

UNDERSTANDING THE REACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES OF
FIRST-GENERATION, UNDECIDED STUDENTS

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Doctor of Education

by:
TRACEY A. GLAESSGEN
Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

UNDERSTANDING THE REACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES OF
FIRST-GENERATION, UNDECIDED STUDENTS

presented by Tracey A. Glaessgen,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Dr. Cynthia MacGregor

Dr. Jeffrey Cornelius-White

Dr. Robert Hornberger

Dr. Denise Baumann

DEDICATION

For my parents—

Without your unconditional love, support, and encouragement,

I never could have completed this journey.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	xii
ABSTRACT	xiii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	2
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Design of the Study.....	11
Setting.....	12
Participants.....	12
Data Collection Tools.....	13
Observations.....	14
Interviews.....	14
Focus groups.....	15
Open-ended questionnaire.....	16
Practitioner’s log.....	16
Data Analysis.....	16
Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls.....	17
Definitions of Key Terms.....	18

Continuing-generation student.....	18
Cultural capital.....	18
First-generation student.....	19
First-generation, undecided student.....	19
Knowledge communities.....	19
Normal discourse.....	19
Reacculturation process.....	19
Transition communities.....	20
Significance of the Study.....	20
Summary.....	21
2. PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY	23
History of Organization.....	24
Organizational Analysis.....	25
Provost Model.....	26
Student development and public affairs.....	27
First-year programs.....	28
Academic Advising at Missouri State University.....	29
Academic advisement center.....	31
Adult student services.....	32
Provost’s academic advising council.....	33
Student Affairs.....	34
SOAR.....	34
Career center.....	35
IDS 120: Exploring majors and careers.....	35

First-Generation Status.....	36
TRiO.....	36
Leadership Analysis.....	37
Adaptive Leadership.....	37
Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting.....	41
Summary.....	42
3. SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY.....	44
Overview.....	45
Characteristics of First-Generation Students.....	46
Academic Preparation.....	47
Cultural Capital.....	49
Financial Security.....	52
Family Support.....	53
Peer Support.....	55
Undecided Majors.....	57
Summary.....	61
4. CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE.....	62
Executive Summary.....	63
Attrition of First-Generation, Undecided College Students: Recommendations for Improved Institutional Support.....	68
Introduction to the Background of the Study.....	69
Statement of the Problem.....	70
Purpose of the Study.....	73
Conceptual Framework.....	74

Research Questions.....	78
Design of the Study.....	79
Setting.....	79
Participants.....	80
Data Collection Tools.....	81
Observations.....	81
Interviews.....	82
Focus groups.....	82
Open-ended questions.....	83
Practitioner’s log.....	83
Data Analysis.....	84
Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls.....	84
Findings.....	85
Reacculturating to the Unknown University Academic Environment.....	85
“I do it on my own.”.....	86
“You are behind before things even get started.”.....	87
“What’s your majors?” asks the counter person.....	88
Gaining Access to the Culture.....	89
Selecting University Translators.....	90
“The most crucial piece of home...turned out to be my roommate.”.....	91
“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own.”.....	91
“A teacher’s help is great.”.....	92
Forming Transition Communities.....	93

“I could cling to her [best friend].”.....	93
“And I knew that I was normal.”.....	93
“I needed a community of people to walk through college with.”.....	94
“It’s easier to feel stupid with other people.”.....	94
“I didn’t join any clubs this year, and I really regret that.”.....	95
Using Academic Advisors as Translators.....	95
“I knew it [academic advising role] was like a high school counselor.”.....	96
“And then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor.”.....	97
“If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn’t work.”.....	97
Additional Support Students Identified as Helpful as Reacculturation Experience.....	99
“As a first-gen...I don’t know what support I need.”.....	99
“I wished I would have moved in a few days earlier.”.....	100
“...[My instructor] told me that she was there for me.”.....	101
Summary of Findings.....	102
Recommendations.....	102
Provost’s Academic Advising Council.....	103
Academic Advisement Center.....	104
MSU: I’m First.....	105
New Student and Family Programs.....	106
Residence Life, Housing, and Dining Services.....	107
First-Year Programs.....	109
Summary.....	109
5. CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP.....	111

NACADA Journal.....	112
Cover Letter.....	113
Abstract.....	114
Introduction.....	115
Selected Literature Review.....	116
Conceptual Framework.....	117
Research Questions.....	120
Methodology.....	120
Findings.....	121
Reacculturating to the Unknown University Academic Environment.....	121
“I do it on my own.”.....	122
“You are behind before things even get started.”.....	123
“What’s your majors?” asks the counter person.....	123
Gaining Access to the Culture.....	125
Selecting University Translators.....	126
“The most crucial piece of home...turned out to be my roommate.”.....	126
“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own.”.....	127
“A teacher’s help is great.”.....	127
Forming Transition Communities.....	128
“I could cling to her [best friend].”.....	129
“And I knew that I was normal.”.....	129
“I needed a community of people to walk through college with.”.....	129
“It’s easier to feel stupid with other people.”.....	130

“I didn’t join any clubs this year, and I really regret that.”.....	130
Using Academic Advisors as Translators.....	131
“I knew it [academic advising role] was like a high school counselor.”.....	131
“And then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor.”.....	132
“If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn’t work.”.....	133
Discussion.....	134
Implications for Practice and Future Research.....	136
Authors’ Notes.....	137
References.....	141
6. SCHOLARLY-PRACTITIONER REFLECTION.....	145
DIP’s Influence on My Practice as an Educational Leader.....	146
DIP’s Influence on My Role as a Scholar.....	149
REFERENCES.....	153
APPENDIX	
1. OBSERVATION PROTOCOL FOR ADVISING APPOINTMENTS.....	165
2. INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	166
3. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	167
4. FOCUS GROUP INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	168
5. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL.....	169
6. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE.....	171
7. PRACTITIONER’S LOG.....	172
VITA.....	173

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER FOUR

TABLE	PAGE
1. FIRST TIME NEW IN COLLEGE RETENTION RATES.....	72

Understanding the Reacculturation Experiences of
First-Generation, Undecided Students

Tracey A. Glaessgen

Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

When students enter institutions of higher education, they are typically leaving behind one culture to join another. First-generation students have a higher attrition rate as do undecided students, but little research has been conducted on students who have both characteristics. The researcher applied Bruffee's reacculturation process to understand the challenges and experiences that first-generation, undecided students have as they transition to a new academic environment. This qualitative, exploratory case study included 35 students utilizing interviews, focus groups, observations, and writings to triangulate the data collected. Findings revealed heightened feelings of stress, desire to become comfortable on campus, reliance upon continuing-generation friends, helpfulness of specialized first-year seminar course, and an uncertainty towards advisors' roles. Based upon research findings and framework, recommendations for practice are shared.

Keywords: first-generation students, first-year success, reacculturation, transition communities, translators, undecided students

CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION

While institutions of higher education are competing to attract new students as well as to reach out to those students who have left before degree attainment, they are simultaneously trying to hold on to the students who currently attend their institution. First-generation students are of particular concern to institutions of higher education as they have a higher attrition rate (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013); students who are undecided with their major are also at a greater risk for attrition (Allen & Robbins, 2008). This dissertation introduction begins by providing an overview of the study, stating the problem of practice, and explaining the study's purpose. Next, the conceptual framework is discussed followed by describing the design of the study and addressing limitations. Finally, the significance of the study is shared and concludes with a brief summary of the overall dissertation introduction.

Introduction to the Background of the Study

As first-year students enter institutions of higher education, they have many decisions to make, including those involving residential housing, social organizations, and academic major selection. To assist students with these decisions, there are dedicated institutional campus resources. While first-year students live primarily on campus at residential colleges due to university regulations, they often have a choice as to the residential hall in which they wish to reside; students may even visit with residential resource staff to have questions answered. Many universities have a student engagement office to assist students with making friends, exploring interests, and hopefully, becoming more engaged with the campus community. First-year students enter higher education

either as declared or undecided of their college major selection; from this decision, they are assigned their advisors.

Within the varying forms of higher education, the advising structure differs from centralized, decentralized, and split-model (The Global Community for Academic Advising formerly National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2015a). A centralized advising office is located within one building on campus with staff advisors, whereas a decentralized advising model assigns students to faculty, usually within the students' chosen major. A split-model, one that is used at Missouri State University, assigns students to a faculty or professional advisor within the students' chosen major. For students who have not selected a major, they are assigned an advisor within an advising office for undecided majors. Unlike the advisors who are experts within their selected discipline, the advisors who work with undecided students are generalists; they know a little about most options within academic departments across campus. Once undecided students select their major, they are reassigned to an advisor within their chosen discipline. At Missouri State University, which operates on a semester system rather than a quarter system, students must select their major by the time they have 75 credit hours, or they will have a hold on their accounts which prevents registration.

Interestingly, approximately one third of students who declare their major actually graduate with that same major, approximately one third of students who declare their major will change their major, and approximately one third of students enter as undecided majors (Cuseo, 2005). At Missouri State University, first-year students tend to follow a similar pattern though the exact statistics have not been tracked (K. Davis, personal communication, November 16, 2015). For undecided students, the process that they go

through to select their academic major selection varies. Some students perform thorough career exploration; other students spend time interviewing family and friends or perhaps chatting with their parents to learn which academic major exploration process they completed to make their decision. In other instances, undecided students may opt to leave higher education institutions due to lack of academic goals or even a sense of purpose (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997). But what happens when first-generation students enter higher education undecided upon an academic major?

Definitions of first-generation students vary, including applying the term if the student is the first one in the family to attend college (Hsiao, 1992). The most commonly used and cited definition (Petty, 2014), and the one that Missouri State University uses, is that neither parent graduated from a four-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Petty, 2014). Although continuing-generation students benefit from having a parent who has successfully navigated his or her way through higher education, first-generation students do not have that ability to get guidance and feedback as they, alone, embark upon this educational journey. The familiar pattern of asking questions and heeding advice from parents has come to a halt for many first-generation students who enter higher education (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). In addition to choosing a major, first-generation students face multiple barriers as they try to achieve their college degree.

Statement of the Problem

Reviewing the literature revealed that first-generation college students have been a topic of interest for quite some time with much of the literature focusing upon their low-income and minority status (Bui, 2002). Likewise, students who are undecided

majors have also been extensively researched and of particular interest to advisors who work with undecided majors (Cuseo, 2005). Articles that focus upon first-generation students date back to the 1990s (Hsiao, 1992), and undecided students as far back as Gordon and Steele's (2003) 25-year longitudinal study they started in the late 1970s though states that research on the higher attrition rate of undecided students has been a topic since the 1920s. Nonetheless, an apparent gap in research exists that focuses upon the first-generation student who is undecided with his/ her major. With such a gap, there are various research opportunities to be explored which would provide more insight into this particular student population.

Research repeatedly indicates that first-generation students are less likely to persist (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013) than continuing-generation students and are most likely to withdraw from college during their first year (Tinto, 2007). Even more compelling, a longitudinal study by Ishitani (2003) found that first-generation students had a 71% higher risk for departure during the first year in comparison to students whose both parents were college educated. The researcher understands that the problem of practice ultimately involves retention of first-generation students who are undecided about their major as research clearly demonstrates that attrition is the highest among first-year students (Tinto, 1999), in general, and first-year students with undecided majors (Leppel, 2001), as well. Specifically, at Missouri State University, upon reviewing the Persistence Profile—First Time students in 2014-2015, first-year, first-generation students have a lower retention rate than continuing-generation students by 9% in 2014-2015 and by 13% in 2013-2014 (Missouri State University, 2015c).

Purpose of the Study

Given the absence of research, the purpose of this study is to better understand the reacculturation experiences of first-generation students who are undecided about their academic major as they transition to being a part of a university and how universities may better support them. The reacculturation process refers to the experiences that students have as they leave behind one culture to join another (Bruffee, 1999), such as switching from high school to university culture. Ultimately, the research study will be qualitative in nature and adopt a constructivist approach. By gaining a better awareness of first-generation, undecided students' challenges and experiences, advisors and administrators will be able to improve the support that is offered to help these students navigate their way through an environment that is unfamiliar to them. Additionally, advisors and administrators will be able to gain a greater understanding of the reasons first-generation, undecided students have a higher attrition rate. In essence, what are the reacculturation experiences of first-generation students who are undecided about their academic major as they transition to being a part of a university?

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do first-generation, undecided students:
 - a. Reacculturate to the unknown academic environment of a university?
 - b. Gain access to a university's culture?
 - c. Select translators within a university?
 - d. Form transition communities within a university?
 - e. Use academic advisors as translators?

2. What support should universities offer to assist first-generation, undecided students as they reacculturate to their academic environment?

Conceptual Framework

When students enter institutions of higher education, they are typically leaving behind one culture to join another one. Bruffee (1999) termed this process as reacculturation, which is, “switching membership from one culture to another” (p. 298) and further described the actual process as “modifying or renegotiating our participation in the language, values, knowledge, and mores of the communities we come from, as well as becoming fluent in those same elements of the communities we are trying to join” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14). Before students enter higher education, they may have mastered their high school culture in which they learned how to function in that particular culture, but once these students enter college, they face an entirely new culture filled with knowledge, information, and basically, a language that they have not yet learned. It is important to note that Bruffee (1999) described reacculturation as “switching” (p. 298) and not merely transitioning between cultures. Whereas in high school, students had twelve years to learn how to speak, write, behave, and perform to a certain level of competence, institutions of higher education expect students to switch from their previous culture to their new culture, immediately and independently. Further, unlike continuing-generation students who have at least one parent who successfully completed college to serve as a translator to this new language, first-generation students often do not have access to such cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge that students have in order to be successful in a collegiate environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

If college is viewed, then, as a culture within itself, Schein's (1993/2005) perspective on organizational culture certainly applies; "Culture will be most useful as a concept if it helps us better understand the hidden and complex aspects of organizational life" (p. 360). Students, particularly first-generation students, are lacking the cultural capital or cultural awareness to glean insight into these veiled and complicated institutions of higher education. Within this very university culture is, as Schein (1993/2005) described, *rules of the game*, *shared meanings*, and *observed behavioral regularities when people interact* (p. 363). Rules of the game include the understood ways of performing an act within the organization (Schein, 1993/2005). Shared meanings are a byproduct of a group's understandings formed after a period of interaction (Schein, 1993/2005). After groups consistently interact, their choice of language, customs, and traditions emerge; these unspoken rules of the game lead to shared meanings that can be easily observed by others (Schein, 1993/2005). First-generation students who are on the outside looking in at this new culture may easily notice that some students, perhaps mostly continuing-generation students, effortlessly join the university's culture. Schein (1993/2005) purposely used the word *culture* because it is concrete and implies that learning how to problem solve has been integrated within a group or community, or in the case of first-generation students, the culture of the university.

Social constructionists, such as Bruffee (1995, 1999), viewed knowledge as something that is created from one individual conversing with another. That is, conversation serves as a vehicle for knowledge because it is constructed "interdependently by talking together" (Bruffee, 1999, p. 133). Similar to Bruffee, Rorty

(1979) regarded the role of conversation “as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood” (p. 389). This shared conversation, which is similar to Schein’s (1993/2005) shared meaning, becomes a method to develop knowledge, and therefore, allows the participants opportunities to reacculturate themselves to a particular culture through conversations with each other (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). As such, when students enter institutions of higher education, they are, as Bartholomae (1985) described in his pivotal article, “Inventing the University,” learning how “to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (p. 134). Whether in the form of speaking or writing, Bartholomae (1985) posited that students are entering the higher education community, and by receiving access to this community via their college acceptance letters, are expected to engage in a higher level of discourse in comparison to their pre-collegiate culture.

Essentially, students “must learn to speak our language. Or he [or she] must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 135). Considering there is limited to no transition time to university culture and its expectations, students are forced to acclimate as quickly as possible to their new environment. With an unfamiliar discourse as an additional obstacle, students are learning how to make sense of the university culture as well as trying to become conversant in this new language, a language that faculty and staff are well-versed and fluent, while simultaneously trying to determine their future academic discipline. It is not surprising, then, as to why first-generation students who are undecided are less likely to persist in the collegiate culture.

Freire (2000) argued that the process of reacculturation is virtually impossible without the actions and conversations of others. Likewise, Bruffee (1995) believed that reacculturation is an extremely challenging process, never fully completed, and even harder to do alone; “We move from group to group best in a group” (p. 14). Knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, Kuhn (1996) claimed, is the collective property of the group that constructs it. Though Bruffee (1995, 1999), Rorty (1979), and Freire (2000) do not limit their perspective on knowledge to one particular area, they, too, agree that a higher level of knowledge is achieved through collective conversations which can be applied to the reacculturation process. In order to assist with the reacculturation process, students may form *transition communities* (Bruffee, 1995, 1999), which are described as a group “in which people construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14). These transition communities are comprised of students who are also going through the reacculturation process, such as an incoming class of first-generation students who are trying to speak the university’s language. Beginning with a smaller number of students, these transition communities will, as the level of trust increases, begin to merge with other transition communities, who have also increased their respective level of trust (Bruffee, 1999).

The support of the transition communities is important as the students strive to join the university’s *knowledge communities* (Bruffee, 1999); these knowledge communities speak the language of the new culture that students are expected to learn. Additionally, it is apparent who is not fluent in this new language and is therefore not a member (Bruffee, 1999). For those students who successfully gain membership, this newly-acquired language has now become the normal or standard discourse of the

knowledge community; “when we *speak the same language*, normal discourse is the language we speak” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 296). Foucault (1972), too, spoke of discourse as a “group of rules that are immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity” (p. 46). Students who are continuing-generation students have an easier time joining this knowledge community because their parents serve as translators of this new language spoken. Students who are decided majors have a “home” department which serves as a translator and facilitator to the knowledge community. However, for students who are first-generation, undecided majors, who translates this new language? First-generation, undecided students face this unknown community with not only a new language but also with double the unknown.

Design of the Study

Because the researcher is interested in learning how first-generation, undecided students construct meaning through knowledge communities as well as understanding their particular experiences, she will conduct a qualitative study utilizing a social constructivism lens; phenomenological research will allow the researcher to learn how the participants make meaning of their experience (Creswell, 2014). Since a qualitative study calls for the researcher to be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014), she realizes it is critical to follow ethical practices so that her participants will trust the research process (Wurtz, 2011). Through her coursework, the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Institute (CITI) basic course and reflected upon the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Code of Ethics (2011). Prior to collecting data, the researcher will receive Institutional Review

Board approval at her case study site as well as the doctoral granting university; she will also seek additional guidance and clarification from her dissertation advisor.

Setting

Missouri State University, a public, four-year, comprehensive, residential, selective admissions institution, was founded in 1905. With approximately 24,000 students in attendance, Missouri State University is the state's second largest university. In 1995, Missouri State University received a public affairs designation, which indicates a university-wide commitment for faculty, staff, and students to engage within their communities, heighten their cultural awareness, and demonstrate ethical leadership.

When first time new in college students apply to Missouri State University, they have several opportunities to declare their major: (a) on the initial admission application, (b) at Student Orientation, Advisement, and Registration (SOAR), which is the university's two-day orientation program for incoming students, and (c) any time after SOAR. Students are assigned their advisor based upon declaration of major. Missouri State University has a split-level model of advising: students who declare their major are advised within their department, and students who remain undecided are advised within the Academic Advisement Center until they declare their major. Students must declare and be admitted to a degree program by the time they have 75 credit hours, or they will have a hold which prevents registration.

Participants

For this dissertation-in-practice topic, the researcher is going to focus upon first-generation students who are undecided. For fall 2014, there were 138 undecided, first-generation students who registered for SOAR. For fall 2015, there were approximately

153 undecided, first-generation students who registered for SOAR. It is important to note that not all first-time new in college students attend SOAR; students who are classified as non-traditional, that is, over the age of 22, and/or married, and/or have children, are exempt from SOAR and instead attend an orientation offered by Adult Student Services. For the qualitative sampling, the researcher will administer purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) in order to conduct focus groups and interviews with freshman and sophomore students who are both first-generation and undecided. The researcher has already consulted with the director of the Academic Advisement Center to see if she can gain gatekeeper consent in order to conduct focus groups and/or interviews with the advisors' students.

Data Collection Tools

Because a qualitative inquiry is based in a participant's natural environment, in this case, university setting, the data collection for this dissertation in practice will utilize an exploratory approach (Creswell, 2014). The researcher selected a constructivist approach because it allows for meaning to be shaped by seeking a greater understanding of the world (Creswell, 2014); this constructivist approach is a fitting complement to the selected reacculturation framework in order for the researcher to construct meaning for her study. Because the researcher serves as the primary data collecting instrument in a qualitative study, she is cognizant of the ethical considerations that must be factored into the study. Since this dissertation in practice is an independent project, *investigator triangulation* (Merriam, 2009), which would allow for two or more researchers to review the data, will not occur. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of any information that is collected, the researcher will triangulate her data by utilizing different data

collection methods, including observations, focus groups, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and a practitioner's log, as well as taking fieldnotes and transcribing recordings (Merriam, 2009).

Observations. Based upon the available data collection opportunities, the researcher plans to observe advising sessions, providing that gatekeeper and student consent is received (Creswell, 2014). To try to collect the most accurate data, the researcher understands the importance in becoming a *skilled observer* (Merriam, 2009) and developed an *observation protocol* (Merriam, 2009) to aid in that process (see Appendix A). During these observations, the researcher will be careful to take *fieldnotes* or *jottings* (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Jottings are described as “a brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 29) and then transpose these jottings into finely detailed fieldnotes containing *thick descriptions* (Emerson et al., 2011). The researcher will use these thick descriptions in order to reflect and process her research as she looks for emerging themes (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews. The researcher plans to conduct multiple interviews with students, as Merriam (2009) indicated that interviewing serves as the primary source for qualitative data. In order to follow ethical practices and procedures, the researcher created an informed consent sheet to be signed by the interview participants (see Appendix B). Since the researcher is cognizant of the fact that she has *insider status* (Drake & Heath, 2011) due to her conducting research at her place of employment, the informed consent sheet is particularly important in order to maintain a transparent and ethical data collection process. The researcher will follow a *semi-structured interview process*

(Merriam, 2009) as it allows for some sense of flexibility within the questioning process (see Appendix C). Part of that needed flexibility allows for *probing* (Merriam, 2009) questions to occur should the researcher need to glean additional information about an unforeseen topic that emerges. An additional ethical safeguard that the researcher will engage in is the transcription of the recorded interviews and focus groups; this process will also allow the researcher to become more familiar with the material (Merriam, 2009).

