the same interests as you, who might not be in your class but still want to pursue the same thing. An event to get all second year students together and explain the expectations in the second year would be helpful.

Pamela had never heard of the sophomore slump, but she concluded that it means feeling lazy at some point, similar to how she felt when her outlook and approach to classes were more lax.
In the first year, I was more cautious and read everything, made sure everything was perfect. The second year was more like, I could just skim this like 10 minutes before class; it is not that bad; it is okay. I don’t have to be so diligent.

She agreed that her cavalier approach definitely added a little more stress during finals time:

I wasn’t, like, really doing the work consistently, so come to the finals, everything was piled up because I was not doing the work consistently; but in the first year I was, like, more prepared because I was doing more like a weekly reading, so I was more prepared and didn’t have to read it all in the end.

She provided quite an interesting definition of the sophomore year: “A period when you are trying to stay motivated and trying to stay relevant; trying to figure out where to go and what to do next.” Pamela struggled with staying motivated.

She stated that overcoming these challenges was essential to success and believed if she were to mentor sophomores she would encourage them to plan so they can make decisions and define their purpose early:

I would definitely encourage them to pick what they need to do next. I know it seems far, but they need to make that decision and stay motivated and remember why they enrolled in the first year and just keep it up and stay focused.

Stephen. Stephen a traditional-aged student, articulated that he started out wanting to major in computer science, but came to an awakening at the end of the freshman year:

I didn’t do so well in class and I ended up passing with what’s considered a decent grade, but I wasn’t impressed. I figured these are intro classes—What lies ahead? After that I decided it’s time to look into something else, and my sophomore year I decided to do public accounting. Declaring a major was not a problem; it was an online process.
In the first year Stephen was less concerned about grades and more concerned about his anxiety issues. He had the mindset that it would get easier in the first year but he experienced his first reality check: “When I got my grades, I was shocked.” His grades were lower than he had anticipated. Second year classes appeared more challenging; and the expectations were greater, so Stephen made a conscious effort to make changes in the second year:

My grades and GPA became a primary focus in the second year. I had to write more papers. There was a lot more expected of me, because I wasn’t going to be babied anymore. Freshman year I was kind of babied, and I could get away with excuses. Making excuses wasn’t going to be easy in the sophomore year. For me, I kind of thought I was going to get the same treatment in the sophomore year, as freshman, and when I didn’t, I was like, it is fine—I can deal with that.

Stephen came in the second year with less anxiety about the campus environment. He had grown used to the campus community:

I was less concerned about how I would find my classes and more concerned about how I would do in the classes, who am I going to hang out with, how am I going to budget my time from studying to going to class and all that fun stuff.

He shared his anxiety about performing well in his major courses:

In the beginning of the fall semester there was a lot of anxiety. It was like, okay, I am switching to accounting and if I mess up this time around, now what happens? Do I switch majors again? That really stressed me out the entire semester. After I got my grades back the fall and the spring semester of the sophomore year, it really eased my tension.
Managing anxiety was a part of Stephen’s development. He made use of the resources that were available, such as his professors:

You can even speak with your professor. That was not a big thing. It’s just like, you are having problems academically? Speak to your professor. College was not meant to keep you anxious. If you keep taking it like that then you are just going to end up doing that.

The major difference between his second and first years was how he handled his anxiety:

I learned in the second year that I need to overcome my anxiety by three things: just hanging out with the right crowd, managing your study time, with your having fun, too.

Stephen saw himself as growing and exercising autonomy in choice- and decision-making:

I definitely saw much maturity. It just showed me that I am resilient. The fact that I can make serious decision-making—That was one of the big things I learned.

His major decision-making moment came when he had to seriously choose a major that he could manage well:

I realize that not everyone is going to do what they wanted to do freshman year. That was one of the big things. I can make major decisions with myself instead of having to rely on someone else.

Although his parents were ecstatic that he was majoring in computer science and had great expectations, Stephen realized he had to make that decision without parental influence: “They’re like, “All right we’re expecting a computer science degree in 2016.” In his sophomore year, Stephen was more confident in telling them he switched majors:

“I wouldn’t dare tell them in first year.” In sophomore year I told them, you know what, I have to switch the major. It is not like a big thing; everyone in college does it.”
Stephen attested to developing more confidence in the second year: “When you reach a certain stage in college, you are an adult. I was like, I’m going to leave my parents out of this. I can do this.” He expressed that his level of involvement increased in the second year, in part due to his increasing confidence. He is active in the accounting club and the Islamic society.

Stephen has heard of the sophomore slump, and he presented his perspective on what he thinks it is:

It just means that you are at a setback; you are going to feel the “babying” is going to continue. You’re going to be in a completely different mindset when you actually hit the sophomore year because you are going to be like: Wait. I was expecting to be babied. Where is the babyness? What’s going on? Why isn’t it so easy? Then you just take a dive in.

He believed he suffered the slump at some point. During the spring semester, he thought he had everything under control and he knew what his classes were about. Yet he constantly put off the need to study. His final exam was a surprise. Additionally, he was thinking about being able to assist his father in paying his tuition because he felt he was burdening his parents: “At nights it would be hard to sleep and I’d cry a lot.”

He did not think about dropping out because he was determined to complete college, and his idea of dropping out would not be accepted by his parents. His refusal to drop out was also influenced by the fact that he wanted to assist his parents financially. Stephen was not eligible for financial aid because of his student status. He is an immigrant student.

Since he was more attuned to getting a job, he felt the college can focus on career workshops or something aimed at sophomores. He said that in the first year students have
developed their own mindset on how the sophomore year will progress and they make decisions on what their career path will be until they go through the courses:

   Making a decision early in the sophomore year about your major and career choice is significant and will set the groundwork for whether you will graduate early or not.

He advocated for more emphasis on major choices and career workshops, stating that “sophomores who are serious will attend these workshops.”

The above descriptions were included to provide a brief summary of each participant’s key responses during the interview. Categories and themes emerged from the participants’ responses and these themes will be identified and explored in the next section to understand the sophomore experience.

**Emergent Themes**

Through the two stages of sensemaking (interpretative analysis and double hermeneutics), as well as sustained engagement with the analysis of the transcripts and participants’ experiences, various themes and subthemes describing their second year experience were identified. The themes define the study participants’ understanding on gaining purpose, establishing relationships, dealing with personal and institutional challenges; as well as their own experiences, and understanding of the sophomore slump. Additionally, through their own understanding of their second year experience, they shared the needs of students in the second year and the institution’s role in meeting their needs. The emergent themes include the following:

- **Theme #1: Development of Self Academically and Personally**
  a) Subtheme #1: Transformation of self morally, psychologically, and intellectually
  b) Subtheme #2: Stronger sense of responsibility for future choices and learning
• **Theme #2: Developing Purpose In Looking Ahead to the Future**
  a) Subtheme #1: Commitment toward developing academic competence
  b) Subtheme #2: Thinking independently and taking responsibility for decision-making

• **Theme #3: Building and Maintaining Meaningful Relationships**
  a) Subtheme #1: Comfort with building faculty relationship
  b) Subtheme #2: Reliance on peer network to shape experience

• **Theme #4: Institutional Challenges Facing Sophomores**
  a) Subtheme #1: Needing more guidance
  b) Subtheme #2: Level of satisfaction with academic advisement
  c) Subtheme #3: Challenged or not in declaring a major
  d) Subtheme #4: Building community to establish identity and support

• **Theme #5: Contextualizing the Sophomore Slump**
  a) Subtheme #1: Defining the slump
  b) Subtheme #2: Experiencing the slump

• **Theme #6: The Journey from the First to the Second Year**
  a) Subtheme #1: Understanding the second year experience

**Description of Themes**

**Emergent Theme #1: Development of Self Academically and Personally.** The first theme that emerged from the interviews is predicated on the research question. How do sophomores from a large urban institution perceive their experiences? During the interviews, the participants overwhelmingly stated that they viewed the sophomore year as a period of change and transformation both personally and academically. As they experienced changes they began to actively reflect on finding meaning and purpose. All participants perceived their experience
as a period of growth and change in their own self-development and in their intellectual development. Two subthemes emerged from this theme: the transformation of self (morally, psychologically, and intellectually); and a stronger sense of responsibility for future choices and learning. During their interviews, the study participants described themselves as entering a new stage of development mixed with new challenges.

**Subtheme #1: Transformation of Self, Morally, Psychologically, and Intellectually**

Participants’ transformation of self occurred as they advanced to another phase of their academic growth in the sophomore year, in contrast to their first year of college. There is evidence of moral, intellectual, and psychosocial development as participants focused on their major courses, tried to define their purpose, redefined their relationships, and worked on their continued adaptation to the college’s social environment. Participants indicated that they were more comfortable in the college environment in the second year than they were in the first. All twelve participants compared moving to the sophomore year with moving into the world of adulthood. The second year was characterized as the point where they experienced an awakening to their new academic reality. They viewed themselves as becoming more responsible for making decisions about their major, choice of friends, and their future. The consensus among the participants was that support from family was great, but they preferred to have less parental control and involvement during this stage of their development.

