

EDUCATION FOR ALL: A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY OF THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES
OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE GRADUATES

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by
EMILY A. PETERS

B.S. University of Minnesota-Minneapolis, 2008
M.ED. University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2010

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Emily Ann Peters, Candidate for Doctor of Education

University of Missouri- Kansas City, 2015

ABSTRACT

Postsecondary entrance and graduation is commonplace in the modern world, yet many students still do not attend or complete their degrees. Students who do not have a familial connection to an institution of higher learning are underrepresented at American colleges and universities; for this particular research, first-generation college graduates are those whose parents and grandparents did not graduate from an institution of higher learning. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the experiences and perspectives of first-generation college graduates in terms of both their pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences. The examination of these perceptions added to the body of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates as compared to their peers who have a familial connection to a four-year college or university and as a springboard to encourage future research regarding how to elevate the rates of first-generation college student success and graduation.

Data was collected through the use of questionnaires, participant-created documents, and interviews. Descriptive statistics, tables, and percentages were used to

analyze questionnaires and an open-coding process was utilized to analyze documents and in-depth interviews. Twelve total interpretive codes emerged from the process and three overarching themes were illuminated during analysis of all data sets: persistence, sustainability, and preparation. Employing aspects of democratic education and increasing the use of support programs for high school students by creating professional learning opportunities for educators at all levels may help future prospective first-generation college graduates.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the School of Education have examined a dissertation titled “Education For All: A Descriptive Case Study of the Educational Experiences of First-Generation College Graduates,” presented by Emily Ann Peters, candidate for the Doctor of Education degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Donna Davis, Ph.D., Committee Chair

School of Education

Loyce Caruthers, Ph.D.

School of Education

Shirley McCarther, Ph.D.

School of Education

Dianne Smith, Ph.D.

School of Education

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My parents are my heroes and I am grateful to them every minute of each day for bringing me into this world and for supporting me through thick and thin, laughter and tears. They have provided nothing but encouragement as I have thrown out idea after idea for what I want to do when I grow up and they truly put the extra in ordinary. If you need models for enthusiasm, love, acceptance, or adoration, look no further than Ed and Terry Peters; out of all I have to be thankful for, I am most thankful for these two people.

For the students I have worked with who have helped pave the way for this epic trip, thank you. You are my source of inspiration each and every day and I promise that I will continue to work tirelessly for you as long as I shall live. It may not be in a classroom, but the positive power of education has burrowed itself deep in my soul and I will not stop until we live in a world where all students have access to an excellent education.

This study could not have been completed without the help of my dissertation committee. Thank you to Dr. Donna Davis, Dr. Loyce Caruthers, Dr. Dianne Smith, and Dr. Shirley McCarther for your guidance, patience, and feedback through this process.

Last, but certainly not least, I write this for all of the kids out there who dare to be the first in their families to complete their degree. You are brave, you are amazing, you are our future. Now go out there and make us all proud.

PREFACE

MY STORY

“Miss Peters, why are you wasting your time?”

To explain who Miss Peters was, I need to note that I am Ms. Peters; and yet, I am very different from the woman to whom the previous statement was directed a number of years ago. I'd like to add that it was not said in a joking manner and instead was quite harsh in tone. If I am to properly explain the significance of this statement on my life and its relevance to the following dissertation, I will need to go back in time...

I am average. I have always been pretty average. That is not a put-down, it is not negative self-talk, and it is not something that I am upset about. It is what it is. (Side note: when my Grandma Pat reads through my dissertation, which she has done many times, this is where she always stops and disagrees with me) I grew up in an average, middle class family with a mom and a dad and two dogs. I received good grades, loved to read and play sports (even though I am clumsy), and had wonderful friends. My childhood was normal. In high school I was busy with various activities and had a normal life. It was all average. Trust me when I say, the fact that you are reading a dissertation written by yours truly is evidence of an all-powerful, faithful, and loving God.

I knew growing up that my family was not as well off as some of the other kids at school, but my parents always made sure I was taken care of and I feel that my only-child status allowed me to be a little spoiled. There was always dinner on the table at 5pm and we ate together every night unless I had a sports match or piano lesson, in which case we would still eat together but at a different time. My parents and family are my heroes. I am

well-rounded because of the opportunities my parents worked so hard to allow me to have. They never showed it to me, but I know there were times when they sacrificed for me and I will be forever grateful for their selflessness.

While growing up, I was often asked-as many young people are-what I wanted to be when I grew up. My answers varied from tightrope walker to ballerina (no coordination...), doctor to lawyer (too much school-I now see the irony after ten+ years of higher education...), mortician (yep, really) to psychologist and political scientist (didn't happen but I do have degrees in these fields). Never, not one time, did I ever say "teacher" or even mention anything to do with education as a choice for a future career. In fact, I always made sure to mention that while I was thinking of a certain occupation, I would make sure I never became a teacher.

I always loved and appreciated my teachers and did not have negative experiences in school; my reality was quite the opposite. I idolized my teachers, they were individuals who gave of themselves in order to educate me and my peers. Growing up, I carefully watched my mom who was a teacher. I witnessed her hard work and what seemed to be the meager recompense she got in return. These were the reasons I did not see myself as a teacher, it all came down to time and money.

My dad worked nights developing satellite photos for the government and private contractors. He had a good, stable job that allowed us to pay our bills and for me to participate in multiple activities outside of school. Unfortunately, I didn't get to form much of a relationship with my dad until he stopped working nights. Up until I was five, Mom and I had to tiptoe around while Dad was sleeping and I only got to play with him on weekends. I honor my mother for her devotion to me during this time and am in awe of

how she juggled so many things while acting essentially as a single mother. I also honor my father for doing what he had to do to take care of us. My dad is one of the hardest working people I have ever met and he consistently amazes me with his brilliance and kindness. My dad accomplished all of this for our family, despite the fact that he had no college degree. As an adult, I truly realize the power of a supportive and loving family and am grateful for the close relationships I have with both of my parents.

Fast forward to Christmas when I was seven: Dad was in school working on his B.S. in general studies in order to become a manager at work and I had just received a “computer” toy that I had been begging for and for which I know my parents had been saving for months. I let Dad help me with the hard math games that I couldn’t complete; he was taking a math class at the time and easily whizzed right through the algebra and geometry problems that I couldn’t even comprehend at such a young age; I remember staring at my daddy with amazement as he concentrated and allowed me to beat the various games.

When Dad graduated, we didn’t have a party. I’m not even sure he went to his own graduation or if we had a special dinner of some kind. But, still to this day, there is an index card proudly displayed on my dad’s nightstand that says “Congratulations Daddy! I’m so proud of you!” and is covered with drawings in place of a graduation card that he has saved since I presented it to him over twenty years ago.

I don’t know why we didn’t celebrate Dad’s achievement, but we should have shouted it from the rooftops. My Dad was a first-generation college graduate. My paternal grandmother was a good student and was incredibly active at her high school, even

playing basketball at a time when female athletes were an anomaly. However, she never went to college because it wasn't common at the time and she married my grandfather, an Army officer. Instead, they traveled the world. Despite never going to college, my grandfather was a Major in the Army and was well known and respected by his peers.

Let's move to January 2008: I was accepted into the Teach for America program and would have my life turned forever upside-down as I prepared to move away to teach third graders in a failing school district five and a half hours from my hometown in Sioux Falls, SD.

I was sitting on my parents' couch on winter break from my senior year at the University of Minnesota when I received the email that would change my life. I was offered a position in Kansas City, MO--a place I had never been to and never imagined living in.

This is one of my more distinct memories from teaching. I knocked on the door. I suppose, if I'm to be honest, that I banged my fist on the door. Rather aggressively. It was November 2008. Snow was falling, and I was wearing three-inch heels, a skirt, and a light blouse with a tank-top underneath. No coat.

I was not locked out of my house or car. I had just stormed out of Troost Elementary School, a school where I never took lunch money and was one of only a handful of white people on the block. I was going after a student who had just had a fight at school and ran home instead of stopping to talk to me. I had wanted to calm him down and understand what was going on. I arrived at his front door before I even realized that I had left the school without telling anyone and without anything to keep me warm on this

freezing day. This was perhaps not the wisest of moves but, as I found myself doing frequently as a new teacher, my passion and emotions often overtook my sensibilities.

After banging on the door, I realized the ridiculous situation I had put myself in and finally noticed the temperature as I started to shiver. I knew my student, T., was in the house and I knew his mother was there as this was not my first visit to their home. I prided myself on eating dinner with every single one of my students and their families in their home at least once a semester to create a sense of community and had dined with this family already on two occasions. I knocked again. And again. I knocked for what seemed like forever and I finally heard a rustle inside as the door opened and a cloud of (illegal) smoke emerged from the house. I explained to T.'s mom why I was stopping by and that I was concerned with some of T.'s recent behavior and academic performance.

She asked the question that has forever stuck with me: "Miss Peters, why are you wasting your time?"

This one sentence from a mother disenfranchised from the school system herself as a young girl and who had previously been told to give up on her child who was only 8 years old fractured my already cold heart. Emotion had landed me on this doorstep and I couldn't explain why I was there. I stammered something about how I cared and knew that all students could achieve before turning around, letting my shoulders drop as I trudged down the sidewalk. I started crying on the journey back to school and realized how tired I was, how sore my feet were, and that I was truly exhausted. After arriving at the school, I was reprimanded for leaving the school even though I had previously been praised for my frequent home visits to see students in their home environments. All I wanted was for my

students to be successful and I couldn't convince anybody that this was possible; I was starting to lose faith in myself.

When I moved to Kansas City, I was young and I was excited. I was ready to be a model for the next "Stand and Deliver" movie and was going to help my inner-city students ease through their remaining school years before I helped them receive college scholarships where they would be honors students. I thought I could overcome my self-perceptions of being "average" and could move my life into serving a more important purpose. Needless to say, my life did not feel like that.

So why did I care about this 8-year-old and his success? After one more year in Kansas City I could move wherever I wanted and go back to school or take on a new, exciting job. Those students changed my life. While I grew up mere hours away, I grew up in an entirely different world from that of my students. I could not leave these children.

Despite my feelings of failure on that day, I persevered through another full school year and my students achieved the highest score on the MAP test that Troost Elementary had ever seen and nearly every student achieved at least two years of growth in both math and communication arts in the single year that I had them. While I may have failed at certain points of my career at Troost, I look back at this time overall as a success. As educators, we can only do our best and continue to improve on ourselves. This, by the way, has nothing to do with my skills as a teacher but simply proves that care, love, community, passion, and a whole lot of hard work can make anything possible.

Why did I care and why haven't I left education? Because of my experiences in life, I believe that all students can learn. I believe that all students should have the right to learn.

All students should have equal access to education, high level classes, special assistance, and extra-curricular activities. All students should get the opportunity to do some hands-on learning, go on field trips, and utilize the knowledge they are being given. I truly believe that your zip code should not impact your entire life. I teach for all of my students and their futures.

While those are the things I believe and are the lens through which I view my work, I do not know how to make that possible for all students and know I can't do it by myself. However, I do believe that we can be more effective as educators in teaching our students and giving all students that want it, the opportunity to attend college. With this dissertation, it is my hope that I will encourage the high school students I currently teach to achieve to their fullest extent, to expose students to thoughts, ideas, and professions that have never been presented to them before, and that other educators and leaders will be motivated by this work to improve the education of all students as they encourage and push their students to the highest level of achievement that they themselves never imagined they could reach. If I have the motivation to do this work, then I feel that we as a society should do be compelled to do this work. Let's go.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As an educator and the child of a first-generation graduate and the grandchild of two first-generation college graduates, I have developed a passion for the concept that all children are owed an education that can prepare them for college or a career. Working with students in inner-city Kansas City whose zip code restricted their potential for success later in life rapidly elevated my desire to find the ever-elusive panacea for the achievement gap. Hearing that test scores and literacy rates of elementary students determined the number of jail cells to be built further fueled the fire in my heart to help the children I was working with. Some may chuckle at the naiveté of my wishes, but I believe that a little faith is necessary to continue moving forward to allowing all students access to a high quality education. Too many well-intentioned educators have been pushed to give up their work because of failure and we, as a society, must put a stop to this. The time has come to demand that all of our children are worth the time and effort necessary to give them the skills necessary to attend a college or university, if they so choose. I believe that the first step of this process is to increase the number of first-generation college graduates. By giving postsecondary access to students who have no familial connection to colleges and universities, their families will be more likely to not only attend, but graduate, and the number of people unassociated with higher education could be dramatically decreased.

While I do not believe that you must attend college to be successful in life--noting the accomplishments of many through history who were or are without a college degree--I do believe that all students should be given the preparation for, and opportunity to, attend

an institution of higher learning if that is what they desire. More importantly, all children should be able to be successful at a college or university and be given the skills and knowledge to navigate their way successfully to graduation. Sadly, this is not occurring universally for all of our students, as it should be. Worse, and more realistically, it is not close to happening; nearly 8.1% of the 38 million non-institutionalized civilians who are between the ages of 16-24 are high school dropouts (Chapman et al., 2011). Results of a longitudinal study of 3,974 students concluded that those who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma than proficient readers (Hernandez, 2011). This study utilized a national database and included students born between 1979 and 1989. The children's parents were surveyed every two years to determine their economic status and the children's reading progress was tracked using the Peabody Individual Achievement Test (PIAT). The children were divided into three reading groups which corresponded to their skill levels and were also divided into three income categories. The research found that 23% of the below-basic readers dropped out or failed to finish high school by the age of 19 compared to 4% of the proficient readers. Six times more children who lived in poverty for at least a year and were not reading proficiently in third grade dropped out of high school or failed to complete than their peers. As of 2009, 89.8% of 18-through 24-year-olds had received a high school diploma or an alternative credential and while these rates have increased since 1972 and sound promising, we are still failing to educate one out of every ten students (Chapman et al., 2011). Throughout this body of work, I hope to intertwine my voice and desire for a societal change with solid, meaningful research and data that will open doors for previously unheard voices: first-generation college graduates.

As a teacher, for the past seven years I have had the opportunity to work with many students who have great dreams and desires to attend college. In the high school I currently serve at, 100% of seniors are accepted into a two-year community college or four-year college or university; they have parents and grandparents who have attended and/or graduated. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I have tragically worked with too many students who failed to see an educational future beyond high school, if they even made it to graduation; of the over 60 children I worked with in my first two years of teaching, only one student had a parent with a degree. I have even had my heart broken over a handful who have dropped out because of their lack of an adequate early education. I can say that I have seen the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates first-hand even though I have not personally experienced it. I have seen the power of education, both as a positive and negative force. Positive in that it can be life-altering in terms of allowing personal and societal freedom and growth for students and their families and negative in that the lack of a solid education early in life can imprison a person by affording them very few options for their future and can inhibit the educational opportunities for their children and grandchildren. If this anecdotal is not enough to encourage a person to support an exceptional education for all children, then perhaps they can be swayed by the societal benefits of education our students:

If the number of high school dropouts in this age cohort was cut in half, the government would reap \$45 billion via extra tax revenues and reduced costs of public health, of crime and justice, and in welfare payments. This lifetime savings of \$45 billion for the current cohort would also accrue for subsequent cohorts of 20-year olds. (Levin et al., 2007, p. 1)

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) discuss the importance of first-generation students graduating from college. The baccalaureate degree is more than ever before an avenue for

upward social mobility. Many of the 10 million jobs that will be created will require skills and competencies beyond those that are acquired in high school and our society needs these skilled workers to function (Callan, 2000). Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of first-generation students fail in college; even though they persisted through high school graduation and made their way to a college or university, they tend to drop out at a greater rate than their peers whose families have experience in higher education. Parental education has an influence on the education and career choice of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Warburton et al. (2001) found that there was a 15% gap between the 3-year persistence rates of first-generation college students and their peers whose parents and/or grandparents graduated from postsecondary education (73% and 88%, respectively).

Despite first-generation college students being less likely than their peers to persevere and graduate from an institution of higher learning, little is known about their college experiences and the ways those experiences compare to the experiences of students who have college-educated parents and/or grandparents. There have been several autobiographical accounts that provide a compelling portrait of the experiences of first-generation college students (Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Rodriguez, 1982) but these are now dated. Even newer and more detailed research (Warburton et al., 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) does not examine the nature of first-generation students' experiences or study the phenomenon directly from the graduates. This work will add to the body of research already conducted on the importance of enabling more prospective first-generation college students to be first-generation college graduates.

The Problem Statement

Participation in a college education and subsequent graduation has benefits both for individuals and our society as a whole; giving all students the opportunity to choose and be successful in postsecondary is the duty of the education system and its educators (Choy, 2001). Students today are different from the students of years past and many of these “new” students will be the first in their families to attend college (Carnevale & Fry, 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Because of a myriad of issues to be discussed through this work, students with no familial history of post-high school attendance or graduation are both under-represented in and have a more difficult time accessing higher education institutions compared to their peers who have some form of familial history of college or university attendance (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Ishitani (2006) deduced that “overall, being a first-generation student reduced the odds of graduating in four and five years by 51% and 32%” (p. 880) and this is only for students who make it to a college or university. Unlike many of their peers, it is apparent that first-generation college students face difficulties that cause them to be less successful in applying, attending, and graduating after high school.

For the purpose of this study, students who have no parental connection to post-secondary education and graduation, will be referred to as first-generation college students; those who achieve graduation will be considered as first-generation college graduates. Students with any immediate familial graduation from an institution of higher learning will not be considered first-generation college students or graduates.

College or some other form of post-high school education has increasingly become the rule in American society as opposed to an exception. Hansen (1983) found that

students view college as an occasion to expand their opportunities in terms of future careers, financial potential, and social connections. Goyette (2008) agrees that the expectation that high school students will go on to attain a bachelor's degree "has, over the past twenty years, become the 'norm'" (p. 475). However, graduation rates are still low at approximately 66%-70% across the nation; this means that at least three students out of ten do not graduate from a school system within the standard four years (Levin et al., 2007).

While there is encouraging evidence (Ishitani, 2003) showing that first-generation college attendance has increased over the last several decades, there are still huge inequalities in attendance between those students with familial connections to post-secondary institutions and those without. "Since the mid-1950s, increasing proportions of high school graduates have enrolled in college, although the growth in enrollment has leveled off in recent years" (Falsey & Heyns, 1984). In terms of percentages, the United States Department of Education (2000) found that only 27% of high school graduates would be first-generation college students. That number decreased to 24% of the undergraduate population because not all of the prospective first-generation college students went on to enroll (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The gap between types of college students is frightening because first-generation students are almost four times more likely to leave higher education than students who have a familial background in postsecondary institutions (Engle & Tinto, 2008); even if they are able to apply and attend an institution of higher learning, their persistence until graduation is minimal.

The United States Department of Education (2000) found that students greatly benefit from the experiences of their parents in institutions of higher learning and due to a

lack of connection to a parental figure with such experiences, first-generation college students do not receive this knowledge or first-hand experience. Wells and Lynch (2012) concluded that parents of first-generation college students are likely less able to help their students with basic high school preparation or college tasks. This includes encouraging students to take the appropriate courses and tests in school, finding information about various colleges and universities, overcoming difficulties involved with applying and attending school, and seeking out scholarship opportunities (Ishitani, 2006).

College enrollment varies for students and is connected to their parents' education; the level of parental education is a good predictor of student educational achievement (Hodgkinson, 1993). Family members are "amongst the most common and important proximal processes for adolescents and young adults and play an important role in academic outcomes" (Dennis et al., 2005, p. 224). Horn and Bobbitt (2000) found that children of parents who had only attained a high school degree were less likely to aspire to a postsecondary education. For students whose parents have degrees, "college is what one does after the completion of high school and was simply the next, logical, expected and desired stage in the passage toward personal and occupational achievement" (Terenzini et al, 1994, p. 62). First-generation students may not necessarily have that same expectation for themselves because college attendance and graduation were not a part of their families' traditions. In some ways, "those who were the first in their immediate family to attend college are breaking, not continuing, family tradition" (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 63).

While many high school students who were surveyed claimed that they planned on attending some form of college or university after graduation, there was a 32% difference between the percentage of students who thought they would enroll and those who actually

followed through (Choy, 2001). Research suggests that the probability that students will attend a post-high school educational institution only continues to spiral downward for those students whose parents do not have a high school diploma. First-generation students whose parents had attended some college, even if they never graduated, were more likely to persist than students whose parents had not attempted (Ishitani, 2006).

Schmid (2001) found that “children whose parents are better educated, make more money, have high status jobs tend to attain higher levels of education than do other children” (p. 73). The less education a parent has, the less education their child(ren) will be likely to have and various studies have found that “first-generation college students may be less equipped for college due to poor academic preparation from high school and lower critical thinking scores prior to college” (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005, p. 223). The evidence of this is startling as first-generation students are less likely to attend college with fewer than 50% entering college compared to 85% of their peers whose parents have degrees (Engle et al., 2006).

First-generation status is most common in children who have families with no educational experience after high school and certainly impacts low-socioeconomic status (SES) and students of color; this can hinder their entry into institutions of higher learning (Cabrera, 2014; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 2001). Chen and Carroll (2005) found that first-generation students tend to come from families with lower incomes; 50.3% of first-generation college students come from a family income of less than \$25,000. Research done by the United States Department of Education (2000) found that half of the 27% of college graduates who were first-generation college students were considered to be low-SES. Schmid (2001) found that the SES of parents is directly

correlated with the achievement of their children. Low SES students are at a higher risk of not, “transitioning to college, completing high school, expecting a college degree, and acquiring college qualifications” (Wells & Lynch, 2012, p. 674) while in high school. Students who are low-SES are more likely to be students of color and are less likely to have parents with a higher education. Engle and Tinto (2008), through the Pell Institute, reviewed first-generation college students and confirmed that they are more likely to be considered low-income.

Students of color are more likely to be first-generation college students than they are to have parents who have a bachelor’s degree or higher; 64% of the first-generation college graduate population is white and 84% of the students who have a familial connection to college are white. Students of color are less likely to attend some form of post-secondary school and have poorer performance and a higher rate of dropping out (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Zalaquett, 1999). These students of color are not only less likely to receive an enhanced education but are also less likely than their peers to actually graduate from an institution of higher learning (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Santiago (2011) found that only 37% of Latino students and 40% of black students are enrolled in college as compared to 49% of their white peers. Only one tenth of Latino adults between the ages of 18 and 24 hold a college degree (Brindis, Driscoll, Biggs, & Valderrama, 2002) and only half of all Latino college students during the 2007-2008 school year were first-generation college students (Santiago, 2011). In 2009, 63% of foreign-born Hispanics between ages 18-24 had completed high school. Status high school completion rates were higher for Hispanics born in the United States: 83.7% for students

whose parents were not born in the United States and 86.7% for those whose parents were born in the United States.

Prospective first-generation college graduates are commonly less prepared academically for college, demonstrated by their lower rates of taking higher-level mathematics courses in high school (only 15.2% of first-generation college students have taken calculus or precalculus compared to 41.5% of students whose parents had a bachelor's degree or higher) and lower college entrance examination scores (10.3% of first-generation college students had a "high level" SAT/ACT score versus 38.7%) (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

Terenzini et al. (1996) suggests that high school students who are potential first-generation college students may need more support in high school because they have not been placed in classes that would prepare them for success in college. In terms of mathematics, 15.3% of first-generation college students top their math education with Algebra I while only 5.2% of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree or above stop there. Tracking in schools can limit a student's potential because it involves placing students who are not expected to perform well or possibly ever attend a post-high school graduate educational institution in lower level classes where they cannot achieve the proper credits to even be able to apply for a college or to meet the standards of acceptance. These tracks are not selected by students but are instead based on perceptions of the counselors, teachers, and administrators in our schools. Research shows that first-generation college students are more likely to, "attend under-resourced high schools and receive inadequate college counseling and are less likely to attain a degree or receive benefits associated with completion" (Well & Lynch, 2012, p. 673).

Students with no connection to a college or university are more likely to delay postsecondary entry, begin at a 2-year institution, and attend part time and discontinuously (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2003). They tend to have more dependents and are older and are more likely to be married than their peers and if they drop out of an institution of higher learning, they are much less likely to return (Horn, 1998). While these are not the only students to be affected by this phenomenon, they are statistically the most likely to be affected. This problem limits the access of students have to various careers, lifestyles, and can inhibit their upward mobility. Ultimately, it could have an immeasurable impact on their lives and the lives of their families (Choy, 2001).

There are programs and institutions that are actively working to service students who have historically had lower rates of college attendance and graduation. During the Freedmen's Education Movement from 1865-1877, African Americans were no longer constrained by the bonds of slavery and were putting a great emphasis on education (Allen, 2010). This would be a chief means for former slaves and free men and women to distance themselves from their inferior status in society; elevating education could enable black men and women to obtain positions they had previously been denied (LeMelle, 2002). Webber (1978), Anderson (1988), and Franklin (1992) all reviewed the work of African Americans to gain and secure educational access through a process of institution building and utilizing legislation as a social movement. Work was done to create a system of universal public education and included poor whites as well as black people. In a landscape where education was reserved as a privilege for the white upper middle class, this was a tall order (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Historically Black Colleges and Universities, to be more deeply discussed in Chapter 2, were founded after the Civil War to promote the

spread of knowledge and give an opportunity for black Americans to receive a postsecondary education. Other programs like Upward Bound and AVID will also be discussed in Chapter 2 as they actively work to assist prospective first-generation college students in the preparation for college while in high school.

While research has documented that first-generation college students are entering colleges and universities at a growing proportion since the 1920s (Billson & Terry, 1982; Pascarella et al., 2004), current gaps exist in the literature related to the experiences of first-generation college students (Riehl, 1994). The existing literature suggests that although more researchers have been focused on these students (Ishitani, 2006; Zwerling & London, 1992), it is difficult to calculate qualitative data because few universities and colleges collect information regarding family history and higher-education attendance (Padron, 1992). Instead, the current research has studied the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates from an outsider's perspective and discusses the barriers to college for these students and which students are most likely to be first-generation college graduates.

The Purpose Statement

This descriptive case study sought to uncover and understand the experiences of five first-generation college students who graduated from an institution of higher learning. The goal of the study was to develop a thick description of the perceptions of students who have no familial history of post-secondary education to address the underrepresentation of first-generation college students and to better understand their support systems, motivation, and experiences. When a researcher utilizes thick description and studies a topic in-depth, it can “open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete

descriptions of people and places...in such a way that we can understand the phenomenon being studied and draw our own conclusions about meanings and significance” (Patton, 2002, p. 438). My pragmatic goals were to use thick description to examine the experiences of first-generation college graduates to add to the body of knowledge surrounding the phenomenon; to discover useful solutions from participants for ways to help all students to attend a college or university, and to stimulate future research in this area. The study utilized descriptive case study in the research design in order to understand and describe the commonalities amongst first-generation college graduates.

A case study, according to Yin (2009) is “...a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (p. 27). Case study is best utilized when you want to answer “how,” and “why” questions, when researchers cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved with the study, when they want to examine contextual conditions that are believed to be relevant to the phenomenon being studied, and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clear (Yin, 2009). In that case studies are designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants, this approach was ideal for this inquiry using “description as [the] main objective” (Yin, 2012, p. 39).

This study fit the elements of a descriptive case study with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of first-generation college graduates’ experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). This allowed me as the researcher to focus on the problem and gain insight and meaning for participants. Yin (2012) states, “If your aim is to do a case study to portray what happened in a particular case, you are likely to be

aiming for a descriptive case study” (p. xxii). First, one of the goals of case studies is to develop an understanding of the bounded system (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). The main purpose of this research was to develop an understanding of first-generation college graduates’ perspectives. Second, descriptive case studies answer theory-based questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). The descriptions of first-generation college graduates developed throughout the research process helped to make meaning of their individual perceptions and experiences.

Case studies can be varied (Yin, 2009) and this research was a multiple case study where various qualitative data sources were collected to understand the experiences of five first-generation college graduates. Each participant was chosen to be an individual unit of analysis, representing a single case; this method was determined based on the focus of the research questions (Patton, 2002). In Chapter 4, each of the cases is outlined and analyzed and the results were compiled to find themes.

Miles and Huberman (1994) identify a case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context.” The case is, “in effect, your unit of analysis” (p. 25). For the purposes of this study, individuals were researched to understand their experiences with college as first-generation students. Having multiple cases allows for a richer data set in order to draw accurate conclusions based on the research collected. According to Stake (1995) and Yin (2009), there are six forms of evidence: documentation, archival records, physical artifacts, interviews, direct observations, and participant observations. Questionnaires, documents, and interviews were used as forms of data collection; utilizing observations for this research would not have provided fruitful data as all of the participants used have already graduated from an institution.

Research Questions

This descriptive case study sought to answer two questions and their five subsequent sub-questions about the perceptions of a group of five first-generation college graduates. In the interest of discovering more about this phenomenon, the following research questions and their sub-questions were explored:

1. What are the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?
 - a. What experiences do first-generation college students face in accessing higher education while in high school?
 - b. What themes are identified in the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?
2. How do first-generation college students describe their decisions to attend college?
 - a. What reasons do they give for attending college?
 - b. How do they persist toward graduation?
 - c. What themes are identified in the collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?

The theoretical framework, as follows, will provide further insight for the purposes and goals of the study. The terms *theoretical framework* and *conceptual framework* are synonymous and will be used interchangeably (Maxwell, 2013) in this study. The theoretical framework is based on the beliefs and assumptions of the researcher, theories and concepts from related literature, as well as empirical studies that serve as the foundation of knowledge for the study.

Theoretical Framework

The questions previously stated guided this investigation related to the experiences of first-generation college students. Bell (2005) defines a theoretical framework as:

An explanatory device which explains either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied, the key factors, constructs, or variables, and the presumed relationship among them. It is an efficient mechanism for drawing together and summarizing accumulated facts...which makes the body of accumulated knowledge more accessible and thus, more useful both to practitioners who seek to implement findings and to researchers who seek to extend the knowledge base. (p. 103)

The theoretical context that frames this research has emerged from “experiential knowledge, existing theory and literature, pilot or exploratory research, and thought experiments” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 25). In this section, I outline the framework of the knowledge base that supports the purpose and methodology of the study and was used to interpret participants’ data related to the phenomenon of first-generation college students.

Attending college or a post-graduate institution is increasingly becoming the status quo in our society. Yet, there are still numerous families who have no connection to or history of attendance or graduation from one of these institutions of higher learning. As Tierney and Serra (2002) say, “A college degree can no longer be considered a luxury, but is rather a necessary passport to the middle class” (p. 3). This study was crafted to understand the experiences of first-generation college graduates from their personal perspectives. Finding a way to target these first-generation college students is not only essential to improving the education of all students but will also open up career possibilities and lifestyles that are generally not accessible to this particular group of students and their families.

Growing up as a child of a first-generation college graduate, I was always taught that attending college was not an option or a choice; it was what I needed to do in order to have a successful life full of options for careers. Because of this familial factor, I grew up with the assumption that college opens up possibilities that a high school education could not give me. The experiences and difficulties faced by my father as a first-generation college graduate caused him to view education as vital. Additionally, because my mother was a teacher who taught for 33 years in the public schools, there was no question that I would be prepared, applying, and attending college after my high school graduation.

Despite not knowing what I wanted to study and what type of career path I was hoping for as a high school student, I knew that attending college would help me to be a productive member of society. In addition, I was highly aware of the stigmas of those people who do not have a formal education. As an educator now, I do not believe that all students should have to attend college as I strongly believe in and support vocational/technical programs and the importance of other career paths. However, it is my wish that all students in every district across the United States be given the opportunity to be prepared for and attend college if it is within their ability and desire.

While I am not personally a first-generation college student, I believe that these students are incredibly special, vital, and highly motivated for a variety of reasons including the desire to improve their life situations, to have a particular career, or to make a certain amount of money. In addition to physical and emotional barriers, these students face many other obstacles in their path of applying, attending, and graduating from institutions of higher learning. They face difficulties that many students who have a familial history of post-graduate attendance, like myself, do not have to overcome because

we have close connections to those who have experienced postsecondary education. Eckland (1964) said, "It is a recognized fact that all students do not have equal access to institutions of higher education" (p. 36). Unfortunately, I do not think our current system of education and society adequately prepares all students for the rigors of college (including students with a family history of college attendance) and educators and policy-makers must work to overcome this serious problem.

Based on my studies, it is my belief as a researcher that the phenomenon of the repression of first-generation college students and their lack of preparation that limits their access to institutions of higher learning is one that must be addressed before the gap widens further. As education becomes more valued in our society and the expectation that students graduate from high school and receive some kind of post-secondary education or vocational training, students who have no familial history of post-secondary graduation are continually under-represented in colleges and universities because of many factors; "it is becoming essential in our society to obtain a college education" (Cabrera, 2014).

While I aim to inject my voice into this body of research, my purpose with this dissertation is to allow the voices of participants to shine in order to highlight their perspectives and experiences at institutions of higher education. As an outspoken person, I will actively work to ensure that I am not projecting my inexperience (never having been a first-generation college graduate) onto my subjects and that this is as much their story as it is my passion.

The theoretical framework of this research is focused on four conceptual strands. The first conceptual strand examines the history of higher education. In order to begin to understand the phenomena of first-generation college graduates, research to understand

the history of higher education and its roots in our society was a necessity. This strand also expands into a discussion on various institutions and programs that have been implemented to improve access to education. The second conceptual strand addresses issues of power and knowledge; being able to voice the deliberate and unintended systems of privilege in our society helps educators to better understand and break down these barriers. The third conceptual strand discusses the literature related to the effects, benefits, and motivations of first-generation college graduates to complete college and the supports necessary for them to persist toward graduation; this was a necessary strand as this study examined the perceptions of five first-generation college students and it was essential to understand relevant research regarding experiences and supports. This literature can also help educators to design specific supports in order to encourage college attendance. If there is no type of advantage for earning a degree, then this research will not have the impact I hope it will; educators need to understand the effects of degree completion so they can convey this to all students. Achieving a degree has the opportunity to greatly and positively impact the lives of students (Levin et al., 2007). The fourth conceptual strand addresses the access to college first-generation college students currently receive. Understanding college preparation in high school, physical access, choice, and monetary concerns can help educators understand the barriers prospective first-generation college students currently encounter.

History of Higher Education

While our own Declaration of Independence, drafted over 200 years ago, states, “all men are created equal,” there is still not equal access for all students to institutions of higher learning; only 26% of prospective first-generation students graduating from

high school will earn a college degree within eight years as compared with 68% of their peers who are not first-generation students (Choy, 2001). Tensions surround this famous sentiment for even at the time the document was written, it involved the exclusion of people of color, women, and those without property. Jefferson is just one example of countless powerful men at this juncture in our history who claimed to support educational for all but owned slaves and denied them civil rights. His many writings are full of the idea of a democratic education where he states, “educate and inform the mass of people” and spoke regularly about the need to uphold the spirit of democracy. In addition, he felt that embracing change was essential for the progression of the human mind. Despite these proclamations, Jefferson still lived in a mindset and culture that had white-supremacist, patriarchal views of the world (Willis, 2002). Men later, including Abraham Lincoln, felt that Jefferson and his “Declaration’s importance was doctrinal, a test of virtue and citizenship” and Lincoln wrote that the Declaration “shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression” (Willis, 2002, p. xxi). Yet still, under Lincoln’s leadership, not all Americans had their freedom and even more were unable to access an education, much less a higher education. Many of today’s students who have unequal access to higher education learning continue to be denied access to a college education due to factors related to class, race, and quality of college preparation connected to inherent institutionalized philosophies (Ishitani, 2006).