Focus groups. Unlike interviews which allow for singularly focusing upon one individual, focus groups allow participants to share their information with each other while also allowing the researcher a chance for gaining a better understanding of the topic than might be garnered from one or two individuals (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The very act of socially discussing the topic and creating individual responses that may be enhanced or modified by other participants' responses is a *constructivist* (Merriam, 2009, p. 92) approach, which initially seems appropriate. The researcher plans to conduct multiple focus groups with first-generation, undecided students because not only is it a more efficient use of time, but also focus groups allow for the participants to construct meaning together as they respond to the questions (Krueger & Casey, 2009). As with the interview process, the researcher plans to distribute informed consent sheets (see Appendix D) as well as transcribe the participants' conversations (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The semi-structured focus group guide (see Appendix E) will include the following: (a) welcome, (b) overview of the research topic, (c) ground rules, (d) different levels of questions, and (e) wrap up (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The researcher will follow Krueger and Casey's (2009) recommendation of 5 to 10 participants for the focus group

composition. When possible during the focus group process, the researcher plans to take jottings to use as a method to triangulate the data (Merriam, 2009). In order to be mindful of participants' times, the researcher will conduct focus groups that last between 60 minutes to 90 minutes.

Open-ended questionnaire. The researcher realizes that she will not be able to interview or conduct focus groups with all first-generation, undecided students, so she plans to try to increase her data collection by distributing an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix F) to both sections of the first-year seminar course dedicated for first-generation, undecided students. Open-ended questions allow for participants to provide more information than close-ended questions (Merriam, 2009). To avoid a conflict of interest, the researcher will offer her open-ended questionnaire as one of several extra credit opportunities.

Practitioner's log. Because the researcher is teaching one first-year seminar course dedicated for first-generation, undecided students, she has had multiple opportunities to glean additional insight. Additionally, the researcher has conducted two rounds of one-to-one conferences with each of her students during the semester. Each conference only lasted approximately 10 minutes each and occurred during weeks 2 and 11 during the semester. By maintaining an electronic file, the researcher has collected some excerpts from students' writings as well as included jottings (Merriam, 2009) from her classroom observations and conversations (see Appendix G).

Data Analysis

The researcher will take fieldnotes during her observations and will repeatedly review along with written responses from the open-ended questionnaire and her

practitioner's log to see which themes, if any, emerge. After conducting interviews and holding focus groups, the researcher will transcribe the materials. Upon completing the transcription process, the researcher will listen through the recording one last time to ensure as much accuracy as possible. Then, the researcher will review the transcription as well as fieldnotes and jottings to note a line-by-line identification of any ideas or issues during this *open coding* process (Emerson et al., 2011) which is consistent with Merriam's (2009) approach to underline words and ideas that are repeatedly mentioned. During this initial stage, the researcher will be particularly mindful of her research questions and conceptual framework, as Krueger and Casey (2009) recommended. These emerging themes will become even more apparent during the *focused coding* (Merriam, 2009) process that follows. In order to assist with determining if themes have emerged, the researcher will create an informal analytical memo, which helps to link themes and organize categorical information (Emerson et al., 2011). Additionally, the researcher plans to create an *identifier table* (Merriam, 2009) in order to quickly access rich quotes throughout the writing of the research study. Finally, the transcription process, open coding, and focused coding will ensure triangulation (Merriam, 2009) of data. Likewise, the observations, open-ended questionnaires, and practitioner's log will add to the overall triangulation of data.

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls

Considering that definitions for first-generation students vary, the researcher has selected the most common version (Petty, 2014) and realizes that this decision may affect her data yield as well as inaccurate classifications since first-generation status is self-reported. Additionally, the researcher will not collect data from first-generation,

undecided students in the Honors College or Adult Student Services. Due to the preferred targeted completion date, the researcher recognizes that, while striving to reach data saturation, she will not be able to interview as many individual students or conduct as many focus groups as she would if this were a multi-year project. As such, the researcher is aware that her findings cannot be overly generalized. The researcher is cognizant of her own biases with the research topic, as she, too, was a first-generation, undecided student, and the site selection is her own employer (Creswell, 2014). Though ethical procedures will be followed, there is still a chance that the research study may be compromised. Finally, the researcher is mindful of the regional limitation of her site selection. The researcher assumes the students she interviews will be forthcoming in their response to the open-ended questions that are asked. Keeping these considerations in mind, the researcher believes that her data collection will readily contribute to answering the research questions.

Definitions of Key Terms

In order to better understand some of the concepts used throughout this research proposal, the following terms were defined:

Continuing-Generation Student

Commonly used definition is the student has at least one parent who graduated from a four-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Ward et al., 2012).

Cultural Capital

Collier and Morgan (2008) define cultural capital as “any preexisting knowledge that students have to interact successfully in academic settings, including such essentially

social skills as the ability to recognize and respond to the standards faculty members use when they evaluate assignments” (p. 429).

First-Generation Student

The most commonly used and cited definition (Petty, 2014) is that neither parent graduated from a four-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Petty, 2014).

First-Generation, Undecided Student

The most commonly used and cited definition for first-generation students (Petty, 2014) added to students who have not selected or declared their academic major.

Knowledge Communities

As defined by Bruffee (1999), knowledge communities designate “a group of people with similar interests and goals who constitute themselves with a characteristic language” (p. 295). It is obvious who is a member and who is not based upon the fluency level; this newly-acquired language has now become the standard discourse that is spoken (Bruffee, 1995, 1999).

Normal Discourse

The same language is spoken by the same group of individuals (Bruffee, 1999).

Reacculturation Process

Bruffee (1995, 1999) viewed reacculturation as “switching membership from one culture to another” (p. 298). The reacculturation process involves a different understanding of the language that is used to create the new knowledge as well as communities that individuals are trying to join (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Bruffee (1999) described reacculturation as “usually painful” (p. 298) and “defines learning as reacculturation” (p. 298).

Transition Communities

A group “in which people construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14); this community is joined before gaining membership to knowledge communities.

Significance of the Study

The researcher acknowledges that she may slightly adjust her research questions as the qualitative approach allows for some fluidity (Merriam, 2009); nonetheless, current research discusses first-generation students and undecided students, but only as separate entities. Importantly, the researcher has not been able to find any literature that combines these two variables. Once the researcher’s study has been concluded, she will help lessen the gap of knowledge that exists about the specific population of first-generation, undecided students by producing two different documents with subsequent audiences and purposes to share her results.

The scholarly piece will provide advisors and administrators with a better understanding as to the reason first-generation, undecided students may have a lower retention rate as well as a better understanding of the academic major selection process that is undertaken. The researcher will write her scholarly piece adhering to the submission guidelines set forth by the *NACADA Journal*, which is a biannual refereed journal produced by The Global Community for Academic Advising designed to promote scholarly discourse and share research findings with academic advisors and administrators (NACADA, 2015b). While the researcher’s findings will be from a case study set at a Midwestern, public, four-year institution, the information shared will be helpful and relevant to any advisor at any institution of higher education who works with

first-generation, undecided students. On the other hand, the practitioner piece will inform administrators as to the resources and support that are needed for first-generation students who are undecided. Since the researcher is involved in two university-related grants that partially focus upon first-generation students, the findings will be immediately helpful to decision makers as to their allocation of resources. The researcher plans to share her findings with members of the Provost's Academic Advising Council, a committee that has advisor representation from each college within the University as well as relevant student support offices and a couple of upper-level administrators.

Summary

First-generation students are at a disadvantage upon entering institutions of higher education as they try to gain entry to a new knowledge community (Bruffee, 1999). Undecided students are also at a disadvantage as they, too, try to gain entry to this knowledge community (Bruffee, 1999). However, when both variables, first-generation and undecided, are combined, these students may experience more challenges and difficulties in trying to become immersed in the institution's knowledge community. Since first-generation, undecided students comprise a significant percentage of first time new in college students every year, it is important for administrators to glean a better understanding of the challenges these students face.

Utilizing a qualitative, exploratory study, the researcher seeks to lessen the knowledge gap between first-generation students and undecided students. By incorporating a conceptual framework that is centered upon Bruffee's (1995, 1999) reaccluturation process, the researcher has created questions to guide her study. The study's design includes a case study at a Midwestern, four-year, public university; plans

for data collection include observations, interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires. To look for emerging themes, the researcher will conduct open and focused coding as well as utilize a participant identifier table (Merriam, 2009). Finally, in order to preserve the integrity of the research process, the researcher will be particularly mindful to follow ethical procedures and guidelines.

CHAPTER TWO:
PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY

As institutions of higher education are competing to recruit students, they are also trying to retain their current students while simultaneously reaching out to students who left before degree attainment. Perhaps it is not surprising that the numbers of first-generation students are increasing (Coffman, 2011; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012); however, these first-generation students are not as easy to retain as continuing-generation students who have a higher retention rate (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013), which is something that Missouri State University, too, is experiencing with first-year students (Missouri State University, 2015c) and, most likely, overall, though no report has been run to provide an exact number. Similarly, students who are undecided with their academic majors are also at a greater risk for attrition (Allen & Robbins, 2008). For first-generation students who are undecided, they neither have the benefit of having a parent who has successfully navigated college nor do they have the benefit of having the routine support of an academic home department. Understanding the first-generation students who are undecided majors and placing it in the context of Missouri State University calls for an analysis of the organization as well as its leadership. Educational leaders would benefit from ascertaining a greater understanding as to how first-generation students with undecided majors reacculturate themselves to such unfamiliar surroundings.

This section begins with a history and organizational analysis of Missouri State University, including the different areas that impact first-generation, undecided students. Next, an analysis of adaptive leadership is provided. The section concludes with discussing the implications for research followed by a brief summary.

History of Organization

Originally founded in 1905 as a college to prepare students to become teachers, Missouri State University is a public, comprehensive, residential, selective admissions institution located in Springfield, Missouri with approximately 24,000 students who attend its six colleges, graduate college, and school of agriculture. The university has approximately 4,000 employees with a similar amount of students living in residential housing. In addition, there are smaller campuses located in Mountain Grove and West Plains, Missouri as well as in China. The university also provides additional educational opportunities, such as distance learning and study away, based on community needs. Missouri State University's mission is "to develop educated persons" (Missouri State University, 2015a) and received a designation in public affairs, which includes the three pillars of ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement.

The highest ranking official at the university is the president, who reports to the Board of Governors, which includes a student representative. Directly beneath the president is the provost for academic affairs and seven vice-presidents and/or chancellors. The office of the provost contains four associate provosts, including the associate provost for student development and public affairs

Organizational Analysis

At times, it is advantageous to look at an organization through a particular lens or frame to glean a different perspective. Applying the structural frame, which can be useful to analyze the basic skeletal organizational structure, Bolman and Deal (2008) noted that organizations restructure when there is new leadership because it serves as a visible indication to employees within the organization and competitors beyond the

organization that a new leader is in charge, even if it is commonly assumed that there is no reason to restructure. In 2005 the provost model was implemented as a result of new leadership, though the university has had two presidents since then, including the current president as of 2011.

Provost Model

Prior to 2005 when Missouri State University hired a new president, there was a strong desire for the university to switch from a vice president of academic affairs to a provost model whereby the provost would be the chief academic officer of the university. With the previous vice president of academic affairs, the position was structurally parallel, and perhaps of equal importance, to the other vice presidents. Faculty Senate requested the provost model “to elevate the importance of academics” (J. Catau, personal communication, November 14, 2015) and to have the university’s organizational chart “show the Provost above all the SMSU campuses” (Missouri State University, 2015d). The configuration of the provost model is a *simple hierarchy* (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 105); there is the provost, four associate provosts, and their respective units. Prior to the provost model, there was the dean for each college, and each department had a department head who reported to the dean of their respective college. At the time it did not seem apparent for the switch other than as a method to appear more faculty-friendly by agreeing to Faculty Senate’s resolution.

Additionally, when the previous president who served from 2005-2010 started, one of the first decisions that he made was to disband University College. According to Bolman and Deal (2008), an organization needed to assess its current structure to ensure that it was operating at its best and, if needed, a restructuring might be in order.

University College was an official college and part of the university; it housed general education, advisement for exploratory/undecided majors, study away, and many of the areas that the associate provost for student development and public affairs currently oversees. However, unlike the associate provost, the leader of University College was a dean; this individual had a voice on the president's administrative council and other top administrative committees, a benefit that the associate provost does not have. As such, the associate provost operates more in the role of manager than a leader in that there is a reliance on helping to provide appropriate processes in order to solve previously, or similarly, seen problems (Grint, 2005). The common assumption for disbanding University College was a cost-savings move: By eliminating University College, the university would save on salary. This savings was only in effect for two years; by 2008, the university created an Associate Provost position for Student Development and Public Affairs.

Student development and public affairs. The student development and public affairs unit focuses upon the resources needed for student success, including academic advisement, assessment, learning commons, public affairs support, athletic achievement center, service learning, and first-year programs. Another responsibility of the associate provost for student development and public affairs is to oversee the university's general education program. Missouri State University requires all of its graduates to complete a minimum of 45 hours in general education which provides a foundation for the critical thinking and scholarly inquiry that the departmental majors will upon build. Unlike the dean of University College who solely focused upon the academic nature of the college, the associate provost focuses upon creating resources to assist students and intertwining

the public affairs mission into all aspects of the university as well as providing assessment and professional development opportunities for the university community.

First-year programs. One department within the Student Development and Public Affairs unit is First-Year Programs, which is “committed to assist new students in achieving a successful transition to Missouri State University’s community of scholars” (Missouri State University, 2015e). First-Year Programs consists of one director, one assistant director who is the researcher of this study, and three graduate teaching assistants who each instruct three sections of GEP 101: First-Year Foundations course per semester. Working together for almost three years, the director and assistant director have produced a cohesive (Bolman & Deal 2008), albeit small, team (Levi, 2014) that trusts (Lencioni, 2002) each other.

First-Year Programs is responsible for the first-year seminar course, peer leadership program, and common reader program, which are all examples of *vertical coordination* (Bolman & Deal, 2008) whereas *lateral coordination* (Bolman & Deal, 2008) is seen in their service on multiple university-wide committees. First-Year Programs is responsible for the education of over 3,000 first-year students annually by administering 103 GEP 101 sections for fall, 11 sections for spring, and five sections for summer. All incoming students with fewer than 24 post-high school credit hours are required to take GEP 101, a two-credit course designed to introduce students to the public affairs mission, campus resources, academic skill building, and assist with their overall transition to university life and expectations; GEP 101 is part of the General Education curriculum. Prior to 2010, students took a one-credit hour course, IDS 110: Introduction to University Life, a course which served the same population of students, but it did not

have the public affairs component nor was it as academically focused. Students who are in the Honors College take a different course administered by that department instead, which is not part of the Student Development and Public Affairs unit, and reports directly to the Office of the Provost.

The director and assistant director of First-Year Programs serve as *ex-officio* members on First-Year Council, which is an advisory committee, not a policy-making committee. First-Year Council is comprised of a faculty member from each of the six colleges, a student affairs representative, and a student representative. This diversity of representation encourages multiple perspectives and is important to the team (Levi, 2014) in order to avoid *groupthink*, (Janis 1971/2005), yet it does not have the authority to design and implement policy. As a result, any recommendations or decisions that are made do not have the ability to be implemented without any interference. Further, unlike all of the other courses taught at the university, First-Year Programs is housed within a unit, not a college; there is no dean overseeing and guarding it from external interest groups (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Academic Advising at Missouri State University

At Missouri State University, “the mission of academic advising...is to assist students as they develop meaningful educational plans to help them achieve their life goals” (Missouri State University, 2015b). As such, all students who have fewer than 75 credit hours are required to meet with an academic advisor at least once each semester. To ensure that students meet with an academic advisor, a hold, which prevents registration, is applied to their student account. Though not required, students who have

more than 75 hours are strongly encouraged to meet with their assigned academic advisor to discuss internships and graduation requirements, just to name a couple of topic areas.

Within the varying forms of higher education, the advising structure differs from centralized, decentralized, and split-model (The Global Community for Academic Advising formerly National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2015a). A centralized advising office is located within one building on campus with staff advisors whereas a decentralized advising model assigns students to faculty, usually within the students' chosen major. For students who are undecided, a decentralized advising model can be particularly unhelpful and stressful as students are forced to decide upon a major during their admission application process. A split-model, one that is used at Missouri State University, assigns students to a faculty or professional advisor within the students' chosen major. For students who have not selected a major, they are assigned an advisor within an advising office for undecided majors. Unlike the advisors who are experts within their selected discipline, the advisors who work with undecided students are more generalists; they know a little about most options within academic departments across campus. For students who are classified as non-traditional, they are advised by Adult Student Services; for students who are classified as traditional, they are advised by the Academic Advisement Center. Once undecided students select their major, they are then reassigned to an advisor, who might be a professional staff advisor or a faculty advisor, within their chosen discipline. At Missouri State University, students must select their major by the time they have 75 credit hours, or they will have a hold on their accounts which prevents registration.

Academic advisement center. Yet another department within the Student Development and Public Affairs unit is the Academic Advisement Center, which provides advisement to students who are undecided and/or exploratory majors. The Academic Advisement Center has one director, two assistant directors, five academic advisors, and one administrative assistant. *Underuse versus overload* (Bolman & Deal, 2008) is certainly evident in this office as fall is peak advising time for the office because students enter the school year as undecided, but then throughout the course of the year, declare their major; an average advising load is approximately 200 students for fall. By spring semester, the advisors have a smaller advising load.

Unlike departmental advisement, the Academic Advisement Center's advisors are generalists; they know a little about many of the majors offered. Though not specialists, each advisor within the Academic Advisement Center has a niche area, such as working with transfer students, precollege students, conditionally admitted students, and pre-health students. Another advisor coordinates the Majors Fair, an annual event, in which all academic departments have a faculty representative to share information about potential majors and minors offered. Not surprisingly, the advisors within the Academic Advisement Center are huge proponents for the Majors Fair as it allows for students, especially undecided students, to chat with different faculty members across campus to explore potential areas of interest. The director coordinates advisor forums approximately eight times throughout the semester; these forums focus on various topics, such as transfer issues, advising policy updates, and program enhancements, which are of interest to university advisors.

With over 150 academic options offered, the university has an expansive array of possible majors. Each year, the university increases the number of majors offered to meet student and community demand. For instance, in 2015, the university offered a Bachelor of General Studies degree option, which allows students to pursue an interdisciplinary degree program with either two or three emphasis areas in respective departments. The Bachelor of General Studies is housed in the Academic Advisement Center within the Student Development and Public Affairs unit. Structurally (Bolman & Deal, 2008) and physically, the Academic Advisement Center and First-Year Programs are overseen by the associate provost for student development and public affairs and are located within the same building, along with the associate provost's office. One advantage to the close physical proximity of the three offices is the allowance for direct communication (Levi, 2014).

Adult student services. Students who are undecided about their major but are over the age of 22, married, or have children, are advised by advisors within Adult Student Services. The associate provost for access and outreach provides administrative oversight of Adult Student Services has a director, two academic advisors, and one administrative assistant. Unlike the majority of other university offices, Adult Student Services is not located on the main campus; instead, this office is located in the downtown vicinity. Due to the lack of convenience for students because they are not seen by an advisor on the main campus, the staff in Adult Student Services assists students with financial aid questions and addresses registration concerns.

Similar to the Academic Advisement Center, the director and academic advisors are generalists and do not specialize in any one major. Following the split-model of

advising, once students declare their major, they are then reassigned an academic advisor within their newly-declared major's department. The director and academic advisors also provide an orientation to new students before each fall and spring semester. Physically, Adult Student Services and the associate provost for access and outreach are located not only in the same building but also the same floor; this close proximity lays the basis for a stronger line of communication (Levi, 2014) as well as continues the *vertical coordination* (Bolman & Deal, 2008) already established from the provost model's *simple hierarchy* (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Provost's academic advising council. In November 2008, the provost's office wanted to have more effective and direct communication to university advisors. The Provost's Academic Advising Council was formed and charged with evaluating advising services for all students as well as suggesting areas for improvement in order to provide quality advising campus wide. An example of *lateral coordination* (Bolman & Deal, 2008), the provost appoints membership, which includes faculty advisors, professional staff advisors, advisement center directors, such as for undecided majors and business majors, along with advisement coordinators, for either standing membership or a two-year rotating membership, to his Advising Council. The current Provost's Academic Advising Council has continued the subcommittee structure that was started three years ago, including focus upon faculty and staff concerns, advising student awareness, and assessment. By having monthly meetings, which is also an example of *lateral coordination* (Bolman & Deal, 2008), committee members have an opportunity to develop a support team (Catmull, 2008) to brainstorm ideas that are innovative, creative,

and functional. With diverse perspectives present on the committee, there is an avoidance of groupthink (Janis 1971/2005).

Student Affairs

One division that works closely with the academic affairs division, in general, and Student Development and Public Affairs unit, in particular, is student affairs. The vice president for student affairs is at a parallel reporting line (Bolman & Deal, 2008) as the provost for academic affairs; both report directly to the president. The vision for the student affairs division is for its members “to be champions for student success” (Missouri State University, 2015h); this statement serves as the backdrop of the organizational culture (Schein 1993/2005). Relevant offices within the student affairs division include SOAR, Career Center, and TRiO.

SOAR. For first-time new in college students who attend SOAR during the summer, they are introduced to the concept of academic advising during the second day. However, students who are older than 22, have children, or are married, are advised by advisors within Adult Student Services and attend its one-day orientation before the semester starts. The SOAR staff includes one director and one coordinator and is part of the student affairs division currently though it previously reported to the associate provost of student development and public affairs. Though academic advising is introduced during SOAR, the advisement session is brief and misses portions of the common developmental advising approach, which focuses upon student learning. When the vice president for student affairs was hired, approximately 1.5 years ago, she requested that SOAR be placed under her leadership; this request once again demonstrates a common structural move with new leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Career center. Another office within the student affairs division is the Career Center. The Career Center has one director, six career resource specialists, and two administrative assistants; this office is physically located in the same building as the vice president for student affairs, which might allow for more direct communication and less chance for the message to be lost (Levi, 2014). The goal of the Career Center is to help students prepare for career readiness at every point in their college career, regardless of whether they are first-year students, seniors, or graduate students. Additionally, for students who are undecided majors, there are career focus instruments that they may take before meeting with a career resource specialist who will help interpret their results. For students who are declared majors, each career resource specialist is assigned a college to specialize their career resources. For instance, students who have a major in the College of Arts and Letters will work with the career resource specialist assigned to that particular college. Feedback from the career resource specialist will include information on internships, resume tips tailored to specific audiences, and job search placement. While this information is particularly useful for those students with declared majors, it is not as helpful for students who have undecided majors as their career audience is not defined, and there is no career resource specialist who focuses upon that particular student population.