Three male participants described their growth process as one in which they sensed more maturity and resilience in themselves. One defined the growth process as the end of transformation between high school and college and the beginning of real life. Others associated growth with an increase in confidence in their abilities.
As evidenced by the female respondents’ descriptions, advancing to the second year was perceived as moving into adulthood and realizing the importance of focusing on what was necessary for future success. They fully embraced and acknowledged that they had officially become adults, which influenced their mindset to act more responsibly, become more independent and make decisions about their future. As participants experienced developmental changes, they had growing confidence and independence in their choices and decision-making. Coupled with this was also the anxiety some participants experienced as they moved through these changes.

The sophomore year was also described as a time when students were developing and processing things around them differently; experiencing life changing moments, and making big transitions academically, emotionally, and financially.

As sophomores in this study were developing towards adulthood there was an increased awareness of self, purpose, and direction of their lives. Moral and psychosocial development occurred as they moved into adulthood. The twelve participants characterized themselves as growing and changing mentally, emotionally, and academically and becoming more engaged in active and reflective thinking.

Their moral development was apparent in their ability to understand the pressures and challenges they encountered in the second year. Some of the common challenges that they identified included the academic demands and pressures, anxiety, the urgency in declaring and selecting majors, and institutional processes.

**Subtheme # 2: Stronger Sense of Responsibility in Future Choices and Learning.**

Moving into adulthood goes hand in hand with assuming personal responsibility for choices and decisions. The participants reflected on the extent to which they began focusing on themselves
in setting and meeting their academic and future goals. Making these important decisions helped to increase their self-confidence. The more autonomy they had in making their decisions, the more confident they became as individuals. Of the 12 participants in the study, at least 11 were free of parental control in their decision-making process. All participants expressed the desire to demonstrate personal responsibility for their decisions and choices. Participants indicated that they considered themselves as having more intense academic responsibilities and personal responsibility of self in the second year than the first. There was the stronger inclination toward taking their academic responsibility more seriously and dealing with the reality now that they were in college, which was different from how they felt in the first year.

The sense of responsibility extended to an understanding of what they needed to do in order to ensure their success. Realizing that study patterns changed, proper time management was required as well as the importance of resolving issues that could carry over from the first year. These unresolved issues could create more difficulty in the second year especially when the academic demands and expectations increased. Three participants had to develop coping mechanisms to deal with their anxiety issues, stress, and insecurities. Overcoming these stressors was essential so they could remain more focused when making decisions about their future and function successfully in an academic environment.

Settling in as a sophomore was important to the participants. Being settled allowed them to have clearer thoughts about their future and meeting their goals in a timely fashion. With a stronger sense of responsibility comes a stronger sense of self-awareness and purpose.

**Theme #2: Developing Purpose in Looking Ahead to the Future**

Developing purpose is another overarching theme that emerged from the interviews of the study participants. The overwhelming consensus was that there was a marked difference in
their thought processes and actions towards their purpose and direction, which was a primary focus for them in the second year. There was less thought about direction in the first year as they spent the time learning about the college environment. As they moved into the second year, reality started settling in that they really were in college and the time had arrived for more intense focus on their entire approach to their academics and their future.

**Subtheme #1: Commitment Toward Developing Academic Competence.** Participants described themselves as experiencing greater academic commitment because they were either passionate about the courses they were taking, had greater expectations such as consciousness about grades, or decided these courses would afford them a good job in the future.

There was a deeper connection with their academic major and deeper meaning ascribed to the courses they took. Wanting to do well in the chosen major was critical for the participants. They wanted to excel and feel comfortable in the major they selected. Once doubt surfaced about their ability to master the courses in their major, they began questioning where they belonged and what they should be doing. Indeed, two of them found themselves resorting to “Plan B” for their major because they were not performing well in one of the core courses they were taking toward their initial majors: medicine, pre-med, and computer science.

The participants agreed that their academic performance in their major was critical and should reflect more than just an average grade. Their ability to perform well was a clear indication that they were on the right track with their academic path and choice in major. They felt vested in their majors. The participants indicated that they saw a strong connection between what they were doing in class and their future. In the sophomore year, the participants were becoming conscious of what they could and could not manage academically. They recognized
the importance of having a plan B for a choice in major. Having a plan B helped them to survive one of the major concerns in the sophomore year.

Some respondents admitted to feeling less worried about the core courses and started ascribing a higher level of importance to the major courses. GPA and grades were important to some of the participants and understanding the course content was more essential to others. For one participant, the focus on academics changed quite a bit in the second year, when a deeper understanding of the courses in the major became important.

The female participants appeared to be more concerned about the grades, while males expressed concerns about mastering the course content. A stronger commitment to their major meant they were more committed and vested in their academic success.

The participants agreed that they sought academic guidance from their professors and were more compelled to get help with their academics in the second year than they had in the first year. They wanted to make sure they were performing well academically. All participants felt that an academic transition took place in the second year because the courses were different from the freshman introductory courses.

Participants in the study expressed that professors and the institution had greater expectations for students in their second year. While the expectations were greater in terms of what they should know and what they should do, the reality for the participants was different. There was a general misconception about what sophomores knew. For some, it was a huge burden because professors had greater academic expectations of sophomores, when in reality students were struggling with the course content. As the expectations grew, the pressure to fulfill these expectations became more intense. While the expectations were greater for these study participants, the reality was that some participants felt they were not fully prepared to live
up to these expectations, not because they did not know what they wanted, but simply because they did not know what they needed to do to get there.

The academic rigors were more intense in the second year because of the focus on the major courses and participants desire to ensure that they were academically competent in these courses. For some of the participants it was not just about getting good grades, but having a full understanding of them and aligning these courses with their plans.

**Subtheme # 2: Thinking Independently and Taking Responsibility for Decision Making.** The decisions made by the participants were influenced either by advice from their peers, professors, or parents, or by their own research to gather information on particular majors. Decision-making was found to be an integral part of their sophomore experience. During this period, the study participants were required to make decisions about academic major.

Uncertainty about decision on a major was also an issue for participants. The study participants were aware that indecisiveness about a major in the second year could delay the academic journey and could pose challenges and anxiety for them.

Deciding on what subject they connected with as a major in the second year came across as very important to participants in this study. Choosing a major tended to give sophomores a sense of identity. The participants realized that they were another year closer to graduating and prolonged indecisiveness could delay their academic journey.

**Theme #3: Building and Maintaining Meaningful Relationships**

Building healthy relationships was another important aspect of the sophomore year experience. While the participants had developed friendships in the first year, those were often relationships of convenience. A major difference in the second year was that participants started seeking more meaningful relationships and selecting friends because of common interests, career
directions, and goals. Eleven of the twelve participants saw themselves establishing deeper relationships, especially with peers. They also saw themselves fostering and taking responsibility for deeper relationships with faculty members because there was more faculty-based advisement in the academic department and there were smaller class sizes. Additionally, the participants all attested to feeling more comfortable relating to their professors, especially faculty members they had more than once for courses in their majors.

**Subtheme #1: Comfort with Building Faculty Relationships.** Student-faculty interaction was a dominant subtheme that emerged from the analysis. Some participants saw faculty members as quite resourceful. They consulted with their professors when they were making decisions on career choice, or when they needed recommendations, or when they were having other personal challenges. They all described their relationships with their professors as growing more and being more comfortable in the second year.

All participants expressed how comfortable they were in approaching their professors because they no longer felt intimidated and they saw professors as partners in the learning process. They all valued faculty relationships because deeper connections with faculty were critical to their academic success.

Participants perceived faculty members as being more helpful, caring, and concerned because they were able to build closer ties and relationships. Participants clearly saw faculty members not only in their roles as educators but as information brokers, mentors, and individuals who understood the struggles of their students.

**Subtheme #2: Reliance on Peer Network to Shape Experience.** Respondents conceded that they established and forged new friendships in the second year. Both male and females expressed the importance of building new friendships in the second year. They recounted losing
their friendships from the first year because they moved to their majors or decided to select more like-minded individuals. The respondents admitted that they were looking for friends who were like them and were resolute about forging relationships that would add value to their own intellectual growth. Furthermore, they agreed that it was necessary to build different relationships in the second year because they were at a point in their academic journey that required them to be conscious in their choices. The consensus was that it was important to be selective with friends.

Sophomores who participated in this study were beginning to add more meaning and purpose in their lives and they saw the value of having more meaningful friendships. They judiciously sought out friends who could contribute successfully to their academic journey. The importance of peer-to-peer interaction resonated with most participants. When the information was lacking in terms of helping participants understand processes and interpreting what they needed to do, they relied on friends and upperclassmen for advice and guidance. Many participants expressed their openness to peer mentoring in the second year.

Peer advising and mentoring from upperclassmen were highly valued by participants, as they felt that other students could better relate to their concerns, since they had most likely experienced the same things. Forming meaningful relationships was obviously important because peers also served as significant information brokers and support for these study participants.

Theme #4: Institutional Challenges Facing Sophomores. Eleven of twelve study participants agreed that they felt a sense of belonging to the college in the second year, and their confidence levels increased, because they were beginning to feel quite comfortable with their environment. They credit the sense of belongingness to preparations they received from the first
year programs. Study participants recognized that although they received enough guidance from the program to meet their needs in the first year, this did not prepare them for the institutional challenges they encountered in the second year. They were very specific in defining their needs and were quite transparent about how they viewed their needs in the second year. The most significant needs were advisement, mentoring by peers and faculty, and more institutional focus on establishing a class identity within the campus community for sophomore students. In discussing their experiences, the study participants compared the first year experience with the second year experience and used the first year as the barometer for what they should be getting in the second year. Participants were hoping for more effective advisement, an effective process for declaring a major, and the creation of sophomore specific events.