Rudolph (1990) thoroughly examined the history of education and described how students have been attending universities and colleges in the United States for almost 400 years. Historically, education was reserved for royalty and nobles. Education was largely

left to the parents who felt successful if they managed to teach their child(ren) a small amount of reading, writing, and arithmetic. However, it was exceedingly rare for parents to have those skills themselves. By 1775, approximately one out of every 1,000 colonists attended a college or university. Most of those colonists barely completed a full course and very few ever obtained a degree (Rudolph, 1990). Before the American Revolution, nine universities were already in place in the colonies. Each was created to educate young, elite students and to teach them to act “piously...with good letters and manners” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 7). Indeed, many people in the Colonial Era did not believe that colleges and universities would become a “characteristic American institution” (Rudolph, 1990, p. 20). From this, education, and public education in particular, would become more common for those in the middle-class.

Universal access to education was not supported by the nation as a whole (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). For example, Historically Black Colleges and Universities were not created by the government but instead were formed through philanthropic activities and the work of foundations. DuBois (1935) felt that had it not been for the education of blacks through the building of schools and colleges that they would have been driven back to slavery. Myrdal (1944) performed a landmark study which viewed the development of higher education opportunity for black Americans as a manifestation of the interest among free blacks for education and the support for higher learning provided by missionaries and philanthropists (LeMelle, 2002). Myrdal (1944) attributed the support from liberal southerners as a result of their allegiance to the so-called “American creed and egalitarian virtues on the part of some southern state and municipal authorities” (p. 896). The

attitude of these reformers was clear: freedmen could receive schools and colleges, but the education within them would remain poor.

Issues of Power and Knowledge

The second strand of the conceptual framework examines issues of power and knowledge within our society. Freire (2005) is well known for enlightening the topics of power and knowledge in society and elevating these areas to the level of consciousness. There is an unacknowledged system of “haves” and “have-nots” which translates into oppressors and those who are oppressed; in our system of education, this looks like those who receive an excellent education and are able to excel in college and graduate and those who have no familial connection to college, receive a poor education, and fail to attend or drop out of college (Jardine, 2005). Those who have a familial connection to higher education are given positions of privilege and they are considered to be superior to those who are first-generation status (Jardine, 2005). It is incredibly difficult to admit and see this phenomenon, especially when in a position of privilege (McIntosh, 1988). Freire (2005) stated:

The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor- when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks as an act of love. (p. 49-50)

Herbert Spencer (1884) argued that educators must deduce whose and what knowledge is of most worth because issues of power (and thus, knowledge), those who decide who is of most worth and what knowledge is of most worth are those who have had ready access to education. “Educational systems have been the primary place in our nation where free speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions are valued in theory and

practice” (hooks, 2010, p. 16) and it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that students are given the skills and knowledge necessary to become educated on these topics. Pressure to learn an expected but unknown curriculum can limit the power of first-generation students and can marginalize their voices as learners (Jardine, 2005).

John Dewey was a theorist best known for examining the role of democracy, knowledge, and power within our American school system (Shyman, 2011). Dewey felt that democracy was a bastion for growth through the education of all members of society and that a real democratic education, “forms the citizen, not the [person]” (Shyman, 2011, p. 93). Arguing that education and access to education can produce a stronger, healthier society that also acts as an equalizer was essential to Dewey and many other theorists to be discussed.

According to Dewey, not only should students become educated in terms of memorizing facts from a book, the whole child must be educated-socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually in order to allow students to develop an array of skills. Being able to educate all members of society can promote both social and academic growth. This in turn can increase the ability of class movement and is essentially what motivated Dewey and other intellectuals to promote a thorough education for all students.

Issues of power and knowledge separate the “haves” from the “have-nots” and greatly affect the status of prospective first-generation college graduates. Horn (1998) found through examining longitudinal data that first-generation status has been shown to be a significant predictor of whether or not students will drop out of college before the beginning of their second year. In public four-year institutions, only 34% of first-

generation students graduate compared to 66% of their peers and at more selective private four-year institutions, 43% of first-generation students graduate compared to 80% of those with familial experience at the university level (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Because first-generation college students are in the minority at their high school with only 27% of graduating students being first-generation status, they are in the position of being inferior to their peers who have connections to college (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004).

Effects, Benefits, and Motivations of Higher Education

The third conceptual strand of the theoretical framework examines the effects and benefits that attaining a degree after high school can have for students and the motivations to attend an institution of higher learning. People who do not have college degrees can have very different goals, social statuses, occupations, and life styles versus those who obtain a college education. By graduating from an institution of higher learning, it will then be more likely that an individual's children would attend college and would excel there. Ishitani (2006) determined that "higher education is generally linked to...higher earnings and better career opportunities" (p. 861) and Levin et al. (2007) succinctly stated: "One of the best documented relationships in economics is the link between education and income: more highly educated people have higher education" (p. 6). These findings suggest that attending an institution of higher learning will allow students access to careers and thus lifestyle arrangements to which they would not previously have access (Cabrera, 2014).

Garman (1995) examined the effect of differences in aspects of higher education including selectivity and student performance. He proposed that students who did not complete college achieved lower earnings than those students who did complete college

and that there would be differences amongst students regarding their choice of college and other factors. A nationally representative sample of high school seniors “to estimate the effects of college years, selectivity, major, and performance on the early post-school labor market earnings of males who attended 4-year colleges” (Garman, 1995, p. 290). These students were interviewed to understand their current level of activity, academics, and future plans and were again interviewed five additional times. The criteria for participation were “out-of-school males with positive earnings who received at least 1 year of education at a 4-year college” (Garman, 1995, p. 294). Findings were that college-educated white students earned more than black students, white students achieved higher years of schooling, and white students enjoyed higher parental family incomes. White students were more likely to attend selective colleges and had higher grades. Black students were less likely to choose lucrative college majors including business or engineering. In terms of college selectivity, “the effect that including parent’s income, college major and grade point average had on estimates of the effect of college selectivity” (Garman, 1995, p. 297) and had the greatest effect on students; the effect was insignificant on white students but was the most significant for black students. This research expanded upon previous research to determine the effects of other aspects of higher education that only acknowledged that there was a connection between income and education.

Unfortunately, “first-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250). Lopez (2001) determined that first-generation college students are more likely to complete college as a means to support their families and that graduation can have a positive impact on their familial structure. Failure to graduate from high school can have private and

public consequences as income is lower, which means that there will be fewer tax contributions to help finance public services. New high school graduates will, “on average, generate economic benefits to the public sector of \$209, 100” (Levin et al., 2007, p. 17).

Pascarella et al. (2004) have concluded that first-generation college students are more likely than their peers to leave a four-year institution at the end of their first year, are less likely to remain enrolled in four-year institutions, and are less likely to attain their bachelor’s degree. Interestingly enough, “when degree attainment is taken into account, there appears to be little difference in the early career earnings of first-generation graduates and their peers” (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250). However, according to this same research, first-generation college graduates will fall behind their peers again because four to five years after graduation, first-generation college graduates are less likely than those students who have college-educated parents to be entered into a graduate or professional program where there is a higher earning potential. They discovered,

first-generation students are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a persistence track to a bachelor’s degree after three years, and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor’s degree after five years. (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250)

Ishitani (2006) says that the value of an education in the United States is evidenced by our nation’s “governmental and societal investment” (p. 861). In fact, Ishitani (2006) goes on to say that state and federal governments benefit when more people are educated because of the increase in tax revenue. It is estimated that male high school graduates pay an additional \$76,000-\$153,000 in taxes over the course of their lifetime and those who graduate from a college or university pay an extra \$503,000-\$674,000 (Levin et al., 2007).

There is a connection between education and health as high school graduates have improved health status and lower rates of mortality than high school dropouts (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006) and those who obtain a college education far even better (Levin et al., 2007). Those with a higher level of education are less likely to use public programs like Medicaid and they tend to have jobs that provide them with health insurance. People who have degrees tend to use more preventative care and visit their doctors more frequently and have lower morbidity and mortality rates (Levin et al., 2007). All of this can again help our society as a whole because money will be saved (approximately \$40,500 per high school graduate over the course of a lifetime to the public) by reducing the number of participants in Medicaid and other programs and could potentially reduce expenditures to Medicaid recipients if the number of ill enrollees declines (Levin et al., 2007).

Allen (1999) researched the structural relationships between four concepts that he believes compel students to complete college: motivational factors, student background factors, academic performance, and persistence. Allen's (1999) research involved a representative sample of freshmen students at an institution that loses approximately 40% of its students between the first academic year and the beginning of the second. Utilizing the College Student Inventory (CSI), all 581 participants completed the 194-item survey to obtain information about the students' family, secondary school experiences, attitudes toward college, and initial impressions of their college; the purpose of the CSI is to measure eventual dropout of students over a four- or five-year period.

Moen and Doyle (1978) strengthened the argument that "motivation is important to students' progress and satisfaction in college" (p. 1) in their pencil-and-paper research of students. Santos (2004) concluded through a survey of 179 entering college freshmen

that student motivations for college attendance formed a hierarchy of sorts with gained knowledge at the top followed by self-improvement, job enhancement, increased social status, and improvement of social life.

Access to Higher Education

The third conceptual strand of the theoretical framework addressed access to higher education institutions for first-generation college students. Money, financial aid, choice, physical access, and preparation in high school are all factors in college attendance. Pelavin and Kane (1990) inspected 15,941 high school sophomores and discussed the relationship of high school courses taken to college attendance, the effect of race/ethnicity and family income on course selection in high school, and the impact of race/ethnicity, family income and high school courses on college graduation. They specifically investigated low-SES students and students of color and examined how their demographics, aspirations, and high school courses taken affected college attendance and completion. They found significant differences between students of color and white students and between low-SES and higher-SES students in terms of their application, presence in, and graduation from college. In addition, Pelavin and Kane (1990) reported that students of color report lower rates of aspirations to achieve a bachelor's degree; these students were less likely to have a parent who graduated and this limited their level of experience. High school preparation is not the same for all students in terms of providing a background appropriate for college attendance. Pelavin and Kane (1990) ascertained that high school geometry was a gatekeeper for both students of color and low-SES students; these students were less likely to take the course and were less likely to

pass it. Their results indicated that students who do not take rigorous coursework in high school can have a difficult time accessing and completing college.

Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) ascertained that when “compared to their peers, first-generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education, level of family income and support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school” (p. 250). Pascarella et al. (2004) used sample data from students who participated in the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL). This sample involved students from 18 four-year colleges from 15 states for a period of three years from 1992-1995. The first sample in 1992 used randomly selected students from the incoming first-year class at each college and participants were informed that they would receive a cash stipend. The participants also completed Form 88A of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) which consisted of five 40-minute test modules which were administered during the Fall 1992 data collection period. In 1993, there was a 72.5% follow-up response rate with participants completing Form 88B of the CAAP, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), and a questionnaire developed for NSSL. The process was repeated again in 1994 and 1995. Usable data came from 1,046 to 1,052 students and 361 had high parental postsecondary education, 471 had moderate parental postsecondary education, and 214 were first-generation college students.

Pascarella et al. (2004) concluded that since “a student’s academic and nonacademic experience of college is likely to be influenced by the characteristics of the institution attended” (p. 257) thus data are potentially skewed for each student if their

institution is more accommodating of first-generation college students. Students whose parents had a higher level of postsecondary education attended institutions with a significantly higher level of entering student academic selectivity. In addition, first-generation students in the study completed significantly fewer credit hours and worked more than their peers. First-generation students were also less likely to live on campus while they attended college than those students whose parents had a high level of postsecondary education. This indicates that first-generation students may not be able to afford to go to selective universities, especially if they are outside of the geographic boundaries of the student.

The four strands of the conceptual framework will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2. The next section provides an overview of the methodology, including sampling techniques and coding process used.

Design and Methods

This is a descriptive case study of first-generation college students and as the researcher, I am the instrument (Patton, 2002) because of its qualitative nature. Patton (2002) states, as the instrument, ‘the credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork’ (p. 14). Thus, qualitative researchers approach their topics with a particular methodology, having made a decision about the best design for the phenomenon under study. In this section, a brief overview of the methodology is provided with a more detailed discussion in Chapter 3.

In that my intent was to use descriptive case study as a major design element, I sought to “enrich the thinking and discourse of educators” (Stenhouse, 1988, p. 50).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) further described the characteristics of the case study methodology as a thick description that is grounded in a conversation-style format that seeks to reveal meaning and build on tacit knowledge. This case study was an opportunity to gain insight into experiences of first-generation college graduates through the use of “criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128).

All participants for the study were the first in their immediate family (siblings, parents, grandparents) to graduate from a four-year college or university within four years. Participants were identified by the researcher and were found using a snowball sampling through familial and collegial connections. Because of a need for a specific type of participant, snowball sampling was utilized because it is useful when you need to locate members of hard-to-find populations (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). I ultimately selected five participants who met the criteria of being first-generation college graduates; they did not have a connection to a four-year university graduation through their parents or grandparents. Using a small number of participants allowed me to collect extensive data from each. After potential participants had been identified and selected, negotiating research relationships was an important aspect of conducting research. Maxwell (2013) states, “the relationships that you create with your participants in your study are an essential part of your methods, and how you initiate and negotiate these relationships is a key design decision” (p. 90).

Each data source, questionnaires, documents, and interviews, are similar to a puzzle piece and each contributes to the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon;

the combination enhances the findings as the various strands of data merge together to allow greater understanding.

Questionnaires were used to gather demographic information and other questions designed specifically to describe experiences with being a first-generation college graduate. Documents written by participants described their motivations for attending and persisting toward their college graduation and participants were encouraged to elaborate on other various experiences they had. Semi-structured and unstructured, in-depth interviews were used in this study to allow participants to share their stories and experiences as first-generation college graduates. Merriam (1998) discussed semi-structured interviews that are also in-depth by saying:

These interviews are guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of the question is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic. (p. 74)

Knowledge about particular experiences and memories came from reviewing the documents. This allowed me as the researcher to garner insights not specifically spoken by the participants during interviews. In order to organize thoughts and information, I kept a journal examining my own thoughts and understandings of the experiences of the participants.

Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously for qualitative data. Data analysis procedures for the questionnaires, narratives, and interviews followed the coding model by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the thematic procedures described by Grbich (2013). Coding utilized labels or tags created based on the research questions. The themes of the experiences of the first-generation college graduates

emerged naturally and reflected the perceptions of the participants. The details of this process along with the limitations of the study including validity and reliability are outlined in Chapter 3.

The Significance of the Study

It has long been said that “education is the great equalizer.” Yet there are far too many students who are not attending college and “large differences in educational quality and attainments persist across income, race, and region” (Levin, et al., 2007, p. 2) and prospective first-generation college students have advantages that their peers whose parents completed a post-secondary program do not have to overcome (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003). Their lack of attendance is based upon several factors, most significantly that there is no history of higher education attendance and graduation in their families. Choy (2001) found that first-generation students are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to post-secondary access, and this disadvantage persists “even after controlling for other important factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools in planning and preparing for college, and family income” (p. 4).

This particular study is significant because if policy makers, educators, and community stakeholders can understand the barriers that first-generation college students face and how to overcome them, students who would not historically have attended college could be provided with the support they need to graduate high school and move on to a post-secondary institution. Allowing more students to graduate from high school and colleges, universities, etc. will allow for more diverse choice with regards to occupation options and lifestyles (Ishitani, 2006) which can allow for self-satisfaction, social class movement, and equal participation in the democratic process. This study is

informational for all educators, especially those working with high school students, and educational leaders at the school, district, state, and federal levels to allow institutions of education to be more effective in reaching out to all students and to encourage further learning.

In order to garner appropriate representation at our institutions of higher learning, it is first necessary to understand the experiences of first-generation college graduates to understand their motivations and how they are influenced to attend and complete a post-secondary program (Dennis et al., 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Santos, 2004). Understanding all of these variables will enable educators and administrators to persuade and encourage more students to achieve a degree beyond high school (Cabrera, 2014).

Most research of first-generation college students has been quantitative (Pascarella et al., 2004). Qualitative studies have not been completed with the purpose of increasing the number of students who are first-generation college students (Terenzini et al., 1996). There have been auto-ethnographies that provide personal accounts of student experiences as the first in their family to attend college (Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992). Terenzini et al. (1996) “found no studies examining first-generation students’ experiences during college, or their cognitive or psychosocial development” (p. 3). While it is the goal of this study to increase college attendance, it is not the author’s personal belief that all students should be forced to go to college. Instead, it is my hope that any student who wants an education beyond high school can be prepared in high school and be provided with the knowledge and skills for accessing college. As Engle and Tinto (2008) say, “due to the changing demographics of the United States, policy makers, educators, and community members must focus efforts on improving postsecondary access and success among those

populations who have previously been underrepresented in higher education, namely low-income and students of color, many of whom will be the first in their families to go to college” (p. 2).

Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, an overview of the methodology, and significance of this research study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature surrounding the four conceptual frameworks of first-generation college graduates. Chapter 3, which includes methods and design, will involve a more in-depth discussion of the project’s design. Chapter 4, which explores the findings, will describe the experiences of the first-generation college graduates and give a voice to the phenomena from the perspectives of the participants. Finally, Chapter 5, which includes the conclusion and recommendations, will provide implications of the study and suggest future studies to address the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colleges, universities, and other institutions that offer some form of postsecondary education are commonplace in our society (Goyette, 2008) and more are being built and founded in even the smallest of communities (Rudolph, 1990). These institutions are more accessible to people of all genders, races, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, sexual orientations, religious affiliations, and ages than ever before. Attention deserves to be, and needs to be, given to these institutions of higher learning because of our global need to develop our human capital for growing industrial needs. “Going to college has been seen in the past by young people, their parents, and substantial portions of society as a way to enhance one’s earning power, to widen one’s intellectual and social horizons, and to contribute to the larger social welfare” (Hansen, 1983, p. 85).

There is an accepted attitude in society that expects any form of education beyond high school graduation; this is seen as the norm and even pushes many people to achieve degrees above the bachelor’s degree level (Levin et al., 2007). However, not all students are given the access and tools necessary to graduate from high school and ascend to, and graduate from, an institution of higher learning (Choy, 2001). This literature review will examine factors that motivate both people whose families have higher education experience and first-generation college students to attend a postsecondary institution and the differences in access to higher education for first-generation college students and their peers whose parents have degrees. Specifically,

personal, intrinsic, and extrinsic factors will be addressed as well as the financial, social, and institutional access to institutions of higher learning.

The following areas are discussed in Chapter 2: the history of higher education, issues of power and knowledge, the effects, benefits, and motivations to complete higher education, and access to higher education. The history of higher education is necessary to understand the expectations and availability of a college education in the United States over time. Having an appreciation for the concepts of power, knowledge, and privilege and how they affect access to institutions of higher learning is essential in order to combat these pervasive issues. In order to achieve more equal access to higher education, it is important to examine why people want to attend colleges and universities and what the benefits are to those that receive a degree. Finally, this literature review will look at access to higher education in the United States. While all aspects of the relationship between first-generation college graduates and higher education are not examined here, the topics chosen are sufficient to give an in-depth examination into the research surrounding first-generation college graduates.

History of Higher Education

In the past, college attrition has been characterized as a national concern, creating major impediments to upward social mobility, and affecting educational and subsequent industrial, scientific and economic progress (Brown, 1960). However, today we have seen great increases in the number of students accessing colleges and universities; homes to higher learning are important to our society. They not only socialize young adults, introduce them to cultures and ideas they have never encountered, they allow these people the autonomy they need to develop before

entering the work force and adulthood; they are required to provide the education and training for specific jobs and skills. Overall, institutions of higher learning improve the education and lives of the masses. Because of increasing standards in quality of work, it is necessary for job-seekers to receive training appropriate for the field or occupation they are interested in pursuing (Levin et al., 2014).

Since World War II, there has been a decrease in the number of blue-collar jobs in the United States and a progressive change in gender attitudes that has encouraged people of color and disadvantaged people and women to attend college. Bean and Metzner (1985) examined national college enrollment trends and described this rise in nontraditional enrollments at colleges and universities. These phenomena have overall stimulated higher numbers of people to attain a postsecondary education. Our society currently relies heavily on other countries for manufactured goods and this requires our citizens to be trained in the work they are doing as the jobs tend to require a more skilled labor force (Levin et al., 2014).

In 1947, President Truman released the *Higher Education for American Democracy* report, which focused on the theme of “education for all” (Trivett, 1973). At this point in history there was a large American demand for these democratic institutions because the end of WWII demanded an educated workforce. There is great evidence that the institutionalization of this goal by Americans was popular because by 1977, 1,240 community colleges were created in 426 of the 435 congressional districts (Gilder, 1980). This again demonstrates the downturn of blue-collar jobs and the need for skilled, educated workers.

The GI bill has been credited with doubling the number of enrolled college students by 1950 (Owens & Valesky, 2011). This law, passed in June 1944 near the end of WWII, “became the chief instrument for access to higher education for Americans who might have considered further study, and they enrolled in unexpectedly large numbers” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p. 486). Both government, private, and institutional financial aid and affirmative action policies began promoting racial, class, and gender diversity in institutions of higher learning for the first time in the 1960s and researchers have been empowered to assess the impact of these programs and how all students can gain access to them.

The National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 also jolted our educational systems after the Soviet Union’s successful launch of the satellite Sputnik on October 4, 1957. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) provided funding to education institutions at all levels and authorized funding for four years. American citizens, spurred on to fear Communism by McCarthyism and its aftermath, greatly feared that schools in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were superior to American school. Encouraged by its citizens, Congress passed the NDEA to increase its domestic supply of mathematicians and scientists. This would be one of the many pieces of legislation introduced to work to improve the education of Americans (Owens & Valesky, 2011).

The Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) was signed into law on November 8, 1965 as a part of President Johnson’s “Great Society” agenda. The Act increased federal money to universities, created scholarships, assisted in providing loans, and established the National Teachers Corps. The HEA was reauthorized in 1968, 1971,

1972, 1976, 1980, 1986, 1992, 1998 and 2008 and was able to keep interest in higher education up while providing opportunities for new students to attend (Beans & Metzner, 1985).

Before WWII, women's roles were limited to traditional work, including food service, secretaries, nurses, teachers, childcare, etc. Over time, a change in the structure of the American household changed because of personal and financial reasons. Through the decades, couples have been tending to have fewer children and more discretionary funds that can be used for their own continual learning and has led to an increase in the population of female students, especially in institutions of higher learning. Lastly, there has been a widespread acceptance of life-long learning for both vocational and recreational reasons (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cross, 1981).

For most of the 1800s, American school structure was based on an eight year elementary program followed by a four year high school program, and this was only the structure for those who attended and/or completed their education. Since then, colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical schools have opened their doors to millions of students from around the world. According to the American Community Survey (2002), 52.7% of people in the United States have some form of college experience but only 27.2% have actually obtained a degree. It is alarming that almost half of the students that attend an institution of higher learning do not complete a program and receive a degree. The American Community Survey (2002) also says that only 8.9% of Americans have a Master's Degree and 3% have obtained a Doctorate.

Records indicate that of the 1.3 million freshmen who took the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 2001, 28% of them would be first-generation college students (Ishitani, 2003). Ishitani (2003) conducted a longitudinal research study on the attrition behavior of first-generation college graduates. He found that first-generation college graduates are more likely than their peers to depart college even after controlling for factors including race, gender, high school GPA, and income; first-generation attrition in the first year for first-generation college students was 71% higher than students who had two college-educated parents. While more students are applying, attending, and graduating college, there is still a gap between students who have college-educated parents and those who are potential first-generation college students.

I wish to examine the history of African Americans in our American system of education by discussing race and access to institutions of higher learning and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (commonly referred to as HBCUs). The purpose of this discussion is not to purport that all first-generation college students are students of color or that race is the most important factor in attendance at a college or university but is intended to demonstrate that our country has historically created arguably successful institutions that have met the needs of underserved students. Additional programs have been created to help prospective first-generation college graduates at the high school level and will be discussed in the fourth strand, access to higher education. It is the hope of this body of work to lay the groundwork for future programs and institutions at all levels of education to give every student, and

specifically first-generation college students, the opportunity to achieve an education that would prepare them to attain a four-year education and degree.

History of African Americans in Colleges and Universities

Because of a high proportion of first-generation college graduates who are students of color, a discussion on the creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities follows. These subtopics were chosen for further exploration because HBCUs successfully created access to higher education for students who had previously been denied this right. Understanding how to give all students the opportunity to attend colleges and universities will allow our education system to be more inclusive in the future.

Before the abolition of slavery in 1863, most African Americans lived in the South. Literacy amongst the slave population was rare but did occur because of craftsmanship or apprenticeship training, religious training, and self-study. John Chavis of North Carolina was sent to Princeton University to be trained to be a teacher to “determine whether or not a Negro was capable of acquiring a college education” (Bullock, 1967, p. 12). He helped to prove the capability and profitability of education at the college level for African Americans. Despite the racist intentions of those sending him to be educated, the effects of Chavis’s success helped pave the way for people of color to be given educational opportunities as a philanthropic effort.

In the North, a select number of African Americans were being educated in universities and colleges (Browning & Williams, 1978). The first African American college graduates completed their degrees in 1826 from Amherst College and Bowdoin

College; other African American college students left the country to receive their education, mostly by attending universities in Europe (Bullock, 1967).

Access to higher education for people of color during this time was based on legal status and geographic location. Approximately 28 African Americans had graduated with baccalaureate degrees by 1860 and established the precedent that “Negro abilities extended to the capacity to attend [and succeed in] the best colleges of the time” (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971, p. 14). African American leaders, who were frustrated by the failure of colleges to admit larger numbers of black students, advocated for separate universities for “colored people” (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). Before the Civil War, a few special universities were founded and will be discussed below; several schools were established in New Jersey, Connecticut, and New Hampshire.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case in 1896 established the legal right to have segregated schools and *Gun Lum v. Rice* in 1927 extended the legality of segregation in all educational institutions (Browning & Williams, 1978). Two years after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, a group of citizens from both the north and south began to plan an education system for the separation of African Americans and whites in the south. It was decided there that education for African Americans should focus on industry. Booker T. Washington worked to “train the Negro to do better what they had always done” and suggested that they “cast down in agriculture, mechanics, commerce, domestic service, and in the professions” (Bullock, 1967, p. 81). Before these decisions, the goal of black colleges had been to create leaders for the African American people. W.E.B. DuBois argued this point and said that an industrial education would train

African Americans in lessons of subordination that would hinder any advancement of the race. He further maintained that the Africans could only be an “intelligent black elite” and not a “laboring class” if they had a liberal arts education equal to that of white students (Pifer, 1973, p. 18).

After 1900, there were approximately 2,500 African American graduates from college. About half of the graduates were teachers, 17% were ministers, 6% doctors/dentists 5% lawyers, and 3-4% people working in business (Pifer, 1973). In 1942, the Office of Education took a survey that made clear that both liberal arts education and industrial education had been accepted by whites in the South and that the impact of education on racial equality and the fears of whites had declined. While many whites in the South supported the idea of containing African American aspirations for life, they did recognize and accepted a college-educated class of African Americans as a philanthropic effort (Browning & Williams, 1978). This attitude may have been due to the Depression and the events leading to WWII because education was not as related to social and economic success in people’s minds as it had been earlier.

Beginning in the 1930s and 40s, several court cases arose over the education of African Americans in an integrated college or university (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971; Vera, 1989). The results of these cases varied with the *Donald Murray* case in 1935 admitting Murray, an African American man, to the Law School at the University of Maryland to the *Bluford* case in Missouri which created in a separate School of Journalism at Lincoln Univeristy.

In 1954, the Supreme Court reversed the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision from 1896 and ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation goes against the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. The Supreme Court then said that all school systems should work “with deliberate speed” to remove past racial segregation. Two years later, the Supreme Court declared in *Florida ex rel. Hawkins v. Board of Control* that the precedent set in *Brown v. Board of Education* was applicable to institutions of higher education (Vera, 1989).

After WWII, the GI Bill increased access to college for veterans who could not have previously afforded it and enrollment numbers soared. Because of this, by the 1960s and 1970s, universities and colleges would be all over the United States. It seemed in this optimistic time that higher education was accessible to all and African Americans flocked to northern states with their GI Bills (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

The 1960s allowed African Americans to begin forming an identity as citizens with equal rights in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, one of the most noticeable changes in American society was the expansion of college education, which had a higher proportion in attendance than other industrialized countries. While in the 1940s less than one out of every 20 Americans was a college graduate, that number quadrupled by 1986 to one in five (Orfield, 1990). These numbers meant that the percentage of adults with college degrees by the late 1980s was higher than the percentage with high school diplomas in 1930 (Folger & Nam, 1967). A higher percentage than ever of these students were students of color and the War on Poverty recruited inner-city students for college and white colleges in the south that failed to integrate students of color felt pressure from civil rights agencies and courts.

Several federal efforts were created in order to increase access to higher education to those who had previously been excluded. These included the 1965 Higher Education Act which provided the first federally funded grants for undergraduates and also helped to create a work-study program. Also during this time, the idea that institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to help students of color. By the late 1960s, some of the most prestigious colleges made commitments to affirmative action programs and included special provisions to help identify and graduate African American and other students of color (Trent, 1991).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Before the Civil War, slavery and segregation limited access and opportunity for Africans and African Americans to education. Overwhelmingly, African Americans were denied entry to institutions of higher learning. Before the Civil War, only three black colleges were founded: Cheyney State College (1839), Lincoln University (1854), and Wilberforce University (1856) (Young, 1992). Oberlin College in Ohio and Bowdoin College in Maine were notable exceptions. A wave of progressive reformers, abolitionists, and missionaries worked to establish churches and schools that would educate former slaves and their descendants. The results of this work are historically Black colleges and universities (Brown & Freeman, 2004).

After the Civil War, support for HBCUs exploded and over 200 were founded before 1890. Prior to the Civil War, HBCUs had been funded by churches, communities, missionaries, private donors, and philanthropic societies but after the war, state governments began to financially support HBCUS after the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution were ratified; these Amendments addressed

the requirement of states to provide private education for former slaves and other black Americans.

Unfortunately, the well-intentioned Morrill Act of 1890 which required federal funds be extended to institutions that enrolled Black Americans had unintentional detrimental effects. The Morrill Act promoted the culture of segregation in the nation and created the concept of separate but equal in institutions of higher learning. Many states created separate HBCUs so they could have a beneficiary for the federal support they were to receive. Despite the increase in HBCUs and their skyrocketing enrollment, they were the institutions that were the most fiscally worst off (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

After 1900, black colleges were the key to the doubling of African American enrollment each decade: 700-800 in 1900 to between 3,000-4,000 in 1910 to 6,000-8,000 in 1920, 20,000-25,000 in 1930, 45,000-50,000 in 1940, and about 95,000-105,000 in 1950.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities are defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 as any accredited institution of higher education founded prior to 1964 whose primary mission was, and continues to be, the education of Black Americans (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001; Garibaldi, 1984; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Between 1954 and 1969, enrollment at private HBCUs increased about 90% from 25,569 to 48,541 (Bowles & DeCosta, 1971). There are currently 100 Black Colleges and Universities in the United States and tend to be clustered in southern and border states with a few exceptions. As with other higher education institutions, HBCUs vary in size and curriculum with schools designated as private, public, four-year, two-year, etc. Unlike other colleges and universities, Walters (1991) identifies six goals specific

to HBCUs: 1) Maintaining the black historical and cultural tradition; 2) Providing leadership for the black community through the important social role of college administrators, scholars, and students in community affairs; 3) Providing an economic center in the black community; 4) Providing black role models who interpret the way in which social, political, and economic dynamics impact black people; 5) Providing college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across race; and 6) Producing black graduates for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination for all students of color.

Regents of the University of California v. Bakke. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and issued several landmark rulings involving race and civil liberties but left the supervision of the desegregation process to lower courts. In 1968, the Supreme Court revisited the issue and in *Green v. County School Board* (1968), determined that it was not enough to just eliminate the practices, state governments were responsible for actively desegregating schools. The school board involved in *Green* had allowed students to attend any school but few families were choosing to send their students to a school dominated by another race. Soon after, the Supreme Court upheld in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1970) that schools were obliged to bus students in order to desegregate a school system.

While public universities were integrated because of court decisions, most institutions remained white. African Americans were being forced into inferior and unequal schools and were not prepared to compete in the admissions process or interview process to obtain post-collegiate careers. In order to combat this issue, many universities began

affirmative action programs “to compensate victims of unjust societal discrimination” (Schwartz, 1988, p. 4) and the University of California, Davis School of Medicine was one such school founded in 1968 whose inaugural class was only made up of white students. Applications were re-created and asked whether students would like to be considered disadvantaged and would then be screened by a special committee. The medical school had reserved 16 of the 100 places for economically or educationally disadvantaged individuals from four racial-ethnic groups: Negro, Asian, American Indian, and Chicano. Students who were disadvantaged financially but was not a member of one of the four racial-ethnic groups was not eligible to be considered for the special admissions process. Participants in the special admissions program were only evaluated in comparison with each other and not the other students not permitted in the program (Posner, 1979).

Allen Bakke was a white male who had applied to 12 medical schools in 1973. As a National Merit Scholar, he moved from Florida to the University of Minnesota and joined the Naval ROTC all while maintaining a 3.51 GPA. After graduation he served in the Marine Corps for four years, including a seven-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Bakke later worked as an engineer for NASA but decided that medicine was his calling. Because of a family issue, Bakke’s application was received late to the University of California and although he had excellent credentials, there were few seats left and even though his scores from the application committee would have allowed him admission had he applied earlier, he was rejected. This happened despite the fact that “Average test scores and other measures of academic promise of those admitted under the special program were far below those of other entrants and of many rejected applicants, including Bakke” (Posner, 1979, p. 171). He applied again in 1974 and received two interviews but was once again rejected.

On June 20, 1974, Bakke filed against the University of California in the Superior Court of California. He was seeking an order admitting him on the grounds that the special admission programs for minorities violated the United States Constitution and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Judge Manker found on November 20, 1974, that the program was indeed unconstitutional and that “no race or ethnic group should ever be granted privileges or immunities not given to every other race” (Ball, 2000, p. 56-57). Manker ordered that the medical school should disregard race as a factor and to re-consider Bakke’s application, which was yet again declined. Both parties appealed and the case was sent to the California Supreme Court, which upheld the original ruling. The court required evidence from the university that Bakke would not have been admitted under a race-neutral program. Unable to do so, the school requested that the United States Supreme Court become involved.

The Supreme Court announced their *Bakke* decision on June 28, 1978 and six opinions were written. Justice Powell delivered the judgment in a plurality opinion; four justices joined with him to strike down the minority admissions program at the University of California and admit Bakke. The other four justices supported the decision to forbid consideration of race in the admissions process but wanted to keep affirmative action permissible under certain circumstances. Bakke was admitted to the school and graduated at 42 years old.

The case received enormous attention while it was awaiting the decision of the Supreme Court, mainly because reverse discrimination, or “affirmative action,” had become a deeply entrenched American institution. Posner (1979) explained how tenuous the situation was:

A decision broadly and unequivocally outlawing reverse discrimination would have exposed innumerable universities, corporations, labor unions, and other institutions

to successful lawsuits for reverse discrimination. It would have outraged liberal opinion, the federal government's affirmative action bureaucracy, the leadership of a number of minority organizations, and other vocal influential groups. And, according to a Gallup Poll, it would have pleased the vast majority of the American people, including almost two-thirds of all nonwhites. (p. 172)

The case did not outlaw reverse discrimination, but it did "cast a cloud over it" (Posner, 1979, p. 172).

While this court case was settled, it still left a muddled legal issue; what actions, if any, can be put in place to protect people of color or other underrepresented groups of people? In the years after *Bakke*, the courts continue to struggle with questions regarding affirmative action and this case seems to have raised more questions than it answered but did bring issues of civil rights to the forefront of national attention. There is a broad consensus that the "Constitution does not permit a legally segregated society" (Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 2011, p. 868).

The creation of HBCUs and the results of several Supreme Court cases have created a precedent that education should be attainable by all people. Despite this, first-generation college graduates are less likely than their peers to attend an institution of higher learning (Ishitani, 2003). A discussion on the research surrounding first-generation college graduates will follow.