IDS 120: Exploring majors and careers. One course that is particularly helpful for undecided students is IDS 120, which focuses upon career values and interest exploration. Students in this class will take a gamut of self-exploration inventories as well as research possible careers of interests. Taught by career resource specialists, students have direct and immediate access to someone whom they can develop a

continuing relationship with as they navigate their way through the university structure.

Both students with decided and undecided majors register for this elective course.

Typically, there are two sections offered each fall and spring semester that accommodates 25 students per section.

First-Generation Status

Before students even enter the University, they have to apply for admission. Part of this application includes asking whether or not the student is first-generation. Prior to 2014, the admission application did ask if the student was considered first-generation, but it was optional to answer. Since 2014, the question is required though one response option is “prefer not to answer” (D. Simpson, personal communication, October 22, 2015). Additionally, first time new in college students who attend SOAR are asked to complete the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), which also asks first-generation status. While some definitions of first-generation status may differ, Missouri State University uses the term for students who have neither parent with a four-year degree.

TRiO. The sole campus resource that mainly focuses upon assisting first-generation students is TRiO. TRiO is a federally grant-funded resource, but unfortunately, only 190 students may be served. In order to qualify for TRiO, students need to be either first-generation status, low-income, and/or disabled. Support services include advising, tutoring, and study skills. Unlike academic advisors who release students to register for the following semester’s classes, TRiO advisors offer additional support but do not release students for registration. In addition, TRiO offers career exploration as well as leadership opportunities. TRiO is staffed by one director, one

assistant director, and one coordinator; it is housed within the student affairs division, which is a fairly recent result of a structural move (Bolman & Deal, 2008) from its previous location in the division of diversity and inclusion. Because this office serves students, a top-line decision for structural relocation was made as it underscores the organizational culture of student affairs (Schein, 1993/2005).

Leadership Analysis

Elements of Heifetz and Laurie's (1997/2011) adaptive leadership framework serve as a guide to understanding the organizational leadership style at Missouri State University. Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) recognized that business executives face adaptive challenges in their line of work, and these adaptive challenges can certainly be applied to educational leaders. Ultimately, adaptive leaders try to help people not only cope but also thrive with organizational change (Northouse, 2016) which is often seen structurally (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Adaptive Leadership

The executives that Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) described had encountered "adaptive challenges throughout the course of their work daily that range from organizational re-structuring to dysfunctional teamwork. Further, Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) felt adaptive challenges happen when adaptive work was present" (Glaessgen, Mitchell, Street, & Weber, 2013, p. 4). Northouse (2016) viewed adaptive challenges as "problems that are not clear-cut or easy to identify....They cannot be solved by the leader's authority or expertise or through the normal ways of doing things in the organization" (p. 262). Organizations, such as Missouri State University, call for leaders who can adapt to any situation that occurs and then try to have their employees follow

suit so they can learn how to do the work themselves after the change has occurred (Northouse, 2016). Specifically, “adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011, p. 57). Successful adaptive leadership, especially when combined with adaptive challenges, is not an easy accomplishment as many thought-provoking questions and uneasy feelings regarding change may begin to surface.

The implementation of the provost model and several presidential leadership switches in a brief time period are major structural changes, which impacted faculty, staff, students, and community, as a result of new leadership. Additionally, as the university is increasing its number of first-generation students, there may need to be some changes in support offered. Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) noted six principles that formed their adaptive leadership framework, which include (a) get on the balcony, (b) identify one’s adaptive challenge, (c) regulate distress, (d) maintain disciplined attention, (e) give the work back to the employees, and (f) protect leadership voices from below.

Though it is easy to get swept up in the routine small tasks of the job, leaders are able to take a step back in order to see the entire organization operating daily whereas managers may not (Kotter, 1990/2011; Northouse, 2016). Leaders need to see emergent themes that are happening, and they do so by *getting on the balcony*, a phrase that Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) used to distinguish the difference between being caught up in the action compared to being a part of the change. Leaders should have the ability to oscillate back and forth between small details and big picture issues while not losing sight of the overarching goals (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011). In addition, leaders should

know themselves, their people, and the sources of variance. Regardless of the administrative level, leaders at Missouri State University benefit when they can remove themselves from the situation to try to glean a different perspective, one that is all encompassing (Northouse, 2016). *Identifying the adaptive challenge* calls for “leaders to look inside the organization to see the change which must occur. Equally important, if leaders know their people, they will be able to ask the challenging questions which will, in turn, aid in illuminating sources of conflict” (Glaessgen, Mitchell, Street, & Weber, 2013, p. 4). Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) described an example which contains “the ability of the leader to look inside his or her own personal mirror; examining one’s personal truth is essential to discovering strengths and flaws within an organization” (Glaessgen, Mitchell, Street, & Weber, 2013, p. 5). Only then, the leader can mobilize and empower their employees (Northouse, 2016).

Another principle from Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) is *regulating distress* because leaders need to be able to have some influence over the organization; “regulating distress is tightly coupled to identifying the adaptive challenge as leaders have crucial responsibilities in a given situation” (Glaessgen, Mitchell, Street, & Weber, 2013, p. 5). These responsibilities include: (a) direction, (b) protection, (c) orientation, (d) managing conflict, and (e) shaping norms (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011). Leaders are expected to provide a sense of stability, and even positivity, during stressful times, times which often include change. If organizational change is too distressing, then productivity is often compromised (Northouse, 2016). Those stressful times within organizations may be further exasperated by conflicting viewpoints, beliefs, and values, as well as clashing individual and organizational cultures, which often leads to conflict. *Maintaining*

disciplined attention is one way to remedy conflict when it occurs by collaborating with individuals to attain a goal or to create a strategic vision (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011). Strong lines of communication, without interference, is imperative to overcome a challenging situation (Levi, 2014).

Essentially, though, a leader who embodies qualities of adaptive leadership recognizes the importance to *giving the work back to employees* (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011). While the organization's leader, in this case, the president, may serve as the visionary director, it is imperative that not only his direct reports, such as the provost and vice president for student affairs, but also their direct reports are recognized as valuable members by welcoming their thoughts and their role in the overall mission; the ability to inspire employees to look outside the confine of their particular position is imperative (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011). Leaders should encourage their employees to act and to carry out their collective vision. Providing direction yet encouraging independent work is the balance in which an adaptive leader strives (Northouse, 2016). *Protecting leadership voices from below* is an important element that leaders need to do, particularly when their employees act and take initiative, which carries out their leader's vision while recognizing that, at times, conflict may occur (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011; Northouse, 2016). Further, leaders must be willing to fully examine the resulting conflicts yet still frame those conflicts and adaptive challenges as an opportunity to learn and grow. By having conversations with different levels of employees, leaders can gain a better sense of their organizational culture (Schein, 1993/2005).

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Applying Bolman and Deal's structural frame and adaptive leadership approach to the practitioner's setting reveals important implications for research. As seen through the structural frame, the University is a complex, dynamic, and large organization. Although the organizational model is a simple hierarchy (Bolman & Deal, 2008), multiple divisions exist with even more extending offices; not surprisingly, direct communication, at times, may be thwarted (Levi, 2014).

With first-generation student enrollment projected to increase (Ward et al., 2012) while simultaneously knowing that first-generation students have a lower retention rate than continuing-generation students, especially first-generation students who have undecided majors with still an even lower retention rate, Missouri State University will benefit from the researcher's study. Understanding how first-generation students with undecided majors reacculturate themselves to the University when they have neither a parent nor a home academic department serving as their cultural navigator should serve as an essential retention component. Further, Missouri State University has 15 key performance indicators, which serve as its annual performance measure, of which one focuses upon the six-year graduation rate (Missouri State University, 2015f); this key performance indicator will improve as more first-generation, undecided students successfully reacculturate themselves to the University, subsequently declare their major, and then graduate within six years.

Though there is some current support offered for first-generation students who are undecided with their major selection, more resources, whether in the form of programs or personnel, along with additional professional development for university advisors might

be needed. Similarly, restructuring current organizational support may yield better results. In addition, learning what successful reacculturation looks like from the experiences of first-generation, undecided students will be helpful for not only the university but also for future students.

Pertaining to receptiveness of the findings, the researcher currently works in First-Year Programs, serves on First-Year Council as an ex-officio member, chairs one of the Provost's Academic Advising Council subcommittees, and teaches GEP 101: First-Year Foundations course, including a special section designed for first-generation, undecided students. Formerly, she served as both a SOAR advisor and an academic advisor within the Academic Advisement Center with the current director. All of these areas are within the supervision (with the exception of SOAR) of the associate provost for student development and public affairs, so the researcher has some sense of knowing that her findings will be of direct interest and useful; plus her growing participation in the student affairs area may also yield a better outcome for any possible implementation or exploration that is warranted from the research findings.

Summary

Similar to other institutions of higher education, first-generation students are increasing in numbers (Ward et al., 2012). For institutions like Missouri State University, it is beneficial to understand how best to support not only first-generation students, but also first-generation students who have an undecided major. Though Bolman and Deal (2008) detail four different frames, which include structural, human resource, political, and symbolic, the structural frame was chosen because it seems the most relevant to understanding the researcher's setting. Additionally, adaptive leadership

was selected as the very nature of Missouri State University calls for leaders who can take a step back in order to fully ascertain the complexities involved in the decision making process.

CHAPTER THREE:
SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

As first-year students enter institutions of higher education, they are faced with an entirely new cultural experience. For first-generation students, this cultural experience is even more challenging. Factoring in the complication of choosing a major (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Cuseo, 2005; Gordon & Steele, 2003) and lack of realization of the wide academic major selection (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012), first-generation students face many obstacles and barriers, including lack of academic preparation (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012), lack of cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008), lack of financial security (Cushman, 2007), lack of family support (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009), and lack of peer support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005) as they try to achieve their college degree. Further, the reacculturation (Bruffee, 1999) process for first-generation students who have undecided majors tends to perpetuate the problems within their academic journey.

This scholarly review provides a summary of the current status of literature related to the topic of first-generation students who are undecided majors. This section begins by providing an overview of the problem of practice and purpose of the study. Next, a summary of the literature related to first-generation students and undecided/exploratory students is discussed.

Overview

Though definitions of first-generation students may vary, including applying the term if the student is the first one in the family to attend college (Hsiao, 1992), the most commonly used and cited definition (Petty, 2014) is that neither parent graduated from a four-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Petty, 2014). Unlike first-generation students, continuing-generation students have at

least one parent who has graduated from a four-year institution. Reviewing the literature revealed that first-generation college students has been a topic of interest for quite some time with much of the literature focusing upon their low-income and minority status (Bui, 2002). Research repeatedly indicates that first-generation students are less likely to persist (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013) than continuing-generation students and are most likely to withdraw from college during their first year (Tinto, 2007).

While pursuing a college degree can be challenging enough, pursuing an unknown college degree can certainly add another layer of complication (Cuseo, 2005; Gordon & Steele, 2003). Students who are undecided majors have also been extensively researched and are of particular interest to advisors who work with exploratory/undecided majors (Cuseo, 2005). Nevertheless, a gap in research exists that focuses upon the first-generation student who is undecided. With such a gap, there are various research opportunities to be explored which would provide more insight into this particular student population. Given the absence of research, the purpose of this study is to better understand the reacculturation experiences of first-generation students who are undecided about their academic major as they transition to being part of a university.

Characteristics of First-Generation Students

Reviewing the literature surrounding first-generation students reveals some common characteristics. Many first-generation students tend to come from more ethnically diverse backgrounds (Dennis et al., 2005) and tend to be less engaged in co-curricular activities than continuing-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). This scholarly review, though, focuses upon five characteristics of first-generation students,

which include (a) academic preparation, (b) cultural capital, (c) financial security, (d) family support, and (e) peer support.

Academic Preparation

Nationally, first-generation students who enter institutions of higher education are lacking in academic preparation compared to continuing-generation students (Martinez et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013, Ward et al., 2012). Overall, first-generation students are more likely to struggle academically, both in high school and in higher education (Zalaquett, 1999). Chen and Carroll (2005) reported 40% of first-generation students needed remedial math courses in comparison to 16% of continuing-generation students. Notably, Chen and Carroll (2005) indicated that first-generation students did not take advance mathematics in high school and only focused on the content needed for graduation requirements. Not surprisingly, the lack of advanced mathematics in high school resulted in less preparation for college. Since multiple majors, particularly in the health sciences, mathematics, and computer sciences, call for strong math skills, these students have most likely decreased their chance to successfully complete these majors.

Similarly, research has demonstrated that first-generation students not only lack preparation in math, but also feel underprepared in reading (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Snell, 2008). While first-generation students anticipate being challenged with math and writing, they do not anticipate feelings of inadequacy with reading. Chen and Carroll (2005) learned that 16% of first-generation students took some sort of remedial reading course while only 6% of continuing-generation students did. Students whose parents are college graduates are more likely to have stronger reading skills than students who are

from families less educated; the educational connection is even stronger than family income when it comes to reading abilities and comprehension levels (Snell, 2008). Further, Martinez et al. (2009) found that first-generation students have lower scores on entrance exams, including math and reading, than continuing-generation students. Additionally, first-generation students tend to feel less prepared for the collegiate environment; this feeling may be from realizing that they have lower entrance scores in comparison to continuing-generation students (Ward et al., 2012).

Once in college, first-generation students have lower grade point averages (GPA); (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004); for instance, one study found a 2.5 GPA in comparison to continuing-generation students' 2.8 GPA (Chen & Carroll, 2005). A close look at first-year students' GPA reveals a substantial glimpse into the likelihood of student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The lack of high school preparation is not only an indicator of inevitable academic challenges but also contributes to a lower first year GPA, it is also a predictor of not completing college. Research indicates that first-generation students are less likely to persist than continuing-generation students (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Elliott, 2014; Martinez et al., 2009; Swecker et al., 2013).

Additional academic struggles for first-generation students may be seen as soon as their first semester in college as first-generation students tend to complete fewer credit hours as well as have to repeat more courses due to unsatisfactory performance the first time (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Doubting their ability to perform well in college, first-generation students are more likely to be concerned with academic failure (Ward et al., 2012) though for many first-generation students a transition course can be helpful

(Vaughan, Parra, & Lalonde, 2014). Further, first-generation students are less likely to receive advice on study skills or test taking from their families (Dennis et al., 2005).

Cultural Capital

In addition to academic challenges, first-generation students struggle with the very concept of attending institutions of higher education. Perhaps because first-generation students are aware of their own academic struggles or perhaps for financial reasons, first-generation students are more apt to attend community colleges than four-year institutions (Cushman, 2007). Regardless of the reason for community college attendance, first-generation students are more likely to graduate if they attend a four-year institution (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Though not stated, one might surmise that the reason for a higher graduation rate at a four-year institution in comparison to a community college might be due to a greater increase to their initial lack of cultural capital.

According to Collier and Morgan (2008), cultural capital, refers to “preexisting knowledge about interacting successfully in academic settings, including such essentially social skills as the ability to recognize and respond to the standards faculty members use when they evaluate assignments” (p. 429). Unlike continuing-generation students who have undoubtedly gleaned helpful information from family members’ academic experiences because they have been reared with the assumption that they, too, will be attending college, first-generation students do not have the same benefit (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2013). Common collegiate assumptions that instructors expect assignments to be researched from credible sources, free from grammatical errors, and timely submissions are not so common to first-generation students. Nor are first-generation students likely to understand the amount of time that

instructors expect them to spend on their homework until they actually experience it. In some cases, first-generation students factor in their homework time based upon their number of available hours rather than the actual number of hours needed to satisfactorily complete the homework (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Collier and Morgan's (2008) study revealed that instructors noticed more problems with time management in first-generation students due to competing interests, which are often family concerns, work demands, and more necessary preparation time as they have fewer resources, including parents with college degrees who can provide additional insight.

First-generation students tend to lack the basic knowledge of the actual university system that they have joined, and often, they are not even aware that there is a university system or language that they are expected to know (Dennis et al., 2005; Jenkins et al., 2013). The university jargon, including prerequisite, degree audit, and declaration of major, may be a commonly known language to continuing-generation students but that is not necessarily the case with first-generation students. As a result, it is not unusual for first-generation students not to know the ins and outs of the university or to even realize there are campus resources that offer support; their parents are not able to serve as navigators to this unfamiliar culture and are not able to direct their students to advisement offices or career service offices. Ward et al. (2012) posit that cultural capital is not quickly acquired; rather, cultural capital is gained from multiple experience that are reinforced by their parents. Since many instructors communicate their classroom and course expectations through their syllabi, it is essential for first-generation students to understand its role. Familiar syllabus concepts, such as office hours, late paper policy, and academic grievance procedure, may be unknown areas that need to be thoroughly

explained (Ward et al., 2012). For example, first-generation students may need to be told that they can just stop in to visit their instructors to get assistance during office hours but the onus to do so falls on them. The instructions for the assignment may say “write a two-page paper,” and the student actually handwrites the assignment when it was implied that students should type all out-of-class assignments. Part of the instructor’s explanation should include the purpose of a syllabus and how it can be used as a tool for student success (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Ward et al., 2012).

For other first-generation students, their lack of understanding of what college really entails can lead to disillusionment, which eventually may lead to dropping out (Chizhik, 1999). Curtailing college disillusionment is not simply providing students with more information. Chizhik (1999) argued that most students experience some level of disillusionment between their preconceived ideas and their actual experience, but intrusive academic advising may help because first-generation students are less likely to reach out to their academic advisor (Jehangir, Williams, & Pete, 2011).

First-generation students may not fully understand the role of an instructor or advisor (Ward et al., 2012). Because first-generation students tend not to seek instructor or advisor support, at least based upon high school experience, they are less likely to get much-needed collegial support nor the family encouragement to ask for help (Dennis et al., 2005; Jenkins et al., 2013). Chatting with an instructor during office hours either to gain clarification on an assignment or to learn more about an academic major or minor is a common collegiate act that many first-generation students overlook (Ward et al., 2012). Though first-generation students tend to gain more benefit, including increased cultural

capital, from interacting with faculty and advisors than continuing-generation students, they are less likely to do so (Ward et al., 2012).

Financial Security

First-generation students who are from low income families are four times more likely to leave college after their first year in comparison to students who have neither risk factor (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The odds of first-generation, low income students graduating from college is approximately 50% (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Financial concerns are linked to the lower graduation rates as first-generation students spend less time on campus because they are more likely to live at home, hold a job, and attend college only part time. Pertaining to their college entrance exams, first-generation students who have financial concerns are also less likely to have multiple attempts for a higher score (Ward et al., 2012) due to the examination cost, such as taking the ACT or SAT repeatedly. Similarly, first-generation students are much less likely to take an ACT or SAT prep course to try to raise their scores due to lack of financial funds (Ward et al., 2012).

In addition, the notion to borrow money to attend college is likely to be a foreign concept for first-generation students. Rather than accruing any debt, particularly with lack of family support in attending college, first-generation students are more likely to leave college (Ward et al., 2012). Completing financial aid forms and applying for scholarships are areas that first-generation students are not used to navigating either alone or with their parents (Ishitani, 2006). For first-generation students who do receive financial aid, they are likely to give any unused amount from their tuition and related college expenses to their families to assist them (Ward et al., 2012).

Although research indicates that students who work part time while they attend college full time tend to perform and acclimate better (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), first-generation students often have to help finance not only their own education but also help contribute to the family income. First-generation students tend to work more than 20 hours weekly and therefore are not able to take as many classes (Jenkins et al., 2013). First-generation students who are work study eligible may find it helpful to work on campus, but oftentimes, the amount of work study funding and the hourly wage is not as competitive as off-campus employment.

While they may need full-time employment, once students work more than 20 hours weekly, their job tends to become more of a hindrance than a help to their academic goals. Research shows that students who are more engaged on campus are more likely to remain on campus (Tinto, 2007), but first-generation students who often have to contribute to their family income are less likely to join campus social organizations as well as less likely to participate in volunteer work. For some first-generation ethnically diverse students, there is the family expectation that they will contribute to the family income, yet for other first-generation ethnically diverse students there is the realization that a college degree may lead to more financial independence; nonetheless, first-generation students from ethnically diverse families often have unrealistic views of the college experience (Dennis et al., 2005).

Family Support

The majority of first-generation college students have benefitted from twelve years of asking their parents questions about their elementary and secondary school experience, but when first-generation students attend college, their ability to receive

advice from their parents' first-hand experience, often times, comes to a close (Barry et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2013). For many first-generation students, they are forging a new identity, one of a college student. Without their family's familiarity with college, first-generation students are less likely to attend college and definitely less likely to attend a prestigious college (Pascarella et al., 2004). A study by Barry et al. (2009) found that for first-generation students the college experience is particularly stressful, whether the stressor is lack of family support and/or financial concerns. Perhaps because first-generation students have fewer important individuals (i.e., family) who can directly relate to their college experience, they are less likely to share their troubles, which leads to greater feelings of stress (Jenkins et al., 2013). Consequently, these feelings of isolation, of being the lone person in a particular situation, may become compounded by their infrequency of meeting with faculty and staff (Dennis et al., 2005).

When first-generation students go to college, they are not just dealing with feelings of isolation, confusion, and doubt, but they are also dealing with feelings of guilt as they leave the comfortable environment of their families (Coffman, 2011). For first-generation students, the idea of moving, both in upward social mobility and in physical location, means a sense of leaving behind something else (London, 1989; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). In addition, their families may not understand why they even feel the need to attend college and may question their decision to do so; as a result, first-generation students not only feel like outsiders at college but also like outsiders within their own families (Cushman, 2007; Schultz, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Families may inadvertently or purposefully serve as a barrier to their students' success (Hsiao, 1992) and contribute to their students'

feelings of guilt of leaving home (Ward et al., 2012). This sense of pull between the future (college) and the past (family) puts first-generation students in a quandary even before the first day of class (Jehangir et al., 2011). Unlike continuing-generation students who were usually raised to believe that college attendance was guaranteed, first-generation students do not have such a clear destination (Ward et al., 2012).