**Subtheme #1: Needing More Guidance.** The twelve study participants overwhelmingly stated that they were still in need of support in their second year. They indicated that as sophomores there was the overall expectation that they should be more aware of what needed to be done, but this was far from the reality of their experience. They assessed that there was the necessity for reinforcing and re-emphasizing second year students’ responsibilities and expectations because the information was more relevant to them at that time.

Participants identified mentorship as an activity that would be helpful in the second year because as students who were making life-long decisions it was important to get some guidance. Because the first year programs had peer mentors, as well as advisers and road maps, to assist students, participants believed that this should be continued in the second year. The idea of having peers as role models was important, as they would serve as a source for guiding and preparing students for what to anticipate in the second year. This was referred to as having a
safety net. This safety net should be in the form of reintroducing what was essential to sophomores, good advisement, mentoring, and building a sophomore community.

**Subtheme #2: Level of Satisfaction with Academic Advisement.** When students moved on to the second year they experienced a form of transition in the advisement process, in that they were moving from a more general form of advisement in the advisement center to more major-specific advisement in the academic departments. Participants spoke much about their experience with advisement. Some participants would still rely on the advisement center for advisement when they felt that the academic department could not adequately furnish them with information. Advisers in the academic advisement center were seen as more helpful, but staffing needs were deficient and staff could not meet the demands. Academic advisement, though understaffed, was their primary source of help. They valued the help and mentoring from departmental advisers, but their availability was limited and in some instances their attitudes were unwelcoming.

Study participants wanted to have access to more support in the form of advisement, processes that were more straightforward, and an environment that would support them in their growth and maturity.

Discontent in advisement was expressed by some of the participants. They indicated that during their process of choosing a major and understanding how this would fit into their future goals, when the advisement was insufficient, sometimes they relied on professors and on peers. Some proactively researched and arrived at answers about where they were going and what they needed to do.

The respondents agreed that being guided accurately and efficiently was essential because they considered themselves at that critical stage of their status as students. The
participants agreed that they were no longer randomly choosing courses so they had to make
effective academic and career planning decisions.

**Subtheme #3: Challenged or Not in Declaring a Major.** Based on the study
participants’ experiences, it appears that the process of declaring a major lacked consistency
across the institution’s academic departments. Some academic departments had a more
streamlined on-line process, while other departments had more tedious processes. The study
participants valued the importance of having enough information on how to declare their majors.
Not knowing what to do and where to go left some of the participants frustrated and frantic about
declaring in a timely fashion.

The respondents agreed that the message on the importance of declaring a major and how
to declare a major needed to be clearer. It should be emphasized consistently in the second year,
primarily at the beginning and middle of the sophomore year. They believed it should be an
institutional effort and a major event in the campus community. “Moments of confusion” was
the catch phrase used by participants to describe their experiences in declaring a major.
Confusion appeared within the timeline, the number of credits they needed to declare, and for
some, getting lost in the series of steps in the process leading up to declaration of their majors.

The process of declaring a major created much anxiety and was viewed as daunting for
the participants who lacked clarity about what they needed to do and how they should proceed in
the process. Overall, participants felt it was necessary to have a more streamlined and
transparent process that was consistent and in some instances more straightforward.

**Subtheme #4: Building Community to Establish Identity and Support.** Building a
community of sophomores to establish a second year experience and an identity for sophomores
was one other area that was important, primarily to the female study participants. There was the
expressed need to bond with other sophomores who were experiencing the same things. Establishing this network through events would allow them to meet other students and would help to increase their sense of belonging. They recognized the strong efforts to welcome them as first year students and believed the support should continue to meet the needs of second year students. They repeatedly mentioned the need for more encouragement. For these participants, fostering a community of peers would encourage support, learning, and overall satisfaction with their sophomore experience. Providing more opportunities for sophomores’ development was also identified as important. It gets them into their career and it gets them more experience.

One of the most vital elements of participating in the first year program for the study participants was the engagement in communities and social programming, which helped with establishing a sense of belonging and interdependence. When they became sophomores, this type of social engagement was nonexistent, which isolated them. As evidenced from participants’ responses, they agreed on the need for more sophomore-specific events to bond as sophomores and to keep informed about the goals and expectations of the second year. This would help to build a community of sophomores and increase the campus awareness of their existence and their needs.

**Theme # 5: Contextualizing the Sophomore Slump.** Of the twelve study participants interviewed, only two had ever heard of the sophomore slump. The study participants were asked to share their perspectives on what they believed this meant. All agreed that it seemed like a time when students in the second year began slacking off and feeling lazy, getting comfortable and going downhill, trying to stay motivated, and doing the bare minimum.

**Subtheme #1: Defining the Slump.** The study participants’ experiences with the slump came in different forms, due to academic challenges such as intensive course load and
underestimating the course load, lack of guidance and struggling with unresolved issues from the first year. Participants believed that lack of a support system at home or college could lead students to fall into the slump.

**Subtheme #2: Experiencing the Slump.** Some participants admitted that there were moments when they lost the drive to complete the work either because they were too tired or they were not as diligent as they had been in the first year. For some participants their experience with the slump involved having an awakening to the reality of their new academic demands and struggling to meet these new expectations with minimal institutional support.

All the participants who experienced some aspect of the slump recognized that it would be fruitless to stay there. Furthermore, they did not think it was productive to stay in a slump because they were halfway to graduation and they recognized the benefits of completing their degrees.

**Theme #6: The Journey from the First to the Second Year.** Having participated in a first year program, the majority of the participants acknowledged that there was a gap when they crossed over to the second year. Although the gap existed, the twelve participants did not fall within the gap but applied what they learned in the first year as a platform to stand on in the second year. The platform represented their familiarity with the college environment and the gap represented their unawareness of the expectations in the second year. All the respondents credited the first year program for the crossover but they were left hanging in the second year without a safety net because of the significant drop in support. The respondents said that academically, the support and all the events occurred in the first semester of the first year. In the second semester of the first year it started dropping off and then it did not return in the
sophomore year. As a result, sophomores said that confusion set in because students questioned what they needed to do.

**Subtheme #1: Understanding the Second Year Experience.** As evidenced by both the male and female participants, they experienced the obvious difference in institutional support in the first year versus the second. While participants did not want the hand holding, they attested to needing support to help them in their development and in gaining a better understanding of what was required to function in the second year. Some participants described the feeling that “something was missing” or “feeling lost and confused.” Because participants were aware that the guided approach was missing in the second year, they were compelled to develop coping strategies by opening up to others who could support and help them manage the issues they encountered.

In addition to experiencing changes in the academic environment, it was evident from participants that they themselves encountered their own personal changes. They saw themselves as being more timid, apprehensive, and reserved in the first year and ultimately gaining more confidence in who they had become as they moved to the second year. The participants said that they developed more maturity in their thought processes and about their future. All twelve participants agreed that they experienced this development. Their experiences in the first year were a prelude to advance to the second year but did not fully prepare them for what to expect in the second year. There was a noticeable difference in what they knew in the first year and what was expected in the second year, and they had to find ways to deal with and cope with these expectations with minimal support. They all agreed that they transitioned quite well to the second year, but they recognized that there was a disparity in the continuity of any type of second year support.
The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analyzed from the participants’ responses, describe the experiences and developmental changes of traditional-aged sophomores. Table 2 presents a summary of these themes and subthemes, and Figure 2 represents the journey of their development from the first year to the second year based on the participants’ accounts.
Table 2

*Themes and subthemes that emerged from twelve participants’ interview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>Theme 3</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
<th>Theme 5</th>
<th>Theme 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development of Self Academically and Personally</strong></td>
<td><strong>Developing Purpose and Looking Ahead to the Future</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building and Maintaining meaningful relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>Institutional Challenges Facing Sophomores</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contextualizing the Sophomore Slump</strong></td>
<td><strong>The Journey from the First to the Second Year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation of self morally, psychologically, intellectually</td>
<td>Commitment toward developing academic competence</td>
<td>Comfort with building faculty relationships</td>
<td>Needing guidance</td>
<td>Defining the slump</td>
<td>Understanding the second year experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronger sense of responsibility in future choices and learning</td>
<td>Thinking independently and taking responsibility for decision-making</td>
<td>Reliance on peer network to shape experience</td>
<td>Level of satisfaction with academic advisement</td>
<td>Experiencing the slump</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Challenged or not in declaring a major</td>
<td></td>
<td>Building community to establish identity and support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2. The Journey from the First Year to the Second Year

This figure describes the participants’ stage of development and their experience as they moved from the first year to the second year of college.

Summary

The second year participants in this study have experienced stages of development and oriented themselves toward their goals of declaring a major, deciding on post-graduation activities, maintaining their grades and GPA, and keeping their commitments to themselves to persist. However, they needed more guidance from the institution as they made these decisions and took steps toward attaining their goals. The experiences shared by the participants showed that sophomore status did not mean that all issues from the first year were resolved. Additionally, it was evident that participants recognized that the attention they received in the
first year, dropped off in the second year. The consensus was that the institution invested a lot of resources and time in welcoming them in the first year but did little to help support their connections in the second year.