Research on First-Generation College Graduates

First-generation college graduates have been the focus of a growing body of research over the years (Pascarella et al., 2004). The research has tended to fall into three main categories: studies that compare first-generation and other college students, attempts to describe the transition from high school to postsecondary education, and examinations of the

persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career labor market outcomes for first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1996).

The first category has looked at a comparison between first-generation and other students in terms of demographic characteristics, preparation, college choice, and expectations (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Warburton et al., 2001). The evidence from this research consistently indicates that, compared to peers, first-generation students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage. First-generation students are not as educated about postsecondary education in terms of the cost and application process, tend to have a lower level of family income and support, have lower degree expectations and plans, and are less well prepared in high school. Warburton et al., (2001) performed a longitudinal study to examine “the extent to which the academic preparation in high school affects [first-generation] persistence and attainment in postsecondary education” (p. 7). Their goal was to determine whether or not first-generation students attending four-year institutions who were equally prepared academically were comparable to students whose parents went to college in terms of their GPA, rates of persistence, and degree attainment. The results indicate that first-generation students who were prepared in high school by taking rigorous coursework were likely to persist and graduate. However, they did find that the biggest factor in student persistence and graduation was the level of parent education; those whose parents attended and graduated college were the most likely to graduate themselves (Warburton et al., 2001).

The second category of research has looked at the transition for first-generation students from high school to colleges and universities (Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994). Terenzini et al., (1996) explored three questions: do precollege characteristics of first-generation students differ from those of traditional students, do first-generation

students' college experiences differ from those of other students, and what are the educational consequences of any differences on first-year gains in students' reading, math, and critical thinking abilities. Research was conducted on 23 campuses with the help of 2,685 students (1,860 traditional students and 825 first-generation students) who had completed one year of study. Findings concluded that it was reasonably clear that first-generation students on average have a more difficult transition to postsecondary education than their peers do because of their entering characteristics and college experiences. First-generation college students have to confront the anxiety and difficulties of college like all students but also have to handle cultural, social, and academic shifts that make their transitions more difficult (Terenzini et al., 1996).

The third and final category of research works to examine the persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career options of first-generation college graduates (Berkner et al., 2000; Choy et al., 2000; Warburton et al., 2001). Berkner, Horn, and Clune (2000) examined approximately three million students as part of the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study who had enrolled in postsecondary education in 1995-1996. Their interviews with over 10,000 students covered the experiences of students over a period of six academic years. Of the students who started in four-year institutions, 18% left without a degree, about three-fourths were enrolled but without a degree, and a small percentage had attained a degree; about 80% of students persisted. Each of these investigations consistently indicate that first-generation college students are more likely to leave their college or university in the first year, are less likely to be on track to attain their degree after three years, and are less likely to be enrolled or hold a degree after five years. When first-generation college students graduate, there is little difference in their first year career

earnings compared to peers who have a familial background in postsecondary education. (Choy et al., 2000; Warburton et al., 2001).

Having an understanding of the history of education in the United States assists in providing basic information for understanding the system that first-generation college graduates are expected to navigate through; this comes without the assistance of families to guide them because they have no experience. This strand of the theoretical framework has examined the history of higher education in the United States. According to Clewell and Anderson (1995), "...participation in higher education has become an essential mechanism for gaining access to economic prosperity, political influence, and social status" (p. 56). It is promising that more research has been dedicated to first-generation students but little research has been done to allow the voices of these students to be heard (Terenzini et al., 1996) and this work aimed to fill this void. The next strand of the literature review will discuss the issues of power and knowledge that exist in education as they can help to explain further the difficulties that prospective first-generation college students may face.

Issues of Power and Knowledge

As former Secretary of Education Horace Mann said, "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery." However, education is not often given the opportunity to equalize all members of our society; certain sects of our society are privileged enough to have true access to education while others are often left behind; (Pike & Kuh, 2005) concluded after examining national survey data that first-generation college students differ from their peers in terms of their backgrounds,

levels of engagement during college, gains in learning and intellectual development and that these differences are directly related to their first-generation status.

As education has long been seen as one of the essential foundations of democracy, the extent to which individuals are afforded the opportunity to receive an education speaks volumes about the power relations and openness within any given society (Allen & Jewell, 2002). In terms of years of education, quality of education, and rigor, there is a great divide between the haves and the have-nots. In American culture, this divide tends to be greatest between those of higher SES and those of lower, and those who are white and those who are people of color as has been established through this work and this divide is strong between first-generation college students and their peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005); we know that those of a lower-SES are more likely to be first-generation college students because of their difficulty in accessing a quality education and they are more likely to have parents who did not attend an institution of higher learning (Dennis, et al., 2005; Schmid, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996; Wells & Lynch, 2012) however first-generation status is not selective in terms of demographics.

Dewey (1916), like many other theorists to be discussed, felt strongly that education was meant for the masses, not simply the “social elite” as Kliebard (1992) referred to those of a high-SES who had strong familial connections to postsecondary education. In terms of higher education, our “masses” are not being educated as there is a gap between students whose families have a higher education background and those who do not (Pike & Kuh, 2005). No longer is education necessarily a path for students to follow to gain the choice to be admitted to higher social classes and the education of a student’s family has the power to determine their future.

Dr. Delpit (Delpit, 2012) met a student through her research who helped her coin the phrase “Multiplication is for white people” that became the name of one of her much-acclaimed books. Her student, as a young man in elementary school, already felt the effects of society’s expectations of him as a black male and felt that he would not need “advanced” skills like multiplication in his future. At birth, he was born with the same level of knowledge as any other student yet because of his unique circumstances, was no longer on par with all other students. This young student, a prospective first-generation college student, could most likely not name the phenomenon and was already well aware of the concept and effects of privilege as it manifests itself in our society.

Privilege, as defined by McIntosh, is, “... an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, [unearned assets], assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 2). McIntosh is best known for her research on privilege and has particularly focused on the privilege of whites and males. Privilege is often something that we are not aware of; in our American society, privilege most frequently affects men and white people. Because of this privilege, certain people can approach their lives with a sense of obliviousness to the difficulties of those different from them. The educated “elite” in our society are often ignorant to the plight of all people here in the United States. Populations of privilege, “... are given cultural permission not to hear [the] voices of people of other races, or a tepid cultural tolerance for hearing or acting on such voices” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 11). Because of this unearned privilege, those with higher levels of education do not have to think about people who do not have readily available access

to education because they do not often find themselves socializing, working, or living with these groups of people. This privilege translates to power and, "...power from unearned privilege ... is in fact permission to escape or to dominate" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 13). Our privileged lack of knowledge regarding the difficulties of populations that have not attended institutions of higher learning matches the lack of knowledge that these groups of people have about preparation for, applying, and getting through college.

This concept of privilege does not only apply to people, it can be applicable to countries as well. The United States is a prime example of a country that has unacknowledged privilege. A great portion of our population, as described above, is unaware--whether intentionally or not--that there are people living within our country who do not have access to higher education. The United States has solidified their position as a world and military power. This power has given the United States a sense of power and privilege. However, despite our inflated sense of esteem, our nation is slipping in terms of academic achievement and college attendance and graduation (Choy, 2000).

McIntosh (1988), a white woman, states that "In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated" (p. 11). According to McIntosh, this is taught in a systematic manner through, "... the curriculum or in the newspaper, the television, the economic system..." (1988, p. 11). Essentially, society has numerous structures and institutions that assist in the perpetuation of ideas of that white culture was, "... morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 4).

McIntosh speaks explicitly to the divide in our society and how this gap is ever increasing; as certain groups of the population receive more education and others receive less, the split is only made wider. Ladson-Billings (2007) calls this achievement gap the “education debt” and prefers the term as it stops focusing on telling people to “catch up” and instead forces us “to think about how we will begin to pay down this mountain of debt we have amassed at the expense of entire groups of people and their subsequent generations” (Ladson-Billings, 2007, p. 316). This gap exists in educational attainment: first-generation status tends to perpetuate itself just as families who have four-year degrees replicate (Choy, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996; Warburton et al., 2001).

While it may not be conscious (and certainly not spoken of), we indeed live in a society that is divided into oppressors and those who are oppressed (Freire, 2005); in terms of this body of work this refers to those who receive education, those who don't, and how those who receive education are oppressing those who do not. “The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor-when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love” (Freire, 2005, p. 49-50). Because of the educated peoples' lack of acknowledgement of their privilege, it is likely that the oppressors will not begin to see the oppressed as individuals anytime soon.

Cremin (1957) said that Mann felt that, “Poverty would most assuredly disappear...He felt that through education crime would decline sharply as would a host of moral vices...In sum, there was no end to the social good which might be derived

from a common school” (p. 8). Because of the lack of acknowledgement between those who have achieved degrees and those who have not, in thinking about privilege, these effects have not been seen. Giving all members in our society the tools to succeed would not guarantee their success but would build skills that can assist in equalizing these divisions. This body of research aims to provide voices to prospective first-generation college students to promote attendance and degree attainment.

Freire says that, “it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted” (Freire, 2005, p. 54). In order to confront these issues of power and knowledge, the way the oppressed perceive the world of oppression must be changed and the second step is to expel myths created, developed, and upheld in the world. As a traditionalist culture, we tend to blindly follow what we have been taught without questioning and we have perpetuated and enhanced the divide between our social classes and various cultures (Freire, 2005). Counts (1978) described educational institutions throughout the ages and around the world as indoctrinating students. Freire (2005) states we must be “critically conscious” to be more aware of and engaged in our world.

Because of power struggles, a culture of violence between the oppressors and the oppressed exists. “Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons-not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized” (Freire, 2005, p. 55). Just as Mao Zedong worked endlessly to separate the classes in Communist China by feverishly educating certain classes and refusing education to others in order to create an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2007), the United States are also leaving a group of people uneducated (beyond the age of 16) so

that they cannot develop the skills to fight back against their oppressors. Our potential first-generation college graduates are lagging behind in terms of attendance and graduation (Levin et al., 2007). However, from the perspective of the oppressors, whom are never humanized by being called the “oppressed” but are often called “‘those people’ or ‘the blind and envious masses’ or ‘savages’ or ‘natives’ or ‘subversives’...who are ‘violent,’ ‘barbaric,’ ‘wicked,’ or ‘ferocious’ when they react to the violence of the oppressors” (Freire, 2005, p. 56). When we create a barrier between members of our society, we essentially create enemies and this can make it difficult to come together to create meaningful educational reforms. In order to achieve this, we must understand the history of curriculum so that we may move forward.

Kliebard (1992) was a theorist and historian who wrote extensively on curriculum theory and its history. Kliebard (1992) was particularly interested in the liberal arts curriculum and felt that the “idea of a liberal education in American schools is alive, but barely” (p. 46). When discussing a liberal education, Kliebard was referring to an education enriched with coursework from many disciplines instead of working exclusively in one. Kliebard also discussed the dichotomy between labor and leisure and strong class divisions between the social elite who can pursue a liberal arts education and those at the bottom of the social ladder who have a general education that prepares them to complete life’s tasks efficiently. Thinking about this in a modern context, this looks like those who can afford a liberal arts higher education and those students who are tracked into vocational/technical courses. In addition, Kliebard was occupied with the idea that in order for there to be a working curriculum, we must, as a society, decide what things are most valuable to know. In order to decide what we

expect students to know, we must figure out how to measure the value of this knowledge.

As Spencer (1884) argued, society must deduce whose and what knowledge is of most worth. Because of issues of power (and thus knowledge), those who decide who is of most worth and what knowledge is of most worth are those who have had ready access to education. Spencer (1884) compares concepts of privilege already discussed to students who are given a nutritious diet and those who are not and how those with the healthy diet flourish and how those who are not become “sick and feeble” (p. 42). If, as a society, we are going to work to enrich the lives of all children, we must realize that nobody’s knowledge is more valuable than that of another person; all must be respected because as humans, we are all unique in terms of climate, experiences, and culture.

If education is truly going to be our society’s “equalizer” then a way to empower the oppressed and educate both the oppressed and the oppressors about each other and to work to become a whole must be found. “True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis” (Freire, 2005, p. 50). While this is idealistic, it should be viewed as the ultimate goal for students. More specifically, it should be the goal for students who have no familial connection to an institution of higher learning. This is not to say that all students must be forced into a liberal education or any other form of postsecondary education, but there exists a responsibility to all people and students to at least create an educational system and society where all students are given the same tools and access to achieve the power to

choose their future (Freire, 2005) instead of having it decided for them merely because of their educational circumstances.

Freire (2005) describes education as freedom. He says, “The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically” (Freire, 2005, p. 48). Society teaches children that they cannot attain certain occupations and lifestyles if they do not have their education and thus their freedom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). McIntosh (1988) also discusses this concept and calls this phenomenon “feeling like a fraud” where there is a tendency to second guess oneself and to not feel as accomplished as one should. If education is examined from the perspective that education is a freedom, there has been a failure to allow all men and women to be created equally as the Constitution encourages. Oftentimes, we consider education to be a right and a privilege but not as one that all students have equal access to (Callan, 2000). Instead of this focus, we society must realize its responsibility for the success of all students schools by focusing on prospective first-generation students.

Counts (1978), who observed the world through a mostly sociological lens, focused on the understanding that schools are a social institution (Ornstein & Levine, 1993). Counts believed that teachers are leaders and should be policymakers; they should not only be concerned with what is happening at schools, but what is happening in the economy, in politics, and be ethical role models. Because of the current cultural obsession of focusing on accountability and assessment, educators are unable to focus on social justice and other concerns outside of their classroom doors and must turn their attention to state testing (Ravitch, 2010). Counts believed that schools need to

identify with progressive forces such as labor unions, farmers' organizations, and groups involved in creating a new social order by working to solve issues (Ornstein & Levine, 1993). Counts asserted that education had "elaborated no theory of social welfare" (Counts, 1978, p. 258), and that it must "emancipate itself from the influence of class" (Counts, 1978, p. 259). Essentially, Counts felt that effective schools would lead to meaningful social change and challenged educators to "engage in the positive talk of creating a new tradition in American life" (Counts, 1978, p. 262). Counts could arguably be disappointed in our current educational system as students like those that worked with Delpit (2012) and adults of any age can identify those schools that are "good" and "effective" and those that are not properly educating their students. These schools can predominantly produce students who will attend institutions of higher learning and may go on to graduate schools and other schools can produce high levels of drop-outs and low rates of college attendance (Levin et al., 2007).

Dewey (1916) was well-known for examining the role of democracy, knowledge, and power within school system (Shyman, 2011). Dewey believed that democracy was a bastion for growth through the education of all members of society and that a real democratic education, "forms the citizen, not the man" (Shyman, 2011, p. 93). Arguing that education and access to education can produce a stronger, healthier society was essential to Dewey (1916).

Not only should students be educated in terms of memorizing facts from a book, the whole child must be educated: socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually according to Dewey (1916). Currently, many teachers feel that they are expected to teach to a state standardized test. This pressure is even more prevalent in low-

achieving schools where there are sanctions if they do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (Ravitch, 2010). If the wish is to have a strong nation that is capable of making democratic decisions, the educational plan that teaches the child as a whole person must be considered. Dewey (1916) asserted:

Democracy, then, is rooted not only in dialogue, but in equality, such that '[democracy] is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from and the liberation of a greater diversity ... that characterize a democracy. (p.87)

Educating all members of society can promote social and academic growth which could increase class movement; this is the idea that people can have the ability to move between the different social classes. As in ancient times, it is difficult for members of our world to move themselves out of their assigned at birth social class. While there are many exceptional citizens, there are few exceptions to this rule (London, 1996). Dewey (1938) believed that curriculum can impact student values, beliefs, and perspectives and to promote democratic values, curriculum must be more than academic exercises but must challenge students to critically examine issues of social importance.

Acknowledging that education is power is necessary in understanding society in terms of oppressors and the oppressed as Freire (2005) described. Dewey (1916) felt that those who had acquired knowledge had the power to move themselves through social statuses. This manifests itself in the occupational field because those who have education have access to graduate schools where they can partake in higher-level jobs including professors, lawyers, and doctors (London, 1996). In addition, those with power (and thus, knowledge) have the autonomy to choose their path in life. Again, this

is something that is unacknowledged by those with this privilege. Conversely, those without knowledge have little power and little control (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Despite how advanced society has become, issues of power and knowledge are still prevalent today (Freire, 2005). As curriculum is continuously redesigned, there is still a failure to directly acknowledge that there are distinct differences between our social classes that result from issues of power, and thus knowledge. Oppressors do not want to acknowledge their position of privilege (by choice or unconsciously) and those who are oppressed may not have the tools and skills (not given to them by their education) necessary to get them out of their position (Freire, 2005).

In her books, Delpit (2012), discusses the “culture of power” and its effect on children. She examines the inherent ability found at birth in all students, the importance of educating our youngest students, demanding critical thinking, assessments, and race on college campuses. Delpit’s work is strikingly accurate and is highly logical; it is frightening to me as an educator with experience in the inner-city that I had never even heard of Delpit before I had the opportunity to listen to her speak at UMKC in 2013. Her work makes sense and is essential reading for all teachers. Reading Delpit’s work makes it difficult to look around and not see this phenomenon occurring for potential first-generation students.

In order to combat the achievement gap, Delpit (2012) recommends a simple solution. Her prescription is for all educators to consistently reinforce the idea that all aspects of education are for all students. Not only does this apply to regular, general education, but it also extends into advanced courses and furthering education beyond high school. Delpit argues that our current culture of power does not express that this

is a possibility for all of our children, especially our low-income students of color who are the most likely to be first-generation students (Levin et al., 2007). In an interview with Nile Stanley (Stanley, 2003), Delpit said that the biggest challenge for teachers working with urban children is that the teachers must believe in the brilliance of all of their students.

Prospective first-generation college students are victims of power in our society as they are members of the oppressed; because of this, they are unable to attain levels of knowledge equal to those of the oppressors (Freire, 2005). While these students have just as much potential as other students, they have a lack of knowledge about preparation and application process for college (Pike & Kuh, 2005) because of a position given to them at birth. There is a need for prospective first-generation college students to be better prepared in terms of coursework in their elementary and secondary educations or they may not end up being successful in completing college (Pascarella et al., 2004). These are not issues that these students, families, and communities can address alone; society must work to equalize education to achieve Horace Mann's dream (McIntosh, 1988).

Issues of power and knowledge are rampant here in the United States and elsewhere in the world but are rarely discussed or recognized (Freire, 2005). Failure to acknowledge these concerns has resulted in a skewed system of education that does not cater to the needs of all students. As work is done to allow more students the opportunity to attend a college or university, it is necessary to understand why students would want to attend and what the rewards are for that attendance and eventual graduation. These topics will be further discussed in the next strand.

Effects, Benefits, and Motivations of Higher Education

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences and perspectives of first-generation college graduates. The goal was to better understand why and how first-generation students persisted towards graduation; this strand of the literature review will investigate other research about the motivators and the resulting effects and benefits of a college diploma for students. Educational institutions and the government make considerable investments toward education and, in turn, expect returns from these investments. In 2005 alone, the government gave \$90 billion in financial aid grants and loans for postsecondary education (Horne, 2006). Horne (2006) found that for individuals, the average cost of one year of college ranged from \$11,692 for a two-year public college to \$32,070 for a four-year private college.

Despite the high costs associated with education, graduates tend to earn higher incomes than students who do not continue their education beyond high school. In the United States in 2005, the median yearly income for college graduates with a bachelor's degree was \$43,954 whereas those with only some college education earned on average \$31,566, and those who were high school graduates made \$25,829 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Levin et al. (2007) examined the cohort of all 20-year olds in the United States. Of these, over 700,000 were high school drop outs. The research concluded that high school graduates earn \$117,000-\$322,000 more in lifetime earnings than those who drop out; the gap widens between high school drop outs and college graduates to \$950,000-\$1,387,000 (Levin et al., 2007).

Not only will a higher salary benefit individuals and their families, but the government can expect higher tax revenues from college graduates (Levin et al., 2007);

high school graduates pay an extra \$76,000-\$153,000 more in taxes than dropouts and college graduates pay an additional \$503,000-\$674,000 over the course of a lifetime. In addition, colleges and universities can expect revenues because of tuition and fees that make up about 25% of revenue and charitable donations that make up about 75% (Carbone & Winston, 2004). College attendance and graduation require an extensive financial investment but students can expect a higher income, the government can expect revenue from taxes, and universities benefit as well (Levin et al., 2007). Attrition from college can detract from all of gains for individuals, the government, and universities (Levin et al., 2007).

Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) found that, compared to other students whose parents have earned a degree or have a high income family, first-generation students are less likely to earn a degree from a four-year institution. Selingo (2003) concluded that the most important role of a college education is to prepare students for their future careers. These careers have the potential to improve the lives students who graduate from an institution of higher learning and can provide a greater contrast in quality of life for those who are first-generation students than those who are not (Levin et al., 2007). Interestingly,

We find that each new high school graduate would yield a public benefit of \$209,000 in higher government revenues and lower government spending for an overall investment of \$82,000, divided between the costs of powerful educational interventions and additional years of school attendance leading to graduation. The net economic benefit to the public purse is therefore \$127,000 per student and the benefits are 2.5 times greater than the costs. (Levin et al., 2007, p. 1)

Education not only has an impact on the pocketbook of the degree-earner and their family, it also has an effect on the likelihood that future generations will attend an institution of higher learning.

There is a connection between education and crime. Levin et al. (2007) state that:

Broadly, crime research finds that higher educational attainment reduces crime both by juveniles and adults. The causal mechanism may be either behavioral or financial. Higher educational attainment may directly influence criminal predispositions. Alternatively, by raising earnings and earnings potential, higher educational attainment reduces the pressure to commit crime and raises the opportunity cost. (p. 13)

This relationship is most clear when dropout status and incarceration rates are examined. Even though dropouts only represent fewer than 20% of the general population, they make up more than 50% of the state prison inmate population (Bonczar, 2003). There is a high cost associated with crime; it was calculated that the average savings per new high school graduate is \$26,600 (Levin et al., 2007).

The United States Census Bureau has found that those who are eligible to vote are more likely to perform their civic duty if they have a degree beyond high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). As more people become educated, the amount of tax revenues for federal and state governments also increases; this can, in turn, improve the public education system for future generations (Levin et al., 2007; Ravitch, 2010).

Motivation of First-Generation College Graduates

In order to get more first-generation college students into institutions of higher learning, there must be an understanding of what can and will motivate them to enroll and eventually graduate with a degree. Students' motivation will affect how hard they will work in school, how and how much they will learn, how well they will perform,

and how satisfied they will be with their experience (Moen & Doyle, 1978); in addition, it can determine their likelihood of graduation and the type of career they will have after graduation. A study of 713 diverse university freshmen by Phinney, Dennis, and Osorio (2006) asked students to self-report their reasons for attending college. This particular sample included 463 Latino, 167 Asian American, 54 African American, and 29 European American students. The results of the research were unique because they uncovered three reasons not previously reported by other studies for students to attend college. These included the students' desire to help their family, to prove their prove self-worth, and because of encouragement from others. The findings concluded that the motivation to attend college to help the family was stronger in students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds with families that had less experience with postsecondary education and are thus more likely to be first-generation college students. Many students, especially students of color from low SES backgrounds, view their education as the panacea to bettering the lives of their families and themselves and can avoid the lives that they grew up with and saw in their own home (Lopez, 2001). The results from Lopez's (2001) qualitative research support those of Phinney et al. (2006) and indicate that first-generation college students may feel a greater sense of responsibility to support their families by getting a college education and have a successful career after school than students who come from families with experience in higher education.

First-generation students have been found to be more likely to remain enrolled in college if they report the aspiration to attain an undergraduate degree (Somers et al., 2004), but first-generation students have been found to report such aspirations less

often, in comparison to their peers (Terenzini et al., 1996). In contrast, first-generation students, in comparison to their peers, more often cited “being very well off financially” (61.4% vs. 48.7%) and giving their “own children a better opportunity” (85.3% vs. 77.4%) as important personal goals (Nuñez et al., 1998); this could have an impact on the completion of their academic goals.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed that students with collectivistic orientations are motivated to meet the expectations and demands of their family members and others whereas people with individualistic orientations are more likely to be motivated for personal reasons. Collectivist motivations consist of a desire to attend college and be successful to meet the expectations of the family or to improve the quality of life for the family instead of focusing on themselves as individuals. Individual motivations stem from an interest in attending college for personal reasons including intellectual curiosity and the propensity to have a rewarding career. Within these classifications, there is a distinct disadvantage for students who are defined as being first-generation college students. If families have no college experience, they are less likely to have the expectation that their students should go to college and the students will be unable to have a collectivistic motivation if they do not know the advantages to having a degree. If students are not given knowledge of the university system by their family, friends, or schools, they do not have the opportunity to be individually motivated to get a degree (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). According to Lopez (2001), first-generation students are highly motivated to support their families and attend college, but if students are never given access to information about higher

education from their high schools, the probability of them actually obtaining a degree or desiring one is abysmal.

Phinney et al. (2006) deduced that the motives that students have for attending college are influenced by their cultural values. Ethnic identity and family interdependence contributed positively to some reasons for attending college. Students who identified as being people of color gave greater importance to family oriented motives than did those students who do not identify as being of color (Phinney et al., 2006). Closeness with family members has been found to decay over time for white students (Helsen et al., 2000) although support from parents is an important predictor of adjustment later in adolescence (Meeus, 1996). For college students of color who are more likely to be first-generation college students, a supportive relationship with parents has been shown to be important for the preservation of psychological welfare and these relationships are often closer than white students (Rodriguez et al., 2003). Regardless of race or ethnicity, students who are first-generation status do not necessarily have the expectation of attending college because it is not part of their family's expectations and traditions (Cabrera, 2014; Terenzini et al., 1994).

Students whose parents actively participated in the school community and are of a higher SES were more likely to encourage their students to take higher-level, advanced courses. Students who take advanced courses are more likely to attend college than students who take regular or remedial classes (Terenzini et al., 1996). The longitudinal research of Warburton et al. (2001) found that 34% of students whose parents were college graduates took calculus compared to 20% of first-generation

students. When examining the grades in calculus, 40% of the first-generation status students had lower scores. Lower proportions of first-generation students took rigorous AP courses in high school: 8% versus 14% whose parents had attended college and 22% whose parents had attained a degree (Warburton, 2001).

According to the United States Department of Education (2000), fewer than one-third (31%) of first-generation students reported that their parents encouraged them to take advanced mathematics courses compared to 39% of students whose parents had some college experience and 53% of students whose parents were college graduates. These same results were found when students were asked about being encouraged by teachers and school counselors. If students are not being encouraged by their families, teachers, and counselors then they will be less likely to take the courses (Cabrera, 2014). As the United States Department of Education (2000) indicated, first-generation students will be less likely to attend college in part because of a lack of access to advanced class. This compelling research speaks to the necessity to actively stimulate first-generation students and introduce them to advanced courses early in their middle or high school careers no matter the educational experiences of their families.

Not only do students seem to need support from their families and schools in order to apply for and attend a higher learning institution, they need to have peer support (Cabrera, 2014). Prevailing evidence from researchers suggests that peer support may be extremely important for the academic adjustment of college students (Astin, 1993). Dennis et al. (2005) suggested that a lack of peer support was not only a sign that first-generation students would be less likely to apply for and enroll in college

but that they would also not adjust well to the college lifestyle after enrollment. In addition, their research predicted a lower GPA for the freshmen year of first-generation college students than for students whose parents had college experience. It is thought that peers can provide support that is more directly contributory to college outcomes than a family, teacher, or counselor can give. This has been surmised because peer groups tend to form study groups, share notes and experiences, give advice about classes to take, and other forms of support that non-peers cannot provide (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Positive peer relationships can encourage first-generation college students to take more difficult classes and be more successful overall. Cabrera (2014) utilized a qualitative, survey research design to gather data from 42 first-generation students at Portland State University. Findings indicated that “peers provided social, academic, and emotional support systems” (Cabrera, 2014, p. 14) for first-generation college students. In order for a first-generation college student to be successful, they will need to be brought into the school community immediately and be allowed for form strong connections with their peers to receive these benefits (Cabrera, 2014).

Students who reported attending college for career, personal, or humanitarian motives were more likely to positively adjust to college (Phinney et al., 2006). Dennis et al. (2005) analyzed 100 first-generation college students in a longitudinal study and found that personal and career-related motivation to attend college was a positive predictor that students would enroll. Because of the lack of support in high school for first-generation college students, these students are less likely to be knowledgeable about their potential career possibilities (Cabrera, 2014). First-generation college

students are less likely to be individually motivated than their peers (Phinney et al., 2006). Students with individualistic orientations and personal and career type motivations had higher grades in college than those with other types of motivation (Cote & Levine, 1997).

High school preparation is imperative for the likelihood of enrollment and success in higher education. The United States Department of Education (2000) found through a longitudinal, qualitative study that the rate at which students completed higher-level mathematics courses in high school had a significant impact on whether or not they enrolled in a four-year university or college. Almost two-thirds (64%) who completed any advanced courses enrolled while only one-third (34%) enrolled if they had math courses through Algebra 2. These numbers increased to 85% and 63% when the students' parents were college graduates. These statistics support the claims of Zalaquett (1999) that first-generation college students may be less equipped for college due to poor academic preparation from high school and that they may have lower critical thinking scores prior to college (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Ishitani (2006) found that student expectations had an effect on their college attrition. He stated that “students who expected not to graduate from college were 1.3 times more likely to depart in the first year than were students who expected to graduate from college” (p. 876). Students who are the first in their families to attend college do not have parents who can share their college experiences with them and may not be sure what they should be prepared for (Cabrera, 2014). Conversely, those with familial connections to an institution of higher learning may be better prepared for the rigors of college. In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) ascertained that

colleges with a weakly integrated student body is expected to have a lower graduation rate than schools with students who are integrated socially and academically; first-generation students may not feel as comfortable on campus because of their lack of adequate expectations.

Both motivational characteristics and environmental and social supports make contributions to the motivations of first-generation college students to apply, attend, and complete a higher-education experience of some kind (Cabrera, 2014). These students are not intrinsically less capable of being productive members of a school community but are not entering universities at nearly the same rates as their peers and it is essential that these students are given the support they need (Horn & Nunez, 2000). The three main support systems that motivate and are necessary for the success of first-generation students are academic support, emotional support, and social support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Horn and Nunez (2000) completed research comparing the characteristics of first-generation students and their peers and determined that “first-generation students were less likely than their peers to participate in academic programs leading to college enrollment” (p. iii). The research discovered that only 6.9% of first-generation college students were highly qualified for entrance to college based on their GPA, rank, and SAT and/or ACT scores. This contrasts with their finding that 27.9% of non-first-generation students were highly qualified to enter college, demonstrating the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) between the two types of students.. Academic support can be manifested in tutoring services, contact with faculty, peer mentoring programs, and campus facilities including libraries and computer laboratories that

support student enrichment (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Riehl's (1994) research indicated that first-generation students tended to have lower SAT scores and lower high school GPAs as compared to their peers and are less confident in their ability to form well if they go to college. Students who have higher academic skills from high school will graduate at a higher intensity from a secondary educational program than those with lower academic skills (Ishitani, 2006).

Emotional support includes support that students receive during stressful periods (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). This support can be given to students by providing them with assistance for coping or by serving as a buffer (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Students can receive support informally from family, faculty, staff, peers, or in more formal settings such as a campus counseling center (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Because first-generation college students do not have a family member to give them advice about what to expect at college, they must form strong connections to the campus in order to persist toward graduation (Cabrera, 2014). Research has found that connections with faculty and their peers can help to offset the influences of home and the workplace for first-generation college students (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994).

In a college learning environment, social support refers to the "friendship and social networks formed by students" (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 490) and can include clubs, organizations, athletics, intramural sports, and interactions in residence halls. Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) suggested that, compared with their peers, first-generation college students had less developed critical thinking abilities, less support from their family in terms of attending college, and spent less

time socializing with their peers and talking with their teachers in high school. Many students have found that first-generation students received less support from their parents in making the decision about college attendance (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001).

This strand of the literature review has examined the motivations, effects, and benefits of college attendance and attaining a degree. After reviewing these, it is essential to discuss the access to higher education and will be discussed next.

Access to Higher Education

As this research seeks to examine the experiences of first-generation college graduates, it is important to understand access to higher education in the United States. It is indispensable to appreciate that not all students are able to access colleges and universities at the same rates (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Many people are unable to attend a postsecondary institution because of barriers including financial inability, ill preparation in middle and high school, or a lack of knowledge about higher education, its application process, and the benefits of a higher degree. First-generation students face unique challenges that students whose parents attended at least some form of postsecondary institution do not have to face. In 1992, 97% of high school seniors said they expected to continue their education at some point in their future and 79% planned to enroll immediately after finishing high school. Only 65% of the students carried out their plans by the following fall and indicates that there is a discrepancy in plans to attend school and actually attending school (Choy, 2001). In 1999, 82% of students whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree enrolled in college immediately after finishing high school. Students whose

parents had not completed college but did hold a high school diploma only enrolled at a rate of 54%. The results are even more dismal for students whose parents do not have a high school diploma; they enrolled at a rate of 36% (Choy, 2001).

Access to higher education includes the application process, attendance, and retention. Bean and Metzner (1985) identified four variables that first-generation dropout decisions are based on:

Students with poor academic performance are expected to drop out at higher rates than students who perform well, and GPA is expected to be based primarily on past (high school) academic performance. The second major factor is intent to leave, which is expected to be influenced primarily by the psychological outcomes but also by the academic variables. The third group of variables expected to affect attrition are the background and defining variables- primarily high school performance and educational goals. (p. 490)

The literature on first-generation college students depicts them as lacking in both personal skills and social and familial support systems compared to their peers whose parents have had some college experience. These are factors that could hinder them academically and socially while in college and can be an obstacle to even attempting any sort of college experience (Terenzini et al., 1996) but Ishitani (2003) deduced that first-generation status is the greatest factor preventing them from diploma attainment, not any intrinsic factor.

First-generation college students may need more support than their peers in high school to gain access to and be successful in a higher education institution (Terenzini et al., 1996). Parents of first-generation college students, through no fault of their own, lack personal knowledge of the college experience cannot help their students with college tasks (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Zalaquett, 1999). These include finding information about colleges and universities, knowing about the application

process, encouraging their students to take the ACT or SAT, applying for scholarships, filling out a FAFSA, or helping find a major or with class assignments if their student does enroll in an institution (Cabrera, 2014). Because there is no tradition of higher education in the families of these students, they have an extreme lack of knowledge of what a university system looks like (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991) and have unrealistic expectations about college (Brooks-Terry, 1988). There is a higher possibility that a student will be unsuccessful in school and be more likely to fail or drop-out when their family does not have any experience in an institution of higher learning (Terenzini et al., 1996).

First-generation students, because of the likelihood that they are of lower-SES, tend to work more hours than other students and expect to take longer to complete their degrees because of the need to take fewer credit hours (Terenzini et al., 1996). Long work hours take away from study time and may limit the number of classes that these students can take. In addition, having to work at least a part-time job may limit the likelihood that first-generation students will be involved in an honor's program at their institution (Terenzini et al., 1996). Work can also cause first-generation college students to not enroll regularly and Ishitani (2006) found that students who were continuously enrolled in a school were 11 times more likely to graduate in 4 years than their counterparts. If students were able to get a work-study job on campus, they were 81% more likely to graduate within 4 years than those students who had to work outside jobs.

Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) say that the likelihood that a student will continue on to college or university depends on the completion of acquiring at least minimal

college qualifications, actually graduating from high school, and applying to a higher education institution. Many times this means that first-generation students will be excluded from this process and there are many barriers keeping first-generation college students from attending the institutions of their choice if they have chosen to attend a program for higher education. While there have been enrollment increases for first-generation students, they have not been evenly distributed between the different types of institutions (Kim, 2004). In addition, Kim (2004) found that there are more financial benefits for graduates of four-year universities than for two-year institutions. This evidence is telling to the underrepresentation of first-generation students at Ivy League universities and any institution with prestige; it speaks to the difficulties that first-generation students who are highly motivated to attend a four-year college must overcome to enroll (Ishitani, 2003).

First-generation college students cannot benefit from the experience of their parents in terms of preparing for and applying to college and are at a disadvantage in attempting to gain access to postsecondary education (United States Department of Education, 2000). In order to give first-generation students an equal opportunity to attend college at the same rate as their peers whose families have at least some higher education experience, it will be necessary to discover what programs and support systems must be in place for these students to succeed. High school programs will be discussed in the following section.

Preparation

Institutions like HBCUs have helped graduate approximately 21 million students as of 2011, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013). While it is

important to have higher education institutions dedicated to giving all students an opportunity to achieve a diploma, it is also need to ensure that all prospective first-generation students are receiving the adequate preparation to build the skills necessary to persist through a four-year program. Two examples of programs that are working to assist high school prospective first-generation college graduates are the Upward Bound Program which is a federal program that emerged out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program which was founded by a teacher named Mary Catherine Swanson in 1980.

The purpose of the Upward Bound Program is to “generate in program participants the skills and motivation necessary to complete a program of secondary education and to enter and succeed in a program of postsecondary education (Zulli, Frierson, & Clayton, 1998). Projects under the Upward Bound program must provide academic tutoring, assistance in preparing for college entrance exams, information on financial aid programs, counseling services, and exposure to cultural events, academic programs, and other activities not generally available to disadvantaged youth (Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.). Upward Bound operates with four other federal initiatives that are referred to as the TRIO programs that receive funding under Title IV or the Higher Education Act of 1965. This program works with “small groups of students, operates with performance-based, measurable objectives” and has had quantifiable success as “the program’s participants are four times as likely to earn an undergraduate degree as those with similar backgrounds” (Gullatt & Jan, 2003).

AVID’s mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society. The program was created on the premise that

underrepresented students (first-generation college students) can succeed in the most rigorous curriculum including Advanced Placement classes but simply need extra support. AVID specifically targets students from the academic middle who have the determination and potential to be successful. They also recruit students of color, students who are economically disadvantaged, and almost all are the first in their families to attend a college or university. Of Mary Catherine Swanson's 30 students in 1980, 28 went on to college (Mehan et al., 1996).

Watt et al. (2008) examined eight high schools in California and Texas that have utilized the AVID program and designed a multiple case study to research the retention of first-generation college-going seniors enrolled in the program. Four California and Four Texas AVID high schools were selected utilizing purposive sampling techniques. The perceptions of students, teachers, and the principals involved in the programs were documented through surveys created for each of the groups of people. Of the 200 surveys distributed to AVID seniors, 180 were returned and 138 teachers and 12 administrators contributed to the research as well. The surveys consisted of 20 Likert scale items and two open-ended questions crafted to solicit answers regarding why students remained in AVID for their four years of high school and why some students dropped out of the program before their senior year. Focus groups were conducted with current AVID seniors and students who had formerly participated in the program but were no longer involved. In the discussion format, students were able to verbally express themselves by responding to open-ended questions regarding their personal views and experiences in the AVID program. Their responses were placed into categories to reflect the possible reason for the retention of AVID students. A total of 13 focus groups were conducted and 67 total

students participated. The study used both qualitative and quantitative data and most of the conclusions were generated from qualitative data analysis. Several themes emerged and included AVID family, senioritis, scheduling, family support, financial pressures, teacher preparedness, and AVID support and strategies. “The personal bonds formed among students and between students and teachers were a critical component. Students who felt nurtured stayed in the AVID program, and students who did not develop this feeling of belonging dropped the AVID class” (Watt, et al., 2008, p. 32-33). According to Wimberly (2002), a feeling of belonging and nurturing is essential for underrepresented students in their decisions to stay in school and develop the skills needed to pursue higher education. This is supported by Slaton (2005) who describes how students who have teacher advocates are more likely to be successful in school and this especially affects at-risk students. The AVID program allows students to work with the same teachers for all four years of high school and allows for the creation of strong bonds between students and their teachers.

The AVID students in the research reported that “AVID prepares them for college and/or their future” (Watt, et al., 2008, p. 34). Survey responses concluded that students, teachers, and administrators agree that students needed to be committed to the program and have the willingness to do the work; meeting these requires was at the heart of their success. An underlying problem was uncovered by the survey responses: “No matter how much support one is given, the burden of accomplishment is on the student; such is why the program is touted for its individual determination” (Watt, et al., 2008, p. 34). For the most part, students dropped the AVID program because of their lack of individual determination. The research found that there was an apparent value to participation in

AVID for all four years of high school and while “Not all students may glean all of the benefits of AVID, but enough benefits or themes exist to provide a variety of support resources to assist a deserving population of high school students in fulfilling their college dreams” (Watt, et al., 2008, p. 36).

Dr. Sandy Husk is the CEO of AVID and reports that during the summer of 2014, over 28,000 educators were education about the AVID strategies and methodologies at the AVID Summer Institutes which work to provide high-quality professional learning and her vision is that AVID will impact 2,000,000 students by 2020. AVID currently impacts 700,000 students (Husk, 2014).

Other alternative options for encouraging college attendance and retention have been created. One example is the Missouri Academy, an “early-entrance-to-college”, two-year program that exists on the campus of Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, MO. The program was founded in 2000 and the first cohort of students graduated in 2002. Qualified students, those who have academic strengths in math and science, live on campus for two years and replace their junior and senior years of high school with a curriculum made of college coursework taught by Northwest Missouri State University professors. Students even attend the same classes together with traditional university students. Upon completion, students will earn their high school diploma as well as an Associate of Science degree. The mission of the program is to prepare “its graduates to succeed in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and other academic fields at any higher education institution-thus empowering them to contribute to society in ethical and meaningful ways.” (Missouri Academy, n.d.)The program is one of eight publicly funded, residential, early-entrance-to college

programs in the United States. Not only are students engaged in rigorous coursework, they are also able to participate in clubs, organizations, and intramural and wellness activities while on campus; this allows students to create a connection to their peers and a college campus lifestyle.

Financial Access to Higher Education

Several researchers have concluded that family income was directly associated with student attrition behavior; those families that had more personal wealth were more likely to be able to provide their child(ren) with an education beyond high school (Hossler & Vesper, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1980; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Not only does SES have an impact on graduation, it also can directly influence enrollment (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983).

Financial aid can be provided to students through grants, loans, and employment from educational institutions, foundations, companies, and the federal and state governments (Levin et al., 2007). This aid is meant to be given out based on the needs of students and ranges from providing no assistance to covering 100% of the cost of tuition and can cover other fees, books, and room and board. No one source of aid generally helps a student with all of the costs of attending school and so a package of aid is put together that can be a combination of grants, loans, and work to help meet their needs. "The distribution of financial aid reflects the economic position of students and their families, the colleges they choose to attend, and the availability of financial-aid resources" (Hansen, 1983, p. 89). Financial aid serves to increase equality of opportunity and to decrease the burden for low- and middle-class families who might not otherwise be able to send their students to school.

Aid is based on merit and financial need; merit-based aid is given to those students who have higher academic abilities and attracts students to prestigious institutions while needs-based aid allows an institution to attract students with less academic attributes. It has been found that financial aid policy “that has moved away from the need-based aid for low-income students (reducing their ability to find the best institutional match) and toward a merit-based aid (that alters the distribution of high ability students across colleges) could foster stagnant graduation rates” (Singell & Stater, 2006, p. 112), especially for prospective first-generation college graduates.

Hochstein and Butler’s (1983) research negatively associated loans with college persistence and found this likely to be because of the inability of low-SES students to pay back their loans; the higher a loan amount given, the less likely a student would attain a degree. This can be because students and their parents are not well informed about the price of attending postsecondary education institutions. Amongst juniors and seniors in high school who planned to attend a college or university, 37% of students and 28% of their parents could not estimate the cost of tuition and fees. It was found that for both students and their parents, the likelihood of not knowing the costs associated with higher education declined as family income and parents’ education increased because paying for higher education is not such a burden on higher-income families (Choy, 2001).

The purpose of financial aid is to give “students with demonstrated financial need greater access to college, a wider choice among institutions, and a better chance of finishing college” (Hansen, 1983, p. 84). John and Noell (1989) found a positive correlation between enrollment decisions and the receiving of financial aid packages

for first-generation college graduates. This evidence is corroborated by the research of Kim (2004) who stated that if a first-generation college student receives financial aid of some kind, they are likely to enroll for classes.

It has been found that “many young people who were qualified for college did not attend because they could not afford the cost” (Hansen, 1983, p. 85). This is especially important because of the high likelihood that first-generation college students are low-SES and are unlikely to have the money to attend school (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Hansen (1983) said that his research indicated a “talent loss” (p. 86) because there were many qualified but financially poor students who did not make plans to attend college even though they showed more promise than many of the more affluent but less able students. Unfortunately, there is much research that indicates that first-generation students are not always getting this valuable financial aid or that when they do, the cost of school is still too much for their families to afford. Hansen’s (1983) research says that even reduced tuition will not overcome the inability of many students to afford their tuition.

Tierney and Venegas (2009) surmised that low-income students who are more likely to be first-generation potential college students do not prepare for college in high school because they do not think they can afford to attend. If this is the case, students may be completing a self-fulfilling prophesy and in a way can be disadvantaging themselves. Parents tend to play a major role in paying for the costs of higher education for their children (Hansen, 1983). Many potential first-generation college students work outside of the home to help support their family. Instead of focusing on school, these students may feel that they cannot afford the opportunity to

enroll and do not have the support from their families to consider the preparations that college entails (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001).

Titus's (2006) work asks the question, "how does SES influence college completion?" (p. 374). He used data from Beginning Postsecondary Survey (BPS) which is a longitudinal database that is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The dependent variable of the research was defined as obtaining a bachelor's degree from the same four-year institution within a six-year period. The independent variables included "measures of student background characteristics, college experiences, unmet financial need, hours worked, and working off campus" (Titus, 2006, p. 375). Characteristics such as academic performance as determined by the SAT, race, gender, and SES were collected. Student experiences were measured by academic performance in college, the declaration of a major, living on campus, and involvement at the school. Unmet financial need was defined "as the student's total cost of attendance less the estimated family contribution and total amount of financial aid received" (Titus, 2006, p. 376). Using quantitative methods, Titus (2006) analyzed his data using hierarchical generalized linear modeling. As with all studies, this research had limitations and listed three explicitly: the availability of data in the accessed datasets, missing data at the student level, and there were limitations with in the quantitative methods that did not allow the weighting of certain characteristics.

Titus (2006) ascertained that 46% of freshmen students with the lowest-SES completed college within six years of starting. This contrasts the 51% of freshmen who graduated from the second quartile, 63% from the third, and 71% from the highest

quartile of income. Titus' research implies that lower-SES students are less likely to attend and graduate than those from a higher-SES. Financial concerns may account, in part, for the high rates of attrition among first-generation students. First-generation students more often come to college from lower socioeconomic strata than their peers, presumably more often in need of financial aid (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Not surprisingly, first-generation students, when compared to their counterparts, were more likely to report worrying about financial aid during the first year of college (Bui, 2002). Additionally, first-generation students were 5% more likely to persist in college for every \$1000 received in grants, 5.03% more likely to persist for every \$1000 dollars received in loans, and 6.08% more likely to persist for every \$1000 dollars received in work-study awards (Somers et al., 2004). This research indicates that financial support may affect patterns of college enrollment for first-generation college students.

Ishitani (2006) completed a nation-wide study to "analyze the attrition behavior of first-generation students" (p. 866). Using data sets from the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS: 2000), Ishitani (2006) followed a diverse sample of eighth-graders over 12 years beginning in 1988. From the original participants in 1988, 4,427 students who had initially enrolled in institutions between 1991 and 1994 were selected for their attrition and degree completion behavior analyses. Of these students, 14.7% were first-generation students. For this particular study, Ishitani (2006) defined attrition behavior "as the first departure spell from the four-year institution in which students initially matriculated" (p. 867). Of the 4,427 students involved, 2,256 students (50.96%) graduated from the same institution by year 2000.

Eight hundred forty-five students (19.1%) left the initial institution where they enrolled and never attended the same or another institution by the year 2000. Of the participants, approximately 25% transferred to other institutions. Ishitani (2006) used the Kaplan-Meier method and found that more first-generation students were found in the group who departed from their first institution and never returned to that or any other school (24.5%). In a drastic finding, first-generation college students whose parents had some college education were 99% more likely to leave their initial institution than their counterparts were.

In Ishitani's (2006) study, students from families with incomes ranging from \$20,000 and \$34,999 were 72% more likely to leave school than students who came from families with incomes of \$50,000 or more. Students from the lowest quintile in their high school class rank were approximately 1.9 or 1.7 times more likely to leave school than their counterparts in the first quintile. In addition, students who enrolled in private colleges (where first-generation students are less likely to enroll) were 34% less likely to drop out than students enrolled in public institutions.

Ishitani's (2006) study also revealed that first-generation students tended to depart from institutions of higher learning during the second year of attendance; they were 4.4 times more likely to leave during this high risk time than their colleagues whose parents had some form of college attendance. During the first year, students from the lowest income group (who are more likely to be first-generation) were approximately 2.3 times more likely to leave than students from the highest income group. They were 8.5 times more likely than those students whose parents graduated from college to drop out.

Financial Aid and Choice in Higher Education

Many studies have concluded that financial aid is an important criterion in the important college choice process for students. Chapman and Jackson (1987) found that the probability that students of high academic ability would enroll in their second-choice school instead of their first-choice college increases from 20% to 50% if the amount of the additional scholarship is approximately \$4,700. According to Tierney (1980), receiving any form of financial aid can have an impact on students' choice between public and private higher education institutions. Hossler (as cited in Loomes, 2000) found that about 80% of students consider their access to financial aid an important factor when making decisions about where to attend college.

Different types of financial aid can have an effect on students' college choice. Specifically, "financial aid, in particular grants, encouraged students to enroll in more expensive institutions" and encourages students to go to schools they would not attend without the financial aid (Leslie & Brinkman, 1988). Orfield (1992) found that when there is a large gap between the amount of financial aid and the tuition costs at elite universities and this gap can prohibit lower income students from attending high-cost, elite institutions. These findings were supported by Hearn (1991) who found that lower income students are more likely to choose and enroll in institutions of lower selectivity. Because of the concentration of students of color found in low-income groups, these findings can be applied to first-generation college students.

Ishitani (2006) concluded that "nonselectivity in admission had significant effects on attrition over time" (p. 876) and that students who attended nonselective institutions were the most vulnerable to leaving; they were 1.4 times more likely to un-

enroll by the fourth year than were students who attended selective or moderately selective institutions. Students who attended nonselective institutions were approximately 50% less likely to graduate within 4 years of high school graduation than those who attended selective or moderately selective institutions (Ishitani, 2006).

Titus (2006) stated that “the chance of college completion is positively influenced by enrolling in a private institution” (p. 385) and low-SES students are less likely to attend private colleges and universities. The research also finds that completion is influenced by the selectivity of the institution. Titus (2006) presents overwhelming evidence suggesting that low-SES students were more likely to attend low selectivity institutions.

Research has suggested that “attending one’s first choice has been shown to be related to the measures of students’ success in college” (Kim, 2004). Specifically, the chances of attrition are higher for students who are able to attend their first choice of school. This does not include limiting factors such as cost, distance, etc. that could hinder some students from attending their first choice of school. Thus, students of higher SES are more likely to have physical and financial access to their school of choice and will have a higher likelihood of graduating in a timely manner.

Hossler et al. (1989) indicate that the term college choice refers to the decisions about whether students would attend higher education, attend a four-year institution, attend a selective institution, or attend a specific institution over other alternatives. The choice that a student makes about their college choice is ranked based on the individual priorities self-selected by the student. It is not necessary for students’ first-choice colleges to be the most prestigious or to have a preference for public or private

schools. A survey of 400 high school seniors who planned to enroll in four-year institutions showed that campus safety was a more significant factor than a prestigious reputation, a low-cost education, a diverse campus, or an attractive campus (StudentPoll, 1997).

Hossler et al. (1989) said that a student's college choice might be linked with their persistence. Students who attended their first choice institutions tended to have higher degree attainment, higher satisfaction with college experiences, higher average grades, higher academic ability, higher emotional health, and higher intellectual and social self-confidence than those who did not attend their first choice. If financial aid encourages and allows students to attend their first choice, "then we can say that the main goal of financial aid-providing equal opportunity to choose college regardless of financial ability-is achieved" (Kim, 2004, p. 48). However, when first-generation college students are not notified of scholarship, grant, or loan opportunities while in high school, the probability that they will enroll is unlikely.

Conclusion

While college is becoming a cultural norm, it is still unimaginable and unattainable for select groups of students, including many first-generation students. Disadvantages for first-generation college students are due to a lack of prior knowledge about college, lack of financial access (Terenzini et al., 1996), not enough support from family and peers (Astin, 1993), and little personal motivation (Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006). Unfortunately, many of these factors hinder the ability of students to attend college but are not due to a failure of the student. In order to educate first-generation college students who wish to attend an institution of higher

learning and to target those first-generation college students who have little to no knowledge about the college experience, work must be done to create programs and systems of support. All students, regardless of the education of their families, should be given the opportunity to further their education if they choose to do so and this philosophy was the motivation behind this research.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH AND DESIGN METHODOLOGY

Failing to prepare all students with the appropriate preparation and opportunity to attend an institution of higher learning can severely impact their lives and the lives of their family, community, and country. Understanding how to move all of our students, specifically prospective first-generation college graduates, to this level of education is of the utmost importance; this is a devastating and pervasive problem that our society does not actively address or even acknowledge. This study explored the pre-collegiate and college experiences of five first-generation college graduates from around the Midwest who were all the first members of their families to successfully navigate and complete college. This is a problem that extends beyond the boundaries of race, religious background, economic level, sexual orientation, family makeup, etc. who are being denied the educational groundwork that all children should receive (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Santos, 2004). The purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college graduates who were successful despite the acknowledged lack of support available for first-generation students in order to better understand their motivations to attend and complete a higher level degree.

This research had two main questions and five subsequent sub-questions:

1. What are the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?
 - a. What experiences do first-generation college students face in accessing higher education while in high school?
 - b. What themes are identified in the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?

2. How do first-generation college students describe their decisions to attend college?
 - a. What reasons do they give for attending college?
 - b. How do they persist toward graduation?
 - c. What themes are identified in the collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?

With the completion of this research, it is my hope that other educators can better understand the barriers that first-generation students face and what types of motivations assist them in achieving success. This issue should no longer be largely ignored and additional research is needed to find the best way to implement strategies to assist prospective first-generation students so that they may access higher education if they so choose; my recommendations for increasing the numbers of first-generation college students are outlined in Chapter 5. If the needs of students are being met in elementary, middle, and high school, they will have the tools to decide their future and whether or not it involves career training, attendance at an institution of higher learning, or some other option. If this does not happen, learners are being denied the right to have a choice in their future and, potentially, the growth of entire generations and our nation as a whole may be stunted.

This chapter will cover: the rationale for qualitative research, the design of the study, data collection and analysis procedures, and limitations and ethical considerations. Each aspect of the design of this research was selected in order to carefully produce the most in-depth analysis with thick, rich descriptions of the experiences of first-generation college graduates.

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative research refers to research that produces findings without the use of statistical procedures or other quantifiable measures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of qualitative researchers is to examine a subject matter in a natural setting which allows the researcher to experience the phenomena and to be able to accurately describe the experiences of the participants as closely as possible. This method allows for greater precision with regard to reflecting on human perspectives and attitudes (Creswell, 2009), thus making it ideal for this research. Qualitative research and analysis results in a different type of knowledge than does quantitative inquiry (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research: a) seeks to understand people's experiences; b) utilizes the researcher as the instrument of collection and analysis of the data; c) is inductive rather than deductive; d) describes the topic in great detail; and e) often requires work in the field. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) state that:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3).

Qualitative analysis is an appealing method because it allows researchers the flexibility of learning in a natural setting. It is the best method for this body of work because it gave me, the researcher, the direct experience of interviewing participants and allowed for a relationship to form and develop. The relationship between researcher and subject created an environment in which the subjects could be open and honest in their explanation of the phenomenon as they have experienced it (Patton, 2002) and created a full set of data to work with to allow for a thick, rich understanding of the experiences of first-generation college graduates.

Qualitative research is a type of inquiry where, “You will need to decide what is important and what you accept. Since qualitative research has no right answers, this puts you in a state of flux” (Lichtman, 2006, p. xvi). Strauss and Corbin (1990) simply stated, “Qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind a phenomenon about which little is yet known” (p. 19). For my particular research interests, my desire to know the “what” and “why” of the phenomenon was greater than the need to acquire measurable outcomes like that of quantitative data (Patton, 2002). Merriam (1998) shares, “Qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6, emphasis in original). Having a direct interaction with participants will provide me with valuable information to interpret.

Qualitative research is appropriate in several situations. Creswell (2013) identifies studying groups or populations to identify measurable variables, hear silenced voices, to obtain a complex understanding of an issue, and to understand the contexts and setting in which participants address an issue. Qualitative research does not seek to simply measure variables or to prove hypotheses, but instead works to describe experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. Often, as is the goal of this research, this includes the voices of people who are largely ignored by society.

As a budding qualitative researcher, reading Lichtman’s (2006) work was very refreshing and helpful as she recalls, “I remember one colleague who asked me whether I had lost my mind when I said I was interested in research methods that were qualitative” (p. 42) and that “I think traditional research, by its very nature, is sterile and impersonal” (p. 35). Because I wanted to immerse myself in this project, explore the experiences of my

participants, and to not compartmentalize them by using quantitative data, qualitative research was an ideal option; there were often times when I felt what Lichtman (2006) has discussed about her own personal experiences and I actively followed her advice to, “Be an advocate, not an apologist” (p. 56) when I was questioned about my research methods.

A final way in which qualitative research contrasts with quantitative methods is that, “*the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis*” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6, emphasis in original) and that the researcher is highly involved in both the study of the design and also the collection and analysis of the data. Personally, I feel that this close connection to the participants, data, and data analysis led to more influential findings that will help future educators like myself who are yearning to assist all of our students in achieving the opportunity to attend an institution of higher learning.

There are many ways to design a research study and many various lenses through which to examine a phenomenon. Grbich (2013) explains that qualitative research is best utilized when trying to explore or understand culture, phenomena, structural processes, or historical changes. This particular research used the theoretical tradition and the methodological technique of case study was utilized to explore the experiences of first-generation college graduates. Qualitative research in a case study design explores an occurrence using a variety of data and attempts to reveal the phenomenon in question (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Creswell (2009) suggested that case studies are prevalent throughout the field of education and researchers tend to use case studies as the research design when the objective is to explore a program or a process more in depth; as the researcher, I chose to use the qualitative case study approach to examine perceptions and experiences of first-generation college graduates. The study adopted a multiple case

design for two main reasons. This design allowed me to draw the strengths of case study to investigate and compare individual participants as multiple cases while also focusing on their experiences as first-generation college graduates.

Theoretical Tradition of Case Study

Merriam (2009) asserts that case study is the most appropriate method for framing a study that allows for the examination of multiple qualitative sources and is the most flexible. Furthermore,

Anchored in real-life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base. (Merriam, 1998, p. 41)

Yin (2003, 2009) confirms that case study is an approach of integrating multiple methods to explore a complex phenomenon; case study is best known for its use of numerous data sources, a strategy which enhances data credibility. Because of this, a case study is not limited to one specific data collection or analysis method. A multiple case design allowed me to view each of my participants as a single case, collect data from each participant in multiple ways, and gain an in-depth understanding of their educational experiences. This ensured that the issues are not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of data that allow for multiple aspects of the phenomenon to be revealed (Merriam, 2009).

While considering the research questions, the researcher must determine what the case is; this can be a challenge. Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case as "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a constrained context" (p. 25) and is "in effect, your unit of analysis" (p. 25). Case studies may be single or multiple in nature (Gillham, 2000; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). In order to create a valid study, the design of this research applied

a multiple case study approach. Yin (2009) cautions against single-case studies and says that “...criticisms may turn into skepticism about your ability to do empirical work beyond having done a single-case study. Having more than two cases will produce an even stronger effect” (p. 62). Thus, by having five cases for this research, possible criticism and skepticism can be diminished.

By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings.” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29)

The multiple case study approach allowed me to glean the perspectives and experiences of five different first-generation college graduates. I believe that this methodology supported a fuller understanding than a single case study design; each participant represented a case with multiple data: a questionnaire, written narrative, and interview. Each of the cases was then engaged and interpreted using cross-case analysis which supported the process of “build[ing] abstractions across cases” (Creswell, 2013, p. 204). Once the researcher has determined that the research questions are best answered utilizing a qualitative case study design and the case and its boundaries have been determined, consideration must then be given to what type of case study will be conducted (Merriam, 2009).

Yin (2009) and Stake (1995) describe a variety of case studies with Stake identifying them as intrinsic, instrumental, or collective and Yin as exploratory, explanatory, or descriptive. Exploratory case studies are used to define the framework of future studies (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). Explanatory case studies seek to define how or why an experience took place; the purpose is to suggest explanations for an experience (Yin, 2003). To elaborate, an exploratory case study will explore a phenomenon while an explanatory case study will explain a set of events (Yin, 2009).

Finally, a descriptive case study is used to develop a document that fully illuminates the particulars of an experience (Stake, 1995) and are often used to provide answers to a series of questions (Yin, 2003). Merriam (1988) describes a descriptive case study as research that gives details about the phenomenon, the exploratory case study as one that will help develop questions for further studies, and an explanatory case study to answer the “how” and “why” questions. According to Yin (2009), a prerequisite for researchers looking to use the descriptive case study approach is the ability to ask good questions, be a good listener, be adaptive, have a strong understanding of the topic being studied, and to be objective in the evidence collection process. If the researcher is able to accomplish this, the end product will result in a rich dialogue surrounding the phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009).

This study fits the elements of a descriptive case study with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college graduates within a bounded system comprised of a limited number of participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). This allowed for the research to focus on the problem and gain insight and meaning for those involved. Descriptive case study was chosen for this research for two reasons. First, one of the goals of all case study research is to develop an understanding of the bounded system (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). The main purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of first-generation college graduates’ perspectives. Second, descriptive case studies answer questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). The descriptions of first-generation college graduates developed through the research process helped to characterize their understandings and experiences. Much of the previous research has focused solely on the barriers that first-

generation college students face and the experiences of these students have been largely ignored. By utilizing case study, the field's knowledge base (Merriam, 1998) of first-generation college students will be advanced. I hoped to understand the motivations of these students in order to increase their access to institutions of higher learning.

Furthermore, Merriam (2008) states:

A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice and further research. (p. 19)

It is my hope that the findings from this research will provide incentive for administrators and educators to find programs and other tools to give prospective first-generation students the appropriate preparation and opportunity to attend a college or university if it is their desire.

This study was bounded by the research questions which supported the design of specific data sources. Each of the five participants completed a closed-ended questionnaire and write a one-page document about their experiences both before and during college and their motivations to persist toward graduation. The main approach used to gather data in this qualitative case study was semi-structured interviews conducted one-on-one with participants. Participant interviews were conducted with the five first-generation college graduates and they were engaged in a series of open-ended questions to stimulate meaningful dialogue about the topic. The following section outlines more specifically the design and methods of the study, including sampling of participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Design and Methods

Research for this descriptive case study was conducted by the researcher primarily in the Midwest. Interviews were conducted in person in Kansas City, MO with five participants whose identities will be kept confidential for their own privacy and the pseudonyms used were chosen by the researcher. Research subjects consisted of three males and two females in order to have a diverse group of participants and to create a rich data set for the multiple case study design. Participants were selected from in and outside of the Kansas City metropolitan area because of the current location of the researcher. Questionnaires and narratives were completed by the participants and were given to the researcher before interviews began. In-person interviews were held at neutral locations chosen by the interviewee to ensure their comfort during the interview process.

Creswell (2013) discussed the importance of selecting the appropriate candidates for any given study. He also stressed the importance of acquiring participants who are willing to share information. “Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, selected purposefully” (Patton, 2002, p. 230) and the procedures were followed for this particular research. First, I incorporated snowball sampling to identify participants by asking family and friends to recommend individuals who were first-generation college graduates. Next, after generating a list of possible participants, I used criterion-based sampling, meaning I selected six participants because they met the criterion of being the first in their immediate family (out of siblings, parents, and grandparents) to graduate from a four-year college or university (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Subjects from a variety of generations were selected in order to understand their varied perceptions about their experiences at post-graduate institutions as attitudes about higher

education attendance have changed. Snowballing techniques were employed continuously until six qualified participants had given consent to participate. Unfortunately, after giving consent but before the data collection began, the sixth participant who was a self-identified black 23-year old female dropped out of the study. Since the five participants were chosen purposefully, the design incorporated nonprobability sampling, which limited the generalization of results to the population as a whole. Nonprobability sampling methods are typical of qualitative research, and as Honigmann (1982) stated, “logical as long as the field-worker expects mainly to use his data not to answer questions like ‘how much’ and ‘how often’ but to solve *qualitative* problems, such as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences” (p. 84, emphasis in original). By selecting a minimum of five participants, the researcher was able to reasonably cover the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002).

Permission to conduct the study was given by the University of Missouri-Kansas City’s SSIRB (Social Sciences Internal Review Board) in the Fall of 2014. The purpose of this protocol was to provide protection for research participants. Participants were provided with the Consent Form (Appendix A) that they signed. This form also gave them an outline of the study and what to expect through the course of the study. The form also explained who I was as the investigator and provided contact information. Potential participants met with the researcher, discussed the research, read the Consent Form, and then were given the opportunity to decide whether or not to participate.

Data Sources

After SSIRB permission was granted to the researcher, collection of data was able to commence. Creswell (2007) explains that, “the researcher employs rigorous data collection procedure. This means that the researcher collects multiple forms of data, adequately summarizes...the forms of data and detail about them, and spends adequate time in the field” (p. 45). Patton (2002) states that, “A rich variety of methodological combinations can be employed to illuminate an inquiry question” (p. 248) and is a trademark of case study which can also enhance the data credibility (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Data collection for this research included: a) a questionnaire, b) narrative documents, and c) interviews. The connections between the data add strength to the findings and are akin to a crystal with many lenses. “Crystallization combines multiple forms of analysis and genres of representation into a coherent text” and “seeks to produce thick, complex interpretation” (Denzin, 2012, p. 84). The following sub-sections describe each of the data sources which was conducted in three phases.

Questionnaires. Phase 1 of the study involved the use of questionnaires that were structure to using closed statements. Questionnaires generally consist of closed-ended questions of Likert scale items that can measure facts, attitudes, and values. A disadvantage commonly associated with questionnaires are low response rates but because questionnaires were a part of the research that participants agreed to as consent requirements, this was not a problem for this research (McClure, 2002).

Questionnaires were given to participants at the time they signed the Consent Form (Appendix A) and initially met with the researcher and were asked to return it along with their document before the interview phase. Participants were informed that the questionnaire asked for information that would determine whether or not they qualified

for this particular research study and that the information provided would be used to inform follow-up questions during the interview process. Participants were encouraged to contact the researcher with any questions.

The questionnaire for this study (Appendix B) utilized closed-ended questions and a Likert scale item to measure basic information about each of the participants. Closed-ended questions force a response, can be scored quickly, and are easy to evaluate (McClure, 2002). Initial questions included participant knowledge regarding familial graduation from a college or university, assurances of participant graduation, how long it took to graduate, race/ethnicity, and year of birth. Participants were also asked about their confidence in being able to provide a meaningful description of their experiences. The first six questions were crafted in order to determine eligibility for the study. The questionnaire was structured by using the research questions to guide questioning during the interview phase of the study. Participants were asked to identify supports they felt were necessary for first-generation college graduates, what motivated them to attend their college or university, what allowed them to persist towards graduation. Participants were given fixed answers but were encouraged to fill additional answers and information. McClure (2002) encourages researchers to add an “other” option when creating a questionnaire to exhaust choices. The questionnaire ensured that the subject met the required criteria for participation. Open-ended responses can be time-consuming to analyze but provide specific and meaningful information (Arhar et al., 2001).

Documents. In both qualitative research and data collection, the gathering of documents is essential as documents are a valuable source of information and provide visible facts that save the researcher from unfounded conclusions (Bogdan & Biklen,

2007). Guba and Lincoln (1992) define a document as any written or recorded material and Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert, "In most traditions of qualitative research, the phrase personal documents is used broadly to refer to any first-person narrative that describes and individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs (p. 133). Patton (2002) describes how "records, documents, artifacts and archives...constitute a particularly rich source of information" (p. 293). This may be due to the allowance of documents to be analyzed objectively and their nature of validating the themes identified through other methods including interviews.

Document explanations (Appendix C) were given to participants at the time they signed the Consent Form (Appendix A). The researcher explained to participants that they could hand-write or type their response and there was no length requirement for the personal document. Each participant was reminded that they could contact the researcher at any time with questions about the process.

Bogdan and Biklin (2007) assert that, "In most traditions of qualitative research, the phrase personal documents is used broadly to refer to any first-person narrative that describes an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs (p. 133). The five participants were asked to generate an open-ended response narrative (Appendix C) before their in-depth interview; to describe, in as much detail as possible, their decision to continue their education beyond high school. Specifically, they should focus on why they chose to apply for higher education and how they were able to complete their degree. This narrative not only addressed the research questions but also provided thick descriptions of the participant's specific experiences in his or her own words. In addition, it gave me additional time to create any follow-up and clarification questions for the interviews.

Interviews. Descriptive case study design lends itself to open-ended and in-depth interviews for data collection on participants' experiences. Qualitative researchers seek to describe the meanings of central themes within a studied topic (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Al-Yateem (2012) recommends interviews to researchers and has found that they are one of the most effective ways of understanding people and their experiences, in-depth interviews were the main source of information for this study. Patton (2002) states that "the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experiences" (p. 348, emphasis in original).

Interviews are an integral part of research and must be carefully crafted in order to yield reliable, valid data. An interview "is a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (deMarrais, 2004, p. 54). deMarrais (2004) goes on to elaborate that an interview is like an evening out with a close friend with whom you have been out of contact. In this scenario and for this particular research, the interviewer asked a participant to engage in an interview. A time, date, and place were established through collaboration with the participants. The meetings began with a greeting, small talk, discussing the purposes of the study, and the consent of the interviewee. At this point, the actual interview could begin with the guiding question and the researcher and interviewee were able to build a relationship through sharing. It is important to remember that "how a question is worded and asked affects how the interviewee responds" (Patton, 2002, p. 353). The researcher should listen more than talk "but offers supportive,

encouraging nods, smiles, and verbal expressions” (deMarrais, 2004, p. 56). Patton (2002) goes on to say that “the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to capture how those being interviewed view their world, to learn *their* terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of *their* individual perceptions and experiences” (p. 348). Most importantly, interviews allow researchers to ascertain and confirm information that extends beyond other documents and observations.

The interviews for this research were semi-structured, open-ended, and in-depth in methodology which permitted both the participants and the researcher the opportunity to expand and clarify information (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). An interview guide was created to ensure that the same areas of information were collected from each participant; it allowed for more focus than a conversational approach but also allowed freedom and adaptability (Appendix C). Patton (2002) describes an interview guide as a tool that consists of open-ended questions and allows for follow-up questions as needed. With an interview guide, “the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (Patton, 2002, p. 343). By first writing their narrative, subjects were “primed” to discuss the pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences.