As they become more acclimated and reacculturated to a new culture, first-generation students may inadvertently leave behind another culture. While trying to build new relationships on campus, first-generation students may be experiencing resentment from family members who believe that the students are choosing a white-collar career over the blue-collar career that has been the family identity (Ward et al., 2012). Similarly, lack of family support may cause first-generation students to doubt their decision to attend college to the point of returning to the familiar environment, one that is not associated with the college culture (Ward et al., 2012).

Peer Support

With feelings of doubt and wanting to fit in, it is not surprising that first-generation students are often most concerned with making friends at college (Cushman, 2007). Once a few friendships are formed, then first-generation students begin to focus upon their academics. Only after first-generation students feel that they have their academic transition under control do they tend to explore extracurricular options, which is unfortunate as they tend to benefit more from extracurricular activities and campus involvement than continuing-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996; Ward et al., 2012). A key element for students' retention is their ability to become socially integrated within the campus community (Tinto, 2007),

and by not doing so early in their collegiate career, their attrition level becomes higher. Terenzini et al. (1996) argue that first-generation students tend to experience campus life differently than continuing-generation students, which impacts their need for peer support. Importantly, peer support might lessen the amount of stress and anxiety that first-generation students tend to experience which is greater than continuing-generation students (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Not surprisingly, peer support plays an important role for first-generation students as it does for all college students, which Astin (1997) found in his often cited longitudinal study. Additionally, in a longitudinal, mixed methods study by Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005), it was found that the lack of peer support, whether real or perceived, is “a stronger predictor of college grades and adjustment than support from the family, when both family and peer support variables are included in a regression analysis” (p. 234). This factor becomes even more challenging when students decide they need the peer support but then do not actually receive it. Sometimes just knowing that support is available can alleviate stress and anxiety, regardless if it is used. Peers can often provide the academic support that families cannot; forming study groups and sharing time management tips are just two examples of peer support that are helpful to first-generation students (Dennis et al., 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2005).

In summary, first-generation students are more likely to struggle academically, both in high school and in higher education (Zalaquett, 1999). Many first-generation students do not have a high amount of cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008) as well as solid financial security (Ward et al., 2012). Since first-generation students no longer have immediate access to role models who can help them in this new arena, graduating

college can become an insurmountable barrier (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Lacking a parental role model who graduated from a four-year university often translates into lack of family support (Pascarella et al., 2004). Finally, first-generation students, like continuing-generation students, benefit from peer support.

Undecided Majors

Once first-generation students select the college they will attend, one of the next main decisions that they will make is choosing their major. Engle and Tinto (2008) found that students in their first two years of college tend to question their choice of major or possible major more often than not. Further, Gordon and Steele (2003) conducted a 25-year longitudinal study and learned that 85% of first-year undecided students were “somewhat anxious” or “very anxious” about the process for selecting a major. At many institutions of higher education, first-time new in college students have the option of either declaring an academic major or remaining undecided. Approximately one-third of entering first-year students are undecided majors, and approximately one-third of entering first-year students are declared majors but change their major, at least once (Gordon & Steele, 2003). There is not much difference between first-generation and continuing-generation students declaring undecided majors with 30% and 33% respectively (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It is noteworthy that one study by Chen and Carroll (2005) reported that first-generation students have more difficulty than continuing-generation students in selecting a major, but no percentages were disclosed.

Regardless of institutional type, public or private, students have a sense of uncertainty as to whether they made the right decision pertaining to their major. At times, students may select their major based upon what their families or guidance

counselors have told them to declare (McDaniels, Carter, Heinzen, Candri, & Wieberg, 1994; Workman, 2015a). Other times, some college advisors receive extra training or professional development to work with students who are undecided with their academic major selection (Workman, 2015a; Workman, 2015b). With approximately 50% of colleges requiring or highly recommending first-year students to declare their major within the first year (Cuseo, 2005), there is no wonder as to why students may question their decision. Community colleges are more likely to require first-year students to select a major, and liberal arts colleges are more likely not to require a major selection (Cuseo, 2005). If it is important for students to explore and to be confident in their selected major, then pressuring students to decide, particularly at community colleges which have a higher percentage of underprepared students, is somewhat concerning. Though one could argue that community colleges, by their very design, need to have their students either select a vocational or transfer track early in their first year (Cuseo, 2005) as the available time frame is only two years.

There are multiple reasons as to why students remain undecided: (a) they are completely overwhelmed with so many options, (b) they want to fully explore their possible interest area before declaring, (c) they have narrowed their choice to a few options, or (d) they may even be questioning if college is the right place for them (Cuseo, 2005). Understanding that the selection of a major does not necessarily answer all career and life-related questions can be a stumbling block for students, including first-generation students (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997). For some students who are concerned about committing to a major, they need to understand that the selected major does not mean that they can never change their career. Cuseo (2005) found that “final decisions

about majors and careers do *not* occur *before* students enter college; rather, students make these decisions *during* the college experience” (p. 6). Although it stands to reason that if first-generation students are less likely to seek assistance from campus resources, they are more apt to struggle with this process. Family conversations pertaining to how to select a major are much less likely to occur for first-generation students, so they enter college with even less of an idea as to how to go about the actual process. Feelings of isolation and doubt may increase for first-generation students who have entered an unknown collegiate environment only to find that they do not have a major department that serves as their academic home (Cuseo, 2005) unlike their continuing-generation friends who have declared their major. Noteworthy, according to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), it is critical that students feel some sense of success during their first year, and for some students, selecting their academic major could be one student success factor.

Research has indicated that students who select a major based upon their interests, abilities, and skills are much more likely to persist than students who may arbitrarily select their major (Allen & Robbins, 2008), so it is important that students are allowed the option to remain undecided until they have considered their options. While students’ interests and skills may indicate which majors are better suited, their performance on standardized exams does not predict their selected major. Results from a research study involving 87,993 first-time new in college students from more than 20 four-year institutions of higher education revealed that students’ SAT scores did not predict their selected majors (Allen & Robbins, 2008). Nevertheless, the study did make the connection between students’ persistence when successful both in academics and major selection.

For many students, general education courses can be useful in exploring multiple areas, many of which may not have even been known to them (Cuseo, 2005). General education courses allow students not only to be introduced to a wide array of subjects that were previously unknown but also allows for an exploration of a potential major. Nonetheless, many first-year students tend not to value the role of general education, particularly those students who feel like they already know what their major will be. By the second year, though, students tend to have a better appreciation and value not only for general education but also in learning (Driscoll, 2014). Suggesting general education courses that might be of interest to students is a common advising practice (Gordon & Steele, 2003). Requiring students to meet with an advisor is one way to ensure that students learn different methods, including general education courses, to explore a major (Cuseo, 2005).

In summation, students are undecided on their academic majors for various reasons, ranging from a feeling of complete uncertainty to not being quite ready to declare. Students who are undecided benefit from exploring areas of interest based upon their values and skills, and for some undecided students, general education courses not only serve as a graduation requirement but also as an opportunity to explore potential interest areas. Additionally, students who are undecided vary in the length of time that it takes for them to decide upon an actual academic major; however, depending upon the institution of higher education, the amount of time that students may remain undecided varies as well.

Summary

Ascertaining a foundational understanding of the common characteristics of first-generation students and undecided students is important in order to become aware of their reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) process. For many first-generation students, they are not as encouraged to attend more competitive colleges in comparison to continuing-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). Nonetheless, from the moment the first-generation student decides to attend college, he or she starts the path to an unknown journey, one that is filled with the college's expectations. Along this path, obstacles such as a lack of academic preparation, cultural capital, financial security, and family/peer support surface. Complicating this journey is the realization that the destination (i.e., academic major selection) is not in sight.

CHAPTER FOUR:
CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

Executive Summary

Attrition of First-Generation, Undecided College Students:

Recommendation for Improved Institutional Support

Background of the Study: First-generation students face many deficits, including academic preparation, cultural capital, financial security, family and peer support. The most commonly used and cited definition of first-generation students, and the one Missouri State University follows, is that neither parent graduated from a four-year institution.

Statement of the Problem: First-year, first-generation students who have undecided majors have a lower fall-to-fall retention rate than continuing-generation students with declared majors. Fall 2013-2014 first-generation, undecided students have a retention rate of 59.49% compared to 80.07% for continuing-generation, declared students (Missouri State University, 2015c).

Purpose of the Study: By gaining a better awareness of first-generation, undecided students' challenges and experiences, advisors and administrators can improve the support offered to help students navigate their way through an unfamiliar environment.

Conceptual Framework:

- Before students enter higher education, they may have mastered their high school culture and learned how to function there. In college, they face an entirely new culture filled with knowledge, information, and a language they have not yet learned.
- Bruffee (1999) used the term *reacculturation*, which is “switching membership from one culture to another” (p. 298) to describe the experience.

- In order to assist with the *reacculturation* process, students may form *transition communities* (Bruffee, 1995, 1999), which are described as a group “in which people construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14).
- *Translators*, it could be argued, “help students acquire fluency in the language of those communities” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 154).
- The support of the *transition communities* and *translators* is important as the students strive to join the university’s *knowledge communities* (Bruffee, 1999); these *knowledge communities* speak the language of the new culture students are to learn.

Research Questions:

- How do first-generation, undecided students (a) *Reacculturate* to the unknown academic environment of a university? (b) Gain access to a university’s culture? (c) Select *translators* within a university? (d) Form *transition communities* within a university? (e) Use academic advisors as *translators*?
- What support should universities offer to assist first-generation, undecided students as they *reacculturate* to their academic environment?

Methodology:

Study Design: Qualitative study utilizing a social constructivism lens

Setting: Missouri State University

Participants: 35 participants, including 7 males and 28 females, selected using purposeful sampling. Of 35 participants, 21 participants were from researcher’s first-year seminar course and 14 were not associated with the researcher.

Data Collection: Observations from 9 advising appointments using an observation protocol and jottings; Focus Group with 5 participants using a semi-structured interview process; Interviews with 14 former first-year students using a semi-structured interview process with probing questions, as needed; Writings, including a questionnaire, from 21 former first-year seminar students, and Practitioner’s Log based upon fall 2015 first-year seminar course and first-generation related meetings.

Data Analysis: A Priori coding allowed findings to be categorized based upon the research questions. In Vivo coding captured the participants’ voices.

Findings:

- Most students reported very stressful transition experiences; these included a high level of stress initiated by college applications and financial aid applications. Stress also resulted from repeatedly being asked what their major is as well as uncertainty of university language.
- Becoming comfortable both within and beyond the residence halls were paramount. A small number ventured out and joined student organizations.
- Students learned university information from continuing-generation and/or sophomore roommates and in their specialized first-year seminar course.
- Students did not view their academic advisors as helpful in their integration to the university, mainly because of uncertainty in advisors’ roles.
- Students identified moving in to campus earlier as beneficial for their transition.

Recommendations to Improve Retention of First-Generation, Undecided Students:

- Provost’s Academic Advising Council — Create advising policy for policy library and university catalogs to define advising role. Provide list of questions for

students to ask their advisors. Encourage advisors to meet with students 2 to 3 times each semester to bridge gap.

- Academic Advisement Center — Offer exploratory major programs. Encourage multiple advising appointments with different topics for first-generation, undecided students to help allay their stress and to increase knowledge for informed decision making.
- MSU: I'm First — Partner with other campus resources to offer a one-day state conference to increase awareness of first-generation students' challenges and highlight campus support. Offer varying workshops, including scholarships and writing, for students to improve success rate for scholarships and decrease stress level associated with finances.
- New Student and Family Programs — Offer a breakout session for first-generation families and/or students during SOAR to lessen the university language gap.
- Residence Life, Housing, and Dining Services — Provide first-year, first-generation students an opportunity to move in to campus earlier and offer support programming during early move in to decrease lack of cultural capital and subsequent stress.
- First-Year Programs — Reduce class size to 25 students to allow for improved community building. Continue with specialized first-year seminar section because it served as a reassuring transition space. Create assignments to increase students' involvement and rapport with instructors.

Complete Report:

Please contact Tracey Glaessgen, Assistant Director, First-Year Programs.

Selected References:

Bruffee, K. A. (1995). Sharing our toys: Cooperative learning versus collaborative learning. *Change*, 27(1), 12-18.

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**ATTRITION OF FIRST-GENERATION, UNDECIDED COLLEGE STUDENTS:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT**

Institutions of higher education are competing not only to attract new students but also to reach out to those students who left before degree attainment while simultaneously trying to retain the students who currently attend. First-generation students are of particular concern to institutions of higher education as they have a higher attrition rate (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013); students who are undecided with their major are also at a greater risk for attrition (Allen & Robbins, 2008). But what happens when first-generation students enter higher education undecided upon an academic major?

This report begins by providing an overview of the study, stating the problem of practice, and explaining the study's purpose. Next, the conceptual framework is discussed followed by describing the design of the study and addressing limitations. Finally, the significance of the study is shared and concludes with recommendations for practice

Introduction to the Background of the Study

Definitions of first-generation students vary, including applying the term if the student is the first one in the family to attend college (Hsiao, 1992). The most commonly used and cited definition (Petty, 2014), and the one that Missouri State University uses, is that neither parent graduated from a four-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Petty, 2014). First-generation students face many obstacles and barriers, including lack of academic preparation (Padgett et al., 2012), lack of cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008), lack of financial security (Cushman, 2007), lack of family support

(Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009), and lack of peer support (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005) as they try to achieve their college degree.

Unlike continuing-generation students with access to at least one parent who has successfully navigated his or her way through higher education, first-generation students do not have that ability to get guidance and feedback as they, alone, embark upon this educational journey. The familiar pattern of asking questions and heeding advice from parents has come to a halt for many first-generation students who enter higher education (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). For first-generation students who are undecided, they neither have the benefit of having a parent who has successfully navigated college nor do they have the benefit of having the routine support of an academic home department.

Statement of the Problem

First-generation college students have been a topic of interest for quite some time, with much of the literature focusing upon their low-income and minority status (Bui, 2002). Likewise, students who are undecided majors have also been extensively researched and of particular interest to advisors who work with exploratory/undecided majors (Cuseo, 2005). Articles that focus upon first-generation students date back to the 1990s (Hsiao, 1992), and undecided students as far back as Gordon and Steele's (2003) 25-year longitudinal study they started in the late 1970s though states that research the higher attrition rate of undecided students has been a topic since the 1920s. Nonetheless, an apparent gap in research exists that focuses upon the first-generation student who is undecided with his/her major. With such a gap, there are various research opportunities to be explored which would provide more insight into this particular student population.

Research repeatedly indicates that first-generation students are less likely to persist (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013) than continuing-generation students and are most likely to withdraw from college during their first year (Tinto, 2007). In fact, a longitudinal study by Ishitani (2003) found that first-generation students during their first year of college had a 71% higher risk for departure in comparison to students whose both parents were college educated.

The problem of practice ultimately involves retention of first-generation students who are undecided about their major as research clearly demonstrates that attrition is the highest among first-year students (Tinto, 1999), in general, and first-year students with undecided majors (Leppel, 2001), as well. Table 1 shows first-year, first-generation students who have undecided majors have an even lower fall-to-fall retention rate than continuing-generation students with declared majors by 10% in 2014-2015 and by 20% in 2013-2014; 69.41% compared to 79.56% and 59.49% compared to 80.07%, respectively (Missouri State University, 2015c). Further, a three-year institutional trend indicates first-generation, undecided students have the lowest fall-to-fall retention rate when compared to first-generation, declared majors, or continuing-generation, undecided students or continuing-generation, declared majors.

Table 1

First-Time New in College Retention Rates

Student Type	Year	Total <i>N</i>	Retained <i>N</i>	% Retained
FG/U	2014-2015	170	118	69.41%
FG/D	2014-2015	617	447	72.45%
CG/U	2014-2015	293	228	77.82%
CG/D	2014-2015	1052	837	79.56%
FG/U	2013-2014	158	94	59.49%
FG/D	2013-2014	618	423	68.45%
CG/U	2013-2014	291	218	74.91%
CG/D	2013-2014	863	691	80.07%
FG/U	2012-2013	180	119	66.11%
FG/D	2012-2013	587	410	69.85%
CG/U	2012-2013	276	206	76.64%
CG/D	2012-2013	758	595	78.50%

Note. FG/U = first-generation, undecided; FG/D = first-generation, declared; CG/U = continuing-generation, undecided; CG/D = continuing-generation, declared. Missouri State University.

Understanding how first-generation students with undecided majors reacculturate themselves to the university when they have neither a parent nor a home academic department serving as their cultural navigator should serve as an essential retention component. Further, Missouri State University has 15 key performance indicators, which serve as its annual performance measure, of which one focuses upon the six-year

graduation rate (Missouri State University, 2015f). This key performance indicator will improve as more first-generation, undecided students successfully reacculturate themselves to the university, subsequently declare their major, and then graduate within six years.

Purpose of the Study

Given the absence of research on this particular population, the purpose of this study is to better understand the reacculturation experiences of first-generation students who are undecided about their academic major as they transition to being a part of a university and how universities may better support them. The reacculturation process refers to the experiences that students have as they leave behind one culture to join another (Bruffee, 1999), such as switching from high school to university culture. First-generation students are at a disadvantage upon entering institutions of higher education as they try to gain entry to a new knowledge community (Bruffee, 1999). Undecided students are also at a disadvantage as they, too, try to gain entry to this knowledge community (Bruffee, 1999). However, when both variables, first-generation and undecided, are combined, these students may experience more challenges and difficulties in trying to become immersed in the institution's knowledge community. Since first-generation, undecided students comprise a significant percentage of first time, new in college students every year, it is important for administrators to glean a better understanding of the challenges these students face.

By gaining a better awareness of first-generation, undecided students' challenges and experiences, advisors and administrators will be able to improve the support that is offered to help these students navigate their way through an environment that is

unfamiliar to them. Additionally, advisors and administrators will be able to gain a greater understanding of the reasons first-generation, undecided students have a higher attrition rate. In essence, what are the reacculturation experiences of first-generation students who are undecided about their academic major as they transition to being a part of a university?

Conceptual Framework

When students enter institutions of higher education, they are typically leaving behind one culture to join another one. Bruffee (1999) termed this process as reacculturation, which is “switching membership from one culture to another” (p. 298) and further described the actual process as “modifying or renegotiating our participation in the language, values, knowledge, and mores of the communities we come from, as well as becoming fluent in those same elements of the communities we are trying to join” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14). Before students enter higher education, they may have mastered their high school culture in which they learned how to function in that particular culture, but once these students enter college, they face an entirely new culture filled with knowledge, information, and basically, a language that they have not yet learned. It is important to note that Bruffee (1999) described reacculturation as “switching” (p. 298) and not merely transitioning between cultures. Whereas in high school, students had twelve years to learn how to speak, write, behave, and perform to a certain level of competence, institutions of higher education expect students to switch from their previous culture to their new culture, immediately and independently. Further, unlike continuing-generation students who have at least one parent who successfully completed college to serve as a translator to this new language, first-generation students often do not have

access to such cultural capital, which refers to the knowledge that students have in order to be successful in a collegiate environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

If college is viewed, then, as a culture within itself, Schein's (1993/2005) perspective on organizational culture certainly applies; "Culture will be most useful as a concept if it helps us better understand the hidden and complex aspects of organizational life" (p. 360). Students, particularly first-generation students, are lacking the cultural capital or cultural awareness to glean insight into these veiled and complicated institutions of higher education. Within this very university culture is, as Schein (1993/2005) described, "*rules of the game, shared meanings, and observed behavioral regularities when people interact*" (p. 363). Rules of the game include the understood ways of performing an act within the organization (Schein, 1993/2005). Shared meanings are a byproduct of a group's understandings formed after a period of interaction (Schein, 1993/2005). After groups consistently interact, their choice of language, customs, and traditions emerge; these unspoken rules of the game lead to shared meanings that can be easily observed by others (Schein, 1993/2005). First-generation students who are on the outside looking in at this new culture may easily notice that some students, perhaps mostly continuing-generation students, effortlessly join the university's culture. Schein (1993/2005) purposely used the word *culture* because it is concrete and implies that learning how to solve problems has been integrated within a group or community, or in the case of first-generation students, the culture of the university.

Social constructionists, such as Bruffee (1995, 1999), viewed knowledge as something that is created by one individual conversing with another. That is,

conversation serves as a vehicle for knowledge because it is constructed “interdependently by talking together” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 133). Similar to Bruffee, Rorty (1979) regarded the role of conversation “as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood” (p. 389). This shared conversation, which is similar to Schein’s (1993/2005) shared meaning, becomes a method to develop knowledge, and therefore, allows the participants opportunities to reacculturate themselves to a particular culture through conversations with each other (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). As such, when students enter institutions of higher education, they are, as Bartholomae (1985) described in his pivotal article, “Inventing the University,” learning how “to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (p. 134). Whether in the form of speaking or writing, Bartholomae (1985) posited that students are entering the higher education community, and by receiving access to this community via their college acceptance letters, are expected to engage in a higher level of discourse in comparison to their pre-collegiate culture.

Essentially, students “must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 135). Considering there is limited to no transition time to university culture and its expectations, students are forced to acclimate as quickly as possible to their new environment. With an unfamiliar discourse as an additional obstacle, students are learning how to make sense of the university culture as well as trying to become conversant in this new language, a language in which faculty and staff members are well-versed and fluent, while simultaneously trying to

determine their future academic discipline. It is not surprising, then, as to why first-generation students who are undecided are less likely to persist in the collegiate culture.

Freire (2000) argued that the process of reacculturation is virtually impossible without the actions and conversations of others. Likewise, Bruffee (1995) believed that reacculturation is an extremely challenging process, never fully completed, and even harder to do alone; “We move from group to group best in a group” (p. 14). Knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, Kuhn (1996) claimed, is the collective property of the group that constructs it. Though Bruffee (1995, 1999), Rorty (1979), and Freire (2000) do not limit their perspective on knowledge to one particular area, they, too, agree that a higher level of knowledge is achieved through collective conversations which can be applied to the reacculturation process. In order to assist with the reacculturation process, students may form *transition communities* (Bruffee, 1995, 1999), which are described as a group “in which people construct knowledge as they talk together and reach consensus” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14). These transition communities are comprised of students who are also going through the reacculturation process, such as an incoming class of first-generation students who are trying to speak the university’s language. Beginning with a smaller number of students, these transition communities will, as the level of trust increases, begin to merge with other transition communities, who have also increased their respective level of trust (Bruffee, 1999).