The next chapter will discuss the meaning and significance of the findings and the themes that emerged from the interviews with 12 participants. These will be examined in light of the theoretical framework and relevant literature of the profession.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

This chapter discusses the implications of the results presented in Chapter 4. Twelve sophomore students were interviewed to understand how they made sense of their experiences in the second year, after having participated in a first year program. The beginning of this chapter summarizes the problem of practice and reviews the results. The results presented are then discussed in context of the theoretical framework of Schaller’s sophomore development theory.

Next the chapter will examine the literature used to guide this study and place the study within this literature. The limitations of the study and the implications for current research and recommendations for future research are discussed as well. The chapter will conclude with a personal reflection from an administrator who has a deep interest in understanding the second year experience and student persistence.

Summary of the Problem of Practice

The intent of the study was to examine sophomore students’ perceptions and understandings about what they were experiencing; to understand the transition they were making as sophomores and the continued need they may have for faculty and staff to incorporate programs, services, and interventions that might be helpful to students as they make the “sophomore transition.” The process of understanding what it means to be a sophomore began with in-depth interviews with second year students attending a large urban institution. How do sophomores at a large urban institution perceive and describe their experience in the second year?

Summary of the Research Results

All students throughout their college experience need institutional support, so why single out sophomores? Participants who compared the first year experience with the second year
recognized that the institution had set the precedent in the first year by demonstrating how much they cared about students and their successful integration within the campus environment. Overall, participants articulated that they were welcomed with open arms, actively participated in structured activities and programs which aided with the integration process, and they were guided every step of the way. In the second year they became less visible to the campus community. This level of invisibility affected them in two ways. First sophomores were left to deal with the challenges as they emerged, and second, administration remained less informed about the sophomore year experience and the support needed as students try to discern who they are and their purpose, and develop meaningful relationships.

Sophomores in this study had a paradoxical experience. The participants viewed themselves as transitioning to another phase of their development and academic experience. Although they had become more focused, purpose driven, intellectually and psychologically grounded, they also experienced a gap or void in their second year experience. The missing piece of their experience was the sophomore-specific support that would help to meet their needs in coping with the new challenges. Some sophomores further defined their experience as a period of being in college to do what needed to be done; these sophomores felt that the honeymoon phase of the college experience had worn off. They viewed themselves as becoming less important to the college because they were left on their own to traverse their way through the second year challenges. There was limited sophomore-specific guidance and preparation to handle the expectations of the second year.

Students experienced personal and academic development as they evolved from being newly-minted college students trying to get acquainted with the environment to becoming more confident and seasoned in the environment. Their developmental process was marked by an
increase in confidence in choosing their direction and understanding their purpose. The study participants described themselves as developing into adulthood and making the best possible adjustments to meet the demands of the second year. The adjustments required them to reassess their lives and their academic journey to fulfill new standards of competence intellectually and interpersonally. Toward this end, they became mindful of establishing more meaningful relationships, developing purpose, and increasing their level of academic commitments. There is evidence to suggest that these participants were either less reliant or were becoming less reliant on parental guidance and support and were more inclined to seek support from peer networks, which they tried to establish as they moved along. The sense of a sophomore community did not exist, so participants had to find ways of identifying their own networks.

The sophomores in this study were opposed to excessive parental involvement because of their need to assume a greater level of personal autonomy. The stories that emerged from the sophomores’ experiences described the importance of gaining autonomy and independence and what that meant to them. These changes occurred at the time when there was limited sophomore-specific support. Sophomores in this study relied heavily on the opinions of their peers and faculty members whom they considered to be equipped with the requisite knowledge and experience to assist them with the demands of the second year. They relied on perspectives of their peers and faculty as they made decisions about their academic paths. Faculty members were regarded as partners in the learning process.

The outcomes from the study suggested that the sophomores who were sure about their major were free of parental influence on their choice. Developing competence was extremely important to sophomores in this study, so choice in major was influenced by how well they could handle and relate to their courses. Selection of a major also increased their sense of belonging
within the campus community. According to Schaller (2005), sophomores need to successfully advance through the four-stage developmental model in order to navigate the second college year. The sophomores in this study demonstrated that they had progressed through the stages and were at the stage they needed to be in as sophomores.

The findings revealed that sophomores were cognizant of what they needed in order to succeed and function effectively in the second year. They expressed their dissatisfaction with institutional services such as advisement, guidance, and opportunities for social engagement, major and career exploration, and the need for a stronger sense of community among students in the second year. While the expectations were greater for them as sophomores, there were limitations in the sophomore-specific support provided by the institution. Study participants valued an orientation of the expectations of the second year and an implementation of resources and services devoted to supporting their second year needs.

The findings implied that advising is important because sophomores were transitioning into their major or concentration. Participants had to adjust to a different form of advisement, which moved beyond general advisement to the more major and course specific advisement conducted by the academic departments. This type of academic transition required more intentional decisions in choosing their academic paths and career aspirations. Participants needed assistance because they were still indecisive about choosing their majors, and in some cases they needed assistance in the process of declaring their majors. The study participants understood the obvious change that occurred when they stopped taking courses randomly and began immersing themselves in more demanding courses in their majors. There was a deeper connection to the courses and a stronger sense of belonging to their majors based on their
academic competence. Social involvement also motivated some of the participants in this study. There was a greater need to join clubs and societies in the second year.

As students moved through to the second year, something else happened in their own growth, development, and personal lives. They evolved from students coming fresh from high school to young adults, trying to understand and make sense of their identity, direction, and goals, within an institutional setting that offered less support and guidance than was offered in the first year. In the interviews, developmental changes were identified as being significant in terms of the impact on students’ psychological transition in the second year. Not only were they making decisions academically and career wise, they were also making decisions about personal relationships and the choices in life.

A positive experience for students in the second college year requires successful navigation through the developmental stages outlined by Schaller (2005). If they are unable to navigate these stages they will fail to progress. It is expected that students who are in the second year should, at a bare minimum, be at the focused stage of exploration, not randomly exploring, but closer to identifying who they are and their purpose. The sophomores in this study were transitioning to their majors and moving on to adulthood. This required having sufficient confidence and autonomy to understand who they were, where they were going, the choices they needed to make, and committing to these choices.

In conclusion, the participants’ stories revealed that the second year experience is multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory. It is characterized by transformation of self and increased confidence, direction, purpose, reality check, relationships, academic expectations, and overall campus expectations. It also includes challenges, frustration, confusion, strong decision making on career and major, less direction and guidance from the institution on what needs to be done,
and awareness about having less time to make up for a mistake or failed course or changed decision. Sophomores are going through different kinds of developmental changes. According to Schaller (2005), they are going through epistemological, intellectual, moral, and psychosocial development. They view knowledge and the world differently, think more about the meaning of life, view themselves in relation to the rest of the world, and have become more conscious about their choices and how they make these choices. One participant summed up the sophomore year as “the end of transformation between college and high school to coming one step closer to the real life.” (James)

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

Schaller’s sophomore development theory was used as the lens through which to view the findings and frame the study design. The findings regarding the participants’ circumstances in relation to the theory are discussed below. Schaller’s sophomore development theory examined the developmental stages and the identity issues sophomores face as their lives progress, how they define themselves, their relationships, and what they want to do in life. Schaller (2005) outlined that sophomores’ transition through four stages: random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choice, and commitment. They advance through these four stages as they deal with identity issues, their progress, sense of self, purpose, and their relationships. The theory will be placed in context of the four overarching themes and subthemes. How did the study participants advanced through these developmental stages?

**Random Exploration.** Schaller (2005) described this stage as being unfocused, a period in which students are not intentional in their thoughts, choices, and decisions. Students are still trying to understand the campus community. They are exuberant and are enjoying the new-found
freedom away from parents. There is no real direction established in terms of their purpose, self, and meaningful friendships.

(According to Schaller (2005), sophomores might still be in the stage of random exploration.) The participants of this study did not demonstrate or share any signs of lingering in the phase of random exploration. They agreed that in the first year they viewed themselves as transitioning from high school to college with lack of intentionality in course selection, goal setting, study habits, activities and social choices, because they were just getting to know the institution and were trying understand how they fit in its social and academic scene. Their behavior and outlook in the first year were consistent with Schaller’s definition of the random exploration stage.

According to Schaller (2005), during this phase, students expanded their communities to include different kinds of people. Friendships for the study participants continued from their high school peers and the numerous friendships that developed among students they met in the large classes.

In their first year, the participants of this study experienced the random exploration phase described by Schaller. Ideally this phase should not continue through to the second year. Most sophomores moved out of this stage by the end of their first year of college or by the end of the summer between the two years (Schaller, 2005).

**Focused Exploration.** The stage of focused exploration is the key starting point for sophomores. All of the participants in this study made the transition from random exploration to the stage of focused exploration. This is the time when they turned inwardly and examined their views of self, their purpose, and their relationships. The participants moved to the stage where they gathered enough information from the first year to engage in more active, evaluative, and
reflective thinking. They defined their existence in the sophomore year as one in which they had a reality check because they had reached another step closer to graduating, yet they had another two to three years to complete the process. Schaller (2005) asserted that development for sophomores begins with the progression from random to focused exploration through active reflection. Bridges (1980) outlined that individuals undergoing any kind of progressive change start gathering information about self and evaluate information that exists. Loevinger (1976) described this reflective stage as the conscientious stage.