Questions for the semi-structured interview were created with the research questions in mind and were crafted to address them and to support the non-structured interview. The questions were intentionally designed to be broad with the intent that as the interview went on, I would ask clarifying questions to get the full perspective of

the participants. Questions for respondents were centered on the following five questions (Appendix D):

1. What was your experience with your high school preparation for college?
 - a. Give examples.
 - b. Describe any barriers/issues with preparation.
2. What was your experience with applying for college?
 - a. Give examples.
 - b. Describe any barriers/issues with applying.
3. What and/or who motivated you to attend college?
4. How did you persist towards graduation?
 - a. Why did you persist towards graduation?
 - b. Describe triumphs/barriers.
5. Describe a memorable college experience.

In a face to face (Bernard & Ryan, 2010), semi-structured interview such as this (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002), questions are generic and are tailored specifically for each participant based on their responses to the questionnaires and narrative documents.

Before engaging in an interview, each participant met with the researcher to sign the Consent Form (Appendix A), handed in their questionnaire (Appendix B), and submitted their personal document (Appendix C). Each participant was offered the opportunity to choose the location for the interview to encourage their comfort. Interviews were conducted one-on-one and each lasted approximately 35-60 minutes.

All interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the participants, transcribed, and analyzed.

Quotes from participants were used as narrative within the data analysis and provided clarification and real-life examples of the answers to the interview questions. Additionally, the quotes provided credibility to the research by giving specific supporting evidence and examples of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. All five participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts created by the researcher to confirm that the information was reflective of their experiences. Member-checks during the interview process increased the credibility and validity of the study.

Questionnaires, documents, and interviews have been described as the three primary data sources for this research. The following section summarizes the data analysis procedures.

Data Analysis Procedures

This research utilized a descriptive case study design to seek meaning for the experiences of first-generation college graduates. After the immense amount of data associated with qualitative data collection was gathered from the questionnaires, narrative documents, and interviews, I began the process of analyzing the data. Al-Yateem (2012) identified the major challenge of qualitative analysis as making sense of all of the data collected. A researcher must be capable of sifting through an enormous amount of data, reducing it into codes, and looking for patterns to identify as themes in the data.

The data analysis process for the questionnaire involved the use of descriptive statistics; descriptive statistics are numbers that are used to summarize and describe

data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2000). In this case, percentages of participant responses will be used to compare, contrast, and analyze the data and are displayed in tables. Each item of the questionnaire was examined individually and is reported on in Chapter 4. Later, case descriptions combine data from the questionnaires, documents, and interviews to explain how interpretive codes and themes emerged.

Data analysis for the narrative documents and interviews was conducted by following the process described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The work of Miles and Huberman (1994) was essential reading for understanding the process and nature of qualitative data collection and analysis. They state that “The initial coding scheme is usually influenced by the research questions” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 307) and this was true for the questionnaires, narrative documents, and interviews. Themes are patterns across data sets and are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated with specific research questions. The researcher seeks to answer the research questions by describing the case and representing and interpreting the larger meaning of the data (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Creswell (2013) asserted that researchers must categorize the data into broad units by combining multiple codes together to form a common idea or theme.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that qualitative data analysis consists of three procedures. The first procedure is called data reduction which refers to the process where the mass of qualitative data is reduced and organized for coding, writing summaries, and discarding irrelevant data. The second procedure is the data display that comes in the form of tables, charts, networks, and other geographical formats. This analysis continued throughout the entire data collection process. Finally,

there is the conclusion drawing and verification procedure whereby the researcher began to decide what patterns could be identified and the initial conclusions that could be drawn and verified through further data collection.

Documents and interviews were analyzed using a set of six sequential steps: (1) affix codes to data collected, (2) note reflections in the margins, (3) sort and sift to identify similar phrases or patterns, (4) isolate these patterns and commonalities, (5) elaborate a small set of generalizations that cover the found consistencies, and (6) confront these generalizations with a formalized body of knowledge (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 9). “Developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis. Without classification there is chaos and confusion. Content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Miles and Huberman (1994) state:

codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to “chunks” of varying size- words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. (p. 56)

Categories created from this coding relied on information obtained from the participants, rather on my descriptions of what was happening. Merriam (1998) determined that “the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives, not the researcher’s. This is sometimes referred to as the *emic*, or insider’s perspective, versus the *etic*, or outsider’s view” (pp. 6-7, emphasis in original).

Miles and Huberman (1994) describe codes as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning” and discuss these codes as descriptive and interpretive, each providing a deeper understanding of the data (p. 56). A preliminary code list was created for each

data source before conducting the data collection. The codes were developed using the research questions and theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The initial codes were simple descriptive codes but were then developed into interpretive codes and refined as the connections with the data emerged and a second code book was crafted. From the descriptive and interpretive codes, themes, or patterns, were illuminated by the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) offer, "Descriptive codes...entail little interpretation. Rather you are attributing a class of phenomena to a segment of text" (p. 57). Interpretive codes provide deeper insight into the phenomena and together with the descriptive codes allow, for the creation of pattern codes. Developing themes, or pattern coding, is the process of grouping the segments of data and interpretive codes into a smaller number of sets to work with. This process involves gathering the interpretive codes according to their meaning and relevance and will allow the research questions to be answered. Pattern codes indicate themes and patterns and will be used later in the study when these patterns become clearer (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The development of a code book for the documents and interviews helped to develop themes.

Physical documents for the data collection and analysis were kept in a safe place by the researcher and all electronic data were stored on a secure flash drive and on the online network Dropbox to ensure the safety and confidentiality of all information. All electronic data was encrypted and password protected.

Cross-Case Analysis

Stake (1995) says that for case studies, researchers will look for patterns and for a correspondence between two or more categories and may possibly take the form of a

table. Yin (2009) suggests that for a multiple case study a cross-case synthesis should be the proper analytic technique. Miles and Huberman (1994) provide two reasons for cross-case analysis: (1) to enhance the generalizability and (2) to deepen understanding of the data.

The research utilized a multiple case study approach where each participant represented their own individual case and required specific steps for data analysis. Because this research utilized case studies, the advice of Lichtman (2006) to use single studies and then multiple cases to treat each case separately and then to combine them was followed. Patton (2002) stated:

The first task is to do a careful job independently writing up the separate cases. Once that is done, cross-case analysis can begin in search of patterns and themes that cut across individual experiences. The initial focus is on full understanding of individual cases before those unique cases are combined or aggregated thematically. (p. 57)

Yin suggests that the researcher should work “to build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details” (Yin, 1994, p. 112). Creswell (2007) says that, “When multiple cases are chosen, a typical format is to provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case...followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis” (p. 75).

I employed the cross-case analysis process which allowed me to observe patterns and themes consistent among each of the cases. I utilized within-case analysis to identify the presence of key elements in each case and then drew comparisons across each of the cases. Finally, thick concrete descriptions were used to understand the phenomenon and interpretations were drawn about meaning and significance of the emerged themes (Creswell, 2013). This format was followed and is discussed in Chapter 4 to communicate

the findings of the research. The following section describes the limitations and ethical considerations of this study.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

It is natural for qualitative researchers to bring a different perspective to research than a quantitative researcher. In a quantitative study, researchers become familiar with a problem and identify a hypothesis to be tested; this will place the emphasis on facts, behaviors, numbers and statistics that can be summarized, and mathematical norms for analyzing data (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative research seeks to find the essence of the experiences of the participants and their relationship to the phenomena. While qualitative research includes descriptive statistics and reviews empirical studies, the true goal and emphasis is to clarify and understand phenomena and was the purpose of this study. Merriam (1995) stated, “qualitative researchers are not seeking to establish laws in which reliability of observation and measure are essential. Rather, qualitative researchers seek to understand the world from the perspectives of those in it” (p. 52).

Limitations

Qualitative design “in no way suggests that the researcher lacks the ability to be scientific while collecting the data. On the contrary, it merely specifies that it is crucial for validity-and consequently, for reliability--to try to picture the empirical social world as it actually exists to those under investigation, rather than as the researcher imagines it to be” (Filstead, 1970, p. 4). Since the researcher is considered to be the instrument in a qualitative study, issues of validity, reliability, and biases must be considered differently than in quantitative research. Merriam (1995) describes, “more

commonly, writers make the case that qualitative research is based on different assumptions regarding reality, thus demanding different conceptualizations of validity and reliability” (p.52). Through the use of researcher reflexivity, researchers have the opportunity to report on their personal beliefs, assumptions, and biases that may shape their inquiry (Creswell & Miller, 2010). As a qualitative researcher, I know my voice is present in my research, as I hoped it would be, and is demonstrated in the Preface and throughout the rest of this body of writing.

Przeworski and Salomon (1988) point out that validity helps the readers ask, “How will we know that the conclusions are valid?” (p. 193). Maxwell (2013) defines validity as the “correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account” (p. 122). In essence, validity determines whether or not the research that has been collected is accurate. In qualitative research, in opposition to quantitative research, the goal is to not find an “objective truth” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122) as this was not necessary for the research to be useful and meaningful.

Validity threats in qualitative research are unlike those in quantitative research. Validity threats are ways in which the researcher could be wrong and are “conceptualized as alternative explanations or interpretations” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 123). Huck and Sandler (1979) call these “rival hypotheses”. In qualitative research, there is a threat of researcher bias and reactivity. The intent of this research was to understand the perspectives of the participants, not those of the researcher. The subjectivity (bias) of the researcher is involved in the process of the researcher fitting data to their existing theory, goals, and the data that will “stand out” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 263). Qualitative research necessitates the researcher to act with integrity. My personal beliefs that first-generation

college students are under-represented, that they are not being prepared in elementary, middle, and high school, that they should be receiving college degrees at higher rates, and that college degrees give first-generation students access to a wider variety of choices and control over their lives had the potential to cloud my judgment when examining data. Being aware of my biases and internalizing the data, I had a colleague question me about my biases and I drafted written reflections as detailed earlier, to help keep my perspective in check when analyzing the final data set.

Crystallization allows for a phenomenon to be examined through many various lenses and combines multiple forms of analysis into a single text (Denzin, 2012). Crystallization, as defined by Richardson (2000), was used to enhance internal validity for this research and involves using multiple forms of data and combines “symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations...crystals grow, change, alter...crystals are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions.”

Patton (2001) says that reliability and validity are factors which researchers should be concerned with when designing a study, analyzing its results, and reflecting upon the quality of the study. Golafshani (2003) says that in quantitative research, reliability refers to whether or not the result is replicable. Generally, reliability is a concept that is used for testing and evaluating quantitative data. In qualitative data, we see the evaluation of the research as the quality of the data and a reliable qualitative study will help us “understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing” (Eisner, 1991, p. 58). In quantitative research, “validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are...Researchers

generally determine validity by asking a series of questions, and will often look for answers in the research of others” (Joppe, 2000, p. 1). Essentially, validity refers to whether or not the results are accurate and if they measured what they intended to measure. According to Golafshani (2003), “although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research” (p. 600).

Creswell (2013) describes how “reliability can be enhanced if the researcher obtains detailed field notes by employing a good-quality tape for recording and by transcribing the tape” (p. 253). This study utilized exceptional and thorough recordkeeping of all interviews in order for them to be internalized by the researcher after transcription. Peer debriefing was also utilized where the thoughts of the researcher were disclosed to a colleague to create more explicit ideas and to discover biases, meanings, and interpretations.

There was a potential question of the connection of the researcher to the participants. Patton (2002) states the efforts of the qualitative researcher to get close enough to “the people and circumstances there to capture what is happening” (p. 48) is crucial to this type of research. He describes some circumstances where closeness to the source of the data made key insights possible by saying “Piaget’s closeness to his children, Freud’s proximity to and empathy with his patients, . . . In short, closeness does not make bias and loss of perspective inevitable; distance is no guarantee of objectivity” (p. 49). There was a possible limitation in that I could have formed a relationship with the participants of this study as we worked together. While I wanted to get to know my

participants and understand their perceptions and experiences, I always worked to keep a professional relationship with them while not acting in a superior manner.

In addition to getting close to the participants, I had to assume that all information that they provided me with was precise, accurate, and honest. I proactively combated this potential limitation by being open with my subjects and allowing them to ask me questions about the study and they were provided with a detailed information sheet when they gave their consent (Appendix A). Maxwell (2013) defines reactivity as “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied” (p. 124). As the researcher for this study, I worked diligently to ensure that my participants felt comfortable throughout the process by allowing them to choose the location of the interview and had advisors and SSIRB review my interview questions to ensure that they were not leading in nature.

Another strategy to ensure validity is the purposeful selection of participants. “The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 245). A limitation of this research is in regards to the diversity of the participants. Participants included three females and two males, four white and two Latino, a variety of ages from 31-84, and an assortment of occupations including two high school teachers, a counselor, a human resources employee, and a manager at a governmental photography facility. The sixth participant was a 23 year-old black female which would have added to the diversity of the group but had to withdraw from the study due to family concerns. While data was collected from a relatively small group of participants, the data that resulted was immense, thick, and rich to ensure validity. In addition, the multiple case design of the research were

another strategy to strengthen validity. Merriam (1998) concludes that, “the inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings” (p. 40).

Despite the carefully crafted methods plan and collection process, I am aware of the limitations of this study that were both unavoidable and unforeseeable. Rossman and Rallis (2003) remind us that no study is perfect; findings are tentative and conditional and knowledge is elusive and approximate. Polkinghorne (1989) says that in order for a research study to be valid, it must be well grounded and well supported. There are five questions he suggests that I used to question myself throughout the research process and also had peers and advisors help me evaluate:

1. Did the interviewer influence the contents of the participants’ descriptions in such a way that the descriptions do not truly reflect the participants’ actual experience?
2. Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?
3. Is the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Has the researcher identified those alternatives?
4. Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcriptions and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experience?
5. Is the structural description situation specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations?

As a novice researcher, it was essential that I, as the instrument of this study, was very careful with my data collection as this is a possible limitation in qualitative research. In order to get the most accurate findings, I had my work reviewed by two peers, a team of advisors, and triangulated my data to ensure that my biases and assumptions were not clouding judgment when I analyzed and interpreted the data.

Ethical Considerations

All researchers, including both qualitative and quantitative, must ensure that their research is conducted in an ethical manner. Therefore, before research began for this study, a proposal was submitted to the University of Missouri-Kansas City's SSIRB for approval. All participants for this study completed a signed Consent Form (Appendix A) which clearly indicated the overall purpose of the research, its features, the risks and benefits of participation, and the promise to keep participants informed as the study moved forward. Participants were aware that they could abstain from participation at any time and that this was a voluntary project. In addition, the researcher worked to ensure that the participant fully understood and comprehended the information provided to them by reviewing the Consent Form and regularly asking if they had any questions (Belmont Report, 1979).

Merriam (1998) stated, "In qualitative studies, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of findings. Overlaying both...is the researcher-participant relationship" (p. 212). The nature of this research required a close researcher-participant relationship as I spent a good deal of time working with participants during the interview phase. Being honest with participants, being transparent about the problem, purpose, and significance, and having them give

their consent allowed this study to be as virtuous as possible while allowing for the creation of a researcher-participant relationship to form.

The Belmont Report (1979) was published to provide a mandate for review of research involving human research participants. It outlines three ethical principles for research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Respect for persons involves treating study subjects as autonomous agents and the protection of persons with diminished autonomy. Beneficence involves minimizing harm to the individuals participating and striving to benefit the subject as much as possible. Justice refers to the benefits and harms to subjects and should be distributed equally amongst participants.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlined the procedures for the methodology of this descriptive case study. Qualitative research was necessary for this type of work as it allowed the research to understand the “why” of the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates. The study upheld all ethical considerations outlined to protect the safety, integrity, and confidentiality of the volunteer participants. All data was secured while not in use and all standards of confidentiality were enacted. Chapter 4 outlines the findings of this study and Chapter 5 discusses implications, including areas for future research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Overview of the Study

This descriptive case study sought to examine the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college graduates. There is much research concerning the comparison between first-generation college graduates and their peers (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999), the transition from high school to postsecondary education (Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Terenzini et al., 1994), and their persistence in college (Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000; Choy, 2000). While research has focused on first-generation college graduates, there have not been many recent in-depth discussions with people who have experienced the phenomenon to unearth information about their experiences both before and during attendance at a college or university (Lara, 1992; Rendon, 1992; Rodriguez, 1982); this research was carefully crafted and conducted to give a voice to those who are the first in their family to graduate from an institution of higher learning. I chose to pursue this topic based on my own experiences as a classroom teacher and as the daughter of a first-generation college graduate. Knowing from firsthand experience that college is a major life transition even with two parents who have graduated, it is essential that we prepare all students for this process. Currently, not all of our children are being educated equally; Choy (2001) concluded that, "High school graduates whose parents did not go to college are less likely than those whose parents earned bachelor's or advanced degrees to be academically prepared for admission to a 4-year college" (p. 11). Almost half, 49%, of potential first-generation college graduates were not qualified for admission to

a four-year college compared with the 33% of those whose parents had some college experience and 15% of those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree.

In order to contribute to the body of research previously conducted, the experiences of five first-generation college graduates were researched and subsequently analyzed; each participant was identified using purposeful and criterion-based sampling to ensure the creation of rich, thick description. Direct quotations from participants were used whenever possible and include any misspellings or grammatical errors in order to be an accurate portrayal of each participant. Each participant was a unit of analysis and served as a single case in this multiple case study. The following research questions were addressed during this process:

1. What are the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?
 - a. What experiences do first-generation college students face in accessing higher education while in high school?
 - b. What themes are identified in the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?
2. How do first-generation college students describe their decisions to attend college?
 - a. What reasons do they give for attending college?
 - b. How do they persist toward graduation?
 - c. What themes are identified in the collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?

Questionnaires, documents, and in-depth interviews were used to answer the questions, as well as their corresponding sub questions. All three data sets worked

together to allow the participants to address specific experiences they could remember from their pre-collegiate and collegiate days and allowed themes and patterns to emerge to answer the research questions.

By collecting data surrounding the experiences of first-generation college graduates, I looked to expose what is happening in the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college graduates from their own, unique perspectives. Because of the failure of our current educational system to appropriately and adequately prepare all students, and specifically prospective first-generation college students, to graduate from college (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004), it is imperative that researchers, administrators, and educators conduct further research to better understand the individual experiences of first-generation college graduates.

The study consisted of questionnaires, documents, and semi-structured interviews, and took place over the course of three months; each data source is used in the discussion surrounding the research questions. Using three data sources to act as multiple lenses (Ellingson, 2009) with which to view the phenomenon, a process known as crystallization, increased the reliability and validity of the study (Denzin, 2012). Crystallization “reflexively embeds the researcher’s self in the inquiry process and eschews positivist claims to objectivity” (Denzin, 2012, p. 84). Because of the use of five participants and three data sets, a thick, complex interpretation was produced. This method allowed for the corroboration of themes of the data sources. In addition to multiple data sources and crystallization, note-taking and member-checking were also used to give credibility to the study. Grbich (2013) suggests that the experiences and perceptions of the researcher be

considered to avoid bias so I kept a reflective journal to allow me to document experiences, questions, thoughts, ideas, and conclusions.

Closed-ended questionnaires were given to participants to ensure eligibility for participation and gather basic demographic information and preliminary information regarding their support systems and motivations to attend college and persist until graduation. The documents involved in the study were narratives written by first-generation college graduates discussing their pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences and to describe their decision to continue their education beyond high school. Finally, interviews that were semi-structured, open-ended, and in-depth were conducted and included discussions surrounding the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college graduates.

Selection of participants took place between November and December of 2014 and I spent three months conducting and analyzing the three data sets from January through March of 2015. During this time I was able to develop a thick, rich description which led to the development and explanation of the themes that emerged during the data analysis process (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis for the questionnaires involved the use of descriptive statistics and include the use of tables to display data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2000). Closed-ended questions and a Likert-scale item were used in the creation of the questionnaire to allow for easier evaluation of the collected data (McClure, 2002). Each item on the questionnaire was analyzed individually and was reported on using tables and percentages of responses from participants. Questionnaires were analyzed before documents were collected and prior to interviews in order to facilitate discussion and follow-up questions during the interview phase.

Data analysis for documents and interviews was conducted utilizing the coding process described by Miles and Huberman (1994), who stated:

codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study. Codes usually are attached to “chunks” of varying size-words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting. (p. 56).

I began the process of data analysis by first creating a descriptive code list before the collection of data began. Following the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994), I also developed the codes using my research questions, theoretical framework, and the literature surrounding first-generation college graduates. Miles and Huberman (1994) define, “Descriptive codes...entail little interpretation. Rather, you are attributing a class of phenomena to a segment of text” (p. 57). From the descriptive codes, interpretive codes emerged; interpretive codes provide a deeper insight into the phenomena and allow for the creation of a third and final set of codes, pattern codes. Pattern codes are able to illuminate the study results in greater depth and indicate a theme or pattern; they are typically utilized in the latter part of a study when the patterns are more clear (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After carefully analyzing the words and phrases used by participants in the questionnaires, documents, and interviews, I was able to determine the essences of their experiences through the use of crystallization (Denzin, 2012).

I first present the findings from the questionnaire and follow with the document and interview findings. A description of each of the cases is provided and the research questions are answered in a cross-case analysis and the chapter ends with a conclusion section.

Questionnaires

Utilizing closed-ended questions allowed me to “force a response” (McClure, 2002, p. 6) from my participants in order to score quickly, easily evaluate, and ensure reliability before analyzing the documents and beginning the in-depth interviews. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the nine-item questionnaire; tables and percentages of participant responses were used to report data. The questions are reviewed below, they are followed by the analysis of data from participants and finally a discussion on the interpretive codes and themes that emerged.

The first item of the questionnaire asked: Have you had any parent or grandparent graduate from an institution of higher learning? Response options included “Yes,” “No,” and “Not sure” and 100% of participants (Chris, Rick, Cindy, Don, and Nettie) responded “no” indicating that they were first-generation status students. Responses to the first two questionnaire items are displayed below in Table 1.

Question two asked: Did you graduate from an institution of higher learning? Response items included “Yes,” “No,” and “Not sure”. One hundred percent of participants (Chris, Rick, Cindy, Don, and Nettie) responded “yes” demonstrating their status as first-generation college graduates. Responses are displayed in a table on the following page:

Table 1

Answers from Questionnaire Items 1 and 2

Participants	Items 1 and 2			
	Item 1 Yes	Item 1 No	Item 2 Yes	Item 2 No
Chris		X	X	
Rick		X	X	
Cindy		X	X	
Don		X	X	
Nettie		X	X	

The third item of the questionnaire asked: If you graduated from an institution of higher learning, how many contiguous years did it take you to graduate with your bachelor’s degree? Forced-response options included four years, five years, and six or more years. Sixty percent of participants (including Cindy, Chris, and Nettie) responded that they graduated in four years. When interviewing participants later, Cindy indicated to me that she had selected the four year option but had actually finished her degree in three and a half years but stayed on campus to work for the full year. Zero percent of participants selected the five years option and 40% of participants (Don and Rick) graduated in six or more years. A table is provided to display answers to the third questionnaire item on the following page.

Table 2

Answers from Questionnaire Item 3

Participants	Item 3		
	4 years	5 years	6+ years
Chris	X		
Rick			X
Cindy	X		
Don			X
Nettie	X		

Question four asked participants to self-identify their race/ethnicity and options included “Asian American,” “Indian/Alaskan Native,” “Black or African American,” “Latino/a or Hispanic,” “Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander,” “White/Non-Latino/a,” or “Other.” Forty percent of participants (Rick and Chris) indicated that they were “Latino/a or Hispanic” and 60% selected “White/Non-Latino/a” (Cindy, Don, Nettie). The results from the fourth item are displayed in Table 3 on the following page.

Table 3

Answers from Questionnaire Item 4

Participants	Item 4	
	Latino/a/Hispanic	White/Non-Latino/a
Chris	X	
Rick	X	
Cindy		X
Don		X
Nettie		X

The fifth question asked participants to write the year of their birth. No two participants were born in the same year and starting from the oldest, Nettie was born in 1928 and is currently 87, Don was born in 1951 and is 64, Rick was born in 1967 and is currently 48, Chris was born in 1975 and is 39, and Cindy was born in 1984 and is currently 31-years old. The range in ages from the youngest participant (Cindy) to the oldest participant (Nettie) is 56 years.

Item number six used a Likert-scale to ask participants how well they felt they could provide a meaningful description of their pre-secondary and secondary educational experiences. The inclusion of this question was to identify potential participants who could potentially be unwilling or unable to provide useful, rich information for the research. Options included 1: Cannot provide, 2: Can provide some, and 3: Can fully provide. One hundred participants indicated that they felt they could fully provide meaningful information for the study. Results of this are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Answers from Questionnaire Item 6

Participants	Item 6		
	1: Cannot provide	2: Can provide some	3: Can fully provide
Chris			X
Rick			X
Cindy			X
Don			X
Nettie			X

Question seven asked: What types of supports did you feel were necessary for you as a potential first-generation college graduate to be successful? Fixed-response options included “School,” “Teacher,” “Counselor,” “Parent,” “Peers/friends,” “Work ethic,” “Persistence,” “Financial,” “Programs,” “Academic,” and “Other” where participants were encouraged to list any options not included. Participants could select as many responses that they felt applied to them. No participants (0%) indicated “Counselor” or “Programs” as having an effect. Twenty percent of participants (Rick) indicated “School,” “Teacher,” “Parent,” and “Academic” as being essential to success. Sixty percent of participants selected “Financial” and included Rick, Cindy, and Don. For “Work ethic” and “Persistence,” 80% of participants (Chris, Rick, Cindy, and Don) indicated this was necessary for them. One hundred percent of participants (Chris, Rick, Cindy, Don, and Nettie) selected “Peers” as a necessary support. No participants filled in the “Other” category. The results of this seventh question are provided on the following page in Table 5.

Table 5

Answers from Questionnaire Item 7

Participants	Item 7										
	Sch.	Teach.	Couns.	Par.	Peer.	W. Eth.	Pers.	Fin.	Prog.	Aca.	Oth.
Chris					X	X	X				
Rick	X	X		X	X	X	X	X			X
Cindy					X	X	X	X			
Don					X	X	X	X			
Nettie					X						

The eighth question asked participants: What motivated you to attend your college/university? Fixed-response options were “Money,” “Career,” “Peers/Friends,” “Parent,” “Teacher,” “Counselor,” “Work ethic,” or “Self” and there was once again an “Other” option. Zero percent of participants indicated that a “Counselor” motivated them to attend. Forty percent of participants (Chris, Nettie) selected “Parent” and “Teacher.” For the “Other” option, 40% of participants (Don and Rick) provided a response. Don added “Friend’s mother” and Rick wrote “Other adult.” For the “Money” category, 60% of participants circled the response and included Cindy, Rick, and Don. Eighty percent of participants (Chris, Rick, Cindy, and Don) selected both “Career” and “Work Ethic.” Finally, 100% of participants (Chris, Rick, Cindy, Don, and Nettie) chose “Peers” and “Self” as a motivation to attend their selected college/university. The results of this item are displayed on the following page.

Table 6

Answers from Questionnaire Item 8

Participants	Item 8								
	Mon.	Car.	Peer.	Par.	Teach.	Coun.	W. Eth.	Self	Oth.
Chris		X	X	X	X		X	X	
Rick	X	X	X				X	X	X
Cindy	X	X	X				X	X	
Don	X	X	X				X	X	X
Nettie			X	X	X			X	

The final question on the questionnaire asked participants to circle “Money,” “Career,” “Peers/Friends,” “Parent,” “Teacher,” “Counselor,” “Work ethic,” or “Self” to answer the question: What motivated you to persist toward graduation from your college/university? No participants (0%) selected “Money” or “Counselor” and none of the participants (0%) filled in the “Other” option. Chris (20%) indicated both “Parent” and “Teacher” as helping him to persist toward graduation. Sixty percent (Chris, Rick, Don) selected “Career” as a motivator and 100% of respondents (Chris, Rick, Cindy, Don, and Nettie) chose “Peers,” “Work ethic,” and “Self.” The results of this final question are found in Table 7 on the following page.

Table 7

Answers from Questionnaire Item 9

Participants	Item 9								
	Mon.	Car.	Peer.	Par.	Teach.	Coun.	W. Eth.	Self	Oth.
Chris		X	X	X	X		X	X	
Rick		X	X				X	X	
Cindy			X				X	X	
Don		X	X				X	X	
Nettie			X				X	X	

Data from the questionnaires indicates that all participants were first-generation college graduates and represent a diverse age range. Responses from the forced-choice items illuminate that Peers, Work Ethic, and Persistence are necessary supports, that Career, Work Ethic, and Self were main motivators to attend a college or university, and that Peers, Work Ethic, and Self were required motivators to persist toward graduation.

Documents

Documents are a rich source of information and “learning to use, study, and understand documents and files is part of the repertoire of skills needed for qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 295). I found that having the participants write about their own experiences and decisions aligned closely to my research questions and purpose. By analyzing the narrative written directly by a study participant, I was able to view the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates from their points of view and to analyze the documents from their perspectives.

Documents are considered to be a rich source of information and Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert, “Personal documents that the subjects write themselves are usually discovered rather than solicited by the researcher” (p. 134). The personal documents for this research consist of the participant-created narratives. In coding the documents using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) coding model, three themes were illuminated and will be described below: Persistence, Sustainability, and Preparation.

Persistence

The theme of Persistence had four interpretive codes: *Motivation*, *Work Ethic*, *Years to Graduation*, and *Self-improvement*. Persistence refers to the ability of the participant to persist through high school and college to achieve graduation; this is something that first-generation college graduates statistically struggle with. Somers and Cofer (2004) compare completion of college for first-generation status students to pushing a boulder uphill in their quantitative examination of first-generation students and those whose parents have achieved degrees. Using a sample of 24,262 students, they determined that differences between the two groups were significant for aspirations, achievement, and persistence to graduation. Similar findings were found by Lohfink and Paulson (2005) for their research on 1,167 first-generation and 3,017 continuing-generation students in their first-to-second-year persistence. Tinto (1993) described the importance of completing a degree; enrolling and then leaving a college or university without a degree has negative consequences. Choy (2001) revealed that first-generation students were less likely than their peers to attend full-time over the course of a full year: 43.5% of first-generation students enrolled at a four-year institution were full-time students who completed the first full year as compared to 61.8% of students whose parents had a Bachelor’s degree

and 73% of those whose parents held an advanced degree. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that after five years, half of beginning postsecondary students had received a degree, 13% were still enrolled, and 37% had left without a degree and were not enrolled. Of these students, first-generation students were less likely than other students to have earned a degree (13% versus 33%) and were more likely than others to have left without their degree (45% versus 29%).

Motivation. The interpretive code of *Motivation* refers to the motivation of first-generation college graduates to persist until graduation. Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) investigated motivation and integration dimensions that influenced academic achievement of first-generation students compared to their peers. Participants consisted of 227 students and they found that motivation contributed significantly to achievement for first-generation students but not for nonfirst-generation students. They found that extrinsic motivators (those outside of the students) contributed to lower grades while internal motivators for success contributed to higher grades. In Cabrera's (2014) survey study, 45% of prospective first-generation students had not thought about college until high school. First-generation college graduates require motivation to be able to overcome their higher rate of dropping out of college (Terenzini et al., 1996) to persist toward graduation.

The participants demonstrated the theme of Persistence in their documents. All five participants indicated that they were intrinsically motivated to attend an institution of higher learning. Because of the way she grew up, Cindy said that if she was to be truly honest with herself about her *Motivation*,

This lifestyle was a big part of my decision to pursue higher education. Growing up, moving all around, wearing dirty clothes, being the brunt of bullying, never being

able to participate in extra-curricular activities due to cost or lack of transportation-these were all things that I knew early on I wanted to be able to change my future.

Chris wrote that his *Motivation* to attend was never about a job and that, "It was all about education for its own sake. I just wanted to have a knowledge base behind me and to expand my curiosity." Rick stated that a sense of meaning or purpose was essential and working to understand his "why"-or why he are doing what he was doing-helped motivate him to graduate and is just a part of "life in general."

Work Ethic. The second interpretive code was *Work Ethic*; this code emerged from participant descriptions of an instilled work ethic that they developed in childhood. McCarron and Inkelas (2006) investigated if the educational aspirations of first-generation students differed from their actual educational attainments by examining parental involvement. The longitudinal study with a nationally representative sample of 1,879 students determined that those students who self-identified as having a strong work ethic were more likely to achieve graduation than those who did not. This code does not simply entail putting in time; Rau and Durand (2000) concluded after 12 years of research that there is no correlation between the number of hours studied and grades that students make. They coin the term "academic ethic" and describe it as "not a natural predisposition; rather, it is learned behavior that is probably found most frequently among children from families with a strong work ethic...Adolescents are socialized into the academic ethic by parents, peers, and teachers" (p. 24). In a similar manner, the *Work Ethic* code that developed entails a strong desire and drive for success that students learned.

For *Work Ethic*, Cindy's devotion to her family throughout her childhood and into her adult years is a demonstration of her sense of responsibility. She took care of her

siblings, helped pay bills, rent, insurance, and took on several jobs to help pay not only for her own education but so her family could be maintained and taken care of. As an Eagle Scout who was taught that, “you don’t do things halfway” Don felt that he should finish his degree, this illuminated the interpretive code of *Work Ethic*.

Years to Graduation. *Years to Graduation* was the third phenomenon to illuminate the theme of Persistence. Research surrounding first-generation college graduation indicates that first-generation college students take longer, on average, to graduate from their college or university than their peers (Warburton et al., 2001). “First-generation students showed higher risks of leaving the higher education system than did students of college-educated parents in years one through four” (Ishitani, 2006, p. 873). Not only does it take first-generation status students longer to graduate, the dropout rate is four times that of students who have a familial connection to an institution of higher learning (Engle & Tinto, 2008); Ishitani (2006) determined that first-generation students were eight and a half times more likely to dropout than their counterparts. Persistence is difficult for first-generation college students as the amount of time to graduate tends to be extended over other students and their rates of retention are lower than their counterparts (Horn, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The number of *Years to Graduation* for participants were diverse. Out of the five participants, only two indicated in their document that they graduated from college in the standard four years (Chris and Nettie). One participant graduated early in three and a half years (Cindy) and two participants took longer; Rick graduated in seven years and it took Don 50 semesters to complete his degree.

Self-Improvement. The final interpretive code was *Self-Improvement*; a desire to improve one's life through attendance and graduation allowed for the interpretive code of *Self-Improvement* to emerge. Research conducted by Santos (2004) places self-improvement at the top of a motivation hierarchy that predicts success in college and research by Dennis et al. (2005) confirms that personal motivation to attend and graduate was a positive predictor of graduation. Cabrera (2014) described the importance of students to have an intrinsic desire for success: "Because all of these students are non-traditional students they faced difficulties in accessing and going through the process of transitioning into college, for some it was a journey on their own" (p. 15).

Each of the participants listed their individual desire for *Self-Improvement* within the documents: Nettie wanted to be close to her future husband to find fulfillment, Chris wanted intellectual curiosity, Cindy found something she was passionate about that could free her from the cycle of poverty, Don was able to realize the reward he felt from learning when it was not cluttered with excessive work, and Rick wanted to merge his intellectual capability with his physical capability.

Sustainability

The interpretive codes of *Continuity of College Choice*, *Financial Support*, *Peer Support*, and *Parent Support* were subthemes that illuminated the theme of Sustainability. Sustainability refers to those forces outside of the student that allowed them to persist in order to attain their degree. Choy (2001) stated, "Overall, 16 percent of those who began their postsecondary education in a 4-year institution....left before their second year-that is, they either dropped out for at least 4 months or failed to return for their second year" (p.

22). First-generation students were about twice as likely (23% versus 10%) as those whose parents had Bachelor's degrees to do so (Horn, 1998).