The support of the transition communities is important as the students strive to join the university’s *knowledge communities* (Bruffee, 1999); these knowledge communities speak the language of the new culture that students are expected to learn. Additionally, it is apparent who is not fluent in this new language and is therefore not a

member (Bruffee, 1999). For those students who successfully gain membership, this newly-acquired language has now become the normal or standard discourse of the knowledge community; “when we *speak the same language*, normal discourse is the language we speak” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 296). Foucault (1972), too, spoke of discourse as a “group of rules that are immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity” (p. 46). Students who are continuing-generation students have an easier time joining this knowledge community because their parents serve as translators of this new language spoken. *Translators*, it could be argued, “help students acquire fluency in the language of those communities” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 154).

Continuing-generation students may have an easier time joining the university because their parents serve as translators. Students who are decided majors have a “home” department; the members of which can serve as a translator and facilitator to the knowledge community. However, for students who are first-generation, undecided majors, who translates this new language? First-generation, undecided students face this unknown community with not only a new language but also with more uncertainty.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do first-generation, undecided students:
 - a. Reacculturate to the unknown academic environment of a university?
 - b. Gain access to a university’s culture?
 - c. Select translators within a university?
 - d. Form transition communities within a university?
 - e. Use academic advisors as translators?

2. What support should universities offer to assist first-generation, undecided students as they reacculturate to their academic environment?

Design of the Study

Because the researcher was interested in learning how first-generation, undecided students construct meaning through knowledge communities as well as understanding their particular experiences, she conducted a qualitative study utilizing a social constructivism lens; phenomenological research allowed the researcher to learn how the participants made meaning of their experience (Creswell, 2014). Since a qualitative study calls for the researcher to be the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014), she realized it was critical to follow ethical practices so that her participants trusted the research process (Wurtz, 2011). Through her coursework, the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Institute (CITI) basic course and reflected upon the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Code of Ethics (2011). Prior to collecting data, the researcher received Institutional Review Board approval at her case study site as well as the doctoral granting university; she also sought additional guidance and clarification from her dissertation advisor.

Setting

Missouri State University, a public, four-year, comprehensive, residential, selective admissions institution, was founded in 1905. With approximately 24,000 students in attendance, Missouri State University is the state's second largest university. In 1995, Missouri State University received a public affairs designation, which indicates a university-wide commitment for faculty, staff, and students to engage within their communities, heighten their cultural awareness, and demonstrate ethical leadership.

When first time new in college students apply to Missouri State University, they have several opportunities to declare their major: (a) on the initial admission application, (b) at Student Orientation, Advisement, and Registration (SOAR), which is the university's two-day orientation program for incoming students, and (c) any time after SOAR. Students are assigned their advisor based upon declaration of major. Missouri State University has a split-level model of advising: students who declare their major are advised within their department, and students who remain undecided are advised within the Academic Advisement Center until they declare their major. Students must declare and be admitted to a degree program by the time they have 75 credit hours, or they will have a hold which prevents registration.

Participants

The researcher focused upon first-generation students who were undecided. For fall 2014, there were 138 undecided, first-generation students who registered for SOAR. For fall 2015, there were approximately 153 undecided, first-generation students who registered for SOAR. It is important to note that not all first-time new in college students attend SOAR; for instance, students who are classified as non-traditional, that is, over the age of 22, and/or married, and/or have children, are exempt from SOAR and instead attend an optional orientation offered by Adult Student Services.

For the qualitative study, 35 participants, including 7 males and 28 females, were selected using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). The researcher consulted with the director of the Academic Advisement Center to gain gatekeeper consent in order to observe advising sessions and with the director of TRiO to hold her focus group. She

invited her former students to participate in interviews and gained individual consent to use writings.

Data Collection Tools

Because a qualitative inquiry is based in a participant's natural environment, in this case, the university setting, the data collection utilized an exploratory approach (Creswell, 2014). The researcher selected a constructivist approach because it allowed for meaning to be shaped by seeking a greater understanding of the world (Creswell, 2014); this constructivist approach was a fitting complement to the selected reacculturation framework in order for the researcher to construct meaning for her study. Since the researcher served as the primary data collection instrument in a qualitative study, she was cognizant of the ethical considerations that were factored into the study. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of any information that was collected, the researcher triangulated her data by utilizing different data collection methods, which included observations, focus groups, interviews, writings, and a practitioner's log. She also took fieldnotes and transcribed all recordings (Merriam, 2009).

Observations. Based upon the available data collection opportunities, the researcher observed nine advising sessions, in which advisor and student consent was received (Creswell, 2014). In order to collect the most accurate data, the researcher understood the importance in becoming a *skilled observer* (Merriam, 2009) and developed an *observation protocol* (Merriam, 2009) to aid in that process (see Appendix A). During these observations, the researcher was careful to take *fieldnotes* or *jottings* (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Jottings are described as “a brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 29)

and then transposed these jottings into finely detailed fieldnotes containing *thick descriptions* (Emerson et al., 2011). The researcher used these thick descriptions in order to reflect and to process her research (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews. The researcher conducted 14 interviews with students; Merriam (2009) indicated that interviewing serves as the primary source for qualitative data. In order to follow ethical practices and procedures, the researcher created an informed consent sheet that was signed by the interview participants (see Appendix B). Since the researcher was cognizant of the fact that she had *insider status* (Drake & Heath, 2011) due to conducting research at her place of employment, the informed consent sheet was particularly important in order to maintain a transparent and ethical data-collection process. The researcher followed a *semi-structured interview process* (Merriam, 2009) as it allowed for some sense of flexibility within the questioning process (see Appendix C). Part of that needed flexibility allowed for *probing* (Merriam, 2009) questions which occurred so the researcher could glean additional information about an unforeseen topic that emerges. An additional ethical safeguard that the researcher engaged in was the transcription of the recorded interviews and focus group; this process also allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the material (Merriam, 2009).

Focus groups. Unlike interviews which allowed for singularly focusing upon one individual, focus groups allowed participants to share their information with each other while also allowing the researcher a chance for gaining a better understanding of the topic than might be garnered from one or two individuals (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The very act of socially discussing the topic and creating individual responses that may be enhanced or modified by other participants' responses is a *constructivist* (Merriam, 2009,

p. 92) approach, which seemed appropriate. Due to student scheduling availability, only one focus group was conducted and included five participants, which followed Krueger and Casey's (2009) recommendation of 5 to 10 participants for optimal focus group composition. As with the interview process, the researcher distributed informed consent sheets (see Appendix D) as well as transcribed the participants' conversations (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The semi-structured focus group guide (see Appendix E) included the following (a) welcome, (b) overview of the research topic, (c) ground rules, (d) different levels of questions, and (e) wrap up (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The researcher took jottings (Emerson et al., 2011) as a method to triangulate the data (Merriam, 2009).

Open-ended questionnaire. The researcher realized that she would not be able to interview or conduct focus groups with all first-generation, undecided students, so she increased her data collection by distributing an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix F) to her first-year seminar for first-generation, undecided students. Open-ended questions allowed for participants to provide more information than close-ended questions (Merriam, 2009). To avoid a conflict of interest, the researcher offered the open-ended questionnaire as one of several extra credit opportunities. Twenty-one students consented to share their open-ended questionnaires as well as additional writings for the researcher's data collection.

Practitioner's log. Because the researcher was teaching one first-year seminar course dedicated for first-generation, undecided students, she had multiple opportunities to glean more insight. Additionally, the researcher conducted two rounds of one-to-one conferences with each of her students during the semester. Each conference lasted approximately 15 minutes and occurred during weeks 2 and 11 during the semester. By

maintaining an electronic file, the researcher collected some excerpts from students' writings as well as included jottings (Emerson et al., 2011) from her classroom observations and conversations (see Appendix G).

Data Analysis

The researcher took detailed fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2011) during her observations, and repeatedly reviewed those notes along with student writings and her practitioner's log. After conducting interviews and holding the focus group, the researcher transcribed the materials. Upon completing the transcription process, the researcher listened through the recording one last time to ensure as much accuracy as possible. Using preexisting or a priori coding (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016) allowed the findings to be in alignment with the selected framework that organized data into categories marked by the research questions. In vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) provided a richness to the findings because the codes "honor[ed] the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106) and is often "applicable to action and practitioner research" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106). Finally, the observations, writings, and practitioner's log added to the overall triangulation of data (Merriam, 2009).

Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls

Considering that definitions for first-generation students vary, the researcher selected the most common version (Petty, 2014) and realized that this decision may have affected her data yield as well as inaccurate classifications since first-generation status was self-reported. Notably, the researcher did not collect data from first-generation, undecided students in the Honors College or Adult Student Services. Due to the preferred targeted completion date, the researcher recognized that, while striving to reach

data saturation (Merriam, 2009), she was not able to interview as many individual students or conduct as many focus groups as she would have if this were a multi-year project. As such, the researcher was aware that her findings cannot be overly generalized. The researcher was cognizant of her own biases with the research topic, as she, too, was a first-generation, undecided student, and the site selection was her own employer (Creswell, 2014). Though ethical procedures were followed, there was still a chance that the research study may have been compromised. Finally, the researcher assumed the students she interviewed were forthcoming in their response to the open-ended questions that were asked. Ultimately, though, the researcher believed that her data collection readily contributed to answering the research questions and will serve as beneficial information for the organization.

Findings

Data collection analysis produced themes congruent with the reacculturation framework. Using the research questions as a guide, the findings are organized accordingly. Therefore, the reacculturation experiences and ways to access the university's culture are explored. Next, selecting translators, forming transition communities, and using academic advisors as translators are shared. The findings conclude with insight into additional support students feel they need in order to help with their reacculturation experience. Further, the poignancy of the reacculturation experience is captured utilizing the participants' voices attributed with pseudonyms.

Reacculturating to the Unknown University Academic Environment

While starting a new chapter in their lives, first-generation, undecided students described their experience as stressful because their environment no longer included their

familiar translators. Throughout their previous academic career, students had the security of their families to help address issues and questions. Students reacculturating to this unknown environment, one filled with college applications, financial aid applications, and major selection, marked a new journey.

During the 14 interviews, the word *stressed* appeared 98 times with 19 instances explicitly related to undecided status and 15 instances explicitly related to first-generation status; 10 of 14 interviewees specifically mentioned feeling stressed about their first-generation and undecided status. Nine of 21 student writings mentioned feeling stressed—as the first one in their family to attend college or as an increasing awareness that they need to decide upon their academic major selection or, in some instances, both. In addition to interviews, two of five focus group participants mentioned feeling some sort of stress and/or anxiety. Likewise, six of nine advising observations revealed students experiencing stress.

“I do it on my own.” As they wrestled through their Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA), first-generation, undecided students were already experiencing the first indicators that their parents’ roles as translators (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) may have ceased. In 13 of 14 interviews, students mentioned a high level of stress involved as they worked on their FAFSA, as Stephanie depicted:

My mom would [help] if she could... Since they haven't done it, they don't know what to do. It's not like my mom wouldn't want to help me, but she doesn't know anything. She tried with what she could, but she didn't even know how to complete the FAFSA....Last semester was very stressful having to deal with the loans, but I am getting the hang of it. I do it on my own. (Stephanie, 82-86)

Similarly, the college application process, including ACT registration, was “*a foreign concept to do as my parents had no idea. Now they have a better grip on things, but it just takes experience*” (Regina, 40-41). Students were expected to know their academic focus for the next four years starting with the completion of their college application.

“You are behind before things even get started.” Conversations with their parents, particularly about coursework and internships, simply did not exist for many first-generation, undecided students. Additionally, there was a growing realization the allotted time to select a major was dwindling. In fact, four of the nine advising observations included some discussion of major selection. Before they even started their collegiate career, first-generation, undecided students were aware that they needed to select a major as well as realized that their parents may not have informed them about the process, as seen in Rianna’s words:

Because at first you are a first-generation college student, and your parents didn’t go to college, so...your literacy rate is a little different. And then if you are undecided, then that is one more thing that is dragging you down. You are behind before things even started. As a first-generation college student, you keep asking yourself, what are you going to do, but you can’t go to your parents about it because they have no idea what you are even doing in college. (Rianna, 237-244)

Being undecided can make such an impact on students’ daily college experiences and escalate the stress level as some students admitted to thinking about their possible major “*every single day*” (Ashley, 79). Other students felt that the selection of a major was an important decision, a decision they did not take lightly.

“What’s your major?” asks the counter person. A popular icebreaker question is “what’s your major,” as Macy shared in her writing, *“One of the first questions new people ask is, ‘What are you majoring in?’ I always have to say I am undecided. Explaining I do not know what I want to do with my life has not been easy”* (15-17). The question is routinely asked of college students, as 10 of 14 students interviewed indicated, and serves as a burdensome reminder of not knowing. In her writing, Bethany addressed the dreaded “what’s your major” question:

Undecided. That's my major, my burden, my least favorite topic to discuss. The truth is, I have not known what I wanted to do with my life since third grade when I decided I did not have a knack for interior design. I have wracked my brain for hours on end, and I always come up empty handed. When people ask me this question it stresses me out. (Bethany, writing 1-4)

The impact that this icebreaker question can have on first-generation, undecided students’ level of concern, frustration, and stress can vary, as depicted by Thomas:

For a while, I was timid about saying I was undecided, and then I decided I was going to say it loudly and confidently, and now I don’t have the energy to keep saying it anymore. The last time I went to [a coffee house] I was asked “what’s your major?” by the counter person. (Thomas, 117-119)

Similarly, multiple students commented that their families would repeatedly ask about their major selection process; *“the only thing about being undecided is every time you see your family they ask if you have decided yet”* (Regina, writing 18-19). Students’ responses to their first-generation, undecided status was almost heartfelt, as Thomas suddenly expressed, *“Because you don’t have family who can reciprocate those feelings,*

those stresses. You can say that you are really stressed about not having a major, but who knows what that feels like” (Thomas, 273-275).

Whether in the form of college applications or financial aid applications, students experienced some level of stress before the first day of college. For many students, completing the FAFSA was their first indication that life would be different. Checking undecided as their academic major on their college application officially signaled another lack of certainty, which would only continue to be emphasized each time someone would ask about their major selection status.

Gaining Access to the Culture

First-generation, undecided students intuitively realized that the collegiate environment would be different somehow. The desire to maintain some sense of familiarity while experiencing an unknown culture was a shared phenomenon. By achieving a comfortable living environment, making new friends, and participating in Welcome Weekend, students were able to gain access to the ever-elusive university culture.

Significantly, 15 of 35 students mentioned *comfy* and *comfortable* when recalling their first days on campus — it was extremely important that they, as quickly as possible, make this unique environment ordinary. As a result, the barren residence hall rooms became the first on-campus challenge to conquer. Claiming their space and filling it with trinkets that reminded them of the familiar life they left behind to enter this unique one, nine students during their interviews, and six other students in their writings mentioned these seemingly every day occurrences

Finding safety in numbers, 10 students revealed they latched onto either high school friends who were now roommates or to other residence hall students during the weekend before classes started. Leaving their residence hall room open and hoping that someone would enter to fill the empty void was a shared feeling. The desire to feel *comfy* quickly went beyond the residence halls as students shared the need to locate their classrooms before the semester kicked off. Echoing that sentiment, students looked for friendly and approachable faces within their classes. A sense of accomplishment and pride occurred when they felt comfortable enough on campus to embark on a new semester's quest for classroom locations, alone.

In all 14 interviews, students indicated they participated in some aspect of Welcome Weekend, the weekend prior to classes that is full of engaging activities, and found it to be helpful in their gaining access to university culture. Usually with their roommate or with someone whom they already knew, students attended the fun festivities with the purpose to meet new people. Welcome Weekend served as the initial tip off that students needed to leave the comfortableness and familiarity of their residence hall. First-generation, undecided students gained access by initially making their new environment comfortable then continuing to step outside their comfort zone to meet new people.

Selecting University Translators

First-generation, undecided students had to quickly reacculturate to the unknown aspect of the university. The routine habit of asking their families for assistance had simultaneously come to a close as the door to college opened. As a result, first-

generation, undecided students had to rely upon different translators, which included roommates, self, and instructors.

“The most crucial piece of home...turned out to be my roommate.” Seven of 35 students mentioned their roommate was instrumental in serving as their translator, and in all seven instances, the roommate was either a sophomore or a continuing-generation student. Due to accessibility and convenience, students indicated when they had questions, they asked their roommates. Students found their roommates to be a source of information as well as comforting reassurance. Conversely, several students who had first-generation roommates expressed that *“it’s kinda nice knowing that my roommate feels stressed, too”* (Regina, 198-199) because it helped to validate their feelings of uncertainty and stress. Yet, they were reluctant to ask their roommates’ questions so as not to increase their anxiety in not knowing the answer, either.

“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own.” Perhaps because first-generation, undecided students had to navigate their way through the FAFSA and the college application process they became resourceful and more observant as a result. For example, Sam shared during his interview that he would read the university bulletin boards to learn information about campus. Likewise, Bethany honed her observation skills during the first few weeks, by *“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own. I think of myself as someone who sits back and listens rather than speak, so I like to observe”* (Bethany, 30-32). In fact, this ability, whether by preference or not, to figure out the answer by researching or by observing other students was a common theme shared by approximately half of students interviewed and demonstrated in three of nine observations.

“A teacher’s help is great.” The single most useful resource was the first-year seminar, which was mentioned 26 times throughout interviews, focus group, and writings. This particular first-year seminar section was designated for first-generation, undecided students. It should be noted as a limitation, though, the researcher was the instructor for students who were interviewed and who shared their writings. One first-year seminar assignment that was overwhelmingly cited as helpful was interviewing an instructor. Because talking to an instructor can be a daunting and unknown experience, students found it, perhaps ironically, helpful to be required to do so. In a way, it forced students to do something that they knew they *should* do but did not *want* to do. If it was not a requirement, many students shared that they would not have sought out their instructors, as John posited in his writing,

This class has taught me that teachers actually do care about you and they are willing to work with you and help you. This helped me get through my public speaking class when we had that instructor interview. After that interview, I met with my teacher at least three more times. A teacher’s help is great. I probably would not have spoken to my public speaking teacher without that assignment.

(John, writing 22-26)

In summation, first-generation, undecided students learned to rely upon different translators to help their reacculturation process. Some first-generation, undecided students had easy access to their roommates who had already reacculturated due to their sophomore or continuing-generation status. Becoming accustomed to having to find their own information, students heightened their self-reliance. Finally, reaching out to form relationships with their instructors proved helpful.

Forming Transition Communities

Upon entering college, first-generation, undecided students were naturally concerned with making friends and sustaining the friendships that they had. While students understood the importance of getting involved as a means of becoming connected to the university, they did not know how. From their friends and the first-year seminar course, many students formed transition communities, which offset some stress, as they reacculturated. Some students participated in university-sanctioned organizations and an almost equivalent number opted not to participate.

“I could cling to her [best friend].” Making friends served as an initial transition community that also included friends who had college-experienced parents. In fact, in all 14 interviews, students emphasized they were extremely concerned about making friends. In particular, students who lived their entire lives knowing everyone in their school and town had doubts of even knowing how to make friends. Likewise, for students who described themselves as shy being surrounded by many people in a strange place was, at times, overwhelming as they were torn between needing to get out of their rooms to meet people and wanting to stay in their safe spaces between four walls. As 19 of 21 students’ writings and/or interviews revealed, friends also served as a means for gathering information; Ashley shared, *“I could cling to her [best friend]”* (Ashley, 143).

“And I knew that I was normal.” For 15 of 21 first-generation, undecided students in the specialized first-year seminar section designed for this particular population, they voluntarily indicated that it was helpful knowing there were similar students as they became part of a transition community (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) and explored university life, with all of its unknowns, together. Regina reflected in her

writing that she thought a class dedicated for only first-generation, undecided students would have only a few students because she was alone in her status. She was relieved upon seeing an entire class filled with other first-generation, undecided students, as she mused, *“When I walked into GEP, I saw a lot of students, and I knew that I was normal”* (Regina, writing 9-10).

“I needed a community of people to walk through college with.” Once initial friendships were made, students turned their attention to expanding their circle of friends. For some students, joining a sorority or fraternity was an instant way to meet people and make new connections, as Jennifer expressed, *“I needed a community of people to walk through college with. I had my high school friends, but I wanted to branch out and meet more people. So, I joined a sorority”* (Jennifer, writing 14-16). Five of 18 women via interviews or writings shared that they joined a sorority, and felt a strong bond and level of trust with their sorority sisters. However, two women shared that joining a sorority may actually have prevented them from making other friends outside of their declared social group. Three male students did not join a fraternity, and their reasoning, captured by John, can be summed up: *“I was not into joining a fraternity, and in my opinion, I thought it was like I was paying for my friends. I know some people join one, but it’s definitely not for me”* (John, 133-134).

“It’s easier to feel stupid with other people.” For other students, having the automatic friend group that is a byproduct of joining an organized university group can be reassuring, both to students and families. Three of 21 students were members of either band or an athletic sporting team, so in addition to moving on campus one week early, they had an organized group of people already pre-established and included freshmen to

seniors. Both women in band commented independently but in exact words, “it’s easier to feel stupid with other people” (Cassidy, 338; Mackenzie, 111). Four of the 21 students joined a university-sanctioned organization after they arrived.

“I didn’t join any clubs this year, and I really regret that.” Whether it was from not knowing how to get involved or not finding the right organization or wanting to get their academic priorities figured out first, nine of 21 students did not disclose participation in university-sanctioned organizations their first semester. Students did acknowledge the benefit and importance of widening their circle of friends, as Sam shared in his writing: *“I didn’t join any clubs this year, and I really regret that. I should have got myself more involved but focusing on my grades was a little more important”* (Sam, writing 17-19).

Briefly stated, students created friendships as the primary form of transition communities. By sharing first-generation and undecided status, students indicated the specialized first-year seminar served as a valuable transition community. In smaller numbers, students formed transition communities by joining university-sanctioned organizations, including sororities and clubs, while an almost equivalent amount of students did not join organizations.

Using Academic Advisors as Translators

At the university, all students who have fewer than 75 credit hours are required to meet with their advisor for a registration release. As established employees, advisors have the insider status (Drake & Heath, 2011) and, consequently, can serve as translators. However, for first-generation, undecided students, the very role of an academic advisor is an unknown concept. Students are unsure how to utilize academic advisors beyond

course registration assistance. Thus, students tended to ask other individuals as well as explore the university website to find answers.