According to Loevinger (1976), individuals in this process become self-evaluative, self-critical, responsible, and differentiated. The study participants confirmed that the second year was the turning point for thinking seriously about their actions and plans. They found they were thinking more about choosing their majors—not just any major, but majors they were passionate about and felt connected to. During this period of thoughtful exploration, the study participants questioned themselves and thought more about their future and what they needed to do to get there. They admitted to thinking more intently about their career goals, their grades, their GPA, and how competent they felt with certain majors. They didn’t think much about these areas in the first year. Additionally, they described themselves as being more autonomous in the second year.

The study participants attested to pondering more about establishing meaningful relationships with peers and forging relationships with faculty members. There was a deeper insight into the importance of choosing friends who could add to their success. This was viewed as important to participants because they experienced an apparent disconnect, having moved on from the friends they had in the first year. One participant recognized that it was essential to think about choosing friends who shared similar goals, vision, and values. Another believed that
moving on to different friends was natural and should happen because it is a part of the process of developing into a different person.

Participants acknowledged that during this phase they sought advice, not just from faculty and staff, but also from their peers. By reflecting deeply about their purpose, participants began to examine themselves in context of the world and of others. For example, participants were open about thoroughly searching themselves before making decisions about their majors. One participant indicated that he wanted to be 100% sure about his choice because it would affect his future life. This was also a critical phase for participants because it came with some degree of anxiety surrounding their future. They wanted to be sure that their choices and decisions would not hamper their academic progress or their goals.

The study participants used this reflective period to search for meaning, understanding, and insight into their academic, social, and intellectual experience. Through reflection the opportunity was created for participants to reframe their interests and their interpersonal relationships, and evaluate their academic competence to ensure success in their collegiate experience. Overall success for these study participants included not just achieving a good grade but also understanding the course content and applying the knowledge gained from these major courses. According to Gore (2006), gaining academic awareness in one’s ability is a good predictor of academic success at the end of the first year.

In the course of this qualitative research, students shared their goal of advancing to graduate school or settling in on a career. During the stage of focused exploration, participants sought academic advisement or performed their own self-discovery to assist with their decisions on declaring majors and committing to future goals.
Schaller (2005) documented that, although sophomores are expected to make a decision, this could also become frustrating for some because they are feeling pressured to choose a path and they may still lack reflection and purpose. Two participants struggled with deciding on the major that would best suit them.

Frustration also surfaced for sophomores if they were still unsure of their purpose in the institution. One male participant still questioned his reasons for being there. This lingered on because of unresolved feelings. He had spent his first year at an institution that was not his first choice but was his parents’ choice for him. His sense of pride in the institution was missing, and this brought on such a degree of stress that he sought counseling to manage it.

In addition to the personal awareness that participants experienced, they were also mindful of the institutional challenges in their second year. Overall, the study participants felt a deep sense of frustration with the institutional processes such as advisement, and the process for declaring a major, and the lack of a cohesive community for sophomores.

While participants were in the focused exploration phase, they were able to identify the increasing pressure and demands that came with being in the sophomore year. They viewed the academics as being more demanding. They all agreed that deep reflection started for them at the beginning of the second semester of the sophomore year. The advancement of the study participants from the random exploration phase is consistent with Schaller’s theory and corroborates her theory that students in the second year start seeing themselves differently. The participants in this study had fully achieved the sophomore status.

**Tentative Choice.** Schaller (2005) described this stage as the most defining stage of the sophomore development because of its importance and because they should reach this stage by the end of their sophomore year. Once students start making choices, they move to the tentative
choice phase. Sophomores, she claimed, are more aware of their responsibilities and oftentimes become more anxious about uncertainty in their choices, so they are more comfortable once they declare their majors. Sophomores want to have a more defined sense of direction and purpose than they did in the first year. This stage seems to run concurrently with the stage of focused exploration as students use their self-reflective skills gained in the focused exploration to make independent, responsible decisions about their future (Schaller, 2005). Success in this stage depends on how deeply students delved into focused exploration.

The study participants, having gone through the phase of focused exploration, have also moved into tentative choice. They talked about taking responsibility for their learning and their decisions. They made conscious choices about the major they declared and the relationships that they forged. They described themselves as being in an autonomous state to make decisions. They were selective about their friends and the relationships that they established. Some study participants opted to join the clubs and societies that fit within their values and supported their purpose and direction.

The choices that the participants made were designed for their future goals, whether job related or post-graduate studies. The participants used the time during the stage of focused exploration to gather information and research to help with defining their choices.

Participants spoke of a sense of relief in resolving the conflict they experienced once they chose a major they were comfortable with or passionate about. Two participants agreed that it was important to choose their majors based on their own decisions rather than on the basis of parental expectations.

Once sophomores entered the phase of tentative choice, they may have had to let go of dreams they had about certain majors and resorting to plan B. By resorting to plan B, they
realized that sometimes initial choices may not be realistic and it was important to apply themselves to alternative plans and choices. Most of the study participants had declared a major and felt good about it because they had narrowed down their choices to move on to specific goals.

Schaller (2005) outlined that students who moved through this stage will feel confident about their choices and their future. The study participants expressed that they developed a burst of confidence that was not evident in the first year. They felt more confident and responsible in their ability to make decisions and select the best options.

Sophomores in this stage are more settled and become more future oriented, have a new sense of responsibility and are able to make decisions based on how much reflection they give to their situations (Schaller, 2005). Participants began the process of redefining themselves by developing a stronger sense of autonomy and they moved toward independence, established their identity and developed more mature relationships.

Schaller, in her theory, expressed the importance of sophomores having enough time in the stage of focused exploration so they can emerge being more confident about their decisions. It can be concluded that the study participants in this stage of development supported Schaller’s findings of her sophomores.

**Commitment.** The final phase is commitment, and Schaller (2005) defined this stage as the period of certainty and resolution about the future; however, few sophomores reach this stage. Deep commitments for the participants involved investing strongly in their courses by maintaining a good GPA and having a strong understanding of these courses. They expressed the importance of doing well in their majors. Garunke and Woosley (2005) explained that
sophomores with a higher degree of certainty in their majors had higher GPAs. As they self-reflected and narrowed their future interests and goals, they moved into commitment.

Three sophomores in this study moved through to this stage in all three major areas of self, purpose, and relationships. They shared their deep commitment to their majors and the career trajectory; and they were clear, resolute, and confident about their future prospects. Three of the participants were vested in their majors and career choices. Although they had declared a major, other study participants were still not certain about their career paths. The participants who had reached this stage were so vested in their choice that they did not want to do much with courses that were outside of their major. In this phase of commitment, sophomores are sure they know what they want and they have already identified how they will get there.

Two female participants described changes that they were experiencing at home. They had made deep commitments to establishing intimate relationships. They had the task of balancing the demands of school along with having a spouse and dealing with the subsequent financial responsibilities. They nonetheless felt that they were independent and could make their own decisions and commit to their choices.

**Summary of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

Schaller’s sophomore development theory was very applicable to the participants of this study, who moved through random exploration in the first year to begin the process of focusing on their growth, maturity, and gaining independence. The study findings were consistent with the literature review on the development process that sophomores undergo and the challenges they need to overcome to successfully define self, relationship, and purpose. The study supported the theoretical framework by defining the stages of growth that students experience as they started the process of moving beyond the first year.
All participants in this study were experiencing some degree of growth. There were, however, findings from this research that were not supported by Schaller’s theory. Her theory did not account for how male and female participants advanced through the stages. This research showed that more males seemed to reach the stage of commitment faster than the females. What accounted for this difference? Was it a natural process, or can one surmise that the institutions’ lack of influence on linking majors to career interest can affect how many students really reach the commitment stage?

The sophomore participants were undergoing the stages of development and they were progressing as Schaller’s theory suggests. As the participants progressed they were exhibiting the same behaviors and experiencing the different levels of growth outlined by Schaller in her theory. Not all students were progressing at the same pace but a common theme among all 12 participants in the study was the increased confidence and independence they experienced as they tried to establish their positions in the second year. The study findings are consistent with the literature review on the developmental process that sophomores undergo and the challenges they need to overcome to successfully define self, relationship, and purpose.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relations to the Literature Review**

This section offers a discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature on sophomore students’ experiences. A discussion on the study participants’ challenges and their overall view of their experiences, their needs, the sophomore slump phenomenon, and their desire to complete their academic degree will follow. Congruent with the extant literature on the experiences of traditional-aged sophomores, the participants in this study possessed the characteristics of typical traditional-aged sophomores; they experienced the developmental changes and encountered similar challenges. Throughout the analysis and the emergence of the
themes, the participants attested to undergoing developmental changes, which influenced how they viewed themselves, their decisions, goals, choices that they made, and the academic challenges they encountered. Significant differences were discussed in relation to the degree of changes they saw in their own selves as they progressed to the second year.

**Sophomore Concerns.** The literature points to three areas that add to the challenges faced by sophomores. These include academic, developmental, and institutional (Pattengale, 2000). This was evident in the stories of the participants. Although the participants experienced these challenges, they persisted because they developed purpose and were vested in successfully completing their goals.