Continuity of College Choice. The first interpretive code that allowed the theme of sustainability to emerge is *Continuity of College Choice* which refers to the tendency of first-generation college students to graduate from a different institution from the one they began their degree at. Ishitani (2006) examined 2,256 first-generation college students and found that approximately 25% “of the sample transferred to other insitutions” (p. 867).

The theme of Sustainability was demonstrated by the participants in their documents. When examining *Continuity of College Choice*, only one of the five participants, Chris, enrolled and graduated from the same university without a break or transferring to a different university. Don and Cindy both graduated from the college where they began but Don took a lengthy break (approximately 20 years) and Cindy transferred to a different college for her sophomore year before returning to the original university. Rick attended his first university for his freshmen year then attended a community college before completing his degree from a third institution. Nettie attended one university for a year before transferring to a larger college to complete her degree.

Financial Support. Having the financial capacity to attend and stay at an institution of higher learning was a subtheme of Sustainability. Because first-generation college students do not have parents with experience in higher education, their parents cannot help them directly with college tasks like applying for financial aid or being knowledgeable about the high cost of education (Zalaquett, 1999). Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that when a university offers scholarships to students, it signals a commitment

which in turn can increase a student's commitment to the institution. DesJardins et al. (2002) stated that when students have to stop enrollment, called a stopout, because of an inability to pay, it indicates that they are "very unlikely to graduate. Of the 1,528 graduates, 79 percent never stopped out and only 61 students who stopped out twice or more eventually graduated" (p. 658).

In order to pay for the second semester of college (*Financial Support*), Don found an on-campus job in the Audio Visual Center. He did not know that there was a special program on campus offered for students who needed income (work study). When told there was no room at the Audio Visual Center, he continued to stop by every week to visit the manager until he was hired. A job was necessary to being able to stay in school and he knew that he was qualified for this job and it was what he wanted to do. He told me, "I worked and lived very frugally. I had no car. On the weekends I stayed in the dorm and it was a quiet life." Chris, Cindy, and Rick also worked throughout their college experience. Nettie was the only participant who did not have to work while taking courses because her parents were able to pay for her education.

Peer Support. Having relationships with peers is a vital to success for first-generation college students and is a subtheme of Sustainability. Terenzini et al., (1996) determined that first-generation students are less likely to develop strong relationships with other students and to become involved in campus clubs and organizations. Pike and Kuh (2005), through the use of a quantitative study with 3,000 participants, found that being involved on campus and having a group of supportive peers "were directly related to gains in learning and intellectual development" (p. 285); however, overall first-generation students reported lower levels of social engagement.

Don's two best friends left school before he did and this was a blow to him. He did write a story, though, that demonstrated some *Peer Support*: "I had a roommate that, one semester, he didn't have the tuition money so I loaned him a couple hundred dollars and the next semester I was short so he loaned me a couple hundred dollars. We were kind of in the same boat." He wrote that he had "a few" close connections but was always "shocked by how many people knew my name." Because he was taking pictures for the school newspaper, he was at all of the major activities and was more well-known than he thought. He stated that some of his connections kept him at school longer than he would have been by himself, "All my life was in Brookings." He had made his home there and had moved on from his life in Sioux Falls and he "really enjoyed the campus life."

Nettie's entire life existed at the University of Minnesota and *Peer Support* was essential for her success. As she wrote throughout her narrative, all she wanted to do was be a wife and to be Emil's wife. Her life became intertwined with his and for the 52 years of their marriage, they went everywhere together and did everything together. In addition to feeling such a strong connection to the campus, her parents were "incredibly supportive" of all of her decisions.

Parent Support. Dennis et al. (2005) asserted that family members are "amongst the most common and important proximal processes for adolescents and young adults and play an important role in academic outcomes" (p. 224). *Parent Support* refers to the aid given to first-generation college students from their parents and/or guardians. The primary purpose of the McCarron and Inkelas (2006) research was to determine whether or not parental involvement had an impact on degree attainment of first-generation college students. From the data gathered from 1,879 students, the research indicated that

parental involvement played a significant impact in student aspirations, attendance, and graduation (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Nettie's family expected her to attend and graduate from college; in fact, she wrote that it would have been "embarrassing" to her family for her to not graduate. Rick says this about his parent's support and their take on education in the house: "My dad did, in 1970, he got us an encyclopedia set. He thought it was important to have at the house, for information, for reference, that we could then explore. So, it wasn't that education wasn't important, but higher academics and post-secondary, that just wasn't a focus." Rick visibly lit up when discussing the encyclopedia set and he says it "really sparked" him. He says, "I would thumb through those and I was always fascinated with people from the past, places from the past, and I just read that stuff."

Preparation

The third theme of Preparation emerged from four interpretive codes: *High School Preparation*, *Gate-keeping Courses*, *Teacher Support*, and *Parent Support*. The initial code book included an interpretive code of Counselor Support but this code was not demonstrated by participants and was thus removed. Preparation includes the years preceding college attendance that assist students later in college. Being properly prepared for attendance at an institution of higher learning can assist students in attaining their degree (Pascarella et al., 2004).

High School Preparation. *High School Preparation* refers to the academic preparation that first-generation status students receive. Greene and Winters (2005) completed a longitudinal study that determined that there is very little difference between the number of students who graduate from high school college-ready and the number of

students who enroll for the first time. This indicates that there is not a large group of students who have the skills necessary to attend college but do not do so; if students are prepared for college, they are more likely to attend. Addition, the research indicated that the percentage of students leaving high school with the skills and qualifications necessary for college attendance are steadily increasing; they found a 9% increase in 11 years (Green and Winters, 2005).

All five participants for this research demonstrated the theme of Preparation in their documents and each described themselves as being “good” students. Some were better prepared than others; Nettie felt her education more than prepared her for college, Don took several higher level math and science courses, and Chris’s school was built to be a college preparatory academy. Others, like Rick and Cindy felt that they did not have a difficult curriculum in high school and that many advanced courses were not even offered at their schools.

Gate-keeping Courses. *Gate-keeping Courses* refer to those courses that represent the gate between high school and college and act as a barrier to higher level courses that could assist in preparation for college. Research, as discussed in Chapter 2, finds that first-generation college students are less prepared than their peers for the rigors of the curriculum in college. Zalaquett (1999) determined that first-generation college students may be less equipped for college due to poor academic preparation in high school and Terenzini et al., (1996) stated that first-generation students were more likely to have lower critical thinking scores prior to college. Only 9.2% of first-generation students took a rigorous curriculum in high school compared to 25% whose parents held a degree (Choy, 2001).

Both Cindy and Rick wrote that there were “no options” for higher-level math courses and Cindy discussed the lack of AP courses offered to her, even though there were offerings at her high school. The inability for these two students to take rigorous coursework while in high school acted as a gate that could have been a potential barrier for success.

Teacher Support. Teachers can act as role-models, givers of content knowledge, counselors, and advisors and play an important role in the preparation of first-generation college students. Pascarella et al. (2004) found that first-generation college students were less likely to have strong relationships with their teachers; first-generation students were less likely than their peers to report that they frequently spent time talking to teachers outside of class. Terenzini et al. (1996) also found that first-generation status students spend less time interacting with teachers in and out of the classroom.

In terms of *Teacher Support*, Chris wrote that he was “very lucky to have some great teachers” who encouraged and pushed him. He credits the small class-sizes at his high school for all of the support he received. Nettie had many “wonderful teachers” in high school and the superintendent of her high school singled her and her childhood best friend out and recommended that they apply to attend St. Olaf, his alma mater.

Parent Support. *Parent Support* under the theme of Preparation refers to the support that parents gave their student in terms of preparing them for higher education. This is different from the *Parent Support* under the theme of Sustainability wherein parents were encouraging their students while they were in college to persist toward graduation. *Parent Support* is helpful in preparation for college but first-generation students may not get the same levels or kinds of support as their peers (Cabrera, 2014)

because going to college is “not part of their family’s expectations and traditions” (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 63).

Don was required to pay for college himself without the help of his parents and when he realized that he would have to come up with “\$650 for tuition, housing, and a food plan,” he realized he didn’t have it. He asked his mother what to do and she told him to go borrow it from the bank. When he went to the bank where he had a “little savings account” they told him to go away. Upon returning home, his mother asked him how it went and when he said, “Not very well” she immediately said, “Come with me.” In a rare moment of absolute control his mother drove him to the bank and “we sat down with the very same banker and the paperwork was signed and I had money for the first semester of school.” This anecdote illuminated the interpretive code of *Parent Support* under the theme of Preparation.

In-depth Interviews

Interviews were conducted with five first-generation college graduates. Purposeful, criterion-based sampling was initiated in the selection of participants to ensure that they were all the first members of their immediate family to graduate from a 4-year college or university.

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed according to the process outlined by Moustakas (1994). Using the interview model outlined by deMarrais (2004), I began the interviews with an open-ended, question created to elicit responses concerning the experiences of my participants and then used follow-up questions that corresponded with my research questions. According to Patton (2002), the interviewer, with the use of an interview guide, “...remains free to build a conversation within a

particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined” (p. 343). Interview questions were crafted to reflect the feelings, experiences, and perspectives of my participants as well as to answer the research questions this study seeks to answer (Appendix D).

Interviews were conducted one-on-one at a location determined by the participant as being a place of comfort. Interviews lasted approximately 35-60 minutes and were recorded digitally using the QuickVoice Pro iPhone app and were transcribed verbatim. The interviewee was provided with a copy of the transcript to be reviewed for accuracy and revision. Once the transcripts were reviewed, the transcripts were coded by the researcher.

All three themes and many of their interpretive codes were present in the interview phase. Quotations and examples from each are described below.

Persistence. It seems, from the participants of this research, that money is not a sufficient *Motivation* to allow students to persist to graduation. I asked if the desire for money could be enough to hold you firmly in place at school and was told, “it is absolutely not enough.” Cindy told me, when coming from a place of poverty, what you think is a lot of money is actually not a lot. She says money cannot be the only motivator because you, “could just work full-time somewhere and work your way up” and that you can make money without going to college and it will feel like a lot. Bottom line, Cindy told me, “there has to be more, there have to be people who challenge you and people who pull with you and people who don’t want you to go back.” She is grateful that she was lucky enough to have that, and, “just at the right time” and acknowledges that many people do not get that,

especially if they are first-generation students. Cindy said, “Because most people that come from that situation at least have some good work ethic because they have to work for everything they have. I do have that instilled in me from that lifestyle.”

When Don took his position at EROS and began taking some of the courses that would eventually lead him to obtaining his degree, he told me:

It was kind of a fulfillment thing. At first, frankly, I did it to see if I could do it. The end of my active college was not pretty. I was highly distracted and my grades collapsed and it was difficult to come to grips with that. I had self-doubt. But I did it and I could. And I liked it.

After feeling so lost in college and after two years without any courses, Don finally found purpose for obtaining a degree. He still felt that wildlife management was interesting but could not support his new career goals. Where he was stretching himself too thin and lost his “why” while in college, later in life he was able to find his “focus.” He told me:

I wanted to get value from the classes that I took so I didn’t want to take two at a time. I didn’t want to be hurt by it, I wanted to have time for that one class and do it right. So I had very good grades and learned something. There were new subjects that I enjoyed.

Even though he could have graduated sooner by taking more classes, that was not the point for Don any longer. In college, he just wanted it over with, and later in life, he wanted the meaning the learning allowed him; this anecdote demonstrates the interpretive codes of Motivation and Self-Improvement.

I asked Cindy to talk about her application process and she regretfully told me that she only applied to one school. There was a college fair at her high school and she walked around to all of the tables and Missouri Western grabbed her attention because she could get a scholarship with her GPA and ACT scores. She picked up their packet, filled out the paperwork and sent it in. I asked if she had any help with filling out her application and

she said no (*Motivation*), that her parents, “didn’t know what all these questions were asking, especially when it came time for the FAFSA” and that because they couldn’t help, they began to distance themselves. They made comments like, “Well, if this is something that you want to do, then you can be the one to do it.” She made the process of gathering up all of the information by herself sound easy. When she received her acceptance letter, she said thankfully there were instructions for what to do and she said she just, “kind of followed the instructions from there.”

Representing the interpretive code of *Work Ethic*, Rick recommends to first-generation college students that if they are still figuring out their personal “why” or self-improvement then “you at least need to have the work ethic that I’m at least going to work through this until I can really figure this out.”

After Don told me an anecdote about an interaction with a professor, I pointed out that he had to be very independent and proactive in college. He responded with, “Yeah, which I wasn’t I guess.” I was surprised by his reaction and told him, “But in general, to get yourself there, to pay for it by yourself, to work that hard...that takes quite a bit of persistence.” He very humbly accepted this but told me “Well we were all in it together.”

Chris had a strong desire for *Self-Improvement*: Chris said, “I think the reason I really wanted to go to college was just to explore my intellectual curiosity. I didn’t go in with a set plan, what to major in, I kinda had an idea because I had taken Latin and I ultimately chose Classics.” He says he could have studied on his own and been knowledgeable by reading books but says he wanted to be trained by professionals and he wanted to meet new people, experience new cultures, and see a different party of the

country; these were all part of the intellectual curiosity he has been fascinated with since high school (Self-Improvement).

Sustainability. *Financial Support* was important to many of the participants.

Because the school he was hoping to attend was halfway across the country and despite not having enough money to see the school before he applied, Chris was lucky to be able to visit the school before he made a final decision to attend. He recalled:

They flew my mom and I out to Vermont and, they had their...I think it was called the 'Students of Color Weekend' or whatnot and we went down for a weekend in the spring and got a chance to go around and tour the campus and it was just picturesque...it was a tough call. Luckily, being Hispanic, they were willing to pay for me to go out there and pay for my mom.

Chris recalled many lonely holidays spent at the college while his friends were off with families or on vacation. Being able to pay for college by working and with scholarships assisted him in persisting toward graduation.

Throughout her interview, Cindy repeatedly discussed her nomadic childhood and how she never formed close relationships with teachers, counselors, or friends. Once she attended college, she was finally able to form bonds with her peers and they were the glue that held her to the university; the interpretive code of *Peer Support* was illuminated. Even when she had to take a year-long detour, they guided her back to her path. It would have been easy for Cindy to go back to her family and work for the rest of her life without completing her education, but her friends challenged her to question herself and her choices and ultimately, helped her achieve her college graduation dreams.

Chris's high school created a system of "brotherhood" that gave Chris a sense of belonging and also provided a safe environment of competition. His teacher Father Francis Landwermeyer taught him Greek and Latin and "motivated his students to public service

by constantly challenging us to lead as the great heroes of the Trojan War exemplified on the battlefield amidst great carnage and sacrifice” and Professor Murray Dry at Middlebury College “breathed the classics into the soul and fabric of my being.”

Rick said parents (*Parent Support*) can act as a “hook” for helping students remain in school. He stated, “Because sometimes when you have friends or family that catch you, that’s...other than that man, I’m not really sure what else sustains somebody to see through that.” He said the school itself was never supportive: “I don’t think colleges have it in their interest to try to set up counseling areas to help people sustain”, but those other relationships were vital.

Preparation. Chris considers himself to be lucky because he attended a Catholic school that was called Central Catholic High School: A College Preparatory School and obviously, judging from its name and from conversation with Chris, emphasized college preparation (*High School Preparation*). He says that, “the curriculum was set up so that you would be adequately prepared for school.”

Nettie’s mother was an excellent student but had to drop out of high school at the age of 16 to begin work at the family’s apple orchard (a point to brag about is that the family eventually helped to create the Haralson Apple-perfect for eating or cooking) to help sustain the large family. Because she grew up in poverty, Nettie’s mother desired a better life for her future children and developed a strong work ethic because of the physical labor she had to endure to help her family. Nettie’s father was a high school graduate and held “the most enviable job in town” which allowed him to be financially stable. Learning and education were important to both parents and Nettie’s father served as President of a local school board. When her parents married, Nettie’s mother was able

to stop working outside of the home as a demonstrator of telephone equipment and devices. Education was incredibly important to both of her parents and Nettie expressed her appreciation for their support multiple times throughout the interview phase.

When we discussed what distinguished her from other students whose parents had gone to college, Cindy had a few interesting thoughts. Not surprisingly, she talked about how family support can really help students. She told me about friends who had gone to the same high school for all four years, had supportive counselors and teachers, had taken the ACT seven times, had help with filling out paperwork, their friends called regularly to check in and initially that made her feel anger. She realizes now that her parents cared how she was doing but they felt that they could not talk to her because, “they didn’t know anything about what that world was like.” She describes the “wedge” that formed because her parents could not understand what she was going through and they felt the best way to handle that was to not ask. *Parent Support* for Cindy looked different than it did for many students and could have discouraged her had she not emulated the theme of Persistence.

Case Descriptions

In this section, I created individual descriptions for each participant, which incorporate questionnaire, personal narrative, and interview data. To protect the identity of participants, I used pseudonyms rather than their given names. After introducing the participants, I identify the three cross-cutting themes of Persistence, Sustainability, and Preparation which were illuminated by all five participants and their subsequent interpretive codes that capture the essence of these participants’ experiences as first-generation college graduates.

Chris

Through the data analysis phase, nine of the twelve interpretive codes were illuminated and where the phenomena that led to the three themes of Persistence, Sustainability, and Preparation for Chris. Chris is a gregarious, goofy, 39-year-old self-identified Hispanic man who teaches English at a high school. He loves reading the classics and is incredibly well-read and intelligent. He credits the hard, advanced classes and the pressure to do well from his peers (*Peer Support*) for pushing him to do well in high school and says that the culture of the school very much expected students to attend a four-year college or university. Chris also says that knowing that his school was one of the oldest Catholic high schools in Texas that was well-regarded along with the amount of money being paid for tuition lent itself to the expectation that college was not a choice.

Growing up in San Antonio with parents of Mexican heritage who did not have a lot of money really presented itself as a barrier for Chris. He says that the thought of his parents not being able to pay for his expensive \$4,000-5,000 a year tuition was always in the back of his head as it was a great deal of money (*Financial Support and Parent Support*). However, Chris's parents were willing to make that sacrifice for their two sons and were very motivated to see them go to college.

Chris was born just one year after his parents graduated and he says, "like any good parents do, they have to sacrifice to make ends meet and work crappy jobs and stuff and so...I don't think they wanted us to have to go through that, to have to endure that kind of lifestyle, so to speak." It took some time for his parents to find their own career paths; his mother was a paralegal and his father joined the Air Force.

I understood that because of his high school experience paid for by his parents who had sacrificed for him and his younger brother, the expectation was well-set that Chris should attend college but I asked him about other motivators to attend. He credits a Jesuit priest who was his Latin teacher (*Teacher Support*) who lectured his students regularly on intellectual curiosity.

In thinking about the application for college, Chris says the counselors at his school did a “pretty good job” at finding unique schools. He always had an idea in the back of his head, or an “awareness,” that he wanted to go to school in New England. He describes the application as being “tough” and applied to many schools. He says he strategized and applied to schools that he knew he would definitely get into and then some “reaches.” Applying to numerous colleges gave him a choice in the type and location of the school. Chris regularly called a friend (*Peer Support*) who was attending Princeton to help him write his college essays because, “didn’t have anybody really to go to in my family to help me do that and so I had somebody who was already at Princeton...I had some good friends.” He utilized other friends to help him and he could bounce ideas off of them. Chris stated, “That’s what was cool about being at a Catholic school, there was like a fellowship, a brotherhood where they were pulling for you...that was cool, in terms of my level of college preparation and going through the admissions process.” The interpretive code of *High School Preparation* was illuminated here under the theme of Preparation.

Chris’s eventual college was not even on his radar but his mother’s boss, who was an alumni, told him to consider it; this demonstrates the phenomenon of *Parent Support* under the theme of Preparation. The school was in a rural location but after studying reports ranking colleges, he found that the college was ranked number six as a liberal arts

school and he says, “that kinda opened up a path for me.” Going to a school with small class sizes where you could get to know your professors and students was appealing to Chris. When I pointed out that this sounded similar to the environment he had experienced in high school, Chris agreed and said the close-knit community was important to him.

The trip to see his future college “sealed the deal” and Chris accepted his place at Middlebury College in Vermont. Chris remembers that college was not always easy. He recalled:

I still remember my dad coming to visit me and this was early on in my freshmen year, first semester. And of course we went out to dinner and everything at a little pub in downtown Middlebury. And I was telling him, ‘man Dad, this place is tough.’ As good of a high school as Central was...I don’t even know if I was prepared to do the work there at Middlebury. I mean, it was that hard. It was that challenging and I dug in and read and kept up but it was really, really hard. And I told my dad that part of self-pity. I was like, ‘man, Dad, I think...I think it would be a little bit easier if I just transferred to UT or transferred to Trinity University in Santonio’ which was a great school and my dad just gave me the tough love speech. My dad said, ‘Your mom and I sacrificed to put you through Central, we sacrificed to get you a plane ticket to come up here, we’ve sacrificed in these different areas to get you to Middlebury.’ He’s like, ‘You said this is where you wanted to go to college, you’re gonna go to college here. I don’t want to hear anymore talk of transfer. You’re here, this is where you’re gonna stay, we’ll see you in four years.’

Chris says this is where having a military man for a father came in handy and confirmed the *Parent Support* he had both in Preparation and Sustainability. He says it all came down to a lot of persistence. He made a goal to never miss a class and had to find the “mental strength” to say that he could do it and that he belonged there. Chris says he had to develop some “thick skin.” Of the five participants, Chris was the only one who demonstrated *Continuity of College Choice* by staying at the same college and graduating in four years. Chris graduated from Middlebury and feels that he “laid the foundation” for his younger brother to go to college. His brother could call him for advice and when he needed an extra push to do well, just as Chris’s older friends had done for him.

Rick

All three themes were present and seven of the twelve interpretive codes were illuminated through the analysis process for Rick. Rick is a gentle, thoughtful teacher who self-identifies as Latino and studied history in college and in graduate school and has been working as a social studies teacher for the last 21 years. Through the analyzing of data, Rick described himself as one of six children and the oldest of four brothers. As a child, he says he was never a discipline problem and did fairly well in school. His parents high expectations for his performance in school and where, “doing well in school was just a matter of good character” and they very much had the attitude of, “if you’re gonna do something, do it right” which he carries with him into adulthood. In school, Rick recalled that he did well but he was unable to take advanced courses like some of his peers; this phenomenon of *Gate-keeping Courses* led to the theme of Preparation.

Rick remembers the conversation with his father after his high school graduation where he was asked what he wanted to do. As he recalls, he told his dad that he wanted to go to college because “Well, I think I like history,” which came as a surprise to his father. Coming from a blue-collar family, Rick says that that his parents wanted him to get, “a good paying job. That was the focus. A good paying job, that you could make the house payments, that you could raise a family on, that’s what you should be thinking about.” The interpretive code of *Self-Improvement* was illuminated here. He describes his father as being “practical minded” who went to business school for a year after high school and then entered the Army Reserves where he learned some skills and then got a job using those skills at another place of employment. When asked about the vision his parents had for him, Rick stated:

Blue-collar work, good paycheck. Was not a great one, but was steady and the vision...it's an interesting one...It kind of ties together, the both of them. The vision of finding a partner and to find a meaningful job was fairly small, it was fairly picayune. You find somebody you can build a family with and get a job that you can sustain that family with. I think that was about as, the only type of criteria on my dad and mom's list. Really. And my mom was...more find somebody that you can build a family with.

Rick's mother worked as a bank teller and had a 6th grade education while his father only had the aforementioned high school diploma. While neither of Rick's parents graduated from an institution of higher learning, they did invoke a culture of learning for him and his siblings. As the oldest of four boys, Rick was the most academic and, "always had my nose in the books."

Rick says he chose a college education for himself for two reasons: first, he enjoyed history as a subject and knew he wanted a career in that field and second, he has a physical disability that would have prevented him from "being successful in a career that required a high degree of physical strength and dexterity" both of which demonstrated the interpretive code of *Motivation*. Unlike his father, the military was never an option for Rick. With this thought process in mind, Rick set about the difficult task of applying for college. He does not recall "actually seeing a counselor about post-secondary at all" and because he attended a small parochial school with only about 650 total students, there was not a variety of AP or advanced classes for him. Rick had, "really little awareness" for the ACT test and did not prepare with a class or a book and instead, "just went in and took the test cold." After asking him if he had to be proactive about choosing to apply for college and taking the necessary steps such as filling out the applications and taking the ACT, Rick gave a resounding, "Oh, yeah" which confirmed his Persistence as illuminated by *Motivation and Work Ethic*.

Despite having a great deal of intrinsic Motivation, Rick also credits his friends for getting him to college (*Peer Support*). He says his decision to go to the college he eventually chose was, “actually based on one of my good friends saying, ‘you should come up here, I’m gonna be here, somebody’s gonna be here.’” Because there was no support from teachers or counselors and no internet at the time, Rick says he wrote to some admissions for some catalogs and information. This led him to look for financial aid to assist in paying for college and he did get some advice from counselors at his high school and received help applying for a few scholarships that would help with tuition for students with physical disabilities.

Once starting college, it was not everything he imagined and Rick describes himself as being “clueless” and “untargeted” and he made the decision to move to Seattle. When asked why Seattle, he answered with, “No particular reason other than I’d never been to that part of the country. It just seemed...cool. Nobody lived there that I knew, nothing.” When he got there, he went to the University of Washington and was disappointed to find out that their minimum admissions requirement for transfer students was a 3.5 GPA and he had a 2.6. The counselors at the University recommended that he went to community college to help bring up his GPA. Rick describes this time as an awakening because he had not realized the level of competition. He reflects, saying:

You don’t just walk in there and you just go do this, these places have regulations...they want a *kind* of student or a certain quality of student. That was, even my first two years, I was just clueless about that. It was just high school, I went to classes and I did the work and I took the test...I was just kind of going. And um, yeah...that’s probably the reason I went to Seattle. At one point, I was conscious enough, I’m just doing this and I’m not sure why. I’m not even sure what I wanna do. And that kinda hit me when I was about 20 and I was like, hmm ok.

This was a time of feeling lost for Rick as his parents were not supportive of his move. As they had through his whole life, they had the attitude that he needed to finish what he had started. However, he does think that if he had decided to drop out because of a great job offer, they would not have minded because of the prospect of a well-paying career.

In order to support himself during this time, Rick worked several jobs (*Persistence*) in addition to taking classes at a local community college. He remembers his schedule where he, “went in from like, 2-6 at one place, caught a bus, worked from 8-6 at another, caught a bus, went home, showered, slept for about four hours or so and then did the vending machines for coffee.” Through all of this, Rick did not give up his dream of college and a “cerebral” career and “always in the back of my mind was history, always in the back of my mind was teaching.” He finally realized that he needed to stop “running in circles” in Seattle. He says the realization came unexpectedly and suddenly. While riding the bus downtown, Rick finally saw the dive bar at one of the stops in a new light. He realized, “I was just depressed, you know dude, these people didn’t make good choices, and this is where they’re at. You’re not really doing anything and you can’t do nothing forever if you want to get somewhere.” This led him to the conclusion that, “If I can’t get into the University of Washington, then I need to go home.”

Rick does not regret his decision to go to Washington and describes it as a “formative period” in his life where he came to a realization:

I got to do something if...what I want to do or if anything that I want to do is going to happen, I have got to do something. I can’t just sit and do the same old, same old. That’s what those guys did and I did watch those guys and was like...that’s just not where I want and they were friends, good friends and all, but they were not college-oriented really, they were just very blue-collar background and I just thought to myself, there was something about me that I didn’t want the same old, same old.

When he got home, he immediately got a job and applied at the school he would eventually graduate from and started taking classes.

When talking about his *Motivation* to stay in school this time, Rick said he “always loved the culture of, the climate of college. I loved sitting around in the student union, talking with people about things...I liked making friends with people...I knew that I liked that atmosphere.” He says that there is evidence of his rising consciousness about the need to go home because his GPA only continued to climb every semester and when graduation came around, he decided that to do what he really wanted, he needed to attend graduate school.

Rick’s little brother went to college and when I asked him if he thought that his attendance and graduation inspired his brother, he responded that, “I don’t think that’s the case, that my going inspired him. But rather, my going made him realize that it’s possible. That it’s an option. You know, Rick went!”

I asked Rick for any advice for first-generation college graduates or the educators that work with them. He suggested three things: get the support of the parents (*Parent Support*), get past the first two years (*Sustainability*), and get some good friends (*Peer Support*). Rick is grateful for the support from his parents and that they never “bad-mouthed” him going to college. Here Rick demonstrated the interpretive code of *Parent Support* under the pattern code of *Sustainability*. He jokingly said, “I can introduce you without some level of shame, you know, this is my ex-drug dealer son. No, it’s, this is my son, he’s going to college.” He believes it is important for parents to be knowledgeable, “so that when kids have questions, they might be able to plug in with their parents.” Since Rick’s parents did not attend college, the only thing they were able to help him with was

filling out a few forms, but for the most part, Rick was on his own. He feels parents are a “hook” and that they can sustain students because, I’ve gotta believe that there are deans of admission or provost who’re thinking, you’re 18, you made a decision to come to college, you knew it was gonna cost, we’ve got your money, if you don’t make it, that’s on you.”

Rick says one of the keys to graduating is getting through the first two years and says:

You gotta get past the sense that it’s not high school, when it feels a lot like it. I didn’t have a very good idea when I started. I think I always had, in the back of my mind, a vague sense of purpose about why I was there, and that’s why I could sustain through classes in an environment that seemed a lot like high school.

It took a lot of individual determination, confirming his Persistence, to get through this rough period of time for Rick, but once he had invested two years, his path seemed to be clearer and things got easier. He feels that if we can give first-generation college students the tools to better understand what this process looks and feels like, they may be more likely to persist through those first few years and attain their degrees.

Rick’s last piece of advice that demonstrated the interpretive code of *Peer Support* under the theme of Sustainability was to build, “a good network of friends, always important, particularly if you don’t have a strong sense of what you want to do, be around people who do.” He credits his fraternity brothers and other friends with helping keep him on track and being good role-models for him. He says, “I could kind of get a good sense of direction from them.” Rick feels that having a sense of direction was essential to him:

If you don’t have a sense of meaning, or purpose, the days just aren’t as bright, the taste just isn’t as sweet, it’s cloudy...you’ve gotta get past that. I would think you’d have to have the why, and if you don’t have the why all figured out, you at least need to have the work ethic that I’m at least going to work through this until I can really figure out the why.

Cindy

Seven of the twelve interpretive codes emerged from the analysis of Cindy's data. Cindy is a white 31-year-old, sweet, caring woman who works as a counselor at a high school. She is married to her college sweetheart and they just had their second daughter. Cindy grew up in with her mother, step-father, older sister, and younger half-brother until the age of six when her mother passed away from a car accident. After that event, she and her sister moved in with her father, step-mother, and three younger half-siblings. Cindy always remembers having to help out with the "little kids" because the adults in the household trusted her over her rebellious older sister.

While she enjoyed her responsibilities and her big seven person family, life was difficult. Cindy remembers moving every one to two years as her father chased preaching opportunities for charismatic denominations. She recalls that they lived on an average income of about \$18,000-20,000 a year, which she called an "abysmal" experience. In many of the homes they lived in, all five children would share a bedroom. Despite this, Cindy says they never went hungry: "We grew gardens, we went fishing, frogging, hunting, and every now and then we'd even get to order some fried chicken.

Moving regularly made making friends difficult as Cindy went to four different high schools. In addition to connecting with her peers, she remembers that none of her teachers really got to know her. She always received good grades but says this is "because, I think maybe I was born intelligent enough to just get by." Nobody at school took her under their wing, be it other kids, teachers, or counselors and she was discouraged from taking advanced math and science courses; this illuminated the *Gate-Keeping Courses* interpretive

code. She only recalls meeting a counselor once, her senior year when she was given the results of the one ACT she took.

Cindy had a strong desire for *Self-Improvement*. Because her parents had no formal education, her step-mother working “odd jobs here and there” including a stint as an Easter Bunny at the local mall, there was not a lot of direct support for Cindy to prepare for, apply, or graduate from college. She knew that she had to take the ACT and because she had to pay for it herself, she took it the one time and earned a 23-she stated “again, I was in the middle” and remembers having to ask the counselor if that was good enough. Cindy’s *Motivation* and *Work Ethic* were confirmed with her proactive approach to preparing herself for college.

Cindy says that her parents always had high expectations for her and that she was responsible for many things around the house (*Work Ethic*). She describes herself as being “obedient” while living in their house. In reflection, Cindy said that when she got to her senior year and decided that she really wanted to go to college, she thinks her parents started “unintentionally discouraging” her. When asked about her interpretation of this, she said that they wanted to keep her close to the family. They would say things such as, “the smarter thing to do would be to wait a year, and just work really hard so you can save up money” or, “if you do go to college, I mean you should because you’re smart, if you do, then you should stay home and commute, somewhere close.” She says these words from her parents likely came from “a place of fear” and that they were scared of losing her. Not only did she help out with the “little kids,” Cindy helped pay the bills for the household and they depended on her.

The school Cindy chose was five hours away from her home and her family was not happy or supportive of this decision. Cindy describes herself as being “gung ho” about her decision (*Motivation*) and was determined and excited to attend and she didn’t give her parents a choice about her education. She took it into her own hands. She finally got her driver’s license the summer before she started college and remembered that the first time she ever drove on the highway was on her way to move into the dorms. Once her family realized that she was not, “going to have it any other way,” they were begrudgingly accepting of the choice. Then, Cindy ominously said, “They changed their minds a year later.”

Cindy had her scholarships (*Financial Support*), was paying for school herself, had gotten a boyfriend, and was doing well in school (even though she did admit that she regularly missed class-again mentioning that she was just intelligent enough to get by) and was blindsided when in the car on the way home from her first year of college, her dad said, “you are never coming back here again.” She says her parents gave no indication of this attitude over the course of the year when they spoke on the phone. She said her parents were concerned about how far away she was from home and that they continued to ask, “what if something were to happen to your dad?” When I asked about this question, she said her dad was sick off and on, but “I don’t know how sick he really was” and perhaps this was just a technique to convince her to be close. They told her repeatedly that she should stay home and go back to just work and save home or if she had to go to college, she should commute. Her having a boyfriend did not sit well either. Cindy described herself as “bawling” through this car ride and that she felt completely “helpless.” She said she considered lashing out and saying:

Screw you guys, I'm going back, I've got my own car and you know, I pay all of my own bills...it's not like you're helping me pay for college, I'm working 40 hours a week, I got my scholarship, I'm paying my own insurance, I'm paying for my own food.

However, by the end of the five hour drive, she realized that a more rational response would be necessary. She asked if they could talk and come up with a compromise.

Eventually they did and she applied to and was accepted to Missouri Southern which was only two hours from home. She says she went there for a year and after that, her whole relationship with her parents and family, "took a hit" and they were not happy with where she was and that she was not either.

By transferring schools, Cindy lost her scholarship and she was working full time but still had to take out loans; her Work Ethic was once again illuminated. The comments from her parents became harsher as they started saying things like, "you think you're better than us." She tried to help the situation by calling home more and she saved to get a more reliable, newer car so she could visit home more. Her relationship with her boyfriend, who is now her husband, continued through this tumultuous time even though her parents forbade her from seeing him over the summer. Cindy stated that they seemed to think that if, "they just removed me from that, then I would end up coming home...that I would end up needing them again or something." She feels as if though they felt like they were not needed any longer and it was never her intention to make them feel that way and that she was simply growing up and becoming an adult. It was "really difficult" for them to see her making her own decisions and involving other people in her life. The theme of Sustainability was present as Cindy persevered despite the lack of parental support.