“I knew it [academic advising role] was like a high school counselor.” Before students ascertain how an advisor can help navigate their academic journey, they need to understand an advisor’s role. Of 11 students who were asked if they understood an advisor’s role, only one student indicated yes. When probed to describe the role, she equated it to a high school counselor and was not certain, as seen in her response: *“I actually did know about an advisor from the older friends who go here. I knew it was like a high school counselor. I pretty much knew, but I am not for certain now”* (Ashley, 173-174). Other students knew that they were assigned an advisor but did not comprehend the reason.

Approximately half of the students indicated they were unsure of valuable advising conversations to have, as seen in Cassidy’s written comment, *“He’s a very nice man, and I’m sure I’ll be talking to him more in the future, but, for now, I don’t really know what I would talk to him about besides classes”* (Cassidy 8-10). Further, many students indicated they had not spoken to their advisors about study skills or career interests, only class selection. Summer shared her hesitancy towards her possible major with her advisor and felt even more confused:

I told my advisor I was second guessing my major, and he didn’t really know what to say to me. I felt lost. If he doesn’t know what I should do, and I don’t know what I should do, then it is hard. (Summer, 299-302)

Whereas other students felt frustrated when they met with their advisor to discuss specific classes for a particular major if the advisor only shared information that was on the

website, as Izaac indicated, “*she just tells me stuff that I can look up. I don’t think it has been that helpful or that I needed it*” (Izaac, 110-111).

“And then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor.” Eighteen of 19 students indicated “no” when asked, “Did your academic advisor assist you with your transition to the university?” One student mentioned she had seen her advisor several times for selecting classes and troubleshooting academic weaknesses. The other 18 students had only met with their assigned advisor for the required one visit, granting that next semester’s sought-after advisor release. In nearly every instance, students described their advising visit much like Sam did, “*I feel like my advisor didn’t ask me if I was struggling or needed help with anything. It was just talking about classes. Like a class registration, but nothing beyond that*” (Sam, 194-197). Equally common, students indicated their academic advisor was not the first or second or even third choice whom they would seek information from, as Thomas responded with, “*I probably start with my roommate. If I still have the question, I will probably turn to my other friends, and then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor*” (Thomas, 310-312).

In fact, it was not until the researcher specifically asked about their advising experience was an advisor mentioned. Ironically, most of the students described their academic advisor as *nice, friendly, or sweet*; no student described their advisor as intimidating or unapproachable. Further, several students recalled their advisor sending an email after midterms either to congratulate them upon their grades or to direct them to appropriate campus resources.

“If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn’t work.”

Paradoxically, students seemed to want more of a relationship with their advisor, but they

were not sure either what to expect or how to initiate it. Students appeared to have some idea that advising can be useful, yet they did not seek additional advising appointments or explore other topics to discuss. Corroborating the writings and interview conversations, in all nine advising observations, the students asked only the question that prompted their appointment. In all nine advising observations, the advisor asked the student if he or she had any other questions, but the student did not ask additional questions. During his interview, Thomas recounted his experience:

Part of it is having questions and part of it is not knowing what questions to ask....It's becoming an adult, and you are becoming more responsible, but it helps if you have somebody holding you accountable. If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn't work — you are going to slip. Maybe it would be good if first generation students were required to meet with their advisor more than one time during the semester. If I had to do it, I would have done it. I think people like me could really use an advisor holding us accountable. (Thomas, 346-353)

Perhaps because first-generation, undecided students were unsure of what the role of an advisor was they did not seek their help. Uncertainty as to which topics and conversations to have with their advisor prevented students from realizing the assistance an academic advisor could provide. Equating an advisement session as a course registration release was a common misconception.

Additional Support Students Identified as Helpful for Reacculturation Experience

First-generation students who are undecided majors experience a reacculturation process that may be different from continuing-generation, declared majors or continuing-generation undecided majors or first-generation, undecided majors because of their overall lack of certainty, both with the college environment and with the academic discipline. Perhaps because of the dual level of uncertainty, students had difficulties in conveying what additional resources would be the most helpful when asked the question, “What support do you still need as a college student?” Students’ responses, though varied, did indicate a continued sense of not knowing what support options there might be. Students also expressed a desire to move in to campus earlier and an appreciation for faculty’s support.

“As a first-gen... I don’t know what support I need.” Of the 14 interviews and five focus group participants, 10 students initially responded with not knowing what additional support might be helpful, as seen in Bobbi’s comment, *“In all honesty as a first-generation college student, I don’t know what types of support I need. Maybe I have not been here long enough to know what support options there might be”* (Bobbi, 151-152). Upon thinking about different types of university support, students did share some thoughts, including Bobbi. She paused before responding with scholarship application assistance because she felt completely overwhelmed with having to navigate the process herself. The five focus group participants did not have any suggestions to share that pertained to campus support as their comments were more focused upon building a friend base. The remaining four students had difficulties in trying to recall what support would

have been particularly helpful during the first few weeks of the fall semester though the question was not limited to assistance needed during first semester.

“I wished I would have moved in a few days earlier.” Six students indicated that it would have been advantageous if they could have moved to campus a few days earlier in the week to allow more time to feel *comfortable* before classes started. The two students in band and one in athletics did move to campus one week earlier, and one student who was on a Living-Learning Community floor was allowed to move to campus on Thursday; the remaining students moved in Friday through Sunday. Ariella, who moved in on Friday, expressed a desire that was shared with five other students who expressly indicated an advantage to moving in earlier, as seen in the following:

When I moved in, I wished I would have moved in a few days earlier, if that was even an option, I don't know. There were a lot of things going on the weekend before classes started. For a new freshmen coming here, they would want to do everything, but it's easy to feel overwhelmed and tired. I didn't want to go to BearBash after spending so much time moving my stuff and getting things arranged and everything else that I had to do. Having a few days before classes started, you would have more time to walk around and get situated. (Ariella, 221-225)

Students discussed the hectic nature of the campus move in process along with the time needed to get *situated* and *comfortable*. Particularly for the students who did not move to campus until Saturday or Sunday, they mentioned the heightened anxiety that they attributed to feeling behind other students who were already settled in to their residence halls.

“...[My instructor] told me that she was there for me.” While not in direct response to the question, “what support do you still need as a college student,” seven of 14 students interviewed indicated they liked knowing that faculty were willing to help them learn the academic culture. For instance, Regina, who at first did not openly disclose to her friends that she was a first-generation student, met with her instructor to discuss her athletic travel plans and surprised herself when she divulged to her instructor that she was a first-generation student, as noted in the following:

I am not really sure [why I disclosed my first-generation status]. Maybe it was in case I was struggling. As it is, I am not really sure what was going on, and there is just so much to know...and my family is five hours away. It was nice when she told me that she was there for me. (Regina, 155-156)

Pertaining to their academic advisor, four students directly mentioned that they would like for their advisor to reach out to them more often, but then followed up that comment with an uncertainty as to what the advisors would do or say. Two students specifically indicated that it would be helpful if there was an office dedicated to first-generation students, so they could have one person to go to with questions over the summer instead of relying on the Internet, “*random movies or TV shows*” (Bethany, 241).

Overall, first-generation, undecided students seemed to continue their pattern in not fully ascertaining the academic environment and its expectations when discussing additional possible support options. For most students, they had a difficult time trying to articulate what additional support might prove helpful. Other students shared that the possibility of moving in to campus earlier seems advantageous and having instructors who are interested in helping them learn about the academic culture are appreciated.

Summary of Findings

First-generation students who are undecided majors tend to lack the cultural capital that continuing-generation students possess, including family members who speak the university language (Bartholomae, 1985) and serve as translators. As such, these students may have different reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) experiences, including a high level of stress and anxiety often initiated with completing college applications and financial aid applications before the repeatedly asked “what’s your major” question begins. Becoming comfortable both within and beyond the residence halls were paramount with students’ reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Selecting their roommates and instructors along with increased self-reliance, students discovered their university translators within their newly-formed transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Finally, though possessing insider status (Drake & Heath, 2011) and fitting to Bruffee’s concept of translators, academic advisors are not viewed as translators by students, mainly because of the uncertainty of their role. This repeated pattern of uncertainty is continued in students’ thoughts on additional campus support though they did share a desire to move in to campus earlier as well as an appreciation for instructors who express an interest in assisting first-generation students acclimate to the unknown university culture.

Recommendations

Based upon the study’s findings, recommendations are presented that would further benefit the university’s support of first-generation, undecided students. Though there are multiple ideas, the recommendations presented in this report stem from the findings and align with the conceptual framework. Further, the recommendations are

separated into categories that correspond with necessary partnering campus offices and affiliations.

Provost's Academic Advising Council

Reviewing the Missouri State website and policy library reveals that the language used tends to focus upon advising as a means for students to receive a registration release, as seen in the following: “Undergraduate students who have less than 75 earned undergraduate credit hours are required to obtain advisor release prior to registration. Graduate students must also obtain advisor release prior to registration each semester” (Missouri State University, 2016g). Currently, there is no policy labeled “advising policy” within Missouri State University’s Policy Library, and the placement of the aforementioned quote is located within the Policy Library’s Chapter Three — Academic Policies — Registration, Op3.04-39 (Missouri State University, 2016g). Because students tend to equate advising with a registration release, the Provost’s Academic Advising Council could create an advising policy recommendation using language that underscores advising is more than a release. The Provost’s Academic Advising Council could follow the procedures outlined in the Policy Library and would comprise creating a policy that, while including the current information, also features the value of academic advising. Once the Provost’s Academic Advising Council is satisfied with their suggested policy revision, the next step is to receive feedback from the provost. Should the provost agree with the suggested proposal for policy revision, he would seek the approval from the president, who would then authorize the revision for general council (Missouri State University, 2016g).

In order to help students not view advisors as registration assistants, the Provost's Academic Advising Council could create a list of questions for first-year students to ask their advisor, or the advisor could provide students with the list of questions either before or during their advising appointment. This way, students could review the list of questions or list of topics to see which ones might be helpful for them to have answered or to discuss. It would behoove not only students but also the university to view advisors as translators who can assist students with their reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Perhaps if students had more interaction with their advisor than the one required semester visit, they might recognize the benefits of having a required university translator available to assist them with their reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). For instance, one study by Swecker et al., (2013) demonstrated that "the number of advisor meetings provided a significant predictor of student retention. Findings from this study suggest that for every meeting with an advisor the odds of retention increase by 13%" (p. 51). Increasing the number of advising contacts each semester, which may not be possible with all students due to the increased work load, may not only improve students' reacculturation experiences but also increase their likelihood to remain at the university.

Academic Advisement Center

The Academic Advisement Center is comprised of academic advisors who are dedicated to helping undecided students select a major that meets their academic and life goals. Though the academic advisors typically share their advising syllabus during the first week of fall semester, students may not take the time to read the informative syllabus that clearly explains the suggested expectations of both advisor and advisee. Therefore, the advisors may want to consider holding a "meet your advisor" social early in the fall

semester which would allow both advisors and advisees to interact with each other as well as an opportunity for students to forge a relationship with their assigned translator.

Another option might be for the Academic Advisement Center to offer exploratory major programs in which different departmental advisors could be featured to present an overview of their major as well as career options. Offering a panel of current students or former students to share how they selected their major and their subsequent career path might also benefit first-generation, undecided students. As an added benefit, the various programs would offer more opportunities for students to interact with their advisors. Likewise, advisors could strongly encourage their first-time new in college first-generation advisees to visit with them early in the fall semester. Preparing for this visit by closely reviewing the BCSSE (Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement), advisors would have talking points already outlined. Particular areas of concern might be foreshadowed by students' perceived study plans as well as their commitment to graduating from Missouri State University.

MSU: I'm First

Stemming from the Center for Student Opportunity, I'm First is an online community designed to offer first-generation college students and their families additional support during their pre-collegiate and collegiate career (I'm First, 2016). Missouri State University submitted an application and was accepted to become a designated I'm First College Partner. To become a College Partner, Missouri State University had to demonstrate commitment to first-generation students. To showcase Missouri State University's commitment to first-generation students, it could host a one-day state conference, which would provide opportunities for other institutions of higher

education to share information and strategies that have been deemed helpful. Conference sessions could be planned that highlight institutions' respective expertise areas.

MSU: I'm First was founded by two first-generation students along with the organization's faculty advisor. Since its inception, MSU: I'm First has grown to approximately 35 student members along with approximately 15 faculty/staff members who have volunteered to serve as mentors to first-generation students. This relatively new organization offers both academic and social events for first-generation students and faculty/staff mentors. MSU: I'm First collaborated with the Provost Fellow for Student Success and the Foundation Scholarship Coordinator to offer five hands-on scholarship workshops in which approximately 100 first-generation students participated. While these workshops were very helpful for students, other workshops could also be developed. It became clear while presenting these workshops that students were struggling with writing their personal statements, so offering a workshop that assists students with their personal statement would also increase their odds of receiving scholarship funds, which would mitigate any stress associated with finances. These hands-on workshops could also expand to include learning how to research effectively, not only for academic courses but also for career exploration.

New Student and Family Programs

New Student and Family Programs coordinates the summer orientation program designed for both students and families. On day two of SOAR (Student Orientation, Advisement, and Registration), one of the featured breakout sessions could offer a first-generation option for families and/or students. This session could focus upon sharing insider tips as well as provide an overview of first-generation resources. Additionally,

families and students would have an opportunity to ask questions surrounded with other individuals who are also experiencing this unknown environment.

New Student and Family Programs offers a family newsletter and blog. One of the features of the newsletter might be a first-generation corner, in which a small segment of the newsletter could offer information that might be particularly helpful to first-generation families. Since so many first-generation students tend to be self-reliant, they would benefit from a website that contained useful information that was captured in one location.

Residence Life, Housing, and Dining Services

Similar to band and some designated sports' early move in, students who are first-generation would greatly benefit by having additional time to acclimate to the university before classes begin. If first-year, first-generation students could move in by at least Wednesday before classes begin Monday, support programming could be created to help orient students to campus culture as well as to form early transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). "Bridge to Bear" or otherwise aptly-named program could be a combination of both academic support and co-curricular engagement and be one to two days long.

Academic support could include the following: overview that provides a brief history of Missouri State University as well as organizational structure, glossary of university terms and language, panel of faculty that allows students to gain a first-hand understanding of academic expectations, panel of successful first-generation students that share insider tips, and panel of academic advisors that communicate ways to develop relationships with their assigned translator. Co-curricular support could include the

following: overview of Office of Student Engagement to inform students not only about university involvement opportunities but also how to get involved, overview of Community Involvement and Service to enlighten students that service is a great way to explore various areas of interest, including future careers; and overview of the Career Center to encourage students to begin making the meaningful connection from college to career. Evening activities could include campus tours to find that semester's classes, campus shuttle tours to help students learn the different shuttle routes, and downtown Springfield tours to showcase the extended campus. Ideally, throughout the program, opportunities would exist for students to increase their access to translators by informally interacting with faculty and staff, perhaps who were also first-generation college students themselves.

Pertaining to housing assignments, students shared that their roommates, if either a sophomore or continuing-generation student, are one of their primary translators for campus information. While perhaps not ideal to assign every first-generation student with a continuing-generation student, intentional placement could then be assessed to determine if there is a correlation to first-generation students' reacculturation. Another option might be to have a living-learning community floor for first-generation students. While first-generation students shared that they did not necessarily ask questions to their first-generation roommates for concern of causing stress, having a residence hall floor that is specifically designed to fulfill the needs of first-generation students may prove useful as students form transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999).

First-Year Programs

Since the first-year seminar course was found to be the main university-sanctioned entity that served as students' transition community, class sizes should be reduced from 32 students to 25 students; this decrease in section size would allow for a greater sense of community, which would then improve students' reacculturation. Specialized first-generation sections should continue to be offered, but first-generation students should be given the option if they wish to take a specialized or non-specialized section. To assist students with their awareness of university-sanctioned events and offerings, first-year seminar instructors could create an assignment to have students explore different student organizations and activities. Likewise, first-year seminar instructors could create an assignment to have students interview a university translator, such as an instructor or academic advisor.

Summary

Each year, first-generation, undecided students enter the university with substantial obstacles to overcome, including deficits in academic preparation (Padgett et al., 2012), cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008), financial security (Cushman, 2007), family support (Barry et al., 2009), and peer support (Dennis et al., 2005) as well as an uncertainty towards their academic major selection (Cuseo, 2005). Not surprisingly, then, first-generation, undecided students have a higher level of attrition than continuing-generation students with declared majors. Using Bruffee's *Reacculturation* (1995, 1999) as a framework provides a new vocabulary for universities to consider when discussing the needs of these students as well as offer a way to view retention. Data collection methods, which included observations, focus group, interviews, writings, and

practitioner's log, led to findings. Findings revealed heightened feelings of stress, desire to feel comfortable on campus, reliance upon continuing-generation friends, hesitation towards joining student organizations, helpfulness of specialized first-year seminar course, and uncertainty towards advisor's role. Additionally, findings revealed students' overall uncertainty in conveying what additional support might be useful—they seemed to know that additional support might be useful, but they were uncertain as to what that support might be. Specifically, though, students had an interest and perceived benefit to move in to campus earlier and appreciation for their faculty who were willing to teach them about academic culture and its expectations. As a result, recommendations include ways to possibly increase students' familiarity with university expectations, campus resources and connections as well as to hopefully increase students' understanding of academic majors and the role of advisement.

CHAPTER FIVE:
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

First-Generation Students with Undecided Majors:

A Qualitative Study of University Reacculturation

Tracey Glaessgen
Missouri State University
First-Year Programs
901 S. National Ave.
Springfield, Missouri 65897
417-836-8343
TraceyGlaessgen@MissouriState.edu
Lead author

Dr. Cynthia J. MacGregor
Missouri State University
Counseling Leadership & Special Ed
901 S. National Ave.
Springfield, Missouri 65897
417-836-6046
CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu

Dr. Jeffrey Cornelius-White
Missouri State University
Counseling Leadership and Special Ed
901. S. National Ave.
Springfield, Missouri 65897
417-836-6517
JCornelius-White@MissouriState.edu

Dr. Denise Baumann
Missouri State University
Residence Life Housing and Dining
901. S. National Ave.
Springfield, Missouri 65897
417-836-5838
DeniseBaumann@MissouriState.edu

Dr. Robert S. Hornberger
Missouri State University
Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management
and Services/Registrar
901. S. National Ave.
Springfield, Missouri 65897
417-836-5520
RobHornberger@MissouriState.edu

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None

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Missouri State University

June 11, 2016

Dear Wendy Troxel, Susan Campbell, and Journal Editorial Board:

I have submitted the following manuscript entitled, “First-Generation Students with Undecided Majors: A Qualitative Study of University Reacculturation.” I, along with my co-authors, Cynthia MacGregor, Jeffrey Cornelius-White, Denise Baumann, and Robert Hornberger, respectfully request publication consideration in *NACADA Journal*.

“First-Generation Students with Undecided Majors: A Qualitative Study of University Reacculturation” applies Bruffee’s Reacculturation process as a framework to better understand the experiences of this understudied population as a gap in research exists which focuses upon college students who are both first-generation and undecided majors. Other qualitative research articles have focused upon first-generation students or students with undecided majors, but the studies have not looked at this specific population. By gaining a better awareness of first-generation, undecided students’ challenges and experiences, advisors and administrators will be able to improve the support that is offered to help these students navigate their way through an unfamiliar environment. Additionally, advisors and administrators will be able to gain a greater understanding of the reasons first-generation, undecided students have a higher attrition rate.

The researcher received University Individual Review Board consent and followed proper research protocol by receiving informed consent with the participants. This manuscript is not under review with any other journal. Thank you for taking the time to review this manuscript.

Respectfully,

Tracey Glaessgen

Abstract

When students enter institutions of higher education, they are typically leaving behind one culture to join another. First-generation students have a higher attrition rate as do undecided students, but little research has been conducted on students who have both characteristics. The authors applied Bruffee's reacculturation process to understand the challenges and experiences that first-generation, undecided students have as they transition to a new academic environment. This qualitative, exploratory case study included 35 students utilizing interviews, focus groups, observations, and writings to triangulate the data collected. Findings revealed heightened feelings of stress, desire to become comfortable on campus, reliance upon continuing-generation friends, helpfulness of specialized first-year seminar course, and an uncertainty towards advisors' roles.

Keywords: first-generation students, first-year success, reacculturation, transition communities, translators, undecided students

Introduction

Institutions of higher education are competing not only to attract new students but also to reach out to those students who have left before degree attainment while simultaneously trying to retain the students who currently attend. First-generation students are of particular concern to institutions of higher education as they have a higher attrition rate (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013). Definitions of first-generation students vary, including applying the term if the student is the first one in the family to attend college (Hsiao, 1992). The most commonly used and cited definition (Petty, 2014), and the one this study uses, is that neither parent graduated from a four-year institution (Hicks, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Petty, 2014) whereas continuing-generation students have at least one college graduate parent. Students with undecided majors are also at a greater attrition risk (Allen & Robbins, 2008) as they may leave higher education institutions due to lack of academic goals or clear sense of purpose (Hagstrom, Skovholt, & Rivers, 1997). When both variables, first-generation and undecided, are combined, these students may experience even greater difficulty becoming connected to the institution, and, thereby, have a higher risk of attrition. For example, during 2012-2015, institutional data revealed a three-year trend of first-generation, undecided students with a higher attrition rate than continuing-generation, declared students. First-generation, undecided students comprise a significant percentage of students every year; therefore, it is important to garner a better understanding of their challenges.

Selected Literature Review

Much of the research on first-generation college students focuses upon their low-income and minority status (Bui, 2002). Research repeatedly indicates that first-generation students are less likely to persist (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Martinez et al., 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Swecker et al., 2013) and most likely to withdraw from college during their first year than continuing-generation students (Tinto, 2007). While pursuing a college degree can be challenging enough, pursuing an unknown college degree can add more complications (Cuseo, 2005; Gordon & Steele, 2003).

Students who are undecided majors have also been extensively researched (Cuseo, 2005). Engle and Tinto (2008) found students in their first two years of college tend to question their (possible) major. Further, Gordon and Steele (2003) conducted a 25-year longitudinal study and learned that 85% of first-year undecided students were “somewhat anxious” or “very anxious” about the major selection process.