**Developmental.** The findings for this study corroborate the existing literature that developmentally, sophomores are different in how they view knowledge and how they evaluate their social and academic environment. The study participants displayed consciousness and were intentional in their choices of major, career, relationship, and direction and had become aware of what they needed as sophomores to successfully thrive in their existing environment. These findings are consistent with the description of sophomores in the literature, which identifies the developmental challenges as being quite different from what they experienced in the first year. Sophomores are described as being more focused on clarification of purpose. Lemons and Richmond (1987) identified development of purpose as a major developmental task of sophomores, tied in with the need to develop purpose and meaning.

All participants agreed that they experienced mental development, starting with how they viewed themselves, their future, and the path to their future. Two participants spoke much about having a different mindset about themselves and their future. They explained their growth as processing things differently and intensely, thinking about the future, being more conscious of
their purpose and, in one case, catching on once they hit the second year. Another participant described it as a period of goal setting and establishing timelines to accomplish these goals. Three participants emphasized that they were intentional about their plans after they graduate.

In addition to focusing on their future, the students viewed relationships differently and stressed the importance of building different friendships. Two participants were conscious about building meaningful friendships. Both felt that they needed to find friends who were going in the same direction and shared the same goals.

The findings also supported the literature on the need of sophomores to feel competent in given tasks during the developmental process. The literature discusses the need to be competent in areas such as academic, social, and cocurricular activities, as this is linked to persistence (Fisher, Raines, & Burns, 2011). Participants in this study were extremely conscientious about excelling academically and socially and, to a lesser extent, in cocurricular activities. Academic competence, especially in their major, was integral to sophomores in this study. Contrary to the literature, the sophomores in this study placed less emphasis on the extracurricular realm of their experience because they were more concerned with surviving and getting through the sudden changes in the second year.

**Faculty and Peer Interaction.** The scholarship on student-faculty engagement in the second year has become quite substantial. According to Schreiner (2010), relationships with faculty members become more important because students are seeking direction about their “possible future.” Student-faculty interaction is identified as an important element to sophomore success (Schreiner, 2010). The input from both peers and professors is significant to the second year experience and was important to sophomores in this study. The majority of the participants relied on the support and advice of their peers and professors. They particularly expressed the
value of peer and faculty input in the decision making process. As sophomores became more confident, they found it to be more comfortable to approach faculty members and they used their own informal approach to foster these relationships.

Participants described their growth, transformation, and their journey towards a sense of self and the importance of finding peers who shared the same goals and values. This supports the literature on the importance of peer relationships in the second year. Sophomores, according to Schaller (2005), view peers as playing an integral role in understanding knowledge and the world around them. Peer relationships were important to the study participants. Overall, they thought peers could serve as mentors and helpful guides in the second year because they had come to rely on peers to help them understand the needs of the second year.

Researchers (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2002) have documented the importance of student-faculty interaction. Faculty involvement and engagement begins to get more critical in the second year because students are beginning to seek mentors who can advise them on their career and major choice. In the second year, participants were more comfortable relating to faculty members and came to view their professors as partners in the learning process. While the interaction with and reliance on staff is mentioned as important for students in the second year, the participants spoke less about their reliance on staff, except when they sought personal counseling and when the faculty member fell short on advisement. This does not in any way suggest that the staff relationship is insignificant for sophomores in this study. It could imply that the lack of a sophomore year experience program limited students’ ability to build relationships with staff members who could play an integral role in the sophomore experience.

**Academic Challenge.** The major academic challenge that surfaced among the participants was the general concern with being competent and performing well in their major
courses and selection of a major. The participants expressed a greater concern for truly mastering their major courses.

Participants tended to be more engaged in their major courses at this time and were fully committed and dedicated, not only to successfully completing these courses, but also to having a full grasp and understanding of the courses. Academic engagement is defined in the literature as an overall involvement in academic life, such as satisfaction with intellectual development and with the academic systems, engagement with task management skills (Garvalia & Gredler, 2002), seeking help from peers (Larose, Robinson, Roy & Legault, 1998), interactions with professors (Strage, 1999), and academic course engagement (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009). This relates to this study, in that participants were highly engaged in their academic work. This is an essential activity in the second year because lack of engagement is strongly linked to attrition.

While academic engagement is important in any class of students, it becomes more important in the second year because students can become demotivated after moving from a year in which there is ongoing support to one in which it has become diminished.

Because the participants in this study were engaged and vested in their academic pursuit, they demonstrated effort, experience, and attentiveness to their work. They were vested in and committed to their learning. These findings are consistent with the existing literature on the importance of creating a supportive academic environment that will help to engage sophomores (Gardner, 2000; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

The sophomores in the study who participated in the first year program indicated that they were able to pull from the experiences to survive through the second year. Although the second year posed different challenges, the demands were different, and they longed for the same
type of attention and a more collective second year experience, they used the information and
direction gained from the first year to navigate the college environment.

**Selecting a Major.** Consonant with the literature, the study participants went through
the challenge of really identifying the appropriate major or changing it, and they also questioned
the relevance of certain courses that were not connected to their major. According to Hunter,
Tobolowsky, Gardner, Evenbeck, Pattengale, Schaller, and Schreiner (2010), the selection of a
major is can be a complex process. The selection of a major requires students to have the
academic ability for specific coursework, awareness of available options, and strong decision
making skills to balance interests with future career or life goals.

The participants in this study demonstrated that having a plan B in the choice of a major
was important. Some participants realized that their plans for a certain major would not
materialize because the initial choice was not the best for them. In choosing a major,
sophomores in the study wanted to ensure that they were comfortable in the course and they
could easily relate to and apply the knowledge gained in their courses to areas outside of the
classroom. More importantly, they want to ensure that they are competent in the courses. The
literature also associates selection of a major with establishing identity (Coburn & Treeger, 2003;
Coghlan, Fowler, & Messel, 2009). The participants said that finding their major allowed them
to feel a part of a community of learners. They described the benefits of being in classes with
other students who shared the same interest. Based on the findings, sophomores were
consistently discovering ways of establishing their identities and finding purpose in the
environment.

In the sophomore year, students are beginning to realize that they are another step ahead
in their academic journey, and their anxiety increases because they want to ensure that they do
not lose the benefit of choosing a major in time. Hesitating to change to an alternative major may delay their graduation because of the need to fulfill additional courses. The participants in this study expressed the importance of and choosing a major in which they could perform well academically. There were no chronically-undecided participants in this study; they had all selected their major, and they were inclined to stay motivated.

**Career Development and Student Motivation.** The literature outlined that students who are more autonomous tend to be sure of their career direction (Guay, et al., 2006). Career development and student motivation are identified as important in the sophomore experience. Only three of the participants in this study were solid in their career trajectory and were seeking internships to support their career goals. The literature describes the importance of motivation and students’ persistence in the second year. Motivation for sophomores is linked to their decisiveness and confidence in their academic goals (Hunter, et al., 2010).

Sophomores who are unclear about their educational goals are 1-3 times more likely to leave their first college during or after the second year (Ishitani, 2008). The findings in this study show that students in the second year stayed committed to the institution because they had defined their purpose within the institution. Commitment to and investment in a major appeared to indicate that sophomores would persist until they complete their degree. Participants expressed their commitment to their major and the need to perform well in their major. Two participants expressed the sense of relief they felt once they figured out what they wanted to do and declared their majors. This suggested that finding a good fit for a major could be a motivating factor for students in the second year.

**Institutional Challenges.** Institutional challenges were identified in the literature as having profound effects on students. Institutional challenges, such as stressors and lack of
satisfaction with the institution, are largely associated with the second year experience. The findings from this study found institutional processes (such as declaring a major), academic advisement, guidance, communication, and financial needs as major challenges for sophomores. Academic advisement was highly valued for study participants. Nealy (2005) outlined that advisement is the most important variable for sophomore year retention. Participants felt that there were limitations in the availability and quality of advisers for academic advisement, which they viewed as integral to their sophomore success. Some advisers were described as unapproachable and burned out. Additionally, some participants expressed skepticism in the information that was provided, assuming a lack of knowledge and information in presenting opportunities for students. There was a general dissatisfaction with processes such as declaring a major. Some participants described it as a simple online process, while others described it as really convoluted. One participant categorized her experience in trying to declare her major as confusing and replete with inconsistencies, both in the process and in the information she received. The participants also expressed concerns about the lack of communication regarding how to declare the major and the last minute notification they received. The literature points to the importance of students’ expectations from the institution. Juillerat’s (2000) research identified institutional practices, policies, and administrative support as critical to helping or hindering persistence and success in the second year.

Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin’s (2007) research findings suggested that sophomores felt invisible and lost, institutional attention lessened, and students felt that they were not getting the support needed. Consistent with Gansemer-Topf et al., (2007) the participants in this study recognized the profound difference in institutional guidance in the first year compared to the second year.
The participants viewed themselves as no longer having special status and came to accept the second year as a point where they needed to do the work themselves. They felt they were held more accountable because it was assumed they knew the rules about their college life.