Sophomore year was a "sucky, sucky, terrible" year at Missouri Southern. Cindy had a difficult time making friends because she lived off campus and rarely went to class. She

did maintain good grades but they were not as good as they had been at Missouri Western. She was also working 40 hours a week. At the end of that school year, she called her parents and told them that she would be returning to Missouri Western. She said she had prepared a rational argument for her return and told them that she understood their concerns but she was not happy or invested at her new school. She had found a place to live, the cost of her education would end up being less if she returned, she would get to be with her friends and boyfriend, and she would be happy living without the regret. She says she didn't ask her parents if she could go back to Missouri Western, she "informed them." Her parents were unhappy with her choice and the relationship continued to deteriorate as she said they "realized that I wasn't just going to do what they wanted me to anymore."

She returned to Missouri Western and graduated in three and a half years (*Years to Graduation*) because, "I just wanted to get done and have a big girl job." She says that when she graduated, she was, "really excited, because I did it" and that her parents attended her graduation and "seemed really proud of me and so I was excited about that...I just felt like it was a really big accomplishment even though I didn't really put a lot of effort into it." She told me that she felt very accomplished and that it was satisfying to finish something that she really wanted to do-her desire for *Self-Improvement* was strong.

Don

Through the analysis process, seven of the twelve interpretive codes were illuminated for Don. Don is a 64-year-old white man who is clever, witty, and does not talk much unless prompted, but will suddenly let out deep, well-thought out ideas and comments. He grew up with an older brother and a father who was an officer in the Army. They moved often until he was in junior high school and he has stayed in the same general

area since. He recalls that in junior high, there were two “pathways” offered, vocational and science and said, “I thought that there was a subset that was going to the other end of the school.” Don did take a shop class in eighth or ninth and got the opportunity to make some furniture and said, “mine were a little primitive and I didn’t like the chaos of the class.” He wanted to take a few of those classes but there was never time in the day; “I was taking so many classes I didn’t even have time for a study hall. I envied the kids that had a study hall.” He says he “wasn’t deliberately on a college track, personally, but I realize that that’s the track I was on.”

When I asked how he was put on that track, he says it was not his parents or his counselors and that he chose the classes he wanted to take. He had straight A’s at that point and “I liked what I was doing.” Grades were never an issue in high school and Don enjoyed the math and science courses most and even had the opportunity to take advanced classes and felt prepared for college. These advanced courses demonstrate the interpretive code of *High School Preparation*. When asked about enrollment help, he said his counselors were “useless” and when he went to his parents for advice about what courses, they told him, “It’s up to you. Take what you want to take.” Don’s mother stayed at home raising her two boys and his father had, “an interesting and successful career in the Army” and had started a degree as it was a requirement to be an officer but retired before completion. Because the degree would have been to fulfill an obligation to the Army instead of for personal reasons, he stopped school upon retirement. Don’s parents did not want to control or influence him so college was never pushed and they did not want to help with choosing courses. He told me, “They had each suffered or seen their friends suffer through domineering parents who told them what to do and then they decided not

to do that to us.” He described this as a “void” and had nobody else to turn to. When thinking about taking the math and sciences courses through high school, he reflected, “I guess I just made that choice.”

Don remembered that his senior year of high school, he realized that other seniors were applying for college and were being accepted and he thought he should look into it. Applying to college and the entire application process was a “complete mystery” and the only help he had at school was from a guidance counselor who pointed to a stack of pamphlets. The only other times he had met with counselors throughout high school, the visit was extremely brief, “so they could check a box on a form.” A friend’s mother had a college degree and was a teacher and encouraged both her son and Don to apply; Don indicated this on his questionnaire. When she asked if he was going to college and he told her he wasn’t certain, he described her attitude as “huffy” and she told him, “Oh yes you are!” He said he and his two buddies spent a lot of time in her home and that she was a major influence on him.

At that point, Don says that attending seemed expected so he and his friend applied to only one school to be together and illuminates *Peer Support*. He applied to South Dakota State University because he was “confident” with his grades that he would be accepted. He was drawn to this school because of his friends but also because, “For some reason, I knew it was cheaper to go to a state school, so I looked there.” The need for financial aid demonstrates *Financial Support*. Once again, throughout this process, Don’s parents were hands-off and seemed neither for nor against a college education when he asked them for their opinion. This was frustrating for him and, “In fact I felt so adrift that I remember at one point wondering if they really cared. Now I realize later that they did, that was just

how they showed it.” His friends who were going to college had parents who were “actively engaged” in the process and he recognized that he would “have to go from a follower to making my own choices; figure out my own path.”

When school became his ultimate choice, Don filled out the application to SDSU by himself, evidence of his *Motivation* and Persistence. “I remember there were questions about family income and my dad didn’t want to answer those questions.” He told me that money was “extremely tight” at this time (*Financial Support*) because his father had been retired for almost 10 years. I asked if he ever considered scholarships or if he applied to any and he told me that he never looked into it because he knew that he could work and he could pay his way through (*Work Ethic*).

Even though he and his two best friends all applied to and were accepted at SDSU, when they put in their requests to be each other’s roommates, his friends were put together as roommates and he was with someone else. Different dorms across campus meant that he did not get to see them often. He did tell me that neither of his friends finished school and perhaps it “might have been even worse” if he would have been close to them on campus.

Don told me that he remembered, “other college freshmen struggling and I sailed through the first semester. For instance, the first semester of physics class was nearly identical to the high school physics class.” Don’s *High School Preparation* aided him in the rigorous of college coursework. Because he enjoyed hunting, Don chose wildlife management as his major. Later on, he found out that one of his friends had a brother-in-law that had a Masters in Fisheries and could not find a job in his field and was instead working as a lumberjack. Don started looking at job prospects for his major and found that

only about 10% of graduates were finding employment and the wages were incredibly low. During a trip to Yellowstone National Park with his friend, their car broke down and they were trapped for three or four days. They met and talked to a frustrated Yellowstone Park Ranger who was a graduated Wildlife Management major and was only able to work his job for the summer, for very little pay. This was incredibly discouraging for Don as, "My wildlife management degree became devalued because the field was saturated." His best friend's brother-in-law had a fisheries degree from SDSU and was unable to find a job for years and had to work as a lumberjack despite having a Master's degree. The work he was doing at school without a degree was comparable to what the lumberjack was making. He recalls, "I remember my freshmen year in particular, what am I doing here? You know, I hadn't chosen a major yet and I felt like I could do whatever I wanted to do, I could be whatever I wanted to be, but I didn't know what I wanted to do."

In 1970, the Vietnam War was in full swing and Don had a low draft number of 103 and a college deferment so he hoped he could keep out of the war by staying in school. The draft went into the 180s that year as he remembers it. He asked his dad what he should do and, "He said I should have a skill so they don't just hand me a gun. There was a lot of talk in the news to end college draft deferments and the war was looking like it would drag on for years." Wanting to control his destiny, Don joined a local transportation unit of the National Guard. He spent his 21st birthday at Fort Polk for basic training in the summer of 1971 and missed the start of the fall semester of college.

After returning to school, he found a second job on campus as a photographer for Student Publications. This meant he had two jobs and National Guard one weekend a month. The photography job involved two to three shoots a week and he was working two

to four hours each day for the Audio Visual Center and also had weekend hours showing films. He loved the work but says he was burning out and, "it was stupid" to be doing so much. Trying to take a "heavy class load" of all science classes to make up for his missing semester along with working so many events around campus made Don's grades suffer. He told me that at this time, "I wanted to get it done. I just wanted it over and done with." However, all of the work, combined with a stressful relationship, was too much and when he finished the fall semester in 1973, Don "walked away from college." After Christmas break, he told the school that he would not be back, told his jobs he would not be working any longer and followed his girlfriend to Vermillion, SD. It seemed at this time that "there was no point" in being in school.

His parents "accepted whatever" he chose and he knew that he could go home at any time and they would provide "a meal and sleep in a bed and use their car" but beyond this "there wasn't support." He told me that he still wanted his degree, confirming Motivation: "To be that close and not have the piece of paper was not satisfying. I wanted the piece of paper. Just for my own self if for no other reason." Working odd jobs and a difficult job led Don to feel disheartened and he returned home to Sioux Falls.

During the summer of 1975, Don started working for the Eros Data Center where he still works today, and discovered that they offered to pay tuition expenses (*Financial Support*). The people there were "highly educated" and at the time, the management was very interested in developing their employees and offered many college courses free of charge to their employees. It was not necessarily "to propel you to a degree but so you could better perform your job" and he estimated that there were 40-45 people with Ph.D.'s and many Master's degrees. Even better, courses were held at the facility and staff

members taught certain college courses. Don took several classes that “sounded interesting” for fun and had “no plan for graduation.” But eventually, he became curious and dropped in one evening to see the head of continuing education at work and told him, “So I think I’m kind of close here. I think we should talk about what I need to graduate.” He was told to come back a week later so that his records could be pulled and examined. The continuing education head told him, “Well, most people come talk to us before they have this many credits and are this far along” but that a degree could be obtained. South Dakota State University offered a Bachelor’s degree in General Studies that “seemed to be me” and he would only need a few more classes so he took a required speech class. It was freshmen speech and he said “Chicken Don” had been too nervous to take it when he was an active college student but that this environment was more comfortable as there were people he worked with in the class.

Don says he had been working the swing shift for many years and wanted to be able to spend more time with his family. This demonstrated Don’s desire for *Self-Improvement*. His boss was impressed with his work and wanted to promote him to a day shift management position, but could not without a degree. By this time he was already pursuing his degree and told them, “Well, wait a little longer and I will.” More frequently, his boss asked him when he would graduate and he continued to tell him the same date and “just a few months before I graduated, they did promote me.” He continued, “I brought in my proof and they had a little party.” He graduated and had his promotion and felt lucky because he had, “Day shift and a great job, too!”

Nettie

Of the twelve interpretive codes, nine emerged from the analysis of Nettie's questionnaire, document, and interview. Nettie is an 87-year-old grandmother of eight and great-grandmother of five who has an incredible memory filled with an impressive array of details. She describes her journey to college as "fairly typical" for women her age. She seemed entranced by the past as I interviewed her and reminisced about her "beautiful" life. Nettie was the oldest child and her family grew by one when she was two years old and after she turned 16, the family was "surprised but blessed" with another son.

Nettie's description of high school was succinct and she continued to repeat that "high school was incredibly easy for me." She earned wonderful grades (*High School Preparation*), just as her parents expected (*Parent Support* under the theme of Preparation), and both brothers were academically inclined as well. Her younger brother Bill would go on to be a State Supreme Court Justice and the "baby" of the family, Jim, is a successful college professor. Nettie was encouraged by the superintendent of the school district to apply to his alma mater. Nettie had a conflict of interest, the man she met during the summer after her sophomore year of high school while working at an amusement park, Emil, would be attending the University of Minnesota. Emil was the love of her life, what her world revolved around, and when she was driving around Excelsior, MN with her mother one day in the car and spotted him, she said, "that is the boy I'm going to marry." Deciding that the University of Minnesota would be too big for her, Nettie only applied for St. Olaf "fully expecting to get in, there was no doubt." She does not recall any help with the application process from counselors or teachers at her school and instead procured an application herself and filled out the forms with the help of her father, who could help her

with the financial information. This anecdote illuminated both Nettie' *Work Ethic* under the theme of Persistence and *Parent Support* under the theme of Preparation.

Nettie's parents told her that they would pay for her entire college education (*Financial Support*). She should not work during the school year but it was expected that during the summers she would go home to live with her parents and work. Her first year at St. Olaf was "such a happy time" and "Slim" as she fondly called Emil, would come down often to pick her up and take her into Minneapolis to socialize with his fraternity brothers. She describes the coursework as being "easy" for her because of her solid education, this confirms her excellent *High School Preparation*. Both she and her friend Nancy decided to leave St. Olaf after their freshmen year and make the transfer to the University of Minnesota.

When I asked Nettie why she transferred and why she persisted through graduation, she told me, "I just wanted to be a wife. I just wanted to be with Slim." Nettie had a strong *Motivation* to be with her eventual husband. She felt that college was expected of her and she wanted to make her parents proud but also felt pride in herself as a college student. She loved the environment of college and wanted to be a college graduate. Instead of choosing a path to be a teacher or nurse, as most of her friends had done, Nettie chose to major in psychology because, "I just loved it." Again, psychology courses were not academically challenging for her and she would eventually graduate cum laude. The interpretive code of *Self-Improvement* was illuminated here. Nettie was living at home for her sophomore and junior years and moved into the dormitories on campus for her senior year. She was engaged to Emil and had the time of her life. She only had a few close friends at school and enjoyed her roommate but her social life became intertwined

with the social life of the fraternity and all of Emil's friends; this would be their group of friends for the rest of Slim's life and she still gets together regularly with the wives of his friends (*Peer Support*). Their marriage of 52 years was a blissful one that all started with the foundation of their circle of strong relationships in college.

Before Nettie graduated, she was hired by Dayton's and would begin immediately after graduation. Slim would not graduate for another semester but Nettie says it would have been embarrassing for her to not have finished in the allotted four years-the interpretive code of *Years to Graduation* emerged. She worked in the human resources department and gave personality tests to prospective employees and helped to determine their hiring eligibility. She speaks with pride of this job as her opinion was highly valued by the men in the department; not many women were given such important positions and to be hired before graduation was rare. When discussing this time of her life, Nettie's physical demeanor changed, she sat up straight and instead of staring out the window, she looked directly at me and had an immense smile on her face as she described her success and what it meant to her and her family (*Motivation and Self-Improvement*). Not only were her brothers prosperous which was a point of delight for the family, their eldest, a daughter, was also a success.

When I asked Nettie for any last thoughts on her experiences in college, she said repeatedly that, "it was such a lovely, enjoyable time in my life" and, "I'm so glad I did it. I loved it." When girls around her were dropping out to get married, Nettie knew that she would persist through graduation, exemplifying the theme of Persistence. She knew she could have gotten a job that would help sustain her without a college degree, but she wanted to graduate for the sense of accomplishment it afforded her. Throughout the

interview, she told me that, "I'm certainly lucky and I know it." She was a lucky woman in her generation: her parents allowed their daughter the freedom to be independent, they paid for her education, she had a highly-regarded career (*Work Ethic*) for a woman in her day, and she had a beautiful family. Three of her own four children would go on to obtain college degrees and one holds a Master's degree. The cycle of education was very important for her and Emil to maintain.

Nettie did not feel very different from her peers at school whose parents held Bachelor's degrees and attributed this to the fact that so many students at the school were the first in their families to go to college. She said that so many people's parents did not have degrees and wanted their children to get the education they had not had the opportunity to obtain. There was a lot of support from families and the University of Minnesota, while quite large, was not as intimidating to her. She did feel that her education from Excelsior High School was excellent and that she was fully prepared to tackle the more rigorous coursework at the collegiate level. Nettie did say that this might be the only place where she saw differences between students; some were just not ready to handle the classes and they were the ones who struggled and perhaps eventually dropped out. In reflecting on this, she thought that maybe these students were more often those who came from small towns and farms and that they had not had as strong of a high school education because they were expected to work on the farms and out of the home while they were young and could not dedicate themselves to their schoolwork like she had been able to as a young girl.

Nettie's memory for names and dates was unmatched, though she did have some difficulty remembering minor details regarding things like the application process for

college. Her daughter informed me that Nettie's memory gets worse through the day and we spoke in the morning to help mitigate any issues.

Cross-Case Analysis

This process of coding and identifying themes is one of the most essential aspects of analysis. The process of analysis allowed for the research questions to be answered reliably and with credibility.

The central questions for this study were:

1. What are the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?
2. How do first-generation college students describe their decisions to attend college?

As discussed in Chapter 3, the cross-case analysis of this study served as a means to illuminate the findings in relation to the research questions. Themes within the notes were amended throughout the coding and analysis process. Analysis of the questionnaires in conjunction with the documents and interviews helped to develop a holistic understanding the perceptions of the participants. Through the activities of use descriptive statistics and coding I found three themes, each with multiple interpretive and descriptive codes. The three themes that developed through the exploration of the data sources were Persistence, Sustainability, and Preparation. Table 8 outlines where each of these three themes and their subsequent interpretive codes were illuminated with each participant.

Table 8

Cross-Case Analysis

Themes and Int. Codes	Participants				
	Chris	Rick	Cindy	Don	Nettie
Persistence	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Motivation</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Work Ethic</i>		X	X	X	X
<i>Years to grad.</i>			X		X
<i>Self-Improvement</i>	X	X	X	X	X
Sustainability	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Continuity of Col. Ch.</i>	X				
<i>Financial Support</i>	X		X	X	X
<i>Peer Support</i>	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Parent Support</i>	X	X			
Preparation	X	X	X	X	X
<i>High School Prep.</i>	X			X	X
<i>Gate-keeping Courses</i>		X	X		
<i>Teacher Support</i>	X				X
<i>Parent Support</i>	X	X		X	X

Each participant had different experiences which resulted in some overlapping; the codes from all three data points were analyzed and combined into overarching themes.

The findings and their data sources are summarized in the table below:

Table 9

Themes From All Three Data Sources

Themes	Data Sources		
	Questionnaires	Documents	Interviews
Persistence	X	X	X
Sustainability	X	X	X
Preparation		X	X

Answering the Research Questions

Five sub-questions were created to illuminate the two overarching research questions. The first and second sub-question under the first research question states: What experiences do first-generation college students face in accessing higher education while in high school? What themes are identified in the pre-collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates?

Answers for this question were found in the documents and interviews. Overall, the experiences of participants in terms of their high school preparation and experiences were varied; this was manifested under the theme of Preparation. Four of the five participants attended public schools and one participant, Chris, attended a Catholic college preparatory school. Despite the wide variability in preparation, from having a poor education with no rigorous coursework to attending high schools designed to prepare

students for college, from having no school or parental support to having one or both, each one of these participants found success in college and were able to graduate.

While having a solid education to build an educational foundation is important and would make the academic demands of college more manageable, it is obviously not the determining factor of whether or not prospective first-generation college students can attend, be successful, and graduate (Cabrera, 2014). It is worth mentioning here that while not all of the families and schools were able to help students prepare for their college experience in terms of academics, each of the participants did mention in their questionnaire, narrative and/or interview that they were good students and this undoubtedly helped them to navigate their college courses.

All four interpretive codes (*High School Preparation, Gate-Keeping Courses, Teacher Support, and Parent Support*) under the theme of Preparation emerged from the pre-collegiate experiences of the participants: three of the five participants described themselves as being good student sand were academically prepared for college (*High School Preparation*) and four of the five participants described *Parent Support*.

All of the participants felt as though they were prepared for the rigors of college coursework but not necessarily the college environment. Don told me that he was “amazed” by the campus and “even amazed that I knew nothing about it.” He wondered how other people were able to absorb everything and “where did they find out. I just didn’t know anything.” He continued:

I was very well prepared by my classes in high school and I remember looking around at people who were struggling and they all came from little rural towns. Their schools didn’t prepare them. Either they hadn’t taken the advanced science classes or they hadn’t been offered. But the rest of it, I knew nothing about it. The whole campus life. The whole student aid program. I didn’t know there was a

student aid program. And I certainly didn't know how to go about pursuing that. And my college advisors were practically nonexistent.

Getting help on campus was incredibly exasperating for Don. He told me that he would go visit his advisors during enrollment only because they had to sign off on his paperwork. When he would ask them questions, they only asked questions back: "Well what do you think?" or "Well you can do that, if you want." Not having support from his family either, Don felt that the advisors on campus should have been able to point him in the right direction but "I felt frustrated every time I left their office."

Chris told me that despite his demanding curriculum in high school, he was not completely prepared for college. He had to work hard but felt out of place on campus and did not know if he belonged there. It got to the point where he wanted to transfer closer to home until his father talked him out of it. Rick and Don both felt adrift and left their campuses even though they both greatly enjoyed their courses. Cindy, used to living a nomadic life, made friends but also had times when she was not certain that she was meant to be a college student.

The following quotes describe a few of the experiences from all of the participants and reflect the theme of Preparation: "I can't say I was prepared in any particular way." "I do remember meeting one counselor my senior year." "I always got good grades but no one ever talked to me about college, no one ever taught me how to study." "You could take really hard, advanced classes." "I thought our counseling staff did a pretty good job." "Very little prep." "High school was always a breeze." "I read a few catalogs from local schools." "My father literally just dropped me off and then left."

The first sub-question under the second overarching research question asks: What reasons do they give for attending college? Answers for this particular question were

varied and came from the questionnaires, documents, and interviews and emerged from the themes of Persistence and Sustainability. Rick's desire to attend college stemmed from his physical disability which limited his future career options and his love of history; he wanted to use his head and not his hands in a future career. Chris wanted to have new experiences and meet new people as part of his curiosity quest. His teachers and education were what propelled him to have a love for learning and says that because of one teacher, "I searched tirelessly for ways that I might contribute positively to society in my adult life. Don says that even though his parents did not push college on him, "It just seemed to be expected so off I went to the same school as my friends." He was a successful student in high school and enjoyed the classes he was taking in college. In addition, he loved his two on-campus jobs and described them as "fulfilling." Nettie wanted a degree, but more importantly, she wanted to be with her love, Emil. Cindy told me that initially she wanted to go to college to "make money" but later she realized it was because she wanted more for herself and her children and felt the best way to create a new cycle was to attend college; this would be what could break the circle of poverty for her family. As a teacher working with students who are preparing to go to college, many mention money as their main motivator for attending college; they want to enter a career-path where they can earn a substantial income instead of wanting to go for something they feel passionate about.

Four of the five participants discussed money in their questionnaire, narrative, or in the interview process. Money was a *Motivation* for participants who wanted to have a high-paying career (Cindy) but was also a barrier for participants who needed help paying for school (Rick, Chris, Don). Nettie did not mention money as a motivator, despite being

grateful for her career post-graduation and was the only participant who did not have to pay for her college education.

As a motivated first-generation college graduate, Chris did not feel that he had any particular advantages or disadvantages. He says that the only disadvantages he felt were socio-economic. He went to school in Vermont and his family was in Texas so his family flew him there at the beginning of the school year and he did not get to come home for holidays. Chris says his family could only afford to send him to school at the beginning of the year and bring him back home at the end of the year and he remembers many “cold holidays spent in the dorm.” His peers tended to come from affluent families and traveled over Spring Break and other holidays but he says, “when you grow up poor, you’re just kinda used to it, you just kind of accept it. You’re like ok, yeah, it’s not so bad. So you just kinda pick up and roll with that punch.” In addition to missing family, Chris says he worked several jobs throughout his four years at Middlebury, work ranging from working in the cafeteria to the athletic department to the library and that he averaged close to 20 hours a week. His wealthier friends did not have to work through college. But Chris says this is an advantage and was a motivator for him. He recalls washing dishes and saying to himself that he did not want to do that for the rest of his life.

Throughout our conversations, I was always so impressed with how responsible, proactive, and determined my participants were and are. When I asked Cindy how she overcame so many obstacles and persisted through graduation and what her motivators were, she told me that it was her lifestyle:

As much as I was taught to be thankful for what I did have, I knew I wanted more for my own children someday. The struggle of being “that kid” drove me. The struggle of watching my parents fight over money, the tears I cried in bathroom

stalls during lunch at school because I was made fun of and struggled to connect and make friends, the frustrations I felt in my lack of control-these things drove me.

She had decided that she wanted her life to be different. In addition, she had come to another realization after acknowledging that her dad's parents were also impoverished growing up. She told me that she did not want to continue the cycle.

Cindy told me that it wasn't all about money but the underlying *Motivation* was breaking the cycle of poverty. She says that at the time, it was about money and thinking, "How do I get money so that I don't have to live this way when I'm an adult?" She continued,

And so, when you're that young, it's all about money. Oh, I've gotta go to college so I can make good money. Of course now, looking back, I think of it differently, but at the time, that's what it was about. And so, I hear these kids talk a lot about, oh, I just want to make lots of money. And I'm like, I know that feeling...It's not necessarily that you want to make lots of money, you just don't want to live like that.

Cindy told me that as a young person, she assumed that the only way to "not live like that" was to go to college. When reflecting on the people she knew, "Anybody I knew who had the things provided for what they needed, went to college...all of the people in church who had money, they want to college." Nobody in her immediate or extended family had ever even started college and were very poor. She adopted the mindset that she would end up just like her parents if she didn't go to college. Cindy told me that she feels terrible saying these things about her family but it was a very powerful motivator.

Cindy said that at times, she could have stopped going to school and just continued with her rigorous work schedule. She told me, "I was making more money than my parents were and so, you know, in that sense I had already succeeded as far as money goes." She was living on her own, buying her own food, paying for her insurance, and living an independent life. She said her bosses always told her how responsible she was and that

they would like to promote her in the future. What sustained her college attendance were the relationships she had made—relationships that she had never formed before because of moving so frequently. In addition to many strong friendships, she also got to know the families of her new friends. She said seeing what other people's lives were like was “very enlightening” to her. Her friends were,

Encouraged in school, and they were encouraged in their work, and they made good grades, and they had high hopes for themselves and it wasn't just about making money for them. You know, they had goals, and they were majoring in things because they were passionate about it. And I just majored in psychology because I didn't know what else to do...Getting to see what passion looked like, was really good for me. Because I had never really seen that before...my parents weren't passionate about what they were doing, they were just going from day to day.

Seeing people be excited about a project or career had been something Cindy had never experienced. Her thought process was that she should go to school, get a career, make money, and become established but seeing that there could be more took off the blinders. She says wanting to continue building relationships and finding out “how good it could be” really helped allow her to finish school.

Chris needed a lot of *Financial Support* to attend his New England private school but was willing to work 20 hours a week during the school year to reach his dream of graduation. He remembered being the “dish guy at the cafeteria” and “that was like my first dirty job where I was like, oh man, you'd get off of work at night and you'd have to take a shower for like, half an hour and then go to the library and study.” The benefit of this hard work was that he recognized that he did not want to do manual labor for the rest of his life. While this was a motivator for him, it was not enough to get through the difficult times to graduation.

Even though money was a main motivator for many of the participants to attend their colleges and universities, it was not their primary motivation. Had the participants not had other reasons, it does not seem from their perspective, that they would have had the fortitude to continue and finish their degrees. There were three themes in terms of the motivation to attend college: desire to have a particular career, self-improvement, pride and these themes were present for the motivation to attend an institution of higher learning as well as to complete a degree.

The second and third sub-questions under the second research question ask: How do they persist toward graduation? What themes are identified in the collegiate experiences of first-generation college graduates? Answering this question utilized data from all three data sources and all three themes (Persistence, Sustainability, and Preparation). Because “students whose parents did not attend college remain at a disadvantage with respect to staying enrolled and attaining a degree” (Choy, 2001, p. 4), this research was particularly interested in the motivations of participants to finish their undergraduate education as opposed to simply attending. Cindy told me that the reason she believes most people give up after getting to college is two-fold. The first is,

Because they feel a loss of relationship with whatever life they had before they decided to go to college and that can be disheartening and that can make you guilty. I feel like there’s a lot of guilt associated with that, because that’s a life you want to leave. And because, if you leave that life, that means that in some way, the life that those other people are, that you love, decided not to leave it, that they did something wrong or that they should have done something different...I think that’s a huge reason that people probably drop out, is because they feel that guilt and that responsibility and so they go back to that.

Cindy described the conversations with her parents where they implied that she thought she was better than them because she was in college were, “painful, very painful” and that it could have been easy to question why she was in college and to just give up. Ruminating

on this and thinking about how life was not that bad growing up and that they had things that other people didn't and the negative self-talk continued and made things difficult for Cindy. She says this has got to be a big reason that people drop out or go back to their families and, "continue whatever they were doing before" because it would have been easy for her to do that. Chris remembered how "People in my hometown thought that I was really stuck up all of a sudden because I decided to go to New England."

Rick supported these thoughts from Cindy by saying how he was not prepared for how lonely and out of place he felt on campus. When people asked what his parents did or whether or not they went to college, it was embarrassing to answer because the responses were met with "oh" or "ok" even though he, himself did not feel embarrassed by the hard, honest work that his parents participated in. He said that, "It was hard for other students to understand, for me to go to college, it was a big risk." It was clear when talking to Rick that he was unsure of himself and his future and this was demonstrated by his drastic move to Washington. A sense of belonging is essential for first-generation college graduates and Rick finally found it at college with his professors and being able to connect socially with fraternity brothers and intellectually with his classmates.

While reading Don's questionnaire and narrative and talking to him during the interview process, it was evident that he was uncertain with his decision to attend college in the first place and even as a teenager described himself as being "lost" and "adrift." These feelings of uncertainty and loss, despite his love for school and his work, caused him to leave until he was able to give school more focus and find his motivation later in life.

The second thing that could explain such a high drop-out rate for first-generation college students according to Cindy could be the lack of strong relationships at their

college or university. This could be problematic because, “they have nothing to hold onto them, to keep them from going back.” She suggests getting involved on campus, making friends, and getting to know the faculty so that there is, “something that’s holding them there.” When she was forced to change colleges her sophomore year of college, Cindy said she had friends who didn’t want her to leave and asked her difficult questions like, “why is it important that you’re always available to your parents?” These questions “challenged” Cindy whenever she was doubting her choices. In her own words:

I had people to challenge me a little bit. And so, if you don’t have that, then you’re gonna go back. Because there’s nothing on the other end of that rope. It’s a tug-of-war. The whole time, it’s a tug-of-war and if you don’t have people on your side pulling with you, then you’re going to fall back.

She also remembered that, “I know of many students who have left after their freshmen year because they just felt they couldn’t find their place on campus.” Rick told me, “My whole first year I thought of transferring.” Don said that “just having someone from the university come up and say, ‘You belong here’ or ‘We’re so excited to have you’ would have changed a lot” for him.

Nettie’s Persistence came easily to her; she was a good student, school was not difficult, and she had a support system from her parents, brothers, and her social network was strong. She was always made to feel welcome and never questioned her decision to attend the University of Minnesota because she felt so comfortable and was always at ease. Chris also had a strong sense of community at Middlebury and felt that, “My professors knew me, and they were hard and they were challenging, but that was the best sort of teacher for me...that’s what kinda helped me get through.”

The word “persistence” came up in all of the interviews I conducted for this research and Chris used it when he simply said, “it just came down to a lot of persistence.”

Unfortunately, this self-drive and proactivity is not easy to learn or teach and Rick had this sense instilled in him from a young age. He says, “So there is something about a dogged persistence. I don’t know how you craft that...You know, sometimes you’ve just gotta grit your teeth and just, plow through man. I wish there was a better answer.”

Cindy spoke of how often her managers at various jobs through high school and college commented on her level of maturity and she credits her strong work ethic to her parents and her upbringing in poverty. She had to work to find food by fishing or gardening and also worked outside of her home at various odd jobs to help make ends meet for herself, her siblings, and her family; this sense of responsibility followed her through her college career. Don had to work tirelessly and burned himself out in order to be able to pay for his education. As an adult beginning to take classes, Don remembers reading an article about the warning signs for people who would drop out of college and he said, “they were all me.” When I asked him if he could remember some of the traits of people who dropped out that article discussed and he quickly listed them off:

Moving off campus, not joining sports or joining a fraternity-I remember I had friends who asked if I would join and I just laughed-working too much, too heavy a course load, missing a semester, working off campus, having a car, and eventually I did get a car. It was just, more and more things that drew me away from concentrating on my classwork. It was just, I remember that so many of those points were me.

He says he realized at that point that he was “less involved in school and more involved in out of school and working too much” to be able to handle it all. Rick also worked around the clock to take courses at the community college. Nettie did not have the struggles of other participants, but did describe her choice of major as one that few women at the time pursued and she had to face the difficulty of being one of only a handful of women in her courses.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the perceptions of first-generation college graduates regarding their pre-collegiate experiences and their motivations to achieve a degree. This research, in contrast to previous studies, contributed to the body of knowledge concerning the phenomenon of being first-generation college students and allowed them to express their experiences. The findings suggested that in order to be successful, first-generation college graduates in this study created a system of support, mastered a strong work-ethic or sense of dogged persistence, and had a desire for self-improvement--a motivator that guided them through a four-year college or university. While these findings are pertinent to a small sample of students, they have implications for helping educators prepare first-generation students for college. The emphasis of this research aligns with efforts by states to prepare more students for college and to prepare them for a more global society (Ravitch, 2010).

The concluding chapter discusses recommendations for future research and conclusions surrounding this project and the phenomenon of first-generation college graduates.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Worth It

When my friends and colleagues ask me about my doctoral work and the research I did for my dissertation, I receive many blank stares after I give them an explanation. I do not believe it is that they did not understand the concept of first-generation college students and graduates, but instead, they did not see why it was “worth it” for me to spend years researching the phenomenon. To them, it is not an issue or a problem; it is a thing of the past. They have not seen students, who by third grade did not know how to spell their own name or do simple addition like I have. Maybe they don’t realize that just minutes from their sunny, suburban lives, there are children who cannot read and their only aspiration is to work at the local gas station because that is all they know. There is nothing wrong with these children, but we are failing them by not giving them choice. And that choice comes from a solid education.

Implications of the Findings

Despite exhaustion, failure, steps and leaps backwards, and feeling my faith in myself begin to waver throughout the process of writing this dissertation, this topic still sparks in me an intense passion for my career and the children I used to and currently work with. When I started this process, I am not sure I realized myself how deep this desire is in my soul. As a person who said I would never be an educator, I can say that the world of education has called to me like a siren song and I could not help but answer; I kicked and screamed along the way and attempted to dig in my heels to no effect, but now have no regrets about being in this career. Here I am, and here is the thing I still feel my

heart race over: all children deserve an excellent education. I want all children to have the opportunity to learn, be engaged in their learning, and to make an educated choice regarding what they want from their future. When there are no more first-generation college graduates, I will rest easily. Until then, I will do my part. It will not be easy, it will not be pretty, but it will always be worth it. Our children are our future. Every single child is worth it.

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college graduates. The goal was to understand, from the perspective of the first-generation college graduates, what exactly their pre-collegiate and collegiate experiences were like in order to find themes and commonalities. All stories, lives, and experiences are different, but by analyzing the data, it was possible to see similarities in the stories of my first-generation college graduates. Giving a voice to under-represented and under-researched first-generation college students was one of the aims of this work of writing in order to inspire future research; suggestions for future research will be described below. The ultimate dream is to eliminate the possibility of being a first-generation college graduate because it is my hope that eventually, all students will receive an education adequate enough to give them the choice of what to do after high school, whether it be college, a training program, the military, or straight into a career.

Just as all perceptions and experiences in life are different, so is the story of each first-generation college graduate; allowing their voices to be heard was incredibly important to me for this reason. The participants for this research came from various walks of life with different races, genders, generations, and financial backgrounds. As with many things, there is not one cure that will address and fix the issue of a significant

portion of our population not being prepared for a post-secondary education. While this is frustrating as a researcher and educator, it is important to remember that the more research done and knowledge achieved will bring attention to this issue and can begin to make adjustments that will better serve our students.

Every one of the participants for this research expressed the need to address the issue of first-generation student status and that it is wrong for it not to be a primary focus for the education system; they each brought these thoughts up to me without my prompting. Because, without proper implementation of programs, supports, and other solutions, students will continue to underachieve and not be given the opportunity to choose a higher education because of their lack of access to adequate learning as children.

Recommendations

There are two recommendations that will be discussed in order to address the need for more prospective first-generation college graduates to attend and subsequently graduate from institutions of higher learning. The first recommendation, democratic education, describes an ideal classroom environment where all students are given the opportunity to learn. Creating mindsets amongst educators and students that the full child should be educated will help properly prepare all students, and specifically first-generation students, for the rigors of college. My second recommendation involves a plea of sorts to my colleagues and fellow researchers to continue examining the experiences of first-generation college graduates and to thoroughly examine the effects that our current high school programs are having on these students. Because of the success of programs like Upward Bound and AVID, I anticipate that we will need to look, as a society, into finding ways to fund these programs and to have them present in all high schools. In

addition to funding these programs, we will need to find a way to teach our current and future educators these practices; a discussion of professional learning will follow.