Approximately one-third of entering first-year students are undecided majors, and approximately one-third of entering first-year students are declared majors but change their major at least once (Gordon & Steele, 2003); this trend is similar with first-generation and continuing-generation students declaring undecided majors (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

As first-year students enter higher education, they encounter an entirely new cultural experience. First-generation students lack the basic knowledge of the actual university system they have joined, and often are not aware there is a university system or language that they are expected to know (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Duron, 2013). Though first-generation students tend to

gain increased cultural capital from faculty/staff interactions, they are unlikely to do so (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

Ward et al. (2012) posited that cultural capital is not quickly acquired; rather, cultural capital is gained from multiple experiences that are reinforced by one's parents. A study by Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) found first-generation students' college experiences are particularly stressful, whether from lack of family support and/or financial concerns. First-generation students may have fewer important individuals (i.e., family) who can directly relate, thus are less likely to share their college troubles leading to greater feelings of stress (Jenkins et al., 2013). Infrequent meetings with faculty and staff may compound feelings of isolation, of being the lone person in an unfamiliar situation (Dennis et al., 2005). With families who may question their decision to attend college, such students may feel like outsiders both within their families and at college (Cushman, 2007; Schultz, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). With feelings of doubt and desires to belong, first-generation students are often more concerned with making friends than mastering academics or joining organizations (Cushman, 2007). Thus, first-generation students lack the cultural capital many continuing-generation students possess, resulting in special challenges.

Conceptual Framework

When students enter institutions of higher education, they are typically leaving behind one culture to join another one. Bruffee (1999) termed this process as reacculturation, which is, "switching membership from one culture to another" (p. 298) and described the actual process as "modifying or renegotiating our participation in the language, values, knowledge, and mores of the communities we come from, as well as

becoming fluent in those same elements of the communities we are trying to join” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14). Students had likely mastered their high school culture, but upon entering college, they are faced with an entirely new culture filled with knowledge, information, and basically, a language they have not yet learned. It is worth noting that Bruffee (1999) described reacculturation as “switching” (p. 298) and not merely transitioning between cultures.

Social constructionists, such as Bruffee, viewed knowledge as something that is created from one individual conversing with another. Bartholomae (1985) posited, students are entering the higher education community, and by receiving access to this community via college acceptance letters, are expected to engage in a higher level of discourse than in their pre-collegiate culture. Essentially, a student “must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is ‘learned’” (Bartholomae, 1985, p. 135). Considering there is little to no transition time to university culture and expectations, students are forced to acclimate quickly. Logically, continuing-generation students would be advantaged over first-generation students due to having college-educated parents who “speak” the university language.

Freire (2000) argued the reacculturation process is virtually impossible without the actions and conversations of others. Likewise, Bruffee (1995) believed that reacculturation is an extremely challenging process, never fully completed, and even harder to do alone; “We move from group to group best in a group” (p. 14). In order to assist with reacculturation, students may form *transition communities* (Bruffee, 1995, 1999), which are described as groups “in which people construct knowledge as they talk

together and reach consensus” (Bruffee, 1995, p. 14). These transition communities are comprised of people who are also going through the reacculturation process, such as an incoming class of first-generation students who are learning to speak the university’s language. Beginning with a smaller number of students, these transition communities will, as the level of trust increases, begin to merge with other transition communities, who have also increased their respective trust level (Bruffee, 1999).

The support of transition communities is important as students strive to join the university’s *knowledge communities*; these knowledge communities speak the language of the new culture that students are expected to learn. Additionally, it is apparent who is not fluent in this new language and is therefore not a member (Bruffee, 1999); “Mastery of a knowledge community's normal discourse is the basic qualification for acceptance into that community” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 643). For those students who successfully gain membership, this newly-acquired language has now become the normal or standard discourse of the knowledge community; “when we *speak the same language*, normal discourse is the language we speak” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 296). Foucault (1972), too, spoke of discourse as a “group of rules that are immanent in a practice, and define it in its specificity” (p. 46). *Translators*, it could be argued, “help students acquire fluency in the language of those communities” (Bruffee, 1999, p. 154).

Continuing-generation students may have an easier time joining the university because their parents serve as translators. Students with decided majors have a “home” department, the members of which can serve as a translator and facilitator to the knowledge community. However, for first-generation, undecided majors, who translates this new language?

Bruffee's (1995, 1999) reacculturation process served as a guide to view the experiences first-generation, undecided students have as they enter the university. With little initial access to university translators, first-generation, undecided students have to switch memberships as seamlessly as possible. Hence, the purpose of this study is to better understand the reacculturation experiences of first-generation, undecided students as they transition to the knowledge community of a university.

Research Questions

How do first-generation, undecided students:

1. Reacculturate to the unknown academic environment of a university?
2. Gain access to a university's culture?
3. Select translators within a university?
4. Form transition communities within a university?
5. Use academic advisors as translators?

Methodology

This study took place at a large, public, Masters, comprehensive, residential, selective admissions institution in the Midwest. Utilizing a qualitative, exploratory study, the researcher selected a constructivist approach because it allows for meaning to be shaped by seeking a greater understanding of the world (Creswell, 2014) and complements the reacculturation framework used by the researcher to construct meaning. Institutional data showed a three-year pattern that first-generation, undecided students have a lower retention rate than continuing-generation, declared students by 10-20%. Thirty-five first-generation, undecided freshmen were selected using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009).

To support validity and reliability, the researcher triangulated data by utilizing different data collection methods, including nine observations, one focus group, 14 interviews, 21 open-ended questionnaires, a practitioner's log, plus fieldnotes. The interviews and focus group used a semi-structured interview process because it allowed for probing questions (Merriam, 2009). Using preexisting or a priori coding (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016) allowed the findings to be in alignment with the selected framework that organized data into broad categories marked by the research questions. In vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) provided a richness to the findings because the codes "honor[ed] the participant's voice" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106) and is "applicable to action and practitioner research" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106).

Findings

Data collection analysis produced themes congruent with the reacculturation framework. Using the research questions as a guide, the findings are organized accordingly. Therefore, the reacculturation experiences and ways to access the university's culture are explored first. Then, selecting translators, forming transition communities, and using academic advisors as translators are shared. Further, the poignancy of the reacculturation experience is captured utilizing the participants' voices attributed with pseudonyms.

Reacculturating to the Unknown University Academic Environment

While starting a new chapter in their lives, first-generation, undecided students described their experience as stressful because their environment no longer included their familiar translators. Throughout their previous academic career, students had the security of their families to help address issues and questions. Students reacculturating to this

unknown environment, one filled with college applications, financial aid applications, and major selection, marked a new journey.

During the 14 interviews, the word *stressed* appeared 98 times with 19 instances explicitly related to undecided status and 15 instances explicitly related to first-generation status; 10 of 14 interviewees specifically mentioned feeling stressed about their first-generation and undecided status. Nine of 21 student writings mentioned feeling stressed — as the first one in their family to attend college or as an increasing awareness that they need to decide upon their academic major selection or, in some instances, both. In addition to interviews, two of five focus group participants mentioned, as did six of nine advising observations, feeling some sort of stress and/or anxiety.

“I do it on my own.” As they wrestled through their Free Application for Financial Student Aid (FAFSA), first-generation, undecided students were already experiencing the first indicators that their parents’ roles as translators (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) may have ceased. In 13 of 14 interviews, students mentioned a high level of stress involved as they worked on their FAFSA, as Stephanie depicted:

My mom would [help] if she could. ...Since they haven’t done it, they don’t know what to do. It’s not like my mom wouldn’t want to help me, but she doesn’t know anything. She tried with what she could, but she didn’t even know how to complete the FAFSA....Last semester was very stressful having to deal with the loans, but I am getting the hang of it. I do it on my own. (Stephanie, 82-86)

Similarly, the college application process, including ACT registration, was “*a foreign concept to do as my parents had no idea. Now they have a better grip on things, but it*

just takes experience” (Regina, 40-41). Students were expected to know their academic focus for the next four years starting with the completion of their college application.

“You are behind before things even get started.” Conversations with their parents, particularly about coursework and internships, simply did not exist for many first-generation, undecided students. Additionally, there was a growing realization the allotted time to select a major was dwindling. In fact, four of the nine advising observations included some discussion of major selection. Before they even started their collegiate career, first-generation, undecided students were aware that they needed to select a major as well as realized that their parents may not have informed them about the process, as seen in Rianna’s words:

Because at first you are a first-generation college student, and your parents didn’t go to college, so...your literacy rate is a little different. And then if you are undecided, then that is one more thing that is dragging you down. You are behind before things even started. As a first-generation college student, you keep asking yourself, what are you going to do, but you can’t go to your parents about it because they have no idea what you are even doing in college. (Rianna, 237-244)

Being undecided can make such an impact on students’ daily college experiences and escalate the stress level as some students admitted to thinking about their possible major “*every single day*” (Ashley, 79). Other students felt that the selection of a major was an important decision, a decision they did not take lightly.

“What’s your major?” A popular icebreaker question is “what’s your major,” as Macy shared in her writing, “*One of the first questions new people ask is, ‘What are you majoring in?’ I always have to say I am undecided. Explaining I do not know what I*

want to do with my life has not been easy” (15-17). The question is routinely asked of college students, as 10 of 14 students interviewed indicated, and serves as a burdensome reminder of not knowing. In her writing, Bethany addressed the dreaded “what’s your major” question:

Undecided. That's my major, my burden, my least favorite topic to discuss. The truth is, I have not known what I wanted to do with my life since third grade when I decided I did not have a knack for interior design. I have wracked my brain for hours on end, and I always come up empty handed. When people ask me this question it stresses me out. (Bethany, writing 1-4)

The impact this icebreaker question can have on first-generation, undecided students’ level of concern, frustration, and stress can vary, as depicted by Thomas:

For a while, I was timid about saying I was undecided, and then I decided I was going to say it loudly and confidently, and now I don't have the energy to keep saying it anymore. The last time I went to [a coffee house] I was asked “what’s your major?” by the counter person. (Thomas, 117-119)

Similarly, multiple students commented that their families would repeatedly ask about their major selection process; “*the only thing about being undecided is every time you see your family they ask if you have decided yet*” (Regina, writing 18-19). Students’ responses to their first-generation, undecided status was almost heartfelt, as Thomas suddenly expressed, “*Because you don't have family who can reciprocate those feelings, those stresses. You can say that you are really stressed about not having a major, but who knows what that feels like*” (Thomas, 273-275).

Whether in the form of college applications or financial aid applications, students experienced some level of stress before the first day of college. For many students, completing the FAFSA was their first indication that life would be different. Checking undecided as their academic major on their college application officially signaled another lack of uncertainty, which would only continue to be emphasized each time someone would ask about their major selection status.

Gaining Access to the Culture

First-generation, undecided students intuitively realized that the collegiate environment would be different somehow. The desire to maintain some sense of familiarity while experiencing an unknown culture was a shared phenomenon. By achieving a comfortable living environment, making new friends, and participating in Welcome Weekend, students were able to gain access to the ever-elusive university culture.

Significantly, 15 of 35 students mentioned *comfy* and *comfortable* when recalling their first days on campus — it was extremely important that they, as quickly as possible, make this unique environment ordinary. As a result, the barren residence hall rooms became the first on-campus challenge to conquer. Claiming their space and filling it with trinkets that reminded them of the familiar life they left behind to enter this unique environment, nine students, during their interviews, and six other students in their writings mentioned these seemingly every day occurrences.

Finding safety in numbers, 10 students revealed they latched onto either high school friends who were now roommates or to other residence hall students during the weekend before classes started. Leaving their residence hall room open and hoping that

someone would enter to fill the empty void was a shared feeling. The desire to feel *comfy* quickly went beyond the residence halls as students shared the need to locate their classrooms before the semester kicked off. Echoing that sentiment, students looked for friendly and approachable faces within their classes. A sense of accomplishment and pride occurred when they felt comfortable enough on campus to embark on a new semester's quest for classroom locations, alone.

In all 14 interviews, students indicated they participated in Welcome Weekend, the weekend prior to classes and found it to be helpful in their gaining access to university culture. Usually with their roommate or with someone whom they already knew, students attended the fun festivities with the purpose to meet new people. Welcome Weekend served as the initial tip off that students needed to leave the comfortableness and familiarity of their residence hall. First-generation, undecided students gained access by initially making their new environment comfortable then continuing to step outside their comfort zone to meet new people.

Selecting University Translators

First-generation, undecided students had to quickly reacculturate to the unknown aspect of the university. The routine habit of asking their families for assistance had simultaneously come to a close as the door to college opened. As a result, first-generation, undecided students had to rely upon different translators, which included roommates, self, and instructors.

“The most crucial piece of home...turned out to be my roommate.” Seven of 35 students mentioned their roommate was instrumental in serving as their translator, and in all seven instances, the roommate was either a sophomore or a continuing-generation

student. Due to accessibility and comforting reassurance, students indicated when they had questions, they asked their roommates. Conversely, several students who had first-generation roommates expressed that *“it’s kinda nice knowing that my roommate feels stressed, too”* (Regina, 198-199) because it helped to validate their feelings of uncertainty and stress. Yet, they were reluctant to ask their roommates’ questions so as not to increase their anxiety in not knowing the answer, either.

“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own.” Perhaps because first-generation, undecided students had to navigate their way through the FAFSA and the college application process they became resourceful and more observant as a result. For example, Sam shared during his interview that he would read the university bulletin boards to learn information about campus. Likewise, Bethany honed her observation skills during the first few weeks, by *“Just kinda figuring everything out on my own. I think of myself as someone who sits back and listens rather than speak, so I like to observe”* (Bethany, 30-32). In fact, this ability, whether by preference or not, to figure out the answer by researching or by observing other students was a common theme shared by approximately half of students interviewed and demonstrated in three of nine observations.

“A teacher’s help is great.” The single most useful resource was the first-year seminar, which was mentioned 26 times throughout interviews, focus group, and writings. This particular first-year seminar section was designated for first-generation, undecided students. It should be noted as a limitation, though, the researcher was the instructor for students who were interviewed and shared their writings. Interviewing an instructor was one assignment that was overwhelmingly cited as helpful. Because talking

to an instructor can be a daunting and unknown experience, students found it, perhaps ironically, helpful to be required to do so because it forced students to do something that they knew they *should* do but did not *want* to do. If it was not a requirement, many students shared they would not have sought out their instructors, as John posited,

This class has taught me that teachers actually do care about you and they are willing to work with you and help you. This helped me get through my public speaking class when we had that instructor interview. After that interview, I met with my teacher at least three more times. A teacher's help is great. I probably would not have spoken to my public speaking teacher without that assignment.

(John, writing 22-26)

In summation, first-generation, undecided students learned to rely upon different translators to help their reacculturation process. Some students had easy access to their roommates who had already reacculturated due to their sophomore or continuing-generation status. Becoming accustomed to finding their own information, students heightened their self-reliance. Finally, reaching out to form relationships with their instructors proved helpful.

Forming Transition Communities

Upon entering college, first-generation, undecided students were naturally concerned with making new friends and sustaining friendships. While students understood the importance of getting involved to become connected to the university, they did not know how. From their friends and the first-year seminar course, many students formed transition communities, which offset some stress, as they reacculturated.

Some students participated in university-sanctioned organizations but an almost equivalent number opted not to participate.

“I could cling to her [best friend].” Making friends served as an initial transition community that also included friends who had college-experienced parents. In fact, in all 14 interviews, students emphasized they were extremely concerned about making friends. In particular, students who lived their entire lives knowing everyone in their school and town had doubts of even knowing how to make friends. Likewise, for students who described themselves as shy being encircled by many people in a strange place was, at times, overwhelming as they were torn between needing to get out of their rooms to meet people and wanting to stay in their familiar surroundings. As 19 of 21 students’ writings and/or interviews revealed, friends also served as a means for gathering information; Ashley shared, *“I could cling to her [best friend]”* (Ashley, 143).

“And I knew that I was normal.” Fifteen of 21 first-generation, undecided students in the specialized first-year seminar section voluntarily indicated it was helpful knowing there were similar students as they became part of a transition community and explored university life, with all of its unknowns, together. Regina reflected in her writing that she thought a class dedicated for first-generation, undecided students would have only a few students because she was unusual. She was relieved upon seeing an entire class filled with other first-generation, undecided students, as she mused, *“When I walked into GEP, I saw a lot of students, and I knew that I was normal”* (Regina, writing 9-10).

“I needed a community of people to walk through college with.” Once initial friendships were made, students turned their attention to expanding their circle of friends.

For some students, joining a sorority or fraternity was an instant way to meet people and make new connections, as Jennifer expressed, *“I needed a community of people to walk through college with. I had my high school friends, but I wanted to branch out and meet more people. So, I joined a sorority”* (Jennifer, writing 14-16). Five of 18 women via interviews or writings shared they joined a sorority, and felt a strong bond and level of trust with their sorority sisters. However, two women indicated that joining a sorority may have prevented them from making friends outside of their declared social group. Three male students did not join a fraternity, and their reasoning, captured by John, can be summed up: *“I was not into joining a fraternity, and in my opinion, I thought it was like I was paying for my friends. I know some people join one, but it’s definitely not for me”* (John, 133-134).

“It’s easier to feel stupid with other people.” For other students, having the automatic friend group that is a byproduct of joining an organized university group can be reassuring, both to students and families. Three of 21 students were members of either band or an athletic team, so in addition to moving on campus one week early, they had an organized group already pre-established and included freshmen to seniors. Both women in band commented independently but in the same exact words, *“it’s easier to feel stupid with other people”* (Cassidy, 338; Mackenzie, 111). Four of the 21 students joined a university-sanctioned organization upon arrival.

“I didn’t join any clubs this year, and I really regret that.” Whether it was from not knowing how to get involved or not finding the right organization or wanting to get their academic priorities figured out first, nine of 21 students did not disclose participation in university-sanctioned organizations their first semester. Students

acknowledged the benefit and importance of widening their circle of friends, as Sam shared: *“I didn’t join any clubs this year, and I really regret that. I should have got myself more involved but focusing on my grades was a little more important”* (Sam, writing 17-19).

Briefly stated, students created friendships as the primary form of transition communities. By sharing first-generation and undecided status, students indicated the specialized first-year seminar served as a valuable transition community. In smaller numbers, students formed transition communities by joining university-sanctioned organizations, including sororities and clubs, while an almost equivalent amount of students did not join organizations.

Using Academic Advisors as Translators

All students who have fewer than 75 credit hours are required to meet with their advisor for a registration release. As established employees, advisors have the insider status (Drake & Heath, 2011) and, consequently, can serve as translators. However, for first-generation, undecided students, the very role of an academic advisor is an unknown concept. Students are unsure how to utilize academic advisors beyond course registration assistance. Thus, students tended to ask other individuals and to explore the university website to find answers.

“I knew it [academic advising role] was like a high school counselor.” Before students ascertain how an advisor can help navigate their academic journey, they need to understand an advisor’s role. Of 11 students who were asked if they understood an advisor’s role, only one student indicated yes. When probed to describe the role, she equated it to a high school counselor and was not certain, as seen in her response: *“I*

actually did know about an advisor from the older friends who go here. I knew it was like a high school counselor. I pretty much knew, but I am not for certain now” (Ashley, 173-174). Other students knew that they were assigned an advisor but did not comprehend the reason.

Approximately half of the students indicated they were unsure of valuable advising conversations to have, as Cassidy wrote, *“He’s a very nice man, and I’m sure I’ll be talking to him more in the future, but, for now, I don’t really know what I would talk to him about besides classes”* (Cassidy, 8-10). Further, many students indicated they had not spoken to their advisors about study skills or career interests, only class selection. Summer shared her hesitancy towards her possible major with her advisor and felt even more confused:

I told my advisor I was second guessing my major, and he didn’t really know what to say to me. I felt lost. If he doesn’t know what I should do, and I don’t know what I should do, then it is hard. (Summer, 299-302)

Whereas other students felt frustrated when they met with their advisor to discuss specific classes for a particular major if the advisor only shared information that was on the website, as Izaac indicated, *“she just tells me stuff that I can look up. I don’t think it has been that helpful or that I needed it”* (Izaac, 110-111).

“And then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor.” Eighteen of 19 students via interviews or focus group indicated “no” when asked, “Did your academic advisor assist you with your transition to the university?” One student mentioned she had seen her advisor several times for selecting classes and troubleshooting academic weaknesses. The other 18 students had only met with their

assigned advisor for the required one visit, granting that next semester's sought-after advisor release. In nearly every instance, students described their advising visit much like Sam did, "*I feel like my advisor didn't ask me if I was struggling or needed help with anything. It was just talking about classes. Like a class registration, but nothing beyond that*" (Sam, 194-197). Equally common, students indicated their academic advisor was not the first or second or even third choice whom they would seek information from, as Thomas responded with, "*I probably start with my roommate. If I still have the question, I will probably turn to my other friends, and then eventually, if I was clueless, I might ask my advisor*" (Thomas, 310-312).

In fact, it was not until the researcher specifically asked about their advising experience was an advisor mentioned. Ironically, most students described their academic advisor as *nice, friendly, or sweet*; no student described their advisor as intimidating or unapproachable. Further, several students recalled their advisor sending an email after midterms either to congratulate them upon their grades or to direct them to appropriate campus resources.

"If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn't work."

Paradoxically, students seemed to want more of a relationship with their advisor, but they were not sure either what to expect or how to initiate it. Students appeared to have some idea that advising can be useful, yet they did not seek additional advising appointments or explore other topics to discuss. Corroborating the writings and interview conversations, in all nine advising observations, the students asked only the question that prompted their appointment. In all nine advising observations, the advisor asked the student if he or she

had any other questions, but the student did not ask additional questions. During his interview, Thomas recounted his experience:

Part of it is not knowing what questions to ask....It's becoming an adult, and you are becoming more responsible, but it helps if you have somebody holding you accountable. If you are the only person holding you accountable, it doesn't work — you are going to slip. Maybe it would be good if first generation students were required to meet with their advisor more than one time during the semester. If I had to do it, I would have done it. I think people like me could really use an advisor holding us accountable. (Thomas, 346-353)

Perhaps because first-generation, undecided students were unsure of what the role of an advisor was they did not seek their help. Uncertainty as to which topics and conversations to have with their advisor prevented students from realizing the assistance an academic advisor could provide. Equating an advisement session as a course registration release was a common misconception.

Discussion

Whether due to their first-generation status or their undecided status or both, students felt stressed. As Barry et al. (2009) noted, the level of stress for first-generation students was high because entering college meant confronting the unknown. For these particular students, this stress, which could no longer be allayed by their families, was partly associated with the college application and financial aid process. Not having those important family members to directly share their experiences added another level of stress, which Jenkins et al. (2013) noted.