Ennis-McMillan et al.’s (2011) findings asserted that first year programs were successful in enhancing students’ engagement and achievement, but for many the impact did not carry through to the second year. The participants in this study recognized that in the second year they were on their own and expressed concerns about the lack of guidance. They did, however, credit the help they received in the first year as being essential in lessening their frustration in the second year. All participants shared the importance of emphasizing second year student responsibilities. The majority of them believed that the institution should focus on sophomores. They would appreciate seeing more emphasis on specific events and programs relevant to students in the second year because in the second year students are left to navigate the environment and meet the demands. The literature supports the importance of establishing sophomore-specific events and programming to assist sophomores in their journey (Hunter et al, 2010). These initiatives, according to Hunter et al. (2010), will assist sophomores to weather the second year storm and stay committed to the institution.

**Sophomore Slump.** Several factors are identified in literature as it relates to sophomore slump and persistence from as early as Freedman’s 1956 historic work on the stages of college students’ experience, to Gump’s recent research on the sophomore experience. Gump (2007) redefined the sophomore slump as a more multidimensional phenomenon, which could begin as early as the second semester of college. He identified academic deficiencies, academic engagement, dissatisfaction with the collegiate experience, major and career indecision, and developmental confusion as issues that are characteristic of the sophomore slump. These were
similar issues identified by the study participants, but an additional issue that surfaced from the findings of this research was over-involvement of parents in the second year.

While a majority of the participants had not heard of the term *sophomore slump*, they were able to provide their own descriptions of what it meant and how this could have affected those who admitted to experiencing the slump.

Experiencing the slump seems to be a normal path for sophomores because slumping is associated with their experiences during the second year. The existing literature asserts that during the sophomore year, students need to be astute in their decision-making and develop a sense of meaning and purpose about their education, where they are going, their life goals, and their career (Gaff, 2000; Ghagan & Hunter, 2006; Pattengale, 2006; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Reynolds, Gross & Millard, 2008; Schreiner 2010; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). This is an important perspective and it is consistent with the results of this study. As participants transitioned into the sophomore year, their perspectives changed. They became different from how they had viewed themselves and their responsibilities in the first year. Participants confirmed that their desires and their thoughts in the second year were centered on their future, their goals, and how they would achieve them. They were more conscious of their academic and social journey and were more anxious about making the right decisions and choosing purposefully.

While previous research saw mastery of course content based on first year grades as necessary for persistence (Wolniak, Mayhew, & Engberg, 2012), this study found that sophomores were more concerned about mastery of their major course content in the second year in contrast to grades in the first year. Sophomores who feel they cannot master their courses could become discouraged and could fall in a slump. One participant shared her own experience
struggling with a course that was essential to her major and the source of distress it caused. The participants evaluated mastery not just in terms of their grades and course content but having full understanding of major courses.

The literature outlined that sophomores might feel disappointed after all the attention paid during the first year (Gansemertopf, Stern, & Benjamin, 2007; Schreiner, 2007b), but the sophomores in this study expressed that, while they did not need the handholding, they needed sophomore-specific guidance. They would welcome more preparation to transition to the sophomore year. Participants agreed to the importance of preparing for what to anticipate in the last semester of their first year so they could approach the second year differently.

The majority of the participants did not display any desire to depart from the institution because they had either selected a major or were already committed to their academic major, and had meaningful interaction with the faculty. Participants spoke much about being heavily invested in their major. They felt they were in the right major, they were experiencing growth, and they were confident in who they had become. For these participants, leaving was not an option because they had set their goals and had found ways of advancing towards their goals. This is important in that the literature identifies commitment to an academic major, confidence in major choice, and meaningful interaction with faculty and staff to be notable predictors of academic success in the sophomore year, as well as factors that could affect their ability to persist (Garunke & Woosley, 2005). Similarly, satisfaction with connections and interaction between students, faculty, and peers were also viewed as important.

**Study Limitations**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) addressed the notion of transferability and outlined that the burden of proof rests with the original investigator and the person seeking to apply the results
elsewhere. Therefore the researcher needs to provide sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible (p. 298).

The following study limitations were included in the design of the study:

- This study was limited to an urban public university and was conducted in one of 17 campuses within that large university system.

- The participant sample was limited to only traditional-aged students, and they were all students who participated in a first year program; therefore, the perspectives of students who were not involved in the first year program and non-traditional aged students are not included.

- The sample size was limited to participants who completed the second semester of the second year; therefore, there might have been additional challenges that they could have forgotten due to maturation

- The sample size was limited to native students in the institution and does not include the perspectives of sophomores who are transfer students.

- The sampling was purposeful, and the study participants self-selected.

- The qualitative study was limited to sophomores who persisted; it did not include those who did not stay.

**Recommendations for Professional Practice**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate and identify the experiences articulated by sophomore students in a large urban institution. Based on the findings that were derived from the experiences of twelve sophomores, the following recommendations are proposed for professionals in the higher education community who seek to understand traditional-aged sophomores. The recommendations are the following:
• Develop a strong mentoring program for students in their second year. This mentoring program could include faculty, students, and staff. This will allow students to be engaged with peers who have been through the cycle of the second year and who could support sophomores as they try to define themselves and their purpose. Peer-to-peer interaction was valued highly among participants in this research study. The mentorship program could also allow them to be paired with faculty and staff who could provide additional academic support and cocurricular support as they try to make decisions about their goals and their future.

• Review the academic advising program to ensure that it is strategic and targeted with regard to academic advising needs and support of sophomore students.

• Create opportunities for more faculty and student engagement and interaction. This was highly valued by study participants and is consistent with the literature. Faculty members play an important role in student success.

• Create opportunities for partnerships between faculty and second year students. Have faculty as mentors as students decide on major and career choice.

• Design and host events that can help to reintegrate sophomores when they return to the campus for their sophomore year. While participants did not want the handholding of the first year program, they still needed to feel their connection to the campus community.

• Create a systematic process for declaring a major, such as a major and career fair event, so sophomores can see the link between their major and career choices. The study findings showed that while some sophomores were thinking about career choices after graduation, others were concerned about advancing to graduate school and not much information was available in terms of how to move to graduate school.
• Create a sophomore experience website that will speak directly to sophomore students. Use the website as a place where sophomores can go to harvest information on resources and support that will be of special interest to sophomores. This will also help to develop a sense of community for sophomores.

• Mastery of academic content and competence in major courses continued to be a major focus for sophomores in this study; Create opportunities and initiatives that would allow sophomores to remain engaged in their learning.

• Develop a comprehensive needs assessment of sophomores. In order to provide the appropriate support for students in the second year, the institution’s awareness of what they really need as they move through developmental changes and respond to expectations is essential. Needs assessment could be conducted through additional focus groups and surveys.

• Develop a sense of community and connect sophomore initiatives to institutional mission. This will aid in the process of creating an institutional culture that tells students that the institution cares about sophomores. The study participants believed that the sense of community that was established in the first year was missing in the second year.

• Develop programs and events that will help to promote opportunities for social engagement. Sophomores acknowledged that the friendships they established in the first year tend to dissolve during the second year; as such, they are searching for more meaningful relationships.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study is aimed to explore the needs and the experiences of sophomores. The results and findings of this study add to the body of scholarship on the second year experience, the
challenges facing sophomores, and second year student persistence. The study was conducted through the lens of Schaller’s sophomore development theory, and there is room for more research on how different groups of students move through the stages of development. The results from this study are not generalizable, and more research needs to be done to examine the real impact of financial aid and stressors on sophomore persistence. Additionally, sophomores will persist based on their own experiences. The study participants were all traditional-aged sophomores who were a mixture of continuing generation or first-generation students. It would be valuable to have research on first-generation versus second-generation sophomores’ perception of their experiences. Additionally, transfer students can also be sophomores if they have not gotten the opportunity to participate in first year programs. There is room for research to understand the needs of transfer students who could be classified as sophomores.

Comparative studies from different four-year institutions, two-year institutions, and not-for-profit institutions are other areas of opportunity that could provide more insight into what sophomores experience.

As indicated earlier, a limitation to this study is that the sample consisted of only traditional-aged college students. The differences in experiences of older, non-traditional aged students and transfer students who are sophomores are worthy of research.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Sophomores are similar to a sibling stuck between the older child and the baby seeking attention.

In the first year, as an incoming freshman, you get a lot of support. In the junior and the senior year, you are pretty much on track because this is your major. As sophomores you are still looking for guidance, which is not necessarily there (Jane).
It is necessary to continue to provide the specific support that will maximize all students’ learning and development; therefore sophomores should not be viewed as the “forgotten class.” We can learn from the success of the first year programs and establish comprehensive initiatives to address second year academic and social needs. First year programs have become embedded in the campus culture and a similar approach should be taken to establish second year initiatives to meet the academic, developmental, and social needs of the sophomore class.

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand how sophomores made sense of their experiences as second year students. Categories and themes emerged from the data to develop a deeper understanding of sophomore students’ experiences as they explore issues relating to themselves, their relationships, their academic experiences, and their decisions. These themes and patterns were aligned with the theoretical framework and served to answer the research question on students’ perceptions of their experience in the second year.

The prevailing theme within the data is the internal transformation that sophomores experienced. They saw themselves as developing psychologically, morally, and intellectually. They had moved beyond getting acquainted with the environment to being more adapted, informed, and confident individuals. Sophomores in this study described themselves as moving into adulthood, developing maturity, and building resilience. Part of their transformation process involved becoming more responsible for their own choices and making decisions surrounding their future goals and career trajectory.