Democratic Education

As I consider my role as an educational leader who has a particular interest in and passion for educating all of our students appropriately, it is necessary to consider the concept of a democratic education. The notion of a democratic education has evolved from Dewey's (1916) theory, described in detail in Chapter 2, that education is meant for all people and should make them productive citizens to the more modern works that promote a system of education that meets the diverse needs of all students. To fully comprehend this meaningful notion of education, it is important to understand that through the ages, a democratic education has been perceived and utilized as both a goal and a method of instruction. In addition, as hooks (2010) says, "Democratic education is based on the assumption that democracy works, that it is the foundation of all genuine teaching and learning" (p. 18). Some may question why it is the job of educators to build into their system the concepts of democracy. It is essential to remember that, "Educational systems have been the primary place in our nation where free speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions are valued in theory and practice" (hooks, 2010, p. 16) and it is thus our responsibility to ensure that students are given the skills and knowledge necessary to become educated on these topics. Ravitch (2010) wrote:

[Schools] are a primary mechanism through which a democratic society gives its citizens the opportunity to attain literacy and social mobility. Opportunity leaves much to its individuals; it is not a guarantee of certain success. The schools cannot solve all our social problems, nor are they perfect. But in a democratic society, they are necessary and valuable for individuals and the commonwealth. (p. 5)

If we as educators want the best for all of our students, then it is our obligation to take this into our own hands and do something; while schools cannot be the mechanism to solve every problem that our students face, but creating democratic schools and institutions will allow them to take charge of their own learning and become conscientious citizens.

David Flinders, a curriculum specialist, historian, and professor at Indiana University, acknowledges that curriculum has evolved from learning basic facts to being tied to citizenship; any educator will tell you that they do not simply teach content to children, they are tasked with teaching the whole child. Flinders (2004) says, “The curriculum is like weather conditions, we cannot take a snapshot and pronounce how we should dress for all time, or perhaps even for tomorrow” (p. x). As leaders in education, it is up to us to ensure that the current curriculum is meeting the needs of our current students. While this is a time-consuming task, it is what makes education democratic in nature.

Through time, as more children in the United States are being educated, the concept of a democratic education has shifted as the original concepts of educating the masses has been met. “When disenfranchised groups of American citizens worked to change all educational institutions so that everyone would have equal access-black people/people of color and white females, along with allies in struggle-there was a dynamic national discourse about democratic values” (hooks, 2010, p. 14). This re-definition still fits with Dewey’s (1938) notion that democracy must be reborn in each generation and that education is the only way for it to happen.

Society, according to hooks (2010), began discussing the meaning and value of democracy again in the 1950s. She attributes this to the disillusionment of men of color

who fought in WWII to make the world a safe place for democracy and came home to a nation that denied them their civil rights. As hooks says herself, “...all citizens needed to assume responsibility for protecting and maintaining democracy” (hooks, 2010, p. 13). Arguing that we live in a culture of entitlement where students have grown up to expect the values of democracy, students do “...not even associate democracy with the ideal of equality. In their minds, the enemies of democracy are always and only some foreign “other” waiting to attack and destroy democratic life” (hooks, 2010, p. 14).

Hilda Taba (1962) focused on how children should learn to relate to each other through democratic relationships and she created a theory of education that advocated teaching through experience rather than reciting facts. Taba’s (1962) approach was four-fold: (1) concept development, (2) interpretation of data, (3) application of generalizations, and (4) interpretations of feelings, attitudes and values. When Taba was a teacher, she referred to herself as a “mediator” because she felt that “teacher” was linked to “lecturer” which was the opposite of her theory of curriculum.

Based on the works of the previously discussed researchers, above all else, the concept of a democratic education is one that has evolved through the ages; that, in and of itself, is the beauty of a democratic education as it is one that must change and adapt to meet the needs of the students it is serving. This type of an education entitles all students to a free, high quality education that gives them the tools necessary to develop into productive citizens of our world.

To me, based on my research and experiences, a system of democratic education is one where it is the culture of the community and also specifically to the educators to think outside of the traditional system of education to ensure that all students are active

participants in their own education. It will develop a generation of well-informed citizens who work to further their own democratic and just community. It creates people who are confident and caring individuals who learn because it is a passion and not a necessity of life. The process of learning will instill skills of critical thinking and will push students to examine the world around them with a lens of social justice. Democratic education aims to create an environment of learning not only for the students in schools, but because of the quality of the education, will create a culture. Learning in this environment is not just for the elite but is for all people and their families and community.

It would be irresponsible to discuss a democratic education and not acknowledge that education is power. It is necessary in understanding our society in terms of oppressors and the oppressed as Freire (2005) referred to them. Dewey felt that those who had acquired knowledge had the power to move themselves through social statuses. This manifests itself in the occupational field because those who have education have access to graduate schools where they can partake in higher-level jobs including professors, lawyers, doctors, etc. In addition, those with power (and thus, knowledge) have the autonomy to choose their path in life. Again, this is something that is unacknowledged by those with this privilege. Conversely, those without knowledge have little power and little control.

An important step for incorporating democratic education into our schools involves acknowledging the potential biases towards students. Teachers, like all other people, are the products of their upbringing, culture, experiences, and the likely un-democratic schools they grew up with. While all people have biases and negative perceptions, the crucial goal is to have our educators become aware of their own and work to break them

down in an effort to treat and educate all students fairly. Biases can present themselves in subtle ways that the untrained eye may not be aware of and teachers act upon these biases unknowingly daily. By becoming aware and putting a spotlight on the importance of educating all children in an effort to engage more first-generation college students in their pre-collegiate education, we can begin to ensure that a democratic education is successful for these students.

As a current educator and as a future educational leader at the building/district level, I acknowledge that there are many aspects of democratic education that must be implemented and supported in order to see the aims of this mindset truly take hold in our society. First and foremost, it is imperative to ensure that schools implement the aspects of a democratic education on a day-to-day basis. As mentioned previously, this means teaching creativity and allowing our teachers to take a risk in their instruction. At first, it may feel quite different to our educators and we may lose some teachers who cannot accept these changes. In a classroom and school, this looks like self-directed learning, having students take part in decision-making, utilizing project-based learning, and other activities that allow students some semblance of control. Noddings (2002) says that education is “a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation” (p. 283).

McDermott (1999) listed the following to be essentials for a democratic classroom: the creation of trust, reflection, self-evaluation, building community, building consensus, authentic projects, and an agreed upon curriculum (p. 138). Democratic classrooms may be noisier than traditional classrooms and may appear to be chaotic, but when examined,

they promote collaboration and interactions amongst students. The goals of a democratic classroom include: getting along, collaboration, thinking critically, engaging one's passion, using time wisely, being an active participant, and exploring the connectivity of the world (McDermott, 1999). Teachers can start by increasing their use of student discussion, allow for student choice in their activities, assignments, and assessments, and allowing students to assist in the creation of their curriculum, rubrics, and classroom rules and procedures (Morrison, 2008).

Teachers will need to, as discussed in the previous section, attend to their own professional learning as there will need to be a significant shift in how they see their role: a democratic classroom and school means that the teacher is a facilitator instead of being the primary holder of all knowledge. Ray (2006) states:

The teacher has deliberately repositioned herself, giving up the power and status that comes from being the one who knows. She doesn't hold the answer to this question; the students do. In fact, because the question proves their thinking, they're the only people who do hold the answer. (p. 59)

This will be perhaps the most difficult task for teachers as they have historically been the "sage on the stage" in the classroom. Teachers today likely did not experience a democratic classroom as a student and will take time for them to understand the importance of this change. Morrison (2008) describes:

Very few teachers have experienced democratic education themselves, so to attempt to institute democratic practices in their classrooms represents a sizeable leap into the unknown. Teachers may be fearful of this unknown, fearful that involving students' voices and choices in running a course will produce chaos and an overall lack of learning...Teachers have been accustomed to viewing most students as lazy and uninterested, people who must be pushed, prodded, cajoled, and threatened into doing "what's best for them," and thus they fear that students will try to minimize challenges and take the easy way out. (p. 56)

Teachers have been traditionally taught to see themselves as having one goal: to increase content knowledge in their students by giving A-F grades and controlling the classroom behavioral management. This will require a dramatic shift in the way teachers envision their roles in their classrooms but it is possible. This type of focus will create students who turn into adults who are capable of the ability to collaborate with their colleagues, provide their opinions, and make justifications for decisions and choices.

These efforts cannot only take place within the classroom and at the school, we need to teach students that these skills are transferrable and students should have the opportunity to make their own decisions with their clubs, committees, and later, with regard to their own lives. Simple reforms including implementing a low student-to-teacher ratio will make a vast difference in the education of tomorrow's leaders. Being able to create a culture of trust, collaboration, and openness will build positive school climate conditions (Price, 2012). At a time when our country is slashing budgets for education, it is vitally important to re-invest in education as it is truly our future.

Our educational system is changing quickly and instead of teaching students how to use common sense, critical thinking, and skills as hooks (2009) recommends, we are teaching them how to take tests. Ravitch (2010) is understandably appalled by this change in our society and argues that there is barely any content knowledge being created in schools anymore because students spend so much time preparing for assessments that there is no time to learn applied content. Teachers, who want to teach their students skills and critical thinking, are being forced to focus on test preparation because if their schools fail, there are serious consequences for the teachers. Schools and districts are pushing for the same changes in academics because they fear the punishments listed in NCLB that

range from a warning to a complete restructuring and takeover of the school or district. Giving students a smaller classroom size and removing unnecessary legislation can have an impact that will lend itself to a more democratic education.

In order to create a more democratic education, it is essential to include the greater community outside of the school building to build cities immersed in the students and their education. Not only will this help connect students to the outer work, but brings the community into the school. Noddings (1998) says that education has four key components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Educators are concerned with the growth of people in modeling, dialogue is to engage people in dialogue, practice allows students to go out into the world to experience life, and confirmation is the act of affirming and encouraging the best in others. If we can have these components in our schools and carry them out into the community, we can positively connect the students with the world and vice versa. As time moves forward, these students educated in a true democratic system will turn into adults within the community and will stay connected to the education system.

This includes bringing in after-school programs to empower young people and having businesses and non-profits foster ways to connect to the world where students will live. Encouraging local businesses and leaders to come into the school to talk, teach, and interact with students will allow students to be curious about problems, issues, and future career opportunities. Learning to work with people outside of the school will also build much-needed social skills that our students are not always receiving in schools today. College and university programs geared towards younger students will also have the same effect. These can be inquiry-based programs that can give high school students experience

in the field they are interested in and will also connect college students with high school students. Parnell (1985) suggests that these types of programs can create a bridge between subject-matter disciplines and the competencies required by the outside world. These types of programs can also incorporate community members and leaders and demonstrates the importance of cooperation and coordination between our schools and the community.

Creating learning centers for community members will involve people from outside of the school system and encourage them to be active in their own learning; this is something that will be more natural in the future as we create life-long learners in our schools who go out into the world with this attitude of craving new knowledge. Not only will this involve community members in learning, it will connect them to each other and allow networking to occur.

Democratic Institutions. There are many examples of schools that are implementing these measures on a small-scale to a completely democratic education. There has been an increase in the discussion on the concept of democratic schools as we are moving away from the No Child Left Behind era with its punitive measures for accountability and into the Common Core Standards which promise to allow for more diversity in learning and preparing students for non-standardized tests. Schools that assert themselves as being the epitome of centers for a democratic education include the Free School in Albany, NY. The Free School was founded in 1969 and boasts itself as the longest running inner-city alternative school in the United States and works to give its 60 students complete freedom over their learning (“The Free School,” n.d.).

This school teaches traditional subjects but also includes “valuable lessons about responsibility, democracy, problem solving and most importantly about how to relate to each other” (The Free School). The structure of the school is different from an average school as it has open spaces with only a handful of desks and blackboards, no grades are given, there is no mandatory curriculum, no tests, no homework, and no unnecessary rules. The Free School seeks to build a community while teaching and practicing democracy; the students have their own council meetings and work through interpersonal conflict as a group. Creating a community is key to building a community of learners. However, the Free School does not seem to be connected to the public which breaks the cycle of a connected, never-ending group of learners in an ideal system of a democratic education.

Montessori schools are another alternative school founded in 1986 that are not quite as extreme as the Free School but have the philosophy that “A child’s work is to create the person he will become” (Global Montessori). These schools embrace diversity and work to provide a safe space where students can develop their sense of order and self-discipline, something that is not a focus of the Free School, while empowering their desire to learn. These schools allow students to learn traditional school subjects through a lens of their own choosing.

The Free School boasts itself as the essence of democratic education. There are indeed many supporters of this type of education as demonstrated by the extensive waiting list. As an educational leader, I would not encourage the entire system as it stands in Albany but would encourage only portions. This is because there has not been research to support the success of the school. In addition, my personal experiences in life and

education have taught me that while students should be given the opportunity to be creative, make decisions for themselves, and have power and control over their learning, they also benefit from structure and basic rules as this is something they will see and experience in the world after their education. Having a clear and shared focus, high standards and expectations, and effective leadership in addition to the steps listed above will create an educational system with a democratic focus that will meet the needs of individual students and will prepare them for full citizenship.

While these solutions seem simple on paper, there has been little progress in educating all students equally (Levin et al., 2007), which would be part of the proof that we live in a society with a truly democratic education, despite numerous efforts. “The future of democratic education will be determined by the extent to which democratic values can triumph over the spirit of oligarchy that seeks to silence diverse voices, prohibit free speech, and deny citizens access to education” (hooks, 2010, p. 17). Henderson and Mapp (2002) researched the impact of school and community connections and student achievement and found that high levels of collaboration and communication, a supportive learning environment, and high levels of parental and community involvement will have the greatest effect; these are all qualities of a democratic education and can and should be easily implemented with small, focused action steps.

In the future as an educational leader, Fullan’s (2007) statement that “There are deep theoretical and evolutionary reasons to believe that society will be stronger if education serves to enable people to work together to achieve higher purposes that serve both the individual and the collective good” (p. 302) really resonated with me as I truly believe that education affects all aspects of society in some way. If a meaningful

educational system can be created, society can move forward to being more productive and successful. In the school setting, educators cannot think of themselves as individuals but must invest in each other as teachers and leaders; without this, no real change can occur. It is up to school leaders to support and meet the needs of students and continue work to ensure that all students, everywhere, have the education they deserve and that will enable them to be life-long lovers of learning and active, engaged citizens.

The Role of Educators

My conversations with these first-generation college graduates were both humbling and enlightening for me as an educator and graduate student. Rick brought up some really good questions and thoughts that I have also pondered throughout the building of this body of work that I believe tie in with the necessity of building the professional learning of educators to allow for a more democratic system of education:

I want to say, you've tapped on to something...but it brings up a broader question, when we think about class distinctions in our country and we see a preponderance of ethnic minorities in the lower classes and we see transformative nature of education, and how do we tap into...How do we make them aware that there's a possibility and that it's worth pursuing. How do you rise above your environment? How do you transcend that when, again, we go back...you don't have a lot of role-modeling sometimes.

The difficulty seems to be that we need to educate in order to educate. It is cyclical and we have to figure out how to enter that cycle. As a researcher, this is where my interests with this body of work are merely the beginning of a long series of research. This is just the first of many steps and I am hopeful that we can find a solution.

Rick and I discussed how he is already seeing these issues with the students he teaches in high school. He says one of the things that he is aware of as an educator is progress and that teachers tend to be from a background where they see progress as the

norm, “that tomorrow’s gonna be a better day than the day before, I’m gonna be smarter than I was the day before that” and that it is incredibly difficult to translate that to this group of students who do not come from this type of background. It is touchy and it is difficult:

Because in the end, what we often, we don’t come out and say it directly, or sometimes we do, in the end, what we are often telling these students, from a fairly early point, is...where you’re at with your family right now, sucks, you want to do better. ‘No I don’t.’ ‘Yes, you do!’ That’s really the nature of being a human being is to want to do better, and if you don’t want to better, than you’re a schmoe. And we hit them right between the eyes, that their identity, without even realizing that sometimes being conscious of it, because in the end, it’s don’t you want to be better than your folks? Don’t you want to have it better than your folks? Well, do you really want to share your room? Do you really want to be living in a dump for the rest of your life?

It is nearly impossible to send this message to students, because we are talking about their families. Rick said it best:

Because, you know, we have people in this country, who are working poor. These are people of good character, they work harder than most of us, they bust 70-80 years, but they did not get the educational skills. Their jobs were relegated to low-end and so, the money’s just not there. But they’re hard-working people and they pass on an ethic about that. And so you can honestly say, hey man, I have decent work. I have a decent home. I know it’s not the greatest...and the kids are going you know what? My parents are just fine, we are just fine, I don’t know what this progress that you’re talking about is. Because we’re all about opening up the blinders.”

How do educators open up the blinders? And how do educators get their students to see options and possibilities without making judgments about where they are at right now?

Chris commented that,

Today, perhaps more than ever, good teachers like Father Landy and Professor Dry that are able to help students form solutions to the problems facing the world are needed in the public school system. The inter-connected structure of the world along with the increasing advent of new technologies pose new challenges for teachers of this generation.

The importance of having a passion to help all students is incalculable. Chris shared with me one of his favorite quotes from President Lyndon Johnson:

Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not our military preparedness-for armed might is worthless if we lack the brainpower to build a world of peace; not our productive economy-for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government-for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant.

Chris concluded with, "In this age of possibility for all children, teachers that prize and implement 'problem-posing' strategies will help students grow into independent, thoughtful, enriched human beings." These thoughts are perhaps the most critical aspect of this work.

When thinking about things that concern him with first-generation college students, Chris really focused on students of color and low-SES students. He stated:

Sometimes we, we kind of feel, as educators that we need to be a bit...obviously you want to be kind and everything but we lower the expectation because we are like, oh, you come from a poor family, you have so much going on at home and there's this and there's that and we give them options that are easy to get out of when we're probably doing them more of a disservice if we're doing that than if we would give them the talk that my dad did and say, 'Hey, you're gonna stick this out.' You know, we're gonna find you help if you need it. We'd be doing them a better service if we were doing that.

It is clear that education has power. When asked about thoughts on being a first-generation college graduate, Chris responded that, "There's a certain honor to it, being the first one. But it's not honor for you, because the degree and everything, while I have my diplomas up, it's an honor for the family." Chris says he felt happiness at the responsibility of making his family proud of him. He says this is especially important when, "your parent's didn't go to college and they wanted that for you and they sacrificed a lot and you made that a reality. There's something kinda cool about that." Many members of Chris's family have attended colleges and the pride was obvious in his face and demeanor when

he discussed their successes to me. Therefore, it is necessary to be implementing democratic education to allow teachers to slowly transition their classrooms to a more democratic environment. Change takes time, but by giving teachers the rationale for why it is necessary and allowing them to be a part of the process (Owens & Valesky, 2011), all stakeholders will begin to be engaged and the necessary modifications will be made.

A difficulty that plagues educators is how to create the mindset that the successful first-generation college graduates outlined in this research hold. Unlocking this mystery will be the true key to achieving educational equity because if students are taught how to have this strong sense of work ethic and motivation, they will be more likely to be successful in their attempts to attain a degree. Educator Angela Lee Duckworth discusses what she calls “grit” and how it is a strong predictor of success for the students she has worked with. Carol Dweck (2007) writes that there are two mindsets: a fixed mindset where you believe what you have is what you get in terms of your qualities as a person and a growth mindset where you believe that your “basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” (p. 7). Her research suggests that the belief and mindset that you accept for yourself will determine and lead your life. Understanding and learning how to nurture the growth mindset in students could be the key to access for potential first-generation college students.

Professional Learning

Having meaningful professional development opportunities will be an influential part in improving teacher quality and assisting with the necessary perspective shift to focus on educating all of our children in order to elevate the status of prospective first-generation college students. Making teachers aware of their own

biases as they relate to the education of all children will allow them to overcome their perceptions and work to ensure that each of their students is successful.

Fullan's (2007) explicit distancing himself from "professional development" and instead moving for "professional learning" has been relevant to me as an educator. Many teachers feel that they attend meetings and workshops that they have had no input in and there is no follow-through afterwards. It is necessary for teachers to feel that they are learning something that they can implement immediately. Settling on a professional focus can only take place after listening to what is happening at the specific school and what is most needed in terms of developing the staff to educate students. Giving teachers the opportunity to express what they need will encourage them to be active participants in their development instead of the "sit and get" attitude teachers tend to feel when they have not been able to contribute to the offerings or being given choice. Teachers absolutely must have access to high quality professional learning and research indicates that our traditional method of professional development, workshops and one-time sessions are not effective (Ball & Cohen, 1999) as only about 10% transfer their learning to the classroom. However, when coaching was added into the process as a development tool, approximately 95% of teachers implemented their new knowledge in the classroom (Cornett & Knight, 2008). We teach how we are taught and in order to practice their profession in a way that is engaging for students, teachers must be given time to learn these new skills and then collaborate with their peers; this cannot be a short, one-time focus and instead must be sustained and become a part of the culture of the schools and districts across the country.

Professional learning must be an ongoing process (Seyfarth, 2008) where teachers are given options to suit their needs and where their feedback drives future sessions. Just as it is important to have a student-driven classroom, it is imperative to have a teacher-driven professional development system. Teachers must be taught how to focus on student learning and how to meet the needs of all students. Having this be a part of their evaluation system will only work to improve the practices of all teachers and will thus improve the climate, culture, and achievement of all of our students. If we as educators claim that student achievement is our purpose, then we must begin to act as if that is the case and must evolve our current practices (McKay, 2013). This problem will not be eliminated and teachers get to work directly with the students who need the most help.

Future Research

The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of first-generation college graduates. Recommendations for future studies will be discussed below and include replication of the study in a different setting and using a greater number of participants to best help first-generation students.

While this study utilized criterion and purposeful sampling, future research can improve on the selection of participants and use a larger population of participants. Because I worked with such a small group of people, it was difficult to get a truly diverse sampling of people. I intended to utilize six participants but unfortunately had one young, female, black participant drop out at a late date because of a pregnancy. Three of my participants worked at high schools, and while their knowledge was enlightening because of how closely they work with future first-generation college graduates, getting

participants from various occupations will be important for future studies. Including more participants of color and those who are non-native English speakers will be essential for future research as it is important to have as many voices heard for this particular topic.

As the United States becomes more diverse, it will be essential to study more people from low-SES families, more people of color, and immigrants who are more likely to be the first members of their family to attend college and graduate. Reyes and Nora (2012) state that “more than half of the growth in the total population of the U.S. from 2000 to 2010 can be attributed to the increase in the Latino population” (p. 2) and that Latino students who complete high school are far behind their peers in terms of college attendance. According to the research, only 37% of Latino high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in college, compared to 40% of black and 49% of white peers (Santiago, 2011). The data indicates that first-generation college students are demographically different from their peers in that they are more likely to be from lower-income homes, to be older, to have children, to be women, and to be students of color (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996). These differences can have an impact on their motivation to enroll in college, their decisions on where they will enroll, and whether or not they can graduate.

This study could also be expanded to examine first-generation college graduates’ perceptions of their experiences with programming like Upward Bound or AVID, as discussed in Chapter 1. Better understanding how students feel about these programs and whether or not they were effective will illuminate whether or not there is a need to fund additional programs similar to these. Researchers can examine data to get a feeling of whether or not the programs are successful by studying whether or not participants

attend and graduate from college, what their highest levels of courses are in high school, and other demographic information, but I believe that receiving anecdotal, experiential information straight from the participants will be the best way to gauge how to create the best programming to be supportive to prospective first-generation college graduates. Including data from the teachers of these programs would also be enlightening and can allow for a corroboration of student perceptions.

A final recommendation would be to research first-generation college students while they are in attendance at a college or university. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that 45% of first-generation college students had not earned a degree and were not enrolled four years later while, “In comparison, 29 percent of non-first-generation students were enrolled after four years” (Reyes & Nora, 2012). The plain truth is that first-generation students are less likely to persist in college and research must be done to determine what is necessary to ensure that students make it to graduation. The natural progression and expansion of this research is to try incorporating several different support systems for both students and their families and to research how this affects their application, attendance, and graduation from institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

Choy (2001) found that for those high school students who aspired to enroll in four-year institutions immediately following high school, the level of parental education impacted the likeliness of whether or not they would actually attain their goals. And indeed, “Only 65 percent of prospective first-generation college students who aspired to enter a four-year institution actually did so within two years of high school graduation, compared to 87 percent of similarly aspiring students whose

parents held bachelor's degrees or higher" (Reyes & Nora, 2012, p. 10). While some form of post-secondary education is within reach of students in the United States, not all students are equally likely to succeed (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

This research sought to expose the voices of first-generation college graduates to better understand their perceptions of their personal experiences to open the door for future research that will increase the number of successful graduates. There is a great need for replication of this study and additional research in order to truly understand how to best allow all students a choice in their college education. The ultimate goal and hope is that someday, so many first-generation college students will graduate and achieve degrees that the phenomena of first-generation students will cease to exist.

Closing Reflection

Throughout the course of this research, I have learned many things both about this topic and about myself. First, I had to recognize the biases within myself about beliefs regarding whether or not all students are capable of learning and had to confront them directly as a high school teacher. Being actively aware of how I treat and educate all of my students has allowed me to be more proactive about working to meet their diverse range of individual needs. This was a difficult process for me as I had to come to grips with the fact that I see neglect of students within my classroom and in the schools I work in as a whole.

As a teacher, I urge everyone who works in the realm of education or with children to research and begin utilizing the concept of a democratic classroom. We

must all be vigilant if we are going to propel all students upwards toward an excellent education. I choose daily to have the belief that the small acts I perform in my own classroom will multiply as my students age and have their own children; as my colleagues and peers read this work and gain a better understanding of first-generation college graduates, these acts will become meaningful and will reproduce.

I grew up expecting to go to college; there was never a question in my mind about what would happen after high school and I never even needed to have this conversation with my parents as it was just the culture of my family. I had incredibly supporting and loving parents, but despite this, applying, attending, and persisting through college was never an overly easy process for me. By working to give students a strong sense of support, instilling a work-ethic, and a desire for self-improvement, it is the hope of this work that more prospective first-generation college students will become first-generation college graduates.

Appendix A
Consent Form

Consent for Participation in a Research Study

Education for All: A Descriptive Case Study of the Educational Experiences of First-
Generation College Graduates

Dr. Donna Davis, Principal Investigator

M.S. University of Kansas

Ph.D. University of Kansas

Emily Ann Peters, Student Researcher

B.S. University of Minnesota-Minneapolis, 2008

M.ED. University of Missouri-Saint Louis, 2010

Request to Participate

You are being asked to take part in a research study.

The researcher in charge of this study is Dr. Donna Davis and the student researcher is Emily Peters.

The study team is asking you to take part in this research study because you are the first member of your immediate family (parents and grandparents) to receive a degree. Research studies only include people who choose to take part. This document is called a consent form. Please read this consent form carefully and take your time making your decision. The researcher will go over this consent form with you. Ask her to explain anything that you do not understand. Think about it and talk it over with your family and friends before you decide if you want to take part in this research study. This consent form explains what to expect: the risks, discomforts, and benefits, if any, if you consent to be in the study.

Background

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a first-generation college graduate. A first-generation college graduate is the first person in their immediate family (parents and grandparents) to graduate from a four-year college or university. As a subject in this study, you have been asked to take part in this research study because of the experiences you have had as a first-generation college graduate.

You will be one of about 6 subjects who have graduated from various institutions in the study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of first-generation college graduates. This research will work to explain the pre-college experiences of first-generation college graduates and how first-generation college graduates describe their decisions to attend college.

Procedures

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to one writing prompt and consent to in-person interviews. This study will last from approximately September-November 2014. While you will be considered a participant during this time, your actual involvement is outlined below.

The writing prompt will ask you to describe your decision to continue your education beyond high school. You should focus on why you chose to apply for a college or university and how you were able to graduate with your degree. You will have 2 weeks to complete the narrative. However, if you need additional time or have additional questions, you may contact the researcher at any time.

Interviews will take place between January-March 2015. Each participant will have one interview. Each interview will be conducted in-person, at a convenient location for you, such as your home or another private location. All questions should be considered optional; you have the option at any time to not answer or skip any question. After your interview, your time as a participant in the study will be finished.

If you are willing, interviews will be recorded; interviews can still take place even if you do not want them recorded. After the interviews, the researcher will transcribe the recordings and email them to you so that you can review them and make sure you said things the way you meant them. Recordings will be used solely to make accurate transcripts and will be kept on the researcher's password-protected iPad that only she

has access to; after the transcripts have been created and you have verified their accuracy, all recordings will be deleted.

Participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in certain activities or answer certain questions. If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so by contacting one of the researchers, Dr. Donna Davis or Emily Peters.

Risks and Inconveniences

All participation, including conversations, are voluntary and may be discontinued at any time for any reason. This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks of taking part in this research study are not expected to be more than the risks in your daily life. A breach of confidentiality is a possible risk of participation in this study and will be avoided by keeping transcripts from interviews in a password-protected, encrypted file and by having physical artifacts (questionnaire and narrative) kept in a locked office at UMKC. There are no other known risks to you if you choose to take part in this study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research. Indirectly, however, talking about your experiences may lead to a better understanding of your own educational experience. Other people may benefit in the future from the information about first-generation college graduates that comes from this study.

Fees and Expenses

There are no fees or expenses linked to being a participant in this study.

Compensation

All participants will receive a \$30 Target gift card.

Alternatives to Study Participation

The alternative is not to take part in the study.

Confidentiality

While we will do our best to keep the information you share with us confidential, it cannot be totally guaranteed. Persons from the University of Missouri-Kansas City Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies), Research Protections Program, and Federal regulatory agencies may look at records related to this study to make sure we are doing proper, safe research and protecting human subjects. The results of this research may be published or presented to others.

You will not be named in any reports of the results, nor will the school or school district be identified. Although audio recordings will be used for precise interviews and observations, no visual or audio images will be used in publications or presentations. If you decide to leave the study early, which you may do at any time, all data collected will be destroyed at that point.

During the research, the data collected will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator's office. All digital data will be stored on a password-protected laptop or iPad until it is transcribed; all digital copies will be destroyed at that time. After the study is over, all files will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigator's office for 7 years.

Contacts for Questions about the Study

You should contact the Office of UMKC's Social Sciences Institutional Review Board at 816-235-5927 if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research subject. You may call the principal investigator Dr. Donna Davis at (816) 235-5956 or the student researcher Emily Peters at (605) 261-0328 if you have any questions about this study. You may also call her if any problems come up.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this research study is your choice. If you choose to be in the study, you are free to stop participating at any time and for any reason.

You have read this Consent Form or it has been read to you. You have been told why this research is being done and what will happen if you take part in the study, including the risks and benefits. You have had the chance to ask questions, and you may ask questions at any time in the future by calling Dr. Donna Davis at (816) 235-5956. By signing this consent form, you volunteer and consent to take part in this research study. The researcher will give you a copy of this consent form.

Signature (Volunteer Subject)

Date

Printed Name (Volunteer Subject)

Signature of Researcher

Date

Printed Name of Researcher

Appendix B

Questionnaire

1. Have you had any parent or grandparent graduate from an institution of higher learning (4-year college or university)? (Circle your response)

YES NO NOT SURE

2. Did you graduate from an institution of higher learning (4-year college or university)? (Circle your response)

YES NO NOT SURE

3. If you graduated from an institution of higher learning (4-year college or university), how many contiguous years did it take you to graduate with your bachelor's degree? (Circle your response)

4 YEARS 5 YEARS 6+ YEARS

4. What is your self-identified race/ethnicity? (Circle your response)

ASIAN AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKAN NATIVE

BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN LATINO/A OR HISPANIC

NATIVE HAWAIIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER WHITE/NON-LATINO/A

OTHER

5. What was the year of your birth? (Fill in the blank)

6. On a scale from 1-3, with 1 meaning you feel you cannot offer a meaningful description of your pre-secondary and secondary experiences and 3 meaning you can provide a meaningful description of your pre-secondary and secondary experiences, how well do you feel you can describe your pre-secondary and secondary experiences? (Circle your response)

1
Cannot provide

2
Can provide some

3
Can fully provide

7. What types of support did you feel were necessary for you as a potential first-generation college graduate to be successful? (Circle any that apply and add in additional information to the Other line)

SCHOOL TEACHER COUNSELOR PARENT PEERS/FRIENDS

WORK ETHIC PERSISTENCE FINANCIAL PROGRAMS ACADEMIC

OTHER: _____

8. What motivated you to attend your college/university? (Circle any that apply and add in additional information to the Other line)

MONEY CAREER PEERS/FRIENDS PARENT TEACHER

COUNSELOR WORK ETHIC SELF

OTHER: _____

9. What motivated you to persist toward graduation from your college/university?

MONEY CAREER PEERS/FRIENDS PARENT TEACHER

COUNSELOR WORK ETHIC SELF

OTHER: _____

By completing and returning the questionnaire, you are volunteering to be a potential participant in this study. Your name and the information you provide will be kept confidential.

Participant Name Printed

Participant Signature

Date

(____)_____
Contact Number

Email

Appendix C
Narrative Document

Please describe, in as much detail as possible, your decision to continue your education beyond high school. Specifically, you should focus on why you chose to apply for higher education and how you feel you were able to complete your degree. Please use any stories or specific experiences that come to mind. Please place this document inside the sealed envelope provided by the researcher; the researcher will collect this during the interview.

Appendix D
Interview Guide

1. What was your experience with your high school preparation for college?
 - a. Give examples.
 - b. Describe any barriers/issues with preparation.
2. What was your experience with applying for college?
 - a. Give examples.
 - b. Describe any barriers/issues with applying.
3. What and/or who motivated you to attend college?
4. How did you persist towards graduation?
 - a. Why did you persist towards graduation?
 - b. Describe triumphs/barriers.
5. Describe a memorable college experience.

Appendix E

Letter to Prospective Participants

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Emily Peters and I am a doctoral student at the University of Missouri Kansas City conducting a qualitative study to gain insight into the experiences of first-generation college graduates-those students who are the first in their immediate family to graduate from an institution of higher learning. As an educator, I have had a variety of experiences working with these students. It is my hope to use the data collected in this study to add to the body of knowledge surrounding the experiences of first-generation college graduates with the hope that future prospective first-generation college graduates will be given the support and experiences to allow them the choice to attend a 4-year college or university and the ability to graduate.

This is a voluntary study; you elect to participate and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you become a study participant, there are two types of data that will be collected: a questionnaire, a narrative document in which you describe your experiences as a first-generation college graduate, one seventy five-minute interview, conducted by the student researcher.

If you decide to participate, I will meet with you individually to explain the study, purpose, risks, and safeguards, and to provide you with a consent form agreeing to participate in the study. Participation is strictly voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time. Strict confidentiality will be maintained and the completed study will not identify participants or schools by name.

It is my sincere hope that you will elect to participate in this study. If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions, please feel free to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Emily Ann Peters

UMKC Ed.D. candidate

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VITA

Emily A. Peters was born in March 1986 in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. She was educated through the public schools in South Dakota and graduated high school in 2004. She attended the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and graduated from the honors program in 2008 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Political Science and Psychology.

After her undergraduate program, Ms. Peters was selected to be a part of the Teach for America charter corps in Kansas City, Missouri. For two years, she taught 3rd grade at an inner-city school. In addition, she earned a Master of Education degree (M.Ed.) in Curriculum and Instruction in 2010 from the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

Since 2010, Ms. Peters has continued her work in education. In addition to 3rd grade, she has also taught K-2 special education and currently works as a high school social studies teacher. She began her journey towards her Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.) at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in the spring of 2012. During this time, she was inducted into Phi Kappa Phi for her academic achievements as a graduate student. After completing the requirements for her degree, Ms. Peters intends to continue her work in education as she pursues her varied career interests.