To further complicate the level of stress, Barry et al. (2009) found the selection of an academic major to be challenging. The very act of using “what’s your major” as an icebreaker question can add to the level of stress as many students attested. As Gordon and Steele (2003) found, some students were so preoccupied that they thought about it daily. Students found their inability to discuss their major selection options as well as the complications, as Cuseo (2005) found, with their families to be frustrating and stressful though Cuseo’s (2005) study did not focus exclusively on first-generation students as this study did.

Additionally, a common theme shared by first-generation students is an overall unawareness of a university system, as Dennis et al. (2005) and Jenkins et al. (2013) both noted. Students developed their sense of self-reliance as they quickly learned the culture was different; alternatively, some students felt it easier to share the unknown together. During their reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) experience, first-generation, undecided students utilized the resources found within their transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) but did not utilize their required university translator, as Bruffee might define academic advisors. Though students understood that they were assigned an academic advisor who would assist with future course registration, their lack of understanding advisors’ roles lead to discussions only focused upon courses. Consequently, students tended to ask other individuals, including their roommates and friends, as well as explored the university website, to find answers to their questions.

Further, students were unaware or too intimidated to meet with their instructors, which was disclosed during their first-year instructor assignments. This infrequency of meeting with faculty and staff is a commonly shared experience, as Dennis et al. (2005)

found. However, as Cushman (2007) expressed, first-generation students are concerned with making friends in their new surroundings, which often leads to forming transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999). Students who joined university-sanctioned organizations formed an increase in transition community (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) size, but unfortunately a substantial number of students did not join any university-sanctioned organizations.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The research revealed the experiences and challenges first-generation students have as they enter higher education undecided upon an academic major. This study is significant because it focuses upon an underexplored population and because of the selected framework, Bruffee's (1995, 1999) reacculturation. This framework provides a new vocabulary for universities to better understand the support services that first-generation, undecided students need.

Because first-generation, undecided students tend to rely upon their initial transition community (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) as they reacculturate (Bruffee, 1995, 1999), academic advisors and first-year seminar instructors might assist in expanding these transition communities (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) by encouraging early involvement in university-sanctioned organizations. By communicating the academic advisor's role as early as possible, students would glean additional benefits. Advisors can be more intentional with their communication since students are uncertain of additional knowledge to gain by starting their communication using language in the culture students are already familiar with, such as explaining similarities between advisors and high school counselors. While officially requiring more advisor visits and/or emails may

inadvertently label first-generation students as different, advisors can express an expectation for increased visits.

The current study focused upon the reacculturation (Bruffee, 1995, 1999) experiences of first-generation, undecided students; however, other related characteristics could be explored. For instance, this study did not look at the intersectionality of low-income and/or minority status which is commonly associated with first-generation students. Targeted research and specialized support services could improve retention of students known to be at greater risk of attrition.

Authors' Notes

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Tracey Glaessgen:

Tracey Glaessgen currently serves as the Assistant Director of First-Year Programs, which is part of a unit designed primarily to increase student success and retention initiatives, at Missouri State University. Previously, she worked as an academic advisor for undecided students at Missouri State University. She has taught various levels of composition courses at Missouri State University and Ozarks Technical Community College as well as served as a writing consultant in Missouri State University's writing center. Her research interests include first-generation students, academic advising, first-year seminars, and rhetoric and composition theory. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English, Master of Arts in English, Literature emphasis, and a Master of Arts in Writing, Rhetoric and Composition emphasis, from Missouri State University. She is in the process of completing her Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri.

Dr. Cynthia MacGregor

Dr. Cynthia J. MacGregor, EdD, is a professor in the Counseling, Leadership, and Special Education department at Missouri State University and serves as the site coordinator for the regional portion of a statewide EdD program in educational leadership

offered through the University of Missouri. Her current research initiative is focused on redesign and implementation of a dissemination-focused dissertation design intended to provide resolution of long-standing educational problems across PK-20 arenas of practice. She teaches and advises doctoral students in various educational leadership roles, from kindergarten classroom teacher to university administrator. She earned Bachelor of Science and Master's degrees in psychology from Central Missouri State University, and her doctorate in educational leadership from the University of Missouri.

Dr. Jeffrey Cornelius-White

Dr. Jeffrey Cornelius-White is a professor in the Counseling, Leadership, and Special Education department at Missouri State University. He teaches a wide variety of courses including Multicultural Issues in Counseling, Tests and Measures for Counselors, and Helping Relationships. His research interests include person-centered and multicultural issues in counseling psychology as well as shared governance and public affairs issues in higher education. He earned a Bachelor of Music in Music Performance from Roosevelt University, and a Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology and Doctor of Psychology from Argosy University.

Dr. Denise Baumann

Dr. Denise Baumann is the Associate Director of Residence Life, Housing, and Dining Services at Missouri State University. In addition, she teaches courses on Student Development Theory and Student Outcomes in Higher Education in the Student Affairs in Higher Education Master's program. Her research interests include leadership styles and emotional intelligence. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Political Science/Public Administration from Minnesota State University, Master of Education in Counseling

Psychology from James Madison University, and a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri.

Dr. Robert S. Hornberger

Dr. Robert S. Hornberger is the Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management and Services/Registrar at Missouri State University. He previously held positions as Registrar and Coordinator of Web and Data Support at Missouri State University. His research interests include predictors of academic success for conditionally admitted students. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Socio-Political Communication and a Master of Science in Computer Information Systems from Missouri State University, and a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri.

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CHAPTER SIX:
SCHOLARLY-PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

When pondering my entire doctoral journey, in general, and the dissertation process, in particular, I am struck by the daily impact this program had on my role as an educational leader. Likewise, all aspects of the writing process, from contemplating possible topics, to researching articles, to writing those first words, to incorporating committee feedback, have influenced my role as a scholar. This section reflects upon the impact this dissertation process had on my role as not only an educational leader but also as a scholar.

DIP's Influence on My Practice as an Educational Leader

As a leader, I have learned to *get on the balcony*, a phrase that Heifetz and Laurie (1997/2011) used to distinguish the difference between being caught up in the action compared to being a part of the change. In fact, this selected reading strongly influenced my behavior, and I cannot count how many times I have removed myself from the situation and metaphorically gotten on the balcony to gain a clearer picture. Oftentimes, the day-to-day hectic nature of First-Year Programs can warrant an immediate reaction; however, I have become much more proactive in my approach. Further, by situating this dissertation in practice within my own organization, I have the opportunity to analyze my surroundings with a more critical eye and to spot elements of adaptive leadership, which was the selected leadership framework I used for my chapter on the organizational setting. With new mandates passed down from the federal and state government not to mention from the organization's leadership, it has been extremely useful to embrace adaptive leadership (Northouse, 2016) within First-Year Programs by asking the questions that most people do not *want* to address but questions that *need* to be asked.

Using my *strategic* strength (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006) undoubtedly helps with the ability to oscillate back and forth between small details and big picture issues while not losing sight of the overarching goals (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997/2011) or making a decision without thinking it through (Goleman, 1996/2011). Of course, not every decision to be made affords the luxury of time to deliberate; I do have to make spontaneous decisions, but I have learned to transfer my knowledge and skills to the given situation. By trying to have diversity at the planning table (Cervero & Wilson, 2006), as Levi (2014) suggested, allows for a broader spectrum of knowledge and encourages multiple perspectives. Learning to incorporate diversity both at the planning table and within the organization allows me to see the benefits in alleviating groupthink (Janis, 1971/2005). While I had been aware of the importance of ethical decision making and cultural inclusiveness, this dissertation process, along with the selected subject matter of first-generation, undecided students, certainly heightened my appreciation and respect for those aspects. Fostering an environment in which questions are welcome as well as exploring varying viewpoints has become even more important to me, mostly because I find enjoyment in the process of critical thinking and problem solving.

Studying different leadership approaches and theories, the one approach that resonated the most is authentic leadership; “Authentic leaders understand their own *values* and *behave* toward others based on these values” (Northouse, 2013, p. 259). Before I started my data collection process, I was acutely aware that inviting my former students to participate in my research study might be considered unethical. Upon discussing ad nauseam my data collection process with my dissertation advisor, I became particularly diligent in following ethical practices and procedures so my students would

trust the research process (Wurtz, 2011). Further, I was even more committed to honoring my students' experiences by encapsulating their voices throughout the dissertation because I knew my students trusted me when I said their experiences would help improve the experiences of future students. Northouse (2013) purported that authentic leaders form a relationship based upon trust with others. I trusted my students to share true stories and experiences with me; in turn, my students trusted me. For the students who were not in my first-year seminar course, I did not have the opportunity to forge an authentic relationship. Though I did try to clearly explain my research purpose and their important role in it, I am not confident that the students whom I observed and conducted a focus group with would say that they trusted me. The data collected did not yield as rich (Merriam, 2009) of information in comparison to the students whom I already knew.

During the semesters of coursework and dissertation writing, I have been frustrated by the perceived lack of data-driven decision making (Petrides, 2003) that seems to occur, at times, within the organization, which is replaced by a decision-making process based upon an ostensibly excessive amount of anecdotal narratives. Equally important, it is not necessarily judicious to base today's decisions upon yesterday's data. Hence, it is essential to review decision making processes and related data that could be used to make those decisions because if the selected data is not relevant or current, using it as a basis for the decision will likely provide erroneous results (Davenport, 2009/2013). Additionally, Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (2006/2013) encouraged leaders to maintain self-awareness so as not to anchor their decisions with premature judgments and decisions. Accordingly, Lasley (2009) argued that the most effective decision making

interweaves a balanced approach between data and content; therefore, data that has been collected, analyzed, and processed should lead to a data-driven decision, and consequently, a continuation of evidence-based practice (Kowalski, 2009). I have learned to try, at least, to ground my decisions in practice or theory and have worked to gain the ability to articulate the reasoning for my decisions. During my data collection, research, and subsequent analysis, I learned that first-generation, undecided students were not likely to attend university-sanctioned events without the encouragement of their friends, most of whom were sophomores or continuing-generation students. As a result, I will create an assignment in my specialized first-year seminar course with first-generation, undecided students to have them attend several university-sanctioned events early in the fall semester.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not briefly discuss Preskill and Brookfield's (2009) analysis of the role of hope and its impact during my dissertation process. Hope serves as an attitudinal shift as well as a means of self-renewal for me (Helland & Winston, 2005). I never thought of the impact of hope before this academic journey, never really considered it. But, have I, by focusing upon understanding their reaccluturation experiences and challenges provided first-generation, undecided students with a sense of hope?

DIP's Influence on My Role as a Scholar

Bruffee (1999) posited, "Good talk begets good thought" (p. 134); these conversations with classmates, instructors, and committee members helped me to continually reflect on my own learning and my role in other people's learning. Interestingly, I knew before I even started this program I viewed learning as a socially

constructed activity (Merriam & Bierema, 2014), one in which knowledge is socially constructed, in part, by the conversations, whether with other people, self-dialogue, or the text, that I engage. Throughout this dissertation process, I have had conversations with my advisor, my supervisor, my colleagues whose interests are also focused upon first-generation initiatives, and the students with whom I conducted research. These conversations have, as Bruffee (1999) theorized, raised my level of thinking and knowledge construction.

Relatedly, as a master's student studying Rhetoric and Composition, I first learned of Bruffee's work, and I have since aligned my approach not only to teaching composition courses and the first-year seminar course but also to learning, in general, with social constructionism. In "Social Construction, Language, and the Authority of Knowledge: A Bibliographical Essay," Bruffee (1986) contended that "entities we normally call reality, knowledge, thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers" (p. 774) and further explained that "social construction assumed that the matrix of thought is not the individual self but some community of knowledgeable peers and the vernacular language of that community" (p. 777). By engaging in conversations focused upon a mutual topic of interest with other individuals, my end product, this dissertation in practice, is a tangible view of socially-constructed knowledge that may not have been produced otherwise. While this dissertation may not be evaluated as an excellent project, I am mindful of Hannah Arendt's (2003) telling quote: "For excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required" (p. 198), which I posit summarizes the social constructionist approach.

Notably, the first book that provided me with a basic understanding of the differences between a scholar and practitioner is Stephen North's (1987) *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field*. North (1987) described the similarities and differences among theoretical approaches, including the scholar, researcher, and practitioner to rhetoric and composition, and I readily identified with the following practitioner description: "Practitioners reflect, they talk, they read" (p. 45). A practitioner, I believed, was an extension of a social constructionist point of view. Further, practitioners viewed it as permissible to accept an "informed intuition and trial and error" (North, 1987, p. 45) as reason enough to do something.

While I still believe that a practitioner is an extension of a social constructionist point of view, I have learned through this dissertation in practice process that simply having a feeling that something is right is not enough. Within a university environment and surrounded by researchers and scholars who can actually use data to verify that something is right, practitioners need to perform their own research to support their intuitions. Thus, the scholarly practitioner approach allows practitioners, such as myself, to gain the ability to make data driven decisions (Petrides, 2003) to improve their practice.

As such, I had the learning opportunity to identify a problem of practice, in this case, the higher attrition rate of first-generation, undecided students. I must admit that I, initially, made the assumption that first-generation, undecided students had a higher attrition rate than first-generation, declared majors, continuing-generation, undecided majors, or continuing-generation, declared majors, but I did not have the evidence to make a valid statement. I was simply, as North (1987) would propose, operating on an

informed intuition because it just seemed to make sense. With the assistance of one of my dissertation advisors, I can now state with accuracy that first-generation, undecided students had a higher attrition rate for the past three years.

Conducting a literature review not only provided a comprehensive understanding of my targeted population but also allowed for my findings to be anchored. The selection of a framework served as a foundation for my data collection process; from the qualitative approach to the semi-structured interview questions (Merriam, 2009) to the a priori coding (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016) and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016), my dissertation in practice is framework driven. Writing a detailed findings section, though now an optional component, ensured that I thoroughly analyzed my data collection.

My understanding of the qualitative research approach allowed me to apply the methods to an educational problem of practice in order to fill a research gap. Learning to combine theory, framework, and practice-oriented knowledge (MacGregor & Fellabaum, 2016) to a problem of practice and then creating a publication-ready article provided an opportunity for me to contribute to existing research. Likewise, sharing my dissertation in practice in the form of a report allows my research to become a resource for key university stakeholders because I can utilize my findings and subsequent recommendations as a foundation for any future departmental decisions and advocacy for first-generation, undecided students. Ultimately, this dissertation in practice has taught me how to make meaningful, research-based contributions to my organization and to disseminate the knowledge to different audiences, including practitioners and scholars.

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Appendix A

Observation Protocol for Advising Appointments

Participants	Questions
Conversations	
Subtle Factors	My Behavior

Sketch of Physical Setting

Appendix B

Interview Informed Consent Form

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Description: I am an EdD student at the University of Missouri – Columbia in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program, and I am observing and interviewing first-generation students who are undecided majors.

Purpose of the research: To understand the experiences and challenges faced by students who are the first in their family to attend college and who are not sure of their academic major.

What you will do in this research: If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in one interview. You will be asked several questions about your experiences and challenges as a college student. With your permission, I will tape record the interview in order to allow me to focus on the conversation.

Time required: The interview will take approximately 1 hour.

Risks: No risks are anticipated.

Benefit: To advance the understanding of first-generation, undecided students' experiences.

Confidentiality: Your responses to interview questions will be kept confidential. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. With your written permission below, excerpts from the interview may be included in my dissertation in practice or other later publications.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. You may withdraw by informing me that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). In addition, you may skip any question during the interview, but continue to participate in the rest of the study

To Contact the Researcher: If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Tracey Glaessgen, 417-836-8343, traceyglaessgen@missouristate.edu. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Dr. Cindy MacGregor, MU-MSU EdD Site Coordinator, 417-836-6046, CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu.

Agreement: The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Introductory Question

1. Describe how your current semester is going. (*RQ 1*)

Transition Question

2. How did you decide to attend Missouri State? (*RQ 1*)

Key Questions

3. Do you have any siblings who went to Missouri State or any other college?
 - a. If so, what is their major?
 - b. Were they ever undecided? (*RQ 1a*)
4. What has it been like for you to be the first one in your family to attend college? Has this had any impact on your college experience so far? (*RQ 1a*)
5. How has being an undecided student affected your college experience? (*RQ 1c*)
6. Share with me how you think you might select your academic major. (*RQ 1a & 1c*)
7. What obstacles have you faced as a college student? Academically? Socially? (*RQ 1*)
8. Who or what has helped you transition to the university? (*RQ 1b & 1c*)
9. Who do you talk to about the stresses of being a college student? (*RQ 1b*) How does that help?
10. Describe your relationship with your academic advisor. (*RQ 1d*)
 - a. How often do you communicate, whether in email or in person? (*RQ 1d*)
 - b. Has your academic advisor assisted you with your transition to the university? If so, how? (*RQ 1b & 1d*)
 - c. What else could your academic advisor do to assist in your transition? (*RQ 1d & 2*)
11. What resources (person, office, website, IDS 120 class) have been the most helpful to you as a college student? (*RQ 1d & 2*)
12. What support do you still need as a college student? (*RQ 1d & 2*)

Ending Questions

13. What else would you like to share about your experiences as a college student?

Wrap-up

Thank you for taking the time to discuss your experiences with me.

Appendix D

Focus Group Informed Consent Form

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

Description: I am an EdD student at the University of Missouri – Columbia in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program, and I am observing and conducting focus groups with first-generation students who are undecided majors.

Purpose of the research: To understand the experiences and challenges faced by students who are the first in their family to attend college and who are not sure of their academic major.

What you will do in this research: If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in one focus group. You will be asked several questions about your experiences and challenges as a college student. With your permission, I will tape record the focus group in order to allow me to concentrate on the conversation.

Time required: The focus group will take approximately 1 hour to 1½ hours.

Risks: No risks are anticipated.

Benefit: To advance the understanding of first-generation, undecided students' experiences.

Confidentiality: Your responses to focus group questions will be kept confidential. At no time will your actual identity be revealed. With your written permission below, excerpts from the interview may be included in my dissertation in practice or other later publications.

Participation and withdrawal: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. You may withdraw by informing me that you no longer wish to participate (no questions will be asked). In addition, you may skip any question during the focus group, but continue to participate in the rest of the study.

To Contact the Researcher: If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Tracey Glaessgen, 417-836-8343, traceyglaessgen@missouristate.edu. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Dr. Cindy MacGregor, MU-MSU EdD Site Coordinator, 417-836-6046, CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu.

Agreement:

The nature and purpose of this research have been sufficiently explained, and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalty.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

Appendix E

Focus Group Protocol

Welcome

Good afternoon. My name is _____, and I am a doctoral student in University of Missouri's Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program. I appreciate you taking the time to share your perspective.

Overview of the Topic

The purpose of this focus group is to look at the experiences and challenges of college students who are the first in the family to attend college and who are exploring their major.

Ground Rules

I invited you to participate in this focus group because I am interested in your own unique experiences, and I hope that you feel comfortable sharing your point of view. I realize that each of you has a different perspective, and I certainly welcome differing points of view. I want to ensure that everyone has multiple opportunities to share their thoughts. I decided to record the session so I can concentrate on the discussion. I will not include any names, and your comments are confidential; information will only be viewed by my dissertation committee and me.

Introductory Question

1. Describe how your current semester is going. (*RQ 1*)

Transition Question

2. How did you decide to attend Missouri State? (*RQ 1*)

Key Questions

3. Do you have any siblings who went to Missouri State or any other college?
 - a. If so, what is their major?
 - b. Were they ever undecided? (*RQ 1a*)
4. What has it been like for you to be the first one in your family to attend college? Has this had any impact on your college experience so far? (*RQ 1a*)
5. How has being an undecided student affected your college experience? (*RQ 1c*)
6. Share with me how you think you might select your academic major. (*RQ 1a & 1c*)
7. What obstacles have you faced as a college student? Academically? Socially? (*RQ 1*)
8. Who or what has helped you transition to the university? (*RQ 1b & 1c*)
9. Who do you talk to about the stresses of being a college student? (*RQ 1b*) How does that help?
10. Describe your relationship with your academic advisor. (*RQ 1d*)

- a. How often do you communicate, whether in email or in person? *RQ 1d*)
 - b. Has your academic advisor assisted you with your transition to the university? If so, how? (*RQ 1b & 1d*)
 - c. What else could your academic advisor do to assist in your transition? (*RQ 1d & 2*)
11. What resources (person, office, website, IDS 120 class) have been the most helpful to you as a college student? (*RQ 1d & 2*)
12. What support do you still need as a college student? (*RQ 1d & 2*)

Ending Questions

13. What else would you like to share about your experiences as a college student?

Wrap-up

Thank you for taking the time to discuss your experiences with me.

Appendix F

Open-Ended Questionnaire

Name: _____

The purpose of this questionnaire is to provide your instructor with a better understanding as to your experiences as a first-generation student who is exploring academic majors.

Please take some time to reflect upon your experiences this semester and then type a response to the following questions.

1. How do you feel about being the first person in your family to attend college?
2. How has your experience as a first-generation college student impacted your college experience so far?
3. How has being an undecided student affected your college experience?
4. What obstacles have you faced as a college student?
5. Who or what has helped you transition to the university?
6. Describe your relationship with your academic advisor. Positives aspects?
Negative aspects?
7. What support do you still need as a college student?
8. How do you feel about being a first-generation student who is exploring your major?

Appendix G

Practitioner's Log

Since the researcher is teaching a first-year seminar course that is designed for first-generation students who are undecided with their academic major selection, she has maintained an electronic file that contains summary of observations, conversations, and relevant excerpts from written assignments.

VITA

Tracey Glaessgen's professional education career began as a graduate teaching assistant in the English department at Missouri State University. She taught both basic writing and college composition as well as served as a writing consultant in the Writing Center and Assistant to the Director of Composition. After graduating with a Master's in English and a Master's in Writing, she taught writing courses at Missouri State University and Ozarks Technical Community College for one year before receiving the position as an academic advisor to undecided students. During her time as an academic advisor, Tracey received both institutional and national recognition.

Tracey currently serves as the Assistant Director of First-Year Programs, which is part of a unit designed primarily to increase student success and retention initiatives, at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. She teaches the first-year seminar course, which includes high-impact educational practices as well as a peer leadership course and a course designed exclusively for a summer bridge program. She serves on numerous committees, including the Provost's Academic Advising Council, Provost's Assessment Council, Common Reader Selection and Curriculum Committee, Student Success, and First-Year Advisory Council. In addition to presenting at local, state, and national conferences on topics such as first-year seminars, summer bridge programs, leadership styles, and first-generation students, Tracey has served on a state advising board and was recently invited to become a member of a steering committee focused upon improving the city's education and poverty rate.