Two major themes emerged regarding sophomores’ need to become independent and exercise more autonomy. Developing purpose and clarity in decision-making was important to them. They were conscious of the importance of defining their goals and doing so in a timely fashion. Selecting an academic program and making a career choice required major decision-
making. Sophomores in this study described their struggles in striving to achieve competence, be independent, and establish their identity.

They identified relationship building as essential for establishing stronger networks and support. In the second year, sophomores felt more comfortable building relationships with faculty members and became more selective in forming relationships with their peers. These relationships were viewed as essential. Professors were seen as influential in their decision-making in selecting majors. They served not only as information brokers, but as instructors, major-advisors, mentors and the main source of contact in the academic domain. Peer relationship was essential to these sophomores as they attempted to establish a community and strong network to provide support and guidance.

The institutional challenges and expectations in the second year cannot be understated. The participants acknowledged the general misconception that sophomores were aware of the expectations. However, this was not the reality. Although they had all adapted to the environment, they did it with difficulty. Having more sophomore-specific support is essential to successfully meet second year demands such as declaring a major, choosing a major, advisement, and intense course work. In describing and contextualizing the sophomore experience, it was evident that the institution invested much in welcoming students in the first year, but did little to support their continued connection in the second year.

This study has demonstrated how the intended research project supports the literature on the second college year and the experiences of sophomore students. Students in their second college year encounter developmental, academic, and institutional challenges, which if not addressed will lead to sophomore slump. The sophomore slump is identified as one of the most significant reasons for attrition in this group of students. Historically, institutional efforts to
promote student success and persistence have been concentrated on the first year of college with minimal support offered in the second year. The findings and the themes are consistent with the three main issues that, according to Schaller, sophomores are negotiating. These are academic major, relationship, and self.

The findings in the study suggest the importance of focusing more attention on sophomores to understand the issues that are unique to the academy’s “middle child.” Second year students are in need of sophomore-specific support as they go through their own internal transition while at the same time encountering the demands of the second year. The sophomores in this study had all participated in the first year program and experienced the benefits of having extra support, and they were aware that having a different kind of support tailored to their specific needs would help to fill the existing gap in the second year by supporting their growth and academic experience.
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Appendix A

IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: July 14, 2014
IRB #: CPS14-06-07

Principal Investigator(s):
Carolyn Bair
Althea Sterling

Department:
Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
Persistence in the Sophomore Year Following Transition from Successful First Year Programs

Participating Sites:
Brooklyn College approval forthcoming

DHHS Review Category:
 Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval:
12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: JULY 13, 2015

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B
Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department of Education

Name of Investigators: Dr. Carolyn Bair, Principal Investigator, Althea Sterling Student Researcher

Title of Project: Persistence in the Sophomore Year Following Transition from Successful First-Year Programs.

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited 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 the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

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

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a traditional-aged undergraduate student who has completed the second year, participated in a first year experience program, and are native sophomores (having attended only Brooklyn College as undergraduates).

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to investigate and identify the needs and experiences articulated by sophomore students in a large urban public institution in the Northeast. The researcher will gather information from students on how they perceive their second year experience and the support provided by the institution to promote academic success and persistence beyond the first year.

What will I be asked to do?
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- A 60-90 minute digitally-recorded interview session during which the researcher will ask you questions about your sophomore year experience
- Clarify any further question that may arise after the interview
- Review a summary of the findings and email comments or concerns to the researcher no later than one week after receipt of summary

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

The interview will take place at a comfortable location of each participant’s choice. Interviews will be conducted at the research site. The interview will take about 90 minutes, during which the researcher will ask you to respond to a series of questions about your second year experience. Three weeks after the initial interview the researcher will contact you only if information is needed to clarify any sections of the interview that were not clear. No more than six weeks after the interview, you will receive a summary of the findings for review and you will be asked to email any comments; or concerns to the investigator.

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

In this study the risks are minimal and include confidentiality and privacy rights. However, measures have been put in place to protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants; therefore the risks are considered to be minimal.

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

There are no direct benefits to the study participants. However the overall potential benefit from conducting this study is that findings from the research can serve to inform professionals who work with students in higher education about sophomores and their specific needs. Understanding the experiences of second year students holds important implications for developing sophomore specific programs.

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

All participants who are interviewed will remain confidential. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym that only he or she and the researcher know. The recordings will be labeled with the pseudonym and no other identifying information. Transcribed data will be stored in a lockable file cabinet until transcripts are verified for accuracy; data will also be stored on a password-protected computer that is only accessible to the researcher. Digital audio recordings, identifiable information and de-identified interview transcripts, and a master list of all participants will be stored on two flash drives stored in a lockable file cabinet, which will be used only on a password-protected computer. The locked file cabinet and password-protected personal computer will be located in the student investigator’s home.
Digital audio recordings, master lists of participants, and all other identifiable information or data will be destroyed (digital files deleted and hard copies shredded) after the completion of the study, with the exception of informed consent forms, in compliance with Northeastern University’s IRB requirements.

Consent forms will be retained for three years after completion of the study in a lockable file cabinet; scanned copies will be stored on a password-protected computer for backup purposes. Three years after completion of the study, hard copies of the informed consent will be shredded and scanned copies will be deleted from the computer.

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

The decision to participate in this research is yours. Participation is purely voluntary. You do not need to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time and you may have your information removed from the study. Your decision to participate will have no effect on your standing with the College or as a student. If you do not participate and you choose to quit at any time, you will not lose any rights, benefits or services 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 call Althea Sterling at Sterling.al@neu.edu or 646-258-3867. You can also contact Dr. Carolyn Bair, who is the adviser for this research at c.bair@neu.edu or by phone at 617-390-4197.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will receive a $25.00 gift card when the data has been transcribed and reviewed.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

It will not cost you anything to participate. If you have to travel to an interview, you will be reimbursed for transportation or any parking related expenses that you may incur.

**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
Appendix C

Althea Sterling-E-Mail Recruitment Letter

Name of Person

Now that you have all survived the sophomore year, I am writing to let you know about an interesting opportunity. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled The Persistence of Sophomore Students Following Transition from Successful First Year Programs. I will be conducting this study as a requirement for completion of the Doctor of Education Degree at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I am interested in learning about your sophomore year experience and what it was like for you. You are being asked to participate because you have completed the second year and you participated in a first year program.

If you choose to participate in the study I would like to have a one-on-one conversation with you to understand what the experience was like for you. I will ask you to talk about your second year experience, how different it was from the first year, how you survived the year, and the support the institution provided.

If you volunteer to participate in the study, you will take part in a 60-90 minute interview during which you will be asked questions about your experience in the second year. Additionally you will be asked to review the summary of what was written up from the interview and to make changes if necessary.

The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed either by a professional transcription company or me. All findings from the interview will be used for the purposes of this study. All responses will remain confidential and will only be used to inform the researcher about students’ experience in the sophomore year. Your name will not be connected with the study or with any of the findings. You will receive a $25.00 gift card for participating.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me by email at sterling.al@husky.neu.edu and I will schedule the interview at a time and place that is convenient to you. I will explain the details of the study and an informed consent form will be provided for your signature during the meeting if you decide to participate. Your participation is purely voluntary and could be discontinued at any time.

Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Althea Sterling
Appendix D

Interview Protocol (Student)

My problem of practice is the persistence of sophomore students in a large urban institution. I propose to investigate how students perceive their experience and institutional support in the second year.

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to say about your experience in the second year. The result of this study may identify ways in which the institution can provide additional support for sophomore students. I would like to record our conversation today. Do I have permission to record this interview?

I will also be taking written notes during the interview. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. The recordings from these interviews will be kept privately and will be destroyed once all data are transcribed. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the institution. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue. Your participation is voluntary in keeping with the human subject requirements from the IRB; I require that you sign this form indicating your consent. This interview should last about 60-90 minutes. I would like to cover several questions. Do you have any questions at this time?
Interview Questions

Purpose statement. The purpose of this interview is to learn from students what factors contribute to a successful sophomore year experience and what challenges students face as they work toward their degree completion.

Opening: Tell me your name and your major

1. What has this year been like for you?
2. How is your sophomore year going compared to your freshman year?
3. In what ways is “sophomore” different from “first year”?
4. In what ways is “sophomore” more difficult or easier than “first year”?
5. Describe what it is like to be a sophomore
6. How do you feel about who you are this year in comparison to the first year?
7. Are there things you are focusing on and thinking (or worrying) about that didn’t even occur to you in your first year?
8. How do you feel about your major? Have you made a solid decision yet?
9. How about your classes? How different are classes for you this year?
10. What has your involvement been like on campus this year?
11. Do you feel as connected to the university this year as you did last year?
   o To your peers?
   o To faculty/staff?
   o To activities/events?
12. As a sophomore at BC what would you consider to be some of the greatest challenges or roadblocks you have encountered to date? Have you resolved any of them? If so, how did you eventually resolve these issues or problems?
13. How would you describe your relationships with peers, faculty, and family this year?
   How are these different from first year?
14. Let’s look at relationships with peers first …
15. Faculty …
16. Family …
17. What is most important to you this year?
18. What are the key things you think you need to accomplish during your sophomore year?
19. Have you ever heard of the term sophomore slump? What does it mean to you? Have you experienced it?
20. Have you ever thought about dropping out? If so, what prompted you to change your mind and stay?
21. Is there anything else you would like to discuss that we did not talk about?